

Helbig, Adriana. 2014. *Hip Hop Ukraine: Music, Race, and African Migration*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Reviewed by Kevin C. Holt

The underpinning principles of *Hip Hop Ukraine: Music, Race, and African Migration* conform to broader trends within hip hop studies. Scholars are increasingly breaking with the traditional approaches, which centralized (African?)Americanness as a governing frame, in favor for approaches that emphasize the global reaches of the imagined hip hop community, taking into account the various ways that non-American hip hoppers negotiate meaning and authenticity through the subculture in their respective locales. In this way, scholars are actively interrogating the notion that American hip hop represents a universal base for hip hop studies. With *Hip Hop Ukraine*, Adriana L. Helbig goes a step further than many of her contemporaries by presenting a complicated, multilayered negotiation of identity, which, as she observes, places American, African, African-American, black, Ukrainian, Ukrainian-American, white, and European identities in dynamic discourse. In order to present this delicate intersectional arrangement of race, ethnicity, and nationality, Helbig offers an historical overview of the ways in which those tenets of identity have shifted throughout the twentieth century, particularly in relationship to socialist and post-socialist regimes in Ukraine. She outlines various overlapping networks of migration between West Africa, Eastern Europe, and the United States of America as a means of asserting an active exchange of subcultural particularity and meaning between the three, thereby challenging the concept of a unidirectional dissemination of hip hop music culture spreading from the U.S. to the rest of the world. The result is a stunningly intricate chronicle, which sets the foundation, not just for Helbig's discussion of hip hop in Ukraine, but also for future research on popular music, race, ethnicity and identity more generally. It should be noted, however, that this project necessitates an emphasis on histories that long pre-date the formation of hip hop, American or otherwise, which means that, despite the name of this book, hip hop does not enter as a central focus until the latter chapters.

The first chapter focuses on the historical construction of blackness in pre-World War II Ukraine and America, particularly the ways in which people came to formulate notions of what constitutes authentic blackness musically/sonically, going as far back as the mid-nineteenth century in order to depict the ways in which literature, art, theater, and music lead to the

formation of blackness in the Ukrainian public imaginary. Helbig argues that American depictions of blackness, both from African-Americans and white Americans, became integral to Ukrainian understandings of what constitutes blackness universally. Helbig cites the visits from prominent African-American thinkers to the USSR, including W.E.B. DuBois, Claude McKay, and Paul Robeson, who acted as ambassadors of blackness (the whole of blackness) for the Ukrainian public. Their receptions indicated a frequently paradoxical mix of reverence of their intellectual prowess and projections of, at least some central core of, racial primitivism. It becomes clear that American takes on race became important symbols from which notions African cultural particularity were extracted; those, in turn, are cyclically informed and affirmed conceptions of African retention. Simultaneously, this era featured dynamic campaigns in Ukraine and America based in the Communist rhetoric of equality for all men, which was poised, rhetorically at least, as a political ideology that would eradicate racial subjugation. Taken together, these phenomena set the stage for a complex interplay in Ukraine, in which the political rhetoric of the land reinforced notions of sameness among all men, while the public imaginary construction of blackness hinged on an idea of fundamental difference along racial lines.

Chapter 2 focuses on immigration and racism in post-Soviet Ukraine. By this point of the Cold War, the Soviet Union had begun asserting itself as the polar opposite of the United States in terms of racial policy and inclusion. The country extended student visas to many young Africans, with the belief that they would return to their home countries after the completion of their schooling; many did not. Helbig argues that these African “invaders” bore the brunt of social, political, and economic frustrations. Furthermore, Helbig found that political imagery often referenced notions of invader rhetoric and African incivility as the underpinning cause of social crisis in Ukraine. Throughout her fieldwork, Helbig observes patterns of physical and psychic violence against Africans. Furthermore, Helbig notes that the children of miscegenation became especially targeted in the 1990s, as rhetoric indicated fears that Ukraine might lose its “whiteness” surfaced. The events outlined by the author suggest a continuation of the aforementioned paradox; officially, Ukrainian discourse asserted that Africans had the potential to be fully assimilated into Ukrainian identity, yet many of the actions and unofficial rhetoric of Ukrainian citizens suggest an ideology based in visceral racial difference, with true Ukrainian-ness being inextricably linked to whiteness even as whiteness itself becomes “authenticated” through non-corporeally based identity structures (e.g. class and cosmopolitanism). Helbig extends this argument

to the complicated relationship that Ukrainian audiences have had with the consumption of African–American music historically. Mid–twentieth century jazz, for instance, at once represented something exciting, exotic, and virtuosic, and something primitive, guttural, and dangerous. Helbig asserts that these Ukrainian assessments of Americans “performing blackness” sonically have become integral to racing music, and notes that non–white Ukrainian musicians often code their performances in ways that perpetuate these conceptions of blackness, thereby simultaneously authenticating both the trope as authentically representative of blackness and the artist as authentically black. To further complicate this field, African immigrants in Ukraine also bring with them conceptions of performing blackness (and African–ness) through appropriations of African–American musics and affiliated subcultural styles. It should also be noted that many of the African–American artists perform with notions of connecting to blackness through African–ness as well. The result is a multivalent and transnational negotiation of diasporic blackness and its relationship to whiteness and Ukrainian identity remain in a near constant state of flux. This is the platform on which Ukrainian hip hop developed.

Chapter 3 focuses exclusively on hip hop scenes in Ukraine and the ways in which participants embrace and complicate notions of hip hop authenticity. As Helbig asserts, hip hop itself is, in many ways, accepted in Ukraine as a symbol of modernity and cosmopolitan urbanity, therefore, representing one of the tenets through which white Ukrainian audiences can construct the self; on one hand, performing bodies racialized as black, as is often the case with the observed hip hop performances in this book, simultaneously mark other bodies in the space as white, and on the other, participation in a cosmopolitan music scene re–affirms some of the aforementioned notions of (Ukrainian) whiteness as modern and worldly. Helbig focuses her research in this area on two case studies of Ukrainian language–based hip hop acts: Tanok na Maidani Kongo (TNMK) and Vova zi Lvova, both of which reside in what has quickly become known as Ukraine’s hip hop center, Kyiv. Helbig finds that many of those involved with hip hop in Ukraine assert commonalities between common themes in American hip hop and the lived experiences of displaced or socioeconomically marginalized Ukrainians. In accordance with notions of hip hop cosmopolitanism, Helbig notes an emphasis on professionalism in presentation, performance, and production among hip hop artists. These high standards work to further legitimize the scene in Ukraine, as it did not represent a mainstream music scene when Helbig conducted her fieldwork. Still, Helbig offers an account of an active hip hop community in which participants conform tropes of hip hop to the lived

realities of contemporary Ukrainians and their navigations of traditional cultural–political ways of being/performing Ukrainian/Soviet identity. As with earlier genres marked by blackness in Ukraine, hip hop is wrought with racialized notions of difference, which draws the emphasis back to the racial Other, read black, as the harbinger of authenticity. As such, Africans and their descendants in Ukraine are offered a platform through hip hop to address issues specific to racial inequality and to build interracial coalitions through shared performance and audienceship.

Chapter 4 looks specifically at the ways in which some African immigrants in Ukraine make use of tropes of both African–American hip hop and traditional Ukrainian musics/culture. Helbig presents a history in which the African donning traditional Ukrainian garb presents a particular romanticized notion of Ukrainian ideology; the racial Other assimilated into, and celebratory of, Ukrainian culture. From another perspective, this gesture represents African immigrants’ search for a place within Ukrainian identity politics. Helbig asserts that given their indeterminate positions within the context of citizenship and belonging in Ukraine, African immigrants are able to use fusion in spectacular performance to create musical–cultural hybrids of Ukrainian, American popular, and African performance, thereby forming an identity politic specific to their raced, classed, and national positions. In order to support this claim, Helbig offers a close analysis of the Ukrainian folk–fusion group Chornobryvtsi, who, she argues “uses Ukrainian folk music to bring attention to members’ physical blackness.” Her analysis of this group indicates a carefully overlaid conflation of symbols (e.g. performing in outfits that feature traditional Ukrainian garb with hip hop inflected elements and styling added). In this way, Helbig propounds genre, performance, and sartorial gesture as an important means through which Africans in Ukraine come to understand themselves within the overlapping entanglements of race, ethnicity, and nation through frames defined by diasporic identity, immigration, and (non?) assimilation.

In Chapter 5, Helbig recounts her fieldwork in Uganda, a country with symbolic and actual significance as a source for Ukraine’s developing sense of hip hop/blackness as an increasing presence. She recounts experiences navigating Uganda in order to see a hip hop group, Alfa–Alfa, perform, noting the difficulty of finding performance locations, navigating interrogations of her presence as a white woman and, as an extension, concerns about her safety levied by her host family in Uganda and others from whom she sought direction to hip hop events. When she did find the venues she sought after, she was met with groups who, like in Ukraine, use African–American and Caribbean music styles to perform notions of blackness

molded specifically to pertinent national and ethnic dynamics to the region. This chapter is by far the book's most self-reflexive. Helbig is transparent about her methodologies, about what her presence as ethnographer means to her interlocutors and the immutable power dynamics therein, about the ways in which her (perceived) identity impacts the means and methods through which she obtained information, and, most interestingly, her own reflections about how she perceived differences thereto between her fieldwork in Uganda and that in Ukraine. Helbig also shares fragments of her personal biography and family history in this chapter, which effectively ties the histories of the previous chapters into a finely woven narrative. The heavy emphasis on shifting Ukrainian identity politics over the twentieth century, prominently here emphasizing the negotiation of "whiteness" and "blackness" becomes personalized as she shares a family history, where her grandparents immigrated from Ukraine to the United States and the ways in which her own experiences as Ukrainian-American ethnographer mirrors many of the central themes and negotiations highlighted throughout the book, including an ever fluctuating sense/performance of self. All players in the construction of this book, the author included, are thus presented as dynamic actors navigating the murky and frequently contradictory space of identity and authenticity, as they relate to and through popular musics that unify and divide, form and re-form; here, chiefly, but not exclusively, hip hop.

Hip Hop Ukraine provides an in-depth history which readers might come to expect from a book which seeks to lay the foundations for a sub-field of study which has not received a great deal of attention in academic texts. Rather than building from the accepted hip hop narrative, Helbig takes great care to root Ukrainian hip hop in Ukrainian history, reaching as far back as the nineteenth century to do so, thereby resisting the notion that Ukrainian hip-hop necessarily centralizes Americanness. While this book is commendable for its historical data and its careful construction of identity politics, it should be noted that *Hip Hop Ukraine* is a bit of a misnomer. As indicated in the chapter overview, hip hop gets very little mention until the second half of the book. Helbig herself articulates in the introduction that this book "is not a study of hip hop in Ukraine per se but rather a study of a specific connection between hip hop musicians and African musicians living in Ukraine" and that it "analyzes changing ideas regarding race in Soviet and post-Soviet society and how hip hop factors into these changing ideologies." Hip hop is, in fact and in this book's historical narrative, only the most recent in a string of racialized popular music genres around which identity politics are constructed and challenged. Therefore, hip hop is not the focus of this book, but one of count-

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less frames through which identity is negotiated and it is this complex and ever changing entwinement of bodies, identities, and popular music that demarcates the significant theoretical and historical contribution this book makes to the growing field of global hip hop studies and cultural popular music studies more broadly.