

What is This Thing Called Hip Hop Studies?: A Response to Saucier and Woods

Editors' Note: Below we present a dialogue spurred by the publication of P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods's article "Hip Hop Studies in Black," published in the June-September 2014 issue of the journal (volume 26, pages 268-94). Nicholas Forster's commentary on that piece, "What is This Thing Called Hip Hop Studies?" is published first. It is followed by a response by Saucier and Woods.

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The recent piece "Hip Hop Studies in Black" poses a number of provocative questions regarding the relationship between Hip Hop Studies and Black Studies. In this article P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods saliently address a variety of problematic absences in contemporary hip hop scholarship and suggest that Hip Hop Studies re-engage with the promises of Black Studies. Saucier and Woods initiate a much-needed discussion in their clarion call for Hip Hop Studies to reckon with the discourse and realities of global antiblackness through an analysis of hip hop historiography. A critical intervention in its critique of current scholarship, this essay also overlooks key intellectual contributions by black feminist thinkers who have provided tools to understand how black bodies and black artists have existed in what Hortense Spillers has called "the interstices" (Spillers 2003).

At its heart, "Hip Hop Studies in Black" explores the ways in which Hip Hop Studies runs the risk of becoming merely another mechanism by which "the antiblack world continually finds new ways . . . to consume and use blackness" (Saucier and Woods 2014: 268–269). This risk is real and the authors' attention represents a critical step forward in rethinking the relationship between Popular Music Studies, Hip Hop Studies and Black Studies. Still, their argument is shaped by a rhetoric that leaves absent voices lingering in the gaps on the page, haunting the piece but never fully resounding.

Although Saucier and Woods brilliantly situate Black Studies as a discipline "emanating from the context of black revolution in the 1960s,"

the boundaries and positioning of Hip Hop Studies remain blurry (271). While careful to note that "hip hop studies is not homogenous," the authors are less meticulous in their use of texts such as Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, Tricia Rose's *Hip-Hop Wars* and unexpected choices like Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* to metonymically speak for the entire discipline (269). Drawing the state of a field is unquestionably a difficult task; however, this broad approach conflates Hip Hop Studies with hip hop pedagogy and ultimately neglects important practical and theoretical distinctions between the two fields of inquiry.

Examining the work of scholars such as Rose and Chang, Saucier and Woods claim that "most of hip hop studies is undergirded by a twofold problematic" in which racism is treated as a performative act and "the history of antiblack sexual violence is recast . . . as a matter of economic exploitation and racial prejudice" (270). These claims become the guiding threads for the article, but they sometimes appear to be projected onto the scholarly works in question, rather than read out of them. Similarly, the authors' configuration indelicately subsumes hip hop pedagogy—an educational approach often used to prepare teachers for secondary schools with different instructive possibilities—into a branch of Hip Hop Studies. This may mislead readers: while hip hop pedagogy owes much to Hip Hop Studies, the two disciplines remain distinct, and the unique complications of a high school teaching environment require a certain emphasis on praxis not always available to rigorous theoretical work.¹

This approach manifests itself in the authors' discussion of individual works enmeshed in ongoing discourses within Hip Hop Studies. Whereas the authors of this essay strive to cover as much theoretical ground as possible by engaging with a wide variety of texts, their argument may have benefited from a more detailed analysis of a small sample of key texts in Hip Hop Studies. Here Saucier and Woods seem to gloss complex arguments in favor of a more general explication of the discipline. While this mode is successful as a polemic, the specifics of certain texts and the broader role of individual performance and experience become less important in the constitution of what the authors call the *longue duree* of antiblackness. Attempting to critique each monograph in the space of a few paragraphs threatens to undermine a task that requires precision and potentially forecloses the possibility for further dialogue.

In their analysis of Dimitri Bogazianos' book *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs*, Saucier and Woods claim that "Bogazianos argues throughout *5 Grams* that the emergence of crack

cocaine, a fairly recent development, rather than the centuries-deep structure of antiblackness, forms the ‘lethal core’ of what [Bogazianos] calls ‘a larger criminological structure of feeling’” (282–283). Without the source material at hand, an unfamiliar reader may assess this as a fair critique of Bogazianos’ central argument, which places the foundation of what Raymond Williams called a *structure of feeling* on the introduction of crack cocaine. A closer look at Bogazianos’ book shows that the authors cite the book in a manner that supports their argument but does not fully represent Bogazianos’ sentence. Bogazianos specifically situates crack cocaine not as *forming* (in Saucier and Woods’ phrasing) but as “represent[ing]” a structure of feeling “that has risen to dominance in public life during the past thirty-plus years” (Bogazianos 2011:7).

This selective use of citation decontextualizes Bogazianos’ work and is unfaithful to the spirit of his argument. The transformation of the word “represents” into “forms” allows the authors to argue against a claim that Bogazianos does not put forth. Bogazianos refers to an era in time and suggests that crack cocaine stands as representative of that moment rather than constitutive of a longer history. The entirety of Bogazianos’ claim reads: “In order to convey crack’s social complexity and symbolic power, I have borrowed a phrase from historian Raymond Williams to suggest that the American experience of crack cocaine represents the lethal core of a larger criminological structure of feeling that has risen to dominance in public life during the past thirty-plus years” (7). An argument may exist that Bogazianos fails to address the history of antiblackness; however, the swiftness with which Saucier and Woods pivot from this truncated sentence to criticizing Bogazianos for not framing “the crack dealer turned rapper” as anything “but an updated position of blackness, no different ethically or politically from ‘slave’ or ‘criminal’” evinces a reluctance to engage with a specific historical moment, one which is different from the present, though certainly not unrelated (Saucier and Woods 2014: 283). This is a bold claim, but one that would feel more substantial if the authors addressed what it might mean for there to be different ethical or political possibilities and positions.

For Saucier and Woods, Bogazianos’ book is emblematic of a larger failure to recognize this era of hip hop as “merely one chapter in the *longue duree* of antiblackness” (283). It seems critical to me that this era is not just another *chapter*, that the histories of crack, the histories of hip hop and the histories of specific urban spaces over the last sixty years are more like an imbricated collection of maps folded over one another. Each meeting place

represents an entire volume's worth of histories, lives, bodies, bureaucracies, epistemologies and ontologies.

In framing such a moment as “merely one chapter” of antiblackness, the authors de-historicize the musician's position in a changing cultural and political landscape (283). Slick Rick, Rick Ross, Grandmaster Flash, Ice Cube and Queen Latifah become, like Ralph Ellison's Tod Clifton, “plunged out of history” (Ellison 1994: 431). Undoubtedly, such artists exist in the *longue duree* of antiblackness, but the various modalities of antiblackness and the resulting political possibilities are unquestionably different. The culture and politics of our current “post-racial” moment are, as Woods argues in a different article, “not simply a return of earlier modes of racist culture, nor . . . merely a continuation of an unbroken white supremacist society” (Woods 2014: 38). Woods' comments, which emerge in an article examining Lil Wayne's song “Mrs. Officer,” speak to the importance of what he calls “further develop[ing] a critical stance that deals honestly with the ethicopolitical context in which black art, black performance, black social movements, and black popular culture find expression” (21). These contexts are multifaceted and are constituted on both a macro and micro level just as they are spatially and temporally influenced. In this argument, Woods gracefully examines the relationship between performance, individual experience and the larger structure of global antiblackness.

Such attention is not always present in “Hip Hop Studies in Black.” The past still seethes in the objects and events of the present; what Saidiya Hartman has called the afterlife of slavery still reverberates. In ruling out the various machinations of antiblackness, Saucier and Woods' powerful claim becomes more totalizing but also somewhat weakened. That hip hop is now part of a broader culture industry that crosses mediums and explodes national boundaries suggests a different political existence than what was available to black popular music before. This is not to assert a Whiggish history that would lead to some sort of liberatory reckoning of multiculturalism, but rather to suggest that the tools of analysis in this instance are critically different than those that emerged from other eras in the *longue duree* of antiblackness.

In Hartman's path-breaking book, *Lose Your Mother*, the recognition of slavery's afterlife is enacted in part through narration-as-speech act—the afterlife of slavery haunts not just in the “skewed life chances” and “premature death” of black bodies but in being itself (Hartman 2007: 6). As Hartman writes, “I, too, am the afterlife of slavery” (6).

Part of Hartman's brilliant theorization is in the trembling of the prefix *after*: the contemporary moment is not one of slavery, but slavery still resonates. Hartman reveals the complexities of this project, interrogating how individual announcements and spaces of mobility or fugitivity are possible. In this utterance, reconciliation of a past is refused but history remains brokenly reconstructed, left as fragments in the present. This process of reconstruction emerges in part from Hartman's speech-act, her individual acknowledgement. This kind of existence does not appear in the vision of antiblackness that Saucier and Woods put forward, bound by a framework that swallows whole the possibility of finding significance in individual lives and histories. Further the authors' vision does not fully account for the theoretical groundwork established and elaborated by black feminism.

Tricia Rose's foundational work in the field of Hip Hop Studies remains an exception that proves the rule. Although Saucier and Woods provide a brief critique of Rose's *Hip Hop Wars*, the authors end their account with the rhetorical question, "Is there really any difference between avowedly progressive critics such as Tricia Rose and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting . . . and avowedly conservative critics such as [Juan] Williams and [John] McWhorter...?" (Saucier and Woods 2014: 283). To answer this question in the negative would be to reduce the work of Rose and Sharpley-Whiting to a series of sound bites, as both Rose and Sharpley-Whiting have been involved in creating new avenues for black feminist scholarship throughout the last twenty years. Saucier and Wood's question minimizes the work of black feminists in a structure of academia that so often undervalues the validity of such scholarship.

Saucier and Woods critique Rose for her "preference for law and order" and her disapproval of the popular stop-snitching movement heard in hip hop songs throughout the early 2000s (279). The authors' critique is important and is representative of a tradition of black radical thought that challenges the very authority of the state, which is made all the more apparent as acts of state-sanctioned violence become acts of spectacle. Still, though Rose and McWhorter may share a belief concerning what Rose calls "the culture of no-snitching," the two come to similar statements through fundamentally different cultural, political, and ethical desires and aspirations (Rose 2008: 226). While Saucier and Woods compare McWhorter's claim that rap is "holding back black people" with Rose's work, the different underlying methodologies and stakes in each claim belie their comparison (qtd in Saucier and Woods 2014: 283). McWhorter speaks from an absolutist linguistic position in which hip hop lyrics are

seen to reflect a specific reality. As the subtitle of McWhorter's 2000 book, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*, suggests, McWhorter has a certain belief in self-destructive tendencies, which manifest themselves in the supposed pathologies articulated in hip hop. This is a position antithetical to Rose's decades-long research and engagement into communitarian politics and the instability of language as viewed by the polyvocality of rap's *hidden transcripts*, which are "highly visible, yet difficult to contain and confine" (Rose 1994: 101). While Rose may share certain skepticisms with McWhorter, they emerge from very different positions, which reject an equivalency.

The politics of citation matter, and they are all the more important in an essay framed as a call to address the historical persistence of the "essential structuring antagonism" of antiblackness (Saucier and Woods 2014: 276). The charges that Saucier and Woods make are sure to be influential, but in not fully contending with past work they subject certain authors to the space of the interstices. Black feminist thinkers remain relegated to the palaces built in the great chasms of history, part of what Spillers described as the "great invisible empire of womankind" (Spillers 2003: 153).

The call for Hip Hop Studies to engage with Black Studies is critical. And, if the account provided by Woods and Saucier regarding the rise of Hip Hop Studies departments and the dismantling of Black Studies departments is true (anecdotal or empirical evidence would help substantiate this claim), such a call is even more important. But this move toward a broader historical narrative of global antiblackness should not come at the expense of black feminist voices who have been addressing precisely these structures of dominance over the last half-century.

Black female musicians from Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and Lucille Bogan to Nina Simone, Lauryn Hill and Erykah Badu have provided critical frameworks that address these very questions, and scholars such as Hazel Carby and Hortense Spillers have reckoned with these debates since the 1980s. The scholarship of black feminists has often been elided and thus, as M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty argued in their foundational anthology, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, a "deliberate focus on questions of genealogies, legacies, and futures" is fundamental to feminist praxis (Alexander and Mohanty 1997: xvi). To turn away from the task of tracing a genealogy of black feminism is to turn away from those who have been critiquing the project of modernity and have generously provided a language to better understand antiblackness. Without reckoning with the foundation laid by

these scholars explications of antiblackness begin to lose their power and poignancy as they appear to emerge without a history. Unfortunately, this trend has been all too common: in 1986, writing on black women's blues and *The Color Purple*, Hazel Carby detailed the continued practice of critics who repeatedly "ignor[ed] the specific contradictions of an urban existence in which most of us [black people] live" (1998: 471).

Spillers speaks precisely to the issues that Saucier and Woods raise, yet she remains absent from their essay. It was Spillers who, discussing the role of black female blues singers, explained that "Black is vestibular to culture. In other words, the black person mirrored for society around her what a human being was not" (Spillers 2003: 155). The relationship between black bodies and state-sanctioned violence was also powerfully surmised in Elizabeth Alexander's groundbreaking essay "'Can you be BLACK and look at this?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)." With a parenthetical extension which denies the closedness of a singular video, Alexander describes a broader history of documents that enact the violence of the Rodney King video, but also probes local histories and various "artistic examples [that] militate . . . against a history of narratives of dominion which have attempted to talk black people out of what their bodies know" (Alexander 1994: 108). With regard to contemporary popular music studies, scholars such as Marcileyna Morgan, Imani Perry, Zandria Robinson and Regina Bradley would be hard-pressed to find room to make an intervention in the vision of the discipline that Saucier and Woods put forward. (Perry's extensive work in *Prophets of the Hood* is relegated to a footnote and a bibliographic citation.) Afro-pessimism may be, as Fred Moten recently suggested, one of the most important contributions to critical theory in recent times, but its ideas did not emerge *ex nihilo* (Moten 2013).

There are ways of building on the relationship between contemporary Black Studies and Hip Hop Studies more broadly conceived. A recent special issue of *The Black Scholar* offers a model, both providing a critical examination of what Black Studies is now and suggesting new ways of theorizing the current state of antiblack violence. Throughout the issue scholars such as Alexander Weheliye, Katherine McKittrick and Christina Sharpe attend to the historical realities shaping Black Studies and also theorize the contemporary antiblack world as being, in Sharpe's words, "in the wake" (Sharpe 2014). Sharpe's conceptualization of the wake is helpful in thinking about the relationship between white supremacy, the *longue duree* of antiblackness and how history speaks to lived experience. As Sharpe writes, "wakes are processes; through them we think about the

dead and about our relations to them; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory. Wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual” (60). It is through this emphasis on process that explanations of antiblackness can point to layers of histories. The multiplicitous meanings of the wake also refer, as Sharpe signals, to “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow” where multivalent histories and becomings are made possible (60). Sharpe’s capacious theoretical term allows for an engagement with present conditions and calls for an attention to the history of those conditions. The shapes of the waves are similar but remain distinct, different in form and possibility.

In an essay cited by Saucier and Woods, Fred Moten urges the reader to follow him as he “linger[s] in, rather than quickly jump[s] over, the gap between fact and lived experience” (Moten 2008: 180). It is this space of the interval that Hip Hop Studies might attempt to inhabit. It is in this space that Hartman and scholars such as Tavia Nyong’o have insisted on the necessity of “critical fabulation” (Hartman 2008; Nyong’o 2014). It is in this space that one can begin to acknowledge the very real conditions of antiblack violence that structure quotidian life. This is a space gestured at in the concluding paragraph of “Hip Hop Studies in Black,” a passage dedicated to asking difficult questions about the role of teachers and scholars in a discipline that has a serious engagement in worlds outside of the academy. Scholars in Hip Hop Studies, Black Studies and Popular Music Studies would benefit from taking up these questions.

The experiences and lives of black folk end too often tragically early, but the histories of those lives, while never fully understandable, should not remain silent. Individual lives are not merely sentences in a longer chapter of the *longue duree* of antiblackness: they constitute an ever-changing but similar present. It is the work of scholars to attempt to interrupt what Saucier and Woods, building on the work of Hartman, call *fungibility*, and to challenge the undergirding framework of black accumulation. In the wake of the recent killings of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Rekia Boyd and too many others whose names will never be known and who therefore will be denied even that unconscionable act of forgetting, scholars must attend to the realities of antiblackness and the particularities of each moment. It appears, that in Saucier and Woods’ entirely correct insistence that Hip Hop Studies reckon with Black Studies and black genocide, they may be too willing to jettison the specificities of such lived experiences.

Note

1. This is not to suggest that hip hop pedagogy should be safeguarded from critique. However, the critical rubric for examining pedagogical praxis requires nuance and differs in kind rather than degree from the textualist methodologies of cultural studies approaches which undergird much of Hip Hop Studies. Hip hop pedagogy frames hip hop as a cultural prism that provides connective threads of light between individuals and formal and informal educational communities, often couched in a language of “empowerment” and “voice.” In some ways these philosophies present themselves as easily marketable under neo-liberal conceptions of individualist efforts. However, a merely linguistic or textual approach to these educational methods seems to me, not to fully engage with the practical possibilities. See thehiphopproject.org and Marc Lamont Hill’s *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*.

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