Culture & Society

Getting Real about Global Hip Hop

Yvonne Bynoe

The cover of a recent *New York Times Magazine* promoted its contents with the eye-catching blurb, "Explaining Hip-Hop to the Taliban."[1] The story, written by a humanitarian aid worker in Afghanistan, dealt with the cultural contradictions that exist in that isolated, war-torn country. The author recounted, "I recited 'hip-hop lyrics' at the request of the young Afghans, who wanted to know 'about the African people with black skin in America' who sing, but without music, like shouting."[2] This article showed that despite being in the backwater of the world, in a country where televisions, movies, and music were banned by the government, these young Afghans could easily call up common stereotypes about Black Americans. The author indicated that he tried to explain the misconceptions, but he lamely conceded, "There is only so much that can be translated from one language to another, from one culture to another."[3] This points to a basic premise: unless one has at least a working knowledge of Black Americans and their collective history, one cannot understand Hip Hop culture. While rap music has been globalised, Hip Hop culture has not been and cannot be. Anyone can be taught the technical aspects of deejaying, breakdancing, writing graffiti, and rhyming, or can mimic artists' dress or swagger, but the central part of Hip Hop culture is the storytelling and the information that it imparts about a specific group of people. The experiences of

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Black people in America—coupled with their beliefs, customs, language, and style—continue to fuel what is called Hip Hop culture.[9]

Hip Hop culture is indeed based on improvisation and adaptation, but these creations are based in turn on a Black American perspective and understanding of the world. Therefore, if international artists are selectively taking parts of Hip Hop culture and reconfiguring them to fit their own histories and experiences, without understanding the framework in which the components developed, how can these new cultural expressions still be called "Hip Hop?"

Understanding Culture. The chief issue relating to the supposed globalisation of Hip Hop culture is whether it can be transported and adapted beyond the United States. Are the permutations of Hip Hop culture developed abroad merely branches of the original tree, or do they actually constitute new cultures in their own right? Undergirding that query is the question of whether Hip Hop culture can legitimately exist divorced from general Black American culture and history. According to music journalist Kevin Powell, "A hip-hop head is not someone who listens and copies the music, lingo, fashion, and dance. It is someone who knows and appreciates its history, going back to the Negro spirituals of the plantation."[10]

In our contemporary world, physical nations are no longer the parameters for establishing a "culture." Nonetheless, culture presupposes that there are agreements within a group of people about how life is lived. In his book *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach*, Richard Lull says,

> Years ago Raymond Williams (1962), succinctly defined culture as "a particular way of life" that is shared by a community and shaped by values, traditions, beliefs, material objects, and territory. From this perspective, culture is a complex and dynamic ecology of people, things, worldviews, rituals, and daily activities and settings. It's how we talk and dress, the food we eat and how we prepare and consume it, the gods we invent and the ways we worship them, how we divide up time and space, how we dance, the way we work and play, how we make love, the values to which we socialise our children, and all the other many details that make up *everyday life*. Understood this way, culture is "our way of doing things" and it reveals who we are as well as who we are not. Culture makes available the frames through which we know ourselves and others, providing coherence for cultural members while marking differences.[11]

Hip Hop culture, therefore, is not merely an entertainment vehicle, but an expression founded in history, common understanding and experience, and traditions, as well as racial and socioeco-

nomic realities existing in America. Thus, purchasing a rap music CD, going to a rap music concert, or donning the latest "urban" fashion does not alone make one part of Hip Hop culture. At best, such actions make one a fan of rap music. Moreover, if culture relates to the everyday lives of its members, then having common language, history, customs, and mores may play a larger role in the development of a culture than merely engaging people whose only commonality is being of the same race or sharing a similar socioeconomic position.

Many people find the concept of a "world culture" abhorrent, since it smacks of cultural imperialism whereby one dominant entity imposes its beliefs, values, and style on everyone else. However, the so-called globalisation of Hip Hop culture does just this. Rather than allowing youth around the world to create their own cultural identities, the United States has exported its own for their use. Youth around the world are different and have varied backgrounds, interests, concerns, and challenges. As the Geto Boys said, for the oppressed, "The World is A Ghetto." But it is also evident that from nation to nation, not all ghettos are the same.[3] Although the chief tenets of Hip Hop culture are unity and inclusion, in light of real differences among youth around the world, it seems irrational that a cultural expression that was born and bred in the United States and heavily emphasizes Black American vernacular and American references can speak for everyone, regardless of the amount of cajoling and stretching that is done to it.

The Development of Hip Hop Culture. Hip Hop culture is a subset of Black American culture that developed in the early 1970s in New York City. It reflects a coming together of African-American, Caribbean-American, and Latino-American cultural traditions, all of which have roots in Africa. Hip Hop is not an inherently political expression; however, social commentary continues to exist in even the most crass rap music compositions. Rap music in its fullest expression, as distinguished from the narrow spectrum of caricatures promoted by mainstream media, provides insight about how a large number of young Black Americans live, talk, socialise, and think about themselves and the United States.

For enterprising Black and Latino youth, Hip Hop culture initially served as community entertainment for those whose had been shut out socially and economically by mainstream entertainment venues. Subsequently, Hip Hop events that incorporated competitive dancing, music, and art were held outdoors in parks, on the streets, or in local community centers and clubs. The Zulu Nation, founded in 1973, was the umbrella organization for Hip Hop culture.[4] The founder of The Zulu Nation, former gang leader Keith Donovan, took the name Afrika Bambaataa, which means "Affectionate Leader." As part of the Zulu Nation, rival "crews" abandoned their weapons and began to battle each other creatively for neighborhood supremacy.

Hip Hop culture has four elements: MCing, the story telling or "rap" component; DJing, the musical component; B-Boying, the dance component also known as breakdancing; and aerosol art, the visual component, also known as graffiti.[5] Although B-Boying and aerosol art gained some mainstream prominence in the 1980s, the rap component was the easiest to commodify, and therefore has become the most marketed aspect of Hip

Hop culture. Thematically, rap music borrows from African-American folklore, adopting the stock characters of the outlaw, the trickster, and the hero. Moreover, braggadocio, a key ingredient of rap music, can be traced back to African-American folktales.

Rap music and Hip Hop culture developed for almost a decade before reaching mainstream commercial radio with the release of "Rapper's Delight" in 1979. Moreover, most of middle America would still not experience rap music until the debut of the cable television show *Yo! MTV Raps* in 1988. The initial airing of *Yo! MTV Raps* came fifteen years after the founding of The Zulu Nation and the inception of Hip Hop culture. MTV's one-dimensional depictions of urban America would become the prototype of what is marketed as "Hip Hop."

Misconceptions and Rap Music Abroad. When one rationally examines "Hip Hop" around the world, one is actually analysing the various ways that American rap music has been adapted to other languages and cultures. Essentially, rap is a creative vehicle that allows people to tell their unique stories in their own ways. But international interpretations of "Hip Hop," more often than not, are based on ill-informed notions about the United States in general, and about Black Americans in particular. This can be seen in the examples of South Africa, Cuba, and Japan.

South Africa. The decade between 1976 and 1986 was the most decisive and violent in the long war against apartheid. In 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from prison after serving twenty-seven years for his activities with the African National Congress (ANC). In 1994, the government policy of racial apartheid ended, and Nelson Mandela was inaugurated President of South Africa. South African youth who had fought apartheid and had lived by the slogan "I'll have liberation before education" found that they were not academically or financially equipped to take advantage of the opportunities now afforded to Black citizens. Many young Black South Africans soon became angry and frustrated after realizing that having a Black-led government would not substantially improve their lives.

In the "new South Africa," about 60 percent of all music heard on South African radio comes from outside of South Africa, with the majority imported from the United States.[3] In this climate, a new music called *kwaito* has emerged. While there is some dispute over kwaito's exact roots, there is no arguing that it emerged out of a young, urban Black experience in post-apartheid South Africa. It is normally agreed that kwaito developed in the early 1990s when local Black music producers started experimenting with a mix of slowed-down house grooves (initially Chicago house music and later London house), international R&B, and South African rhythms and baselines. Kwaito is a brassy mixture of street-inspired vocals—a mixture of English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Pedi, Sotho, and Xhosa slow-tempo beats often known as *isicamto*—and plenty of funky, rhythmic grooves, most of which are electronically generated. Kwaito is a homegrown music that speaks for the disenfranchised youth. The name "kwaito" may trace back to a 1950s Sophiatown gang called *Amakwaito*—a name derived from the Afrikaans word *kwaai* meaning angry. Thandiswa ("Red"), lead singer of the group Bongo Maffin, compares kwaito to Hip Hop in

the United States, saying that it is “more than just a music genre, it’s a whole sub-culture.” It seems, however, that much of the kwaito sub-culture is based on American images. Many Black South African males treat American rap artist Tupac Shakur as an icon, calling him a “real nigger.” For young Black South Africans, Tupac epitomises the young Black American male—the renegade, the outlaw. Although their grasp on Black American history is shaky, as is their understanding of the volatile term “nigger,” young South Africans see American rap artists like Tupac as examples of Blacks who have wrested status and money from a government that had previously denied these things to them. In a somewhat misguided way, the luxury and defiance depicted by some Black American rap artists provide hope and inspiration to disgruntled South African youth who share a similar racial history.

Cuba. Although Cuban police closed down rap shows in the early 1990s, Fidel Castro was the first world leader to formally support rap music. In 1997, at the Cuban Rap Colloquium, the question was raised, “Is rap revolutionary or counterrevolutionary?” In 1999, Cuban minister of culture Abel Prieto answered the question by officially recognising rap as a valid and important part of Cuban culture. As a result, the previously underfunded Cuban Hip Hop Festival received an estimated $50,000 worth of goods and services from the Cuban government that year. Some Cuban government officials are still wary of *si rap*, seeing it as a possible threat to national stability. *Raperos* often level criticism at society and at individuals rather than at the government. Some rap artists rap about the deleterious effects of tourism or police harassment of Black Cubans.

Fidel Castro’s revolution took place forty-two years ago, and with the introduction of socialism came the official abolition of racial discrimination. Some Black Cubans, however, feel that equality is subjective in their country. Julio Cardenas of the group RCA (Crazy Raperos de Alamar) has been quoted as saying, “There should be a consistency of freedoms.” Published reports indicate that Afro-Cubans make up approximately 60 percent of the total population, yet senior government posts are largely held by white Cubans. Moreover, slums like Alamar, a massive housing development a few miles east of Havana, is home to 100,000 to 300,000 mostly Afro-Cuban people.

Like in the United States, “Hip Hop” in Cuba is an urban and mostly Black phenomenon. Alamar is considered the birthplace of Cuban “Hip Hop,” perhaps because its higher elevation allows it the best reception of Miami television and radio stations. In 1980, the Sugar Hill Gang song “Rapper’s Delight” came to Cuba, as did B-Boying. Rap music, however, spread slowly through Cuba in the 1980s because most people were not able to collect albums. In 1992, Paris became the first rap artist from the United States to perform in Cuba, and a reported 200,000 people attended the event. In Cuba today there are over 400 rap groups; the artists spit lyrics over Afro-Cuban beats.

According to *rapero* Maigel Entenza Jaramillo, “Rap music expresses the truth in the ghettos.” Music producer Pablo Herrera clarifies that Cuban rap music is unique: “We have our own things to say…It’s not about copying American rap.” Nevertheless, although many Cuban rap artists decry “gangster” rap in

favor of messages about social improvement, others do fabricate experiences with guns, violence, and drugs in an attempt to mimic American rap artists. Efforts to imitate American rap artists often fall flat. In 1999, Cuban artists Dos X came to the Cuban Hip Hop Festival and addressed the crowd with, "Wassup nigger motherfucker! Shit motherfucker bitch! Yeh man represent motherfucker nigger!" Similarly, a few years before, Cuban rap artists had as the refrain to their rap tribute to Malcolm X, "Malcolm, we wanna be just like you, nigger, a nigger like you."

In published reports, after Black Americans in the audience objected to the use of the word "nigger," a heated debate ignited. Cubans reportedly became defensive, rather than acknowledging to Black Americans their error in using the term. While Cubans may have been correct to question America's exportation of rap records containing the racial slur, they did not bother to ask themselves why someone, in Cuba or elsewhere, would utter English words that they do not understand and have not bothered to define.

Pablo Herrera stated, "What makes Cuban hip-hop Cuban is simply that it's being made by Cubans. They are talking about our society from the perspective of people who were born and raised in Cuba during the socialist revolution..." This distinction is at the crux of the argument against the notion of "global Hip Hop."

Japan. Japan may be one of the most homogenous countries in the world. Perhaps it is for this reason that its citizens are socialized to be resistant to foreigners. Unfortunately, the lack of personal contact between the Japanese and people of other races and cultures has fostered many misconceptions and stereotypes in Japan about foreigners, particularly Black Americans. Moreover, Japanese politicians are renowned for their bigoted comments that seem to appear every few years. The most notable statement was made several years ago by former Japanese prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, who said that the United States is in an inevitable intellectual decline because there are "too many Blacks and Mexicans there." Ironically, despite the lack of contact with Black people, and widespread prejudice against them, "Black" is in vogue in Japan. It is popular to use stereotypical depictions of Black people on everything from clothing to department-store mannequins. Most Japanese people who wear shirts with "pickaninny" images on them are probably not aware of how deeply offensive their shirts are to Black Americans. The imported images that the Japanese receive of Black Americans are primarily those of athletes, rap artists, or Los Angeles street gangs. Therefore, many people in Japan honestly believe that being of African descent automatically ensures sports supremacy, intellectual inferiority, criminal tendencies, and sexual prowess. The "Black" craze seems to have little to do with real Black people, but instead with fetishized notions of characteristics Black people are presumed to possess.

In a country where people of African descent are a negligible portion of the population and English is not widely spoken, how can Hip Hop culture flourish? Ironically, while most rap music features Black artists dealing with life as "outsiders" in America, the popularity of "Hip Hop" in Japan is based on its Americanness. According to the cognoscenti, rap music came to Japan in the 1980s with American rap artists like RUN DMC, and

was advanced by "Tokyo Old School" artists. Rap music, however, was not generally recognized in Japan until about 1994 or 1995. At this time, hardcore supporters of "Black culture" and "Hip Hop" invested in dreadlocked hairstyles. They also frequented tanning salons and purchased expensive skin darkeners. "Blackness" became a fad to be consumed, without the obligation of learning about or understanding Black people. Therefore, while Japanese youth are becoming more Westernized, most have no increased insight into the significance of the Black American experience to Hip Hop culture; for most Japanese, "Hip Hop" is symbolic of American renegade chic.

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Japanese youth who have had more substantial exposure to America and Black Americans may still not understand all of the intricacies and politics, internal and external, of Hip Hop culture, but the cultural exchange has made them reevaluate injustice in their own society. The next step for Japanese youth is to use their adaptation of rap music to develop a cultural model that reflects their own unique society and history.

Conclusion. In so many accounts, writers portray Hip Hop culture as rising from the bowels of New York City. Although Hip Hop culture developed in rough terrain, it is a mistake to equate it solely with deprivation and pathology, which to a great extent is the only connecting thread of "global Hip Hop." What is often omitted from the chronicles of Hip Hop culture is that it also represents the resilience, creativity, and intellect of young Black Americans. Hip Hop culture also reveals the political ideology of young Black Americans and their general acceptance of American ideals—including capitalism. Eschewing the concept of the globalization of Hip Hop culture should not be construed as cultural chauvinism, but rather as a recognition that Hip Hop culture deserves to be seen in its fullest light, encompassing its historical and social precepts.

In our modern world, cultural borders are porous. Young people like Kheli Fiadjoe are becoming more the norm. The Togolese piano prodigy enjoys the NBA, Russian poetry, rap artists like Tupac, Biggie (U.S.), and MC Solaar (France), as well as Congolese *soukous*, Nigerian reggae, Ivorian *makossa*, and European classical music. True cultural exchange, however, is not an a la carte proposition; it requires at least a modicum of understanding of a given culture and the people who create it. Thus, while "rap" as a creative tool is portable and adaptable, it belittles Hip Hop culture to continue to insist that as a cultural entity it can be dissociated from its roots and dissected at will. Like any other cultural entity, Hip Hop culture should be appreciated, studied, and respected for who and what it represents.

NOTES

1 John Sifton, "Temporal Vertigo: A Last Road Through Premodern Afghanistan," *New York Times Magazine* (30 September 2001): 48-51.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 America in this essay refers exclusively to the United States.

5 Kami-Leigh Agard, "Kevin Powell on Hip-Hop and Being Black in America." *Cyber Influence*, http://www.dac.neu.edu/cyber/archive/2000/march/kevin_powell.htm

6 James Lull, *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

7 Geto Boys. "The World is a Ghetto." on album *The Resurrection*. Rap-A-Lot/NooTrybe Records, 1996. See also War. "The World is a Ghetto." on album *The World is a Ghetto*. Avenue Records, 1972.

8 See http://www.rubunation.com/history

9 Youth had limited training or access to instruments through the New York City public school systems during this era. As a result, they ingeniously began to use (2) LPs as the foundation. Initially there were no rap music records. Deejays used various genres: rock, soul, reggae, techno, etc. to provide "break beats" for B-Boys and musical accompaniment for MCs. Conceptually, massive speakers, as well as "rapping" over music are Caribbean imports. In places like Jamaica, home of Hip Hop legend, DJ Kool Herc, "sound systems" and "toasting" have been popular for some time. Style elements of B-Boying are traced to the Brazilian martial art capoeira as well as Asian martial arts movements, popularized in films. In May 2001, rap artist KRS One introduced, "The Redefinitions that expanded the key elements of Hip Hop culture." The additions: 1) Beat Boxing - The study and application of body music i.e. human beat box; 2) Street Fashion - The study and application of street trends and styles; 3) Street Language - The study of street communication; 4) Street Knowledge - The study and application of ancestral wisdom and universal law. See, http://www.templeofhiphop.com

10 Interviews with representatives of Metro FM and Kaya FM in South Africa, March, 2001.

11 Steve Wright, " Kwaito: South Africa's Hip Hop." CNN Online. http://9.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/Music/9906/09/kwaito.wb/
9 June 1999.

12 Danny Hoch, "La Revolucion Embraces Hip-Hop—With Fidel's Blessing," *Village Voice* (5 October 1999): 194.

13 Ibid.

14 Brett Sokol, "Rap Takes Root Where Free Expression is Risky," *The New York Times*, Arts & Leisure (3 September 2000): 28.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Hoch, 194.

18 Ibid.

19 Sokol, 28.