Charlie D. Hankin. *Break and Flow: Hip-Hop Poetics in the Americas*. New World Studies. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2023. x, 276 pp. ISBN: 9780813949826

Matt Yuknas
University of Oregon
myuknas@uoregon.edu

Since the celebrated birth of hip-hop on August 11, 1973, in a South-Bronx apartment building rec-room, the genre has evolved into an international phenomenon that reflects the experiences of marginalized communities from around the world. But how do these cultural evolutions remain true to their US origins/genesis, and more specifically, how have hip-hop poetics changed/adjusted to their foreign environments? Charlie Hankin's book offers an expanded perspective on this question through inclusion of the Global South. Drawing on sound studies, personal narratives informed by an immersive ethnography, and Afro-diasporic literary theory, *Break and Flow: Hip-Hop Poetics*

in the Americas "considers how rappers in Cuba, Brazil, and Haiti elaborate a shared poetic project that echoes across geographic and linguistic borders" (p. 2).

Hankin's title references both hip-hop's rhythmic infrastructure (the breakbeat) and an emcee's signature aural fingerprint (flow). For Hankin, break and flow are two opposing yet complimentary forces that symbolize tradition and innovation. On the musical hand, the "break" indicates a unifying aesthetic (tradition) while "flow" indicates individuality and improvisation (innovation). On the other (more metaphorical) hand, break indicates a literal rupture in tradition while flow represents our navigation through tradition. If music is a representation of culture, then hip-hop is a unique indicator of culture's symbiotic relationship with tradition and innovation. As Hankin notes, "in rap music the vector of continuity turns out to be rupture itself: the break. What was once rupture in the song's structure becomes the repeated rhythmic pattern that gives new iterations of rap continuity across time and space" (p. 14). In essence, *Break and Flow* argues that rap both initiates modern, inventive modes of community building and maintains similar Afro-diasporic poetic features across three sites within the Americas. The book examines this claim by way of six poetic conventions/techniques and a framing theoretical chapter.

In the first chapter ("Yearning"), the author analyzes linguistic constructions of tense (here, then, now) to create an alternative realm that distort conceptions of a linear timeline to develop past, present, and future utopian ideations. Pointing to a particular time in relation to the 'now' becomes a window through which to examine the question: "what are the social implications of rap to point at what is and what could be?" (p. 19). For Hankin, the incorporation of subjunctives become a metaphorical time-machine that reflects the desire, or yearning, to conjure an alternative past and future in hopes of transforming the present; this outward-pointing mode

of yearning "expresses the social force of the hip-hop poetics" (p. 20) to produce material effects. When Haitian group Master Dji raps:

> We know everything that's happened
> We would not want to start over
> We have a lot of work still to do
> For us to get there, we can't turn back[1]

they call on their community to evade political regression, despite current economic instability, and "return to the emancipatory potential of the Haitian Revolution" (p. 28).

Chapter 2 ("Raplove") develops the idea of communal yearning by turning towards inward-directed poetics of rapping about rap – a process Hankin calls *raplove*. Love songs about hip-hop or odes to hip-hop become a religious, transcendental force that bolster "rap's community-forging potential and compliment outward-directed yearnings to intervene in the social sphere and remake the world" (p. 15). Intertextual and self-referential discourse develops into prayer-like apostrophe that embodies a "desire to be present with rap, to affirm and inhabit the temporality of the rap song from within its acoustic presence" (p. 55-6).

Chapters 3 and 4 dissect how "the social aspirations and poetic conventions of rap songs link neighborhood histories of hip-hop to Afrodiasporic modes of belonging" (p. 15). Chapter 3 ("Uprooting") investigates how Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil grappled with their anxiety of foreign cultural influence while also participating in a global practice associated with the African diaspora. United through forced geographic displacement, Black "artists have found in hip-hop new roots that allow them to defy national borders, forge connections between neighborhood communities, and remap their relationship to place" (p. 71). Such political regulations of music denationalize hip-hop and challenge its US-centricity without fear of empowering the nation state. For example, Cuban

rapper Alexey's lyrics obfuscate "origin stories and narratives of importation and nationalization" (p. 16) while also providing "a platform for reasserting racial identity" (p. 84):

> and like me, there were many in Havana
> dancing and listening to [Black] American music, nothin' more
> Dad bought a recorder for me
> and my first cassette was of Public Enemy[2]

Situating herself within the history of hip-hop and hip-hop within the history of Cuban culture, Alexey demonstrates an uprooting of hip-hop from the US and planted in the broader Afro-diaspora while simultaneously "undermin[ing] notions of national [Cuban] culture" (p. 112).

Chapter 4 ("Scale") further elaborates how hip-hop poetics illustrate a sense of place by scrutinizing how lower socio-economic neighborhoods (the Brazilian *periferia*, Haitian *baz*, and Cuban *aldea*) traverse both hyperlocal and translocal signifiers. Grounded in historical notions of rurality and marginality, these communities reflect a proudly "ghettocentric" ideology that places themselves in direct conversation with iconic US hip-hop sites (locals refer to Havana as the "new South Bronx") to create cosmopolitan spaces of belonging. For Hankin, "their multi-scalar approach between neighborhood and world exposes a cosmopolitan yearning typical of postcolonial writers since at least the turn of the twentieth century" (p. 16).

The final two chapters examine how "rappers forge new genealogies, elaborate a community writing practice, and produce decolonial forms of knowledge" (p. 15). Chapter 5 ("Writing) dissects the act of writing as a tool to combat the historical oppression of letters, a means of community building for those oppressed communities described in the previous chapter and break the imposed colonial binary of orality/literacy. The mimetic role of rap poetics rooted in Afro-diasporic oral-aural traditions, explains Hankin, becomes a type

of "shared poetic citizenship" (p. 125). The intertextual integration of local rap lyrics, genres, and practices (*pwen*, *samba*, and *repente*) demonstrate a sense of community writing and composition that root themselves in their environment. "The sampling of lyrics becomes a re-citation machine, a continuous act of citing (again) and reciting out loud upon which to forge community" (p. 128).

Chapter 6 ("Violence") analyzes how hip-hop poetics have appropriated the poetics of protest to critique violence within urban communities and outside systems of oppression. Hankin argues "that the convention of writing to hip-hop poetics produces a corollary: the responsibility to critique violence" (p. 143). Rappers continue to employ violent rhetoric in their lyrics, but now weapons become a metaphor for letters; knowledge and independent thought become artillery to ameliorate systemic brutality. When Brazilian group Racionais MC's rap:

> my style is heavy and I make the ground shake
> my word's worth a gunshot and I have a lot of ammunition[3]

or

> violently pacifist, true
> I came to sabotage your reasoning[4]

words become ammunition where "violence is executed against logic and reason" (p. 161). Hankin concludes by suggesting that "listening is the interface between the politics and poetics of rap: the vehicle for yearning and raplove, for uprooting, placemaking, and community writing" (p. 169).

One of Hankin's most useful theoretical innovations is his nimble adaptation of Paul Gilroy's theory of the Black Atlantic. Black Atlantic theory is used to culturally and politically unite Afro-diasporic peoples displaced by that Atlantic slave trade. Gilroy describes it as a "desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national

particularity. These desires are relevant to understanding political organizing and cultural criticism. They have always sat uneasily alongside the strategic choices forced on black movements and individuals embedded in national and political cultures and nation-states in the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe."[5] Hankin treats hip-hop poetics as a conduit for expressing these desires, or yearnings, promoting an ecumenical dialogue across the Americas by and for the Afro-diaspora.

This approach to conceptualizing a transatlantic community readily lends itself to shared literary tropes that eclipse linguistic and geographic borders. For example, Chapter 2 ("Raplove") reveals a possible genealogical connection between European *ars poetica* and boasting in the Afro-diasporic signifyin' tradition. While Hankin refuses to take a position on whether these poetic devices are related only by analogy, the referential meta-narratives in raplove mirror a similar tradition of self-affirmation in ars poetica. Take this excerpt from Alexander Pope's "Essay on Criticism" (1711):

> True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
> As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance.
> 'Tis not enough no harshness gives offence,
> The sound must seem an Echo to the sense.[6]

Pope boasts his proficiency as a writer, noting how much time he has put into his craft, and toasts other writers, who are presumably unable to pen moving humanistic emotions. These tropes are "so familiar in rap that one wonders whether Pope might have tried his hand in a freestyle battle had he been born three hundred years later" (58).

What do the poetics of hip-hop, as visualized through a transatlantic network, tell us about the breaks and flows of Afro-diasporic cultural traditions? Seen through the lens of rap lyrics—or from the orientation of literary theory—this concept of a shared poetics across the Americas is driven as much by the

yearning for an international community as by forging a unique national/local identity. This conclusion might imply a kind of Eurocentric or US-centric elitism, whereby cultural expressions follow the direction of affluent world leaders. But Hankin reminds us that "these are not so much cultural histories *about* hip-hop as cultural histories in hip-hop" [my emphasis] (167). Hankin acknowledges the US as the leader of hip-hop, but is concerned with how local communities in Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil have adapted the art form to align with their political experiences and cultural expectations. While the specifics of Cuban, Haitian, and Brazilian rap lyrics may not resonate with other Afro-diasporic communities, Hankin's approach enables us to identify and speak broadly about shared literary tropes grounded in local political and cultural histories.

With its expanded scope, *Break and Flow* is not a typical ethnographic study of hip-hop. Hankin bridges his experiences of hip-hop in three separate countries to weave a cohesive, singular narrative, navigating the nuances of each country while at the same time maintaining the boundaries of individual poetic tropes. But at times this expanded scope can be overwhelming as the reader bounces from one political context to another. For example, although Hankin subdivides chapters 3 and 4 ("Uprooting" and "Scale") by each respective country, the rest of the chapters largely blend their cultural parallels. While this comingled approach reinforces Hankin's goal of developing a shared poetics across the Americas, it also compels the reader to buy into a literary transatlantic theory, thereby sacrificing important historiographical context that would illuminate hip-hop's emigration to, and trajectory within, Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil. This is not the fault of Hankin, but indicative of a larger trend amongst popular music scholars who forfeit genre-specific historical narratives in favor of a more critically sociological method, often referred to as the 'New Musicology.'

There is a final point to be made in reference to the historical context of hip-hop poetics and its US-genesis. The sources and examples taken from

US hip-hop (e.g., Sugar Hill Gang, Public Enemy, A Tribe Called Quest) are introductory in nature and appeal to a broad audience, thereby ignoring the genre's complex nature and cultural subtleties. The same subtleties he so expertly explains in the other Afro-diasporic communities exist in the US as well, and I would have liked to have seen more range in his critique. Perhaps the author's use of more mainstream artists was purposeful, allowing the reader to draw on their own eclectic experiences with hip-hop and discover their own parallels. This discussion in itself is an example of the author's ability to stimulate intellectual ruminations applicable to all hip-hop movements regardless of their origin. Beyond the masterfully conceived and executed main thesis of this book, *Break and Flow* makes an important contribution to the broader intellectual project of global hip-hop studies, showing vividly what we stand to gain by listening across geographic and linguistic borders.

Notes

1 All translations provided by Hankin. Original: "Nou konn tout sa k te passe / Nou pa te vle rekòmanse / Nou gen anpil travay pou n fè / Pou nou rive fòk nou pa gad dèyè." Master Dji, "Tan pou tan," *Politik pa m'*, (Bwa Patat Records, 1990).

2 Original: "Y como yo, había muchos en La Habana / Bailando y escuchando música americana no' ma' / Papá compró una grabadora pa' mí / Y mi primer cassette fue de Public Enemy." Alexey made it clear in her interview with Hankin that "música americana" was to be understood as "música negra americana" (Black American Music). Alexey ..el tipo este.. (Obsesión), "Como fue," *Contar el rap: Antología de rap y hip-hop cubanos* (Malcoms Junco Duffay, 2017).

3 Original: "Meu estilo é pesado e faz tremer o chão / Minha palavra vale um tiro, eu tenho muita munição." Racionais MC's, "Capítulo 4, Versículo 3," *Sobrevivendo no inferno* (Cosa Nostra 1997).

4 Original: "Violentamente pacífico, verídico / Vim pra sabotar seu raciocínio." Ibid.

5 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 19.

6 Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, (London 1758), 16, lines 361-64.