BLACKNESS AND AUTHENTICITY IN JAPAN'S HIP-HOP CULTURE

How an art form born from Black American marginalization is recontextualized by Japanese youth

AHMMAD BROWN
SWARTHMORE SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY
UNDERGRADUATE THESIS
2007

INTRODUCTION

New Locales

It is an extremely hot and humid morning in the midst of Tokyo's rainy season. After spending an hour split amongst three overcrowded trains, I am in the final stretch of my journey to school. Already a few minutes late, I scurry past the slower moving traffic as quickly as my overheated body will take me. As I approach a construction site near the entrance of my campus, I hastily map out a route to avoid being slowed by congestion in the narrow walkway. Just as I pass the construction area, a male construction worker that looks to be around forty years old crosses my path. We make eye contact and I nod to him in greeting. In the split second that we are side by side, along with a smile, he offers the following greeting in poorly accented English, "What's up my nigga?" Perhaps it was the fact that I was late for class. Or maybe it was because I was already tired and the heat had got to me. It even quite possibly could have been the fact that I didn't *want* to hear what I had heard or even believe that I heard it. Whatever the reason, it was not until fifteen minutes into class that it dawned on me and I whispered to myself, "Damn, some forty year old Japanese guy just called me 'nigga.'"

Within a week of arrival in Tokyo, it became apparent to me that unlike most of my other fellow exchange students, I would have to deal with misinformed racially charged situations on a consistent basis. While walking through areas of Tokyo like Shibuya where many hip-hop inspired Japanese youth congregate, I would often receive head nods from young Japanese males with darkened skin and intricately braided hair while my white or Asian friends would be ignored. On some level, it seemed as if these individuals felt a bond with me that they did not share with my non-Black friends.

Specifically, it felt as though they identified with me through the commonality of Blackness or an appreciation of Blackness. The most glaring example of this occurred as I was transferring trains at Akihabara station. Just before mounting the escalator, I noticed a middle aged Japanese man in dread locks with unnaturally tanned skin riding the escalator in the opposite direction. He wore a loose Caribbean style button up short sleeved shirt along with baggy khakis, brown sandals, and large black sunglasses. As we neared each other, he looked directly at me and said, "Peace brotha." As if nothing out of the ordinary had just occurred, he dismounted the elevator and continued on his way.

The two examples above hint to the type of perceptions that Japanese people have of Black people. Perhaps more importantly, they illustrate the extent to which Blackness has been interpreted by Japanese society. In each of the situations, it should be noted that I was greeted in what is generally recognized as Black language. For the most part, both "nigga" and "brotha" are recognized as words that African-Americans and Black people use to greet or address one another, a fact that the two individuals mentioned above were evidently aware of. But what are the reasons that they would want to show solidarity with me? The answer to this question is rooted in the global proliferation of hip-hop and Black culture.

In Tokyo, Japan, youth are just as likely to know the title of the latest 50 Cent single as the most pop-culture savvy American teen. If one is only familiar with the American version of hip-hop, it may be a mystery as to how it traveled 7,000 miles from the urban neighborhoods of New York to the streets of Tokyo, but the roots of this story are not so dissimilar to the manner in which hip-hop has come to dominate American pop culture. The American public was introduced to hip-hop when it broke from its humble

beginnings in the poorest areas of New York to mainstream media outlets in the form of radio, tapes, and movies. At once, Americans were exposed to an art form that was more than a decade in the making. Thanks to globalization, much of the world was exposed to the hip-hop movement through the same outlets only a few years later.

The seed of hip-hop that was planted in Tokyo in the late eighties through films like *Wild Style* and *Beat Street* has grown into an environment that fosters youth hip-hop culture. Although hip-hop has touched many more lives than its pioneers could have ever imagined, not all are happy about its growing influence in locales like Japan. One particular point of contention in regards to the proliferation of hip-hop in international locales is the issue of imitation and authenticity as some believe that hip-hop culture is grounded in the circumstances in which hip-hop was born.

Although Japan is certainly not the only international locale that has adopted hip-hop culture, the manner in which it has often been appropriated does deserve special consideration. Unique to the Japanese version is the physical consumption of Black characteristics, specifically darker skin and Black hairstyles. While on the surface, such practices appear to be only aesthetic choices, in the context of Japanese society, they have deeper meanings. But perhaps more so than anything else, Japanese hip-hop is an example through which we can examine globalization. Specifically, the appropriation of hip-hop culture as a form of "Black" culture as opposed to an "American" culture speaks to the manner in which Japan and other international manifestations of hip-hop interact with the culture. Rather than another example of American culture imposing its will abroad, hip-hop and Black culture are recontextualized in Japan to construct new meanings and identities.

Methodology

Between March and August of 2006 while studying abroad at Sophia University in Tokyo, I conducted field research consisting of participant observation as well as formal and informal interviews. The foundation of my research came from multiple hours of participant observation at Tokyo hip-hop clubs, dance clubs, as well as music stores and stands catering to hip-hop customers. The vast majority of these observations took place in the neighborhoods of Shibuya, and to a lesser degree, Roppongi. In an effort to obtain consistent findings and make reliable contacts, I visited the same locations on multiple occasions. For example, Manhattan Records in Shibuya quickly became the primary record store at which I conducted participant observation as I visited it roughly ten times during my stay in Tokyo. As for hip-hop clubs, I visited the Gaspanic locations in Shibuya and Roppongi most frequently. In choosing to visit the same locations, not only did I ensure consistency in my fieldwork, but I was able to build relationships with individuals who would happen to see me on multiple occasions. Consequently, I was able to make contacts that would become informants or even interview subjects. In addition to the locations to which I made multiple visits, there were many one-time events that provided significant insight for my research, including hip-hop or Black music festivals and competitions.

In order to maintain status as a participant observer, I developed note taking methods unique to my various research locations. For example, if I were to take notes in Manhattan Records, my actions would not only draw unwanted attention but would likely affect the behavior of my subjects as well. To compensate for this, I would take mental

notes for periods of ten to fifteen minutes while pretending to browse and record them shortly after leaving the store. While note taking during observation at a record store was not preferred as it reveals my research intentions to my subjects, it was impossible at the clubs simply because there is not enough light to write. To get around this, I developed a sort of digital short hand through which I was able to take notes on my cellular phone. Although my notes would not get transcribed until the next day, it was a method that was not only viable for not taking but preserved my status as an anonymous observer.

While I made every attempt to make my observations as inconspicuous as possible, there is a factor that occasionally rendered my efforts futile. As a young Black male, it was very difficult to divorce myself from my research topic, especially considering the extent to which Blackness and hip-hop are related in the Japanese imagination. While this did not allow me to conduct research in an anonymous fashion as frequently as I would have liked, there were significant benefits to my racial identity in pertinence to my studies. Primarily, as a young Black person, I was able to explore certain topics that would be much more difficult, if not impossible for a researcher of a different age or race. For example, albeit to my surprise, many of my informal and formal interview subjects were extremely comfortable discussing issues of race with me. In fact, for some of my interview subjects, it seemed as if they had spent their whole life waiting to find out more about Blackness from an actual Black person. Indirectly, this allowed me to gain a basic understanding of the Japanese perception of Blackness. Moreover, by virtue of being Black, much of my research came to me without any effort on my behalf. Incidents resulting from simple walks to the grocery store or the train station that were worthy of further investigation occurred virtually on a daily basis.

While participant observation provided a solid basis, it was informal and formal interviews that allowed me to develop many of my insights for my research. Whereas I conducted the majority of my informal interviews with students at Sophia University in spontaneous fashion, my formal interviews had much more structure. Lasting at least one hour and no more than three, I would have an interview protocol consisting of prepared questions as well as association games, in which the interviewee would be asked to attribute characteristics written on index cards to various topics of my research including, but not limited to "Japanese hip-hop," "American hip-hop," and "Black people." To ensure I would not miss information during these formal interview sessions, they were all recorded with the consent of the interviewee.

Chapter Overview

Attempting a discussion on Japanese hip-hop in pertinence not only to its relationship with Blackness, but its subversive nature as well has proven to be a difficult project. With that said, I have arranged my work in as coherent a fashion as possible. To make navigation easier, I will include a brief chapter outline.

In chapter 1, I frame hip-hop as a phenomenon that has its roots in local culture, but has proliferated globally. Central to my argument in this chapter is that Japanese hip-hop cannot be considered without a fairly comprehensive examination of the culture from which it is appropriated. With this in mind, I document the birth of hip-hop, with particular attention given to its relationship to the Black American experience. After establishing the roots of hip-hop, I offer brief perspective on the manner in which hip-hop has spread to locales other than Japan across the world. In making this analysis, I draw

attention to the fact that Blackness, and perceived experiences of Black Americans, cannot be divorced from hip-hop culture, thus providing a lens through which to analyze the manner in which hip-hop is recontextualized in Japan..

Chapter 2 places Japanese interactions with Blackness in context through an examination of historical perceptions of Blackness. This is followed by an analysis of other types of Black culture/music that have made their way to Japan, most notably jazz. Central to this discussion is the issue of authenticity, as to many Japanese and Westerners alike, Black culture can only be produced by Black people which renders Japanese production of hip-hop culture inauthentic in the eyes of many. This analysis sets the stage for subsequent chapters in which the function of hip-hop and its relationship to Blackness in Japan are examined.

Chapter 3 focuses on Japanese hip-hop as it relates to perceptions of Blackness. Particularly, I examine the images of Blackness that appear in hip-hop hot spots in Tokyo like Shibuya, and how they inform the manner in which hip-hop and Black style and fashion are appropriated. More than simply clothing, I present arguments that relate the appropriation of hip-hop and Black style to the construction of new and potentially deviant identities. Particular attention is given to the manner in which the appropriation hip-hop and Black style is rooted in transnational constructions of race and gender.

Whereas chapter 3 focuses on Japanese hip-hop culture as it relates to Blackness in terms of fashion, style and image, chapter 4 concentrates on the appropriation of hip-hop as it relates to the Black experience. Using this is a starting point, I discuss the manner in which Japanese hip-hop is subversive as an independent entity. Lastly, I

examine the ways in which casual consumers of hip-hop culture are able to construct deviant identities in Japan.

Ultimately, my hope is that this paper will shed light on the dynamic manner in which hip-hop and Black culture have flourished globally. More so than simply global popular culture, the growth of hip-hop in Japan offers poignant insights to our increasingly global world and the manner in which identities are constructed.

CHAPTER 1
From Local to Global

A Note on Globalization

When considering the global proliferation of hip-hop culture, it is easy to dismiss developments outside of the United States as mimicry. After all, it is American culture, be it in the form of films, television, or music that set the standard for worldwide export and imitation (Schiller 2001). Japanese hip-hop has certainly not been exempt from these understandings of global culture, as arguably more so than other forms of popular culture, the ability to participate in hip-hop culture is deeply rooted in notions of racial authenticity. However, this reasoning fosters overly simplistic analyses of complex intersections of global and local culture. While it is clear that to some degree, the notion of a hegemonic cultural relationship between West and East permeates Western society, to lend the emergence of Japanese hip-hop and other appropriations of Western culture to this rudimentary model excludes non-Western nations from the possibility of cultural production.

Unlike many other international appropriations of hip-hop culture, the Japanese version faces unique obstacles in its quest for global legitimacy as Asian consumption and appropriation of global culture is often dismissed merely as desire to devour all things Western (Appadurai 2001:86). Although hip-hop enthusiasts in Tokyo bear a striking resemblance to their American counterparts, to say that Japanese hip-hop is only a mirror image of American hip-hop could not be further from the truth. As Arjun Appadurai (2001) explains, "[A]t least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized in another way" (588). Particularly, what makes the phenomenon of Japanese hip-hop so worthy of consideration

is the fact that despite hip-hop's global nature, the Japanese version has cultivated a unique identity that in many ways simultaneously remains true to hip-hop's origins. In addition to the style and fashion of hip-hop enthusiasts in urban centers of the United States, elements of hip-hop's subversive roots can be found in Tokyo as well.

In the forty years since its inception, hip-hop has been described as many things. Although its label as a culture is probably the most widely accepted and technically correct, hip-hop has come to be known in America primarily as a form of music, and has been defined as a style, fashion, and way of life among many others as well. While all of these definitions of hip-hop are accurate, I argue that more than anything else, hip-hop is a means through which to assert alternate and potentially subversive identities. Albeit in different contexts, this is how hip-hop was used in its original form in Bronx, New York and how it is often used today in Japan. In this sense, Japanese hip-hop is not simply another example of the homogenization of global culture, but rather a recontextualization of culture. The identity that Japanese youth are able to construct and its role for those who assume it is the focus of this paper, but before I begin this discussion, the various components that inform not only Japanese hip-hop, but also hop-hop culture as a whole, must be considered.

Beginnings

It is 1929 and plans for the new Bronx Expressway are being completed that will connect Manhattan to the outer boroughs of New York City. Although many see the benefits (primarily economic) of this project, few notice those that will be hurt the most are the 60,000 Bronx residents who will be displaced by the construction. Unfortunately,

as too often the case in United States history, those hit the hardest were Black and Latino residents. These residents relocated to locations like the South Bronx where public housing was ample, but jobs were non-existent (Chang 2003:11). By 1977, the state of the South Bronx was in such dire straits that President Jimmy Carter paid a visit. After stepping out of his motorcade and taking in the devastation that had plagued the area, President Carter simply turned to then secretary of housing and urban development, Patricia Harris to say softly, "See which areas can still be salvaged" (Chang 2003:17). This anecdote highlights the extent to which the Bronx had been devastated by the late 1970's. The frustrations of the residents of this area had certainly taken their toll. When placed in context with other areas of New York that had high populations of people of color, the bleak situation in which the people of the Bronx lived at this time is evident, "It's [The Bronx] grim project housing and burnt-out buildings have little of the political and cultural resonance of neighboring Harlem" (Toop 1991:12). Hip-hop culture became the manner in which Bronx residents rejuvenated their surroundings at a time when the rest of the world had forgotten them.

From its inception, hip-hop was truly a Diasporic endeavor. Elements of sound culture were brought from Jamaica while elements of dance where largely developed by Latino Caribbean ethnic groups. These components meshed with African-American culture to create hip-hop culture, which consists of the art of MCing (rap), turntablism (DJing), graffiti, and breakdancing. In this sense, hip-hop is not representative of a single ethnic group, but instead represents the hybridization Black Diasporic cultures, including African-American, Latino, and Caribbean cultures (Gilroy 1993:103). Although originally not overtly political as reggae had been in Jamaica a few years earlier, hip-hop

was rooted in marginalized sociopolitical conditions as well. Namely, hip-hop culture was an avenue of expression for Black and Latino youths who did not have a voice, "They [the elements of hip-hop] sprung from kids who had been born into the shadows of the baby boom generation…What TV camera would ever capture their struggles and dreams? They were invisible" (Chang 2003:111). More precisely, hip-hop culture became the method in which a group of marginalized peoples defined themselves, "What began in basements, on street corners, in public parks, and throughout the still of the night would furnish young people fertile spaces for crafting new identities" (Watkins 2005:9). Of course, what no one realized at this time was the extent to which young people throughout the nation and eventually the world would utilize hip-hop culture to assert identity.

In its infancy, the union of hip-hop and politics was not obvious, but inevitable in consideration of the conditions to which it was born. At block parties hip-hop music became a venue for youth to put aside their differences and build community, "The dances featuring these off the wall mobile jocks, at first held in schools, community centers, house parties and parks, helped bring former rival gangs together" (Toop 1991:14). Hip-hop also became the manner in which poor Black youth expressed their anguish through lyrics as rap pioneers used their community stardom in a positive manner. Through the influence gained by being a popular DJ or MC, influential messages could be passed to the masses at the sound system parties that dominated the youth scene in the Bronx. For example, hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa utilized hip-hop to curb gang activity and raise drug awareness. If a fight would break out amongst the party attendees, he would stop the music as well as the party until the situation

defused. In his rhymes, Bambaataa would insert warnings about drug use to his youthful audiences (Chang 2003:102-107). Perhaps the most prominent and notorious example of hip-hop being used as a means of sociopolitical awareness in its early years is Grandmaster and the Furious Five's 1982 hit "The Message." The song begins with MC Melle Mel's poignant description of the dilapidated environment that many poor Black and Latinos found themselves in the years following the Civil Rights Era,

> *Broken glass everywhere*
> *People pissing on the stairs*
> *You know they just don't care*
> *I cant take the smell, I cant take the noise*
> *Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice*
> *Rats in the front room, roaches in the back*
> *Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat*
> *I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far*
> *Cause the man with the tow-truck repossessed my car* (Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, 1982)

Rapped over an infectious beat, Melle Mel's vivid narrative was a startling reminder of the racial and social inequalities that defined live for the urban poor. Five years later, a group named Public Enemy burst onto the national hip-hop scene bringing together radical political ideologies and potent music. Although MC's had long included sociopolitical lyrics in their songs, Public Enemy was the first group to have an overtly sociopolitical message. The following excerpt from Public Enemy's "Party for Your Right to Fight" exemplifies the manner in which hip-hop was utilized to influence change:

> *Power equality*
> *And we're out to get it*
> *I know some of you ain't wid it*
> *This party started right in 66*
> *With a pro Black radical mix*
> *Then at the hour of twelve*
> *Some force cut the power*
> *And emerged from hell*
> *It was your so called government*
> *That made this occur*
> *Like the grafted devils they were* (Public Enemy, 1988)

Here, Public Enemy draws attention to the inequalities that Black Americans faced while placing blame on the government for the failure of the Civil Rights Movements to continue beyond the late sixties. Through songs like "The Message" and "Party for Your Right to Fight," marginalized peoples had a voice to express their plight to a society that found it easier to ignore their situation. Hip-hop was no longer a result of sociopolitical situation for Blacks, but the primary tool to change that situation.

Beyond The Bronx

For the casual consumer of hip-hop today, it may be hard to imagine the conditions that were integral to the development of the hip-hop culture. After all, in the imagination of many Americans, issues of blatant racism and sociopolitical struggle are ancient history. Nevertheless, hip-hop's transformation from a local underground culture to a transnational economic and cultural behemoth did not occur over night. I submit that hip-hop's global ascendancy can be examined in three stages, the first of which being its birth as a local culture independent of mainstream society. However, before reaching its current stage as a form of mainstream global culture, hip-hop found its way to mainstream white America largely with its subversive elements intact. This intermediate stage is especially noteworthy as it offers insights into the manner in which hip-hop has been appropriated internationally. Specifically, rather than another brand of popular music, for many white Americans in the mid eighties and subsequently in several international locales, interaction with hip-hop culture was innately subversive.

Nearly thirty years after America's exposure to hip-hop, retrospectively, it is now obvious that the music video culture is what caused the explosion of white suburbia's

interest in hip-hop music (Kitwana 2005). However, in hip-hop's early years, to be white and involved in hip-hop culture was a signifier of sociopolitical involvement, as the movement had yet to reach mass media outlets,

> Unlike many white kids who are part of hip-hop's consumer audience today, young white Americans who began identifying with hip-hop during the mid 1980's for the most part were not in it for the arts alone. Many viewed hip-hop as an appealing antiestablishment culture. Hip-hop was still primarily an underground phenomenon (Kitwana 2005, 26).

In other words, when hip-hop initially reached white communities in the early eighties, to be white and associated with hip-hop indicated recognition of the sociopolitical conditions in the culture was born. However, as hip-hop began to reach further into the depths of white suburbia in the late eighties and early nineties hip-hop's initial context became lost in the money making machine it was quickly becoming. Hip-hop was no longer a sub-culture, but rather a mainstay of American and global popular culture.

Largely as a result of hip-hop's commoditization, in today's United States, to be non-Black and have an interest in hip-hop culture has no correlation with being aware of racial, social, and political marginalization (Kitwana 2005). In its commoditization, not only have whites begun to consume hip-hop, but they have become the driving force of its production as well. In an interview of a hip-hop A&R,[1] Bakari Kitwana discusses the growing influence of whites in hip-hop, "'Right now, some of the hottest producers such as Alchemist and Scott Storch are white (Kitwana 2005:6). When one also considers that the individuals who run the corporations that produce and distribute hip-hop culture are overwhelmingly white as well, it is fair to say that hip-hop's roots in the Black experience have mostly been lost in its mainstream manifestation.

[1] A&R, or artist and repertoire, refers to the person/department who is responsible for scouting and developing talent at record labels

However, not all externalities of hip-hop's commoditization are negative, as undoubtedly, the popularization of the culture have broken down racial barriers throughout the nation, "Despite the ways African American men have been vilified during this younger generation's lifetime, more and more young whites are abandoning old apprehensions about young Blacks and openly embracing Black youth culture" (Kitwana 2005, 15). To take Kitwana's argument a step further, more and more youths across the *globe* are embracing hip-hop and Black culture despite racist ideologies that permeate themselves around the world. Perhaps Bakari Kitwana says it best, "Hip-hop' cultural movement has helped equate 'black' with 'cool'" (Kitwana 2005:15).

While hip-hop's relationship to Blackness is undeniable as hip-hop was created in response to social issues specific to Blacks, in the United States and abroad, this relationship has taken on exaggerated proportions. Specifically, while Blackness and the Black experience are essential to hip-hop, hip-hop culture does not necessarily define the Black experience. Because hip-hop is the only representation of Blackness that many whites receive, mainstream America often finds it difficult to dissociate the two. Furthermore, as hip-hop has been commoditized, so has the hip-hop image, and consequently, the image of Blackness. Unfortunately, the fact that the image of Blackness presented in hip-hop is only an image is frequently lost in its consumption.

Explicitly, the current image of Blackness in hip-hop is an image that sells, but not necessarily an image that accurately reflects the Black youth experience, "Sometimes the white youth who rely exclusively on media representations of hip-hop are appropriating distorted representations of Black youth culture, not Black youth culture itself" (Kitwana 2005:123). Marvin Gladney expounds on this line of reasoning pointing

out that anything outside of the distorted images of Blackness that many whites have internalized is not commodifiable as hip-hop, "Acts which do not provide sufficient amounts of 'shock,' or mythical ghetto flavor are not perceived as being marketable in the same manner as acts like N.W.A or Ice T." (Gladney 1995:294). In other words, if hip hop artists do not conform to an image of Blackness that is defined in overwhelmingly white boardrooms and not by the producers of the art or Blacks themselves, one is unable to be viable in today's hip-hop market. Although Gladney's work is a bit dated,[2] it is still relevant to today's discussion on hip-hop in the United States as well as internationally. Specifically, Gladney's argument is indicative of hip-hop's current stage. What began as a local culture for a local audience has grown into a popular culture to which its originators have very little influence.

As hip-hop has grown to have a large white consumer base in the United States, so has the prevalence of hip-hop images that point to racial stereotypes that have haunted American society for centuries. Although Kitwana's point that whites rely on "distorted representations of Black youth culture" is well taken, it is sad to consider the very real possibility that to the majority of American society, the fact that Black hip-hop representations are distorted does not matter. For so many white Americans and people around the world, hip-hop is the only manner in which they interact with Blacks. In international locales like Japan, this truth is only more evident. Hip-hop has become the face of Blackness not only in the United States, but globally as well.

[2] "The Black Arts Movement and Hip Hop" was published in 1995. Although by academic standards this is recent, in terms of the development of hip-hop culture and its manifestation in mainstream media outlets, a gap of ten years is rather significant.

As hip-hop has spread internationally, comparisons have been drawn between hip-hop appropriation and consumption abroad and by white America. If we are to consider hip-hop culture as an entity belonging to Blacks alone, this comparison is applicable, but this way of thinking omits important factors. Of primary importance is the fact that hip-hop can no longer be considered a local, underground culture. This does not mean that hip-hop's roots are entirely absent from its new millennium version, but in its current form, hip-hop is undeniably popular culture. Although many artists keep the underground aspects of hip-hop alive, hip-hop is now a commodity that is produced and consumed on a global scale. Furthermore, to compare international versions of hip-hop to white America's interest in hip-hop culture imposes American racial dynamics on international manifestations of hip-hop culture. For many Blacks today, white America's involvement with hip-hop is looked down upon as they have no shared sociopolitical experience with Black Americans. Although international hip-hop participants do not necessarily have shared experience with Blacks, what distinguishes white America's participation in hip-hop is that historically, whites have been the oppressor and have enabled the marginalization of Blacks in the United States. If we consider hip-hop culture not only as a Black form of music and cultural expression, but also as a subversive culture of the oppressed, the equation of international hip-hop with white America's interest in hip-hop culture today is rendered inappropriate. Alternatively, a more valid comparison is hip-hop's initial reception and adoption by some whites as an "antiestablishment culture" in the mid eighties.

Almost paradoxically, in going global, hip-hop has once again become local. Although the American mainstream version of hip-hop certainly found a place in

international appropriations of hip-hop including Japan, the fact that in so many locations hip-hop's roots are emphasized more so than its mainstream bravado is encouraging for those who hold hip-hop's original values dear. Like white Americans in the eighties who were drawn to hip-hop because of its subversive elements as opposed to gross essentializations of Blackness, many international participants of hip-hop utilize it as a means of identity construction. Whereas America's version of hip-hop has been largely reduced to a money making machine, international manifestations of hip-hop have played an integral role in keeping the subversive elements of hip-hop alive.

Globalization of Hip-Hop

Tricia Rose (1994) was the first to take a critical lens to proliferation of hip-hop culture in the United States. Focusing on hip-hop as a voice for marginalized Black communities, Rose traces the history of hip-hop music along a long lineage African and Black cultural traditions ranging from the griots of West Africa to the oratorical displays of Muhammad Ali. In the tradition of Rose's seminal work, many others have examined hip-hop culture as it relates to the experience of Black Americans. Bakari Kitwana (2002) discusses hip-hop culture as it relates to the generation of Black Americans born between 1965 and 1984. Citing high rates of imprisonment, police brutality among other issues plaguing the Black American community, Kitwana frames hip-hop not in terms of music or even a culture, but rather as a synonym for Black youth culture. In later works, Kitwana (2005) again looks at hip-hop solely in terms of Black experience through an examination of white American participation in hip-hop. Implicit in his discussion is that hip-hop culture ultimately belongs to Black Americans.

Like Kitwana (2002), Jeff Chang (2005) discusses hip-hop culture in terms of its relationship to a generation. However, while Kitwana speaks of the hip-hop generation only in relation to Black Americans, Chang roots hip-hop in the experience of Black and Latino Americans, but examines its proliferation to individuals of various races and ethnicities throughout the United States. Citing multicultural generational protests, Chang suggests that hip-hop culture has transcended a Black form of culture and expression and is now a vehicle through which young people of all colors spark change. Likewise, S. Craig Watkins (2005) discusses hip-hop as a multicultural endeavor in its contemporary form in the United States. Referencing many of the social ills that Kitwana (2002) does such as police brutality, Watkins does so not only in the context of the Black Americans, but all peoples of color, including Latino and Asian Americans. While consideration of the roots of hip-hop culture in the experience of Black Americans is essential to any examination of hip-hop, regardless of locale, I argue that in limiting discussions of hip-hop to the context of Black Americans, we ignore its potential as a truly global movement.

In the spirit of hip-hop as a global culture, there have been various studies on new locales of hip-hop production and consumption, the most notable being Tony Mitchell's compilation, *Global Noise* (2001), which features essays on various international hip-hop communities in nations including the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and Australia. Of particular interest in this collection are André JM Prévos' (2001) and Ted Swedenburg's (2001) discussions on hip-hop as a tool for immigrant communities to combat racism and social ills in France and the United Kingdom. In these contexts, the appropriation of American hip-hop culture is congruous with hip-hop's development in

the United States in that in both locales, its practitioners are marginalized peoples of color who utilize hip-hop in "opposition to the social order and to political and economic systems that have led to what they call the oppression of minorities" (Prévos 2001, 43). The fact that many of the hip-hop artists in the United Kingdom and France are of African descent allows for easy appropriation of hip-hop's ideals that were constructed in the urban ghettos of the United States, "Like many Black U.S. rappers, they [see] themselves as natural commentators and observers of a seldom seen and largely ignored world where poverty, violence, and despair are prevalent" (Prévos 2001:50).

Whereas the parallels between hip-hop in the United States and other Western countries with populations of marginalized peoples of color are readily apparent, the sociopolitical roots of hip-hop have found homes in locales where participants are not marginalized by their race, but ethnicity. Jacqueline Urla (2001) examines the hip-hop influenced political group Negu Gorriak and their message of Basque nationalism and language revival for Basques living throughout Europe. Particularly salient is the fact that like many hip-hop acts in the United States, Negu Gorriak addresses the social problems facing their generation of Basque young people including drugs and unemployment (Urla 2001, 174). For Basque participants in hip-hop culture as well as people of color in Western Europe, direct connections to the hip-hop culture and its sociopolitical roots are easily identifiable, but in other locales, interest is purely cosmetic.

In her study of Bulgarian rap, Claire Levy (2001:136) asserts that, "[Bulgarian] fascination with Black Americans' participation in rap music is hardly motivated by any sympathy for or understanding of the realities of Black urban ghetto life" Levy goes on to explain Bulgaria's interest in hip-hop has developed in terms of fashion derived from

stereotyped images of Black rappers in popular music, and has deviated minimally from the mainstream American rap images of violence and misogyny. At first glance, Japan's interest in hip-hop seems to bear resemblance to that of Bulgaria. Unlike people of color in France and the United Kingdom, and in contrast to sociopolitically focused Basque hip-hop groups, Japanese hip-hop participants do not seem to be systematically oppressed on a societal level. Relative to the aforementioned locales, issues of extreme poverty, racism, discrimination and other social injustices that are integral to the roots of hip-hop culture appear to be marginal issues in Japan. Although this argument bears consideration, an examination of hip-hop culture in neighboring Korea sheds light on the manner in which Japanese hip-hop can be utilized as a subversive tool.

Sarah Morelli (2001) examines the phenomenon of hip-hop in Korea as a tool in which youths combat the lack of youth agency, long school hours and political corruption. These themes have also found a place in Japanese hip-hop thereby fostering a culture that is subversive of dominant culture. Although many American hip-hop enthusiasts would question the severity of these themes in comparison to the societal conditions that have systematically oppressed urban persons of color in the United States, Korean and Japanese use of hip-hop in this manner is worthy of consideration. Whereas aspects of Korean hip-hop lend to the ideals of hip-hop's roots, Morelli also examines Korean interest in hip-hop in relation to stereotypical notions of Blackness. Specifically, Morelli explains that "globally, the African American man now defines the standard [of masculinity and hipness]" (2001:253). Morelli argues that this notion permeates itself in all aspects of Korean hip-hop including fashion, language, and music videos where African-American males are included not only as a celebration of Afrodiasporic cultural

recognition, but competition as well where the African American male is the benchmark of masculinity (2001). These interpretations and conceptualizations of Blackness are as just as prominent in Japan, where as I will discuss in chapter 3, association with hip-hop and subsequently Blackness is a manner in which Japanese males assert masculinity.

More so than an adoption of global culture, international examples of hip-hop point to a model in which global culture becomes indigenized. Namely, hip-hop's subversive roots are recontextualized as a venue for new identity construction in their respective locales. In the following chapters, I will examine the ways in which hip-hop culture is recontextualized in Japan, be it in the form of hip-hop as a form of subversive expression or through association with Blackness.

CHAPTER 2
The Japanese Version Contextualized

A New Model

While hip-hop culture's global proliferation has given individuals throughout the world a vehicle through which to construct subversive identities and culture, perhaps a more obvious result of its growth is the worldwide visibility of Black people and Black culture. On the surface, these two affects seem to be independent of one another, but I argue that they are not mutually exclusive. For many of its international participants, in recognition of the Black experience from which hip-hop was born, more so than with hip-hop culture itself, a bond is formed with Blackness.

Despite increasing awareness of Blackness through hip-hop, by no means is hip-hop the global community's first exposure to Blackness. In fact, well before hip-hop's ascendance, racial stereotypes that permeate the West, particularly in the United States, could be seen globally as well. However, it is these racial dynamics that make the worldwide success of hip-hop so unique. While on one level, hip-hop is only one of many examples of American culture gone global, first and foremost hip-hop is seen as a Black culture. The distinction between hip-hop as a form of "Black" culture as opposed to "American" culture is significant as in its translation abroad, hip-hop is marked as separate from American culture. This in and of itself as an indication to its subversive nature. In pertinence to Japanese hip-hop, Ian Condry (2000:71) explains that, "Over time, rap music's association with lower-class African Americans became widely known." Along with its non-relationship to American culture, its association with

Blackness marks hip-hop distinctively as a subversive culture in its appropriations abroad.

In this light, hip-hop's intimate relationship to Blackness cannot be ignored. Accordingly, before we can examine the interactions that Japanese youth have with hip-hop, we must consider the history of Blackness in Japan as that informs the manner in which Japanese youth relate Blackness to hip-hop culture. I argue that when coupled with already existing racial stereotypes of Black people, the Japanese appropriation of hip-hop culture by means of physical consumption of Black characteristics such as darker skin and Black hairstyles is a vehicle through which Japanese youth deviate from and subvert mainstream society.

Blackness in Japan

Although Japanese people have been exposed to Blacks since the sixteenth century when African servants were brought to Japan by Portuguese and Dutch traders (Russell 1996) it has only been recently that the Japanese public has been bombarded by images of Blackness. Primarily, this can be attributed to the rapid popularization of hip-hop music which is recognized as a Black form of culture. But through hip-hop, what can be said about the Japanese perceptions and subsequent interactions with Blackness? Japan's history with Blackness helps shed light on this question.

Michael Weiner (1997) explains that "it was not until the Japanese encountered the European enslavement of Africans that negative images of 'blacks' began to emerge" (100). Weiner goes on to explain that racism was not unique to Blacks as white Europeans were considered inferior as well, however this "reflected cultural or political

considerations" (1997) as opposed to a belief that Blacks were genetically inferior. The earliest interactions between Blacks and Japanese are depicted in artwork of Portuguese travelers. In *Black Nanban,* Arnold Rubin offers a description of a piece of artwork depicting Black slaves,

> Much of the same quality of liveliness and vivid characterization [as of the Portuguese] is exhibited in rendering of companions of the Portuguese [Blacks], most of which exhibit pigmentation which ranges from grey to various shades of yellow and brown to black, exaggerated animal facial expressions verging on the grotesque and far less elaborate costume than the Portuguese. The darker figures, in particular, are also clearly subordinate in status, being shown as deck hands on the ships (Rubin 1974, 6).

As this description illustrates, Blacks' subservient status to whites was readily apparent from their first interactions with the Japanese. Consequently, the Japanese perception of Blackness has been created out of Western hierarchies of race, which placed Blacks as subordinate and sub-human. Formally, racial hierarchies made their way into Japanese consciousness by means of foreign academics teaching social Darwinism and Japanese visits to the Untied States and European countries. In encountering racism in the United States, many Japanese officials attributed Blacks' status in society to their inherent inferiority, and likened them to *Eta* outcasts in Japan (Weiner 1997). Such perceptions paved the way for racist images that of Blackness that would spread throughout Japan in the twentieth century.

John Russell (1996) further argues that Japanese perceptions of Blackness are borrowed from the West. Specifically, Russell explains that representations of Blacks in contemporary Japan can usually be characterized by one of the following eight stereotypes: infantilism, primitivism, hypersexuality, bestiality, natural athletic prowess or physical stamina, mental inferiority, psychological weakness, and emotional volatility. Russell takes his arguments a step further by discussing the manner in which the Japanese

view themselves against Blackness (and whiteness). Russell states that the Japanese individual can situate him or herself against Blackness in one of two ways. The first is to accept Western constructions of race and situate oneself as inferior to whites but superior to Blacks. The second way is to identify with what Russell calls the "Black Other" and "assert solidarity with non-whites" (1996:27).

Russell (1996:35) further explains the subversive undertones of Japanese association with Blackness stating that "Disaffected Japanese youth came to see the African American as a counter to the values of the Japanese establishment and the Black Other was adopted as a symbol of defiance, forbidden fruit, and their own alienation from the Japanese mainstream." Russell's assertion is particularly relevant to the manner in which many Japanese hip-hop enthusiasts physically assume Black characteristics. For these youth, hip-hop is only a medium through which to align themselves with Blackness rather than the primary vehicle of defiance. Moreover, in this sense, the Japanese recontextualization of hip-hop culture not only subverts mainstream Japanese society, but the established model of cultural dissemination as well. In their appropriation of hip-hop, the Japanese place emphasis on its designations as a form of Black culture as opposed to American culture.

While the subversive aspects of the Japanese recontextualization of Blackness are readily apparent, the presence of problematic Black stereotypes deserves consideration as well. Some would argue that the connection between Japanese youth fascination with Blackness lend to more traditional perceptions of Blacks as opposed to their image in contemporary Black culture, "*Weekly Playboy*…argues[s] that by pursuing Black identity, Black faces and witches have arrived not so much at a semblance of contemporary Black

culture, as at the primary stage of human evolution, which is rooted in Africa, and is based on the principle not of money but of black magic" (Kinsella 2005:148). Although influenced by images of Blackness in the media, it can be argued that the desire for Japanese youth to darken their skin is actually tied to traditional interpretations of Blackness as a primitive, mystical people. This theory deserves consideration, but in pertinence to the hip-hop subculture, it seems more likely that the desire to embody Blackness is a result of the image of Blackness portrayed in popular media. After all, in neighborhoods like Shibuya, it is not the image of an African tribesman that dominates store walls and advertisements, but of the twenty-first century gangster rapper.

In a society where there is very little interaction with African-Americans and Blacks in general, it is obvious that Japanese youth learn about Blackness through the media. Unfortunately, media often projects a stereotypical and essentialized view of Blackness, "Until very recently, some of the most popular icons on display in Shinjuku and across the country were Little Black Sambo and his liver-lipped cousin" (Wood 1997:40). Despite not having an understanding of the racial context of the Sambo images, the fact that the Sambo image was (and to an extent still) an acceptable representation of Black people to Japanese people hints at their misinformed perceptions of Blackness. The Sambo figures, which dramatically and unrealistically highlight features specific to Blacks, lends to the notion that Blacks are animalistic and infantile. In fact, Black character dolls are sometimes placed next to stuffed apes and other stuffed animals in toy shops (Russell 1996).

Although these stereotypes of Blacks are still present in Japan, perceptions of Blacks have gone in a similar, yet new direction, "Recent trends in Japanese literary

representation of the Black Other tend to portray Blacks as sexual objects, studs, fashion accessories and quintessential performers, images that imported American media reinforce daily" (Russell 1996:34-35). However, the images of Blackness seen in today's media as opposed to more overtly racist stereotypes are undoubtedly related. For example, whereas perceived Black hypersexuality is still seen as a negative characteristic to much of Japanese society, for Japanese youth, this characteristic becomes desirable *because* it goes against the status quo. More precisely, it is not the meaning of Blackness that has changed, but rather the manner in which the meanings are received and interpreted by select Japanese individuals. Blackness itself has been recontextualized by Japanese youth as a symbol through which subversive identities can be constructed. Through its recontextualization, they can align themselves with Blackness indirectly through hip-hop culture or overtly in assuming Black physical attributes. Either way, Blackness is the medium through which new identities are created.

However, in creating new identities through association with Blackness, more issues arise. As aforementioned, more so than perhaps any other form of popular culture, hip-hop is rooted in shared experience. To appropriate that culture, or more boldly the racial characteristics of its originators as a symbol of the culture invites criticisms of mimicry. As Japan continues to interact with hip-hop not only as consumers of the culture, but producer as well, authenticity becomes an important issue.

The Struggle for Authenticity

Whenever there is discussion on hip-hop or Black culture in locales other than the United States, the most heated topic of discussion is usually the issue of authenticity.

This discussion is especially pertinent to the Japanese hip-hop community, as on the surface, there is very little in common between Blacks in the United States and Japanese youth. The issue of Japanese appropriation of Black culture and authenticity is not unique to hip-hop culture, but was first addressed in pertinence to jazz music. Like with hip-hop there is a belief that jazz music belongs to Blacks; for any other group to participate in the culture is an infringement upon the history and social context of which the music was born. While discussions on the proliferation of hip-hop in Japan are relatively recent, the discussion on jazz has raged for decades and continues to have relevance.

However, unlike jazz enthusiasts, many hip-hoppers in Japan have taken fandom and appreciation of Black culture to new levels in their efforts to physically assume a more Black identity. I submit that in addition to constructing a subversive identity through the physical consumption of Blackness, Japanese youth hope to create an identity in which they are able to participate in hip-hop culture despite lack of racial "authenticity." Stemming from its roots in the underclass of the United States, the sociopolitical landscape of hip-hop fosters a narrow identity of who is allowed to participate in the culture. To be involved in hip-hop, popular conception is that you must be Black or at least have faced life obstacles that are congruous to those that are unique to Black Americans. This is why authenticity is of paramount importance in regards to participation in hip-hop culture. In America, for non-Black hip-hop participants, credibility is usually in the form of economic disadvantage. For example, top selling American rapper Eminem is white but is marketed as someone who is from an economically deprived background. I argue that Japanese participants assume Blackness

through skin color and hair partially in order to gain this credibility, thereby giving them right to participate in hip-hop culture. The issue of credibility and authenticity continues to resonate not only in the realm of hip-hop, but jazz as well.

Many African-American jazz artists have criticized the Japanese affinity for jazz music. One of the most notable criticisms came from saxophonist Branford Marsalis, who argues that the Japanese appreciation of jazz is superficial at best (Atkins 2001, 20). Marsalis' sentiments get at the heart of the complications of the proliferation of Black culture globally, and particularly in Japan. There is an underlying notion that Black music is more than simply music, but culture as well, to which being Black is essential to understanding. Jazz and the blues are forms of music that were created by African-Americans during a time when racial violence was rampant and Blacks experienced overt racism and discrimination. To many, the essence of jazz and blues is of these experiences, "Jazz and other folk or 'black expressive' forms value precisely those human qualities that constitute lived experience" (Atkins 2001:24). Similarly, hip-hop culture was created in a social context specific to the Black experience in the United States during the years immediately following the Civil Rights Movement. For non-Blacks who participate and identify with Black music, authenticity immediately becomes an issue, as many argue that shared experience is requisite for participation in the culture.

In his analysis of jazz in Japan, E. Taylor Atkins offers a definition of authenticity in pertinence to music, "Authenticity in jazz as in other folk arts, implies that an artist must possess specific qualities-educational background, life experience, ethnic heritage, motivations, or artistic vision" (2001:2). Here, Atkins gets at the notion that having life experience specific to those who "own" the music is essential to be an authentic producer

of the music. Likewise, Joel Rudinlow (1994) discusses issues of authenticity in pertinence to blues music. Specifically, Rudinlow attempts to separate issues of race and authenticity from genetics. This approach is particularly useful in examining the Japanese appropriation of Black music, as to some Japanese, Black people are owners of Black music not because of their shared experience, but because of genetic characteristics that other races lack that lend to the production of the music. The tendency to associate the production of Black music with genetic characteristics specific to Blacks is not surprising considering that Blacks have traditionally been portrayed as animalistic in Japanese society. While Rudinlow views authenticity in terms of shared experience, he presents an argument in opposition of shared experience as well. Although the original innovators of blues music were African-American, and the music is in direct relation to their experience, Rudinlow argues that the entire African-American community does not necessarily share the same experience of innovators. Rudinlow takes this argument a step further in arguing that contemporary Blacks have very little claim to the experience of the creators of blues music, "The access that most contemporary black Americans have to the experience of slavery or sharecropping or life in the Mississippi delta during the twenties and thirties is every bit as remote, mediated, and indirect as that of any white would-be blues player" (1994:133).

Similar statements can be made in regards to the Japanese appropriation of contemporary Black music such as hip-hop. Although born in raised in America, many African-Americans first interactions with hip-hop were through media like their Japanese counterparts. In this sense, when a middle class African-American wears hip-hop clothing or adopts hip-hop culture, it can be said that he is doing the same thing as a

Japanese hip-hopper who dresses like 50 Cent because he saw him on MTV, "[Japanese] interpretations are undeniably imitations at first, but that is not much different than, say, the second generation of rappers in the U.S., who were introduced to rap music via records and television" (Condry 2000:181). Although such an analysis deserves consideration, it ignores the fact that African-Americans are still marginalized and discriminated against in American society. Although most contemporary African-Americans do not have the direct experience of growing up in the Mississippi Delta in the twenties, or even in the Bronx, New York in the seventies and eighties, they do have the shared experience of the discriminations and injustices that fueled the creation of music and culture in those particular locales.

As Black culture continues to grow in Japan, issues of authenticity have become increasingly pertinent to the Japanese who participate in such cultures. Although valued, several Japanese hip-hop artists do not seek the approval of their African-American counterparts. In fact, some have attempted to attack and deconstruct the relationship between hip-hop and Blackness, "It is not the case that 'black' equals 'hip-hop.' There are many blacks, so-called 'house negros,' who despise hip-hop's message. For Blacks in the American hip-hop community, in some ways, these people are the enemies, and us hip-hoppers living in Japan are the allies" (Condry 2000:176).

While some Japanese attempt to disassociate their participation in Black forms of music from Black culture, the overriding sentiment that Black music belongs to Black people remains. For many Japanese jazz enthusiasts, Black American innovators are held up as the pinnacles in their art form, "Bandmates staunchly identified themselves as disciples either of Sonny Rollins or of John Coltrane, debating the saxophonists' relative

merits ad nauseum" (Atkins 2001, 34). Likewise, many Japanese hip-hoppers eagerly journey halfway around the world to learn about the roots of hip-hop in New York City. Despite having their own hip-hop artists, most Japanese hip-hop enthusiasts still look to Blacks in the Untied States as the innovators and owners of the culture. After all, its association with Blackness is a large reason that hip-hop is seen as subversive. To dissociate the tow would divorce hip-hop from much of its subversive power.

The Japanese Version

I argue that the worldwide spread of hip-hop as a transnational culture rather than a form of American culture appropriated internationally is a result of its intimate relationship to Blackness and the Black experience. While this should not be lost in any analysis of hip-hop culture, the Japanese version is more than worthy of consideration as a culture in and of itself.

With the international success of a 1982 breakdancing film entitled *Wild Style,* hip-hop culture made its way to Japan. Inspired by the live performances of breakdance teams like Rock Steady Crew in Yoyogi Park, many Japanese youth began to practice aspects of hip-hop culture (Condry 2001). As Ian Condry (2001:227) explains, hip-hop came to Japan not via rap, but rather breakdance, and "Over time DJing, rap, and graffiti appeared, in roughly that order.". Gradually, hip-hop began to infiltrate the 1980's disco scene, in fact causing many groups to cross over to the hip-hop genre. Coupled with the effects of an increasingly global media, a rising amount of American hip-hop and R&B performances in Japan solidified the place of "Black music" in Japan (Condry 2001). Now, more than twenty years later, hip-hop is a staple to Japanese popular culture.

Just as the American hip-hop culture has expanded to from its initial context, so has its Japanese incarnation. Despite criticisms of imitation and artificiality, Japanese hip-hop has grown into a legitimate component of not only the Japanese musical scene, but the global as well. In recent years, popular Japanese hip-hop collective the Teriyaki Boyz, have collaborated with American hip-hop juggernauts Kanye West and Pharell Williams. These transnational collaborations cannot be considered isolated occurrences. As Japanese hip-hop continues to grow, its imprint will undoubtedly be left on the global music scene.

Despite its proliferation, there are still questions not only in regards to Japanese hip-hop's global position, but its domestic role as well. Perhaps the most frequent questions relate to authenticity, but to the individuals in Japan who live and breathe hip-hop culture, these issues are irrelevant. The fact of the matter is that for hordes of Japanese youth, hip-hop culture *is* real, and for that reason, its function in their lives is more than worthy of consideration. Despite lack of shared experience and context with the innovators of hip-hop culture, for many Japanese, hip-hop culture is a template for individual and collective expression; "People who may share no historical relationship with Blacks but who find in hip-hop a language, a set of resources, and knowledge with which to articulate similar but not identical struggles and concerns" (Urla 2001:173). Meanwhile, others choose to associate with hip-hop culture in terms of aesthetics, which often manifests itself in the physical consumption of Blackness. While the darkening of one's skin or the appropriation of Black hairstyles may appear simply as mimicry, even these forms of expression have specific meanings in the lives of Japanese hip-hop

participants. In the following chapters, I will explore the different ways in which Japanese youth interact with Black culture and hip-hop.

CHAPTER 3
Aesthetic Appropriation as Subversion

In the Eyes of a Participant

During my time in Japan, I spoke with and observed various individuals ranging from college aged hip-hop fans, to those in their lower twenties that did not affiliate with hip-hop culture, as well as to individuals in their upper twenties and lower thirties whose knowledge of hip-hop did not go beyond their infrequent visits to Shibuya. Despite their varying backgrounds, there was an underlying feeling of uncertainty in regards to the state of hip-hop in their society. On one hand, many artists and consumers expressed pride in the development and innovations of Japanese hip-hop, but others saw Japanese hip-hop only in relation to Black culture as imitation, therefore rendering some or all aspects of it irrelevant. Even though aspects and components of hip-hop culture seem to permeate throughout Japanese youth culture, Japan's relationship with global hip-hop culture (to which Japan is integral) seems to be shaky at best.

Some of the best insights that I received in regards to Japanese hip-hop came from an informant, Yen Yen, an underground MC who like many other Japanese, spent five years in New York to learn hip-hop culture from at its origin. During our two hour conversation, we discussed many topics, but one recurring theme was Yen Yen's emphasis on the superficial nature of Japanese hip-hop. After asking about the Japanese hip-hop scene in general, Yen Yen replied that, "Hip-hop culture in Japan is only clothes." Yen Yen later clarified this point stating that some Japanese artists (like himself), and consumers take hip-hop very seriously as a culture, but for the most part, he sees hip-hop in Japan as fashion. His dismay with much of the Japanese hip-hop scene

was readily apparent as he explained its relationship to his own artistic and business aspirations,

> [Japanese] teenage kids only get clothes. Some teenage kids get hundred dollar sneakers or seven hundred dollar jackets, but they don't want to buy my shit [his CD's]. What is hip-hop culture? The culture that is coming up [in Japan] is only clothes or some single for a mainstream artist.

Yen Yen later reiterated his opinion on the superficiality of Japanese hip-hop consumption stating, "If it's number one in the USA, then it's number one in Japan. That's it." Throughout the interview, Yen Yen's dissatisfaction with the more shallow aspects of hip-hop came to light. In fact, he was so insistent in bringing up these points that it began to seem as if *he* felt that Japanese hip-hop was inauthentic, which was rather surprising coming from a Japanese hip-hop artist. Towards the end of our interview session, I solicited his opinion on the authenticity of Japanese hip-hop asking if it is phony. His reply was rather ambivalent, "I don't want to say that…but some people say that."

Yen Yen is not alone in his critiques of Japanese hip-hop culture as many Japanese see it as purely imitation as evidenced by Ian Condry's work on the subject, where the most common responses to his research dismissed Japanese hip-hop merely as imitation (2000:168). Despite Condry's experiences and Yen Yen's verbal critiques of Japanese hip-hop culture, it should not be forgotten that Yen Yen spent five years in New York City fine tuning his craft. On a level, his travels to New York were an effort to legitimize his place in hip-hop culture. In consideration of his dedication to hip-hop culture, it is more than understandable that he and the most serious of Japanese hip-hop artists hold high standards for the development of hip-hop culture in Japan, as they are its representatives. But why is it that it is so easy for the Japanese to dismiss their brand of

hip-hop as imitation? Is it lack of artistic merit in comparison to their American counterparts, or an issue of race?

Yen Yen shed light on the issue of authenticity stating, "Black people are hip-hop. Japanese people, white people, white men don't do hip-hop. Maybe Eminem is the only white man that I'm thinking about." Because Yen Yen is making this statement as someone who is very aware of dynamics of both hip-hop in the United States and Japan, it is surprising that it is so easy for him to question the legitimacy of a community that he is a part of. Even if one's skills and artistic qualities are sufficient, for some Japanese hip-hop enthusiasts, being Japanese is a hurdle that must be cleared to be authentic in hip-hop culture. Yen Yen was certainly not the only person who expressed these sentiments as Japanese hip-hop producers, consumers, as well as bystanders repeatedly affirmed that hip-hop is a Black thing, thereby implying that Japanese hip-hop is inauthentic.

In another interview, a Japanese woman in her mid twenties stated that Japanese hip-hop is neither a culture nor creative because hip-hop is "for Black people." Because Japanese hip-hoppers have cultivated a culture that is legitimate in and of itself, it is somewhat troubling that many look to outside sources for approval, but even before those in the Japanese hip-hop community allow themselves to be judged as authentic or inauthentic by Blacks, some seem to have come to the conclusion that their work is inauthentic simply because of their race. But if the disjoint between Japanese hip-hop and authenticity is race, then how is it that these Japanese hip-hoppers attempt to become more "Black?" The answer to this question is rooted in the images of Blacks that are seen by Japanese youth, as before Blackness can be recontextualized, there has to be a model to work from.

Images of Blackness

Although Japanese interest in hip-hop can easily be dismissed as a fad, this line of thinking fails to consider the reasons that Japanese youth associate with hip-hop and its function in their lives. Even if we are to consider Japanese interest in hip-hop only as a passing trend, why is that hip-hip is that Japanese hip-hoppers specifically choose hip-hop as opposed to another fad? As aforementioned, I argue that the answer to this question is hip-hop's association with Blackness. In identifying with a music and culture that has such strong connections to a group of people that are highly stereotyped, Japanese hip-hoppers are able to utilize hip-hop as a vehicle to assert deviant identities. The level in which one chooses to associate with hip-hop and Blackness can range from casual consumption of hip-hop clothing to full fledged hip-hop culture enthusiast, but regardless of degree of association, there are common factors that influence one's decision to be more "Black." Because there are so few Black people in Japan, the primary manner in which Japanese youth learn about Blackness is through media images. In order to understand the identities that Japanese hip-hoppers cultivate through association with hip-hop and Black culture, the manner in which Blackness is presented in Japan must be examined.

When walking through the heart of the Shibuya neighborhood of Tokyo, one is bombarded by images of Blackness. In what is considered by many to be the center of Tokyo youth culture, hip-hop seems to reign supreme. The streets are littered with hip-hop apparel and record stores. Young Japanese and Black men alike stand outside of stores soliciting patronage to their hip-hop themed clothing stores while the latest 50 Cent

single booms from the adjacent record store's speakers. In Shibuya, like many locales throughout the world, hip-hop has been commoditized and Japanese youth are certainly buying into it.

Although the proliferation of hip-hop has paved the way for a racially and ethnically diverse group of global hip-hop consumers and producers, still the most salient image of hip-hop is the Black male. In Japan, this is no different. As is the case in the United States, when it comes to hip-hop media, most notably in the form of advertisements and American based publications like *The Source, XXL,* and *Vibe,* the Black male is the symbol for the entire culture. Although Japan and the United States share this characteristic, there is a key difference in the selection of images that appear in Japan. Just as hip-hop has become multifaceted on a global scale, so has the range of hip-hop sub genres in the United States. Although unified under the umbrella of hip-hop culture, there is no single American hip-hop style, with variations based on region, age, and sociopolitical orientation just to name a few. This is significant as even in the new millennium, some Americans most significant interactions with Blacks are by means of the media. Like Japan, this media interaction is usually in the form of hip-hop music, but I argue that the pluralistic nature of American hip-hop has created room for multiple identities of Blackness to be constructed in the imagination of those without real life interaction with Blacks. In recent years, for every overtly misogynistic violent gangster rapper, there is a hip-hop artist at the other end of the spectrum who is socially and politically conscious, with various other personalities falling along, or even outside of that spectrum. Although both 50 Cent and Kanye West are global hip-hop icons, their difference in style, demeanor, and personality is readily apparent even to non hip-hop

fans, which challenges monolithic stereotypes of Blackness that have defined Blacks in the American imagination for much of its history. I am not stating that looking to hip-hop artists as representations of potential Black identities is not stereotypical and even racist in and of itself, but it does allow more room for different interpretations of Blackness. As for the images of hip-hop and Blackness that have come to dominate locales like Shibuya, these nuanced differences have not translated, where the vast majority of hip-hop images are intimately connected with racist conceptions of Blackness, including but not limited to the hypersexual, violent male. In Japan, this one dimensional portrayal of Blackness has great consequences, as unlike the United States where similar images are common, there is no alternative Black identity available, be it in the form of other media images of Blackness or actual interaction with Blacks. It is in this manner that hip-hop, Blackness and sexuality intersect in Japan.

In Shibuya, a small yet frequently visited CD stand epitomizes the manner in which Blackness is translated to Japan. The stand is located on the corner of a street and is around ten feet wide. At this store, CD's are displayed side by side in seven rows with around fifteen CD's per row. These CD's seem to be the more popular offerings of the store, as the cover of each is clearly visible. Immediately, I notice that every single one of the CD's on display is of the American mainstream variety and is either hip-hop or R&B. Beneath this display is a less organized heap of various hip-hop CD's ranging from older American to Japanese hip-hop CD's. The walls surrounding these displays contain postcard sized posters depicting mostly African-American rappers as well as R&B artists and scantily clad women. In all there are about thirty-five images. Out of these thirty-five, the only two depicting actual artists that are not of Black males are the

late R&B superstar, Aaliyah, and prominent white rapper, Eminem. It should be noted that Aaliyah is the only female artist to be depicted on the display. All other posters of females are of unknown individuals dressed in bikinis or in halter tops and extremely short skirts or shorts. Additionally, these women are either covered in oil or water to give their skin a shiny, more sexual appeal.

Looking at this display, it becomes clear that the dominant image at this stand is the Black male. The amount of Black male images significantly outnumbers those of women. Moreover, while the Black male rapper usually has an image to himself with his name clearly written in the foreground of the picture, images of women do not include their names, and often, women do not have the image to themselves (excluding Aaliyah, who was the only female presented as an artist). Women are clearly presented as sexual objects, while the Black male is depicted as aggressive, menacing, and hypermasculine.

The images of the Black males on display at this CD store fall loosely into three categories. The least represented category, with four pictures, is the depiction of a rapper with a high-class, wealthy persona, and a connotation of mafia like authority. The most notable image of this category is a black and white picture of the deceased rapper Biggie Smalls. In this particular picture, Biggie Smalls is dressed in a black suit with a white shirt and a black tie. He has a black top hat to match in addition to a long black pea coat over his suit. The outfit is accentuated with a black cane and round black sunglasses. Smalls is alone on this photograph leaning on the side of a cobblestone bridge. Everything about this image depicts power and authority. From his designer suit and cane to his nonchalant pose on the bridge, the image brings out a persona that commands respect. Aspects of the image are clearly drawn from American mafia movies like *The*

Godfather, which influenced the hip-hop sub genre Mafioso rap, to which Biggie Smalls belonged. It is interesting to note that the only thing that makes this photo hip-hop themed is the fact that the subject of the image is Biggie Smalls. Almost everything else about the photo from the cobblestone bridge to the designer suit is things that are generally not associated with Blackness. In fact, the setting and Smalls' style of dress is associated with high class white society. Juxtaposing an African-American rapper like Biggie Smalls with a style of dress and setting representative of upper class whiteness makes what would otherwise be a symbol of authority a subtle symbol of resistance. Confounded with its visual reference to the portrayal of Italian-American Mafia culture, the image becomes even more subversive as the Mafia reference indicates an undertone of violence.

The second manner in which the Black rapper is represented is the gangster. In these images, the rapper is usually seen with his shirt off revealing his muscular upper body and various tattoos. The rapper may have a gun in one or both hands, and he usually sports a bandanna either on his head or covering his face. This image conveys both aggressiveness and authority. These types of images were the second most popular on display at the store. The most popular category of images was that of a popular American rapper like Jay-Z or Nas simply standing casually in baggy blue jeans and an oversized t-shirt and jacket with a chain or hat cocked to the side. In these images, the rapper usually has a scowl on his face and will often have his arms crossed in what can be perceived as a belligerent manner. Although these images are not as blatantly aggressive and menacing as the gangster like images, such characteristics can be ascribed to these images as well as there are few images on display to suggest that the American rapper, or

more specifically, the Black male is anything other than aggressive or menacing. Nas simply crossing his arms can easily be interpreted as aggressive because the vast majority of other images of Black males clearly convey aggression.

Figure 1: *Wall in Shibuya*. Photo by author.

On the wall immediately adjacent to the CD store is collage of promotional posters displaying many images similar to those that I have described above (see Figure 1). Again, of note is the fact that almost every individual depicted on the poster is a Black male with the exception of Fat Joe, who is Puerto Rican (considered part of the African Diaspora) in the lower right hand corner and the five images with women. Only one of the women on the poster is musical artist (Mariah Carey, the third picture from the left on the top row) and even in this image she is not alone, as there are two other women in the background.

Even when women appear in these images, their presence is clearly in deference to men and augments the hip-hop males' identity more so than their own. Most notably, the women's bodies and sexuality is emphasized more so than their identity as hip-hop participants. When they are in pictures with men, they appear as ornaments, no different than a fancy car that may also be in the image as well to enhance the image of power and authority of the male rapper. When one or more women happen to have an image to themselves, the sexual overtones dominate the intended reading of the picture. In these particular cases, taken individually out of the context of a hip-hop display, they could easily be mistaken for soft core pornography. Like their portrayal of men, these images suggest the manner the roles that one is supposed to play as a hip-hop participant based on gender. Whereas the male is dominant, with authority and control, women are only able to participate as subordinate, sexual objects. By no means are these sorts of images limited to small independent music stands, as they appear in some of the more frequented music stores in Shibuya as well.

Down the street is perhaps Shibuya's most well known hip-hop music store, Manhattan Records. This two floor shop, neighboring its sister clothing store, is a one stop shop for both casual and hardcore hip-hop fans. In addition to hip-hop magazines in both English (*XXL*, *The Source*, *Vibe*) and Japanese (*Black Music Review*, *Woofin*, *Lure*), Manhattan Records offers a wide array of hip-hop films and documentaries primarily from the United States, as well as newly released mix tapes and CD's from Japanese and American artists. While these selections cater to the casual fan, the hip-hop enthusiast need not look further for vinyl recordings ranging from the latest mainstream albums from both sides of the Pacific, as well as hip-hop classics.

While the inventory is impressive, the aesthetics of Manhattan Records reveal aspects of Tokyo hip-hop culture as the store is covered wall to wall in hip-hop posters, mostly of Black American mainstream rappers. These posters are very similar to the pictures that cover the walls of the aforementioned CD store, particularly of the gangster male caricature. Although the underground, hip-hop purist aspects of the store are clearly apparent from the booming sound system and in-store DJ, the image of the mainstream American rapper prevails by means of the various LCD monitors located throughout the store. Playing on these screens are various rap videos that feature the scantily clad women, gangster posturing, and misogynistic undertones that have come to dominate the airwaves of BET and MTV. Like the posters, all of the men on the screen are Black males.

Upon closer inspection of Manhattan Record's inventory, the stereotypical representations of hip-hop and subsequently Blackness are only more evident. Manhattan Record's movie collection consists primarily of Black gangster films including *New Jack City* and *Belly*, along with *Scarface*, which stars Al Pacino and tells the story of a Cuban-American drug lord. The violent, mafia themes of *Scarface* have widely influenced mainstream rap culture and have inspired the Black gangster images that represent hip-hop throughout the world. Contrastingly, there are very few movies that relate to hip-hop culture that do not have violent aspects. In fact, I could not even find a copy of *Wild Style or Beat Street,* two classic movies that introduced Japan and much of the world to hip-hop. It can be argued that the absence of movies like *Wild Style* and *Beat Street* can be attributed to their age, but *New Jack City* came out in the early nineties and *Wild Style* is only a year older than *Scarface.* There was not even a copy of *Rize*, the 2005

documentary that details the innovation of Clowning and Krumping, two similar styles of hip-hop dance that are developing in Los Angeles. Although there are various potential explanations as to why certain films make to the shelves and others do not, like at the aforementioned CD stand, it appears that the image of hip-hop and Blackness at Manhattan Records is stereotypical and monolithic. The images and media that proliferate throughout Tokyo indicate that hip-hop is the domain of the violent, crime oriented, sexually dominant Black male. Women are allowed to participate (without regard to race) only as sexual objects for the Black male.

These stereotypes of Blackness are not limited to the CD and record stores, as hip-hop culture has pervaded all venues of youth and music culture in Tokyo. At Vanilla, a popular dance club in Roppongi, hip-hop is not the main attraction, but draws many hip-hop inspired club goers. Despite the club's lack of association with hip-hop, the visual experience shares similarities with the hip-hop stores of Shibuya. Primarily, unlike the general dance floor, the hip-hop area features large screens that loop various rap videos. Like in Manhattan Records, the videos presented are of African-American mainstream rappers in flashy cars and with near naked women. Even at non hip-hop specific venues, the stereotypical image of Blackness remains the same.

It should be reiterated that the images of Blackness that I have detailed above are certainly not unique to Japan or Tokyo, as hip-hop media in America projects largely the same image. In fact, it is from America that Japan gets these images, but the important difference is context. In a society where the vast majority of individuals have never been in the direct presence let alone interacted with a Black person, these images begin to define Blackness. In Tokyo, hip-hop and Blackness cannot be divorced from one

another, therefore in casual association with hip-hop culture and style, the Japanese youth also associates with the characteristics that accompany Blackness. But how does this identity inform the lives of Japanese hip-hoppers, and more importantly, through association with hip-hop and the aforementioned caricatures of Blackness, what identities are Japanese youth attempting to assert? I argue that the recontextualization of Blackness through hip-hop in Tokyo speaks to complex intersections between race and gender, and East and West.

Blackness and Sexuality in Japan

The relationship of gender and sexuality with Japanese hip-hop consumption is one that is based not only in racial and gender stereotypes, but Japan's relationship to the West as well. Edward Said (2000) argues that the relationship between the East and the West is rooted in discourse that places peoples of the East, or the Orient, as racially inferior to whites. Particular after World War II, the Western sentiment of inherent superiority has manifested itself in a manner that feminizes and emasculates Eastern nations. It was the Allied forces, comprising of both Black and white soldiers who occupied Japan and came to represent a new standard of masculinity in contrast to the defeated, emasculated men of Japan. In particular, the sight of American soldiers with Japanese women had a profound effect on Japanese masculinity, "The *panpan* [Japanese prostitute] arm in arm with her GI companion, or riding gaily in his jeep, constituted a piercing wound to national pride in general and masculine pride in particular" (Dower 1999,:35). Japan's politically subordinate position to the West, particularly America, has helped shaped standards of gender identity in Japan to this day.

Whereas much of the gender discourse regarding the relationship between the East and the West has centered on the manner in which the East has been emasculated, there have been efforts to subvert this relationship. Perhaps most notable is David Henry Hwang's award winning play *M. Butterfly,* which inverts the notion of the subordinate, feminized East that is presented in the French opera *Madama Butterfly.* In *M. Butterfly,* a French civil servant falls in love with a Chinese opera singer, who in fact is a male spy for the Chinese government. The civil servant eventually commits suicide upon realization of his lover's true identity. In this storyline, it is the white man whose masculinity is placed into question as he falls in love with a man disguised as a woman, and it is the Asian man who is ultimately victorious. However, it should not go unnoticed that the Chinese man is only able to achieve male status by adopting Western characteristics. Specifically, it is not until he wears an Armani suit that he is recognized as a man. The underlying message here is that to achieve masculinity, Asian men must forsake their own identities for Western notions of male identity. That withstanding, M. Butterfly is in many ways defiant of Orientalist discourse and forces us to consider the relationship between politics and gender, "[G]ender is also not understandable without the figurations of race and power relations that inscribe it…*M. Butterfly* calls into question analyses of race and colonialism that ignore links to gender" (Kondo 1990:25).

In the same manner that *M. Butterfly* is a product of Orientalist discourse, although on a less conscious level, I argue that Japanese appropriation of hip-hop and Black culture serves a similar purpose. Japanese participation in hip-hop and consumption of Blackness is a manner in which Japanese men are able to reclaim masculinity. But are the protagonist of *M. Butterfly* and the scores of hip-hop inspired

Japanese males truly successful in subverting East-West relationships? After all, for the protagonist of *M. Butterfly* to defeat his Western foe, he had to play into the constructed Western stereotype of Asian women. Did he necessarily reclaim his masculinity, or simply take away his French counterpart's masculinity? Why is it that some hip-hop inspired Japanese males appropriate Blackness rather than asserting their own Asian male identities? Are these actions truly subversive, or only new ways in which Orientalist intersections of race and gender are affirmed?

In the Roppongi district of Tokyo, these intersections of race and gender are readily apparent. The amount of interracial/international couples traveling amongst clubs and bars is astounding relative to all other areas of Tokyo, but these couples are almost exclusively non-Japanese men with Japanese women. Conversely, the occurrences of non-Japanese women with Japanese men are extremely scarce. Perhaps most notable are the large amounts of Black men with Japanese women who frequent the hip-hop clubs in the area. Although there are many hip-hop inspired Japanese men in this area, during my observation, most of them frequently interacted with one another rather than with women. The preference that some Japanese women have for foreign men in locales like Japan only reaffirms the Orientalist discourse of the feminized Japanese male. The foreign man becomes the epitome of masculinity in contrast to the "shortcomings" of the Japanese male, "The foreigner becomes a reflexive symbol in an indirect discourse of complaint... [W]omen have appropriated the *gaijin* [foreign] males as reflexive symbols by which they construct an image of Japanese man as they are, and as they wish them to be" (Kelsky:184). Perhaps the most poignant example of the intersection of race and gender in Roppongi is the manner in which clubs owners solicit business. While completing

fieldwork on a Saturday evening in Roppongi, I was handed a promotional ticket for club Vanilla. With the ticket, all Japanese women and foreigners, male or female, were admitted for only 1,000 yen (around ten American dollars). All others (Japanese men) were admitted at the normal rate of 4,000 yen (around forty American dollars). Although not explicit on the ticket, it was clear that the only group denied the discount were Japanese men.

If Japanese males have been feminized, association with hip-hop and Blackness is a manner for Japanese males to reclaim masculinity. Nina Cornyetz (1994:125) explains the relationship of Blackness to masculinity, "In Japan, Black skin is both metonymy and metaphor, mimicry and menace, not as an appendix to the lacking other but as reconfiguration of the lacking self in the empowered, masculinized image of the other." . If the hip-hop (Black) male is violent, aggressive, and hypersexual, aligning oneself with the style of hip-hop allow one to construct an identity in relation to hypermasculinity.

During my fieldwork there were occasions when Japanese males would not only adorn themselves in hip-hop fashion, but associate with Blacks as well. In particular, one incident at a reggae festival in Yoyogi Park speaks to the manner in which Blackness is held up as ultimate in male sexuality. A Japanese man appearing to be in his lower twenties attended the reggae festival with a Black man of similar age. Both were dressed head to toe in hip-hop/reggae style of baggy shirts, blue jeans and caps cocked to the side. Enjoying the live music, both began to dance, and shortly thereafter, two Japanese women approached them. Like the men, they sported hip-hop/reggae fashion, but these women also had darkened skin and corn rows. While both of the men were capable dancers, the women simultaneously danced with the Black man ignoring the Japanese

man. Although the Japanese man has appropriated aspects of Blackness that represent masculinity, Japanese women do still not recognize his masculinity.

While for men, association with Blackness is a means to assert masculinity, hip-hop inspired Japanese women see the Black male as the ultimate in phallic prowess and masculinity (Cornyetz 1994). If contemporary notions of Blackness came to Japan through commoditized stereotypes of Blackness in hip-hop, Black people themselves have become a commodity in which Japanese women can own, "it was the latest fad [Japanese women dating Black men], akin to the latest pocketbook or other fashion accessory" (Cornyetz 1994:129).

The relationship and interactions between Blackness and masculinity is most evident at Japanese dance clubs. While performing research on the hip-hop floor of Vanilla, the preciseness in which many Japanese males had appropriated American hip-hop style and culture astonished me. Their level of knowledge of American hip-hop was so acute that depending upon the type of song played their dance styles would change appropriately. For example, when a west coast song would come on, these individuals would begin to Crip Walk, a type of dance associated with street gangs in Los Angeles and Los Angeles hip-hop culture. If a southern hip-hop song was played, the Japanese males would begin to snap dance, which is the style of dance appropriate for the song. In addition to sensitive knowledge of the sub genres of mainstream American hip-hop, this group of Japanese males' wore hip-hop clothing that that exhibited acute knowledge of fashion. Labels were left on fitted caps as contemporary hip-hop fashion mandates. For those wearing Polo shirts, collars were popped, and in the dark, their immaculate Air Force Ones stood out. Even if these men only appreciate hip-hop in its American

mainstream incarnation and its fashion, the level to which it is appreciated is anything but superficial. However, while they performed aspects of hip-hop, and subsequently Blackness very well, it was only a performance, as their non-interaction with hip-hop inspired Japanese women illustrated. Japanese women paid these men no attention, instead choosing to interact with "genuine" Blacks.

Although few in numbers, the Black males who were in the club could not be missed, as they consistently received attention from hip-hop styled Japanese women. Although these men were Black, it should be noted that they were not African-American, but African. To the Japanese club goers, these individuals likely appear as authentic representations of hip-hop culture, but in fact, both groups are non-native to "authentic" American hip-hop culture. Ironically, it was the African males whom I observed this particular night who appeared to have the least awareness of hip-hop style and culture. One that stood out the most was a man who wore former football and baseball star, Bo Jackson's jersey. Although this would be acceptable in hip-hop fashion if it were a retro jersey, or a throwback, as it is known in hip-hop culture, where an older jersey is redesigned and stylized for fashion, this individual simply wore the plain jersey. In addition to the jersey, various aspects of his hip-hop style and fashion including elaborate tennis shoes that featured a spinning medallion were misappropriated. Especially when considering this individual in relation to the group of aforementioned Japanese men, his awareness of hip-hop knowledge and style was lacking. Although his performance was shaky at best, it does not matter, as to the club goers, the Black male, even though not African-American, was the authentic representation of hip-hop. Women with tanned skin and elaborate Black hairstyles who had mastered hip-hop fashion to a much greater

degree than the African individual flocked to him for attention. As the women approached him, he rarely made an attempt to dance, and when he did, it came off quite awkwardly. Although the group of Japanese men has performed hip-hop to a better degree than the African individual, they still have not achieved masculinity in the eyes of the Japanese women who affiliate with hip-hop.

While I have focused on the appropriation of hip-hop style and Blackness as an attempt to assert masculinity for Japanese males, perhaps the clearest example of the effect of hip-hop images is in relation to hip-hop enthusiastic Japanese women. Although male Japanese hip-hoppers are clearly influenced by elements of the Black American hip-hop image, it is the women who fit directly into the mold of the hip-hop woman as portrayed in images like the ones described in the preceding section. While the Japanese women see the aforementioned African male in terms of a hypersexual masculine object, in their interactions with him, they seem to reduce themselves to sexualized female objects. In watching multiple women dance in extremely sexually provocative ways with the at times seemingly uninterested African male, I was reminded of the rap videos that bombard the airwaves of BET and MTV on a daily basis. In those videos, women are there simply to be looked at as sexual objects and nothing more. Similarly, in hip-hop posters that grace the walls of Shibuya, it is the near naked, nameless women who are ornaments to the hypermasculine Black male. For those who see these images, the Black male rappers become models for Japanese men to imitate. Likewise, the women in these images become the template for Japanese women who wish to associate with hip-hop. On one level, the women described above have only reduced themselves to objects for

the African male's enjoyment, but on the other hand, their actions can be seen in a subversive light as well.

In consideration of the strict dress codes at many Japanese high schools in which clothing and hairstyles are strictly regulated (Field 1995:58), the adoption of Black physical characteristics such as dark skin and braids is blatantly subversive to mainstream standards of appearance for young Japanese women. Along with Black physical characteristics, through hip-hop inspired clothing, which for women is usually tight fitting and revealing, young Japanese women explicitly deviate from societal expectations. Hip-hop has even influenced the body language many of the young women who subscribe to the culture, as in stark contrast to expected upright posture, the more relaxed and at times sexually suggestive body language of women in American hip-hop videos is emulated, particularly in hip-hop clubs. But more so than simply passive resistance, in adopting such characteristics, young Japanese women reject societal expectation for them as passive agents in interactions with males.

Though I do not contend that Japanese women are able to completely reverse existing gender hierarchies in their interactions with Blackness and hip-hop culture, I do argue that through the recontextualization of perceived hip-hop and Black culture, they are able to assert greater amounts of sexual agency. While it is difficult to make an argument that images of sexually submissive women are empowering for women in the United States, this is not necessarily the case when recontextualized by young women in Japan. For example, in the aforementioned example of the African man at Vanilla, it was the Japanese women who initiated all of their interactions. Contrary to the hypersexual stereotypes that are assigned to him as a Black male, it was the African man who

appeared awkward and uncomfortable with the more confident Japanese women. I submit that the Japanese appropriation of hip-hop and Black culture make these sorts of interactions possible. For these Japanese women, association with hip-hop and Black culture can be seen as empowering as it allows a space for the expression of a more explicitly sexual identity that otherwise would likely be impossible. But perhaps more importantly, in openly expressing sexual desire for the Black male, Japanese women not only reject potential Japanese male partners, but expected standards of interaction between man and woman as dictated by Japanese society that limit the agency of women.

It should be mentioned that while rare, I did notice Japanese men with Black women. While this is an area that deserves significant discussion, as it completely subverts the feminized Japanese male stereotype, the prevailing dynamics of Blackness and sexuality in Japan are centralized on Japanese male imitation of Blackness and Japanese female desire of Blackness. These dynamics are most easily seen in the hip-hop clubs of Roppongi. Here is the most interaction between African-American males, and Japanese hip-hop enthusiasts, male and female alike. On Saturday nights, Roppongi is a popular destination for many American servicemen stationed near Tokyo, and hip-hop clubs in this neighborhood are a common destination of African-American servicemen. Each night that I conducted fieldwork in a popular Roppongi club called Gaspanic, Japanese women with darkened skin and adorned in hip-hop fashion sought the attention of the various Black servicemen, who often sport their "native" hip-hop fashions. Whereas the Japanese men who attend this club are performing the masculine images of hip-hop, it should be noted that the African-Americans are performing as well to assert their status as the pinnacle of masculinity. These performances occurred in such a

manner that every trip that I made to Gaspanic, before morning, there was a fight involving either Black servicemen or hip-hop inspired Japanese males. In both cases, they are playing out the roles of the hip-hop, hypermasculine, violent male. Usually, the fights are over the attention of a Japanese woman, which highlights the extent to which Black males are objects to be coveted. Likewise, in performing masculinity, the African-American men objectify the Japanese women as commodities to be owned as well. At Gaspanic, gender specific roles of hip-hop are played out on a regular basis. Males strive to emulate the caricature of Blackness in hip-hop, while women assert sexual agency albeit as objects for male enjoyment. Although the extent of violence and performance at Gaspanic are not at all representative of the entire Tokyo hip-hop community, it illustrates the manner in which images of hip-hop and Blackness shape the behavior of some Japanese who associate with hip-hop culture.

In this chapter I have examined the appropriation of hip-hop in terms of Blackness, and its affect on some Japanese youth who associate with hip-hop, but the extent to which hip-hop has become a part of Japanese youth culture is by no means limited to performances and recontextualizations of Blackness in and of itself. In the next chapter, I will focus on the manner in which Japanese youth utilize hip-hop explicitly as a subversive tool.

CHAPTER 4
Subversion through Culture

A Chance Encounter

Through the first two months of my fieldwork, I had seen many examples of Japanese youth association with hip-hop, but most seemed to be intertwined with an affinity for Blackness that overshadowed an interest in the actual music or culture. Although I was certain that there were Japanese hip-hop enthusiasts that enjoyed and participated in the culture beyond the more superficial aspects of (perceived) Black fashion and style, I had yet to come across many cases. On some level, I had become disappointed that despite claims from various scholars and culture critics that international hip-hop is more representative of hip-hop's original values than the American version, I was unable to find more than a handful of people who knew of anything beyond the latest releases from countries on both sides of the Pacific. In my informal interviews, subjects would constantly refer to mainstream giants 50 Cent or Eminem. Although claiming to have affinity for hip-hop music of Black culture, these individuals knew nothing of hip-hop's subversive origins-or so I initially thought.

On a stifling hot day in late May, I traveled to Shibuya to observe and conduct research on the second floor of Manhattan Records. Due to its extensive collection of vinyl recordings, I figured that this was an excellent location to meet individuals who took an interest in hip-hop culture beyond fashion, as consumption of vinyl separates true hip-hop enthusiasts, or b-boys/girls, from the run of the mill hip-hop fan. Intent on finding a Japanese b-boy/girl, I achieved my goal without stepping a single foot into Manhattan Records. About fifty feet from Manhattan Record's entrance, I noticed a man dressed in black baggy jeans, a baggy black t-shirt with a wet t-shirt wrapped around his

head to provide respite from the heat. He stood next to a fence with a boom box in his left hand and a bundle of CD's in his right. As I approached him, I noticed the beads of sweat that were dripping down his face. Undoubtedly, he had been standing there for hours. Now ten feet away, his purpose for enduring the oppressive humidity became clear. The CD's in his right hand were his life's work and product, and the sounds from the boom box in his left were the product's sample. In stark contrast to the impressive Manhattan Records only a few feet away, this individual's efforts seemed futile. Countless droves of Japanese hip-hop consumers entered Manhattan Records after walking past the individual without giving him a second glance. Almost mockingly, whenever the doors to Manhattan Records would open, the sounds from its booming speakers would temporally drown out the CD selling man's meager boom box.

Initially, I felt sorry for this individual, as his plight was a pitiful sight to behold. Seemingly exhausted and exasperated from his hours in the heat without selling many CD's, I began to ponder his motivations. And then it hit me. Looking at this individual, I was reminded of the stories that have become hip-hop legend, when before its mainstream success, artists would sell tapes out of the trunks of their cars because music industry executives felt that hip-hop music did not have a place in the American or global musical landscape. Through the efforts of these artist/entrepreneurs, thirty years later, it is laughable how wrong those executives were. Although an ocean away and decades removed, this individual was fighting the same fight: his independent underground enterprises versus the mainstream juggernaut that had become global hip-hop. Even visually, this individual stood in defiance of the mainstream version of hip-hop represented by Manhattan Records. I decided at that point, this individual's perspective

would be essential to my research. Stopping to chat with this CD selling man, I found his name was Yen Yen (who is introduced in chapter 3). Through our conversations, the intersection of hip-hop, Blackness, and subversive culture in Japan took on a new light.

Transnational Subversion

About a week after our initial meeting, I set up a formal interview with Yen Yen. In addition to getting his general take on the nature of Japanese hip-hop, I wanted to touch on a few specific topics. First, I wanted to find out his insights on how Japanese hip-hop relates to American hip-hop. Is it a spin-off or an entirely independent entity? How does he view Japanese hip-hop? Yen Yen provided thoughtful responses to all of these questions, but I primarily wanted to focus the interview on his perceptions of Blackness as it relates to hip-hop culture. By the time I interviewed Yen Yen, I had developed a bias that for the Japanese, hip-hop fandom is synonymous with "Black culture" fandom. Although a simplistic analysis, for someone not immersed in Japanese youth, popular music or hip-hop culture, it is not such an outlandish conclusion. After all, a component of Japanese hip-hop fandom is the appropriation of Black physical features. Even in the consumption of hip-hop music, its relationship to Blackness is overtly evident; if you want to buy an American hip-hop CD in a Tokyo music store, you are to go to the "Black Music" section which also houses contemporary American R&B and soul selections (see Figure 2). It was clear that the Japanese interest in hip-hop is intimately related to Blackness, but important questions remained. For the Japanese b-boy/girl, was their knowledge of the African-American experience limited to what is conveyed in the images of Black hip-hop artists found in locales like Shibuya? For the

casual Japanese hip-hop fan, to an extent, this is to be expected, but is this perception the same for those who make hip-hop culture their livelihood?

Figure 2: *Black Music Section*. Photo by the author.

These questions are of importance, as despite its global nature and current form, hip-hop culture is rooted in the experience of Black Americans. Of course, for an individual to participate in hip-hop culture and not be aware of this dynamic is a reality of the current global hip-hop scene. Even in America, although hip-hop is seen as a "Black thing," there are many who casually enjoy hip-hop without regard to its history. However, in consideration of the manner in which Japan consumes hip-hop culture, it would be troubling if the Black experience was divorced from hip-hop. Everything about hip-hop in consumption in Japan explicitly indicates Black, from fashion and style to its

genre label at CD stores. In Japan, is hip-hop's relationship to Blackness only for grossly stereotypical aesthetic or labeling purposes, or was there something going on that doesn't initially meet the eye?

These were questions that I could not directly pose to Yen Yen due to various factors including my own bias in the questions as well as difficulty in communication. Although Yen Yen's English was better than my Japanese, it would be difficult for sophisticated concepts to be conveyed on both sides. To overcome these difficulties, I devised an interviewing strategy that would indirectly get at the issues my questions addressed. First, I wrote down characteristics on index cards and placed them on the table. The characteristics were cool (*kakkoii)*, talent for music (*gakusai)*, stupid (*baka)*, intelligent (*atama ga ii)*, artistic (*geijyutsuteki)*, nice (*shinsetsu)*, socially conscious person (*syakaishikijin*), dangerous character (*kikenjinnbutsu*), frightening (*kowai)*, creative (*kurieiteibu)*, aggressive (*aguresshibu*), and phony (*mayakashi)*. I would then say the name of an African-American hip-hop artist and ask Yen Yen to choose all of the characteristics that represent the artist. Yen Yen also had the freedom to introduce any characteristics that he deemed appropriate by writing them on blank index cards as well. The three artists that I chose were Kanye West, Jay-Z and 50 Cent. Each of these artists has a distinct identity; Kanye West is seen as more of a socially conscious rapper than the others, while Jay-Z offers a mixture of street culture and business savvy in his lyrics and persona. Contrastingly, 50 Cent is known almost exclusively as a gangster rapper. Although I did not want the interview to focus on these artists, I hoped that through discussion of their identities as African-American rappers, it would open up conversation on his perceptions of Blackness and subsequently the African-American experience.

Almost immediately my questions were answered when I asked Yen Yen to choose characteristics that define Kanye West. The first card that Yen Yen chose was "dangerous character." Immediately, my heart sank as this was a card that I expected Yen Yen to select for gangster rapper 50 Cent whose lyrics are filled with violence. Even choosing this card for Jay-Z would have been predictable as he does his fair share of gangster posturing, but to choose "dangerous character" for Kanye West was something that I did not expect at all. Before Yen Yen could finish selecting other cards, I questioned him on the selection asking if he was sure about it. Yen Yen calmly confirmed his selection. Sensing my concern, Yen Yen proceeded to explain his choice:

> He's going to take Black culture and take over, man. He's going to take over, trying to be the president. That's a very, very dangerous person to the white man. He makes the songs like fuck Bush, but then gets the Pepsi commercial with him and that song. That's crazy, because he has a lot of power.

Needless to say, Yen Yen's reasoning shocked me. He had more than exceeded my expectations, as this early in the interview, I was only looking to see if his concept of Blackness was monolithic. To my surprise, not only was Yen Yen cognizant of the nuanced differences between the three artists, but was acutely aware of African-American issues as well as the manner in which hip-hop music is used as a vehicle to advance social causes. Yen Yen went on to discuss his introduction to hip-hop music through American rapper Nas, who is often associated with socially conscious and Afrocentric lyrics. Upon hearing one of Nas' CD's, Yen Yen discussed its affect on him, "First time I didn't know what he was talking about, but then [I realized] that he was talking about some real work. He's talking not about the violence. He's got the knowledge, and I feel Nas." As the aforementioned comments indicate, throughout the conversation, Yen Yen's awareness of hip-hop history and its sociopolitical undertones was more than

evident, but how did this translate to Japanese hip-hop culture? Does Yen Yen utilize his brand of hip-hop in sociopolitical or subversive light?

Although Yen Yen did not directly address these questions, much could be understood simply in reading between the lines of his comments. For example, Yen Yen repeatedly distinguished himself as an underground and independent artist. Particularly he explained that he had the opportunity to work with mainstream labels, but chose not to. Citing the experiences of his friends who worked with the music industry only to lose creative control of their work, he pursues a career not only as an artist, but an entrepreneur as well. His reasons for being an independent artist parallel the reasons that many aspiring American hip-hop artists choose to do the same thing. This type of sentiment is subversive in and of itself as it is in opposition of the capitalistic stronghold on the music industry, but in the context of Japanese society, Yen Yen's career decision is subversive in other ways as well. By not adhering to societal expectations of college education followed by corporate tenure, Yen Yen and others like him are redefining what lifestyles are acceptable as a Japanese adult.

Gordon Mathews (2004) discusses the *furiitaa* phenomenon in Japan in which capable young adults do not seek permanent employment, but rather perpetual movement amongst temporary positions. Although there is considerable debate as to why increasing numbers of Japanese youth do not seek traditional employment, its opposition to societal protocol is unmistakable. Through his research Mathews concluded that, "No longer was the Japanese societal lockstep- of husband at work, married to his company, wife at home to raise children to become future workers and mothers- necessary to follow" (2004:31). Increasingly, Japanese youth are turning to alternative lifestyles. Although Yen Yen does

not necessarily fall under the category of *furiitaa,* his career choice is similarly subversive. Yen Yen views hip-hop culture as means to express and assert his unique identity, which would be impossible if he were to follow the path of tertiary education and "lifetime employment" set forth by Japanese society. In this sense, Japanese hip-hop culture functions similarly to its origins in Bronx, New York as a vehicle for subversive culture. To make hip-hop one's life work in Japan means to forego an opportunity to ever be seen as a "normal" member of Japanese society. Conscious of this, Yen Yen and others like him have recontextualized hip-hop to Japanese society as an expression of defiance. Perhaps more interestingly, many Japanese hip-hop artists have incorporated subversive elements in their music.

Rebellion through Culture

In her examination of the Japanese education system, Norma Field (1995) equates the rigor and intensity of Japanese schooling to the pressure put on child sports prodigies, in which the experience of childhood and adolescence is sacrificed for success. Field explains that in the case of sports prodigies, success means an Olympic medal or professional contract, but for Japanese youth, the ultimate prize is entrance to the best schools and subsequently the best jobs in the eyes of Japanese society. Specifically, Field details the long days that Japanese youth must endure simply to stay on pace, packing in full school days with cram school, private lesson as well as homework. In addition to the demands of schoolwork, Field explores the obstacles that many Japanese students face outside of their curricular expectations, particularly in the form of bullying as certain students are subject to bullying from not only their peers, but from teachers and

administrators as well. Focusing on a 1990 incident in which a junior high school girl was crushed to death by a teacher closing a gate to prevent tardy students from entering school grounds, Field presents us with the opinions of her school aged subjects. Their comments reflect the oppressive nature of Japanese education, as one student likened school to a "Robot factory or a concentration camp" (1995:57) while another simply stated that "School is a scary place" (1995, 57). The majority of the pressure that Japanese students face in their educational experience is intimately related not only to their future success, but the acquisition of adult status as well, "For virtually every Japanese born after World War II, twelve years of formal education have become the link between home and work, childhood and adulthood" (Kelly 2002:40). In other words, to deviate from the prescribed path of education and company employment is to forsake one's status as an adult.

Although the Japanese education and employment systems continue to dictate the lives of millions of Japanese, an increasing number of youth have begun to deviate from such paths. Specifically, the proliferations of young adults who fall under the categories of NEET, an acronym which describes young adults who are not in education, employment or training as well as *furiitaa* have been the source of controversy in contemporary Japanese society. While there is debate as to why the numbers of young Japanese who fall under these categories have increased, some scholars argue that "[S]ocial structure [as well as] the working conditions in Japanese firms may have a serious influence on the increasing number of NEETs" (Genda 1995:). While some youth are able to maneuver the obstacles that Japanese education brings only to face difficulty upon their job search, others are not that lucky. Although the Japanese

education system is advertised as meritocratic, the system refuses to "acknowledge class, race, gender, and other forms of inequity" (Field 1995:54). Those who are unable to achieve success in education are marginalized from jobs that are deemed desirable to the Japanese imagination and are relegated to alternative lifestyles as "[B]oth *freeters* [*furiitaa*] and NEETs are more likely to be found among those who are less educated" (Kosugi 2005:6).

Oppressive educational experiences and bleak career outlooks are the reality for many Japanese youth, but through hip-hop culture, many are beginning to articulate voices in opposition to these conditions. If hip-hop provided a vehicle youth of color in the Bronx in the 1970's, the same can be said of many Japanese hip-hop artists today. The simplest method in which to assert a subversive identity is through dedication to the culture as in the case with Yen Yen. Although Yen Yen completed high school, he did not choose to enter further education as he had already decided that a corporate lifestyle was not for him. As a result of conscious decisions like Yen Yen's to deviate from societal expectations, there is hope for change, "If the postwar social contract has been shaped and sustained by the conditioned and conditioning participation of the population, this same population can effect systematic change" (Kelly 2002:236). As Japanese hip-hop's popularity increases, so does its potential to induce change. In this sense, Japanese hip-hop keeps alive the original undertones of hip-hop culture that were cultivated in the United States more than thirty years ago.

Hip-hop culture allows one to craft subversive messages in various mediums, but perhaps the most direct is through lyricism. Like early American political groups such as NWA and Public Enemy, as well as contemporary acts including Dead Prez and The

Coup, some Japanese hip-hop artists choose to express themselves through their lyrics. The topics that Japanese hip-hop artists touch upon are broad, including World War II military atrocities, issues of racism, and even criticisms of the United States government and its involvement in the Iraq War (Condry 2006), but perhaps the most ubiquitous subject is the environment that Japanese youth face in educational institutions and subsequently the corporate world. In "*Shinjitsu no Dangan* (Bullet of Truth)," Zeebra of King Giddra, who is recognized as the father of Japanese hip-hop raps (translation follows),

> *Daigaku dereba ii syuusyoku*
> *Asahan mae ni kutta yuusyoku mae ni kutta cyuusyoku kurai no mono*
> *Kyouiku mama yurai no sono ani na kangae angai*
> *Kawatte kiterun jynai*
> *Tada sore damatte miterun jynai*
> *Kotoshi no daisotsu nokyou cyousya kimaranu yatsu no oosa sousa yonbun no ichi ga mada*
> *Maji, hanahada okashikutte hanashi ni naranainda tada*
>
> *You graduated from college and you get a good job*
> *It's the easiest thing in the world, completed even before eating breakfast*
> *It's that simplistic thinking that causes education mamas*
> *But things aren't changing, aren't they*
> *And you're just shutting up, and watching it happen*
> *This year's survey of college grads employment says that almost a quarter of them still have no job*
> *Seriously, that makes it nothing more than empty talk* (Blues Interaction/P-Vine, 1995).[3]

Here, Zeebra verbally admonishes Japan's education and corporate employment systems as well as those who easily fall into the established Japanese lifestyle. Not only does Zeebra point out what he believes are social ills, but through criticism, urges his listeners to resist as well. While some Japanese hip-hop artists attack aspects of Japanese society through lyricism, for others, hip-hop is the only viable option in a world dictated by strict rules and standards.

[3] Lyrics as well as translation taken from Dr. Ian Condry's website http://web.mit.edu/condry.

Ironically, one of the most popular artists in the Japanese hip-hop scene today is not ethically Japanese. Verbal, one half of top selling group M-Flo and member of hip-hop super group Teriyaki Boyz, was born Ryu Yong Gi in Tokyo to Korean parents. While many Japanese utilize hip-hop culture as a type of passive resistance, Verbal explains his relationship to hip-hop culture in different terms, "I got into hip-hop because being Korean I knew that I wasn't going to get a job" (personal communication). Verbal's comments are particularly salient in consideration of the manner in which hip-hop culture blossomed out of the marginalized communities of the South Bronx. As Yasunori Fukuoka (2000) explains in her comprehensive study of the experience of Koreans living in Japan, "[T]he great majority of them [Koreans in Japan] have, in fact, experienced suffering and conflict" (Fukuoka 2000:43). Verbal's comments on his and other Korean's inability to find significant employment in Japan echoes Fukuoka's research and analysis as she documents many cases where her subjects are unable to find work due to their ethnicity. In this sense, parallels can be drawn between the experiences of Koreans in Japan and of Blacks in the United States, particularly for those who pioneered hip-hop culture. While I do not wish to focus on this relationship, it is important to note that this is an example through which hip-hop culture has become a universal symbol of resistance. For those who do not wish to associate with or are marginalized from mainstream lifestyles, hip-hop culture is an alternative.

The use of hip-hop culture for the purposes of resistance takes various forms in Japan. We have seen examples in which association with hip-hop takes the form of passive resistance through the appropriation of hip-hop fashion, style as well as Blackness. Meanwhile, some utilize hip-hop culture as a venue to stray from societal

norms, through the pursuit of alternative lifestyles in order to support careers as hip-hop artists. Still, others take a more direct route, particularly through hip-hop lyrics, in subverting mainstream Japanese society. Regardless of the manner in which those who produce hip-hop culture interact with its subversive manifestations, it is clear that hip-hop culture in Japan is much more than simply a passing trend or fad.

Defiance through Casual Consumption

To this point in this chapter, I have focused on Japanese hip-hop culture producers and their relationship to the culture's subversive nature, but for the casual hip-hop consumer in Japan, what does hip-hop mean? Certainly, the population of Japanese who consume hip-hop is not limited to those who darken their skin and hit the hip-hop club scenes on a weekly basis or the b-boys/girls found at Shibuya hip-hop specialty stores. In casually observing Tokyo music stores, the majority of customers of the hip-hop or "Black Music" sections are clearly discernable as hip-hop culture adherents, but there are also those in attire ranging from standard blue jeans and a t-shirt to business suits browsing and even purchasing the latest American releases from the likes of 50 Cent and Jay-Z. For these individuals, is their affinity for hip-hop music, particularly of the American variety, a simple reflection of aesthetic taste? On the surface, this appears to be the most likely explanation as despite the deviant perception of hip-hop in Japan, hip-hop music permeates aspects of Japanese society that are yet to be socially acceptable even in the United States. For example, in many Tokyo department and boutique stores, the background music is often unedited American hip-hop. For the American visitor, it is a disorienting feeling to hear violent, misogynistic lyrics spewing from the speakers

while shopping for undershirts, but for the Japanese customers, it is as natural as the sounds of Kenny G coming from the speakers of Macy's in suburban America.

Of course, the more lenient view on violent hip-hop music in Japanese public areas is explained by the fact the lyrics are likely indecipherable by the customers, yet the prevalence of hip-hop music in these spaces indicates that there is potentially a wider population of hip-hop consumers than can be identified through physical markers such as the appropriation of hip-hop or Black cultural style and fashion. When considered in this light, even the assumption that all Japanese hip-hop enthusiasts are young people who spend their days in Shibuya and their nights at clubs must be reexamined. I was able to receive some insights to these issues through an interview with a twenty-six year old Japanese female accountant named Megumi (pseudonym). While we cannot take her story as representative of every hip-hop consumer who does not fit the mold of the Shibuya b-boy/girl, Megumi is an example of the various identities that hip-hop culture allows its consumers to construct.

I became interested in interviewing Megumi for the purposes of this project while giving her English instruction. To earn extra money during my stay in Tokyo, I taught English part time at her place of employment. During one lesson in which I was telling her about my project, she said to me, "You're not dirty like Kanye West." This was a surprising comment to me on multiple levels. Primarily, I was amazed that she was able to make such a loaded comment without any hesitation. However, because of this candidness, I knew that she would be willing to answer any of my racially charged questions in relation to hip-hop without feeling uncomfortable. Secondly, I was surprised that she knew of Kanye West. As a Japanese white collar worker, I assumed that she

would be too far removed from youth subculture to have any idea who Kanye West is. Lastly, I was surprised that she believes that Kanye West is dirty. Her statement is ironic because Kanye West is generally thought of as a thoughtful, intelligent, clean-cut, and a positive individual relative to other mainstream American rappers. Megumi's ignorance to this implies one of two things: (1) because she does not live in America, her knowledge of American hip-hop personalities is unreliable, therefore when characterizing Kanye West as dirty, she simply was not aware of his characteristics or mixed up his characteristics up with another rapper, or (2) Megumi thinks that the majority of Black people are dirty and simply picked out Kanye West as a representative for Black people to contrast me with. The one thing that was not surprising about Megumi's comments was that she could not see me as anything other than in the context of a Black person. This highlights the extent to which despite the growing Japanese hip-hop scene, for the casual consumer of hip-hop, it is seen unequivocally as Black culture; only a few weeks earlier, like the vast majority of people I spoke with, she dismissed Japanese hip-hop as merely imitation of the American version.

A few weeks after her initial comment, I interviewed Megumi in order to gain a better idea of how the Japanese individual who does not outwardly associate with Blackness feel about Black people. Similar to my interview protocol with Yen Yen, I began by laying out ten cards, each with a characteristic on it. This time the characteristics were intelligent, cool, respectable, sexy, aggressive, nice, talented, role model, scary, and stupid (Megumi was virtually fluent in English rendering Japanese translations unnecessary). Her task was to choose the characteristics that she ascribes to Black people. Like with Yen Yen, she was told that if there were characteristics she

could come up with that weren't represented by the cards to feel free to write them down on blank cards that I placed on the table as well. After a few seconds of hesitation, Megumi said, "there are people like you (me) and there are people who are ghetto." Here, two things are significant. First, she is aware of the term "ghetto" and knows how to use the word in context. For those who have grown up with hip-hop culture, the meaning of "ghetto" has transcended its dictionary definition and become an adjective to describe the style, fashion, and behavior of Black Americans, specifically that which is displayed in the mainstream representation of hip-hop. While this definition of "ghetto" is embedded in vocabularies of many young Americans, its meaning has negative undertones. Like the mainstream images the word describes, it represents a monolithic version of Blackness to which all Blacks are expected to adhere. Although these perceptions of Blackness have their roots in the United States, the global proliferation of hip-hop allows people around the world to adopt stereotypes of Blacks as seen by Megumi's comments. With that said, to an extent, she does not group Black people all together, as she was able to see me outside of the "ghetto" stereotype.

To this point, Megumi had more or less ignored the cards that I had placed on the table, but she did choose "aggressive" as a characteristic of the Black people that she encountered during a summer stay in Pennsylvania in her teenage years. Ignoring the cards, she proceeded to offer her thoughts about the Black people that she met while in Pennsylvania saying that, "they like to have fun and enjoy life everyday." She also stated that "they do not study, but enjoy dancing and listening to music." After this statement, I pointed to the "stupid" card and asked if she feels that Black people are stupid. She calmly said no. After pausing, she said, "I want to be like them in a way. I

always worry about school, work or life." What is most revealing about the interview is that Megumi contrasts the lifestyle of the Blacks that she met in Pennsylvania with the lifestyle that she leads as a Japanese woman.

Hoping to connect her perception of Black people with her interest in hip-hop culture, I quickly constructed another characteristic game. This time, her task was to choose characteristics that she could ascribe to American hip-hop, but like in the first attempt at this interview method, Megumi largely ignored the cards. Instead, she began to explain her interest as purely aesthetic, citing that hip-hop is simply "cool." My attempts to elicit reasons as to why hip-hop is cool were initially unsuccessful, but eventually she offered a particularly significant comment, "Hip-hop stars represent the American Dream." Taking her statements a step further, she continued, "[hip-hop stars] have lots of money, popularity and everyone listens to them…I want to be like that." Without further prompting, Megumi continued her explanation stating that, "Black people started off with a sad background." Although general in her analysis, Megumi's comments indicate an awareness of the social experience of Black Americans that gave birth to hip-hop. Although this was likely the first time that Megumi had verbalized or even consciously thought of her interest in hip-hop music and culture in this manner, the function of hip-hop in her life became very clear to me. Struggling to synthesize the rest of her thoughts in English, I offered the phrase *shyakai ni hankousuru* (defiant to society) as a characteristic that she associates with hip-hop, to which she nodded in agreement. Megumi's final comments on this topic were that on a subconscious level her interest in hip-hop relates to its image as a rebellious culture.

For a young, white-collar professional Japanese woman, life can almost certainly not be described as without worry. Specifically, professional development is a constant uphill battle as even with equal levels of education, Japanese women rarely have the same career opportunities as their male counterparts. Moreover, even after obtaining desirable positions, many women find it difficult to advance at the same rate as men, if at all (Okano and Tsuchiya 1999:6-78). While these issues are specific to young professional women like Megumi, the average Japanese youth, male or female, faces many obstacles as well. Particularly, they are constantly under extreme pressure to perform in school and to conform to society; however, through identification with hip-hop, many Japanese are able to deviate from societal expectations. But as Megumi's comments illustrate, for some Japanese, it is hip-hop's intimate relationship with Blackness and the Black experience that are the source of its subversive elements as opposed to hip-hop culture in and of itself. This is evident in Megumi's characterization of Japanese hip-hop as "neither a culture nor creative." Although Japanese b-boys/girls have cultivated a hip-hop culture that keep hip-hop's original subversive nature in mind, it seems that for the causal hip-hop consumer, Japanese hip-hop is inconsequential. Though those like Megumi miss out on the Japanese movement, she is still touched by the global influence of hip-hop and Black culture.

For Megumi, interest in Blackness by means of hip-hop culture is medium for her to express a deviant identity against mainstream Japanese society, even if it is not expressed outwardly. While Megumi does not view Japanese hip-hop as real or authentic, her interaction with American hip-hop culture sheds light on the Japanese version. Like American, or "Black" hip-hop for Megumi, Japanese hip-hop is the space

in which not only youth, but young adults are able to explore and express identities in a society where such expression is discouraged. In other words, Megumi and others like her have recontextualized meanings associated with Blackness and hip-hop as a vehicle through which to consider and potentially change situations specific to them. More so than simply a fad or even a culture, for many, Japanese hip-hop is one of the few viable spaces in which deviant manifestations of self and group identity are possible. In this sense, Japanese hip-hop as well as the presence of American hip-hop culture in Japan reflects the global nature of hip-hop culture, to which Japan is becoming an increasingly integral component.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

On January 24, 2007, Yokohama based hip-hop super group the Teriyaki Boyz released the single "I Still Love H.E.R." which was produced by and features perhaps America's most prolific rapper, Kanye West. While this transnational collaboration was noteworthy in and of itself, in consideration of the song's intended meaning, its importance takes on new proportions. Namely, the title "I Still Love H.E.R." is a direct reference to American rapper Common's critically acclaimed 1994 single, "I Used to Love H.E.R." About the deteriorating state of mainstream hip-hop, Common uses a woman (H.E.R., which stands for "Hip-hop in its Essence and Real") as an extended metaphor for his relationship with hip-hop culture and music. Considered one of the greatest hip-hop recordings of all time,[4] this song was and continues to be a poignant reminder that in many ways, the mainstream version of American hip-hop bears little resemblance to its origins. In crafting a song titled "I Still Love H.E.R.," Kanye West and the Teriyaki Boyz explicitly pledge their allegiance to hip-hop culture in spite of its flaws. But more interestingly, Kanye West, a frequent collaborator with Common, *traveled to* Japan to make this statement. As this collaboration illustrates, Japan has not only found a place in the global hip-hop community, but has become a locale that is respected for adherence to hip-hop's roots.

Despite the increasingly transnational nature of hip-hop production as not only illustrated by Kanye West's work with the Teriyaki Boyz, but also hip-hop groups like Foreign Exchange, which comprises of American rapper Phonte and Dutch producer

[4] This has been asserted by multiple hip-hop media outlets, most notably *The Source* magazine's January 1998 issue which listed the one hundred greatest hip-hop tracks of all time.

Nicolay, discussions of international versions of hip-hop as inauthentic continue to rage on. Points of contention generally revolve around issues of authenticity, but as I hope my study has shown, we must not allow ourselves to fall victim to such hollow terms. While some American hip-hop enthusiasts are quick to throw criticisms of inauthenticity at international versions of hip-hop, rarely do people take a step back to consider what authenticity actually means.

For all intents and purpose, in pertinence to hip-hop culture, authenticity is synonymous with being Black. While this explanation seems straightforward enough, upon further inspection, its entire premise is faulty at best. What exactly does being Black mean? Is it an issue of skin color? If this were the case, the many Japanese who darken their skin are already taking steps in the right direction towards this abstract notion of authenticity. Is being Black about a certain type of style and fashion? This notion, of course, is absurd as Blackness cannot be defined monolithically. In this day and age, a Black teenager who wears college shirts and khakis is just as likely to be a hip-hop connoisseur as a Black youth of the same age in baggy jeans and a throwback jersey. If we were to ask those who attempt to make the social construction of race into a biological science, I would shudder at their definition of Blackness. But if we can't even define what being Black means, why is it that it is so easy for some to attach Blackness to authenticity in hip-hop culture?

I argue that it is unproductive to think of Blackness in the aforementioned terms, especially in pertinence to hip-hop culture. However, the issue of Blackness as it relates to hip-hop should not be ignored. While the distinction is subtle, it must be considered if we are to make sense of the global proliferation of hip-hop culture. The debate over

Black ownership of hip-hop culture does not directly relate to skin color, but rather shared sociocultural experience. What makes hip-hop culture truly unique among other (sub)cultures that have come to permeate popular culture are the circumstances in which it was born. The following anecdote illustrates this point: a few years ago, an anonymous poster on a hip-hop message board argued that Black people do not have a right to own hip-hop music/culture because white people created classical music, yet they do not claim ownership of that genre. While this poster's assertion that whites do not claim ownership of classical music is more than debatable, his/her comments are fallacious in a different and more significant manner. Hip-hop is perhaps the only genre of popular music that was not only born specifically out of systematically marginalized group of people, but speaks directly to the issues of that group of people as well.

It must be remembered that hip-hop does not refer to music, but more specifically, a culture, to which the music is a component. In its nascent form, the hip-hop movement took precedence over hip-hop *music*. To ignore the experience of Black Americans to which the essence of hip-hop is owed would be an irresponsible analysis. But this leaves us with the question of authenticity. If we accept that hip-hop's association with Blackness is not directly related to skin color, but rather shared experience, the problem of authenticity becomes more manageable. As I have explained in this paper, in the beginning, hip-hop culture was a vehicle through which marginalized peoples were able to express themselves at a time when there was no other venue for their voices to be heard. In many ways, the Japanese version of hip-hop is doing the same thing, only in a different context. For example, rather than overt racism, the issues that face many young Japanese are generational, as there is an increasing number of Japanese who choose to

deviate from the educational and career paths that are expected of them. While on the surface, the darkening of one's skin and the adoption of Black hairstyles appears to be purely aesthetic, in a Japanese context, it is a viable method through which to subvert their mainstream society.

While identification with and understanding of the experiences of those who created hip-hop culture and continue to carry it on in the United States is one thing, the consumption of their general physical attributes is another matter entirely. For most Black Americans, the darkening of one's skin to look Black touches a sensitive nerve as such practices in the United States are rooted in racism. However, it must be remembered that although not immune to Western constructions of racism, Japanese society does not have the same social or historical context as the United States. Specifically, overt racism against Blacks is something that can only be abstractly understood by the Japanese simply because they have had limited interactions, to say the least, with Blacks. Once we get past looking at this issue in American racial discourse, although not entirely unproblematic in consideration of the stereotypical images of Blackness from which they hold as a model, Japanese attempts to look more Black becomes more innocuous.

During an interview with a Black Jamaican-American, I asked if she was offended by images of Blackness and Jamaica that appear in popular media in Japan. To my surprise her response was, "No. It actually makes me kind of proud." When showing pictures of Japanese hip-hop enthusiasts to Black Americans, they are often shocked to see that so many Japanese physically assume Black characteristics. However, as one individual pointed out, "Why is it so shocking that someone would actually want to look

Black?" The answer this question lies in the fact that to much of the world, Black people have been seen as inferior, even subhuman for centuries. Only recently have these perceptions begun to change. In consideration of this, the global adoption of hip-hop and Black culture marks a significant change in a positive direction. In the case of Japan, where whiter skin has been traditionally associated with beauty, the adoption of Black characteristics simultaneously subverts Western as well as Japanese constructions of beauty (Kinsella 2005). Indirectly, the Japanese who choose to associate with hip-hop culture in this manner help redefine global perceptions of Blackness as something desirable as opposed to all of the negative qualities it has historically been associated with.

In recontextualizing Blackness and hip-hop, Japanese youth have offered a new model in which we can consider globalization. Whereas globalization has so often been equated with Americanization (Tomlinson 1999), hip-hop has not taken this path. Rather than adopting the American version of hip-hop, Japanese youth and many others throughout the world have successfully indigenized the culture to fit their specific situations. I submit that hip-hop is unique in that it is one of the few cultures that lends to indigenization and recontextualization on a global scale. After all, hip-hop is rooted in subversion of the very country the leads the project, arguably in a hegemonic nature, of globalization. Regardless of locale, hip-hop has been a vehicle through which to express resistance and defiance. That being said, it has still yet to reach its potential, but the proliferation of hip-hop culture in Japan and others like it is a step in the right direction. Perhaps Common needs not to look any further than Japan to find "Hip-hop in its Essence and Real."

REFERENCES

Appadurai, Arjun. “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks.* Ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006.

Chang, Jeff. *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-hop Generation.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005.

Condry, Ian. “The Social Production of Difference: Imitation and Authenticity in Japanese Rap Music.” *Transactions, Transgressions, Transformations: American Culture in Western Europe and Japan.* Ed. U. Poiger, H. Fehrenbach. New York: Berghan Books, 2000.

"A History of Japanese Hip-Hop: Street Dance, Club Scene, Pop Market." *Global Noise: Rap Outside the U.S.* Ed. Tony Mitchell. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalization. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006

Cornyetz, Nina. “Fetishized Blackness: Hip Hop and Racial Desire in Contemporary Japan” *Social Text,* no. 41 (Winter, 1994) pp. 113-119.

Dower, John. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II.* New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1999.

Field, Norma. “The Child as Laborer and Consumer: The Disappearance of Childhood in Contemporary Japan.” *Children and the Politics of Culture.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Fukuoka, Yasunori. *The Lives of Young Koreans in Japan.* Melbourne: Transpacific Press, 2002.

Genda, Yuji. "The 'NEET' Problem in Japan." *Social Science Japan,* no. 32. September 2005.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Gladney, Marvin J. "The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop." *African American Review,* Vol. 29, No. 2, Special Issues on The Music (Summer, 1995).

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. "The Message." *The Message.* Sugar Hill Records, 1992.

Kelly, William W. "At the Limits of New Middle-class Japan: Beyond 'Mainstream Consciousness.'" *Social Contracts Under Stress.* Ed. Olivier Zunz, Leonard Schoppa, and Nobuhiro Hiwatari. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002.

Kelsky, Karen. "Flirting with the Foreign: Interracial Sex in Japan's "International" Age. *Global/Local.* Ed. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

King Giddra. "Shinjutsu no Dangan." *Sora kara no Ryok.* Blues Interaction/P-Vine Recordings, 1995.

Kinsella, Sharon. "Black Faces, Witches, and Racism against Girls." *Bad Girls of Japan.* Ed. Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley. New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2005.

Kitwana, Bakari. *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture.* New York: Basic Civitas, 2002.

- -. *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Realities of Race in America.* New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005.

Kondo, Dorinne K. "M. Butterfly: Orientalism, Gender, and a Critique of Essentialist Identity." *Cultural Critique* No. 16 (Autumn, 1990), pp. 5-29.

Kosugi, Reiko. "The Problems of *Freeters* and "NEETs" under the Recovering Economy." *Social Science Japan,* no. 32. September 2005.

Levy, Claire. "Rap in Bulgaria: Between Fashion and Reality." *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA.* Ed. Tony Mitchell Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 2001.

Mathews, Gordon. "Seeking a Career, Finding a Job: How Young People Enter and Resist the Japanese World of Work." *Japan's Changing Generations: Are Young People Creating a New Society?* Ed. Gordon Mathews and Bruce White. London: Routledge Curzon, 2004.

Mitchell, Tony. "Another Root- Hip- Hop Outside the USA." *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA.* Ed. Tony Mitchell. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 2001.

Morelli, Sarah. "Who is a Dancing Hero? Rap, Hip-Hop, and Dance in Korean Popular Culture." *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA.* Ed. Tony Mitchell. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 2001.

Okano, Kaori and Mononori, Tsuchiya. *Education in Contemporary Japan.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Prévos, André JM. "Postcolonial Popular Music in France: Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture in the 1980's and 1990's." *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA.* Ed. Tony Mitchell. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 2001.

Public Enemy. "Party for your Right to Fight." *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back.* Def Jam Recordings, 1988.

Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America.* Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press: University Press of New England, 1994.

Rubin, Arnold. *Black Nanban : Africans in Japan during the Sixteenth Century.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974

Rudinlow, Joel. "Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* Vol. 52, No. 1, The Philosophy of Music (Winter, 1994), pp. 127-137.

Russell, John. "Race and Reflexivity: The Black Other in Contemporary Japanese Mass Culture." *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 1996.

Said, Edward. "Latent and Manifest Orientalism." *Orientalism: A Reader.* Ed. A.L. Macfie New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Schiller, Herbert I. "Not Yet the Post-Imperialist Era." *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks.* Ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006

Swedenburg, Ted. "Islamic Hip-Hop vs. Islamophobia: Aki Nawaz, Natach Atlas, Akhenton." *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA.* Ed. Tony Mitchell. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 2001.

Tomlinson, John. *Globalization of Culture.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Toop, David. *Rap Attack 2: African Rap to Global Hip-Hop.* London: Serpent's Tail, 1991.

Urla, Jacqueline. "We are All Malcolm X!: Negu Gorriak, Hip-Hop, and the Basque Political Imaginary." *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA.* Ed. Tony Mitchell. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 2001.

Watkins, S. Craig. *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2005.

Weiner, Michael. "The Invention of Identity: Race and Nation in Pre-war Japan." *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan.* Ed. Frank Dikotter. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997.

Wood, Joe. "The Yellow Negro." *Transition,* No. 73. (1997).