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## BOOK REVIEW

### **THE GLOBALLY FAMILIAR: DIGITAL HIP HOP, MASCULINITY, AND URBAN SPACE IN DELHI, ETHIRAJ GABRIEL DATTATREYAN (2020)**

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 264 pp.,  
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*Reviewed by Elloit Cardozo, Jadavpur University and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS)*

In his proposal for the *CIPHER: Hip Hop Interpellation* project, J. Griffith Rollefson rightly namedropped India as amongst the regions that continue to remain ‘notably underrepresented in the literature’ (2018: 9) of global hip hop. Almost as if in requital, this was followed by the publication, in quick succession, of Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreya’s *The Globally Familiar: Digital Hip Hop, Masculinity, and Urban Space in Delhi* (2020), and Jaspal Naveel Singh’s *Transcultural Voices: Narrating Hip Hop Culture in Complex Delhi* (2022): quite possibly the first two academic books on hip hop in India. While Dattatreya concedes that hip hop ‘certainly was not the central object of focus’ (199) in his book, it undeniably serves as the stencil he employs in producing what often reads (to his credit) like a literary cartography. *The Globally Familiar* offers a nuanced reading of how digital media-enabled participatory cultures work to open up the possibilities for establishing comradeship by collapsing differences across ethnicity, race, religion, gender and caste, while simultaneously coarticulating the very same differences. Dattatreya draws on the ‘co-incident collaborative fieldwork’ (Singh 2022: 24) he conducted with Jaspal Naveel Singh<sup>1</sup> in Delhi between 2013 and 2014 amongst young heterosexual men engaged in various artistic practices of what were the germinative stages of Delhi’s now-burgeoning hip hop scene. Divided into an introduction, six analytical chapters and an epilogue, the book brings out the various ways in which the notion of the ‘globally familiar’ pans out as ‘Black American

1. Especially given Dattatreya and Singh conducted fieldwork at around the same time, often in collaboration, I strongly recommend *Transcultural Voices: Narrating Hip Hop Culture in Complex Delhi* (2022) as an alternative reading (from a linguistic ethnographic perspective) to Dattatreya’s version of the history of Delhi’s then-nascent hip hop scene.

masculinity as it is digitally broadcast, received, and retrofitted for rebroadcast through hip hop's sonic, visual, and kinesthetic sensibilities' (4).

The introduction defines the book's titular concept, 'the globally familiar', as 'the technological infrastructure that facilitates connection across place and time as well as the diversity of media these technologies can be made to conjure', and 'a feeling of connectedness made possible through media-enabled participation and practice and the affective economy and structure of aspiration this feeling produces' (3). Dattatreyan ekes out the finer workings of his deployment of this term in great detail throughout the rest of the introduction. However, the rest of the book uses the term in a myriad of ways that can be slightly difficult to follow at times. The prologue offers somewhat of an explanation in that Dattatreyan points out that he evokes intersectionality 'to signal an attentiveness to multiplicity of sociohistoric factors that shape how subjects are made and make themselves and the ways in which these factors come together, in motion, in their performative self-representations in space' (211). The 'globally familiar', as a result, becomes a dynamic (and often optimistic) framework that tries to encapsulate the varied ways in which the 'global' affects, is experienced at, and co-constructed by the 'local' (a binary that Dattatreyan proactively seeks to problematize).

Personally, I prefer the analytical overlay of 'aesthetic citizenship' that Dattatreyan used while this book was still a Ph.D. thesis to refer to 'the digitally enabled cultural production these young men engage in and the visibility, belonging, participation, and limits it suggests' (2015: 4). While a relatively static framework as opposed to the 'globally familiar', the reason I prefer this term is best exemplified in a translation Dattatreyan provides in his book. He translates part of a verse performed by one of his interlocutors, Sudhir, from '*Kya amir [mein] ghamand/ Garib [mein sharam]/ Dono [bhed bhaav] ka rakthe [bhram]*' to '[w]hat is the attitude of rich people? / Poor people hesitate / Both (poor and rich) go different ways' (137). I contend that a more appropriate translation (both literally, and given the context Dattatreyan establishes) would be: 'What is this pride the rich have? / The poor are ashamed / Both (the poor and the rich) harbour the illusion of discrimination'. Dattatreyan's translation seems to familiarize the global in that it replicates the global discourse of 'the rich get richer, the poor get poorer' in the context of Delhi. This, despite his best efforts, restricts his reading of this verse to a reportage (as told to him by Sudhir) of disenfranchisement that is documented online through pictures of the event. Instead, if one reads between these lines in Sudhir's verse, it seems like he is looking inwards while simultaneously narrating a widespread phenomenon. I believe that 'aesthetic citizenship' is a better-suited framework here (and elsewhere) given how it makes one pay attention to the performative nature of the visualizing and visibility tactics employed in Sudhir's narration as well as those of the other (mostly) disadvantaged youth Dattatreyan engages with in the pages of his book, in order to articulate their belonging (citizenship?) to the city of Delhi through an anticipatory and often carefully constructed digital and online documentation of their engagements with hip hop. Dattatreyan, I must point out, seems to provide an insight into why he switched to the 'globally familiar' when, while discussing the global hip hop nation, he draws on Jared Ball to point out that, 'the metaphor of nation carries problematic colonial, imperial, and, of course, nationalist residuals' (223).

The analytical chapters in Dattatreyan's book run along three major themes: the first two focus on masculinity and how it relates to digital hip hop, the two that follow look at the networking opportunities generated by

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digital hip hop, while the final two look at hip hop placemaking as it relates to an emerging racialized spatiality in Delhi. The first chapter focuses largely on a music video produced by Jay, one of Dattatreyan's interlocutors, and how it sees him evoke the 'globally familiar' in order to transcend differences across class, ethnicity and religion as he embodies a form of emotive masculinity that is far removed from the Black American masculinities associated with hip hop. He focuses on how Jay employs such an embodiment to forge friendships and heteronormative romance. The second chapter extensively analyses ethnographic excerpts describing Dattatreyan's travels with some of his interlocutors drawing on the existing framework of fetishes to theorize 'swag' as it relates to consumer culture, corporeality and hip hop masculinities in forming social and spatial relationships. In looking at how 'genuine fakes' become a symbol for urban hopefulness, Dattatreyan fleshes out the complexities of the consumerist aspirations held by the youth he met in associating value to material signifiers of hip hop. In the third chapter, Dattatreyan looks at how his interlocutors partake in the DIY production of what he calls digital hip hop in the city's emergent youth culture industries. He argues that the affective commodities produced by these youth are indicative of the possibilities of forming new labour arrangements facilitated by the disruptions created by hip hop creativity and online social media networks. The fourth chapter sees Dattatreyan discuss the competing ideologies of what 'authentic' hip hop is: at play between two different groups of what he calls hip hop emissaries. In this he draws attention to how digital hip hop creates a 'complicated political economy of recognition' (18) amongst varying groups of incoming international hip hop actors in the scene. In the fifth chapter, Dattatreyan focuses mainly on Sudhir and his crew's employment of the 'globally familiar' in their role as urban geographers of sorts, for an urban redevelopment project. In this he looks at their evocation of the global hood to think of Delhi's urban villages, and its various implications. The final chapter sees Dattatreyan examine his interlocutors' deployment of the category of race to articulate their experiences of exclusion. He uses these narratives to look at how other artists from diverse backgrounds mobilize race to speak of their lived realities of discrimination. Finally, the book's epilogue discusses where some of Dattatreyan's interlocutors are in their lives as Dattatreyan was writing this book a few years later. In looking at how the lives of his interlocutors unfold digitally, besides how his relationships with them evolved through digital contact, he touches upon the ethical and political aspects of doing anthropology as a result of the state of constant connection many of us find ourselves in due to online social media networks.

Having already played a role in shaping the development of Delhi, and consequentially India's hip hop scene (some of the pseudonymized artists that feature in Dattatreyan's study, especially Jay and Soni, are quite easily identifiable by the time one reaches the prologue, with even a superficial familiarity to the current state of Indian hip hop), *The Globally Familiar* is deservedly poised to become a seminal text for hip hop studies in India (alongside *Transcultural Voices*), not least by virtue of being possibly the first book-length inquiry in the field. The spike in interest directed towards hip hop in India after the success of Zoya Akhtar's Oscars-nominated film inspired by Mumbai's underground rap scene, *Gully Boy* (2019), has simultaneously led to an increased legitimization of hip hop studies in Indian academia, as evidenced by the launch of the University of Mumbai's 'Introduction to hip hop studies' course in 2021. This first-of-its-kind academic course has unsurprisingly been met with the

oft-warranted scepticism that has always been reserved for scholarly engagements with hip hop, questioning the intentions of such engagements for fear that the culture will be co-opted and misrepresented (Forman 2004: 4). In being a conscientious and self-reflexive piece of research, *The Globally Familiar* not only does a wonderful job of staying true to hip hop's ethos of employing the knowledge of self as a spiritual, pedagogical and moral superstructure (Gosa 2015), but also provides a shining example of how to produce mindful yet rigorous work for budding hip hop scholars in India and beyond.

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