

Straight Outta Compton . . .Via New York

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Abstract

Sounding Race in Rap Songs explores the production of musical identity in hip hop's first two decades as a commercial genre. Although I don't ignore lyrics or visual imagery, my main purpose is to analyze rap music as music, to understand how specific artistic decisions contribute to racial meaning in particular songs.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Black Studies, Cultural Studies, Digital Media, Hip Hop



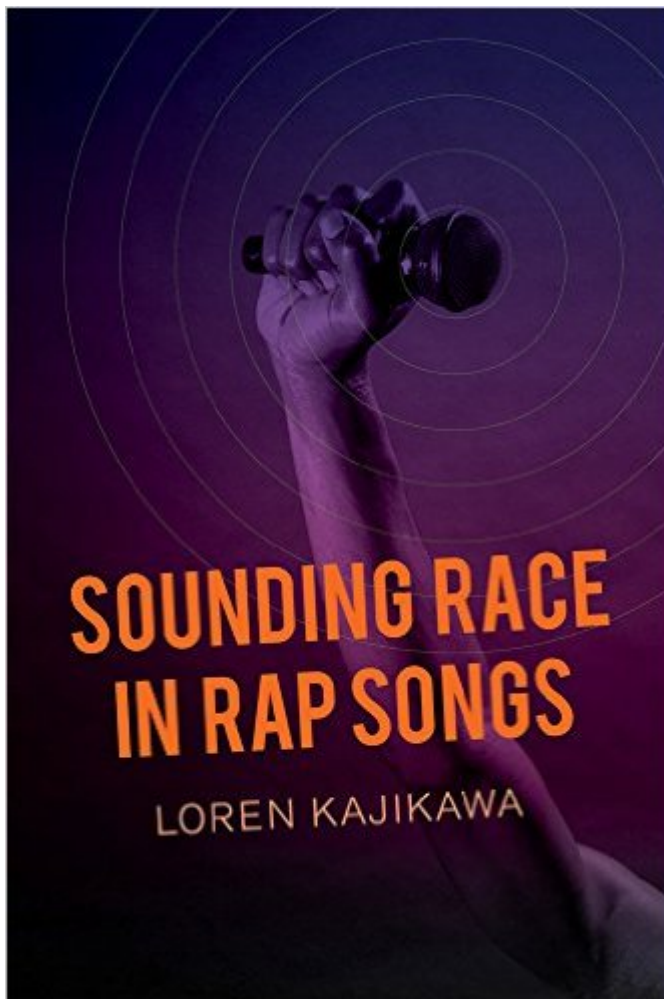
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Sounding Race in Rap Songs explores the production of musical identity in hip hop's first two decades as a commercial genre. Although I don't ignore lyrics or visual imagery, my main purpose is to analyze rap music as *music*, to understand how specific artistic decisions contribute to racial meaning in particular songs. My methods revolve around the study of how producers manipulate breakbeats, also commonly known as "breaks." Initially understood as short, percussion-heavy passages that appear in many songs recorded in the 1960s and 1970s, breaks have been central to hip hop from the [music's earliest days in the South Bronx when DJs began isolating and looping them on their turntables](#) to the delight of dancers. Since then, producers have tried out new approaches to working with breakbeats: hiring studio musicians to re-record them; programming drum machines to imitate them; and using sampling-sequencing technology to capture and rearrange them.



Throughout the book, I describe how producers use breaks and give rise to musical-racial codes that can be manipulated to project a variety of identities and attitudes. The following excerpt from the third chapter of *Sounding Race*, explains how the style of beat making popularized by the New York-based [Bomb Squad](#) (Public Enemy's production team) provided a blueprint for pioneering west coast gangsta rap group N.W.A's depiction of Compton, California. By layering multiple loops into a dense, cacophonous mix, N.W.A transposed Public Enemy's "[too black, too strong](#)" sound onto the world of Los Angeles's postindustrial streets.

N.W.A and its former members have been in the news recently thanks to the biopic *Straight Outta Compton*. Yet one aspect of the group's development downplayed in the film is the way that its members formulated their identities in relation to east coast rap. In the mid-1980s, New York was the undisputed center of the industry, and its influence on L.A.-based acts is easy to see and hear. Ice Cube's first group C.I.A. (Cru' In Action) used a nasal, hockey style approach to rapping cribbed directly from the Beastie Boys 1986 album [License to Ill](#). And the cover of N.W.A's first album [N.W.A and the Posse](#), features numerous group members posing with the giant clock necklaces made famous by Public Enemy's Flavor Flav. In similar fashion, the beat Dr. Dre produced for "Straight Outta Compton" (the title track to their breakout 1988 album) followed the Bomb Squad's potent formula for signifying militant blackness. —**Loren Kajikawa**

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The following is an excerpt from Chapter Three “‘Let Me Ride’: Gangsta Rap’s Drive Into The Popular Mainstream,” of Loren’s Kajikawa’s [Sounding Race in Rap Songs](#), with thanks to The University of California Press. Any notes have been included in the text to conform to *Sounding Out!*’s style sheet.

We [Public Enemy] were in Vegas and they [N.W.A.] were on tour with us, and I had just got the vinyl in. That's what this is all about. Because Run-DMC and LL Cool J gave me energy. And if our energy happened to be transferred to N.W.A., then that's what this whole thing is for." Chuck D as quoted in Brian Coleman, [Check The Technique: Liner Notes For Hip-Hop Junkies](#) (New York: Villard Books, 2007), 354.

According to Chuck D, Public Enemy's musical style directly influenced Dre, and he recalls giving the first two copies of [It Takes a Nation of Millions To Hold Us Back](#) to Dr. Dre and Eazy-E prior to the album's official release. The recorded evidence supports Chuck D's recollection. For many of the tracks on [Straight Outta Compton](#), Dr. Dre seems to have borrowed from the "loops on top of loops" style of Public Enemy's Bomb Squad.



<https://youtu.be/TMzi25Pq3T8>

In fact, when Ice Cube left N.W.A. in 1989, he hoped that Dre would continue to make beats for his solo project. When this proved impossible due to Dre's contractual obligations to N.W.A., Ice Cube began collaborating with the Public Enemy's Bomb Squad, which served as the production unit for his album *Amerikkka's Most Wanted* (1990). N.W.A.'s breakthrough was finding a way to put a distinctive spin on these influences, and the artistic strategy that they arrived at for their first Ruthless Records release was designed to put themselves on the map—both literally and figuratively.

Rather than shout out the multiplicity of neighborhoods where their members were actually from (as they had done in *"Panic Zone"*), N.W.A. chose to center their identity around Dr. Dre and Eazy-E's hometown of Compton, California. The sound of Compton as Dr. Dre imagined it, however, drew on musical practices and artistic decisions similar to those found in Public Enemy's *"Rebel Without a Pause."* To construct the rhythmic foundation of *"Straight Outta Compton,"* Dre looped the breakbeat from The Winstons' *"Amen Brother"* (1969), one of the most sampled beats in hip hop, that also served as the foundation for dozens of songs in the UK's *"jungle"* (aka *"drum and bass"*) genre.



https://youtu.be/GxZuq57_bYM



Like other heavily sampled breaks from this era, the one-measure loop features a syncopated interlocking of snare and bass hits that is reminiscent of *James Brown's "Funky Drummer"* (featuring *Clyde Stubblefield's famous beat*). As if he were following the Bomb Squad's exact formula, Dr. Dre layered a drum machine (Roland TR-808) over this break.

♩	1	-	+	-	2	-	+	-	3	-	+	-	4	-	+	-
Hi-hat	o	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Kick	k		k													

The 808 was programmed to add its characteristic bass boom to the first two drum kicks of the “Amen” loop, and to tick off a 16-count hi-hat pulse with a closing hi-hat clasp on the downbeat of every other measure. The “Amen” break and the two hi-hat parts, provide the rhythmic foundation around which Dr. Dre places numerous other repeating sounds. Two other ingredients stand out in this beat: a guitar ostinato and a low drone on what sounds like a baritone sax or trombone (or perhaps a downwardly pitched sample of another instrument). The guitar ostinato, which plays straight eighth-notes on E-flat except for a one step descent to D-flat on the “and” of every fourth beat, churns out tight 1-measure units of sound.



The horn drone (also on E-flat) has a raw, muddled quality, and casts an ominous cloud over the track.

By combining these layers with the dense percussion track, Dre created a tightly packed funk groove with many sonic similarities to Public Enemy’s Bomb Squad. Like “Rebel Without a Pause,” the track to “Straight Outta Compton” features tight 1-measure loops stacked on top of one another to create a thick and intense groove.

<https://youtu.be/q0b0jlaCEHU>

Public Enemy, “Rebel Without a Pause”	N.W.A., “Straight Outta Compton”
Akai Drum Machine	Roland TR-808 Drum Machine
“Funky Drummer” (looped <u>breakbeat</u>)	“Amen Brother” (looped <u>breakbeat</u>)
“The Grunt Pt. 1” (trumpet glissando + guitar)	Low-pitched horn drone + guitar riff

Comparison of layers of looped sound in Public Enemy’s “Rebel Without a Pause” and N.W.A.’s “Straight Outta Compton”

Except for the drone, most of the elements in the track have a punchy feel, full of rhythmic stabs and staccato attacks, including the automatic gunfire that Dre samples to follow Ice Cube’s reference to an AK-47 assault rifle. Due to the “noisiness” of the beat, the way sonic space seems filled to maximum capacity, the members of N.W.A.—similar to Public Enemy’s Chuck D and Flavor Flav—practically yell their verses, as if they must raise their voices in order to be heard over the cacophony. Even before the actual words to “Straight Outta Compton” are digested, the sound of the track and the group’s vocals evoke the palpable tension of imminent conflict, which reinforces

the theme of violent confrontation in the song's lyrics. For the chorus of "Straight Outta Compton," Dr. Dre strings together a series of samples with rapid-fire precision. The sound of screeching car tires from [Davy DMX's "One for the Treble"](#) is followed by turntable scratching; the scratching leads directly to a choppy sample of the words "City of Compton" from Ronnie Hudson's "[Westcoast Poplock](#)," which is then followed by more scratching. The whole chain of musical events is deployed over the breakbeat from [Funkadelic's "You'll Like It Too,"](#) which Dr. Dre splices into the beat just for the chorus. The rapid cutting from one sample to the next exemplifies the "rupture" Tricia Rose identifies as fundamental to hip hop's post-industrial aesthetic in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (39).

Thus, the music and lyrics for "Straight Outta Compton" depict the city as a place of extremes, where things happen fast and change is sudden and complete. It is a place where one is either equipped to deal or left behind. In this way, Dr. Dre exploited the spatial characteristics encoded in Public Enemy's music to depict Compton as place. The sonic characteristics that animated Public Enemy's militant blackness were rerouted and effectively transposed onto N.W.A.'s depiction of Los Angeles gangstas.

Loren Kajikawa has served on the faculty at the University of Oregon's School of Music and Dance since 2009. His main area of research and teaching is American music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and he offers a variety of courses in music history, ethnomusicology, and musicology. Kajikawa's writings have appeared in *American Music*, *Black Music Research Journal*, *ECHO: a music-centered journal*, *Journal of the Society for American Music*, and *Popular Music and Society*, among others. His recent book *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (University of California, 2015) explores the relationship between rap music's backing tracks and racial representation.



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