Book Reviews

Philosophy and Hip-Hop: Ruminations on Postmodern Cultural Form

By Bailey, Julius. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014. Pp. xx, 198. Hardcover $90; Paperback $39.99. eBook 29.99.

In *Philosophy and Hip-Hop*, Julius Bailey takes the reader through a journey of hip-hop culture and its varied manifestations throughout the world while informed through philosophical incite but in lay terms. The book has the following functions: first, as a sequel to *Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason* by Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby, second, as a means to demonstrate the intersection between hip-hop, ancient and modern philosophy, and third, to serve as a testament to the state of hip-hop culture in light of industry's invasive tendencies. Although, most hip-hop scholars such as Jeff Chang and Bakari Kitwana trace mark the origin of hip-hop as a cultural movement which began somewhere between the historic meeting of late 1971 among mostly African American and Puerto Rican rival gangs geared towards the formation of a peace treaty and unity for the sake of common communal objectives and Cool Herc's block parties in the South Bronx around 1973. Rightfully so, South Bronx owns the geographical and cultural legacy for the advent of hip-hop as conventionally known. However, Bailey argues that hip-hop's origins have roots in multiple cultures ranging from West Africa to American literary movements such as the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, and its accompanying subcultures on multiple U.S. coastal regions including the rural south. However, "hip-hop became, very much, an urban phenomena and this encourages its spread at lightning speed within African American and worldwide cultures" (p. 27).

Bailey presents hip-hop as originally intended to serve the public by curtailing violence and gang warfare through culturally transformative artistic means. Throughout the chapters referred to as ruminations, the author emphasizes that twenty-first century hip-hop culture exist in a condition wedged between its nostalgic past of progressive subversion and reinforcing the norm of self-exploitation for commercial viability purposes. According to the text, a unique feature of hip-hop lies in the idea that forty years after its inception, it "is still recognized as a distinctly Black form of culture; the Black roots of jazz as such, though rock ad rolls roots are more often ignored than they are explored" (p. 37). Bailey could have given an explanation and concrete examples on how African-Americans faced systemic exclusion and expulsion from Rock and Roll. As hip-hop experienced commercial growth and expansion, the segregated music industry accelerated its efforts of phasing out African American bands with musicians with the exception for a few tokens. Such practices hinder African Americans from forming their own cultural narrative, but must accept the aristocratically constructed cultural forms which result in a loss of control over individual and collective self-definition. Just as several prominent African American recording artists became so-called "rhythm and blues" musicians because they faced direct denial from major record labels as rock musicians (i.e. Nile Rodgers, Rick James), hip-hop artists began facing similar challenges which produced a split between the

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mainstream for those who conform to corporate standards and the underground, if one chooses to remain true to their message and authentic artistic expression.

Bailey critiques "gangsta rap" as more than merely "reality rap" but an aesthetic form of criminality commodification as a response to industry's demand. In the book entitled *The Lonely Crowd*, David Riesman emphasizes the idea that Western culture has become increasingly more "other-directed" and less "inner directed". Although, Bailey does not reference Riesman, the author implicitly hints that African American's have collectively lost the ability to self-determine their own cultural type. Black urban culture has become subject to a pre-conceived sub-narrative, which provides an inaccurate depiction of African American reality. According to Bailey, the music industry as a business has become so concerned with profits, that it has become negligent in producing representative accounts of the African American experience, but has resorted to sensationalized depictions of exaggerated stereotypes. Industry's false representation of authentic hip-hop culture has contributed to hip-hop's cultural divergence. The book would have benefitted from a brief discussion of the idea that the so-called East and West Coast feud of the 1990s was partially a by-product of the media's use of controversy as a means of emotional manipulation on a mass-level, and a real culture war within hip-hop. Aristocratically constructed industry demands have caused a divide in hip-hop culture in addition to distorting African American reality. By the mid-1980s, "the new breed of rappers delivered raw and vivid depictions of the harsh reality of American inner cities" (p. 51). As the industry became increasingly dominated by an obsession with materialistic success, the artist became increasingly challenged by the accompanying "role conflict" of navigating through the power structures of capitalism and producing a substantive and socially relevant product.

Rumination 3 entitled "Toward a Philosophy of Hip-Hop Education" focuses on hip-hop as pedagogically relevant because it has the ability to link foreign and abstract concepts to real life experiences with culturally specific relevance. Although Bailey does not reference Bloom's Taxonomy of higher ordered thinking skills, the author focuses on the need for an inclusive educational approach which empowers marginalized youths. However, the author references Malik El-Shabazz (formerly Malcolm X) in terms of describing the goal of hip-hop pedagogy as a means for developing the necessary intellectual growth in order to understand one's surrounding, the world's problems, and how the self fits into such a complex system.

The unique feature of *Philosophy and Hip-Hop* entails the author's presentation of one of Plato's well known ethical arguments in relationship to the state of hip-hop. "The ideal society that Plato describes will vanish when there is disorder and when there is injustice" (p. 87). Hip-hop exists in a struggle between the will to become an agent of justice and submission to external pressure to conform to a pre-constructed narrative. The thrust of the book deals with the idea that Hip-hop has lost a collective sense of purpose, since its corporate takeover. When society or its parts collectively become driven by individual desires rather than the greater good. However, hip-hop culture has responded favorably to the struggle between morality and pragmatism. Classical sociological theorist Emile Durkheim describes such a condition as *anomie* which can

translate as derangement. "The deterioration begins when individuals no longer have the capacity to act for themselves, as individual actions result to collective repercussions" (p. 87).

The book uses well known philosophical themes and concepts as illustrations for presenting hip-hop culture as a testament to both the African American experience and its international manifestations. Rather than philosophical abstractions, Bailey uses a conversational tone in lay and concrete terms as he articulates the triumphs and struggles of the collective hip-hop community within a global context. Throughout the text, the author focuses on the need to make both philosophy as a discipline and hip-hop as a culture to become applicable for pedagogical strategies, social commentary and a pillar for progress

Toward the latter part of the book, Bailey discusses the commercial pressure hip-hop artists face with regards to reinforcing of what ethnographer Elijah Anderson termed "the code of the street." Failure to conform to such codes through not only through recordings, and performances, but also public appearances can result in "professional suicide" due to the nullification of one's street credibility. Elevation through the ranks of such a code comes with great difficulty; however, status becomes easily lost if not properly safeguarded. However, if corporations control the parameters of "the code of the streets" more than the culture itself, then artistic authenticity consequentially becomes endangered due to their minimal ability to construct one's self definition. The greater socio-political crises results from the disproportionate amount of power that a few possess in terms of controlling ideas, information, and the wills of the masses which in turn results in large scale emotional, cognitive, and behavioral manipulation. "History has proven that control is achieved through the management of information" (p. 106). Hip-hop industry has made a public display of such behavioral vulnerabilities through the tendency of artist to conform to externally imposed stereotypes through commodification processes.

Philosophy and Hip Hop would appeal to scholars who desire to remain current on the state of hip-hop culture as it relates to primarily African American within the rapid emergence of a global context. Bailey does not assume that the reader has philosophical training, but rather expresses sentiments, laments, and aesthetic theory with a broad target audience. "Hip-hop, one of the most far-reaching of postmodern insurgencies, is mistakenly tagged solely as an art form. In essence, it appears in every sense of the word to be a revolution and renaissance" (p. 103) As the title suggests, the book delves into problems and cultural responses to postmodernism as a twenty-first challenge which functions as the culmination of Karl Marx's nineteenth century synthesis of class struggle compounded with the problem of the color line as W.E.B. Du Bois had predicted for the twentieth century. Upon reading the book, the audience should expect to have their self-perceptions, and their assumptions about the depths of systemic exploitation challenged.

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