J. Griffith Rollefson’s *Flip the Script: European Hip Hop and the Politics of Postcoloniality* takes readers on a journey through three major European cities—Paris, Berlin and London—guiding them through each of the city’s respective hip hop communities. Along the way, Rollefson explores the ever-growing European hip hop scene and how it is linked to postcolonial studies. In this book, he discusses how hip hop music has resonated with European ethnic youth, arguing that postcolonial politics are what drives interest in hip hop among minority adolescents. He supports his argument through music analysis, scholarly citations, and field work, including interviews with musicians from the aforementioned cities. *Flip the Script* outlines three arguments, or as Rollefson calls them, “pillars,” to support his claim. His first pillar explores how postcoloniality serves as a kind of double consciousness among European ethnic populations and how hip hop music “illustrates” this double consciousness. His second pillar considers how hip hop is, enigmatically, a mainstream protest music. Finally, his last pillar explains that music, especially to the hip hop community, is a legitimate form of expression and an important way to make observations about the world around us. He argues that the logocentric ideal of Western society has delegitimized music as a form of expression in our physical reality. Overall, Rollefson’s 244-page scholarly monograph convincingly details the postcolonial politics of hip hop and links them to the dissemination of hip hop in Europe.

*Flip the Script* is separated into eight chapters along with an introduction and a conclusion. Each chapter ventures into a new city and introduces new musicians. The
first two chapters explore the hip hop community of Paris. The second of the two chapters analyses the music of Senegalese-French rapper, Sefyu. The third and fourth chapters are set in Berlin. The first of the two analyses the music of multiple rappers from a single hip hop label called “Aggro Berlin.” The second discusses the ways in which hip hop is commercialized, with an emphasis on Germany’s capital. The fifth chapter, the longest, analyses many songs from M.I.A’s album Arular. The sixth chapter returns to Paris to interview two local MCs, Xiao Venom and Mani Peterson. Finally, Rollefson discusses London. The penultimate chapter introduces the reader to the blues code and how it has influenced hip hop music, and the last chapter analyses the album “Straight Outta B.C.” by rapper Juice Aleem.

In Flip the Script, Rollefson demonstrates how hip hop music has become a staple among European youth because of the genre’s relation to postcolonial politics. According to Rollefson, hip hop music in the United States is a manifestation of the struggles faced by African-Americans as a result of a long history of oppression that began with slavery, and progressed through segregation and discrimination, the last still experienced by many today. Rollefson argues that hip hop music resonates with European youth for similar reasons, stemming from colonial practices.

In his first two chapters, Rollefson takes the reader to Paris. He introduces the material related to his first pillar, postcoloniality as double consciousness, by discussing a hip hop concert and political rally. These events were sponsored by Ras L’Front—a French anti-fascist political organization—in connection with the 2007 presidential election. One of the artists involved, a Chilean-French rapper named Pizko, explained to Rollefson that he was born in France and identifies as both French and Chilean, lamenting that some people are incapable of understanding this. Pizko, however, is aware of and has accepted his own dual identity. This interview negates Rollefson’s point that all ethnic youth are dealing with double consciousness.

While the idea of French ethnic youth identifying with more than one “label” is understandable, it is difficult to understand how postcoloniality acts as double consciousness based upon the evidence provided by Rollefson. According to José Itzigsohn and Karida Brown’s article, “Sociology and the Theory of Double Consciousness,” double consciousness describes the difficulty, to a degree, of realizing a sense of self when one lives in a society where they are part of a subordinate group. However, the artists to whom Rollefson has spoken do not seem to feel any form of conflict within them. Pizko himself said that he self-identifies as a “Latino Frenchman.” In light of Pizko’s words, Rollefson’s argument would have been stronger had he acknowledged that the issue of double consciousness is not with the artists themselves, because they do not feel conflicted. The main issue lies with the French public for being incapable of comprehending the idea of someone who identifies with more than one group in society.

As mentioned above, Rollefson attended a political rally held by Ras L’Front in preparation for the French presidential election. One of the main issues under consideration during this election was immigration, and various hip hop artists were

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invited to perform and share their views. Much attention was given to these performers, because they were called to speak about the way they were treated and their experiences living in certain areas of the city. In interviewing various hip hop artists, one of the topics that arose in Rollefson’s work was life in the banlieues. A banlieue is a French suburb that might be compared to an American “project.” Banlieues are primarily inhabited by immigrant and low-income families and are usually referred to as, especially in music, a “hood.” These neighbourhoods were also a topic of discussion when the election process began. Rollefson briefly discusses artists’ depictions of how difficult life was in these areas, strengthening the connection between European postcolonial youth and American hip hop music. People living in banlieues want to be able to identify as ethnic-French people and receive the support they need, according to Valérie Orlando’s “From Rap to Raï in the Mixing Bowl Beur: Hip Hop Culture and Banlieue Cinema in Urban France,” which further supports Rollefson’s observations. Orlando’s article discusses hip hop culture in the “ghettos” of France. Ethnic-French people want to live in a society where both of their identities are acknowledged, and they articulate this desire through music in a manner similar to their American counterparts.

Rollefson’s second pillar, the commercialization of hip hop as a protest music, is introduced in chapter four, which focuses on Berlin. Here, Rollefson tackles the issue of hip hop being commercialized despite it primarily being viewed as a defiant music. Rollefson begins chapter four by comparing the evolution of hip hop to the evolution of blues. The dissemination of blues music can be largely attributed to a fascination with the authentic. Blues music was embraced because of its (apparent) authenticity. It was also largely associated with African-Americans because of its roots in slavery; the blues was and still is considered an African-American vernacular music. Blues music being a part of the history of African Americans made it very popular among white audiences, as they believed the genre to be genuine. Ulrich Adelt’s “Black, White, and Blue: Racial Politics in B.B. King’s Music from the 1960s” discusses blues music and its racial politics. The section titled “Blues and Racialization” discusses how blues music is racialized and how it draws its strength from the people who perform. The struggles that performers have endured, especially in the case of African-American performers, is evident in blues performance. This article supports the notion that music can play a role in the racialization of a population. Like blues, hip hop is deemed authentic by its listeners and can play a key role in the formation of identity. Rollefson argues that hip hop is viewed in a similar light. Hip hop can be compared to blues, because it is also considered a black music. Therefore, many ethnic youth who are searching for something genuine with which to depict their life experiences turn to hip hop.

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3 Ibid., 396.

Rollefson continues to discuss the paradoxical nature of the commercialization of “authentic and defiant” hip hop in chapter four. He uses a German hip hop record label called “Aggro Berlin” as an example. Two of the label’s most popular artists, Tony D and B-Tight, adopt personas that are hyper-racialized, with traits that include hypersexuality, violence, and greed. These traits are not necessarily a true reflection of who they are. According to Rollefson, this type of artist is able to thrive commercially because of racial stereotypes that exist in society. Because there are myriad stereotypical attributes associated with African-Americans, personas such as those portrayed by Tony D and B-Tight, are considered authentic. Rollefson makes his point clear in mentioning that these personas are both extremely manufactured and enigmatically lauded for their authenticity.

The caricatures portrayed by Tony D and B-Tight are controversial, as are the personas of many contemporary hip hop artists. This is mainly attributed to the content of much hip hop music. In the introduction to Flip the Script, Rollefson touches on some troubling aspects of hip hop, such as crude language and misogyny. However, he fails to adequately defend hip hop as a music that is extremely important to many people. An article written by Marcyliena Morgan called “‘The World is Yours: The Globalization of Hip-Hop Language,’” mentions an online forum held by Google and a group called Intelligence Squared. The forum consisted of multiple panelists who addressed the topic of hip hop. The audience in the forum was asked to vote on whether they believed hip hop was degrading to society. Most voted no, but the mere fact that if one were to conduct a Google search today, it will provide auto-filled options for the connection between hip hop and the degradation of society. This assumed relationship even on the part of a Google algorithm demonstrates that there is a stigma that continues to surround hip hop. Rollefson could have spent more time in chapters three and four linking to research such as Morgan’s and explaining why hip hop is so important to European ethnic youth.

The final two chapters demonstrate Rollefson’s final pillar, disputing music’s delegitimization as a form of expression in society. He attempts to reinforce the genre’s function as an interactive form of communication through performance. In these last chapters, he relates hip hop to blues performance. He argues that blues language or “code” continues to influence the evolution of African American music and plays a role in the popularization of hip hop in Europe.

Rollefson does not clearly explain the link between music performance, the blues code, and European hip hop’s ever-growing popularity. In his own research, William C. Banfield outlines the history of black music and discusses how hip hop follows the cultural codes that came into existence before its rise in popularity. In other words, Banfield’s research supports Rollefson’s claim. However, Rollefson does not make a clear enough connection between the blues code and the rise of hip hop in Europe. His belief in the existence of the blues code in European hip hop is plainly stated.

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2. William C. Banfield, Cultural Codes: Makings of a Black Music Philosophy- An Interpretive History from Spirituals to Hip Hop (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 87-171.
Unfortunately, Rollefson’s opinion about whether or not the blues code used in European hip hop is the reason for its acclaim, remains unclear. This omission weakens his argument.

Instead, Rollefson uses the symbolism of the letter “X” to support his argument that the blues code is present in hip hop. Rollefson believes that hip hop gets its performance roots from blues music and one piece of evidence is the use of the letter X. He introduces “X” as a symbol frequently used in blues music to represent a crossroad. While Rollefson then supports his claim through the analysis of a single song, he does not provide any additional works to support his finding, which is disappointing.

As mentioned above, Rollefson did not make a strong enough connection between the popularization of European hip hop and performance. However, in Marcyliena Morgan and Dionne Bennett’s article “Hip-Hop & the Global Imprint of a Black Cultural Form,” they mention a young Japanese person who spoke about their love for hip hop, how it has brought their community together, and how the artist appreciates that hip hop is representative of black power. Although this person was Japanese, s/he loves hip hop’s authenticity. This endorsement of the music’s ethos can be attributed to the blues code that Rollefson claims is incorporated into hip hop performance, because we know that blues has been viewed as an authentic black music. Hip hop can certainly receive the same response from European ethnic people, especially since hip hop artists are more common in Western Europe. If Rollefson had included a similar piece of evidence, his argument would have been much stronger.

One aspect of *Flip the Script* that differentiates it from other works is how it connects European hip hop and post-colonial studies so strongly. There are many works that focus on European hip hop, and many more on the status of post-colonial states. However, there are not as many works that study the two as closely as *Flip the Script*. Jannis Androutsopoulos and Arno Scholz examine the hip hop communities in France and Germany, as well as Italy, Spain, and Greece. But while their article is interesting to read, it only discusses European hip hop in a general sense and does not fully consider the perspectives of ethnic hip hop fans. *Flip the Script* responsibly lent its focus to ethnic minorities and asked how hip hop resonates with them.

Another feature unique to *Flip the Script* is its analyses. Many analytical discussions tend to focus on the lyrical content of hip hop music, but not as many pay attention to the lyrical and musical content in the same manner as Rollefson. Consider, for example, that Milosz Miszcynski and Adriana Helbig have explored hip hop communities in some Eastern European countries, such as Serbia, Russia, Estonia and many others. Their research differs, however, in its point of view, given that Eastern European countries did not function historically as major colonial powers. That said, Miszcynski and Helbig do examine the dissemination of hip hop throughout Eastern Europe and

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how it resonates with ethnic youth. Like *Flip the Script*, these researchers provide very in-depth analyses of specific pieces. Brought into dialogue with one another, these texts bolster their authors’ claims and help the reader pay closer attention when listening to the music in question on their own.

One of Rollefson’s biggest drawbacks was his analysis of various pieces. Some of the analyses were interesting, however, many of them were unnecessarily long and repetitive. For example, he dedicated all of chapter five to the analysis of London rapper M.I.A.’s 2005 album *Arular*. The analysis was interesting at the beginning of the chapter, however, it was extremely difficult to remain attentive for the entirety of his extensive repetition of common themes.

Rollefson consistently builds on the research of others and makes his own insightful and well-thought out observations. This is especially true of his analyses of the various pieces addressed in the book. But while Rollefson offers compelling insights, it is easy to get lost in the information he provides due to his writing style. *Flip the Script* is for an academic audience and it can at times be a struggle to fully understand the purpose of his writing without repeated readings.

In conclusion, J. Griffith Rollefson’s *Flip the Script: European Hip Hop and the Politics of Postcoloniality* tackles a very interesting and tough subject, about which he is obviously very passionate. However, the book does require a few reads and prior knowledge to fully enjoy. As a third-year university student who enjoys hip hop, a book such as this should be exciting and a compelling read. However, it was difficult to engage with the text when the book is not tailored to the audience most influenced by the topic. It is understandable for a text to be tailored to an academic audience, but when dealing with a topic as relevant as this, the author should consider making the research somewhat accessible to those outside of the academy as well.

For Further Reading:


