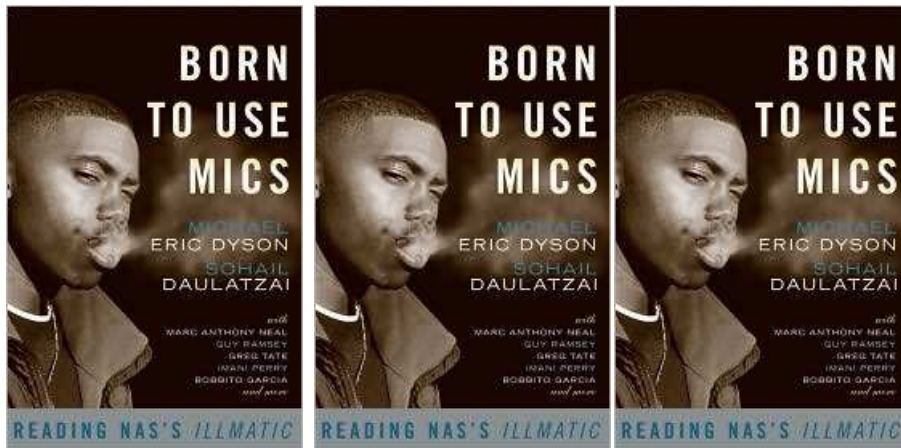


Born to Use Mics



a book review

by

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Daulatzai, Sohail and Michael Eric Dyson, eds. *Born To Use Mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2010, pp.320)

Born to Use Mics is a novel intellectual endeavor that brings a newfound literary and scholarly esteem to the rap album. Edited by Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai, it enlists ten of academia's most renowned Black scholars and public intellectuals to critically engage a singular rap album: Nas' 1994 debut release and magnum opus *Illmatic*. The chapters of the book parallel *Illmatic*'s track listing and each song on the album commands its own interpretive chapter and scholarly inquiry. *Born to Use Mics* aims to leverage *Illmatic* as a lens to better understand hip hop (both the culture and its practitioners) and the material realities that informed the album. Most importantly, *Born to Use Mics* endeavors to highlight the transformative lessons that can be gleaned from *Illmatic* now and applied moving forward.

The text thereby attempts to establish itself as not just a book that explores hip hop through *Illmatic*, but rather a source that explores America through *Illmatic*. And at its best, Sohail Daulatzai's essay "A Rebel to America: "N.Y. State of Mind After the Towers Fell" represents *Born to Use Mics'* ability to do so. The essay probes "that fertile ground and volatile minefield that gave birth to {*Illmatic*}: the post-Civil Rights and Black Power era, the Reagan/Bush/Clinton years of white backlash, the shifting sands of race and the emergence of the global economy, the crack era and the formation of an urban police state" as well as "the premillennium tension leading to 9/11, and the Bush II years that followed" (3). Daulatzai historicizes "N.Y. State of Mind" (the second song on *Illmatic*) in a global context of expanding American imperialism and the Black and Brown resistance fighting it at each turn. This internationalist perspective powers Daulatzai's brilliant insights concerning the dialectics of American identity and empire, ideals that Nas both affirms and resists within the lyrical contours of "N.Y. State of Mind." Daulatzai notes,

All over in this fantasia, throughout the shantytowns and outposts of empire, skull and bones fill mass graves as the killing fields have become theme parks, a brave new world built as a cross between Disneyland and the West Bank. In fact, in the last days lament that is "N.Y. State of Mind," Nas suggests that New York might just be that—a state of mind—something that's not geographically bound, that's borderless, amorphous, asymmetrical, ephemeral, dangerous... the song is a dystopic allegory for American global power. Because it's that New York state of mind that Nas refers to that is also an American state of mind...It's a state of mind that is both domination and resistance, the prison house and the inmate rebellion. (39)

"A Rebel to America: "N.Y. State of Mind After the Towers Fell" offers a far more cogent reading of *Illmatic* than the text's other chapters because it grounds the album in a critical discussion of exploitative power relations. Lacking the same political impetus and analysis, the other chapters in *Born to Use Mics* are cumbered with the reoccurring oversight of an inability to address—or perhaps even understand—the role hip hop (specifically rap) plays in furthering America's imperialist agenda and the capitalist impulses of its ruling class. While almost all of the book's contributors speak to the gross commodification of hip hop and the repetitious stream of debasing messages and images that signal such commodification, none attribute it to the hegemonic machinations of the ruling class to exercise leadership (read: domination) over subordinate groups through ideological controls (Dimaggio 15). In his necessary book, *I Mix What I Like: A Mixtape Manifesto*, Jared Ball argues that "[c]olonialism¹ requires an assault on the immaterial culture of a people in order to protect an assault on their material realities" (4). Therefore, the commodification of hip hop "moves beyond the sale of music," and "[w]hat is ultimately at stake is the regulation of communication and the management of populations who have been targeted for subservience" (10).

In other words, the ability to determine which forms of cultural expression are disseminated and which are suppressed is purely ideological and serves the colonizing purposes of producing and managing consciousness that ultimately determines behavior, obscures the underlying colonial relationships and inevitably “assure[s] that power remains unchecked” (120). Most importantly, Ball contends that, “No amount of popular, sanctioned media is anti-colonial,” which “demands that we shake off tendencies to find comfort zones within mainstream media” (38). Its assemblage of inventive and brainy analysis notwithstanding, this is exactly what *Born to Use Mics* does—exploit the radical dimensions of *Illmatic* to further buttress hegemony by giving credence to mainstream media comfort zones—specifically the studio album.

Cultural nationalism undergirds *Born to Use Mics*. Thus the book advances ideals that appear counter-hegemonic but they ultimately reinforce the tenets and practices of the dominant class. For example, in chapter one “It was Signified: The Genesis,” Adilifu Nama contends that hip hop’s commodification results from hip hop’s cultural amnesia rather than the mainstream (read: ruling elite) media’s systematic manipulation of hip hop to manage consciousness and behavior. Nama claims that hip hop was co-opted due to its proclivity to “wager its relevancy on the popular acceptance of new hedonistic spectacles and their ability to outsell the previous sonic craze” (28) rather than heed the “transformative impulse” of its collective memory “fermented in the fear, faith, and juju magic of the black experience, a transformation witnessed in those intrepid persons who took the first furtive steps off the plantation and were never dragged back” (18-19). Such romanticized explanations serve as a poor and, frankly, dangerous substitute for the causal analysis advanced by Ball. They privilege reactionary identity politics that glamorize the past while trivializing (if not altogether ignoring) the current structural workings of an exploitative system of class rule impacting the faceless, nameless Black and Brown populations that Nama purportedly defends. This is why Frantz Fanon aptly asserts that, “Seeking to stick to tradition or reviving neglected traditions is not only going against history, but against one’s people” since “tradition changes meaning” when a people struggle for sovereignty against a tyrannical regime (160).

In the chapter, “Time is Illmatic,” Guthrie Ramsey Jr. makes claims similar to Nama’s when explaining the nexus between Black music and media corporations. Ramsey oversimplifies this colonial relationship as the contestation between artistic autonomy and “artistic output as commodity,” (65) thereby attributing hip hop’s commodification to marketplace trends rather than power relations. His oversimplification is indicative of a nationalist politics that treats culture independent of political economy, and as Michael Parenti warns, “[O]ne cannot talk intelligently about culture if one does not at some point also introduce the dynamics of political economy and social power” (17). Ramsey’s analysis posits that *Illmatic*’s critical acclaim was “hip hop’s response to *the strange bedfellows of art and commerce*” as hip hop celebrated an album that aesthetically “rubb{ed} against the grain of industry expectations” (68) {emphasis: added}.

Again, completely ignoring the power dynamics at work, Ramsey suggests that hip hop can resist its co-optation by simply affirming an album while doing nothing to disrupt the colonial relationship that mainstream media imposes on hip hop in the first place. Ramsey's inept analysis results in even sloppier semantics as he places hip hop on an equal footing with the corporations through the cliché that "art" and "commerce" are "strange bedfellows." Ramsey's imprecise language mystifies the reality that "it is the will of the corporation beyond the innovation of the artist that must dominate the relationship in order for that relationship to exist at all" (Johnson 81). Moreover, the mere inference that hip hop can be co-opted suggests that the culture and its forms maintain a radical essence in and of themselves. This completely ignores the evolution of a retrograde capitalist ethos that hip hop seems insistent to nurture and further evidences a cultural nationalism bent on inventing traditions and reifying culture from political economy.

Perhaps the reasons why the contributors in *Born to use Mics* are unable/unwilling to recognize how a militant artist like Nas and a radical project like *Illmatic* reproduce hegemony stem from their refusal to see themselves as complicit in the (re)production of hegemony from their own imperial locations within the university. As Wahneema Lubiano notes, the role of the Black activist intellectual is a dubious one because the "one place the state makes its presence felt, but is not necessarily named is the university." And the university's "domination is so successful precisely because it sets the terrain upon which struggle occurs at the same time that it preempts opposition not only by already inhabiting the vectors where {activist intellectuals} would resist (i.e., by being powerfully in place and ready to appropriate oppositional gestures), but also by *having already written the script that we have to argue within and against*" (68) {emphasis: added}.

Lubiano's observation of academia's racist, colonial power structure calls into question more than the politics of *Born to Use Mics*; it challenges the enterprise of the book itself. As Ball argues that mainstream media appropriates hip hop after sanitizing/emptying out its radical properties, so Lubiano contends that radical intellectualism has been "in many ways thoroughly appropriated, diluted, and neutralized," with the result that hegemony and the hierarchical power relations it bulwarks "remain completely unchallenged." This is easily evidenced by the burgeoning field of hip hop studies that *Born to Use Mics* represents. As Lubiano notes, academia can seamlessly continue "business as usual" by offering "a selection of ethnic or racially specific courses" without ever challenging the epistemological tenets of domination that form the political relationships and material realities that govern how our world is constructed (68).

Sadly, *Born to Use Mics* follows this template. It offers *Illmatic* as a “Black,” discursive site of inquiry but does little to challenge status quo power relations. Whether in James Peterson’s relativist pardon of “the come-up” (i.e. hip hop’s practice of predatory “by any means” capitalism to achieve the American Dream) or his endorsement of Afrocentric cultural knowledge to stave off nihilism (which he ironically purports to be both the cause and consequence of Black suffering), or Marc Lamont Hill’s attempt to change Nas from a self-professed “thug intellectual” to a *public* intellectual, or Kyra Gaunt’s feminist politics that call for a more satisfying system of gender representation within the heteronormative conventions of coupling, or Eddie Glaude’s affirmation in bourgeois notions of rugged individualism overcoming racially-targeted and systematically-blighted poverty-stricken communities, or Imani Perry’s subscription to the fantasy of the oppressed where the exploited accrue supernatural powers in the subjugated spheres of the margins, *Born to Use Mics*’ insistent drive to treat culture as an autonomous force independent of power relations voids its revolutionary potential.

And despite its frequent laments of how the entertainment industry appropriates rap, *Born to Use Mics* teaches us nothing on how to avoid the corporate commodification of hip hop. It simply demonstrates academia’s prowess to do the same. The book’s contributors boldly contend that they use *Illmatic* as “our weapon” to “chronicle and probe that American landscape in {the} war against oblivion,” (9) but *it ain’t hard to tell* that their culturalist politics fundamentally undermine their would-be radical rhetoric and subversive posturing.

Notes:

1. The language of “colonialism” and the categories of “colonizer” versus “colonized” are specific to Ball’s text. While I agree with Ball’s underlying premise that hip hop must be understood relative to America’s hierarchical power relations, I find the colonial framework inadequate to address the full complexities of ruling class machinations in the United States. I will expound upon this and how a Marxian class analysis is better equipped for this work in a forthcoming review of *I Mix What I Like: A Mixtape Manifesto*.

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