



## Careful not to judge a book by its cover

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The Vancouver Sun

*Thursday, April 12, 2007*

VANCOUVER - Sometimes you really do have to be careful not to judge a book by its cover.

Ghetto Nation by Cora Daniels is a perfect case in point.

The cover is a masterpiece of modern marketing. With muted traditional red, white and blue tones, a stern steely-eyed Uncle Sam, covered in flashy jewelry, and displaying gang gestures, stares out at you. With striking juxtaposition, it seizes your attention in both presentation and topic. Overall, the whole thing looks like a rather compelling cultural read.

That's where the disappointment begins.

The book you think you're getting from the cover is not the book that's there once you open it up. Not really a book, but more a draft of a magazine article that never seems to come to a conclusion, Ghetto Nation is a meandering tirade by Daniels against what the journalist sees as the denigration of culture into strip-club aesthetics and movie-line-jumping manners.

For Daniels, this rot has spread from the narrow-minded and threatening postures of hip hop to celebrity red carpets, suburban malls, vaulted political offices and high society of modern life.

Not really the most original of insights but you hope after getting through the first few pages, that there is more to come. Unfortunately, there isn't.

Lacking much historical context or poignant purpose, what you get is a whole bunch of dashed-off asides like "let's be honest, pop culture isn't that creative. Instead it is inherently reactive. With profit always the goal, there is only one rule: give the people what they want." What does that even mean? The answer - under the cliches - is, like the book itself: nothing.

It's easy, and perhaps even fulfilling, to sum up the increasingly aspirational down-marketing of society with the wide berth comment that "not only are we embracing the worst, but we are also taking pride in doing so" as Daniels does.

And certainly for a lot of people over 35, hip hop, which is the real focal point of the book, seems like a disjointed monologue of bravado and violence over top of other people's music.

But because of the beats, the DIY attitude, the sense of individualism, the community and the savvy of the genre, I love hip hop.

At the same time I - like many other fans of the genre - hate what so much of it, in the pursuit of a fat bankroll and bloodied status, has become in recent years. This is not - as Jesse Jackson, Vernon Jordan, Bill Clinton, Maya Angelou, and Public Enemy's Chuck D among others - have said, what the Civil Rights movement fought for and what Martin Luther King Jr. died for. Nor is it, despite those who try to wrap themselves in the glory of battles they never showed up for, what the Black Panther Party, Richard Pryor and others stood up for. It just isn't.

Perhaps we excuse the flagrant sexism, the relentless violence, the contempt for education and the contemptibility of some elements of the idiom because we are afraid to reject it. Perhaps it is because we don't want to seem uncool or old fashioned, or because we hope it'll just go away - but it won't and we shouldn't.

That's a discussion well worth having, but it's a hard discussion and certainly not the one articulated in

Ghetto Nation. In that sense, Daniels is guilty of exactly what she criticizes. In the past few years, there's been, on both the right and the left, an increasing tendency to fall prey to the "name it and they will believe" style of argument.

Rhetoric replaces discussion, passion overrides precision and shouting fire in an unlit theatre is thought to be a virtue. While I have no doubt Daniels' intent, as a critic, an African-American and a women against hip hop, which often denigrates all three in one form or another, is true, the results are too fickle. The journalist, who has written for the New York Times and Fortune and appeared on PBS's Charlie Rose, probably wouldn't like to be compared to the likes of Ann Coulter, comedian Bill Maher or rapper 50 Cent, but she is essentially peddling the same shtick they are - outrage, vile and bile, no chaser.

Why not? Outrage is a great way to get attention, and it can help sell books. The subtitle, A Journey into the Land of Bling and the Home of the Shameless, says it all nicely - unintentionally offering a perfect critique of the book's very own pretensions.

Lacking a theory, or much of a point besides a lurking feeling that something is wrong with the world, Ghetto Nation is speckled with tangential autobiography, celebrity associations and shiny statements of the obvious like "in reality, parenthood has become ordinary and is taken for granted" without any significant analysis.

You want to examine the multi-pronged nature of race and frat boy idiocy, the decay in urban values, the legacy of fatherless homes, a limiting vernacular, and the extension of American Exceptionalism with a backbeat into a collage of bloodshed, exploitation and dropout nonsense?

If you really want to examine that - and it's some serious stuff - pick up Nelson George's Post-Soul Nation, Jeff Chang's Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation or Todd Boyd's Am I Black Enough For You. That's some serious stuff. On the other hand, Ghetto Nation, which has neither book smarts, street cred nor common sense, simply isn't.

All it has is a great cover, and that's just not good enough.

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