

Global Hip-hopography

Quentin Williams and Jaspal Naveel Singh

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In Travis Harris' seminal article on global Hip Hop studies, "Can It Be Bigger Than Hip Hop," he argues that "real Hip Hop" is something that transcends the stereotypes of Hip Hop as simply the commercial music disseminated on radios, online forums, and social media.

As a Hip Hop scholar astutely aware of the field's development since its nascent birth in the mid-late 1980s, Harris' observation is one of appreciable significance. Rather, the internationalized community of Hip Hop practitioners responsible for universalizing Hip Hop's fundamental thesis, the attainment of self-knowledge (KRS-One 2009), has succeeded in frustrating essentialized connotations of Hip Hop as somehow an American-centric cultural form whose global/glocal expressions are merely secondary copycats, where Hip Hop is only "real" if it is mediated and ultimately defined by American formulations of what Hip Hop "real" is. As Harris aptly notes, "Global Hip Hop is Hip Hop" (2019). Thus, as part of the burgeoning "third wave" of global Hip Hop studies, the point which global Hip Hop studies become Hip Hop studies from a global perspective instead of the Oriental "Them" to the Anglophone "Us," Quentin Williams and Jaspal Singh's edited collection follows through with Harris' desire for scholars all around the world to "reveal what truly is Hip Hop" (69). This book is aimed at revealing the diverse, fruitful, explorative, awakening, "woke" world of the subaltern community who refuse to be subjugated, silenced, and curtailed. Global Hip Hop represents those who dare speak up and be vocal about the great discrepancies of contemporary life.

Indeed, Williams and Singh, along with 31 other international scholars-qua-Hip Hop heads, have attuned the field's collective ear towards the question of which

theoretical, methodological, and processual paradigms are the right fit for scholastic work on Hip Hop. Committed towards foregrounding the need to “reflect on and critique what we do when we write Hip Hop” (2), this collaborative monograph exemplifies the need to examine the dynamics behind the academic curation of the Hip Hop narrative and the epistemic dimensions of Hip Hop’s many expressions as augmented by the many-sided, often subjectivized, die that is modern life in the capitalist, phallo-centric, machine. The collected work centers around a multi-dimensional interrogation and applied application of “hiphopography,” a methodological concept first established in the work of Joseph Eure and James Spady (1991) prior to the publication of Tricia Rose’s seminal book on the contextualization of rap in America (1994). This far more holistic practice of cultural research was conceived of as a way to ethically sustain the community-rooted knowledge which only those within that community can fully articulate. Williams and Singh’s focus on using Spady’s methodology on a global scale, while largely effective, could have been applied further than the standard geographical boundaries such as Germany, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom to include underrepresented places like Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (Coppentrath 2022). This, however, is not a negative but rather an advantageous next step for the, now expanded, field of global Hip Hop studies which is now more than 40 years old.

Speaking of holistic approaches to the study of Hip Hop, William and Singh’s book is succinctly organized into six sections. Spanning Hip Hop communities around the world, the book aptly conveys a globalized awareness of Hip Hop. The six sections substantiate the book as novel and cover a myriad of topical themes: “*Now check the method,*” six chapters dissecting the fabric of the hiphopographic method, “*Feminine energy,*” two chapters interrogating the experience(s) of Hip Hop womanhood, “*Mind, body and soul,*” three chapters exploring the realms of visual (graffiti) and moving (breaking) Hip Hop, “*Fear of a black planet,*” two chapters on the (trans)racialization of Hip Hop in Brazilian and Danish/Finish rap scenes, “*Politricks,*” two chapters dissecting the multivarious intersections of politics and rap in China and South Africa, and “*This is a journey into sound,*” three chapters investigating the dimensions of Hip Hop’s sound production and circulation.

Spady’s clarifications of the methodological underpinnings of “hiphopography” are principally rooted in ethnographic processes of giving narrative ownership, epistemic license, and the analytical pen to the cultural creators themselves. Letting those who give Hip Hop its tangible and intangible mind and body raise the first glass, Williams and Singh continue such work by defining Spady’s methodology as something which both “reflects” and “celebrates” Hip Hop’s lived experience as told through academic study. A “critical methodology” which keeps the scholastic Hip Hopper’s head “on the ground,” the book is a sustained masterclass in the advantageousness of studying Hip Hop from a practitioner-first perspective. Endorsing a nuanced, glocalised application of Spady’s “hiphopography,” this book stresses the importance of centering attention on the spaces where culture is generated. Such a space-based “hiphopographical” methodology was recognized in Murray Forman’s influential 2002 book, “*The Hood Comes First.*” One of the more American-centered examples of what Williams and Singh’s book argues for global Hip Hop studies, Forman focuses on the richness of Hip Hop’s spatial

dimensions. As he writes, echoing Williams and Singh's focus on spaces of cultural production, "The prioritization of spatial practices and...discourses underlying hip-hop culture offers a means through which to view both the ways that spaces and places are constructed and the...kinds of space or place that are constructed" (2002: 3). In short, Hip Hop relies on encoded spaces to become itself encoded, its rearticulation of spatial politics invoking cultural politics.

Despite the book's novelty, a stellar and sophisticated contribution alongside "second wave" monographs like Mitchell (2001) and Fernandes (2011), Williams and Singh have less to say on Hip Hop culture's response to the "technological turn," and the politics of technology (Schoon 2017), to the politics of The United Kingdom's racialized war on drill (de Lacey 2022), Singapore's ongoing censorship of rap, and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic (Bienvenu 2021). However, one monograph cannot do it all, nor should it, but it seems an oversight to have not considered some of these elements when speaking about the necessity of being "an active part in the ongoing Hip Hop cultural production". Negotiations of power and its influence on the offline and online expressions of Hip Hop have easily identifiable methodological implications. With the influence of cyber-mediated research procedures like "Digital Musicology," "Digital Ethnography," all subsumed under the umbrella of "Digital Humanities," consideration of the impacts technology, music videos, streaming, online (sub)culture(s), and social media-mediated self/Other expression have had on the study of Hip Hop is pressing (see Denisova and Herasimenka, 2021).

South Africa, China, India, and Brazil were represented but other areas and voices are absent, Oceania, the Steppe region, the Middle East, South-East Asia, non-canonical African countries, members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and contribution from Indigenous voices. One recent book that exemplifies the importance of broadening the geographic purview in global Hip Hop studies is Helbig and Miszczyński (2017), whose work includes the subtopic of indigenous Hip Hop culture.

Credit must be given, however, towards the book's subtheme of decentralizing written scholarship, exemplified in the six chapters that comprise the section "*Now Check the Method*," which collectively reveal the untranslatable epistemes encased in Hip Hop's visual and sonic manifestations. An especially potent element of the section is Sahil Saxena's photographic documentation of Delhi's underground Hip Hop scene, pictures of the dynamic, moving, and human face of Hip Hop's often abstracted essence. Saxena begins the chapter ferociously, and rightly so. They argue, "Hip Hop isn't anymore what it could have been," with the central tenets of this living expression of sociopolitical self-actualization, "Peace, Love, Unity and having fun," (131) usurped for commercial opportunism. This is one of the book's strongest contributions, that of spotlighting the centralized position which those outside the academy, non-scholastic collaboration, and community-fabrics play in the co-creation of Hip Hop knowledge itself. Of course, if speaking about Hip Hop's "fifth element," iconic works on the creation of "know thyself" paradigms and community-based education like Love (2018), especially Global Hip Hop Studies' latest special issue call, speak to the many inroads Williams and Singh's book traverse. Said "fifth element" is the principle of knowledge creation, the epistemological substructure of Hip Hop more generally, and the guiding fixture upon which techniques like sampling find their salience, the internal logic of the

Hip Hop community's DNA. This type of "fifth element" work which avoids essentializing Hip Hop as predominately music-based and instead focuses on Hip Hop's central theme, what KRS-One had called "a shared idea, a feeling, an awareness" (v.52), is brilliantly substantiated in the writings of Maïko Le Lay, Friederike Frost, and Mylo Elliott. Breaking has received its own scholastic development with Fogarty and Johnson (2022) and Aprahamian (2023), with graffiti not far behind (Bloch 2019). But these three chapters paint a more polysemous understanding of what Le Lay calls "living praxis" (2023: 201). Embodiment does not end with doing that which you study. Rather, it forms a reciprocal relation with the culture you both belong to and are describing. As Frost notes, "hiphopography" provides a road for the academization, or more importantly legitimation, of "corporeal knowledge," and a way of mediating the "insider-outsider" dilemma (250).

All things considered, Williams and Singh's work enriches Hip Hop's scholastic practices, not just in its content but in its methodology. Subsequent publications on global Hip Hop reflect this growing focus on foregrounding Hip Hop's multivarious embodiments (Nietzsche and Shick 2022). By returning to the place(s) of creation after so many years away, the study of Hip Hop will/can (not) be the same. "Hiphopography" is a restructuring of who holds the keys of knowledge itself. Much like ethnography's gradual attunement to its personal objectification of the studied, so too has this book awoken its readers to the living, breathing, thinking face of Hip Hop. Not only that, the book argues for its own relevance to the field through its "embodiment" of Spady's ideals. As Williams and Singh write: "get to know real Hip Hop Culture, provide an accurate, clear and honest picture of it and teach others to do the same" (4). This book is an encouraging step for "Hip Hop academicus."

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