

Two Turntables and a Social Movement: Writing Hip-Hop at Century's End

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Hip Hop America
By Nelson George
Viking, 1998

The VIBE History of Hip Hop
Edited by Alan Light
Three Rivers Press, 1999

The Dying Ground: A Hip-Hop Noir Novel
By Nichelle D. Tramble
Villard, 2001

Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema
By S. Craig Watkins
University of Chicago Press, 1998

In the eighties, when I was growing up in Los Angeles, Cal Worthington was the most famous car salesman in all of Southern California. His television commercials for his Long Beach car lot always presented him in the same way: dressed in a two-piece suit, cowboy hat on his head, and twanging—in a dusty drawl that sounded imported direct from Dallas—“This is Cal Worthington and my dog Spot” while he wrestled with tigers on the hoods of Mustangs and promised slashed prices and bad credit sympathies. White, Southern, country, and goofy, Worthington was local TV’s reigning pop icon of working-class white suburbia.

After disappearing from the airwaves for most of the nineties, Worthington has finally returned. Now, though, his spots are running on radio, on The Beat, one of LA’s leading hip-hop and R&B stations. In between Nelly and Snoop is Worthington 2001 style. It’s the same voice, the same country accent, the same banjo plucking away behind him, the same white car dealer in the same white cowboy hat on the same lot off the 405 freeway, but now Worthington calls Long Beach “The LBC” and talks about car prices that are “the bomb.” We all have our ways of registering just how significant hip-hop’s impact on mainstream US culture has been and for me this was it: something is definitely up when even Cal Worthington of Worthington Ford has gone hip-hop.

The hip-hopification of Worthington is, of course, about little more than chasing market trends and profit margins (if polka was dominating the *Billboard* charts, Worthington would be playing an accordion on top of a beer barrel). Nevertheless, that it is hip-hop that has been internationally recognized as a dominant commercial force, the commercial idiom with which one must become fluent in order to sell products, is the point here. It could be anything else, but it’s not: at the turn of the twentieth century, US popular culture has become nearly synonymous with hip-hop culture, or at least a commercialized and commodity-ready version

of what was laid out as hip-hop culture in the late seventies and early eighties.

Hip-hop has changed the way radio-ready pop sounds (listen to the rhythm tracks that hold up *NSYNC and Britney Spears), changed the way TV advertising works (witness Sprite's glossy campaign featuring rap artists like Busta Rhymes and its more underground campaign, which features unknown freestyling rap MCs culled from the street corner), and further confused the racist logics of *Billboard* sales charts by consistently landing hip-hop albums on the Top Ten charts above rock and pop releases. The impact has of course become increasingly global as well: it has left its mark on local music scenes from Tokyo to Johannesburg to Mexico City, impacted fashion trends across the world, and is guaranteed to occupy a prime spot on the new release shelf of any major chain store. When I recently was in Hong Kong—where Jay-Z's new album was being hyped alongside the new solo album from Wong Kar-Wai acting phenom Tony Leung—a cab driver complained to me that the English his daughter was learning was not the Queen's English that he had learned. "What English does she speak?" I asked. "Ice Cube," he answered.¹

The great change is that hip-hop has gone from being a cumulative inter-American, Afro-Caribbean product of Reaganomic violence on US inner cities, the booming crack trade, and massive deindustrialization campaigns, which shipped jobs out to metropolises and passed off the decimation of affordable housing and public space as urban renewal, to being a confirmed US national commodity that can bring in over \$1.8 billion in sales during a single year (as it did in 2000). The question we're left with, then, may be simply a matter of definition. Just what is hip-hop at the turn of the century? Is it, to borrow a framework from Chela Sandoval, a "differential social movement" that produces a "differential social consciousness," a "theory and method of oppositional consciousness" that becomes a "method of emancipation" (178–83)? Or has it become another commodified object of African-American cultural expression that speaks as much to the construction and performance of race by music industry marketing campaigns as to the construction and performance of race by hip-hop practitioners who use it to imagine new social realities?

Hip-hop is all of this, at once: a bundle of beats, rhymes, and videos—bling-bling on MTV, broke on the underground—that speaks to the heart of the contradictions (and sacrifices and triumphs) that all African-American pop cultural forms have always had to negotiate in order to survive the boom and bust of the mainstream pop economy. In his *New Yorker* chronicle of Jay-Z and the emergence of "corporate rap," Kelefa Sanneh summed it

So if hip-hop's scope has grown so much in the past two decades . . . if indeed hip-hop is everywhere, if indeed there's a little hip-hop in everything, if . . . hip-hop is "trans-historical," "trans-stylistic," and "trans-musical" . . . then what is it?

up like this: "Hip-hop, once a noun, has become an adjective, constantly invoked if rarely defined; people talk about hip-hop fashion and hip-hop novels, hip-hop movies and hip-hop basketball. Like rock and roll in the nineteen-sixties, hip-hop is both a movement and a marketing ploy, and the word is used to describe anything that's supposed to appeal to young people" (Sanneh 60).

So if hip-hop's scope has grown so much in the past two decades (going from noun to adjective), if indeed hip-hop is everywhere, if indeed there's a little hip-hop in everything, if—as Greg Tate puts it in *The VIBE History of Hip Hop*—hip-hop is "trans-historical," "trans-stylistic," and "trans-musical" ("since any sound can be rendered hip hop-able"), then what is it? (393). How do scholars and critics in the academy talk about hip-hop if what hip-hop is has changed so much since the last time it was talked about in any sustained way? This last question is directed mostly to the books that have been published about hip-hop, or in the name of hip-hop, since the 1993 publication of Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*—the first major academic book to refract hip-hop culture through the lens of contemporary scholarship, the first major academic book to take hip-hop seriously enough to analyze it, granting a whole new generation of hip-hop scholars the permission and legitimacy to shape their scholarship around the study of hip-hop.

Rose wrote eloquently of hip-hop artists as "prophets of rage" (99). For Rose, hip-hop was both a marginalized and willfully marginal African-American cultural expression that had an oppositional, contestatory relationship to US racial and economic hegemony, institutionalized US racism and social injustice, and the biased, exclusionary Eurocentric constraints of Western musical discourse that were deaf to the cut-and-mix, sample-and-sequence, scratch-and-cut "noise" of black youth culture. And yet she was well aware of the contradictions beginning to develop, contradictions which all subsequent writing on hip-hop has been born into and forced to deal with: the extent to which hip-hop's counterhegemonic moves and possibilities were always at risk of reiterating the hegemony they were working against. "It is at once part of the dominant text," Rose commented, "and yet, always on the margins of this text; relying on and commenting on the text's center and always aware of its proximity to the border" (19).

Though acclaimed music critic Nelson George published his trade press overview *Hip Hop America* five years after *Black Noise*, he focuses on virtually the same period, but with a different agenda. Where Rose was theorizing hip-hop difference and hip-hop opposition, George is mostly concerned with registering hip-

hop as an “American” art form and an “American” industry. Best known for his previous books on rhythm and blues and the Motown legacy, George was one of early hip-hop’s first and most committed reporters in the late seventies, writing in *The Amsterdam News*, *Billboard*, and *Record World* (where he spearheaded an advertorial feature on the then nascent hip-hop indie label Sugar Hill records) before becoming a leading critic at *The Village Voice* in the eighties.

It is no surprise, then, that George focuses on the two periods he was most involved with, 1977–1987 and 1987–1993, and that he identifies himself as a disillusioned outsider to the contemporary hip-hop scene, “an affectionate older observer.” He fesses up early on: “Because I did not grow up with hip hop as the dominating pop music of my childhood, I don’t have the unvarnished devotion to it that younger writers do” (x). As a result, *Hip Hop America* keeps its critical head pointed backward and George writes a highly personalized “fall from grace” hip-hop narrative with nostalgia as his guide, even choosing to begin the book with a JFK nod: “We would like to live as we once lived but history will not permit it.” George’s principal complaint is that hip-hop’s values have been corrupted by its rise to commercial prominence. “Hip Hop didn’t start as a career move,” he writes, “but as a way of announcing one’s existence to the world” (14).

Hip Hop America is less a cohesive book project and more of a grab bag of anecdotes, reports, and riffs that are connected to each other only through the author’s longing for a hip-hop that no longer is. His chapters are quick snapshots organized by topic—moguls, drugs, sampling—that are not personally intimate or probing enough to add up to a personal history of hip-hop (too frequently he ends up celebrating the accomplishments of his own career: who he knows, what film he’s produced, what he’s written). And at times the center just cannot hold, for example when George stretches to connect hip-hop to the world of professional sports with profiles of Allen Iverson and Mike Tyson. He tries to position them as hip-hop athletes whose rebel poses and brushes with the law and the standards of dominant culture, whose performances of in-your-face blackness, are extensions of the oppositional character of hip-hop.

Beyond the limits of its form and structure, *Hip Hop America* makes two serious missteps in its attempt to deliver a wide angle survey of hip-hop’s major topics and events. First, George repeats the main shortcoming of *Black Noise* by limiting his look at “hip hop America” to “hip hop New York.” While there is no doubt that New York City, specifically the boroughs of the South

Bronx and Queens, are hip-hop's geocultural home base within a broader inter-American and Afro-Caribbean nexus, the music has expanded far beyond the borders of New York, sprouting vital and booming regional scenes across the US and now across the planet. As late as 1998, it seems counterproductive and willfully exclusionary to continue to perpetuate the conflation of hip-hop with New York. For example, George devotes only 14 pages to Los Angeles hip-hop, a scene that cropped up in response to that of New York but has since gone on to become one of the most influential sites of hip-hop production and performance, containing volumes of its own history, its own stories of negotiations with deindustrialization and "dopeman" economics (to borrow an NWA phrase), its own histories of street survivalism and public sphere destruction.² George's longtime *Village Voice* affiliation doesn't make any of this particularly surprising, but it ends up shortchanging the potential of his book by mistaking New York for America, by leveling out regional, local differences in order to present a cleaner, more unilateral account of hip-hop history.

The second misstep is *Hip Hop America's* refusal to take women in hip-hop seriously and its near-ignorance of hip-hop feminist attempts to theorize and think through the contradictions and complexities of gender performance and gender representation in hip-hop songs and hip-hop videos. George doesn't deal with women until close to the book's end and when he does, it is swift, cursory, and dismissive. "If none of these female artists had ever made a record," he proposes, "hip hop's development would have been no different" (184). Comments like this—which defy logic, let alone the actual course of hip-hop history which has indeed been dramatically altered by artists from Roxanne Shante and Salt-N-Pepa up through Queen Latifah, Missy Elliott, and Lil' Kim—reengender "hip hop America" as a masculinist musical nation. George even engenders hip-hop fandom by comparing his relationship to hip-hop to a relationship with a woman: "There have been times I've loved it more than any woman. There have been times I hated it with the viciousness usually reserved for a cheating lover" (22). George's critical chauvinism is particularly disturbing in light of the efforts that *Black Noise* made so many years earlier to address these very issues. George makes no reference to feminist hip-hop critics like Joan Morgan and Karen Goode and refuses to address what Rose so urgently argued in 1993. "As women who challenge sexism expressed by male rappers, yet sustain dialogue with them," she wrote, "who reject the racially coded aesthetic hierarchies in American popular culture by privileging black female bodies, and who support black women's voices and history, black female rappers constitute an important

and resistive voice in rap and contemporary black women's cultural production in general" (182).³

George fares far better when discussing hip-hop's MC alter egos, turntable innovations, and sampling strides in the context of African-American traditions of self-formation through creative practices of appropriation and recycling, of customizing what you're given so it resonates with your own character and attitude: "the hipster's cool bop, crisp stride of the corporate boy, the back-bending b-boy stance" (52). And his destabilizing of hip-hop as essentially and irrevocably "black" is a welcome intervention into the strict black/white racial discourse that so much of hip-hop criticism relies on. George calls the idea of hip-hop as exclusively African-American "an appealing origin myth," pointing out Latino contributions to the culture, the impact of non-US popular music to early hip-hop DJ sets, and the role of white entrepreneurs and consumers. Writes George, "I'd argue that without white entrepreneurial involvement hip hop culture wouldn't have survived its first half decade on vinyl" (57).

The best of George's points—and none of his missteps—are taken up across a more diverse and varied terrain by a collection of journalists and academics in *The VIBE History of Hip Hop*, a helpful, informative, and balanced overview of hip-hop culture edited by Alan Light, the founding music editor of *VIBE* (the glossy monthly hip-hop and R&B magazine created by Quincy Jones in 1994 that on the book's back cover is tagged as "the voice of the hip hop generation"). *The VIBE History* is nowhere near a scholarly text and doesn't try to be, which is part of why it works so well: it documents and chronicles hip-hop across a historical trajectory primarily through the eyes and words of journalists who have devoted large parts of their careers to writing about various aspects of hip-hop culture.

As current *VIBE* editor Danyl Smith admits in the book's introduction, the result is a hip-hop sourcebook that acts as a history only if we understand history to be a selective compendium of stories told through different voices, in different tones, and in different forms (*The VIBE History* moves between historical essays, artist profiles, opinion pieces, and extremely helpful chapter-by-chapter discographies). The stories range across era and topic: John F. Szwed's excellent grounding of hip-hop orality in Caribbean toasting and urban US double dutch, street toasts and story rhymes (where the creole meets the postmodern); Havelock Nelson's informative profile of hip-hop pioneer DJ Kool Herc (a Jamaican immigrant about whom much has been speculated and hypothesized but little has been actually documented in full); and Chairman Mao's been-there, seen-it-all-firsthand praise song to

the techno hijacks and hijinks of the hip-hop DJ who cuts up time, space, and beats on homemade mix tapes and hand-manipulated vinyl.

Mao calls the art of the DJ “the essence of hip hop, the basis on which everything afterward was founded” (78) and makes a purity claim on it that hip-hop history has yet to prove wrong: for all the mutations and modifications and compromises that hip-hop has undergone since the seventies, it is the dynamic, grass-roots creativity and skill of the DJ that have remained constant, undaunted. “Hip Hop’s Darwinian cycle of natural selection has placed its ruthless mack hand down on virtually every discipline of the culture in some way,” he writes, “yet it is DJ-ing which has somehow managed to transcend, reinvent, survive, and flourish throughout” (78).

The VIBE History covers these other mutations by alternately choosing breadth over depth (from Sugar Hill Records to Tupac, Biggie Smalls, and quick takes on hip-hop cousins like dancehall and trip-hop) and depth over breadth (focused explorations of hip-hop’s battles with censorship, hip-hop fashion, hip-hop globalism, and hip-hop graffiti history). The book’s coverage of the West Coast scene fills in the gaps of *Hip Hop America*. Ben Higa’s “Early Los Angeles Hip Hop” essay shows just how active Los Angeles was early in hip-hop history (especially in terms of popping and locking dance innovation), and Cheo Hodari Coker, Carter Harris, and Robert Marriott offer detailed accounts of NWA, Eazy-E, and the gangsta empire of Death Row Records, respectively.

In her finger-snapping contribution to the collection, “Ill Na Nas, Goddesses, and Drama Mamas,” Karen R. Goode disagrees with George on the impact of women in hip-hop. “While the form is both a cultural phenomenon and a microcosm of a larger patriarchal society,” she argues, “the feminism of hip hop informs the weight and the creativity of the genre” (374). Foxy Brown, Mia X, Queen Pen, Lauryn Hill, Missy Elliott, and Da Brat are all “serious women who are not only leading but advancing the form . . . These women are here to save hip hop. Well come” (374). In the collection’s closing essay by veteran hip-hop critic Greg Tate, “15 Arguments In Favor of the Future of Hip Hop,” women don’t just save hip-hop—they are its future. Tate links hip-hop’s increasing commodification to an increasing ethics of testosterone and male dominance and argues that “if hip hop is to survive as a spiritual vessel, it will have to embrace the feminine principle in order to become more physically powerful” (from there, though, Tate then makes a more traditional hip-hop turn by equating the power of women with the reproductive and nurturing locus of the womb:

“Hip hop needs to return to the womb for sustenance, nurture, and guidance”) (387).

Unlike George, who critiques hip-hop out of nostalgia for a bygone era, Tate critiques hip-hop in order to maintain its dynamism and secure its future. He has particularly strong and vital words for any attempt to conform hip-hop to a racial essence when that essence has been constructed in response to capitalism’s buying and selling of blackness in a market defined by centuries of US racism. He writes, “[l]ike the antebellum slavery system and the American religion of racism that evolved from it, hip hop’s audience demands black bodies do the dirty work of sustaining hip hop’s authenticity. The racial imaging of hip hop through mass media, coupled with an apparent desire on the part of the hip hop audience for a pure black form, has advanced a kind of preemptive ethnic cleansing in hip hop that grows more extreme across time” (392).

For Tate, hip-hop must be discussed with reference to the history it comes out of and extends: the history of selling black people and black culture to US audiences, which is inextricable from the legacies of slavery and institutionalized racism. While George is all too eager to accept the arrival of hip-hop in the upper “big Willie” echelons of corporate commerce as a marker of success, Tate refuses to forget the ongoing story of race and money that all black art gets filtered through. For him, hip-hop is far from just a musical innovation or even a cultural movement. It is “an African-American response to the consumerization and disposability of people. It is the vehicle that can represent the misrepresented and compete in the marketplace. Hip Hop is the pop art of race politics” (386).

What *Hip Hop America* and *The VIBE History of Hip Hop* are both clear on is that the hip-hop response that Tate refers to is a generational one. Early in *Hip Hop America*, George makes an argument for hip-hop as the offspring of what he dubs “the post-soul era . . . a product of post-civil rights era America” (viii). It’s an idea that he never fully explores or returns to, but one that S. Craig Watkins makes the subject of his thorough study of African-American filmmaking in the age of “the Hip Hop generation,” *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema*. If you think of hip-hop as solely a three-tiered musical culture (rapping, break dancing, and graffiti writing) then *Representing* isn’t quite a hip-hop book. But if you consider hip-hop, as Watkins puts it, “a generational discourse,” then it is an exhaustive account that explores the economic and political contexts of hip-hop that have enabled a new generation of black filmmakers

to make films about the cultures of black youth that hip-hop has given voice to.

At the heart of Watkins's argument is what he sees as a central contradiction. "The same time that black youth are so prominently figured in the nation's war on drugs, the largest prison industrial complex buildup in history, and tightening welfare restrictions" they are key players in the marketing and expanding of a youth consumer economy. With hip-hop as their primary witness, they have successfully seized popular culture as "a crucial location for expressing their ideas and viewpoints about the contradictory world in which they live" (2).

Unlike the way George and Rose foreground hip-hop as musical performance, Watkins treats hip-hop as a social movement that emerged out of the urban rubble of Reaganomics, the expansion of the welfare state, and "the economic woes of postindustrialism" that disadvantaged the already disadvantaged (24).⁴ He approaches hip-hop as the cultural representative of a social, political, and economic paradigm shift. As a result, hip-hop signifies far more than just a musical practice; it is a way of being for black youth struggling to survive campaigns of racial injustice, economic defeat, and social neglect.

The element of this transformative, expressive culture that Watkins is most interested in is black film, specifically the new generation of independent and commercial black filmmakers that emerged in the eighties and nineties. But Watkins avoids films directly about hip-hop—like *Breakin'* (1984), *Beat Street* (1984), or *Krush Groove* (1985) (a film Gary Dauphin calls in his "Hip Hop In The Movies" contribution to *The VIBE History of Hip Hop* "quite simply the best 'pure' hip hop movie ever made" [205])—and heads instead to Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* (1989), which made Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" synonymous with a trash can thrown through the window of Sal's Pizzeria, and John Singleton's *Boyz n The Hood* (1991), which starred former NWA rapper Ice Cube, put a realist, dramatic narrative on "straight outta Compton" gangsta philosophy, and helped catapult what Watkins dubs "the urban ghetto film cycle" to commercial success. Lee gets the most attention, though, a filmmaker whom Watkins believes is the most hip-hop of all (though he never actually states it that way) because he "typifies the entrepreneur who has transformed marginality . . . into a source of opportunity by responding, in innovative fashion, to social, economic, political, and cultural changes" (107).

In *Hip Hop America*, George argues that films like *New Jack City* (1991) and *Menace II Society* (1993) "have largely failed the culture" (109). Dauphin argues that these "hip hop movies" were

all too often “only tied to hip hop at the point of sale, featuring young black men who, between buying records and sneakers and particular fits and brands of jeans, had an alarming tendency to blow each other’s brains out over wounded pride and drugs” (206). But Watkins chooses to neither laud nor condemn the “repetitious production of ghetto-theme action films” and instead investigate it as yet another component of hip-hop’s social, generational sea change: the film industry’s response to the popularity of gangsta rap and “the perversely prominent rise of the postindustrial ghetto in the American popular imagination” (171).

Watkins’s insistence on discussing hip-hop as both a generational and social category in direct dialogue with transformations in the economy resonates loudly in Nichelle D. Tramble’s debut novel, *The Dying Ground*, which is subtitled “A Hip-Hop Noir Novel.” The “noir” part makes immediate sense. Tramble’s 23-year-old Berkeley undergrad protagonist Maceo Redfield is a black detective by circumstance. His best friend Billy, an entry-level crack hustler, ends up dead at the corner of College and Alcatraz in Oakland in 1989. Billy’s girlfriend, whom Maceo has loved for years, flees the scene and the Bay Area, putting Maceo on a classic noir hunt for answers in a world that won’t give him any. As he says late in the novel, he runs a race he has no chance of winning, and he runs it amidst the shadows and corpses of urban black Northern California, from televised funerals at the CME cathedral to manic drives on the 580 freeway to the “Tombs” lockup in downtown Oakland.

The novel’s hip-hop affiliation is more difficult to pin down. Save for characters like Black Jeff and Mike Crowley, who quote Eric B and Rakim in their freestyles in front of Rasputin’s record store, and infamous Oakland underground MC and mogul Too Short, who shows up at Billy’s funeral, there is little actual hip-hop itself in the book. *The Dying Ground* is not saturated in hip-hop form the way that Ricardo Cortez Cruz’s 1992 novel of South Central surrealism *Straight Outta Compton* was. On its back cover, Larry McCaffery dubbed *Straight* “the first major rap novel” because Cruz wrote like a DJ, fading and cutting between chunks of prose, sampling voices and singers, crossfading narrative into a collage of rants, riffs, and paragraph ciphers on a post-Rodney King Compton block where palm trees had perms and kids “scratched music on cement.” In this sense, then, *The Dying Ground* is not a “rap novel” at all—Tramble writes with careful, studied pacing and follows a traditional linear narrative arc—but in the sense of hip-hop as a generation-defining social movement for black youth, it most surely is a hip-hop one.

The Dying Ground begs an important question for scholars

of contemporary literature: What makes a novel hip-hop? Does a hip-hop novel have to try to replicate the aesthetic practices of hip-hop culture—the flow of an MC, the beats of a DJ, the jagged curves of a graffiti artist, the attitude of a b-boy? Does it have to come with a Def Jam CD, plugs of Sony artists, and a PNB Nation marketing tie-in like Ronin Ro's flimsy pulp flop *Street Sweeper* (2000)? Does it have to have characters directly based on hip-hop icons, like the versions of Tupac, Biggie, and Suge Knight who fueled the West Coast manhunt of Gar Anthony Haywood's excellent 1999 mystery *All The Lucky Ones Are Dead* (1999)?

Bertice Berry uses a little of each of these tactics in her novel *The Haunting of Hip Hop* (2001), which tries to cash in on hip-hop's profit clout while taking spiritual high ground against it—the hip-hop novel as anti-hip-hop novel. The simplistic plot is delivered with a heavy hand: she gives us Harry “Freedom” Hudson, a successful hip-hop producer who becomes a “slave” to the corporate skyscraper plantations of the rap industry. For Berry, a sociologist who doubles as an inspirational speaker and a stand-up comedian, hip-hop is “hollow” music that uses the sacred African drum to send “the wrong message” to the next generation.

Thankfully, Tramble's novel has more in common with those of Cruz and Haywood and its relationship to hip-hop runs deeper. *The Dying Ground* is set just two years after Too Short started building his empire selling *Born to Mack* tapes out of his trunk in East Oakland (a history that Billy Jam maps out in his profile of Too Short in *The VIBE History*), but Tramble resists employing hip-hop as a literary trick or marketing device. She follows Watkins in treating hip-hop as a social movement lived out through popular culture, a generational consciousness defined by a litany of federal put-downs: the economic disintegration of American inner cities, the redistribution of funds away from public parks and schools, the massive deindustrialization campaigns that exported factory jobs away from urban workers. At one point late in the novel, Maceo Redfield thinks aloud about what links him to his friends: “The three of us, at twenty years of age, were connected by abandonment and pain. Our parents, in their own unique ways, had made the choice to disregard us and forever relegate us to orphan status . . . I didn't want to explore the ways in which Billy was linked, or Chantal, or Scottie, or even Smokey, but the bottom line was drugs, the common denominator for us all. Drugs and a self-hatred so deeply embedded in the psyche of our community that we gave away the souls of our children for a golden calf” (252–53).

That this generation is not only hip-hop but, as George would have it, “post-soul” and “post-civil rights America,” is lent

further credence in *The Dying Ground*. When Tramble's Maceo goes down to the Oakland city jail to bail out a friend, he sees a photo of Black Panther Huey P. Newton on the wall; Maceo thinks that Newton's death on an Oakland street corner "was representative of where we were and all that was yet to come for us. The night of his death he was out searching the streets . . . for drugs at a dangerous hour, in a dangerous city with a dangerously short memory" (202). A few years later, Newton would become an icon of hip-hop radicalism. But in the 1989 of *The Dying Ground*, he is just another fallen hero reduced to the ash that covers the Oakland streets. Beneath all of their serious differences, what is hip-hop for Tramble is what is hip-hop for *VIBE*, Watkins, and George: the urban ash that covers everything and everyone until it becomes a code for triumphant living, the only way possible to see enough of the world around you to make your place in it and rise above it, both on and off the page.

Notes

1. Writing on hip-hop's global impact is now beginning to surface. For two good recent examples of hip-hop's presence in Japan, see Nina Cornyetz and Joe Wood.
2. For treatments of West Coast hip-hop, see Robin D. G. Kelley; Brian Cross, *It's Not About A Salary. . . : Rap, Race, and Resistance in Los Angeles* (1993); and William Shaw, *Westside: Young Men and Hip Hop In L.A.* (2000).
3. See also Joan Morgan and Danyel Smith.
4. For a sustained account of music's ability to act as a social movement that generates the production of new cultural knowledges, see Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (1998).

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