


BOOK REVIEW

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QUENTIN WILLIAMS & JASPAL NAVEEL SINGH (eds.) *Global hiphopography*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. Pp. xxvi, 466. Hb. €150.

Reviewed by STEVEN GILBERS 
Department of English Linguistics, University of Groningen
Oude Kijk in 't Jatstraat 26, 9712 EK, Groningen
The Netherlands
s.r.k.i.gilbers@rug.nl

In conversation with H. Samy Alim, the late James G. Spady—renowned for his work as a scholar, journalist, and activist—reflected on the cultural foundations underlying linguistic innovation:

The reason why people create ANY new languages at any time in any given society is that the ones that they are speaking or have heard spoken are unable to convey the thoughts, the concepts, with the cultural clarity of what they want to say. (Spady, as cited in the reviewed volume, p. 30)

Using this language-based analogy, Spady explains why the emergence of Hip Hop required him to devise a new scholarly approach, one that operates on the same wavelength as its object of study: ‘hiphopography’. With his groundbreaking approach to Hip Hop studies, he flipped the script on traditional methods of ethnography in an attempt to level the playing field between researcher and researchee. Few Hip Hop scholars have been as influential to the field as Spady, and his ideas still live on in the work of many Hip Hop scholars even three decades after he started the wave.

Global hiphopography is a testament to Spady’s lasting legacy. Alongside a total of thirty-one Hip Hop scholars/practitioners from the Global North and South, Williams & Singh pay tribute to Spady’s vision in their critical exploration of hiphopography—writing in and on Hip Hop culture—around the world. Multidisciplinary and multimodal in nature, *Global hiphopography* is a highly ambitious effort. Not only does it attempt to capture the status quo of hiphopography as it is practiced in various (academic and non-academic) disciplines, contexts, and cultures around the world, it tries to push the methodological envelope as well, all while challenging colonial, heteronormative, and masculinist narratives.

The book’s ambitions become evident in its first few pages already. As the editors argue in the introduction, they aim to address ‘the problem of writing (about writing) Hip Hop’ in different localities across the world (1). ‘Writing Hip Hop’ should be interpreted in its broadest possible sense here: from rappers

writing lyrics to scholars writing academic papers and even the shapes, moves, and beats composed by breakers, graffiti artists, and musicians. It is in all of these domains that the authors see the potential of so-called Hip Hop literacies—informally acquired writing practices and traditions that Alim (2011) refers to as ‘ill-literacies’—to bridge the cultural, linguistic, and racial gaps resulting from colonial history.

Naturally, this approach results in a wide variety of perspectives, disciplines, and even essay formats being represented in the volume’s chapters. While one might expect such a diverse collection of essays to feel disjointed, the opposite is the case. Aside from the introductory chapter, the book’s eighteen essays are thematically grouped into six sections, each covering a different side of hiphopography. Part 1, ‘Now check the method’, is by far the densest of these, and its critical, often autoethnographic discussions make it arguably the most interesting section. It features five chapters that try to ‘push the envelope of hiphopography by critically thematizing methodological reflections and dilemmas’ (10). The chapters reflect on Hip Hop and hiphopography as they are practiced in wildly different locales and contexts, ranging from a UCLA lecture series co-taught by Public Enemy’s Chuck D (chapter 2 by H. Samy Alim and colleagues) to the production of a collaborative book and EP in South Africa (chapter 4 by Adam Haupt). What they all have in common is that their authors acknowledged that Hip Hop practitioners are the experts in the field, as much or arguably more so than the scholars studying them.

A stand-out contribution to Part 1 is offered by Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan in chapter 5. Reflecting on his own take on hiphopography, Dattatreyan makes the case for ‘hiphopography as study’, a way of transforming Hip Hop from a mere object of investigation into a means of learning through co-creation. He presents two compelling ethnographic vignettes—one situated in New York City and one in Delhi—that each showcase in their own way how Hip Hop-centered collaborative creation may be a ‘vital site for intellectual, political, and social growth’ (116) and a source for the democratization of knowledge and learning. Dattatreyan’s approach is particularly fresh, and, given that other recent work echoes his vision of letting go of Hip Hop as the object of research, it feels like his work is part of the next wave in the field. In similar vein, for instance, de Lacey (2023) employs hiphopographical methods in his study of grime performances to study creative process and improvisation in a broader sense, and Abdali (2023) argues for Hip Hop as a lens to look through rather than an object to look at by means of collaborative musical creation in a Hip Hop space. Studies like these show how a hiphopographical approach may be employed not just to study Hip Hop culture from a narrow perspective, but to reflect on broader (societal) themes as well.

The book’s later sections are more specific in their focus than Part 1. Part 2, ‘Feminine energy’, features two chapters that shift the focus to women in Hip Hop. It critiques Hip Hop’s typically male-oriented perspective as well as the

quality of Hip Hop studies' coverage of women in Hip Hop, both in an African and in a British context. Next, in an effort to counter the 'overemphasis on rap music analysis in hiphopography' (16), Part 3, 'Mind, body and soul', turns its gaze to Hip Hop dance and graffiti. Part 4, 'Fear of a black planet', and Part 5 take a more sociopolitical point of view, the former dealing with processes of racialization in Hip Hop and the latter exploring how Hip Hop artists engage with political ideologies in China and South Africa. Finally, Part 6, 'This is a journey into sound', touches on the domain of music production and circulation. While each chapter offers a unique and interesting point of view, it is in the chapters crossing national borders that the book shines the most, true to its title promising GLOBAL hiphopography. Chapter 10 by Friederike Frost, for instance, offers a fascinating account of her transnational doctoral research on storytelling through the body in breaking, which she conducted not just in her home country of Germany but in Morocco and Cuba as well, and Marcos Morgado (chapter 11) turns to the Brazilian Hip-Hop scene, exploring how transnational Hip Hop aesthetics are constructed between Brazil, the African continent, and the United States.

While many projects would fall flat with such a scope and such sizeable ambitions, *Global hiphopography* largely succeeds. That is not to say that it is without limitations, though. Despite its global perspective, the book remains primarily Anglocentric from a linguistic point of view. Moreover, though the book does not showcase much interdisciplinary work, its multidisciplinary clearly highlights the diversity of the field, and could potentially inspire more collaboration between various subdisciplines of Hip Hop studies or the integration of hiphopography's qualitative methods with quantitative analyses. Finally, though critical of some of Hip Hop culture's characteristics—most notably its male-dominated heteronormativity—the book clearly reveals the authors' deep reverence for and appreciation of Hip Hop culture and hiphopography in its broadest sense. While this is generally a positive quality of the volume, it does have the undesirable side effect that the authors at times seem to be preaching to the choir. Because of this, any reader currently skeptical of the value of hiphopography as a scholarly approach will most likely not be convinced to change their mind, even though the principles behind hiphopography as defined by Spady over thirty years ago may be very useful to this potential audience. All that being said, though, one volume cannot be expected to do everything, and the authors deserve praise for even undertaking a project of this scope. The book not only serves as a fitting elegy to Spady and his intellectual legacy, it also offers valuable critical reflections on hiphopography, and—true to the egalitarian ideas that underlie Spady's approach—presents these reflections in a suitable style to reach academic and non-academic audiences alike.

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