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Review of *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and The Production of Black Cinema*

By: Nikitah Okembe-Ra Imani

Representing: Hip Hop Culture and The Production of Black Cinema, by S. Craig Watkins. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. \$30.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-226-87488-5

S. Craig Watkins's *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* is an imposter. That is to say, the "hip hop" part of the subtitle has nothing to do with the substance of the text as I read it, leaving one to wonder whether it was chosen as a marketing strategy.

As a scholar of hip-hop, I found it particularly jarring that Watkins chose the strategy of the forces he theoretically spars with, by equating hip-hop culture with, alternately, gangster rap and then African-American male youth culture in general. Hip-hop culture is a cultural aesthetic that incorporates styles of literature, clothing, oral expression, visual representation, and dance. It emerged as a response of the oppressed to the stifling economic and social conditions of urbanization in New York. As its commercial potential was recognized, it came under the direct influence of the corporate culture that Watkins correctly categorizes as exploiting cultural manifestations and symbols. One of the effects of this co-optation, infiltration, and invasion of hip-hop culture was the inversion of many of its main themes of cultural reconstruction, multiculturalism, and spirituality. Ultimately this culminated in the reduction of hip-hop culture largely to its oral form, its corresponding dissociation from the cultural system, and strategic engineering of the culture's adherents toward conspicuous consumption.

The problem is that Watkins treats this diseased, malformed corporate creation, which runs counter to hip-hop, as the cultural system itself. Thus we find two strategies interwoven through-out the text. First is a direct link drawn between the "ghetto dysfunction" theme, characterized in African-American film and commercialized by Hollywood during the 1980s and '90s, and hip-hop culture. The only way comparability can be established here is to equate the "gangster rap" metaphor, and the associated music often accompanying the films, with the cultural system. I believe this to be a false equation.

Second, and even more debilitating, is that once this dubious connection is made (actually, more taken for granted), the explication of the other elements of the cultural system, or the effect of capitalism upon them, is rendered unnecessary. The role of the turntable instrumentalist, the break dancer, the graffiti visual artist, and all others is at best implicit and presumed to be consistent with the overriding ghetto theme.

Last but not least, at times hip-hop is mistakenly taken to be the whole matrix of cultural production by African-American male youth. Hip-hop is larger than African-American male youth culture, and it does not exhaust the contributions of that culture. Watkins's failure to grasp this creates a problem in the level of analysis that plagues the text throughout. I am convinced that the term hip-hop was added only because of a few anecdotal references to it, because the central thesis involves African-American male youth culture, and because it has particular resonance as a cultural commodity at this time.

The book is really about and does a more admirable job of dealing with the production of black cinema. In this guise, it has two distinct phases. It begins with an emphasis on Spike Lee, treating him as the representative example of the new wave of African-American cinema during the period presented in the text. The weakness is that Spike Lee strikes one as a rather convenient choice, given that few of the others

mentioned have gained similar influence and status. In any case, the book does an admirable job of constructing a critical biography of Lee's experiences within the political, social, and economic context of the time.

The latter half of the book stalls when it tries to change the level of analysis to focus on macro issues involving the "ghetto" theme in African- American cinema dealing with males. It seems to argue that the pathological profile of self-destruction that characterized the theme, not to mention the incipient sexism, was a form of resistance to hegemonic culture. My conclusion, based on external knowledge of contemporaneous sociological and cultural trends, as well as on the data the book itself presents, is that this profile is part of a longer historical theme of "black" pathology which has always been commercially viable in film. This dates back even to *Birth of a Nation* in the early 1900s, which suggests that the book presents as immediate and contemporary something that has been a part of an ideology of white supremacy in society and Hollywood since the advent of the studio system. To call this trend "success" within the con- text of those pre-existing oppressive scripts is for me a particularly unsavory and inaccurate conclusion.

Please don't select this book for knowledge about hip-hop culture or for the origins of the pathological theme within African-American film. Select it instead for an insightful, scholarly, and thorough treatment of social, political, and economic factors impinging on the production of film, American and African- American film in particular.