
Victoria Lindsay Levine and Dylan Robinson, eds. *Music and Modernity Among First Peoples of North America*. Wesleyan University Press, 2019. 330 pp. ISBN: 9780819578631.

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Kyle T. Mays. *Hip Hop Beats, Indigenous Rhymes: Modernity and Hip Hop in Indigenous North America*. SUNY Press, 2018. 180 pp. ISBN: 9781438469461.

<https://www.sunypress.edu/p-6543-hip-hop-beats-indigenous-rhymes.aspx>

Modernity is a charged topic when it comes to scholarship on, with, and by Indigenous people(s) because of the ways colonial apparatuses, including the academy, have seized on the concept to frame Indigeneity as belonging to the past in ways that occlude political agency in the present. Indigenous people, it seems, must retain traditional cultural ways while *obviously* being fully modern as well, according to the simplest definition of the modern, which is to say, living fully in the contemporary moment. It is not actually a paradox, but through the distorting lens of colonial *dispositifs* it can appear as one. In music studies, this apparent bind is reflected in the entrenched ordering of classical, popular, and traditional musics. This institutional ordering reproduces disciplinary investments in these categories that effectively forces scholars of Indigenous music-making to choose: which formation will render this music and these people legible?

Two new books seek to reset the discourse on Indigeneity, modernity, and music. *Music and Modernity Among First Peoples of North America* is a collection of essays edited by Victoria Lindsay Levine and Dylan Robinson. *Hip Hop Beats, Indigenous Rhymes: Modernity and Hip Hop in Indigenous North America* by Kyle T. Mays is a monograph based on the author's ethnographic work with Indigenous hip hop artists and members of the communities that have sprung up around them. Both books engage in what one might call performative enactments of modernity that bring discourses and people together. At their base, both books are sensitive to the ways modernity is fraught—shot through with the tremulous question of membership. The persistent feeling of being left behind is not a problem of temporality *per se*, although temporal maneuvers may produce it. Nor is it a direct product of modernity defined in temporal terms, or the distribution of goods and amenities that we associate with the very modern imperative of development. The experience of being told—either directly or through governmental apparatuses and epistemic orderings—that one is *not*

modern, that one does *not* have a commensurable voice and therefore an equal say, is what these contributions seek to rectify, each in their own way.

Music and Modernity Among First Peoples of North America has a lofty ambition: “to refocus the ethnomusicology of American Indians/First Nations toward new perspectives on Indigenous modernity and to model decolonized approaches to the study of Indigenous musical cultures,” as Victoria Lindsay Levine writes in her Introduction (2). The product of a careful, ten-year germination, the fifteen essays that comprise this volume are united by the metaphor of a dance, as invoked in Heidi Aklaseaq Senungetuk’s Prologue. Senungetuk describes how Inupiaq dance groups often invite guests to participate in a puala, an invitational dance that allows for a degree of improvisation while adhering to certain protocols. She extends this invitation to the reader, noting that the puala form in some ways mirrors the process of writing this book. What makes this collection unique is that each author had the opportunity to read the contributions of the others and incorporate their insights. The book is thus not organized by “theme, theoretical orientation, geographic area, or chronology” (3); rather, the authors chose to weave conceptual strands from one chapter into the next. Many hands make light work, and by bringing together very different essays with a shared focus on the contemporary and on music (broadly defined), the authors and editors make it clear how rich the reality of Indigenous musical practice in North America is today.

The editors have taken care to include studies of traditional, popular, and classical music, while highlighting the arbitrary borders between them. For instance, Gordon E. Smith’s exploration of Mi’kmaw funeral practices reveals how the vehicles by which tradition is enacted are modern. Essays on popular music include T. Christopher Aplin’s detailed tour of the construction of a global Indigenous consciousness through hip hop, set against a backdrop of migration and mediatization as both ideology and lived experience; and Christina Leza’s exploration of how hip hop activism at the U.S.-Mexico border facilitates a negotiation of Native American and Latino Indigenous identities. Finally, Dawn Avery’s analysis of the contemporary Indigenous classical music scene makes clear that it is both diverse and vibrant.

In addition to discussing a range of music, there are chapters devoted to politics and policy, as well as Indigenous musical and sound ontologies that push the boundaries of what music studies had historically considered music. These range from the essays on music’s role in activism by Anna Hoefnagels, Elyse Carter-Vosen, and the aforementioned chapter by Christina Leza, to analyses of music’s confluence with

governmental apparatuses. For example, Byron Dueck elucidates how Indigenous culture is treated as expedient through the example of powwow instruction sponsored by educational and child welfare apparatuses (part of the legacy of residential schools) in Winnipeg. John-Carlos Perea interrogates how universities police space by analyzing how his own institution has treated powwow musicking as “noise.”

Turning to Indigenous ontologies, Dawn Avery challenges the idea that Indigenous classical music compositions are intrinsically tied to ideas of pastness—European cultural heritage in particular—by suggesting methods of musical analysis that are in keeping with Indigenous (Kanienkéha) teachings. Dylan Robinson introduces Indigenous ontologies into the analysis of performance art by drawing attention to the *functions* of song and address in works by Peter Morin (Tahltan) and Rebecca Belmore (Anishnaabe). And Jessica Bissett-Perea’s chapter on Inuit sound worlding in television documentaries explores how a visual sovereignty might be enacted.

The volume is bookended by historiographic and theoretical essays. David Samuels’ opening essay reexamines Frances Densmore’s recording practices to show how ethnomusicology’s idea of modernity was constructed. Beverley Diamond’s penultimate chapter offers a critical reappraisal of the binary between tradition and modernity, suggesting action-oriented ways of being—such as different modes of listening—as an alternative analytic. Finally, Trevor Reed’s concluding essay draws on Bruno Latour’s theory that the idea of modernity is constructed through a two-part process: hybridization or translation followed by purification. Through the example of his own work repatriating Hopi song recordings, Reed shows how Indigenous people are agents of the hybridization and purification process. Ultimately, he suggests that processual ways of understanding modernity and its agents could help us break free from the confining set of terms associated with modernity that we have inherited.

Music and Modernity Among First Peoples of North America is a critical contribution to scholarship on Indigenous music, showcasing the diversity of contemporary Indigenous music-making as well as the different methodologies and positionalities from which Indigenous and settler scholars have approached them. Not only does it provide a solid overview of the field, this collection shows how we can be in dialogue—however subtle—with one another, even across large differences. While it would be premature to herald any particular model of scholarship as decolonized, the fact that the editors of this book took such scrupulous care to produce this work in a collaborative way does enact a different model, and it is a generous, hopeful one.

The desire for inclusion—a shared stake and an equal voice—runs through Kyle T. Mays' *Hip Hop Beats, Indigenous Rhymes*. Mays brings his own voice as a Black and Indigenous scholar into the discourse, and it is almost *through* his voice—his choice to combine hip hop vernacular with academic prose—that a sonorous sense of subjectivity is evoked. Mays' writing is engaging, accessible, and unselfconscious. He frequently uses the first-person to enter into a more personal dialogue with his readers. For example, the passage below where he tells us what the book is about is clear and its rhythm pulls the reader in:

In this book, I make one major claim: Indigenous hip hop might be one of the most important cultural forces that has hit Indigenous North America since the Ghost Dance movement in the late nineteenth century. Straight up! Hip hop allows for Indigenous people, through culture, to express themselves as modern subjects. They can use it to move beyond the persistence narratives of their demise, or their invisibility, or the notion that they are people of the past incapable of engaging with modernity.

Now, let the story begin. (3)

The quoted section ends with the literary equivalent of a beat drop. Mays punctuates his prose with verbal interjections that conjure a musical analogue (e.g. the record scratch of "check it"). This contributes to a sense of hip hop as a lived-in way of experiencing the world. The musicality of the writing is one of the book's best features, particularly because Mays' musical analyses focus for the most part on the content of the lyrics. It might otherwise be easy for the reader to lose sight of the fact that while the world of Indigenous hip hop exists at the intersection of multiple force vectors, it is a musical world. Mays' prose conveys a sense of what it might mean to live in it.

The book has five body chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of Indigenous hip hop. The first chapter articulates the stakes of Mays' claim that hip hop positions Indigenous people as modern subjects. He juxtaposes the use of racist sports mascots as an example of how Indigenous people have actively been erased, portrayed as extinct, to assert that Indigenous people are nevertheless fully modern. Other chapters open onto the claims that different identity groups might make of Indigenous hip hop artists. So, there is a chapter on masculinity and feminism in Indigenous hip hop, as well as a chapter teasing out some of the complex points of encounter, contention, and accord between Black and Indigenous peoples. The second chapter is a bit of an outlier, as the only purely descriptive chapter in the book, focusing on the fashion of Indigenous hip hop. As far as overall methodology is concerned, Mays offers descriptions and interpretations of lyrics, iconography, and relevant secondary sources

such as documentary films and sample curricula, mixed with insights from interviews he conducted, including a chapter-length interview with Lakota rapper Frank Waln.

Hip Hop Beats, Indigenous Rhymes is designed to complicate simplistic or essentialist views of Indigeneity and hip hop (Indigeneity as distinct from Blackness, hip hop as intrinsically masculinist). This is important work, but it is hampered by Mays' lack of precision when using key terms and a tendency to pull his punches. Take for example this passage where Mays defines modernity:

By modernity, I am taking a simple yet complex definition put forward by Scott Richard Lyons. He writes, 'To embrace indigenous modernity is to usher in other modern concepts...including the concepts of decolonization.' Decolonization itself has varying definitions, but one of my favorites is put forth by decolonial theorist Frantz Fanon. He writes, 'In its bare reality, decolonization reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives. For the last can be first only after a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists.' I am not advocating the use of violence for radical social change, per se, but I am calling Indigenous hip hop artists warriors, armed with both words and art. This art can, in turn, get people—especially the seventh generation—moving to change their existing social conditions. (23)

The problem with this definition is that it is not a definition. Lyons is outlining the implications of adopting Indigenous modernity as a stance, one of which would be a necessary engagement with the idea of decolonization. Mays seizes on this turn as an opportunity to quote an uncompromising passage by Fanon; however, he twists it so it reads counter to Fanon's spirit. Fanon's very next sentence is, "This determination to have the last move up to the front, to have them clamber up (too quickly, say some) the famous echelons of an organized society, *can only succeed by resorting to every means, including, of course, violence*" (Fanon 3, emphasis mine).

Defining a key term by elaborating on a tangent and then advocating for the opposite of what the author of that tangent intended suggests to me that Mays chose the passage for its affective impact, without engaging with Fanon's call for violent uprising against the state. This is probably wise from a standpoint of self-preservation, but it raises important questions concerning the role of the scholar in a world yearning for transcendent rupture in the direction of justice. Mays' disavowed desire points to the ways the traumatic reality of violence imposes limits on how we scholars permit ourselves to understand the many expressions of Indigenous modernity. Did the last already clamber up, or is it yet to occur? And if it is yet to occur, are we blinding

ourselves to possible circumstances? Is the metaphor that of a dance, or a war? Is it words and art, or red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives?

In his chapter on the intersection of Blackness and Indigeneity, Mays draws upon his experience as a Black and Indigenous man to advocate for the necessity of viewing the categories as not mutually exclusive. It is disquieting, though, to see anecdotal evidence employed frequently to explain insensitive uses of Indigenous iconography by Black individuals. For example, Mays describes his encounter in an airport with a Black man wearing a shirt with a racist image by the rapper T.I. on it. The exchange is brief though, and the conclusions drawn too broad:

...I saw a brotha in Group A wearing... a shirt that has an Indian chief head; it is the emblem of T.I.'s Grand Hustle Gang label. I had to ask him, 'Whas goin' on, bruh. Yo, what does the chief head symbolize on that shirt? I'm Native and was just curious.' He responded, 'It's just the Hustle Gang symbol, just about doin' you, bein' yourself.' I just nodded and said, 'Cool.' This brief anecdote suggests that many black Americans might be clueless about Native mascots and representations. (90)

This is not the only instance of unsubstantiated speculation. For example, he says that "[i]t is difficult to explain the function of Indigenous representations in hip hop culture, but if I could speculate, I would imagine black folks find something noble in Native histories, a white settler masculinist version, where they desire to align themselves with being a chief, the best artist in the game" (51). I suspect Mays' positionality comes into play here: he offers up examples of insensitive behaviour, generalizes them, and then empathizes with each side without excusing the behaviour. This is a heavy burden for one individual to bear, though—it is a heavy emotional burden, and it comes with a heavy burden of proof. A method that grapples with its own limits—perhaps a phenomenological approach—would be more informative and evince greater care, for the researcher and subjects alike.

The chapter on gender is similarly empathetic, while being richer in ethnographic detail. There remains a tendency, though, to issue a call to arms and then backpedal. While drawing conclusions in order to influence the direction of future research in the area, Mays writes:

Is there room for an Indigenous hip hop feminist framework? Hell yeah! I think we need to begin to further consider that the work being put in by Native female artists is a form of Indigenous feminism. We can utilize the dope scholarship of black hip hop feminists in order to develop Indigenous hip hop feminist theories that are not essential in nature, but

are multifaceted, place the experience of Indigenous women within hip hop and how that is represented, within settler colonialism, race, class, gender, and sexuality.

I want to be careful, though, as a black/Indigenous male. Indeed, Indigenous women can and have always spoken for themselves; my family and all of the Indigenous women who continue to influence me greatly are a testament to that. I am in no way attempting to speak for them. But it is some shit worth noting, and should be considered for future scholars working in the field of Indigenous hip hop. (83-4)

This is a welcome gesture toward acknowledging work being done outside academic channels while nudging scholars toward adopting an intersectional analytic. But Mays renders himself transparent in the next paragraph by claiming that he is not engaging in the act of representation. Is citation not a form of representation? Why claim that these groups speak for themselves and, moreover, that he as the scholar writing about them is not? It seems to me that the cause of justice, whatever its manifestation, is not served by abdicating our scholarly responsibilities in order to make room for the expertise of others. Better to add one's voice than to erase it. When it comes down to brass tacks, I want Mays to speak *for* himself, and not only *as* himself.

Mays' authorial voice is a striking one, and it belies his timidity in the above examples. His melding of scholarly and vernacular language is the great strength of the book, a stylistic choice that comes out of a desire to bridge his academic readership and his Indigenous interlocutors. Underpinning this is an ethical commitment to accessibility and building community. However, it raises some interesting problems. The many ways academics use language are all for the purpose of communicating research findings at the same time as situating those findings with regard to pre-existing scholarship. There is some overlap between this purpose and, for example, the way Mays gives shout-outs throughout the book. Nevertheless, scholarly claims (if not diction) tend toward parsimony, whereas hip hop is larger than life. At times, Mays' pumped-up style and ear for wordplay can make exposition and passing comments read like major—even controversial—claims. For example, "[t]he 1970s marked a complete reversal in US policies toward American Indians, from termination to self-determination" (26). I can't help but wonder how the book would read if Mays had committed to writing the body of the text *exclusively* in hip hop vernacular, and relegated all the scholarly buttressing, including historical context, to an extensive series of footnotes.

The sheer amount of work being done by Mays' voice imparts to his arguments a lonely feeling. But the production of scholarship is, at its base, a communitarian effort

(neoliberal atomization and the corporatization of the university notwithstanding) and, much like modernity, we partake of it through engaging with the fruits of one another's labour. I would have liked to see Mays engage with literature examining the relationship that Indigenous artists—including hip hop artists—have with their publics, the marketplace, and governmental institutions. Scholars, including most of the contributors to *Music and Modernity Among First Peoples of North America*, have explored these dynamics in interesting and productive ways. It's never too late to join the dance.

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Work Cited

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