Traversing Racial Distance in Hip-hop Culture: The Ethics and Politics of Listening

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Abstract

Hip-hop is often studied as a 'political' culture. Listeners, however, often contest the attachment of a political nature to hip-hop. After the 'dilution' of "real" hip-hop by record labels seeking to package the sound for mainstream consumption, is it fair to say that hip-hop retains political relevance? To address this question I make two moves. In the first, I approach hip-hop from a perspective that moves beyond lyrics, seeking to understand what the music 'does' rather than what it represents. In the second, I take this approach to the study of race in hip-hop culture, examining how phenotypical variation affects the affordances and subject-positions available to a given body in hip-hop culture. In approaching hip-hop through the materiality of racial difference, I find that the "political" in hip-hop emerges in moments of creative and ethical experimentation in the face of alterity.

Keywords: hip-hop, race, materiality, ethics, responsibility

Hip-hop is a site of political experimentation, in which the legacies and persistence of racism and intolerance are critically approached. Early hip-hop deploys a form of "aesthetic violence" to capture an audience and attack racist institutions (Shusterman, 2005). Hip-hop is deeply rooted in the political struggles of black radicals in twentieth-century America; we can see the lasting influence of leaders including Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X on the lyrical content of the earliest hip-hop artists (Dyson, 1995; Collins, 2006; Forman, 2004; Daulatzai, 2012; Mohaiemen, 2008). Well into the 1990s, many rappers were often explicitly political, but even so called "gangsta" rappers touched on the subject: Tupac Shakur and Nas are two examples of highly successful and widely popular artists that effectively fused dense, political poetry with catchy sampling, beats, and production in the 1990s. The following quote from Frantz Fanon, himself an influence on the black radicals that inspired the hip-hop generation, provides a rendition of a kind of power that

prematurely articulates hip-hop's style:

> the dreams of the colonial subject are muscular dreams, dreams of action, dreams of aggressive vitality. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, and climbing. I dream I burst out laughing. I am leaping across a river and chased by a pack of cars that never catches up with me. During colonization the colonized subject frees himself night after night between nine in the evening and six in the morning (2004, 15).

Here, we might read muscular action as a political agency that escapes the grasp of colonial power. Hip-hop that exudes aggressive vitality is a work that deploys expression to strike violently at the affectivity and corporeality of the listener or reader in order to jerk them into a response. All the same, hip-hop folds aggression into a muscular practice that does not end in violence, but in creation. Hip-hop culture is made up of four practices: MCing (or rapping), DJing, dancing, and graffiti.[1] In each of these aspects, hip-hop uses aggressive vitality to challenge its listener to "live" hip-hop by contributing to its culture.

Studies of hip-hop expose how its culture opens a conversation around race, marginalisation, and privilege (Morgan, 2009: 48). At the same time, if we look at the lyrics of hip-hop tracks that enjoy significant radio play, such topics rarely come to light; they are the 'sanitised' products of 'mainstream dilution,' an unfortunate but 'familiar denouement to the story of most formerly subversive musical genres' (Dyson, 2004: 405). After this dilution, can we take seriously any claim that hip-hop culture '[continues] racial transformation fermented in the fear, faith, and juju magic of the black experience' (Nama, 2010: 18)? Despite being swallowed up by a mass media economy, does hip-hop maintain its political salience and provide a space to challenge the legacies of racism?

By examining a student group at a public university, I explored this tension through both interviews and observations of meetings, events, and performances that the group put on. The group I worked with is primarily responsible for hosting an annual hip-hop festival; however, members also debate, share, and rap together weekly in addition to organising open mic nights and short performances. A hardworking artist and scholar who found her intellectual passions through hip-hop led the team. The club was composed of fans of a spectrum of hip-hop styles. Some were fans of the most extravagant and notorious mainstream rappers while others were bookish types that listened to every canonical rapper and DJ since 1976 as if they were conducting independent research. On top of being students, the members of the group participated in all aspects of hip-hop culture: some were DJs that made tracks for the rappers in the group to rhyme over, others were dancers, graffiti artists and graphic designers. As I conducted ethnographic research on this student group I was struck by the broad spectrum of interest across almost all hip-hop's musical subgenres. While the "conscious" versus "mainstream" divide permeated many discussions and valorisations of hip-hop artists (where the former includes the kinds of political rap that we might associate with "old-school" hip-hop and the latter is framed by record labels, famous for misogyny and the glamorisation of guns, violence and parties), this binary played out differently in listening practices. Students asserted value for *both* conscious and

mainstream hip-hop, stepping across these boundaries depending on the moods and affects they wanted to experience (DeNora, 2000; Bull, 2000):

> When do I use Lil Wayne?…when [I'm] with friends and just like chilling out, having a few beers…if I'm just chilling in my room and I'm having a bad day or I need to wake up and I'm super tired or I need to study for a test, I listen to Lil Wayne just to make me smile.

The above is said by a student who is highly dedicated to presenting hip-hop to the university community as an educational and transformative art form. What is particularly clear here is that taste shifts depending on context and objectives:

> because we are in an academic setting we do want to promote things of academic value…so much of the community in the United States looks down towards hip-hop, we feel that as a club it is our job to show that hip-hop can empower people and hip-hop can [address] issues [that] are problems in [American] society.

Listeners *use* hip-hop to manage the sounds, memories, and vibes in the spaces through which they move (Anderson, 2004), folding hip-hop into everyday experiences. It is imperative to analyse how sound, technology, and 'other' bodies (Saldanha, 2007) affect the circulation of mood, vibe, atmosphere, and identities emerging in a given musico-cultural assemblage (Jazeel, 2005). The complexity of listening practices illustrates the importance of meeting the demand for hip-hop studies that go beyond 'hermeneutic strategies' such as analysis of lyrics to a more complex methodology to understand what music 'does' and what listeners do with it (Thompson and Biddle, 2013: 19). To address this question in my research, I turned my attention to how these students sensed and responded to the materiality of hip-hop culture. Below, I focus on one form of materiality that is often in question in the world of hip-hop: phenotype. Phenotype is involved in the framing of a body's "affordances" and power relations in hip-hop culture.[2] In tracing phenotype, I uncover an experimental practice framed around "responsibility" that takes on ethical, political, and creative overtones.

Racial distance in hip-hop

In unpacking the group's relations around race and phenotype, I was surprised to find that the racial composition of the group ran counter to what I had expected: I incorrectly assumed that this group, based at a public university in the San Francisco Bay Area, would enjoy participation from a large proportion of black students. While there were a few active black members, the majority of the club was from other ethnicities – Latinas, South and East Asians, whites, and international students. One of the black students I interviewed identified an interesting tension: he teased that the club was the 'hip-hop cultural appropriation' group. Putting aside for a moment that the comment was made half-jokingly, this is a salient point. The racial distance from the "norms" of hip-hop weigh in an interesting way on one of the key problems in hip-hop culture: the 'appropriation' of black art by privileged, mostly suburban whites who 'revel in the den of black iniquity' (Watkins, 2005: 97). While multiple ethnicities were

engaging with what is one of the most highly visible forms of black culture in the United States and perhaps globally, "appropriation" is an inadequate term to cope with the diversity of approaches to listening to hip-hop that I encountered (cf. Basu and Lemelle, 2006: 5-6).

In the rest of the paper, I will use the conceptual device of distance and proximity to unpack how hip-hop plays into two students' mediations of race and phenotype. I found that phenotype in hip-hop is mediated in different ways, dependent on particular imagined geographies that frame the potential for listening, reading, and responding (see Dittmer and Gray, 2010). These mediations are inflected by a consciousness of the privileges and exclusions implicated by phenotype (Saldanha, 2006 and 2010). While a variety of factors influence relationality between an individual listener and hip-hop works, one of my most interesting findings is that the form of hip-hop culture itself (possibly more so than its content) opens up interesting potentials for relating to racial difference and alterity in the public sphere.

Samuel and Owen

Proximity generates certain tensions between bodies assembled in hip-hop spaces. In an interview, Samuel, a rapper and black member of the group reflected on his experience going to hip-hop shows. He mentioned two gigs that he attended with very different artists performing. At an Iamsu! show (a rapper that works with a more mainstream and commercially viable sound), Samuel perceived an environment of appropriation in the midst of a predominantly white, suburban crowd of listeners. Conversely, Samuel felt entirely different when attending a gig where Common was performing (a well-known "conscious" rapper whose lyrics often address racism and black identity):

> These white kids that at the concerts…there's certain…when I went to the Iamsu! concert, and any hip-hop concert I've gone to, it's a bunch of white kids from the suburbs because that's who can afford to go to these concerts for the most part. When I went to the Iamsu! concert, it was a bunch of white kids over here you know, kinda no respect at all… all that "nigga, nigga, nigga" saying it with the song and it's like at that point he's saying it in the song; I don't know how I feel about you saying it next to me. [Laughing]. But if you go to a Common concert, and it's a bunch of white kids and they're all vibing – you hear me? – I'm passing the blunt to these dudes, [loud laughter] I'm like, "what's up, brah?"

For Samuel, proximity to white hip-hop fans invokes a bifurcating and ambiguous disposition. There is a kind of politics of 'vibe' into which we might read, considering the 'affective atmosphere' (Anderson, 2009) or 'economy' (Ahmed, 2004) at play in a given space and how it is inflected by race. For Samuel, conviviality in a concert atmosphere demands a kind of responsible listening on the part of his others. Proximity to audience members rapping along without thought given to content is experienced as abrasive. This kind of listening generates a bad vibe, it is (for him) a kind of appropriative mediation of hip-hop by white listeners. Thus, for Samuel, 'vibing' has as much to do with an appreciation of sound as it does with a demand on the other listener

(for better or worse) to have a respectful and ethical appreciation of hip-hop's roots. When I asked Samuel if it was more "okay" for black listeners to listen to commercially diluted, mainstream music and for white listeners to avoid that in favour of more conscious hip-hop, he hesitantly agreed. 'Black people already understand certain shit…to the rest of the world that doesn't understand it, the mainstream is perpetuating the stupidity.' Indeed he does not racialise it – it is not improper for whites to listen to the mainstream, but for Samuel, *understanding* where hip-hop comes from is a responsibility of listeners who come from a 'different' or distant life than those whose identities are 'represented' in hip-hop.

I want to turn very briefly now to a few conceptual sources to make sense of Samuel's demand. Denise Riley offers an interesting approach to thinking about a 'dynamic hearing', framing listening itself as a poetic act (2000, 66). Listening demands a kind of expression. Samuel's demand to those 'disrespectful' concert-goers renders them responsible for a poetic or creative listening based on an understanding of the struggles implicated in hip-hop culture, rooted in the experience of marginalised African-Americans. Paul Gilroy (1993: 78), drawing on an interview with author Toni Morrison, deploys the notion of 'call-and-response' as the bedrock of a black aesthetic; the idea is that the medium makes some form of demand on the listener. Both Riley and Morrison help us to conceptualise listening from an embodied perspective, positioning it as a practice of making oneself vulnerable to the demands of others. This 'dynamic hearing' might be figured in hip-hop culture as an opening of oneself, as a listener, to certain forms of 'aggressive vitality' and 'aesthetic violence'. Thus, hip-hop's aggressive vitality puts us in an 'affective disposition' in the face of its force (Levinas, 1996: 4, see also Critchley, 2008: 61-2). In a sense, this condition of sensibility is a relation in which we find ourselves 'held hostage' by the 'accusing presence' of alterity that puts in play a demand of responsibility (Dussel, 1999: 127-129), making 'subjectivity vulnerable, exposed to affection' (Sussin, 1999: 139). Our 'susceptibility to norms and violences that remain indifferent to us' is the 'source of our responsiveness and responsibility to others' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 105). Opening oneself to vulnerability is a key feature of participating in hip-hop culture. Entering into the community of hip-hop involves a responsibility to risk oneself: 'communication only takes place between two people who risk themselves, each lacerated and suspended' (Bataille, 1994: 20, quoted in Esposito, 2010: 122).

Owen could easily look like one of those disrespectful suburban white kids that give Samuel a bad vibe. But Common is Owen's favourite rapper. He started listening to Seattle underground hip-hop in high school while living in Northern California to escape a stifling suburbia:

> It seems unfair of me to say but living in that small town with
> affluence, everything was just close-minded and small and…hip-hop
> gave me that chance to feel that I was different, to get into [a] kind of
> consciousness…I was looking for something very different to subscribe
> to.

Escaping his small town, for Owen, put in play a demand to 'get into' a different consciousness. Owen is not literally risking himself, but in approaching hip-hop culture, he attempts to cast off a consciousness inculcated from a privileged, even sheltered life. For him, responsibility took the form of educating himself about the marginalisation of black communities in the United States by listening to hip-hop.[3] Listening to conscious hip-hop, for Owen, is something that he needs to 'sit down and totally take in, like listening to jazz or Gil Scott-Heron'. Owen submits himself to a kind of dynamic hearing when it comes to hip-hop, demanding of himself that his listening practices contribute to his awareness of the political challenges faced by marginalised Americans even if it presents a risk to his own consciousness.

It seems that this mentality of "consciousness" has a concrete effect on the mood, atmosphere, and coherence of bodies in hip-hop culture. For Samuel, distance and misalignment emerged in proximity to an inauthentic listening by privileged white suburbanites: they revealed a lack of consciousness and respect for what hip-hop is. This is remedied through a more conscious and responsible form of listening. The disposition in which Samuel mediates racial difference in hip-hop culture is affected by *others*' commitment to responsible, dynamic listening. Owen might be one example that answers Samuel's demand.

Hip-hop's politics of race

These two examples help us to think about the politics of race in hip-hop. I present these two listeners to consider how banal, everyday experiences of listening are subject to specific affordances inflected by phenotype. It is certainly valid to claim that hip-hop is a radical form of anti-racist critique, but it is crucial to trace how hip-hop actually and concretely operates on and through bodies in moments where they are brought together and spaced apart by racial difference.

Race in hip-hop culture operates in variegated relations of distance and proximity. Samuel, a rapper and long-time hip-hop listener, articulates a demand of responsibility toward his proximal others. Owen is an example of a response to this sort of demand, framing his exploration of hip-hop around the demands presented by the fact of his skin and the privileges it affords. Despite his distance from other hip-hop listeners in terms of his race, Owen sees his embeddedness in hip-hop culture as demanding a responsibility to understand positionality through his skin and historicity. For him, listening to hip-hop and participating in its culture is an entry point into gaining greater consciousness about lives and people he had not previously been exposed to.

Through the mechanics of demand and response in hip-hop culture, ethical reorientations emerge in concrete encounters: bodies are forced to recognise the specific facts and histories of race and then respond to them. Through their responses, we see a movement from ethics into politics in the process of 'dynamic hearing', risking oneself to respond to a demand with poetic and creative activity. Samuel explained that hip-hop is a reflection of the struggle of marginalised people of colour in the United States and lamented that the student group did not truly reflect the demographics of this struggle. I

pushed him to explain a little further and he gave a lucid response:

> If you're going to be coming from [the privileged] side of things, I just wish you would rap, I wish you would step into the cipher[4] and contribute to it. I wish you weren't here for just another club meeting. I wish that you were actually here to rap with us.

It is particularly interesting that Samuel brings up the cipher as a site that demands creative responses from those bodies racially and socially distant from the struggles out of which hip-hop emerged. Cipher, a key term in the hip-hop lexicon, here refers to a circle of rappers (but equally dancers, DJs, and other artists depending on the situation) freestyling off-the-cuff with a recorded beat on in the background. Ciphers blur the line between performer and onlooker; what Samuel is demanding is that instead of being a passive spectator that fellow hip-hop fans like Owen accept the risk of a failed performance. Thus, the political in this space is not about mainstream or conscious hip-hop; it resides in creative and experimental responses to one's difference in the face of the other:

> Responsibility…"owns" aggression as well as the ethical mandate to find a non-violent solution to rageful demands…responsibility is bound up with an anxiety that remains open, that does not settle in an ambivalence through disavowal, but rather gives rise to a certain ethical practice, itself experimental (Butler, 2011: 177).

Politics in hip-hop is about dealing with and even pursuing our shared vulnerability in creative spaces such as the cipher. The experimental ethical practice around race that we encounter in hip-hop emerges from positions of vulnerability implicit in specific relations inflected by phenotype. This experimentation proceeded as members debated what counted as "real" hip-hop, the value of the mainstream and the role of the artist, promoted events, and organised a day-long hip-hop festival.

Methodologies focusing too closely on asking what music *represents* at the expense of asking what music actually *does* miss experimental ethical and political practice in musical cultures. Hip-hop is not simply a site of happy openness in which multiple races befriend the other (though this certainly happens); it is through the work of meeting demands inflected by phenotype that hip-hop culture produces novel, ethical approaches to racial and social difference. Race remains visible and opens productive conflicts, demanding a political practice that transcends cosmopolitan openness in favour of a practice that is proper to a complex space of conflicting demands within purportedly open, post-colonial spaces.

Endnotes

1   Tricia Rose's 1994 book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* is instructive in laying out this categorisation of activities in hip-hop culture.
2   For a theoretical overview of 'materiality' and 'affordances' in musico-

cultural assemblages, see Born, 2013: 41-44. For a specific treatment of the materiality of phenotype in musical and cultural assemblages, see Saldanha, 2006, 2007, and 2010.

3   The pedagogical potential of hip-hop has been well documented and researched. For some examples see Paul, 2000; Morell and Duncan-Andrade, 2005; and Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, 2002.

4   "Cipher" is a difficult term to define. It refers to a circle ("cipher" is actually the name for the number "0" for the "Five Percenters", a spiritual movement with which many rappers were involved and which is deeply related to the Nation of Islam, see Knight, 2007: 53) of participants and onlookers in which performance is shared, passed from one to the other. For example, a cipher of MCs might involve rappers freestyling with or in response to each other, or of b-boys and b-girls dancing. There is an implicit competitive element to a cipher but it is also a free-flowing space in which creative engagement moves freely between participants, blurring the lines between performer and spectator.

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Biography

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