

## Transcultural decoloniality, global hip hop and reflexive narrative analysis

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[Thematic line: Analytical models that contemplate the critique of western modernity]

**Abstract:** Drawing on a decade of studying narrative and voice in Indian hip hop culture, this chapter asks to what extent the category of ‘transculturation’ can remain relevant for the current decolonial turn in discourse studies. Originally coined in the literary critique and cultural analysis of the colonial aftermath in Latin America, transculturation at once points to transformation, transgression and transcendence. I argue that a renewed attention to transculturation can help decolonise our academic activities and activism and advance a critique of the modern/colonial world order and its hegemonic epistemologies, methodologies and practices. A decolonial turn in discourse studies is necessary for three reasons: (1) expanding the global reach of the critical analysis of discourse, (2) including more researchers and students from previously colonised spaces and (3) formulating southern theories that can properly interrogate current global cultural flows. Drawing on my ethnographic experiences of studying hip hop cultural expression in India, the chapter presents an analysis of one narrative – or story – told by the Indian rapper Manmeet Kaur. I show of Manmeet and I co-construct a narrative about global hip hop transculturation and evaluate this story according to a logic of decoloniality. I will also consider how my later analysis of Manmeet’s story ‘back home in the armchair’ re-emphasised modern/colonial ways of analysing ‘the data’ that I had collected in India. Through these ethnographic reflections and ethical examinations, I will try to formulate a southern theory of *transcultural decoloniality* – i.e., a way of studying hip hop that is sensitive to the transformation, transgression and transcendence of modern/colonial discourses. While my approach to studying global hip hop remains tentative and comes with its own contradictions and dilemmas, I believe that it can help students of discourse to reimagine old connections and build new intersectional solidarities between Latin American decolonial thinking and cultural expressions and narratives elsewhere in the postcolonial world.

**Keywords:** Decoloniality, Ethnography, Hip hop, Narrative, Transculturation

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Pronouns: he, his, him

## **1. Introduction: The spectre of decoloniality**

Since the brutal murder of George Floyd in June 2020, the spectre of decoloniality is haunting the global north. The global academy, coloniality's prime institution for advancing modern knowledge, is now actively beginning to question its Eurocentric canon, perhaps even recognising its overemphasis on Enlightenment theory and its ethically problematic data collection methods. Academic institutions might now even be taking small steps to address the systemic racism at work in their own ranks, leading to mostly cosmetic changes in institutional identity politics, but nevertheless opening up some avenues for advancing radical epistemological, methodological and ontological shifts in the academy. Discourse studies is not spared from this spectre of decoloniality and we might now speak of a *decolonial turn* in our field. This paradigm shift, from what I can see, calls for three broad changes in how we analyse discourse. First, we must expand the global reach of the critical analysis of modern/colonial discourses as well as of emancipative decolonial discourses. This is necessary so that we can contribute our part in establishing a broad international opposition against current forms of capitalism and neocolonialism. Secondly, black and brown researchers and students from previously colonised spaces and diasporas must be at the forefront of these decolonial moves, rather than white scholars from the colonising nations, who may, however, act as allies and tactical collaborators if they are able to recognise their privilege and get ready to actively dismantle the modern/colonial discourses from which they themselves have profited in their careers and lives. Thirdly, and in my view most importantly, we must begin formulating new southern theories, new southern epistemologies and new southern methodologies that can critically interrogate the complexity of current colonial and decolonial discourses.

To this end, I argue in this chapter that a continued attention to transculturation can contribute to decolonising discourse studies and, more generally, our academic activities and activism. A recognition of the decolonial potentials of transculturation can advance a critique of the modern/colonial world order and its hegemonic epistemologies, methodologies and practices. Drawing on my experiences of studying narrative and voice in Indian hip hop culture, I will formulate a southern theory of *transcultural decoloniality* – i.e., a way of studying hip hop that is sensitive to the transformation, transgression and transcendence of modern/colonial discourses. While my analytical model of studying global hip hop remains tentative and comes with its own contradictions and dilemmas, I believe that it can help students of discourse to reimagine old connections and build new intersectional solidarities between Latin American decolonial thinking and cultural expressions and narratives elsewhere in the postcolonial world. Before I provide a detailed analysis of one narrative, let me begin this chapter by clarifying and explaining some of the terminology I will be using – hip hop, transculturation, coloniality and decoloniality – and reviewing some of the global hip hop studies literature that takes a transcultural perspective.

## **2. Conceptual toolkit: Hip hop, transculturation and decoloniality**

*Hip hop* is a decolonial option. It is a southern theory. It is border thinking. Hip hop subverts modern/colonial epistemes by challenging the discourses of racialised and gendered capitalist

coloniality, while also, simultaneously, reproducing precisely these same discourses to find a *terra contradictionis* – to contradict itself, to move in stasis, to manoeuvre its roots and to find uplift under oppression. Hip hop is a dilemma, and because of that it is transcultural and decolonial.

In the early 1970s, African American, Caribbean (especially Puerto Rican and Jamaican) and multiethnic youth *created hip hop culture* out of the post-Fordist ruins of the racialised inner-city ghettos of New York City (for historical accounts of the developments of hip hop, see Toop 1991; Rose 1994; Chang 2005; Chalfant 2006). With the term ‘hip hop’, they referred to a set of cultural, artistic, spiritual and intellectual practices used for self-expression and the circulation of street knowledge. These practices include, among others, graffiti writing, rapping, beatboxing, deejaying, sampling, street dancing, breaking, Islamic spirituality, vernacular understanding, overstanding, street fashion, informal education and media entrepreneurialism. We can read hip hop’s practices as transcultural because they mix a range of earlier Black and Latinx cultural creations, for instance, Mambo dancing, playing the dozens, jazz improvisation and participation in spiritual/religious organisations, such as Rastafarianism, the Nation of Islam and the Nation of Gods and Earths (Five Percenters). Yet, as I will argue in this chapter, more than simply a mixing of cultures, transculturation revitalises the revolutionary potentials of older cultural traditions in order to articulate a decolonial third space from which one can speak back at hegemonic western modernity and its oppressive colonial discourses.

*Transculturation*, as an analytical term, interrogates the complexity of discursive and material re-significations which occur in scenarios of cultural contact, especially violent contacts such as genocide, slavery, war and oppression. The concept had originally been developed for the cultural and literary analysis of Europe’s violent invasion and appropriation of the Americas and the colonial aftermath (Ortiz 1947; Pratt 1992; Spitta 1995; Rama 2012). In Ortiz’s (1947) original formulation in his study on the social impacts of Cuba’s sugar and tobacco economies, the term *transculturación* was employed to critique anthropology’s then widespread assumption that cultural contact leads to the dual processes of ‘deculturation’ and ‘acculturation.’ Ortiz argued that, rather than just making one group acquire the other group’s culture (acculturation) and losing its own (deculturation), cultural contact also involves ‘neoculturation’ (Ortiz 1947: 102-103); the emergence of a new hybrid or creole culture that becomes meaningful in the struggle for decolonisation and postcolonial identity. In this vein, Spitta (1995: 2) succinctly glosses transculturation as a “complex process of adjustment and re-creation – cultural, literary, linguistic, and personal – that allow for new, vital, and viable configurations to arise out of the clash of cultures and the violence of colonial and neo-colonial appropriations.”

Although the neoculturation in transculturation highlights the agency of the colonised in their struggle for decolonisation, it is important to note that this agency is limited within the dominant regimes of European knowledge and so-called modern systems of material distribution. Pratt (1992: 6), for example, notes that “subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, [yet] they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for.” To grasp this limited agency of transculturation, it will be helpful to insert a brief discussion about the notions of coloniality and decoloniality.

As an analytical term, *coloniality* investigates the effects that colonialism, postcolonialism and neocolonialism have on the contemporary world (Mignolo 2000, 2021; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Quijano 2000; 2007). A basic insight of research into coloniality is that during the last 500 years of European colonial oppression of the entire world, so-called ‘modern’ (i.e. colonial European) regimes of knowledge and systems of material distribution have become hegemonic on a global scale. Even though most colonies have been given political independence after World War II, European colonial epistemic regimes continue to shape and legitimise current systems of political domination. For example, they control the racialised and gendered labour markets and naturalise the north-south economic dependency.

Analogously to the way that coloniality points to the continuing effects of European colonialism on the contemporary world, an analytical attention to *decoloniality* allows us to understand the people’s continued struggles for decolonisation. Decoloniality aims to give a name to a range of broad intersectional tactics that support a wide range of social justice issues, such as support for Indigenous land reclamation efforts and calls for reparations for slavery. Decoloniality exposes, for example, exploitative labour market regulations, racist policing practices and femicide and resists against neo-fascist and masculinist politics. The scope of decoloniality extends beyond the revolutionary political oppositions against formal European colonial and imperial rule or against current forms of neo-colonialism. Decolonial thinking and decolonial embodied practice, more broadly conceived, can be part of our everyday social interactions, our decision making in public and in private life, our discursive practices and it can be part of our storytelling, as I will show through my analysis below.

In similar ways as decoloniality can be described as a discursive practice, transculturation has been understood by its leading theorists as a discursive, linguistic, semiotic or narrative process that involves signification, enunciation, representation and languaging more generally. Bhabha’s (2004) famous anti-essentialist ‘third space,’ for instance, describes transculturation as a form of languaging. Rather than a thing or an assignable identity, the third space designates a locus of enunciation (see also Mignolo 2000), or a discursive positionality from which one can speak in the postcolony and advance neoculturation.

It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity, that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (Bhabha 2004: 55)

Hip hop, when it emerged as a transcultural practice among African American, Caribbean and Latinx youth in the 1970s in the USA, offered marginalised youth such discursive conditions of enunciation; positions from which they could speak, rap, dance, write and perform, as well as think, feel, hope and dream, in order to appropriate, translate, rehistoricise – or, in Bhabha’s words, “read anew” – the signs of colonialism, of the middle passage, of slavery, of segregation, of struggles for Civil Rights, of pan-Africanism and of the hyper-capitalist moment of Reaganomics and the USA’s Cold-War era scramble for global hegemony. Hip hop offered them a transcultural possibility of constructing a Black positionality by which circulating signs could take on new, at times subversive, meanings.

Over time, these Black hip hop transcultural third spaces of enunciation themselves travelled outside of the racialised North American inner-city ghettos, first into mainstream US pop culture, then into the rest of the world, Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia, Oceania. In its various uptakes in the world, Black US-hip hop is not simply copied or mimicked, but rather global hip hop youth renegotiate and translate what Blackness could mean in their own local contexts (see e.g. Bucholtz 1999; Lee 2007; Roth-Gordon 2009; Simeziane 2010; Morgan and Bennett 2011; Partridge 2013). In these global renegotiations, Blackness is not to be understood as a simple and fixed descriptor of skin pigmentation, but rather as a globally shifting signifier that indexes marginalisation, as well as resistance against marginalisation, in the postcolony (Fanon 1986[1957]).

Within the emerging field of global hip hop studies, the term ‘transculturation’ has already garnered some attention (for a detailed discussion, see Singh 2022). For example, Dennis’s (2006; 2012) work on constructions of race, class, place and authenticity of Afro-Colombian rappers, deploys transculturation to capture the “dual processes – often characterized by conflict and struggle – of transformation and change in which the forces of modernity and modernization modify the traditional, while at the same time, there is an infusion of traditional elements, arts and cultures into spaces of modernity” (2006: 250). Like Bhabha, Dennis suggests that this transcultural transformation and change is situated in the study of meaning, or semiosis: “through these emergent modes of transculturation, objects that possess one meaning (or no meaning) in the culture of origin are transformed and furnished with new and sometimes even subversive meanings in a new context” (p. 249). Dennis’s attention to meaning emphasises that transculturation is a semiotic and discursive process that involves recontextualisations and transformations of signs, objects and practices in both the local and the global hip hop culture.

Pennycook’s work on global hip hop (2003; 2007; Pennycook and Mitchell 2009) similarly uses transculturation to describe the global flow of cultural and linguistic forms and ideas associated with hip hop on the one hand, and the local appropriation and refashioning of these forms and ideas on the other (2007: 6-7). Pennycook then goes one step further and highlights that hip hop transculturation does not simply cross the boundaries between the global and the local but also challenges the ontologies (the claims for real existence) of these boundaries. To conceptualise this reimagination of transculturation as a de-essentialising force of ontology, Pennycook develops three further ‘trans’ terms: translation, transtextuality and transmodality (pp. 36-57). By means of deploying these concepts, Pennycook tries to complexify the study of global hip hop and “escape from the debates over globalization versus localization, or neologisms such as glocalization that, by eliding the two polarities, flatten the dynamics of what is occurring here” (p. 7). The transculturation of hip hop in his examples, drawn mainly from the Asia-Pacific region and from Africa and the African diaspora, then, is not to be understood as a process of global homogenisation, as part of a wider westernisation of the east/south, but rather as “part of a reorganization of the local” (ibid.). Instead of being mere (inauthentic) imitations of American hip hop, imitations of some kind of acrolectal, metropolitan variety of hip hop, “the identifications with American and African-American culture by hip-hop artists around the world are embedded in local histories of difference, oppression, class and culture, often rejecting American dominance while identifying with forms of local struggle” (Pennycook 2007: 91). Transculturation, in Pennycook’s work, allows

for a nuanced analysis of the discourses that shape how hip hop artists position themselves globally and locally, while also challenging the ontological existence between the boundaries of the global and local.

In this chapter, I will draw on a decade of studying Indian hip hop culture from a transcultural perspective (see also Singh 2022) to try and formulate a southern theory of *transcultural decoloniality* – i.e., a way of studying hip hop that is sensitive to transformation, transgression and transcendence of modern/colonial discourses. While my approach to studying global hip hop remains tentative and comes with its own contradictions and dilemmas, I believe that it can help students of discourse to reimagine old connections and build new intersectional solidarities between decolonial thinking and hip hop cultural expressions across the postcolonial world. It is not my intention here to glorify hip hop, or indeed transculturation, as an easy solution for the predicament of coloniality. Hip hop is not a southern theory that could simply reverse or undo the European oppression of the global south. Rather, hip hop is a dilemmatic force that can subvert by simultaneously challenging and reproducing racist, sexist and capitalist discourses. To exemplify this, I will carefully carve out the intricate and dilemmatic narrative positioning practices of one hip hop practitioner in India, Manmeet Kaur, and show how she navigates a complex postcolonial world and thereby becomes conscious of her own identities, histories and futures.

### **3. Analysing Manmeet Kaur's narrative: Teaching, learning and applying hip hop's transcultural histories**

Manmeet Kaur is one of India's most seasoned hip hop musicians. To date, she has released three albums, toured across India and Europe and collaborated with a host of musicians, artists and activists. I met Manmeet for the first time in 2013, while I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Delhi's emerging hip hop scene. At the time, Manmeet was 20 years old and lived in Mumbai. She had started experimenting with rapping a few years prior and had put out a few songs and semi-professionally produced videos on social media. While doing fieldwork in Delhi, I found some of her music online and spontaneously contacted her via private message to ask if she was willing to meet me and do an interview for my research. She responded warmly and generously agreed to my interview request. She invited me to hang out for a few days in Mumbai, take me to events and show me around. We would have plenty of time to talk, she said.

The two-minute long narrative excerpt that I present below comes from an approximately three-hour long interview I conducted with Manmeet on Chowpatti Beach. As we were sitting in the sand, overlooking the Arabian Sea and Mumbai's crescent shape coastline crammed with high-rise buildings (see Figure XX.2), we discussed a wide range of topics, such as the celebration of masculinity, sexism and violence in hip hop, how to write lyrics and record raps that can move audiences, what Indian hip hop will look like in ten years' time, and many other topics. This interview, one might also call it an audio recorded informal conversation, marked the beginning of a long-lasting friendship between Manmeet and myself – one that deeply informed my ethnographic study of hip hop in India. Elsewhere, I describe my ethnographic relationship with Manmeet in more detail (Singh 2022).



Figure 9.2: Manmeet Kaur performing at Dillagi – International Disability Day Celebration, Carter Road, Mumbai, December 2012



Figure 9.1: Manmeet Kaur and Jaspal Singh conducting an ethnographic interview, Chowpatti Beach, Mumbai, January 2013

Manmeet’s narrative, which, as you will notice, is heavily co-constructed by me, recounts her experiences of hip hop transculturation. The story is transcultural in the sense that it is about hip hop practices, histories and ideas that were created by the descendants of people displaced to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade. But it is also transcultural in the sense that Manmeet as narrator assumes three positionalities: she first appears to be someone who disseminates hip hop knowledge to cultural outsiders, then she appears as someone who herself learns about hip hop’s history and its actors, and finally she constructs herself as someone who applies this knowledge in a critical fashion to her own life. In other words, we could speak of a double transculturation: How hip hop transculturates out of the racialised North American ghetto in the 1970s and how it transculturates into the lives of people altogether elsewhere in the contemporary moment. The narrative begins with me and Manmeet describing how Manmeet’s live performances in Mumbai might have introduced hip hop cultural outsiders to particular pieces of knowledge, practices and histories that were previously unknown to them. Manmeet then continues to narrate how she herself gained this knowledge and understanding about hip hop by watching many YouTube videos in which hip hop veterans relay their experiences. She finally concludes her story by suggesting that this kind of informal media education can help her to make her own life better. In my analysis, I will first offer a brief analysis of the structural aspects of the narrative (section 3.1) and then continue to discuss the transcultural significance of several elements, histories and positionalities in the narrative (section 3.2). In the discussion, I deliberate how we can read her narrative as formulating a southern theory of transcultural decoloniality – i.e., a way of studying hip hop that is sensitive to the transformation, transgression and transcendence of modern/colonial discourses, and I will consider how my later analysis of Manmeet’s story ‘back home in the arm-chair’ re-emphasised modern/colonial ways of analysing ‘the data’ that I had collected in India (section 4).





*Interview with Manmeet Kaur, Chowpatti Beach, Mumbai, January 2013*

- 01 Jaspal: You must have also influenced many people in, in Bombay itself. I mean, many  
02 activism stuff and all these kinda things.
- 03 Manmeet: Yeah
- 04 Jaspal: So, you go to colleges. You go to, you know, events and all that.
- 05 Manmeet: Yeah
- 06 Jaspal: So, do you think that some- like most of the people who are in your audience?  
07 Manmeet: Uhum
- 08 Jaspal: They must have like been exposed to live hip hop for the first time.
- 09 Manmeet: Ya
- 10 Jaspal: So, you must have inspired a lot of people- not even inspired but just like  
11 exPOsed people, you know.
- 12 Manmeet: Ya, exposed them to, I can produce hip hop, you know.
- 13 Jaspal: Yeah
- 14 Manmeet: And I feel, trust me, I feel better doing this thing. Like I have no- I'm not saying  
15 I'm doing this for years, no:. I've just started doing it and liking it more than I  
16 liked when I performed at a hip hop show.
- 17 Jaspal: Yeah
- 18 Manmeet: Real talk, in India. I like, I like introducing- and people would come to me and  
19 say "Ohhh, so this is how it actually started, scratching." "Ohh this is how they  
20 actually used to attach the freaking wire" you know. DJ Kool Herc. They would  
21 just go to the=  
22 Jaspal: =the lamppost, the lantern=  
23 Manmeet: =attach with the streetlight and do the shows.
- 24 Jaspal: @@@@
- 25 Manmeet: ☺ It's all about peace, love, unity and having fun.
- 26 Jaspal: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- 27 Manmeet: And they would be amazed. They would like, "We never knew this part of the=  
28 Jaspal: =story=  
29 Manmeet: =this part of the hip hop."
- 30 Jaspal: Yeah
- 31 Manmeet: And I told them, like, "This is amazing." I- from the past couple of months,  
32 ONly thing I used internet was (.) for watching the videos of veterans speaking  
33 about hip hop.
- 34 Jaspal: Uhum uhum
- 35 Manmeet: Like "what does KRS have to say ☺ about Lil Wayne<sup>2</sup>?" @@
- 36 Jaspal: @@@
- 37 Manmeet: "How does HE look at the younger generation?" A couple of point I disagree  
38 to, but most of the things were coming out of experience. Like "I need to think

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<sup>2</sup> KRS One, the self-proclaimed 'teacha of hip hop' epitomises authentic old school values and hip hop's underground consciousness. Lil Wayne, a top selling rapper, producer and entrepreneur is often seen as inauthentic and sell-out by many hip hop practitioners who align with notions of authenticity.

39                   like HIM (.) to make my life better.”  
 40 Jaspal:       Nice one.  
 41 Manmeet: You know, matlab ((*meaning/I mean*)), that’s the best way you can use  
 42                   YouTube, man. I mean, bless all those guys who uploaded all those interviews,  
 43                   man.

In this narrative excerpt, a range of transcultural ideas, concepts and histories of hip hop are deployed by Manmeet, and co-constructed by me, to advance a critique of western modernity. In the following analysis, I spell out how we can read Manmeet’s narrative as an example of transcultural decoloniality. First, however, allow me to provide you with some descriptive insights into the structure of the narrative and the polyphonic orchestration of several narrative figures.

### **3.1 Structural analysis of narrative episodes and parts and polyphonic orchestration of narrative figures**

On the structural level of narrative parts and the narrator’s orchestration of narrative voices, Manmeet’s narrative resembles common findings in the discourse analytical and sociolinguistic literature of storytelling. Manmeet’s narrative contains three episodes (lines 1-18; 18-31; 31-43) which each have a more-or-less definable introduction, a complicating action and an evaluative resolution and sometimes also a coda (Labov and Waletzky 1967). Manmeet and I co-construct two narrative figures who speak in reported speech, or constructed dialogue (Tannen 2007; see also Hill 1995) in the story world, indicated with quotation marks in the transcript. First, we hear the voice of the college students being amazed about learning about hip hop’s history (lines 19, 20 and 27-29) and then we hear the voice of Manmeet as a narrative figure, first, responding to these students (line 31), secondly, asking questions about hip hop’s histories herself (lines 31, 35) and finally drawing out relevant lessons for her own life (lines 37-39). But apart from these voices that are directly quoted by the narrator, Manmeet evokes several other figures that are known (to me and to other cultural connoisseurs) from hip hop’s history: Grand Wizard Theodore, DJ Kool Herc, KRS One and Lil Wayne. These figures do not ‘speak’ directly in the narrative (and Grand Wizard Theodore is not even named by Manmeet), yet their voices can be reconstructed in a post-hoc analysis of the narrative.

### **3.2 The transcultural significance of hip hop histories in the narrative**

In lines 1-11, I begin by setting up the narrative scene. I construct Manmeet as a hip hop artist who has influenced a lot of people in Bombay (now called Mumbai, but Manmeet and I kept using the city’s older name in our interactions<sup>3</sup>). I suggest that her various performances must

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<sup>3</sup> India’s now largest city on the country’s western coast was originally named ‘Bom Bahia’ (good bay) by Portuguese colonisers in 1534. When British colonisers took over in 1662, they called the city ‘Bombay’ and it was this name that stuck with the city throughout the centuries until right-wing Hindu fascist Shiv Sena Party (The Army of Shiva Party) renamed the city ‘Mumbai’ in 1995 (for an account of topographic renaming in India, see also Singh 2020). They believed that ‘Bombay’ was a British mispronunciation of ‘Mumbai’, which

have influenced not only hip hop practitioners, but also activists and college students who are not immediately affiliated with hip hop (see also Figure XX.1). I speculate that these cultural outsiders, when attending Manmeet's performances at colleges and social protests, must have been *exposed to live hip hop for the first time* (line 8). Manmeet agrees with my observation (lines 10, 12) and then continues to narrate that although still being very new to performing, she likes playing in these activist spaces more than she likes playing in designated hip hop spaces: "I've just started doing it and liking it more than I liked when I performed at a hip hop show" (lines 15-16).

She continues to explain that she particularly enjoys introducing those cultural outsiders to practices and histories of hip hop of which they might have previously not been aware. The narrative figures of the activists and students appear to fulfil the narrative function of providing an audience for Manmeet's storytelling while she performs in colleges and social protests. Thus, note that the narrative that we co-construct, while we were sitting on Chowpatti Beach on this January afternoon in 2013, is itself about narrative practices. She tells me a story about her storytelling. She provides two examples of the narratives that she uses to introduce activists and college students to hip hop: scratching (line 19) and attaching wires to streetlights (lines 19-23). These are two makeshift technologies that have contributed to the birth of hip hop in the Bronx in the early 1970s, and they have been mediated and recited again and again in hip hop historiographical artefacts (see also Nietzsche 2012) – to the degree that have attained mythological discursive value in culture's history. Let me briefly explain the transcultural significance of scratching and attaching wires to streetlights.

### ***Scratching (line 19)***

Scratching designates a now very popular and widespread technique used by many hip hop DJs and turntablists. The basic idea is that the DJ uses their hand to move a vinyl record back and forth in fast and rhythmical ways in order to create 'scratch' sounds on a turntable. This technique was said to have been invented by the African American teenager Theodore Livingston from the Bronx in New York City, who goes by the stage name Grand Wizard Theodore. The hip hop journalist Laurent Fintoni (2015), in a blog post titled *A Brief History of Scratching*, tells the story of Theodore's invention of the scratch in the following way:

As legend has it, sometime in 1975 Theodore inadvertently heard himself scratch on his home system after his mother had asked him to turn the music down (else she turn it off). The sound wasn't new; it wanted to be found and Theodore heard its call. With some more practice he refined the back and forth hand motion into the 'scratch', a rhythmic element that made its first public appearance shortly after at a local club. (Fintoni 2015)

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they associated with a local deity called Mumba Devi, who is an avatar of Shiva's wife Parvati. The Shiv Sena argued that the name change would decolonise the city. So, while Manmeet and my continued calling of the city by its British colonial name might be interpreted as a colonial hangover on the surface, on a deeper level it could also be interpreted as our resistance against Hindu fascist discourses that aim to establish Hindu supremacy in the name of decolonisation (see also Singh, in press).

Fintoni's account broadly corresponds to Grand Wizard Theodore's own narrative of the invention of the scratch, which he relates in the opening scene of the filmic documentary *Scratch*. {0:36-1:16}

This one particular day, when I came home from school, I- you know, I usually go home and practice. And I was playing MUsic a little bit too LOUD. And my mom's came in, banged on the door. Boom boom boom boom. "If you don't cut that music DOWN, you gonna have to cut it OFF." So while she was in the doorway, you know, screamin at me, I was STILL holdin the record and rubbin the record back and FORTH. When she left, I was like "uhhm... that was like- that's a pretty good iDEA." So when she left, I experimented with it, you know, a couple of months, a couple of weeks, different records. And then, when I was ready, we gave a party. And that's when I first introduced the scratch.

Theodore's invention of the scratch revolutionised the development of hip hop deejaying and music. Now DJs competed not only over who had the best records, and who could mix them best, but also over who could scratch better. In other words, in the early 1970s, Theodore had transformed the turntable into a musical instrument in its own right. In Theodore's narrative we can immediately see how transculturation is at work. As Pratt (1992: 6) notes, while "subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture [in this case: the turntable, the record, the scolding mother], they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for [in this case: scratching]." Theodore's transcultural invention had huge repercussions. By the mid-1990s the practice of scratching had become a globally competitive 'discipline' of hip hop deejaying, often referred to as turntablism, which also became formalised in the institution of the ITF, the International Turntablist Federation, which existed between 1995 and 2005 and which hosted competitive scratch tournaments across the world. The film *Scratch* documents this transcultural development and introduces viewers to the various scratching techniques and styles and to the main protagonists of turntablism. These transcultural hip hop historiographies are all implied in Manmeet's evocation of scratching in line 19. Yet, they are not fully explicated in her narrative, perhaps because Manmeet assumes that she and I share this historical knowledge of the beginning of scratching and that we are aware of its transcultural significance.

#### *Attaching wires to street lights (lines 19-24)*

Perhaps in order to corroborate her assumption that I know what she is talking about, I heavily co-construct the subsequent narrative talk by latching (lines 22 and 28). In the second example she brings up another transcultural technology used by Bronx youth in the early 1970s that is mythologically associated with the birth of hip hop culture: attaching wires to street lights. This technological hack allowed DJs from the Bronx to access electricity that could power their turntables and sound systems to transform public spaces, like parks, into sites of African diasporic celebration and conviviality. The invention of this technology is often associated with Clive Campbell, a Jamaican DJ who migrated from Kingston to New York City in the late 1960s, and who came to be known as DJ Kool Herc. The story goes something like this.

DJ Kool Herc is credited with being the first hip hop DJ. In the summers of 1973 and 1974, Herc would host parties out of the common room at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx. Soon enough the parties became too large and the party organizers needed a new venue. Not having the funds to rent out a larger nightclub, Herc looked to nearby Cedar Park. It was here where Herc saw construction crews tapping power from the base of a lamp post. Taking the cue, Herc hooked his DJ'ing equipment into a lamp post one summer night. More than 3,000 people showed up for what was the first open air hip hop concert. (Morgan 2009)

With this technique of hooking up one's sound system to public street lights, the early Bronx hip hop musicians found a transcultural method to broadcast their cultural and musical creativity and lyrical messages to multigenerational audiences. The hip hop DJs from the Bronx thereby continued the tradition of earlier musicians from the Caribbean diaspora in the USA, who were said to have jammed together in the streets and parks and attracted crowds from marginalised urban neighbourhoods to gather, celebrate, dance and collectively resist disenfranchisement. However, different from these earlier versions of vernacular diasporic conviviality, where African American, Puerto Rican and Jamaican migrants to New York City would use drums, guitars, horns and other traditional musical instruments, the hip hop DJs used electrified record players, mixers, amplifiers and speakers to transmit music to the people. As electricity is not easily accessible in public spaces, the idea of illicitly tapping street lights to power the DJ equipment was born. This technique provided the new generation of multi-ethnic Bronx youth a tool for appropriating urban space that harks back to the history of African diasporic vernacular street culture of their parents' generation but in ways that are aligned with the emergence of high-tech culture of the 1970s and early 1980s.

When Manmeet tells me the story of her telling cultural outsiders the stories of scratching and attaching wires to street lights in lines 18-31, she connects transcultural histories across the postcolony. The activists and college students who hear her narratives "would be amazed" (line 27) because they never knew about these histories of hip hop. Presumably, so it is implied in her narrative, these cultural outsiders would have thought of hip hop simply as a genre of music or an American style of dressing and talking but wouldn't have understood the transcultural significance and the emancipative potentials of some of the practices that have contributed to the birth of hip hop among African American and Latinx youth in the US. Manmeet's and my co-constructedness of this part of the narrative, as well as my laughter in line 24, suggests that we both know about this history of scratching and tapping street lamps their transcultural significance within hip hop culture. Therefore, we both construct ourselves and each other as cultural insiders of the culture.

### ***Peace, love, unity and having fun (lines 25-31)***

This also becomes evident in lines 25 and 26, when Manmeet summarises, in smile voice, the cultural significance of hip hop as being "☺ all about peace, love, unity and having fun" to which I enthusiastically reply "Yeah, yeah, yeah." This co-construction of the narrator and the interviewer as cultural insiders draws on a catchphrase that is often associated with old-school hip hop and hip hop authenticity, or "real talk", as Manmeet calls it in line 18. For example, a record produced by James Brown, the Godfather of Soul whose music is often sampled by hip

hop producers, and Afrika Bambaataa, one of the three Founding Fathers of hip hop, alongside Grandmaster Flash and DJ Kool Herc, is called *Unity* (1984), which contains a chorus with the lyric “Peace, unity, love and havin’ fun.” The four concepts provide a moral compass for ‘authentic’ hip hop heads from around the world to remind them of what hip hop was all about at its inception and they stand in direct contrast to some of the concepts associated with contemporary mainstream US hip hop, such as gang violence, hate, misogyny and divisions along racial lines; all topics, by the way, that Manmeet and I had critically discussed during our three hour long interview in 2013. When Manmeet cites, or better samples<sup>4</sup>, these words, she thus aligns with a discourse of hip hop authenticity and morality that decriminalises hip hop’s makeshift practices, like ‘stealing’ electrical power from municipal street lights, by ways of showing their pacifistic, loving, unifying and playful effects on communities and cultural conviviality under coloniality.

***From teacher to learner in India’s emergent digital circuits (lines 31-43)***

From line 31 onwards, Manmeet’s story moves from being about her transmitting knowledge to Indian activists and college students, to her herself learning about the histories of hip hop by using the internet. The swift move in positionality from teacher to learner in line 31, to some degree, answers the question of how Manmeet, a then 20-year old woman from India, knows about the histories of hip hop’s inception in the Bronx in the 1970s so that she could relate them to cultural outsiders on social protests and in colleges and activist spaces in early 21<sup>st</sup> century India. She quotes the *internet* (line 32) as the prime resource by which she learns about hip hop’s histories.

This corroborates with many other narratives that I have collected in Mumbai and Delhi in 2013, where access to online worlds, both in the form of cyber cafes and in the form of the then emerging 3G/4G smartphone infrastructures, was mentioned as important digital affordances that made hip hop knowledge available in India and that created a recognisable Indian hip hop scene. Gabriel Dattatreyan (2020: 9), in his anthropological book about hip hop in Delhi, makes the point that the

emergent digital infrastructure has provided young people across various social divides in urban Indian with, among other things, access to popular cultural content from around the world: global news (fake or otherwise), English Premier League football, K-pop, Naija pop, Japanese manga, and, of course, hip hop, all which supplement their previous diet of the popular produced by national and regional mass media industries as well as web-based media directed at “Indian” youth.

To grasp these new digital affordances, Dattatreyan develops the notion of the *globally familiar*, which he thinks of as “a technological infrastructure that facilitates connection across place and time as well as the diversity of media these technologies can be made to conjure” (2020: 3).

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<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Roth-Gordon (2009) in her linguistic anthropological study of hip hop-affiliated favela youth in Rio de Janeiro calls such citations of rap lyrics in spoken interaction between hip hop fans ‘conversational sampling.’

The globally familiar's connections across time and space are articulated in Manmeet's final episode of her narrative, when she reveals that *from the past couple of months, ONLY thing I used internet was (.) for watching the videos of veterans speaking about hip hop* (lines 31-33). In this account, the internet provides Manmeet with a window into the history of hip hop, embodied by the "veterans" of the culture, which allows Manmeet to learn something about the culture and also about her own life. Afforded by the internet with a plethora of hip hop historiographical artefacts, Manmeet begins to ask herself questions: "*what does KRS have to say ☺ about Lil Wayne<sup>5</sup>?*" @@ (line 35), and "*How does HE look at the younger generation?*" (line 37). In these constructed dialogues with herself, certain two famous rappers from the USA, KRS-One and Lil Wayne, come to personify different generations of hip hop as well as different moral positionalities with regards to the culture's relationship to the mainstream. KRS-One embodies the "veterans" from the South Bronx, who occupy positions of cultural authenticity and underground fame, whereas Lil Wayne embodies the "younger generation" of US rappers from outside of New York (Lil Wayne is from New Orleans), who have to some degree abandoned some of the moral values of old-school hip hop authenticity and have 'gone mainstream' with a their commercially successful music and merchandise. In so far as Lil Wayne and KRS-One occupy opposing moral positionalities with regards to authenticity, they are here deployed as narrative figures solely for the purpose of Manmeet's learning about the culture on the internet. Note that while she aligns with KRS-One's opinion about commercialisation, she is not entirely uncritical about it: *A couple of point I disagree to* (lines 37-38). Yet, Manmeet is quick to acknowledge that KRS-One's and presumably other veterans' words come *out of experience* (38). Thus, she reminds herself: *Like "I need to think like HIM (.) to make my life better"* (lines 38-39). These lines are the resolution, or even the punchline, of the narrative, in which the narrator evaluates all the voices and narrative plots and articulates the transcultural significance of the story for her own life. It is the transcultural moment of the narrative in which Manmeet critically absorbs ideas and experiences of cultural veterans into her own vision of life, her morals and thinking.

I positively evaluate her narrative resolution in line 40: *Nice one*, after which Manmeet adds a generalising coda in which she reflects on her use of the digital platform YouTube and thanks other social media users who upload hip hop's historiographical artefacts: *You know, matlab ((meaning/I mean)), that's the best way you can use YouTube, man. I mean, bless all those guys who uploaded all those interviews, man* (lines 41-43).

#### **4. Discussion: A southern theory of transcultural decoloniality**

What can we make of Manmeet's narrative in terms of transculturation and decoloniality? Surely, the narrative re-narrates transcultural and decolonial histories developed by African American and Latinx Bronx youth in the 1970s and 1980s, such like scratching or attaching wires to street lights. Manmeet also cites, or samples, phrases such as 'peace, love, unity and

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<sup>5</sup> KRS One, the self-proclaimed 'teacha of hip hop' epitomises authentic old school values and hip hop's underground consciousness. Lil Wayne, a top selling rapper, producer and entrepreneur is often seen as inauthentic and sell-out by many hip hop practitioners who align with notions of authenticity.

having fun’ to articulate a particular moral discourse of decolonial and transcultural conviviality. But apart from these evocations of transcultural histories, her narrative is transcultural in the sense that it appropriates or absorbs these histories and experiences and makes them relevant for her own life and for her own futures. Just like the South Bronx youth used the technological affordances that surrounded them in innovative ways to develop new technologies like scratching or attaching wires to street lights, Manmeet uses the internet, and in particular the video sharing platform YouTube, as a digital infrastructure to learn about hip hop’s histories and moral understandings in order to, as she tells herself, “*make my life better*” (line 39). She therefore uses hip hop’s transcultural histories as inspirations to transform her own life.

This transformation, although still anticipated in the future, also transgresses and even transcends modern/colonial discourses that aim to keep her in her designated place in hip hop and in society at large. To fully appreciate this argument, we need to leave the story worlds and storytelling worlds that we have dwelt in so far and take a moment to look at Manmeet as a person and hip hop artist, rather than just a narrator. Soon after our interview in January 2013 in Mumbai, Manmeet got married to an Indian male rapper and the couple moved to Chennai, in the south of India, where her husband’s family lived. Manmeet had originally thought that marrying a hip hop artists would mean that they could produce music together and tour across the country and world to perform at gigs, events, and protests. However, in Chennai she found herself doing household chores in her in-laws’ house, while her husband was away pursuing a white-collar job in an office. Manmeet went on frequent trips back to Mumbai alone and, in 2014, recorded an eleven-track strong self-produced socially conscious and politically aware English-language album with the title *Hip Hop Bahu* (‘bahu’ is the Hindi term for daughter-in-law). Soon the couple got divorced and Manmeet moved to Goa, where she sustained herself by performing daily shows at beachside bars with an international funk band and travelling musicians. The connections she made in Goa would eventually bring her to Europe, to France, Belgium, Italy, Spain and Germany, where she would perform and record her second album *Neophilia* in 2018.

When I met Manmeet again in late 2019, she was back in India and lived with her parents in Chandigarh, in the Punjab, in the north of the country. During this visit, which I describe in more detail elsewhere (Singh 2022), she told me many stories about how she had to go up against many odds in the past seven years since we had first met in 2013. She told me about promoters and marketing agents not paying her for her performances at shows, producers letting her down last minute, artists talking behind her back, and most disturbingly she told me about many experiences of sexual harassment and assault, as well as about how her parents and family members felt ashamed of her because she was a female divorcee. Her female positionality in India’s patriarchy as well as her female positionality in hip hop’s hegemonic masculinity who raps in English about social and political injustice made her have to fight battles on many fronts. *I have to transgress all norms, man*, I remember her telling me on one occasion during my visit to Chandigarh in 2020. Transgression, for Manmeet, is not a choice. It is something that she has to do in order to live a life and make a career as a socially conscious and politically aware female hip hop artist, a label, by the way, which she wholeheartedly rejects. *I’m just a hip hop artists, why does everybody think they have to add ‘female’? Judge me on my rhymes, not on my gender, man*. Her everyday transgressions, however, wore her out



and she soon got tired to constantly have to make extra efforts to avoid, anticipate and deal with sexualisation, shaming and patronisation, both within hip hop cultural circles and out there in (Indian) society at large.

Transgression, then, led to her desire to transcend her positionality as a woman in Indian hip hop. To an extent, the fact that she raps in English rather than in an Indian language like Hindi or Punjabi (both which she speaks fluently), could be interpreted as allowing her to transcend her geographical positionality as an *Indian* woman and imagine herself as part of a more *global* transcultural hip hop movement. Elsewhere (Singh 2022; Cardozo and Singh, in preparation), I say more about some of the underlying hip hop cultural and sociolinguistic processes that might have driven Indian rappers to first start out with rapping in English in the early 2010s and why they have by and large moved to rapping in Indian languages, which are although often heavily infused with English codeswitching (see also Cardozo and Mysore 2020). This move from rapping in English to rapping in local languages has been documented in hip hop scenes across the world (e.g. Bennett 1999; Mitchell 2001; Lee 2007; Pennycook 2007; 2007). The fact that Manmeet has not followed this trend and continues to rap in English could be read as her tactic to transcend Indian hip hop cultural spheres and instead position herself as a travelling cosmopolitan artist who uses the current global lingua franca English to pursue international connections and garner recognition for her music across the Anglosphere. My representation of her work and life and our encounters in this chapter and book undoubtedly also belong to this Anglosphere. At the time of writing this chapter in late 2021, partly due to the travel restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, Manmeet was back in Goa. In Goa she released her latest album *Bin There, Dust That*. Goa, as India's prime off-the-beaten-track tourist destination where English is spoken by many, despite its Portuguese colonial history, offers Manmeet a cosmopolitan refuge within India's suffocating patriarchal society and hip hop scene, which by and large has moved to embracing local languages, such as Hindi, Punjabi and Kannada. Thus, while on the surface Manmeet's continued use of English for her rap music might be interpreted as a colonial hangover, a transcultural reading that takes into account her gendered positionality could lead us to understanding her use of English as a way to transcend locality and position herself as a cosmopolitan travel who moves between places in India and in the world to evade being held back by local structures. If we understand coloniality as a form of structural oppression that is connected to European colonialism but is complexly imposed on individuals in local forms of domination, a simplistic reading such as English = colonial and local languages = decolonial seems insufficient. Manmeet's continued use of English can be interpreted as her transcultural tactic to transcend Indian coloniality.

Despite my attempts to demonstrate transcultural decoloniality in Manmeet's narrative and in her lived experiences that she shared with me during our ethnographic encounters, the result of this chapter is unsatisfactory, in humble opinion. My own analysis back home in my proverbial armchair re-introduces colonial readings and draws on essentialist ideas, for example when I talk about Manmeet's 'female positionality' within hip hop or within Indian society. Manmeet herself often rejects such colonial labels and attempts to find intersectional tactics that help her confuse or subvert the image of femininity, of Indianness and of hip hop, among other categories, both in her many conversations with me and in her music and art. For example, I tried to show how her use of English in her rap music might be read as her transcultural decolonial tactic to transcend locality and open up translocal cosmopolitan vistas

for her own life and her future as an artist. Thus, my discourse analytical approach to ‘analysing’ global hip hop narratives, ultimately reproduces coloniality, no matter how hard I try to avoid doing that. Perhaps, the genre of writing formal research papers, with its emphasis on empirical data analysis and theorising, is fundamentally flawed and imbued with coloniality? A better document for readers to relate to some of the complexities of Manmeet’s transcultural decoloniality might be listening to her music and watching her music videos on YouTube and other online media platforms.

## **5. Conclusion: Postcolonial decoloniality**

In this chapter I have shown how a continued attention to transculturation may help to develop analytical models that contemplate a critique of western modernity. One narrative, told by the Indian rapper Manmeet Kaur, which was heavily co-constructed by me, the researcher, was studied to show how transcultural histories were re-narrated but also how the narrator uses these histories to transform her own life and futures. I hope that my reflexive approach to analysing Manmeet’s narrative could do some justice to the trust she has given me when narrating her life experiences to me over the course of almost a decade.

My analysis and discussion aimed to carve out a southern theory of transcultural decoloniality that is sensitive to people’s tactics of transformation, transgression and transcendence of modern/colonial borders. One result of this study is that we can simply equate coloniality with Western colonialism, but we must instead cast our critical eyes on local forms of oppression, such as Indian Hindu nationalism and Indian patriarchy, as well as hegemonic masculinity within globally circulating cultures such as hip hop. These forms of local modern/colonial oppression might well be connected to British or Portuguese colonialism in India, but they are more complex than that, as I tried to show in this chapter.

The chapter, in the general architecture of this book, then also invites us to find ways out of the dichotomy between *postcolonial studies* in the South Asian subcontinent associated with scholars such as Gayatri Spivak, Ranajit Guha or Dipesh Chakrabarty and *decolonial studies* in Latin America associated with scholars such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh. What could transculturation and an emphasis on transcendence, transgression and transformation bring to the table when analysing subalternity and coloniality? Can Indian Marxism be reconciled with border thinking? How can Indigenous land reclamation movements in Latin America inform Dalit emancipation in South Asia and vice versa? Is feminicide different and similar in both continents? Finally, what can decolonial and transcultural insights of African, Oceanic and European scholarship contribute to these discussions? I hope that readers can find tentative answers to these questions in my chapter and in the many other wonderful chapters collected in this volume.

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