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Reviews

Christopher Dennis. *Afro-Colombian Hip-Hop: Globalization, Transcultural Music, and Ethnic Identities*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. 181 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7391-5056-6

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In recent years Colombia has emerged as the topic of a small but significant corpus of scholarly monographs dedicated to its vibrant popular musical production in relationship to questions of ethno-racial identity, gender, globalization, transnationalism, memory, and nationhood. While the majority of this research has concerned itself with so-called “ethnic” genres such as *salsa*, *vallenato*, and *cumbia*, Christopher Dennis instead offers readers a highly descriptive introduction to Afro-Colombian hip-hop, an expressive form overwhelmingly associated with African American urban youth. Lucidly composed in a manner largely unburdened by specialist jargon and heavy theorization, Dennis’ book is suitable for academics and lay readers alike, but should be of particular interest to Colombianists and students of Afro-diasporic cultural production. Combining on-site interviews and data gathered during informal interactions with Afro-Colombian hip-hop performers with various scholarly sources and lyrical examples, he effectively deals with the lack of appropriate published material facing most scholars of contemporary Colombian popular culture. (Interestingly, as the author reveals, even the very label “Afro-Colombian hip-hop” is something of a recent terminological novelty; Colombians tend to simply refer to the music as “hip-hop” or “Colombian hip-hop,” echoing the often ambivalent location of ethno-racial identity within the genre itself).

Arguing that hip-hop constitutes a fertile example of the multiple impacts of globalization, Dennis employs the genre as a lens onto the unique challenges provoked by socio-cultural and economic change within the local context. A discussion of the multiple ways in which U.S.-centric hip-hop simultaneously impacts Afro-Colombian socio-political concerns as well as engenders new forms of hybrid cultural expression in fact forms the nucleus of the study. While a critique of globalization thematically unites the book as a whole, its early chapters are also devoted to an elementary overview of hip-hop’s introduction to Colombian popular culture, with particular emphasis on the structural factors undergirding its integration into local musical networks. Dennis dedicates considerable effort in later chapters to delineating the symbolic and material uses of Afro-Colombian hip-hop, characterizing it as a skillful form of socio-political commentary regarding the Afro-Colombian community, a means of articulating Afro-Colombian difference and pride in the interest of self-preservation, and a vehicle for expressing a uniquely Colombian form of blackness. Many of the arguments offered throughout are supported by lengthy lyrical examples that comprise a valuable written archive of current Afro-Colombian cultural production in some instances not available elsewhere.

Afro-Colombian Hip-Hop’s focus on urban Afro-Colombian culture offers a necessary alternative perspective on an understudied community so often framed as disconnected from modernity and treated instead as a static relic of rural folklore within academic and public discourse alike. Building on Peter Wade’s foundational critique of the ideological role of *mestizaje* in Colombian popular music, Dennis also contributes to a more detailed understanding of Colombia’s 1991 constitution and the impacts that its problematic attempts at re-imagining a multicultural nation vis à vis black and indigenous subjects have wielded on Afro-

Colombian youth. Indeed, with little exception a consideration of broader socio-political and economic factors is never far from the core of the author's arguments, an approach that distinguishes his work from a good deal of existing Cultural Studies scholarship on popular culture, which often downplays the influence of political economy.

Notably, the sharp critique of globalization throughout begins as a clear example of the flawed “globalization = Americanization” mindset, yet gradually develops into a more nuanced commentary regarding the effects of globalization on local cultural production, thus at times appearing somewhat contradictory in its aims. As John Storey has argued, simply conflating globalization with wholesale Americanization proves problematic on several fronts; first, it does not account for the fact that cultural influences are multi-directional in nature, and that economic success does not necessarily translate into cultural imposition. It also operates under overly simplistic notions of consumption, ignoring consumer agency and conflating commodities with culture. Finally, the “globalization as Americanization” thesis hinges upon a very limited notion of the “foreign” (John Storey, *Inventing Popular Culture: From Folklore to Globalization*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003, pp. 110-111, 113). As such, while Dennis’ take on globalization eventually recognizes the agency of Afro-Colombian hip-hop performers in particular (the question of consumer or fan agency falls beyond the book’s purview), his frequently one-sided assessment of the dynamics of globalization would have benefitted from the inclusion of more varied perspectives on such a critical central theme.

In his analysis of Afro-Colombian hip-hop, the author furthermore contends that lyrical content, not sound, constitutes the defining component of the genre. While this point of view makes some sense given Dennis’ disciplinary grounding in literary studies, bypassing the opportunity to offer readers even the most elementary notion of how Afro-Colombian hip-hop sonically registers ultimately weakens his statements regarding the centrality of technological shifts within the genre, as concrete examples of the specific manner in which technology shapes sound are not addressed. However, the lack of sonic description is perhaps most acutely felt in the chapter devoted to the singular ways in which Afro-Colombian hip-hop artists have re-semanticized hip-hop through the incorporation of a rich array of autochthonous and international musical genres. Lyrical content is therefore overtly privileged, even though the discursive analysis of the study’s frequent lyrical examples paradoxically proves a primary methodological weakness. As Dennis himself admits, he opts to favor celebratory readings of the performers’ lyrics; yet much like his consideration of globalization, his frequently univocal lyrical interpretations would provide more compelling evidence if more layered analyses were offered. Undoubtedly, however, *Afro-Colombian Hip-Hop* proves a solid, if at times uneven, introductory monograph chronicling the cultural production of contemporary Afro-Colombian youth in the context of twenty-first century globalization. Dennis’ research not only subverts commonplace notions of that which constitutes Colombian popular music, it simultaneously contests U.S.-centric, Anglo-centric models of hip-hop performance and production. These points alone render it worthy of consideration among the ever-increasing body of work dedicated to Colombian popular music and global hip-hop as well.

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