Review

Transcultural voices: Narrating Hip Hop culture in complex Delhi
Jaspal Naveel Singh (2021)

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An important contribution to sociolinguistic accounts of hip hop, Jaspal Naveel Singh’s ethnography of hip hop culture in Delhi both builds on and departs from previous studies (see e.g., Alim, Ibrahim, and Pennycook, 2009; Terkourafi, 2010; Ross and Rivers, 2018), by developing a programme that he terms ‘global hip hop linguistics’ (p. 26). The result is a captivating and analytically robust exploration of the narrativisation of voice, anchored in the complexities of globalisation. Through his interdisciplinary theorisation of transcultural voices, Singh presents us with sharp insight into the dialogical, polyphonic narratives woven by Delhi’s hip hop heads as they ‘speak through’ (p. 7) and orchestrate multiple voices in order to normalise, transform – and at times transgress – their social positionalities as young men in contemporary urban India. Pushing back against ‘variety’ approaches to global hip hop, the book centres on the use of hip hop as a ‘sociocultural resource’ (p. 11) mobilised by its practitioners to position themselves within a wider hip hop scene and community, in moves that both localise and reach out beyond the specific time-space of contemporary Delhi.

Throughout the ‘hiphopographic journey’ (p. 253), we are introduced to a range of hip hop artists across Delhi and the narrative strategies they engage in. Linguistic strategies, such as prosodic style-shifting to index a local ‘Indian’
voice, work to construct their authenticity as hip hop heads and to exclude those who are deemed to be ‘inauthentic’ performers (Chapter 4). Translanguaging hip hop practices – or what Singh calls ‘translingual remixin’ – are also mobilised strategically to both challenge and reproduce linguistic ideologies, as the fluid use of language pushes at the boundaries of reified language borders while, at the same time, named languages such as Urdu can be usefully drawn on to make a wider political statement of solidarity with marginalised communities across India and Pakistan (Chapter 5). The act of reaching out beyond the immediate time/space is also enacted through ‘synchronisation’ within narratives of transcultural narration. Borrowing the metaphor of ‘wormholes’ (Sheppard, 2002), Singh illustrates how the myth of the Bronx is used as a means for hip hop heads to narratively position themselves within hip hop’s histories, contemporary complexities and futures, and to situate themselves within an imagined ‘postcolonial global hip hop family’ (p. 170) (Chapter 6).

Perhaps the most important sociolinguistic contribution of the book, Chapter 7 provides a compelling critique of the field’s logocentrism, calling instead for a semiotic analysis of embodied voices. Through a focus on the moving and standing bodies of breakers in the cypher, and their rule-driven, highly structured interactions – their ‘standardised figurative grammar’ (p. 204) – Singh demonstrates how these ‘danced narratives’ (p. 187) negotiate circulating figures of masculinity that help construct these young men’s identities. This poses a challenge to the imagined inclusive, global community of hip hop that is capable of breaking down social borders of marginalisation as alluded to in the previous chapter, as breakin culture is shown to be built upon tenets of heterosexual masculinity, to the exclusion of women, non-binary and queer communities. In contrast to the previous chapters which focus on hip hop practitioners’ strategies for positioning themselves within a global hip hop community, the final analytical chapter (Chapter 8) explores one participant’s reflections on hip hop methodologies, that is, ways of ‘feeling, understanding and overstandin hip hop’ (p. 228). Drawing on his conceptualisation of hip hop as both a thing and a way, Singh introduces ‘affective overstandin’, a concept borrowed from hip hop spirituality and Rastafarianism, that centres knowledge of the self. In this way, hip hop can be understood as both an epistemology and an affectology – an exercise in decolonial ‘border thinking’ (Mignolo, 2000) – which has powerful shaping effects on ‘the bodies, the minds and the spirits of young people across the postcolony’ (p. 249).

Throughout the book, Singh often returns to this conceptualisation of hip hop as a thing and a way. By this, he understands the hip as the ‘the presuppositions, the knowledge and the understanding of cultural resources, language
and history’ and the hop as ‘the way, the entailment, the practice, the movement and the overstanding to creatively engage with the semiotic and social world’ (p. 42). This extends to the presentation (the performance?) of the book, as the framework of transcultural voices (Chapter 2) not only undergirds Singh’s ‘dope methodological and theoretical approach’ (p. 26) to the analysis (i.e., the thing), it also shapes the ethnographic writing (i.e., the way). That is, the orchestration of Singh’s ‘own’ polyphonic narrative voice throughout the text is recurrently put under the spotlight. This is signposted most notably through his strategic codemeshing, which he justifies in the glossary at the beginning of the book, as he draws on alternative spellings for hip hop terms (breakin, emceein, graffiti writin, etc.), thereby infusing his writing with hip hop narrative figures. ‘My own voice’, Singh reminds us, ‘is half theirs’ (p. 21).

Singh’s justification for this codemeshing emerges from his own complex positioning that we see him navigate throughout the book as he provides honest and sincere reflection on his role as a hip hop fan and practitioner, as well as his relationship to South Asia through his family heritage. This role ambiguity that he experiences leads him to ask uncomfortable questions about what – or who – the book is for. Intentionally provocative, the book confronts the reader with difficult questions about how our participants understand the purposes of our research and our writing; what it means to represent them through scholarly registers; and how we manage the unease that comes from critiquing the practices of those with whom we have built rapport, with whom we are in community. Singh’s ‘wilful persistence’ (Ahmed, 2012) with these ethical questions is designed to make us feel discomfort; to entail an embodied, affective reading experience. In this way, the book is an important demonstration of the ethics and politics of ethnographic writing that many readers will stand to benefit from.

Part of the polyphony of Singh’s narrative is his frequent interpellation of the reader. We are invited to ask our own questions, to develop our ‘own’ critical voices, to ‘challenge my ideas, expand them and develop them’ (p. 253). In this vein, I will take this opportunity to engage in dialogue with the book, to offer my own provocation. In the prologue and epilogue, Singh provides a compelling argument for the ubiquity of gender (notably, constructions of masculinities) on the global and local hip hop scene, as well as his own inability to initially acknowledge this. Bookended by the high-profile gruesome gangrape and murder of Jyoti Singh and the ensuing hanging of the perpetrators, Singh situates his fieldwork and the production of the book within this wider context of gendered, sexual violence in India. He asks, in the final few pages, what role hip hop plays here, not only in terms of how hip hop practices contribute through the reproduction of hegemonic masculinities (as in Chapter 7) but also in terms of how hip
hop can participate in the building and enacting of other ways of being. Through these questions – indeed, throughout the whole text – Singh draws attention to tensions between hip hop’s capacity to be both inclusionary and exclusionary. Exclusionary practices built upon gender and sexuality are well documented in the book. What I was left wondering was how else hip hop in Delhi might also, perhaps despite itself, serve other regimes of exclusion. We are told on several occasions, often through the entextualised voices of his participants, that hip hop is a unifying force, that it ‘brings young people together across caste, class and ethnic borders’ (p. 256) As one young graffiti writer puts it, ‘that’s what hip hop is you know […] no language no caste yeah’ (p. 155). These claims would have benefited from further analysis in order to see the extent to which hip hop heads in Delhi may perpetuate discourses of ‘caste-blindness’ (Deshpande, 2013) that have shaped post-independence, modern India.

This is particularly salient in the current political climate, in which caste violence, along with islamophobia, are unrelenting even as they are discursively denied. In the time since Singh began his fieldwork in Delhi, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party has risen to power, fomenting far-right sentiment and violence against those who threaten the political project of Hindutva – Muslims and Dalits in particular (Natrajan, 2022). How are hip hop heads navigating these political shifts? What role does/can hip hop play in contesting – or even reproducing – such conditions? At the BAAL Book Prize Event in September 2022, Singh noted that, in recent return visits to the field, he has been distressed to witness some of his participants veering politically to the (far) right. There is a suggestion of this in the final vignette of Chapter 8, which took place five years after the initial fieldwork. Here, we learn of the spiritual transformation of Scientik, a hip hop dancer and instructor who, in the elapsing time, has turned not so much away from hip hop, but towards a lifestyle built upon Hindu philosophy: yoga, vegetarianism, tee-totalism, spiritual pilgrimages. Hip hop, Scientik tells us, is how he got there.

I do not know if Scientik is among those who Singh referred to at the BAAL event. The practices Scientik references are not, in and of themselves, evidence of nationalist sentiment, and I certainly do not mean to suggest that Hinduism and Hindutva can be conflated. But in this specific political moment, these practices can index a particular politics (Pandian, 2002; Gorringe and Karthikeyan, 2014) – one which sits uncomfortably alongside the progressive tenets of hip hop. Reading this final vignette opened up questions for me about how practices with critical and transgressive potential such as hip hop can be taken up, appropriated – remixed, even – by and for conservative forces (Tebaldi, 2021). In his closing remarks of the chapter, Singh reflects on Scientik’s transformation: ‘I
feel that hip hop lives; transmutes into all kinds of directions’ (p. 252). What happens when those directions undermine the political claims of inclusion, solidarity, and community on which hip hop is built?

These provocations are meant not as a criticism, but rather as evidence of the doors that are opened through Singh’s engaging and deeply reflexive account of what hip hop means, and does, in the lives of young men and women in globalised, contemporary Delhi.

References


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