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## **Electronic Article**

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## **Post-Civil Rights Music; Or Why Hip Hop is Dominant**

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If soul music was the unspoken sound track of the pleasurable side of the Civil Rights movement in the US (and by extension Canada) in the 1960s, hip hop is the music of Martin Luther King's civil rights dream. The dream I speak of here is the one vernacularly translated as that of black boys and white boys holding hands together. Some would say it is his nightmare. What do I mean? Hip hop is the most multicultural of popular musical forms – all races and ethnicities are involved. Simultaneously hip hop is also the most racialized, and indeed the most blackened, musical form of our times. How did this happen and why should it be of interests to music scholars? In this short essay, I will attempt to suggest that a healthy understanding of contemporary popular musics and the commodified baggage of race has much to offer reconceptualizations of music studies. I bring to the conversation a commitment to interdisciplinary scholarship or what some would call cultural studies.

Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman have edited a tome concerning music and the racial imagination in an attempt to intervene meaningfully in music scholarship, and to make it more interesting and relevant to larger questions of culture. The editors invoke race to mean more than Black and White (in spite of what I will do here, I agree with that important distinction) and the essays work way beyond that particular divide to demonstrate the ways in which one of the central technologies of late Enlightenment and Modernity has continued to impact and organize our lives in insidious and complex ways. Importantly, then, the text tackles the social and the political as important implications for culture and musical scholarship. Radano and Bohlman have produced an interventionist text, but they have also done something else and something more. They

have consciously brought to music scholarship questions from the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field we call cultural studies. Identifying the role that cultural studies plays in the formation of the text is crucial to understanding the nature of Radano's and Bohlman's intervention. Their assumption is, and it is one that I am more than inclined to agree with, that music scholarship needs to address itself to "larger questions and concerns" more explicitly. But equally telling and important is the assertion that the pretence of not addressing "larger questions and concerns" by music scholarship thus results in restating and perpetuating the status quo. Put briefly and simply – Europe and Euro-North America makes music, and all the 'others' make cultural gestures on the route to making music. The status quo spoken of here is the central role that race and raciological thinking plays in music scholarship and the organization of the discipline.

Cultural studies is "an intellectual practice of politics" that makes the questioning of disciplines a central part of its strategic, pragmatic and self-reflective practice. Thus, what Radano and Bohlman offer are a collection of essays that reflect on the ways in which late Enlightenment and modernism's articulations and organizations of racial difference continue to shape human culture, in this case music scholarship. The task here is not to rehearse the content of each of the essays but to discern how the essays provoke new and or different kinds of questions for music scholarship. In this regard the text must walk the very difficult line of denying the existence of race as a category and simultaneously speaking the effects of racism on and in the lives of racialized others. This skillful dance is necessary if the discipline of music studies is to seriously encounter its own very public crisis of knowledge, a crisis that has been felt in many other disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. To provoke such a crisis is to know that the instabilities of music scholarship have already appeared, have been noticed and probably debated and that these instabilities having now been revealed will not go away. Thus, *Music and the Racial Imagination* is really the second blow in the crisis that has already begun for music scholarship. Centering a conversation about race and racism in

music scholarship helps to bring the crisis to the fore as opposed to remaining a low intensity conflict, felt by many, but not often seen publicly. Thus in many ways this is music scholarship's encounter with the radical potential of cultural studies to ask different and difficult questions, to stake different kinds of claims, and to make the discipline reflect upon itself anew.

The consequences of reflecting anew should bring to music scholarship some perspectives and questions that many of us who work on music, decidedly outside of the confines of music studies, have grappled with for some time now. These questions and perspectives are related to how music scholarship has placed a premium on attempting to appear neutral. As Radano and Bohlman point out in their introduction the modern discipline of music studies cannot be conceived outside of the prevailing and ongoing formations of racist and racial discourses of modern times. Thus, music scholarship must find ways to deal strategically and forthrightly with both the pernicious effects of race and racialized thinking—if, that is, it is to engage in a project of knowledge production that seeks to enable humankind to live life differently from its present formation. Cultural studies brings to music scholarship the insistence and the demand to mean and do something beyond the small confines of disciplinary boundaries.

Such claims as I stake them out and as the editors and essayists point to demonstrate that music and its pleasures are deeply implicated in the political and social organization of human life and are simultaneously reflective of human concerns and life. Thus, how to use music as a tool for thinking about and assessing human life is at stake in the text. The scholars in *Music and the Racial Imagination* collectively bring to music scholarship insights from ethical studies, queer theory, and post-colonial studies (to name just a few) as ways of broadening what might be at stake in music scholarship. But what is equally important is that given the reading of modernity that the editors offer, the concerns that the essayists bring to music scholarship were never outside music scholarship in the first instance. It has been music studies' denial of the complexity of its

very constitution that has been at stake. The enormity of raciological thinking and its impact on shaping the modern world has infiltrated all aspects of modern and postmodern conditions of life. Claims to the contrary can only be based on an active refusal of the ample evidence of post-1492 resistances by those who were made less than human in that moment of European ascendancy. The reverberations of the European expansionist project continue to organize numerous aspects of our lives today.

Rap music has developed from the effects of race and racism in the Americas. The Americas constitute the best possible laboratory of the enactment of the European raciological project. To map the history of that project is to chart the ways in which North American racism and ghettoization; migration across the Americas into the USA; and other cultural forces come together to produce an art form that is truly cut and mix and thus immediately opens itself up to all forms of appropriation. Rap music and its place in hip hop culture is a quintessential postmodern art form – cut and paste, bricolage, collage. It is the open spaces in rap music and hip hop culture that make it an art form that can sustain interventions from those not immediately resonant with the history of origins. Thus the White rapper is and should not be a surprising phenomenon. Similarly, First Nations rappers or rappers from a wide range of racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds should be no cause for surprise. The form lends itself to appropriation – that form is itself an appropriative form. The Americas – all of it – is a creole space.

What can rap bring to music scholarship? The persistence of raciological thinking and its deep impact on the ways in which postmodern human life is lived is immediately evident in rap music. The cross racial identification that is evident by the largely male publics attracted to its rhythms is a story that concerns the persistence of race and raciological thinking in music and the larger culture. The poverty that gave rise to the inventive beats of rap and hip hop culture is invested in post-civil rights economic, educational, and cultural policies that rendered the urban Black poor less than citizens within the U.S. populace. King's dream was lived for them as a nightmare. This

circumstance (severely truncated for space reasons here) simultaneously dragged along with it certain persistence racial stereotypes that have emerged as the most important signifiers for the cross-racial marketing of rap and hip hop culture. The most obvious of those racial stereotypes have been criminality, rampant sexuality, and a particular kind of machismo that places Black men in a position of being a kind of ongoing menacing attraction. This small package has been used to market rap music across cultural and importantly economic tastes. It works because the deep embeddedness of raciological thinking is fundamental to its attractions. That is, attraction to rap music and its authenticity is located within the ongoing cultural, but now revised, notion of black primitivism. Thus Black boys and White boys hold hands in the production and reproduction of ongoing raciological thinking in the debasements that populate much of commercial rap music. The multicultural dream as nightmare is highly marketable and profitable.

Scholars working within the paradigms of cultural studies have consistently read more than the music of rap music to make sense of its cultural impact. This insistence on reading music as a significant connector as well as an expression of social and political conditions is an insight that can bring much to music scholarship. To make such claims is not to suggest that the mentioned concerns are not already part of music scholarship, but rather to pose the concern that they do not occupy the kind of space and attention that they should in music studies. Thus, what we are really faced with is the overwhelming disciplinary policing of music scholarship to keep at bay matters that implicate more than questions of aesthetic appreciation and repertory. I deliberately chose to use hip hop in my discussion here because popular music and racially defined musics complicate the ways in which musical form and content might be understood. These musics put at stake the question of what music is supposed to do, what it is used for, how pleasure is derived from it, and a host of contradictions, disappointments and pleasures that require us to see music as something more than form and content. Creolization, syncretism, hybridity, and

other such terms that speak directly to the cross-racial, cross-cultural dimensions of the post-1492 world complicate the racialized story that some musics are pure with a clear lineage of descent while others are mongrel.

Once raciological thinking is tackled, the story that music scholarship in its dominant disciplinary forms seeks to tell is a story that can no longer be sustained by current theoretical, archival, and largely discredited knowledge. That is to say, this “new” information puts new questions on the table, requiring different ways of coming to knowledge. Music scholarship’s repressed have returned to uncover and make central to its founding the place of race, racism and raciological thinking. One of the small but significant stories of rap music’s arrival on the cultural scene was the evisceration of music programs in urban schools. This first world structural adjustment policy led to the direct relationship between access to instruments for making music and the remaking and reconstruction of the turntable and vinyl as instruments. This creative endeavor largely spurred by urban Black, male youth represents I believe a strong rebuke to music scholarship’s lack. One must ask: Why are most of the histories of rap music written outside of music studies proper?

By engaging the centrality of raciological thinking the project of music scholarship might find itself centrally involved in the side of knowledge production that seeks to remake humankind so that, as Sylvia Wynter has put it, “new forms of social life” might become possible. This is no small task. But it is a task that *Music and the Racial Imagination* demands we undertake.

### **Biographical Information**

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