



[*We Still Here: Hip Hop North of the 49th Parallel*](#), edited by Charity Marsh and Mark V. Campbell. Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. 328 pp. ISBN: 9780228003502.

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From the East Coast–West Coast feuds of the 1990s to the rise of the so-called “Dirty South,” location has always mattered in hip-hop.¹ *We Still Here: Hip Hop North of the 49th Parallel* enters the fray, asking how race, space, and place matter in hip-hop created in what is commonly referred to as Canada. Editors Charity Marsh (University of Regina) and Mark V. Campbell (University of Toronto) curate a rich and inclusive collection of chapters; instead of tackling the impossible question, “What is Canadian hip hop?” the book’s contributors explore what hip-hop in Canada

can look and sound like, what it means to its practitioners, and the social and political change it creates. The chapters span topics such as solidarity between Black, immigrant, and Indigenous communities, Canadian hip-hop’s place in the existing scholarship on diaspora, and the challenges and imperatives of writing hip-hop history in a Canadian context. One of the strengths of *We Still Here* is its insistence on hip-hop as culture first and commodity second, if at all. Although the editors name-check chart-topping artists such as Drake and The Weeknd, the book is more concerned with portraying the diversity of hip-hop practices in Canada, weaving together the common threads of racial identity and spatial politics.

We Still Here features several distinct methodological approaches, such as archival curation, video and song analysis, and oral histories. Indeed, it is in this regard that Marsh and Campbell truly present a “polyvocal notion of hip hop in Canada” (p. 6). In a literal sense, the collection also incorporates a multitude of voices, from child participants in the Hip Hop Project in Winnipeg (Charlotte Fillmore-Handlon) to professional artists such as True Daley and JB the First Lady. Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) voices, and especially the voices of Women of Colour, consistently stand at the forefront. *We Still Here* strives for diversity but never resorts to tokenism, instead approaching inclusion as a central theme with infinite variations. For example, in her

¹ For the foundational work on this topic, see Murray Forman, *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

outstanding contribution “Rapping to and for a Multivocal Canada,” Liz Przybylski argues that the search for a unified national identity is inherently exclusionary: abandoning it makes space to find new ways of existing within the nation (p. 87).² Her analysis of the song “Plan Nord” (2014) by Algonquin rapper Samian explores one example of an irreducible, multivocal musical utterance. “Plan Nord” combines a hip-hop beat, Inuit *katajjaq* (vocal games), natural sound effects, intertribal instrumentation, and French language rapping to critique the titular *Plan Nord*, an extractivist natural resource policy proposed by the Québec government. In this sonic mixture, each element is important; none is subsumed into another. While the resulting music may not sound stereotypically “Canadian” (if such a thing exists), Samian’s utterance is deeply involved with a swath of Canadian territory and its people (p. 71). In case studies such as this, Marsh, Campbell, and the book’s contributors deftly avoid the homogenizing trap that often befalls discussions of national musical styles.

There is, however, one “uniquely Canadian” thread that runs through the book, and that is the role of government granting agencies. In Canada, publicly funded projects have been vital to both nascent local scenes and the long-term survival of hip-hop communities. Traces of granting agencies can be found in most chapters, but two examples demonstrate the importance of institutional support. In her chapter on Toronto’s innovations in hip-hop dance, Mary Fogarty writes that the Fresh Arts program “has been cited by many dancers turned rappers or musical artists as being instrumental in their development” (p. 104). Fresh Arts was founded in 1993 as a Jobs Ontario youth program primarily targeting immigrant neighbourhoods; the program provided both physical rehearsal spaces and mentorship for young artists. Charlotte Fillmore-Handlon’s chapter examines the “aural imaginaries” of immigrant and Indigenous youth in Winnipeg through the creation of the multi-media hip-hop stage production, *Winnipeg Child* (2009). The production was facilitated by the Crossing Communities Art Project, in turn funded by the Canada Council for the Arts and other organizations (pp. 116n2, 136). Public funding is a cornerstone of Canadian arts industries, so it comes as no surprise that hip-hop projects have benefit from these initiatives. *We Still Here’s* discussions of institutional support connect to broader patterns in Canadian music and demonstrate a key difference from hip-hop south of the border.

In its “direct refusal to fetishize” mainstream hip-hop, *We Still Here* makes an important contribution (p. 4). However, its engagement with the divide between mainstream and independent or community-based music is not fully investigated. Despite her proviso that “understanding hip hop through this sort of false binary is concerning,” Marsh’s concluding chapter on “Powerful and Fierce Women in Hip Hop in Canada” makes tacit assumptions about mainstream hip-hop. Marsh and the panellists at the 2013 edition of Raincity Rap (Vancouver) generalize

² Here Przybylski builds on concepts from Richard J. F. Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 12.

commercial hip-hop as “slick and seductive” (p. 234) and based on the “wilful degradation of women” (p. 227). While these assessments may describe a particular segment of the industry, they are not universally true. In practice, there is slippage between the categories, as in the political (and immensely popular) music of artists like N.W.A. and Kendrick Lamar. Violence, materialism, and misogyny also percolate through complex power dynamics. In “‘Don’t Hate Me Because I’m Beautiful’: Black Masculinity and Alternative Embodiment in Rap Music,” Antonia Randolph writes that mainstream, Black rappers “design ... masculinities not only to satisfy their own desires, but to meet their White audiences’ stereotypes about Black men.”³ These rappers indeed take part in oppressive systems, but their images are also “conditioned by the institutional power of dominant men,” typically white record executives.⁴ Though the experiences of the Raincity Rap panellists speak to real issues, Marsh misses an opportunity to engage with how hip-hop artists from different segments of the industry grapple with the same oppressive structures, albeit with different strategies and outcomes. The book’s insistence on community music making and independent artists is generally a strength, but *We Still Here* might have benefited from a more thorough engagement with hip-hop’s segmentation into mainstream and independent contingents.

Nearly all of the chapters would be suitable for an undergraduate readership, albeit with some contextualization and guidance. Some selections may prove challenging for a general survey course (especially for students outside the fields of music and cultural studies), but would be well suited to upper-year courses on Canadian music or hip-hop. In order for students to engage fully with the texts, instructors may need to present critical concepts such as historiography, decolonization, or diaspora. Still, the contributors largely present their theoretical underpinnings in an approachable and transparent way suitable to undergraduates.

In sum, *We Still Here* is an important contribution, lending a much-needed first volume on hip-hop in Canada. This edited collection will serve as a fruitful point of entry into discussions on race, power, colonization, and locality in hip-hop culture on Canadian soil. It provides excellent methodological models for future studies, and lays out the contributions of several key scenes and artists. *We Still Here* will be of special interest to instructors looking to teach hip-hop in Canada: its introduction, in particular, offers a great place to start. Above all, *We Still Here* is a testament to how space and place still matter in hip-hop through a radically inclusive set of Canadian case studies.

³ Antonia Randolph, “‘Don’t Hate Me Because I’m Beautiful’: Black Masculinity and Alternative Embodiment in Rap Music,” *Race, Gender & Class* 13 no. 3/4 (2006): 201.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.