

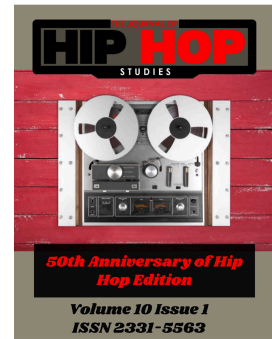
Essay Review: Renegade Rhymes

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A Review Essay of *Renegade Rhymes: Rap Music, Narrative, and Knowledge in Taiwan* by Meredith Schweig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022): xxiii, 248 pp.; 9780226819587. \$30.00

In *Renegade Rhymes: Rap Music, Narrative, and Knowledge in Taiwan*, Meredith Schweig explores the persona of Taiwanese rappers as musical knowledge workers who wield their craft to assess and reconstruct Taiwanese identity. Through examining rap lyrics as well as the artists' civic engagement in activities such as college Hip Hop education (p. 107), benefit concerts (p. xv), and street protests (p. 173), Schweig reveals the multifaceted roles of musicians as knowledge producers, teachers, and social activists. By conducting a literary analysis and sociohistorical examination of Taiwan's post-martial law era, Schweig highlights the challenges musicians face in navigating their Taiwanese identities amidst rapid social, political, and economic transformations.

Chapter One, "It Depends on How You Define 'Rap'..." and Chapter Two, "... Because Others Might Define It Differently," explore the polyphonic history of Taiwanese rap. Schweig examines three main lines: *xiha* (Taiwanese rap in global Hip Hop), *raoshe* ("rhapsody tongue"), and *liām-kua* (indigenous Taiwanese speech-song form). The first two strands bear resemblance to US Hip Hop, with mainstream acts like L.A. Boyz emerging from the commercial dance scene, underground artists such as MC HotDog and Dwagie originating from an online Hip Hop discussion forum, Master U (p. 30), and "academic rappers" like PoeTek and TriPoets, who possess academic backgrounds and contribute to local Hip Hop education (p. 36).

The focus then shifts to the third strand, *liām-kua*, which Schweig examines closely, highlighting its similarities with rap in storytelling, improvisation, and vocal techniques. Drawing on Cheryl L. Keyes's concept of "reversioning" and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s notion of "signifying," Schweig argues for a connection between rap and *liām-kua* within a speech-song continuum. She supports her argument with music examples such as Jutoupi's *Funny Liām-Kua* (1995), which incorporates sampling and wordplay (p. 52), and Kou Chou Ching's "Taiwan Traditional Hip Hop Style," featuring samples of traditional songs and instruments (p. 56). Schweig contends that *liām-kua* can be viewed as Taiwan's traditional rap form, playing a role in the reconstruction of indigenous Taiwanese identity.

The book's second part, "Narratives and Knowledge," explores the interventions rappers undertake to reshape their living conditions. Chapter Three, "Masculinity Politics and Rap's Fraternal Order," examines how artists use rap's masculine ethos to redefine post authoritarian social norms. Drawing on Confucian gender roles – depicting men as bold and extraverted (*wai*) and women as reserved and introverted (*nei*) – Schweig portrays rap's musicality as inherently masculine. Through music examples like Dwagie's "Forty-Four Fours" (2002), Schweig illustrates the rapid-fire

flow embodying the *wai* ethos. By examining rap battles, Schweig identifies new spaces for male social interaction, self-empowerment, and alternative paths to manhood.

Chapter Four, “Performing Musical Knowledge Work,” explores various Hip Hop pedagogical projects, spanning from university Hip Hop clubs to local Hip Hop digital platforms like Professional Technology Temple (PTT). Through these initiatives, community members gain social capital, assert their narrative agency, and forge new paths of survival within Taiwan’s neoliberal capitalist framework.

In Chapter Five, “We Are So Strong, We Are Writing History,” Schweig explores a series of rap songs that tackle Taiwanese post martial history, particularly the discourse around Sinicization versus independence. She argues that historical narratives are social constructs, contrasting these rap songs with official historical accounts found in films and school curricula. Schweig illustrates how these songs disrupt conventional knowledge construction processes (p. 158).

Schweig substantiates her argument on rap as knowledge work by integrating established theories of identity and history. She incorporates Sarah Drews Lucas’s concept of “narrative agency,” as outlined in “The Primacy of Narrative Agency: Re-reading Seyla Benhabib on Narrativity” (2017), and Komagome Takeshi’s exploration of historical narratives as sites of power, from “Colonial Modernity for an Elite Taiwanese, Lim Bo-Seng” (2006). These frameworks support Schweig’s argument concerning the communal nature of storytelling, enabling the reshaping of historical narratives and the proactive envisioning of future trajectories. Schweig illustrates this through case studies of artists like Kou Chou Ching and Chang Jui-Chuan, who utilize rap to reframe Taiwan’s indigenous history and advocate for local language revitalization. For instance, Chang’s track “My Language” (2010) challenges cultural hegemony with lyrics like, “I speak your language, don’t mean I’m your slave / I speak your language ‘cause I’m about to invade / Your music, your culture, your beliefs, and your face / with kung fu, Confucius, Tao, and my name” (p. 149). Schweig emphasizes that by doing so, these artists confront the marginalization of indigenous perspectives while carving out space to reconstruct their Taiwanese identities (p. 141).

The book intertwines two narrative threads: first, the evolution of rap within Taiwan’s post-martial law history, spanning from the 1980s onward. Second, the “old-school” generation of rappers, born between 1975 and 1985, whose formative years coincided with Taiwan’s post-martial law era. Schweig employs Taiwanese rap as a lens into the sociohistorical fabric of Taiwan, revealing how the experiences of these rappers are shaped by the broader sociopolitical and economic landscape. She highlights rap’s role as a catalyst for personal growth, an avenue for alternative perspectives on Taiwan’s societal evolution, and a force for social change.

Schweig’s fieldwork approach is deeply rooted in Clifford Geertz’s concept of “deep hanging out” (p. 13), as expounded in his seminal article of the same name (2000). This ethnographic methodology enables her to allow the personal narratives of her subjects to organically converge into cohesive themes, rather than imposing her

own preconceptions. Initially intrigued by issues surrounding “received knowledge and selective remembering in the creation of historical narrative” (p. 14), Schweig’s research trajectory took a pivotal turn when she attended the historic 921.87 Rap Concert on her first day in Taiwan. This transformative experience inspired her to center her investigation on rap, acknowledging its capacity to generate knowledge through the art of storytelling.

However, Schweig’s focus on narrativity in her analysis of rap often divorces it from its broader context within Hip Hop culture, resulting in skewed conclusions and a fragmented approach to musical analysis. For example, her comparison of rap to *liām-kua* on a speech-song continuum, intended to highlight rap’s narrativity, overlooks rap’s integral place within Hip Hop and its adherence to counterhegemonic principles. This oversight echoes the approach of African Hip Hop scholars like Catherine Appert (“Rappin Griots: Producing the Local in Senegalese Hip-Hop,” 2011) and Patricia Tang (“The Rapper as Modern Griot: Reclaiming Ancient Traditions,” 2012), who employ the “rapper as modern griot” trope, merging rap and griot traditions into a single continuum while ignoring the dissonance arising from their distinct social positionalities. By failing to consider the positionalities and motivations of *liām-kua* rappers, Schweig takes rap out of its cultural context, treating it as an isolated object of study.

Additionally, Schweig’s preference for informants primarily from educated backgrounds, as she acknowledges – “most of my professional relationships in Taiwan were inscribed in the circles of higher education” (p. 14) – suggests that Taiwanese rap is predominantly associated with the middle class. However, this selection overlooks marginalized populations, leading to a biased portrayal of Taiwanese rap that fails to fully represent its diversity and potential social significance.

In *Renegade Rhymes: Rap Music, Narrative, and Knowledge in Taiwan*, Schweig exclusively utilizes Western staff notation. However, many of her subjects note that Taiwanese rap performed in Hoklo and Hakka languages carries a naturally “smooth” musical quality (p. 151). Schweig’s reliance on Western staff notation does not fully capture the phonetic complexities of these languages that contribute to their perceived smoothness. By incorporating alternative notational techniques from world music analysis, Schweig could enhance the clarity in depicting how tonality, rhyme, and rhythm interact within rap compositions to achieve this smooth effect.

Overall, the book skillfully explores Taiwanese rap’s significance in knowledge creation, interwoven with extensive historical insights, making it a crucial asset for the increasing literature on East Asian Hip Hop, an important but neglected area of study. Schweig’s historical lens echoes approaches seen in other works on East Asian Hip Hop such as Ian Condry’s *Hip-Hop Japan* (2006), while her exploration of indigenous revitalization through Hip Hop aligns with literature emphasizing the parallels between African griots and rappers. Yet, the book neglects the symbiotic relationship between rap and Hip Hop, offering only a fleeting reference to the “knowledge” aspect within Hip Hop (p. 9) to elucidate the persona of Taiwanese rappers as creators of

knowledge. While it advances the conversation on Hip Hop pedagogy by accentuating the genre's potential for disseminating and producing knowledge, it falls short in providing a robust musical analysis and a holistic portrayal of Taiwan's Hip Hop soundscape.

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Maybe I'm making this harder than it needs, but Hip Hop is nothing short of rhyming, beats, and heat that cannot be captured by a title, a degree, or a study. Five long years at the academy. I search for the key hidden in between the lines. Deep structure of the human mind. Reflected in the construction of music and culture designed. By those confined, bind, forced blind. I write about my people's senses, dances, defenses Amidst fists and fences. Songs of freedom heard by few. I work to bring them into view and put them on the cue.