

Book Review

***BritHop: The Politics of UK Rap in the New Century*. Justin A. Williams. Oxford University Press, 2021. ISBN: 9780190656805, 240 pp.**

Over the past twenty years, British rap has taken over award ceremonies, dominated festival line-ups, and topped the music charts. It has become a cultural phenomenon, informing a sense of politics and belonging, particularly among young people and members of marginalised groups around the United Kingdom. Yet despite its rich history and impact, it has remained largely untouched by academia until recently. With *BritHop: The Politics of UK Rap in the New Century*, Justin A. Williams attempts to not only historicise the genre, but also to establish it as an influential part of music history and the current political landscape of Britain.

The theory of *BritHop* is largely centred around the postcolonial cultural criticism of Paul Gilroy's *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004). Postcolonial melancholia describes a Britain that is unhealthily mourning its colonial past, while convivial culture represents a hybrid nation constructed from different cultures. Williams subsequently prioritises a reading of music that concerns race and nationalism, studying each artist through a postcolonial lens. He engages with how they criticise and recognise postcolonial melancholia, as well as how the effects of colonisation still impact communities today.

Williams begins his opening chapter by using Martin Cloonan's five categories for analysing relationships to 'Englishness' within music. He applies Cloonan's theory to the British MCs of the past twenty years,

such as Riz MC, whose song “Englistan” echoes a political ambivalence found in punk music which approaches Englishness not as ‘celebration’ but ‘preoccupation’ (27-28). Williams, however, primarily focuses on the terms ‘Hip Little’ (a celebration of Britishness and community), and ‘Hip Big’ (a critique of whiteness and a lack of diversity) (28). The references to each category successfully emphasise the importance of national identity for each artist, arguing that despite shared values, British MCs are not homogenous in their sense of belonging, but have distinct approaches to the subject.

Vernacular studies also prove vital to Williams’ thesis. By discussing the linguistics of British MCs, he emphasises grime as being its own subculture: a club where its members are not just united by their dress sense, ideals, and music tastes, but by the very way they speak. As outlined by Williams, when artists like Riz MC rap ‘This is England, the bridge we living in,’ (26) the ‘we’ suggests people who are multicultural, those who use similar language and even sound like him. Accents and language are further discussed in the book as a way to redefine Britishness, with British-Palestinian rapper Shadia Mansoor being categorised as a British artist despite her rapping in Arabic. Vivaly, discussions like these allow for new canonisations of the British artist at a time when academic writing on grime is still in its formative years.

The conversations around ‘otherness’ and a sense of belonging are developed in the second half of *BritHop* when Williams draws similarities between grime and 1970s punk, as well as accentuating how British Hip-Hop uses humour to subvert otherness. Williams selects Nottingham rap duo Sleaford Mods and East-European satirist Bricka Bricka as two artists who critique current government policy and British national attitudes. However, *BritHop*’s primary strength is how it simultaneously celebrates the impact of its chosen artists while also providing criticism when necessary. Williams is keen to note how Sleaford Mods are close to falling into the same trap as punk by filling a rhetoric with ‘critique and social realism’ (79) yet failing to accompany it with the required sense of social responsibility. Similarly, Bricka Bricka is recognised for his effective critique of harmful stereotypes inflicted on Eastern European immigrants but is also potentially prolonging negative attitudes towards

certain social groups by exaggerating unfavourable connotations associated with them. Williams even applies these criticisms to himself as the author of a book so focused on identity politics and themes of otherness. While he writes with clear authority and knowledge of UK Hip-Hop, he recognises that he cannot understand what it is like to be a member of marginalised social groups in Britain, and that this will impact his ability to express their lived experience. In the introduction to *BritHop*, Williams presents Ann duCille's ideas around how art should be universally read by people from all backgrounds:

As more and more scholars – male and female, black and non-black – take up the task of reading the work of African-American women writers, who reads these texts may have a direct bearing on how they are read. In a best of all possible intellectual worlds, where we all had equal access to each other's cultures, the race, gender, and historical experiences of the critic might be irrelevant (12),

The sentiment expressed here towards the importance of reading and writing widely is agreeable. However, Williams uses it as a defence for his writing without recognising that his taking up of space could prevent members of underrepresented groups from similar opportunities.

Williams also recognises the various contradictions that arise from publishing an academic text on British rap, with the primary point of contention being that releasing the book is playing into an education system where it will 'no doubt become part of a governmental exercise in an increasingly privatized and neoliberalized Higher Education sector' (xii). Yet he is keen to note what academics can do with the information learned in the book, specifically their ability to give the community the 'cultural and financial importance it deserves' (182).

In his conclusion, Williams briefly connects the artists spoken about throughout the book to their criticism of more recent British events, such as the Brexit referendum and the Grenfell fire. The text ends with a thoroughly convincing argument for the benefits of studying UK rap artists, highlighting their ability to act as a mouthpiece for marginalised people across the country and beyond. *BritHop* argues that by valuing British rap, academia is also signifying that it values the artists and communities that are largely overlooked who, despite this, have found

community within the genre.

British rap cannot be fully covered in the parameters of one book, but *BritHop* takes an engaging look at some of its most culturally impactful facets. As more scholars begin to research British hip-hop, this text is likely to form an integral part of their studies, with authors hopefully expanding on the blind spots in Williams' work, such as how sexuality and gender are represented in the genre. While *BritHop* documents issues of race, culture and a sense of belonging within British rap artists, it does not manage to explore how these intersect with other social identities, and how these relationships further define the music and community itself. Nonetheless, *BritHop: The Politics of UK Rap in the New Century* is an accessible starting point for all those interested in British rap, youth culture, and influential music released in the 21st Century.

Paris Fawcett
University of Nottingham

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