

8. Hip-Hop Mundial: Latino Voices, Global Hip-Hop, and the Academy

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In a 2007 interview with *RECMag.com*, enigmatic Puerto Rican hip-hop graffiti legend Rammellzee offered this perspective on hip-hop history: “There’s no story to hip-hop—just culture—that’s all you get.” As Rammellzee alludes, hip-hop culture has developed along a unique trajectory and its origins are not easily summarized. A culture that includes rhyming (MCing), breakdancing (b-boying and b-girling), graffiti art, and mixing or “turntablism” (DJing), hip-hop today is representative of a complex system of styles and subgenres. In re-constructing hip-hop’s cultural roots, Hebdige writes, “the mix is very rich” (1987, 265). Similarly, in a 2005 interview with *UGSmag.com*, San Francisco Bay Area artist, Joe Dub (Joseph Bell) explains, “rap is a gigantic cauldron, a stew.” Along these lines, book-length studies have centered on African American (Rabaka 2011; Ramsey 2003), West Indian (Seyfu Hinds 2004; Hebdige 1987), and Puerto Rican (Rivera 2003; Flores 2000) influences. There also exist several canonical works chronicling the seminal years of hip-hop culture, such as Kugelberg’s *Born in the Bronx* (2007) and Chang’s *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop* (2005). Collectively, these studies explore hip-hop as a unique example of a local, grass-roots movement, infused with the inventiveness of aficionados and augmented by input from communities around the globe. If hip-hop were to fall out of fashion tomorrow, one would have to admit that it has enjoyed “a long run.” The culture has sustained longevity, popularity, and global reach, becoming a vital form of expression and agency in communities around the world. Hip-hop shows no sign of slowing down and the movement continues to flourish as an enduring global force.

Hip-Hop and the Academy

As the genre continues to uphold worldwide success, both commercially and in the underground, hip-hop’s reach today extends from the streets to the academy. In the scholarly realm, hip-hop culture has given rise to conferences, symposiums, courses, archival collections, theses, books, and journals. As of December 2012, a search of the OCLC WorldCat database finds over nine hundred theses and dissertations, covering the various elements of hip-hop culture. Although the “intellectualization” of hip-hop remains controversial (Gosa 2013), courses continue to be offered from a variety of disciplines, including

religion, linguistics, history, sociology, psychology, behavioral studies, human development, political studies, music, criminology, and the list continues. As academics seek to view hip-hop through a scholarly lens, a growing body of research analyzes, dissects, and deconstructs a culture that exhibits an encyclopedic diversity.

In the last decade, academic libraries have become active participants in the collection and preservation of hip-hop history. In 2007, Cornell University founded the Cornell Hip Hop Collection, using author Johan Kugelberg's donated artifacts as the cornerstone of the archive. Highlights of the Cornell project include the work of Joe Conzo Jr., reputed to be "the first hip-hop photographer," through his documentation of the movement's seminal years. The Cornell collection also provides a permanent home for rare hip-hop artifacts, such as Buddy Esquire's hand-drawn event flyers, many of which are now being digitized. In 2012, Cornell's Department of Music, in conjunction with the Department of Rare and Manuscript Collections, appointed pioneer hip-hop legend DJ Afrikaa Bambaataa to a three-year term as a visiting scholar. Bambaataa's appointment represents the institution's commitment to hip-hop as a serious and vital area of scholarship.

While the mission of the Cornell collection is to preserve early hip-hop culture, the University of Houston Libraries focus on local hip-hop history. The Houston Hip-Hop Collection includes photographs, audio and video recordings, and ephemera, such as handwritten lyrics and publicity materials representing the development of the city's unique hip-hop culture. The papers and sound recordings of DJ Screw and his Houston collective, The Screwed Up Click, are central to the collection. The University of Houston Libraries' (2012) exhibition, *DJ Screw and the Rise of Houston Hip Hop*, examined local Houston hip-hop to explore "the larger context of a music scene that has been independent, entrepreneurial, and rough-edged from its beginnings in the 1980s." The University of Houston also collaborated with the HERE Project (Houston Enriches Rice Education), to host "Awready! The Houston Hip Hop Conference" at Rice University. Conference presenters included independent Latino artist Chingo Bling (Pedro Herrera) and introduced the Houston Hip Hop Archives Network, a partnership developed to preserve local hip-hop artifacts.

While academia appears to be embracing the culture, for many the term "hip-hop" still conjures up a knee jerk reaction of disgust, or what Dyson (2007, 52) refers to as the "aesthetic revulsion to the iconography of hip-hop." Behind the stereotypical images associated with hip-hop is a complex, multifaceted, innovative movement that continues to reinvent itself. The assumption by some that the "radio" hip-hop heard through major media outlets is representative of the entire genre is unfortunate. Hip-hop has always embodied diversity and versatility, and it would be difficult to identify another musical

genre that has enjoyed comparable adaptation and local interpretation in communities around the world.

The Lens of Hip Hop

By its nature, hip-hop is a participatory culture that encourages innovation and reinterpretation. Its spread was aided by the fact that, in communities worldwide, young people emulated the styles they saw in music videos and hip-hop shows, while they incorporated their own perspectives. DJ Disco Wiz (Luis Cedeño), often attributed as the first Latino DJ, states: “The more I began DJing, the more I began to find my own style and relate back to my ancestry from Puerto Rico and Cuba” (2009, 40). American youth growing up in the 1980s emulated hip-hop culture, whether rhyming in school hallways, comparing dance moves on the playground, or experimenting with “wild style” graffiti. Films depicting hip-hop culture, including Charlie Ahearn’s *Wild Style* (1982) and Stan Lathan’s *Beat Street* (1984), mesmerized youth around the world. Those who identify as members of what Kitwana calls “the hip-hop generation,” essentially people born between 1965 and 1984, recall their first experiences with hip-hop as symbolic and transformative (2002, 4). As Alex Nava writes: “Hip-hop is part of my autobiographical story” (2009, 182). Of his Tucson upbringing, Nava further explains:

I was raised on hip-hop. Some of my earliest memories of music conjure up the sights and sounds of hip-hop, from the rhythm and flow of a rapper’s voice to the bodily movements and contortions of a break dancer. Among many of those in my generation and especially of my hood, hip-hop was too alluring and “fresh” to resist (2009, 181).

Likewise, McFarland (2008, 1) reflects on his first introduction to hip-hop through the recording *Rapper’s Delight* (1979) by the Sugarhill Gang:

I thought the song was musical and lyrical genius. I enjoyed the word play, clever use of image and metaphor, the way the MCs gave new meaning to familiar words, and the use of disparaging humor that was similar to the dozens....I, like millions of other Black, Brown, White, Asian, and other youths, was hooked.

As these reminiscences illuminate, people tend to see themselves through the lens of hip-hop, identifying elements of their own cultural experience within the genre. Kitwana explains, “Young people worldwide gravitate to hip-hop and adapt it to their local needs” (2006, 10). To highlight one example, in 2010 the Ukrainian Students Union of Montreal’s Concordia University, the McGill Ukrainian Students’ Association, and the Ukrainian National Youth Federation organized a dance competition between the Syzokryli Dance Ensemble of New York and a local breakdance crew, The Deadly Venoms. The contest recognized commonalities of performativity, agility, strength,

competitiveness, and one-upmanship in both Ukrainian dance and hip-hop. The title of the event, “Hip Hop Hopak,” incorporates the Ukrainian dance, the *hopak*, which “involves a large mixed group of performers and features bright costumes, sweeping group formations, enormous energy, athleticism and technical virtuosity in the acrobatic steps” (Nahachewsky 2012, 6). Some aspects of the hopak could easily translate to a description of a dance cipher, a performance circle in which breakdancers showcase their skill, talent and innovation. In common with the hip-hop cipher, in western Ukraine the hopak is also performed in a circular formation (Hnatiukivsky 1984). Both breakdancing and the hopak share an improvisational approach that gives performers the opportunity to prove their talents with spontaneity, and respond to or “answer” the moves of the previous dancer. In diasporic Ukrainian communities, the hopak has come to symbolize a bombastic visual assertion of the culture’s vibrancy. Likewise, breakdancing fulfills a similar function, as Chang states: “In the cipher, hip-hop’s vitality is reaffirmed, its participants recommit to its primacy, and the culture transforms itself” (2006, 4).

The “mélange of influences and voices” that make up hip-hop complicate research into the genre (Neal 2003, 109). In addition to hip-hop’s various influences and offshoots, today as in the past, DJs and MCs commonly change names, modify aliases, join crews, and leave them again to form new ones. As Johan Kugelberg writes in the introduction to *Born in the Bronx*, it is difficult to “...give specifics of what happened when, or who was first, what’s on second or I don’t know on third...” (2007, 31). Hip hop history is complex and an attempt to tease out a particular cultural influence risks descending into a contradictory maze of anecdotal assertions. Nevertheless, there are several studies that specifically tackle the Latino/a contribution. Rivera’s *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* (2003) and Flores’s *From Bomba to Hip-Hop* (2000) each review the Puerto Rican influence. The 2009 documentary *From Mambo to Hip Hop* narrows in on both the Puerto Rican and Cuban roots of the culture. McFarland’s *Chicano Rap* (2008) examines the intricacies of Mexican and/or Chicana/o hip-hop, both on the West Coast and in the Midwest. Likewise, Cross’s *It’s Not About A Salary* (1993) is a classic gem that includes Raegan Kelly’s chapter “Hip-hop Chicano: A Separate but Parallel Story,” in addition to interviews with Aztlán Underground, Kid Frost, Skatmaster Tate, Cypress Hill, and the Funkdoobiest. *Art in the Streets* (Deitch, Gastman, and Rose 2011) offers perspective on the growth and development of graffiti culture, including the West-Coast style termed “Los Angeles Cholo.” Additionally, an unprecedented visual overview of hip-hop history is Ed Piskor’s online comic, *Hip Hop Family Tree* (2012) which is scheduled to be released in print format in 2013.

Further excavating the Latino influence, Travis Gutierrez Senger’s film, *White Lines and the Fever* (2010), explores the life of Puerto Rican DJ Junebug (Jose Olmeda Jr.), a pioneering artist who performed at the New York Club

Disco Fever in the early days when “hip-hop was driven by Saturday night” (Kugelberg 2007, 31). With the convenience of digitized music online today, it is easy to lose sight of the importance of the DJ during hip-hop’s early years. This quote from Disco Wiz illuminates the intrinsic role of the turntable artist: “We quickly turned our attention to the DJ. Music was the party and the party revolved around whoever was playing the music” (2009, 37). Although DJ Junebug is not a household name, his influence for the period is reinforced by the fact that he is referred to in the dialog at the end of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s iconic hip-hop anthem, “The Message” (1982): “So what’s up for tonight y’all?! Yo, we can go down to “The Fever” man/ Check out Junebug.”

As the above works chronicle, Latinos have played an important role in the development, dissemination, and diversification of hip-hop culture. Fernandes maintains that “the development of bilingual rap by Latino artists in the late 1980s helped to erode the hegemony of the English language in global hip-hop” (2011, 9). Latino artists have been key participants in both dimensions of hip-hop culture: the commercial, market-driven, mega-star universe and the so-called “underground,” often represented by unsigned artists who chronicle a working-class existence, invoking commonalities with southern blues music. In “the underground,” artists range from single, independent MCs such as Houston’s Chingo Bling, to duos like the Chicarones and Of Mexican Descent (OMD), to multiethnic collectives, such as the Los Angeles-based crew, The Visionaries. With the capacity to distribute their artistry to a global audience through social networking sites, such as MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube, underground hip-hop artists are able to skirt industry models and reinforce new paradigms of dissemination. Immortal Technique (Felipe Coronel), an artist of Afro-Peruvian descent, has been outspoken about his noncommercial approach and is quoted in *The Guardian*, saying: “go on the internet and steal all my music and listen to it. If it speaks to you, then feel free to support me” (Shahid 2012). This mindset is pervasive in the underground as artists are openly critical of commercial distribution strategies. In fact, anti-commercialism remains a significant aspect of the underground hip-hop narrative, both today as in the past.

Mining the Underground

Hip-hop culture has changed dramatically since its birth at a back-to-school party at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx (Chang, 2005), to become both a mass-market, global product and an international cultural force that enjoys persistent local interpretation and input worldwide. In an interview on the *Miss Rosen* blog, DJ Disco Wiz offers this take on hip-hop’s trajectory:

In the beginning hip hop was about the people and for the community that really had nothing else. After I came home, it was no longer that. When hip hop became a business it changed its essence and became something new

and very different from what we had created so many years earlier in the streets of the South Bronx. Exactly when that happened, I can't pinpoint. But in my opinion the change was neither good nor bad. It was a change that helped hip hop become global. And it is a business that has helped many. I truly believe that for anything to survive it must reinvent itself and change with the times, and hip hop is a perfect example of this. People reclaim it every day. Today, real hip hop lives in the grass roots and underground movements. In some places, it is still about the people and for the community. (Miss Rosen 2010)

While *Disco Wiz* provides a thoughtful retrospective analysis of hip-hop's commercial shift, author and editor Selwyn Seyfu Hinds is poetically dramatic in his characterization:

The revolution that you dreamed of as you once danced to Chuck D's booming voice and the Bomb Squad's wailing sirens didn't just die; it was still-born. Captured by the unyielding seduction of the marketplace. The vagaries of trend. The power of the buck. (2002, 4)

To provide some context for the shift, Fernandes explains that the 1996 Telecommunications Act ushered in an era of conglomerates that monopolized the airwaves:

By the start of the new millennium, 80 percent of the music industry was controlled by five companies—Vivendi Universal, Sony, AOL Time Warner, Bertelsmann, and EMI. The post-1996 period after the Telecommunications Act was passed came to be seen as the era of corporate rap. (2011, 14)

As independent, unsigned, and underground MCs found themselves with less access to conventional distribution methods, they sought alternative means of building their fan base. One method was to distribute mixtapes, and later CDs, out of the trunks of cars, or even backpacks. This practice led to the characterization of the "backpack" as an identifying attribute of "underground hip-hop fashion" (Kwame Harrison 2009, 142). The circumvention of mass media distribution is celebrated in such works as 2Mex's (Alejandro Ocana) 2010 release, *My Fanbase Will Destroy You*, a title which pays tribute to the loyal following of the underground artist and challenges the "gatekeepers of officialdom who define economic and social relations between artists and consumers" (Guins 2008, 73).

Most of us are only exposed to bits and pieces of hip-hop music, hand-selected for our consumption. Hip-hop today has been commodified as a product to appeal to the masses (Krim 2000; Russell Potter 1995). It is commonplace now for top forty pop songs to include a "rap" interlude, or for commercial rappers to collaborate on industry-contrived songs designed to achieve maximum profit. Mainstream music has adopted hip-hop for its own purposes, to the point that in a 2010 *New York Times* article, Caramanica writes: "Pretending Kesha isn't a rapper is no longer feasible," explaining that the pop

star “threatens to become the most influential female rapper of the day.” The acceptance of mainstream hip-hop as the mouthpiece for the movement ignores the incredible innovation and versatility inherent in a culture that is a true testament to human creativity, diversity, and the interconnectedness of global culture today. In defending hip-hop against stereotypical characterizations, Dyson explains: “I think it’s important to understand the feistiness of hip hop, the way hip hop is able to renew itself beyond the dead ends of the bling and the booze and the broads when it goes international” (2007, 49). When compared to the rich variety and vitality of hip-hop music found in local communities worldwide, the commercialized version often pales as a contrived, one-dimensional, industry-generated product.

Frustration with the hip-hop industrial complex is a common theme in underground hip-hop, and the involvement of the underground with economic issues is evident in the lyrics of artists like Def3 (Danny Fernandez), a Canadian rapper of Chilean descent. In a song from his 2011 album *Amnesia*, he chronicles the financial struggles of the independent rap artist:

I’ve invested my earnings, but I still got no home/
Maxed-out my credit,
even skipped on a payment/
Broke it then fixed it, I’ve shot it then framed it/
Made money from nothing while performing on stage/
Struggled and slaved, I’ve worked minimum wage.

The dichotomy between the commercial and the underground is one of the underlying narratives of hip-hop music. On his 2004 record, *Return of Fernandomania*, L.A.-based artist 2Mex touches on several areas of dissent commonly addressed in underground hip-hop lyrics:

The bling bling stuff was a mirage/
I got your sister doing headspins in the garage/
And you can pass the XO pass the Hennessy/
Pass me the X-Clan and Public Enemy/
The straight best from the underground West/
You should buy a kid a book and not a bulletproof vest...

In these lines, 2Mex comments on the “mirage” of industry hip-hop, making reference to the opulent lifestyles promoted by commercial rappers. His reference to “headspins” relates to breakdancing, an artistry still closely associated with the roots of hip-hop. Underground artists convey an allegiance to hip-hop’s early years, or the “old skool,” often used to designate authenticity. As such, 2Mex expresses his preference for hip-hop legends such as the X-Clan and Public Enemy over contemporary rap stars, symbolized by “XO and Hennessy,” the transposed name of the cognac often featured prominently in commercial rap videos. In advising his audience to “buy a kid a book and not a bulletproof vest,” 2Mex denounces the iconography of “gangster rap.” In another song, “Love Fights Back” from his 2003 album, *Unreleased Hits*, 2Mex explains that in the underground, talent and innovation are held in higher esteem than the material wealth enjoyed by mainstream artists: “They got nice cars and nice clothes/
And I got original styles and mad flows.” In this lyric,

it is understood that the originality and “flow,” or rhyme of the hip-hop artist, cannot be bought and sold, despite the commodification of the culture.

Conclusion

The participation of Latino/a artists in the development of hip-hop culture is well-documented. As a prolific movement that is nevertheless subject to the ephemerality of pop forms, libraries and archives should continue their engagement with the preservation of hip-hop culture, with particular attention to underground artists. We should acknowledge a certain interdependency between commercial and underground hip-hop. Although commercial forms can be recognized for sustaining popular interest in the music, it is often argued that the real innovation and power of hip-hop lies in the underground. Fernandes explains this quite well in the following: “By 2000 hip hop had become a global tour de force, marking out terrain in both mass culture—where its dominant appeal lay—and on the level of the subcultures—where its real dynamism resided” (2011, 16). The “dynamism” that Fernandes refers to is powerful, as artists around the world push the limits of the music as a testament to human creativity and the potential for genius inherent in every person.

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