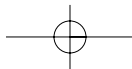


Kitwana, B (2005) *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America*, New York: Basic Civitas Books

This latest offering by the former executive editor of *The Source* magazine is an ambitious attempt to discuss the relevance of hip hop to changing “racial politics” (2); and the future of coalitional political alliance-building in the United States. The preface states that “The premise of this book is simple yet long overdue: the national conversation about race in this country has yet to catch up with the national reality” (xi). Six subsequent chapters attempt to detail what that national reality is, in the author’s view: namely, that after two decades of mainstream media visibility and almost one decade of complete mainstream media saturation, hip hop culture has irrefutably changed young peoples’ understanding of race in America.



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In a previous work (*The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*, 2002) Bakari Kitwana defined the “hip hop generation” as “African Americans born after the civil rights movement between 1965 and 1984” (165). Perhaps in response to critiques of that racially – and temporally – conscribed category, most notably by fellow hip hop public intellectual, activist and amicable sparring partner Jeff Chang in his (2005) *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, Kitwana expands his scope in this book to address “the full range of American youth who identify with this youth culture” (166). Indeed, *Why White Kids* posits the promise and potential of hip hop precisely in its ability to attract adherents across racial divides, and to further widespread understanding that “corporate elite free market democracy for the few” (206) is disadvantaging the majority of US youth, regardless of race.

The book is divided into two sections. Following the preface and an introduction, Section One is entitled “Questions: Do White Boys Want to Be Black?” and includes Chapter One, “Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop,” Chapter Two, “Identity Crisis? *More Than Acting Black*” and Chapter Three, “Erasing Blackness: *Are White Suburban Kids Really Hip-Hop's Primary Audience?*” Section Two is called “Answers: From W.E.B. Du Bois to Chuck D” and contains Chapter Four, “Wankstas, Wiggers and Wannabes: *Hip-Hop, Film and White Boyz in the Hood*”, Chapter Five, “Fear of a Culture Bandit: *Eminem, The Source, and America's Racial Politics (Old and New)*,” and the final chapter, “Coalition Building Across Race: *Organizing the Hip-Hop Voting Bloc*”. It's worth noting the curious slippage between the gender specific terms “white boys/boyz” and the gender neutral term “white kids” in these titles, which repeats elsewhere throughout the book.

The unevenness of this book owes largely to the fact that it reads as several incipient book projects spread somewhat disjointedly across these six chapters. The first, and presumably primary, project, as indicated above, is buoyed by hopeful visions of the future and posits a new racial politics emerging among those who cannot remember a time before hip hop. Arguments for this surface primarily in Chapters: One, Two, Four, Five and Six. Unfortunately, many of the claims made are sweeping and unsubstantiated, and, as this is by no means an academic text, there is little in the way of a citation trail. Witness this statement from page 192: “Hip-hop politics, just like hip-hop music and culture, has an intrinsic appeal to all Americans”.

More compelling are the relatively few places where the book discusses in detail a handful of whites involved in hip hop culture and activism, drawing from interview material to narrate their coming-to-hip-hop and coming-to-politics stories. It is here where the book goes some way towards fulfilling expectations raised by its title. Though these few examples, found mostly in Chapter Two, can't be expected to substantiate the book's broader claims, they are valuable in the glimpses they provide of the complexity and range of white attachments to hip hop culture. They provide such significant shifts in tone and texture, though,

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that they read like a second, entirely different book project. Unfortunately, these intimate stories only form a small part of the book, and are counterbalanced by far too many generalities.

A third project, confined primarily to Chapter Three, follows a polemic trajectory and seems at odds with the rest of the book. “Erasing Blackness” sets out to prove why black Americans still control hip hop. Having heard too often the familiar refrain (for many, a lament) that hip hop music is now a genre marketed by mostly white music executives to a majority white buying public, Kitwana bristles at implied suggestions that blacks are no longer a significant part of the equation. To the book’s credit, it does raise valid questions about the ways dubious Soundscan statistics have been widely interpreted as established fact. Point taken, but curiously, in its pedantic emphasis on the demographics of the listening public, this chapter misses opportunities for a more interesting and nuanced discussion of the complexities of race in hip hop.

Overall, this book does not completely succeed as social history, political analysis, or manifesto. What could have been a powerful insight into the effects of hip hop culture on racial politics in America, and the stakes involved in forging political coalitions in the 21st century, falls disappointingly short. Like some others writing about the power and potential of hip hop to bring about social change, Kitwana struggles to adequately convey hip hop culture’s generative tensions (some would say glaring contradictions) without himself sounding contradictory. Other writers, such as Chang or Kelley (1994; 2003), manage this balancing act with more nuance and style.

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