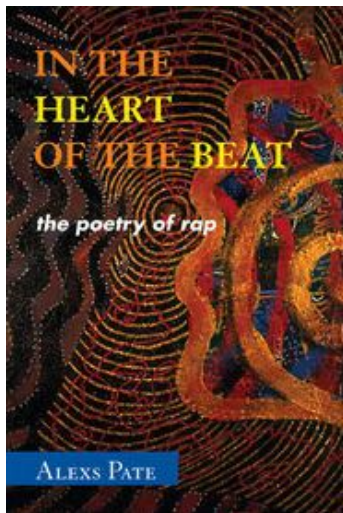


## Book Review

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### **In the Heart of the Beat** the Poetry of Rap

Alexs Pate



The Scarecrow Press, Inc.  
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Alexs Pate's *In the Heart of the Beat* begins with an anecdote from his childhood days in North Philadelphia. Johnny, a boy in the neighborhood who survived a car accident, was subsequently involved in a conscious process of reorientation of speech as a means to counter his disability. What the 'Professor' (Johnny) and rappers share in common, however, is their sense of exigency in speech and their need to articulate and prioritize their distinct worldviews from a position of marginality and oppression. In fact, orality has been one of the defining features in Black cultural history, one that has sustained African American sanity and self-expression. In this book Pate, therefore, makes an attempt at disengaging the poetry of rap from the claims of music and hip hop beats and validates the 'speech' of rap by subverting the conventional notions that determine its popular consumption.

In separating rap from its musical component, Pate establishes the primacy of the text and places it in a literary tradition that may be traced back through the Black Arts Movement. The poetry of rap celebrates a system of values that legitimizes the principles of black aesthetic. The 'historical continuum' that Pate speaks of leads him to draw parallels between KRS – One's "Who Protects Us from You?" and Langston Hughes's "Who but the Lord?", Aceyalone's "The March" and Bob Kaufman's "Private Sadness", Tupac Shakur's "White Man'z World" and Claude McKay's "The White City", Queen Latifah's "Ladies First" and Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" etc., on the basis of their creative impulses and thematic affiliations. Pate

points out that there is the same degree of despair, anger and resistance ringing throughout rap as had been resonant in Amiri Baraka's call to create "poems that kill."<sup>i</sup> Here also he cites examples of the use of progressive jazz, gospel, and other musical forms in the poetry productions of African American poets like Hughes, Baraka and Giovanni, thereby pulling out and joining threads of evolution and legacy in the development of rap.

A deliberation on 'rap/poetry'<sup>ii</sup>, a term that clearly indicates the author's intent, precludes a discussion on the 'nonliterary' quality of rappers, and yet the absolute agency and sophistication with which they use literary devices and poetic structures. Here Pate suggests that this book proposes to conduct a systematic 'reading' of the best rap/poems produced, an assertion which falls in line with his initial statement about eschewing in his analysis all that is 'popular' about rap music. The exclusion of the popular from within its own realms, however, makes a dangerous proposition and lends itself to a dichotomy on questions relating to ideology and focalization. In his explication on layering and texture in rap, for instance, Pate offers illustrations from "How to Rob" by 50 Cent, a name that the author had himself disavowed in his prefatory proclamation in the opening chapter of the book. If the book aims at identifying the 'good' poetry in rap, how does one characterize the generic conditions in which so much of the popular rap originates and operates? This is an issue that Pate does not address in any of the expository sections. The critical fulcrum thus shifts and turns at mysterious points despite all the intense and irreducible description that Pate provides. This polarization, therefore, reinforces in a way the cultural binary in the reception of art that the book itself seeks to destabilize.

In chapter seven Pate catalogues, in a rather prescriptive manner, the different elements of 'rap/poetry', such as saturation, language, imagery, texture, meaning, structure/form/rhythm, and flow, which serve as parameters for approaching a qualitative analysis of rap lyrics. Saturation refers to the level of authenticity of the hip hop experience presented in a rap/poem. Here Pate contrasts the impact of the lines "Woke up in the back of a tray/ On my way, to MLK/ That's the county hospital jack/ Where niggaz die over a little scratch"<sup>iii</sup> from Ice Cube's "Alive on Arrival" to the chunky lyrics of a McDonald hamburger commercial that exploits the rhythm and structure of rap.

While discussing the function of codes in rap, Pate makes references to the act of signifying that adds complexity to the language rappers use. He also dwells at length on the various aspects that apparently constitute the negative energy of rap. However, profanity, violence, misogyny, sexism, homophobia are all shown to be persistent realities of urban inner-city life. Pate shares his own reservations on issues of gender and racism and the ethical implications that they bear. But he defends the "normalized" profaneness in the language of rap by analyzing the features of common discourse and by suggesting the matter-of-fact-ness of such linguistic (mis)occurrences. He, therefore, directs and expects the readers/listeners to look beyond the obvious and try exploring the real depth and beauty of rap/ poems, an effort which is rewarding but not purely innocent. Pate's concern over the feminist question is overtly expressed in his treatment of the two rap/poems, "Dear Mama" and "Wonder Why They Call U Bytch", by Tupac Shakur. He has also included specimens in the form of LL Cool J's "I Need Love" and Common's "The Light" to show how (in these cases) gender issues have been dealt with in a favorable light, involving a great deal of sincerity on the part of the speaker.

Nevertheless, in both the poems/songs, the objectification of woman is secured without an attempt at retrieval.

In the final segment, Pate scores out a thematic categorization of rap/poems. Tradition, crime and punishment, social criticism, urban ghetto life, gender, relationships, roots, hip hop, parody, and spirituality are some of the content credits under which the rap/poems are clubbed. The author hereby purports to demonstrate the range and variety of rap/poetry as such.

Pedagogic reviews acknowledge the effectiveness of hip hop and rap in generating critical literacy among learners in academic environs. Hip hop texts have been scrutinized to explain important literary terms and techniques and to show how relevant social dialogue may be negotiated within a poetical framework. Pate clears new ground by making a complete re-evaluation of rap following the lines of poetry, pure and simple. His assessment of the poetic potential of rap music is much appreciated, and much awaited is the anthology of rap/poems that he proposes to publish.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Amiri Baraka's "Black Art," in Alexis Pate, *In the Heart of the Beat: The Poetry of Rap* (Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010), p. 20.

<sup>ii</sup> Alexis Pate, *In the Heart of the Beat: The Poetry of Rap* (Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010), p. 3.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

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