

Book Review

Low, B.E. (2011). *Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom*. Chicago, IL: Stanford University Press.

MARK V. CAMPBELL
OISE, University of Toronto

Amongst all the recent literature, dare we call it an explosion, on hip hop culture and its relationship to the academy, Bronwen Low's *Slam School* is an interesting and unique take on developing a critical hip hop pedagogy. Low partners with a high school teacher and a university student to co-teach a curriculum unit on spoken word and hip hop in a high school class in the United States. *Slam School* follows in the footsteps of Martha Diaz and Marcella Hall's *The Hip Hop Education Guidebook Vol. 1* by continuing to envision an amicable relationship between the formal school setting and hip hop culture. As a Canadian white woman professor, the author ventures into an American classroom to explore the relationships between difficult knowledge and hip hop culture in the classroom. Low undertakes no easy feat: her project is complicated by her outsider status in fieldwork, her nationality and racial appearance. Nevertheless, *Slam School* provides insightful commentary on the ongoing tensions and possibilities of formalized schooling and popular culture in general and more specifically, rap music and hip hop culture.

Low analyzes the ways in which studying spoken word and hip hop in the classroom can be productive and educationally enriching. *Slam School* delves into the complex world of race, rap and social antagonism that nefariously accompanies even the slightest progressive inquiry into hip hop culture. Low carefully balances the theoretical insights of scholarly giants, Henry Louis Gates, Jacques Derrida, Ferdinand de Saussure and others, alongside the ethnographic reality of her field work, all filtered through the tools provided to us by hip hop culture. One of the strengths of Low's work is her third chapter that focuses on Black Popular culture in schools, "The Tale of the Talent Night Rap". Besides the rich narrative and interesting series of events detailed in the chapter, it highlights in a very succinct way the numerous and overlapping complications connected to living hip hop culture and living blackness in a Eurocentric context.

Another strength of *Slam School* is found in her powerful concluding chapter to the book entitled "Pedagogic Futures for Hip Hop and Spoken Word". Low rightly identifies the future of critical hip hop pedagogies as resting with the formation of a healthy relationship between community centres and schools (p.151). Low is interested in having both schools and community centres recognize and support the development of transferable skills such as "initiative, creativity, commitment, and leadership". By highlighting the importance of multilingual rap and global hip hop, Low identifies what I believe is the most critical element of the future of critical hip hop studies, pedagogies and lives. Importantly, Low turns to the work of both Murray Forman (2001) and Awad Ibrahim (1999) to highlight the ways in which American media imperialism effects the identity construction of young black hip hoppers in Canada. The critical works of Ibrahim and Murray more than a decade ago, illuminate some of the important areas of future critical hip hop pedagogies, particularly within the Canadian context where images from American rap and hip hop pervade the media landscape.

Interestingly, what made Low's final chapter powerful—a focus on the multilingual hip hop cultures in Montreal—points to some of the limitations of the book

What is clear from the brief description of the Montreal hip hop scene is that there exists enough artistic energy and community organizations to base her study within the multilingual landscape in Quebec. Unfortunately, the study takes place in the United States, burdening the project with a number of disadvantages. Some of the limitations of *Slam School* speak directly to an insider/outsider dichotomy. This dichotomy is evident in the book's use of hip hop in the title: where hip hop stands in for rap music and its consumption. Since the study is primarily centered around language, it is understandable why rap music is the focus, but for the Hip Hop Educator this leads to an expectation that djing, sampling and bboying will be taking up throughout the text.

The book's preface sets the work's racial tone, as Low frankly and openly situates herself within the context of the subject of her book. As a white female, Canadian, non-hip hopper, Low's transparency is ethically admirable. She opens her preface with the line "I am not what you think of as hip hop", immediately notifying us as to her positionality and her assumed academic audience. Race is front and centre on Low's preface and consequently throughout her book. Part of the assumption on the part of her full disclosure is that white Canadian women are not normally recognized as part of hip hop culture, a clear amplification of dominant media messaging. The richness and potential contribution of hip hop culture is effectively closed down at the outset of Low's study as the multiethnic draw of hip hop's openly hybrid artforms don't really get mentioned until the final chapter of the book. White female Canadian hip hoppers such as B-girl crew SheBang! and underground emcee Eternia are not mentioned as a way to disrupt dominant media narratives of the blackness of hip hop.

Despite opening chapter 2 with a quote from Stuart Hall's classic essay, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular culture?", Low does not capitalize on Hall's work in his assertion of the hybridity of Black Popular culture. In this chapter Low tackles the often-tackled question of realness and authenticity in hip hop culture but it is Hall's hybridity assertion that speaks in volumes as to the centrality of discourses of authenticity in rap music. Further amplifying this omission is the author's data analysis that "concentrates on how the language of authenticity in creative writing pedagogy, such as "truthfulness in writing," complicated discourses of hip hop authenticity..." (53). To help her move through the discourse of authenticity, Low develops a typology of hip hop realness consisting of six overlapping and interrelated elements: blackness; the 'streets'; "hard" heterosexual masculinity; the importance of representing the place and culture you are from; the importance of being true to yourself; and politically conscious, "underground" hip hop. In focusing on the "commercially dominant image of the black male MC" in her search for hip hop authenticity, the author narrows in on U.S. rap as opposed to global hip hop culture. While this effort yields important insights, what gets neglected is the role of transnational music labels in creating, guiding, censoring or illuminating various aspects of hip hop culture as deemed adequately lucrative. Hip hop's continual calls to keep it real then highlight at least two things: a history of 'unrealness' in African American culture, here read: blackface minstrel shows; and secondly capitalist penetration and commodification of the once recreation culture of America's marginalized youth in New York City.

Working through Hall's assertion of hybrid Black Popular culture might have helped Low answer questions related to hip hop's hyper sensitivity around "keeping it real". The "real" is almost never on the table due to the filters of multinational record labels, the capitalist market desires of impoverished marginalized Black Americans and

dominance of the media landscape by elite non-Black Americans. More importantly, and more glaringly absent is America's minstrel past—to think about the centrality of not just authenticity but the power to control one's visual representation brings any analysis on black authenticity to another analytical space. Although throughout the text there is deep connection between blackness and hip hop culture, somehow America's anti-black, segregated racist past does not become part of the conversation. Such a discussion could have brought to the fore continuing issues of oppression, anti-black racism, eurocentrism and disempowerment that make both possible and necessary the integrity-seeking efforts of "keeping it real". Low rightly identifies discourses of "keeping it real" as ways to ensure integrity but decides to create a "pedagogical response to the stranglehold of authenticity in hip hop" (59). The response was to treat rap music as fiction in Low's study: effectively shifting from "rap as source of the truth of experience to rap as a theatre of popular desires and fantasies" (62). This redirection of the research closed down the possibilities of examining discourses of authenticity in hip hop as intimately connected to if not completely made possible by the postindustrialized reality of marginalized black and brown youth whose creative response to unemployment and marginalization (hip hop) was commodified and sold by the very orchestrators of black and brown oppression. A focus on the global and multilingual developments of hip hop culture is one arena whereby, as Low rightly suggests, a critical hip hop pedagogy can successfully emerge. Overall, *Slam School* nudges us towards an important trajectory for the future of hip hop studies and the future of the culture itself. This future lies beyond the borders of the United States and takes a special interest in engaging the diasporic and multilingual realities of the now global phenomenon we call hip hop.