

**AFRO-COLOMBIA'S HIP-HOP PERFORMS INTRICATE GLOBAL, REGIONAL, NATIONAL, AND LOCAL IDENTITIES**

Stephen Kip Tobin  
Ohio State University

Review of *Afro-Colombian Hip-Hop: Globalization, Transcultural Music, and Ethnic Identities*, Christopher Dennis (2012) Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 162 pp., ISBN:9780739150566, h/bk, \$60.00.

Hip-hop studies in Latin America have exceeded two decades of academic scrutiny, but the map regarding local specificities within the region continues being drawn. This book aims to refine said map by illuminating a particular ethnic-racial segment of Colombia—Afro-Colombian youth primarily living in urban areas—and analyze how their hip-hop differentiates itself from other forms, both within its national panorama and U.S. hip-hop. This distinctive rap practice, Dennis argues, offers musical texts through which Afro-Colombian subject positions are interpellated, articulating marginalized identities that negotiate the complex interactions between the consumption and influence of the global mode of hip-hop (overwhelmingly U.S.) and the production of its own local version that responds to and expresses the reality on the ground. It simultaneously gives voice to local experiences on the streets while enmeshed within a complex interplay of national, Latin American and international affiliations.

This intricate process leverages Fernando Ortiz's transculturation, updated for the globalized era, although a discussion of how this may differ from Nestor Garcia Canclini's hybridity is never engaged and would be especially pertinent given hip-hop's birth coinciding with many globalization practices. Dennis argues that this particular musical practice offers an alternative route to speaking out and speaking for otherwise subaltern identities that have been marginalized amidst the multiculturalism discourse so pervasive in the 1990s that it was written into the very Colombian Constitution, but, Dennis argues, not reflected in actual social

hierarchical relations within the country. He views Afro-Colombian hip-hop as an updated version of Benedict Anderson's imagined community – only here the rap song and its associated cultural accoutrements, such as videos, fashion, and street-legitimized vernacular, allow artists to construct these complex identities that shift fluidly between differing registers. As the subtitle suggests and this work delivers on, the music is wholly transcultural, and only through this lens of more mobile postmodern subjectivity can this mode be understood.

The introduction provides the historic context for Colombia's African diaspora, its current demographics, the globalization processes that have affected the region, the neoliberal economic reforms pertinent to the country, as well as the author's motivations and limitations in the study.

Chapter two traces the arrival and consumption of U.S. hip-hop culture and rap music into Colombia in the 1980s, but not emerging as substantial cultural production until the mid-1990s when a confluence of factors coincide to facilitate its formal and informal practice. Colombian youth consumes U.S. popular and hip-hop culture via television, music videos and cinema undergirded by the mass communications and digital technologies, all of which coincide with an apex of internal displacement that results in the mass urbanization of black populations.

In chapter three, Dennis analyzes the socio-cultural meanings created within localized rap form, which often aligns with *hip hop real*, a specific identitary and performative adherence crucial to the form being viewed as credible by accurately reflecting the lived street experience. Dennis's choices of songs evidence its "street cred" by acknowledging the urban social experience, often unstable and displaced, caught within the crossfires of the drug trade and its ensuing violence, as well as violence caused by tensions created within displacement, urbanization and rising ethnic-racial tensions within the Afro-Colombian community.

Dennis hails Althusserian theory in chapter four by asserting that this musical form along with its accompanying cultural elements (videos, lyrics, dress styles) interpellates its fans as identifying subjects not by simply recognizing themselves but by helping them to imagine, construct and actively perform—primarily via dance—Afro-Colombian subjectivities. Part of the identitary link established begins with hip-hop's origins in the United States' and the rapper's urban, often marginalized and peripheral discourse, transmitted transnationally through a

mediated technological apparatus that commodifies a certain African-American black imaginary. But instead of resulting in Americanized hip-hop performed by Colombians, the force of the local perforates the homogenous force of the global, and results in the unique glocal contemporary mixture seen through artists such as Flaco Flow&Melanina, Zona Marginal, Asilo 38 and Choc Quib Town.

In the fifth chapter, Afro-Colombian hip-Hop confronts the peculiar position that this musical practice finds itself in, wedged between dual-forces of globalization that causes, on the one hand, homogenization via the spread of US hip-hop culture as both an origin and a continued practice that informs and influences the form and cultural content within its many styles, while on the other, a degree of heterogeneity exists throughout the local musical cultural forms native to Colombia and within its regions. Afro-Colombian hip-hop, then, eventually employs the “adoption to adaptation” process which gives its regional and local singularity, itself infused with Colombian rhythms such as *cumbia*, *vallenato*, *chirimía* and *currulao*, et al. Much like Retamar’s *Calibán*, Dennis sees the transculturating process so evident within Afro-Colombian hip-hop not as mimicry but a strategy to resist and overcome the dominant culture by ultimately absorbing the form and reworking it to give voice to marginalized groups, resignify their image as positive and hail solidarity.

By the time one reaches the conclusion, Dennis’s point has clearly been made and effectively argued, if not repetitively so. This book, likely the first extensive text to track and analyze this very specific yet significant hip-hop form within Colombia, deserves the attention of any scholar of Latin American/Caribbean cultural studies or ethnomusicology eager to fill out and refine the contemporary global map of musical praxis.