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## BOOK REVIEW

### **FOR THE CULTURE: HIP-HOP AND THE FIGHT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, LAKEYTA M. BONNETTE-BAILEY AND ADOLPHUS G. BELK JR (EDS) (2022)**

Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 321 pp.,  
ISBN 978-0-47213-286-7, h/bk, USD 80.00

*Reviewed by Mikal Amin Lee, Brooklyn Academy of Music*

*For the Culture* is an anthology of eighteen essays compiled by Lakeyta M. Bonnette-Bailey and Adolphus G. Belk Jr that touch on the many ways in which hip hop, social justice, contemporary grassroots organizing, activism and the academic world interact, intersect and inform one another. Series editors William Cheng and Andrew Dell’Antonio ask in the foreword, ‘So what roles can music and musicians play in agendas of justice? And what should musicians and music scholars do if – during moments of upheaval, complacency, ennui – music ends up seemingly drained of its beauty, power, and even relevance?’ (ii).

In meeting that challenge, the thesis of Bonnette-Bailey and Belk Jr’s anthology is ‘that rap is more than a musical genre or cultural form’ and ‘can influence and has influenced political attitudes and behaviour’ (4). It is a means through which ‘Hip-Hoppers have responded to and commented on politics’ (4). Exploring this, the anthology is separated into five sections. The first highlights hip hop’s involvement in protest movements, particularly around mass incarceration and the justice system. Section 2 focuses on the different methods and approaches hip hop uses for political engagement. Section 3 discusses hip hop in educational and academic spaces, and Section 4 highlights discussions around gender and sexual orientation within the culture. The last section looks at hip hop and social justice movements around the world. Each of these sections is a mix of scholarly research, essays and first-person accounts of different movements. The contributions heavily emphasize

the ethos of hip hop and its practice as being radical, disruptive and transformative for the spaces and individuals who interact with it, regardless of the subject or environment.

While each section centres on a specific area of inquiry, it is all viewed through the frame of hip hop culture and music as being a liberatory practice. Select essays or papers within *For the Culture* acknowledge and recognize the more problematic aspects of hip hop and themes that may run counter to the narrative presented in the thesis, yet the book overwhelmingly focuses on the more positive effects of the culture in society and within specific communities. In this way, the anthology serves as less a dialogue and critique of hip hop, and more as an affirming tome exploring several ways in which its impact is positive, transformative, and, in some cases, a crucial component of activism. While all of this is true, the lack of a problematizing critique on hip hop leaves gaps of discussion when thinking about the culture holistically. The anthology is not reflective of the larger conversations that exist around the music's commodification or its responsibility concerning issues of misogyny, violence. Moreover, instead of going in-depth on the range and spectrum of hip hop music or expression, the book almost exclusively sticks to rap or rapping and centres music that could be categorized as 'conscious' or 'political'. This narrow lens on a culture that has now become so broad potentially leaves out less ideal examples of artists, that for some of the essays could serve as a powerful counterpoint. This doesn't lessen the importance of the research, however, and the nuance around the culture lies in its praxis as a whole.

The first section, 'Activism or Perpetuation?: Hip-Hoppers, Protest Movements, and Mass Incarceration', highlights the intersection between politics, protest and entertainment. The section includes four essays that investigate either the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement or look at inequality, racism and cronyism in the criminal justice system. Two in particular, 'Going upstate' and 'This is America', I will briefly outline here. Adolphus G. Belk Jr's essay 'Going upstate' succinctly outlines mass imprisonment and its injustice in New York State. His case study gives a history of how mass incarceration came to be historically, and quickly shifts to discussing efforts by members of the hip hop community to actively (and successfully) lobby city officials to lessen, then ultimately remove, the Rockefeller Drug Laws. Belk Jr does a wonderful job of showing the history of how government and private industry have colluded to create new laws, and use existing ones, to benefit them economically through government contracts and campaign funding. Conversely, Belk Jr illuminates how hip hop artists used artistic contributions to create counternarratives and highlight the injustice of incarceration, and also sometimes engaged in political action, through lobbying and campaigning for politicians who aligned with ending the Rockefeller Drug Laws.

In their essay 'This is America', Lakeyta M. Bonnette-Bailey, Lestina Dongo and Michael Westberg chronicle the beginnings of the Black Lives Matter Movement, and the ways that hip hop artists at the local, regional and national level participated and contributed to it. The essay outlines several of the higher profile cases that led to the organization of BLM – including the killings of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Mike Brown and Sandra Bland – and highlights their injustice and the actions that hip hop artists contributed in the cities and states where these murders occurred to raise their profile and offer direct action. The essay concludes that as hip hop's popularity grew, and the celebrity and influence of these artists increased, so did their actions and efforts

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towards justice, including leveraging their elite status to draw attention, and effect the political process.

Section 2, 'Old-School and New-School Methods of Political Engagement', features four essays, each examining hip hop music and hip hop communities' actions through the lens of civic and human rights. Sarah Napoli's research paper 'Everyday rights: Creating rights identities within the Midwest rap community' observes how both emcees and spoken word artists craft a 'rights identity' and asks the question, are 'these identities framed in a human rights lens or alternative discourses of social change?' (113). In keeping with the anthology's overall stance, Napoli argues that hip hop by origin and design addresses, highlights and confronts injustices and inequalities acted upon communities. Through an ethnographic lens, she interviews artists and poets from the Midwest who speak to hip hop and poetry's role in asserting, affirming and educating them on their personal power, their political power and illuminating them to the inalienable rights afforded to them. Napoli looks to show that hip hop chronicles the struggles and oppression of peoples in a way that crystallizes these identities and their rights to be free and exist.

Ife Jie's 'Movement music revisited: Conscious rap and contemporary political activism' also uses ethnographic research to 'explore how emcees use Hip-Hop music to encourage political engagement and activism' (143). Jie first outlines how music serves in the framing process of a political issue, then spends the remainder of the chapter in discussion with various artists and community leaders, as they talk about their relation to hip hop culture and music and how it serves them in their activism. Ife also details hip hop's history in conveying the feelings of communities that have been traditionally marginalized and disenfranchised.

Section 3, 'Education and Social Justice', looks at how hip hop is used in traditional and non-traditional academic and educational spaces. There are three essays in this section, each going in-depth on either pedagogies or methodologies of hip hop that engage different areas of education. Damon Sajnani's 'Problematizing the civil rights paradigm of hip-hop studies' pushes back on hip hop studies' homogenized portrayal of hip hop music. Utilizing Imani Perry's research as a base, Sajnani outlines how hip hop's Blackness is varied, expansive and is seen in the full spectrum of the African Diaspora. Sajnani suggests that in order to fully understand hip hop (as Perry also asserts) one must engage with the many different expressions of Blackness across the diaspora, and that in order to be considered authentic within the culture one must acknowledge, respect and understand the blackness that informs hip hop. Sajnani uses his time to critique various scholars and academics who look to distance and disconnect the racial and ethnic identities of its participants from the cultural and creative production of hip hop. Through centring Perry's scholarship, he successfully justifies the view that hip hop is culturally, politically and spiritually Black, and while participants need not be so themselves, their legitimacy lies in acknowledging that it is in fact Black music and Black culture.

Jabari Evans looks at the pedagogy of creative music making in his research paper, 'It's bigger than hip-hop'. Evans cites Ian Levy, Christopher Emdin, Edgar Tyson and Bettina Love, in first discussing the creation of affinity spaces for students, then quickly turns to the methods of hip hop music production and its values and benefits in select programmes in Chicago Junior High Schools. Through his own application of hip hop pedagogy in these spaces, Evans documents the socio-emotional learning that occurs when

students engage in the practice of hip hop arts via song creation. He ultimately concludes that the practice of hip hop song making reimagines and reinvigorates the concepts of culturally responsive teaching through experiential knowledge. The result, he suggests, is an alternative learning environment with important traditional educational benefits, including in meaning making, building self-confidence and knowledge acquisition and application.

Section 4 is 'Gender, Identity, and Sexuality in Hip Hop'. The three essays contained in this section explore hip hop's role in the emancipation and subjugation of gender and sexuality within the hip hop community. Britta L. Anderson's ethnographic study, 'Public grief and collective joy', looks at femicide in the US-Mexican border city Ciudad Juarez and the role of the feminist hip hop collective *Batallones Femeninos* in addressing it. Anderson's case study of the unsolved murders of migrant women factory workers in Ciudad Juarez dovetails with her examination of *Batallones Femeninos* and their use of music, and various political and educational tools, to engage the community in acknowledging and acting on the injustices. Using close observation and interviews with the group's members, Anderson outlines the misogyny and violence the collective endures, and the strategies they use to counterattack it. Alba Isabel Lamar's essay, 'Atrevidas', documents the unique political history of Cuba, and how the Afro-Cuban hip hop duo *La Reyna Y La Real* choose to use their music to engage in political discourse. In doing so, Lamar illuminates the struggles the group faces – as with *Batallones Femeninos* – to be legitimized and safe within the toxic masculine confines of the hip hop scenes in their country.

The three essays in Section 5 – 'Mixing It Up: Hip-Hoppers and Social Justice around the World' – probe deeper into the ways that hip hop is utilized in politics, and how the hip hop community uses the culture as a tool for liberation. Lisa M. Gill's essay, 'Watch the throne: Representations of Blackness in western political expressions', looks at the political power of hip hop and Blackness by juxtaposing the political stances and identity in two songs – 'Ni\*\*as in Paris' by Jay-Z and Kanye West and Yasiin Bey's answer track 'Ni\*\*as in Poorest' – through the lens of the 2007 French presidential election campaigns of Nicholas Sarkozy and François Hollande. Gill first frames the discussion around the colonial history of France and Black people, then quickly moves to the election, which pitched the ultra-conservative Sarkozy against the centrist-right leaning Hollande. Through an exegesis of Jay-Z and Kanye's song, Gill outlines the significance of the populist message that Hollande seized on to use in his campaign strategy. Gill comments on the power of the Black populist narrative that he appropriates from the song, and then introduces the counternarrative and critique of Jay-Z and Kanye's song that emerges in Bey's response. Gill's conclusion shows the significance hip hop has as a political tool, regardless of which end of the spectrum uses it.

Anwar Ouassini and Mostafa Amini's 'Native transnational "flows"' documents how some Indigenous artists in the Americas have identified with hip hop culture and the Black power and civil rights movements, adapting them to their own struggles as Natives. The essay centres hip hop as an African American art form, and then looks at how the adoption and adaptation by Natives authentically elevates and cultivates their global political and economic cache. The essay shows how marginalized communities see themselves parallel with the specific struggles of African Americans, and use the cultural production of hip hop as a tool and a means to align themselves

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within the context of larger global struggles against colonialism and white supremacy.

Ultimately, *For the Culture* serves as a general overview of existing arguments and ideas that have been delved into by hip hop educators such as A. A. Akom, Bettina Love, Ian Levy, Christopher Emdin and others. Much of the research found in the book re-illuminates the idea that hip hop in and of itself is a means and strategy as well as tool for liberation, self-reflection and political action. It also builds on the foundations of cultural anthropologists such as Tricia Rose, Imani Perry and Jeff Chang and what they have uncovered, observed and offered around hip hop's ethos, and its framing of various social and political movements. While many of the arguments and findings are not necessarily new or innovative within the realm of hip hop studies, the anthology does offer new voices to the discussion via its exploration of movements within Cuba, Mexico, China and among the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. It unfortunately does not do enough in problematizing the culture itself, offering only small portions – as in Section 4 – that push back on some of the underlying issues within the music genre, and industry itself. As a text, it is a valuable secondary source to engage when thinking about hip hop's place in the larger story of the fight for social justice and change.

### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Mikal Amin Lee is a cultivator of culture. The co-curator of the highly popular *Word. Sound. Power.*, the springtime hip hop/spoken word performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). A scholar and essayist of almost two decades, he is an associate editor of the journal *Word Beats & Life*, and a community editor for *Equity and Excellence in Education* at the University of Umass Amherst. He has taught, lectured and written about hip hop pedagogy and anthropology at the African Diaspora Conference in Brazil, the Shoko Festival in Zimbabwe and the Golden Era Conference at Indiana University, and at the University of Dortmund. He has published in the peer-review journal *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* and the blog *The Counter Balance*, through *Intellect* and a chapter in the *Hip-Hop Pedagogy Handbook* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024).

Contact: Brooklyn Academy of Music, 321 Ashland Place, Brooklyn, NY 11217, USA.

E-mail: mikalamin@freshrootsmusic.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1340-7566>