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Amy S. Dempsey

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, amysue@siu.edu

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“THEIR STUFF AND OUR STUFF”: CULTURAL VISITORS USE HIP HOP AS A TOOL
FOR CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

by

Amy S. Dempsey

B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2012

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Masters Degree.

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Approved by:

JoAnn E. Argersinger, Chair

Kay Carr

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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In 2009, President Barack Obama announced the 100,000 Strong Initiative, which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton launched in 2010. It is “a public-private partnership to which private corporate and foundation donors thus far have pledged more than seven million dollars.”¹ Fundraising for the initiative attracted major celebrities in the hip hop community. will.i.am of Black Eyed Peas fame, met with Secretary of State Clinton in 2011 to discuss his role in promoting and building “strong educational and cultural ties between the United States and China” by directing a concert in Beijing.² Sending hip-hop artists abroad represents one way the U.S. Department of State is using hip hop as an instrument in cultural diplomacy. In the years between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the War on Terror, cultural diplomacy was not treated with the urgency it had in the past. The global community considered this a retreat from the cultural front and criticized the U.S. for its absence. Upon its return the United States saw that the it was no longer the friend one turned to for advice, in fact, its global image as a leader of democracy was slowly crumbling in certain regions of the world. In its efforts to reach out to rebuild its relationships with other nations, the U.S. Department of State recognized the powerful force that hip hop has become in the United States and abroad. It used that power to mend broken relationships and create new ones.

¹ U.S. Department of State. *American Musician will.i.am Heading to China to Promote Exchanges*. <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2011/08/20110801115256tegridb0.5458294.html#axzz2yv2EhzyH> (accessed March 3, 2014).

² Ibid.

America's Image Abroad

“Cultural diplomacy is the linchpin of public diplomacy, for it is in cultural activities that a nation's idea of itself is best represented.”³

In the wake of the events that occurred on September 11, 2001, surveys suggested a continuing distrust of the United States even among nations with which it was traditionally aligned.⁴ The Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy (ACCD) asserts that as the U.S. continues its War on Terror its relationships with other nations and cultures can be used as tools against “the forces of darkness.”⁵ However, the U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation in Iraq has led the global community to question the U.S. foreign policy and whether or not it is guilty of unwarranted invasions. The ACCD feared this outlook threatened to isolate the U.S. and end its reign as a global superpower. The 9/11 Commission also urged the U.S. government to refocus on cultural diplomacy and “to engage in the struggle of ideas underway in the Islamic world.”⁶

In a report issued by the Defense Science Board on Strategic Communications in 2004, it concluded that America's domestic policies had a negative impact on American influence and leadership at the international level. According to the report, as debates about Islam occur throughout the world, the U.S. has lost its credibility and is no longer invited to the conversations nor trusted as a guide on issues brought to light in the debates.⁷ In addition to the invasion of Iraq

³ U.S. Department of State. *Cultural Diplomacy: The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy*. <http://www.state.gov/pdcommission/reports/54256.htm> (accessed February 27, 2014).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

by American forces, there are other controversies that damaged America's international image. The Abu Ghraib scandal and the incidents at Guantanamo Bay cast doubt on the United States as a "beacon of hope," and instead made it appear more threatening. The committee noted the possibility that America's image in the Arab world was being tarnished by excessive television coverage on prison scandals and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁸ In an effort to combat the growing anti-American attitude these events have created, the U.S. Department of State had to re-evaluate its international relationships and send out cultural visitors to assess the situation on the ground. During their visits, cultural visitors were expected to be open and inviting to their hosts, which included listening as well as speaking. With cultural visitors, the State Department could put into action the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy's finding that "Cultural exchanges counteract the stereotypes that inform the attitudes of people everywhere, revealing the common ground."⁹

In light of the America's declining global image, Congress appointed The Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy in 2004. Its purpose was to advise the Secretary of State in ways to help combat anti-Americanism abroad. In order to do so, committee members conducted a fact-finding mission to search for causes of anti-Americanism, and enable the Secretary of State to select the best methods to improve the cultural diplomacy of the United States.¹⁰ The fact-finding mission found that government support for cultural activities abroad must be

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

increased if the U.S. were to combat growing anti-Americanism. The committee called for an increase in funding to U.S. embassies to develop and advance cultural programming.¹¹

The ACCD concluded that cultural diplomacy represented a critical component in forming the face of America's global image abroad. Indeed, according to the ACCD, the role of cultural programming was as important as military action.¹² After its fact-finding mission, the ACCD concluded that the polls, which reflected an "abiding anger toward U.S. policies and actions," were an accurate reflection of America's image abroad. This report, however, also noted that although people around the globe did not agree with all U.S. policies, they still recognized some positives in American policies.¹³ Public diplomacy offered the United States an opportunity to demonstrate the many different facets of American culture by "the promotion of communication between peoples as opposed to governments." Cultural exchange programs are geared toward building bridges and long lasting relationships.¹⁴

Some European countries and the Soviet Union had cultural diplomatic programs in place in the first decades of the twentieth century.¹⁵ The United States programs came about a little later when the Department of State created cultural relations branch in 1938.¹⁶ After World War II and the onslaught of the Cold War, the U.S. escalated its cultural interactions. The Information

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Frank A. Ninkovich, *U.S. Information Policy and Cultural Diplomacy*, (New York: Foreign Policy Association, 1996), 3.

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶ Department of State, *Cultural Diplomacy*.

and Education Exchange Act of 1948 provided much of the legislation that formed the foundation of U.S. cultural diplomacy. “Persons participating in such projects carry to other countries, and bring back to their own, information, knowledge, and attitudes which through personal experience and personal influence promote a better understanding of the United States abroad and increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries.”¹⁷

The U.S. government’s commitment to diplomatic relations in the post-World War II era reflected its concern regarding America’s global image. Backed by public support, the U.S. State Department designed diplomatic missions meant to represent those at home and inform those abroad. The State Department’s actions at that time could have been guided by a growing devotion to nationalistic attitudes. David Thelen recalled that, in the U.S., the historical scholarship of the mid-twentieth century was unquestionably nation-state centered. He described historical scholarship at that time as adhering to a nation-state worldview because it promoted the idea that “Nations expressed people’s identities, arbitrated their differences and solved their problems, focused their dreams, exercised their collective sovereignty, fought their wars.”¹⁸ To ensure success at home and abroad, the Department of State used music to advance its diplomatic policies.

The U.S. State Department found that music worked well as an instrument of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War. In his article “Music Pushed, Music Pulled: Cultural Diplomacy, Globalization, and Imperialism,” Danielle Fosler-Lussier discusses the goals of the

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ David Thelen, “The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History,” *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (December 1999), 965.

State Department's Cultural Presentations Program. Started in 1954, the program "aimed to enhance the reputation of American culture, create a positive impression of the United States and its foreign policy, and compete with the many Soviet and Chinese performers who traveled for similar propaganda purposes."¹⁹ African-American jazz musicians were among those dispatched to other countries. Their candid stories and criticisms of their treatment at home earned them respect from their foreign audiences. It also made them seem more receptive to critiques of the American government.²⁰

After the Cold War ended, government and public support for cultural diplomacy faded and other nations noticed America's absence on the cultural front. The Arab world highlighted this absence by inviting the U.S. back to the cultural conversation.²¹ The dismantling of the United States Intelligence Agency (USIA) in 1999 left the U.S. weak in the area of cultural diplomacy as it broke down the infrastructure and personal ties built by the agency. As a result of these weakened diplomatic relationships, the U.S. could no longer combat the growing decline in its international popularity. Cultural diplomacy took root by highlighting American cultural values as reflective of U.S. political ideologies while at the same time welcoming the attempts of other nations to do so, as well. One way of doing this was to send "cultural visitors" abroad and receive them from abroad.²²

¹⁹ Danielle Fosler-Lussier, "Music Pushed, Music Pulled: Cultural Diplomacy, Globalization, and Imperialism*," *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 1 (January 2012), 53.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

²¹ Department of State, *Cultural Diplomacy*.

²² *Ibid.*

Americans were traditionally unsupportive of cultural programs, which stems from failing to come to a consensus on what cultural diplomacy should entail and how to enact it.²³ “Americans, with their deeply rooted hostility to the political control of ideas, have never been entirely comfortable with a tight governmental link to culture and information.”²⁴ The Department of State also regards the lack of public support as an obstacle to forming and maintaining cultural arts as diplomatic tools when the country is not at war. Rather than just being used as weapons during war, in peacetime, they can be used as a safeguard for the country. America’s reappearance on the cultural front has led some to believe that it only appears at times of crisis. A more committed and durable cultural diplomacy program might convince them otherwise.²⁵ This means a continuous commitment to a cultural diplomacy program. The committee noted that the Japanese built a sixty million dollar National Culture Center in Egypt. The center hosts seven hundred performances and three hundred thousand audience members annually.²⁶ The Japanese commitment in Egypt and the ACCD’s call for better funding of cultural programs mark the importance of facilitating cultural interaction.

While military might represents the power of a nation, cultural arts best represent the people of a nation. The United States is home to one of the most globally popular forms of cultural expression. Rap music and hip hop culture are recognized for their ability to raise awareness of the political, social and economic discontent of people around the world. While rap

²³ Ninkovich, *U.S. Information Policy*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵ Department of State, *Cultural Diplomacy*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

music once threatened to tarnish America's image abroad, the U.S. Department of State turned to hip hop culture as a way to combat anti-Americanism abroad.

Development of Hip Hop in the United States

"Rappers Delight," released by the Sugar Hill Gang in 1979, was the first rap song to capture the attention of the world. Since that time rap music has become one of the most popular ways in which African Americans express their social and political discontent.²⁷ Although hip hop is historically known to have resulted from a blending of African American, Jamaican, and Puerto Rican cultures in Brooklyn, New York, during the 1980's, its roots and its future are now a matter of much scholarly attention. James G. Spady, cultural theorist and "hiphopography" creator, is sure that historians "have as much to offer Hip Hop Studies as Hip Hop culture has much to offer historians," but has discovered that historians are reluctant to make this culture an object of study because of the scarcity of written records on the topic.²⁸ However, as hip hop revealed itself as a successful cultural connector, the U.S. Department of State noticed its frequent appearance in transnational cultural dialogue.

The the roots of Africa in hip hop emerge in the style of singing called "rapping." DJ Kool Herc based his performance style on a traditional African storytelling practice known as a "toast."²⁹ Trickster tales from West Africa survived in U.S. slave cultures with the trickster's presence representing resistance. Tricksters were replaced with the figures of "bad men" who

²⁷ U.S. Department of State. *American Popular Music*. <http://iiddigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/publication/2011/07/20110727111524su0.2943188.html#axzz2yv2EhzyH>.

²⁸ James G. Spadey, "Mapping and Re-Membering Hip Hop History, Hiphopography and African Diasporic History," *Western Journal Of Black Studies* 37, no. 2 (Summer2013 2013), 135.

²⁹ Department of State, *American Popular Music*.

were often violent (enslavers) and a “toast” would be a veiled way to call them out on their misdeeds.³⁰ American rappers used this same form to bring attention to their political, economical, and cultural oppression in latter decades of the twentieth century with the United States government and white society targeted as the oppressors.

Hip hop culture expanded to all areas of the United States, and hip hop communities formed in areas that were home to large African American communities. As each of these communities embraced hip hop culture, they added distinct elements of their own, which eventually enabled listeners to identify a particular musical style with a particular geographic location. Matt Miller explored the development of “bounce,” a New Orleans style rap music that incorporates New Orleans musical traditions of the past while its lyrics represent the New Orleans community of the present.³¹ He found that “bounce” resulted when “African Americans in New Orleans took the idea of rap and made it their own—a syncretic process of creolization and experimentation led to the emergence of distinctive musical style and forms of identification.”³² As hip hop culture grew and encompassed new spaces, it proved to be an adaptable medium through which people all over the world connected. Hip hop started as a local event, turned into a national phenomenon and eventually spread throughout the world. Its ability to go beyond local and national boundaries proved it a popular and effective form of cultural protest.

Hip Hop Development Abroad

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Matt Miller, *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans*, (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 2.

³² Ibid., 3.

The origins of hip hop have been traced back to African storytelling and musical traditions. Hip hop, then, is transnational even from its inception. The African American contribution is the use of these traditions to introduce a form of resistance to social and economic oppression in the United States. In the 1980's, it once again made a transnational voyage back to Africa where the youth there could empathize with the black youth of America and their continued struggle for social and economic equality.³³ According to Frank Salamone, it is human nature to imitate in our process of creation. Humans engage aspects of other cultures, imitate those they find appealing, and eventually create something new that is a blend of the old and the new.³⁴

Hip Hop is no longer confined to the Afro-American and Latino existence; it has taken on a global identity of protest. It is a culture that has developed through transatlantic and transpacific networks. As this globalization process progresses, Hip Hop has come to be seen as a mode of expression through which the local, and the conflicts and tragedies within that community, are recognized and recorded.³⁵ Ogaga Okuyade writes, "As the number of hip-hop artists continues to soar with the passage of time, these artists have taken advantage of the public space music offers marginalized groups to engage their societies dialectically on pressing postcolonial issues and help celebrate the hope signified in the attainment of independence in 1960."³⁶ At the time Nigeria gained its independence from Great Britain, African-Americans

³³ Msia Kibona Clark, "Representing Africa! Trends in Contemporary African Hip Hop," *Journal Of Pan African Studies* 6, no. 3 (September 2013), 1.

³⁴ Frank A. Salamone, "Nigerian and Ghanaian popular music: Two varieties of creolization," *Journal Of Popular Culture* 32, no. 2 (Fall 1998), 11.

³⁵ Spady, "Mapping and Re-Membering", 128.

³⁶ Ogaga Okuyade, "Rethinking Militancy and Environmental Justice: The Politics of Oil and

were launching the second wave of the Civil Rights Movement. It is not surprising that both places fostered atmospheres in which hip hop flourished, nor is it a surprise that the unique elements of those cultural environments led to distinct differences in the hip hop cultures that emerged in the United States and abroad.

Hip Hop culture and rap music found its way into the lives of youths throughout Africa, but especially in Nigeria. The 2010 MTV Africa Music Awards reflected Nigeria's growing hip-hop community and entrance into the global rap stage. Nigerian artists dominated the event, bringing home the awards for Artist of the Year, Best Group, Best Female Performer, Best Male Performer, and Best New Artist.³⁷ Not everyone, however, embraced this news with excitement. Some Nigerians feared that Western forces used media sources, such as television and the internet, to further imperialist intentions. Although not all agreed on the Nigerian response, it was commonly believed that cultural imperialism was "working the ideals and values of the dominating power into the psyche of the subordinate group."³⁸

If Nigerian rappers are taking all their cues from Americans, they might have used the awards stage to voice any political concerns that weighed on the minds of their fellow countrymen, most likely the 2011 presidential election that was soon to take place in Nigeria. However, no grievances were aired, and it was an American rapper, Chuck D that brought social issues to the stage that night saying, "You have everything you need right here. Recognize your

Violence in Nigerian Popular Music," *Africa Today* 58, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 82.

³⁷ "2 Face: Nigerian Pop Singer Wins MTV Africa Award," *The Berkshire Eagle*, Dec 12, 2010, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/817255467?accountid=13864>.

³⁸ Stephanie Shonekan, "'The Blueprint: The Gift and The Curse' of American Hip Hop Culture for Nigeria's Millennial Youth," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 6, no.3 (September 2013): 195.

legends; recognize your history.”³⁹ Because underground hip hop in the U.S. is politically and socially aggressive, it is not considered marketable on a global scale. Stephanie Shonekan argues that this is the reason Nigerians do not have access to what is considered to be socially conscious hip hop.⁴⁰

Rap music brings the Nigerian people together in their love for particular styles and popular musicians. It crosses ethnic and geographic boundaries, and with the help of social media, it is crossing international boundaries, as well.⁴¹ Shonekan’s essay, “Nigerian Hip Hop: Exploring a Black World Hybrid,” explores the development of Nigerian hip-hop culture and notes that hip hop is one way in which Nigerians have been influenced by diasporic music. They have traditionally been consumers of jazz, rnb, and reggae as well.⁴² She writes, “The hybrid character of each succeeding black musical genre has revealed an evolved form that retains elements from preceding genres even as it possesses its own distinct qualities.”⁴³ Daily News Egypt pointed out one of these distinguishing qualities, “Nigerian hip-hop is more social than political, often addressing the challenges of everyday life while delivering a dose of optimism that Nigerians can overcome them.”⁴⁴

³⁹ “2 Face: Nigerian Pop”, The Berkshire Eagle.

⁴⁰ Stephanie Shonekan, “Nigerian Hip Hop: Exploring a Black World Hybrid,” in *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, ed. Eric Charry, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 148.

⁴¹ “Nigerian Hip-Hop, Long a Copy, Grows into its Own.” Daily News Egypt, May 05, 2011. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/864904472?accountid=13864>

⁴² Shonekan, “Nigerian Hip Hop”, 152.

⁴³ Ibid., 149.

⁴⁴ “Nigerian Hip-Hop, Long,” Daily News Egypt.

Stephanie Shonekan shares the results of questionnaires and interviews given to Nigerians involved on the national music scene. The results show that Nigerians choose to listen to American hip hop over Nigerian hip hop, but they do still listen to Nigerian artists.⁴⁵ She argues that at a result, “Although Nigerian rap appropriates an African American musical genre, many agree that it is undeniably Nigerian and reflects the Nigerian experience.”⁴⁶ Artists are often nurtured by their local culture but politically and economically oppressed on a national scale.⁴⁷

Nigerians appropriated African American music, added their own creativity when recreating, and ended up with new and culturally reflective music of their own.⁴⁸ Nigerian rappers localize hip hop as do American rappers. Local settings have an impact on the lyrics and style of individual artists. As a postcolonial nation, Nigeria has remained a space where a double consciousness can develop between external and internal forces.⁴⁹ As in the U.S., Nigerian hip hop is divided into different styles where as some artists gear their music to appeal to a national and international audience. Others, however, adhere to local styles, which mark their music as coming from a specific ethnic or geographic location.⁵⁰ This geographic marker can also be seen

⁴⁵ Shonekan, “Nigerian Hip Hop”, 148.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 150.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 151.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 147.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 150.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 148.

in American hip hop culture where “Regional hip-hop dialects emerged, notably in southern California, where a smoother, more laid-back style of rapping gained traction.”⁵¹

“Hip hop culture began as an expression of local identities.”⁵² Just as rap and hip-hop culture developed in the inner city of New York, Nigerian hip hop development took root in Lagos, in inner-city neighborhoods.⁵³ Daily News Egypt reports the Nigerian style of rap to be “mostly upbeat, feel-good music” with positive themes performed in a variety of Nigerian languages, but especially Nigerian Pidgin English.⁵⁴ The use of Pidgin English has allowed it to become popular in surrounding countries, as well as in Uganda and South Africa. Nigerian immigrants living in America, Europe, and Asia increased a desire for Nigerian hip hop abroad. Their presence in other countries has introduced a new style of hip hop that Nigerian DJ, Jimmy Jatt, says is “high-energy,” and that artists from other countries find it hard to match.⁵⁵

The Impact of Hip Hop on Nigerian Culture

While hip hop has proven to empower those in Nigeria who wish to call attention to local and national issues, some believe its true nature as a vehicle for protest has been lost in translation. Instead, some see the influence of American hip hop as a threat to local cultures and national identities because of the amount of violence and degradation of women prominent in certain American hip hop cultures. In 2004, 50 Cent, an American rapper, was set to perform at Star Mega Jam in Lagos, Nigeria. However, a disagreement between him and Eedris

⁵¹ Department of State, *American Popular Music*.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Shonekan, “Nigerian Hip Hop”, 151.

⁵⁴ “Nigerian Hip-Hop, Long,” Daily News Egypt.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Abdulkareem, a Nigerian rapper, led 50 Cent to cancel his appearance at the event. While disagreements between American rappers are a common phenomenon and sometimes are even staged as publicity stunts, the altercation between 50 Cent and Eedris Abdulkareem was serious enough to garner official notice as, “An official at the United States Embassy in Nigeria confirmed the event.” The argument began when Eedris refused to vacate a seat on an airplane that was assigned to 50 Cent. After a verbal airing of grievances, a physical altercation ensued.⁵⁶

Rappers and hip-hop artists from other countries are often accused of imitating American artists, especially when they place an emphasis on recreating a sexist and violent environment.⁵⁷ T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting examined the impact of hip hop culture on gender relations in America. She recalled an event at which Russell Simmons, co-founder of Def Jam records, defended television programs that played rap videos in which women were depicted as sex objects. Simmons told them to “turn off their television sets” if they did not want to see the videos. Sharpley-Whiting noted that those attending the event did not believe that turning off their televisions was enough to counter the “unpleasant gender politics and sexual provocations that flowed from them.”⁵⁸ In contrast to American public sentiment about the way women are portrayed in rap music, Shonekan sees their portrayal in Nigerian hip hop as more humorous than degrading. “It is rarely perceived as offensive to Nigerian women,” she writes, “Flagrant

⁵⁶ “Rapper 50 Cent Involved in Scuffle at Nigerian Airport,” *Miami Times*, December 2004, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/363126984?accountid=13864>.

⁵⁷ “Nigerian Hip-Hop, Long,” *Daily News Egypt*.

⁵⁸ T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps Up, Ho’s Down: Hip Hop’s Hold on Young Black Women*, (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 3.

disrespect and disdainful behavior by men toward women in Nigeria is typically not well received or tolerated...”⁵⁹

Collaboration with American rappers is often seen as a promising career path for Nigerian rappers. The global success of hip-hop has made it harder for young artists to become successful.⁶⁰ In 2011, Nigerian rapper, D’banj, filmed a video for his hit song “Mr. Endowed.” Snoop Dogg, a popular American rapper, appeared on the video.⁶¹ It is common for American rappers to invite already established rappers to make a guest appearance on their albums or on a single track. The presence of the established rapper seems to legitimize the new artist. With so much competition in the hip-hop music industry, this offers another way to attract attention to a new artist. The appearance of an American rapper could possibly add yet another layer of legitimacy in foreign countries.⁶² Although Nigerian rappers acknowledge African American hip hop as the foundation for their musical styles, they denounce Nigerian women for embracing non-African fashion.⁶³ They also criticize those who travel to or spend time in the U.S. and then return to Nigeria with a new “Americanized” style.⁶⁴ Shonekan suggests that the oil boom that Nigeria experienced may be responsible for the introduction and spread of American culture through elites who were financially able to travel internationally. While their governmental and

⁵⁹ Shonekan, “Nigerian Hip Hop,” 156.

⁶⁰ U.S. Department of State, *American Toni Blackman Takes Hip-Hop to Asia: Rap artist coaches teens to use lyrics not violence*, by Carol Walker. <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2006/05/20060508165427bcreklaw0.2009546.html#axzz2yv2EhzyH>.

⁶¹ “Nigerian Hip-Hop, Long,” Daily News Egypt.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Shonekan, “Nigerian Hip Hop,” 159.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 160.

educational systems were adopted from the British, they were drawn to the style and culture emitted from the U.S.⁶⁵

Using Hip Hop to Strengthen Cultural Contact

Traditional Yoruba diplomacy carries over into Nigerian cultural diplomacy. When a dignitary visited the Oyo-Yoruba, a greeting company with drum music and praise singers would handle the introductions, informing the leader of the guest's background through the singing of oriki.⁶⁶ It is from this long tradition of leader diplomacy and denial of the controversies surrounding their government that some Nigerian elites felt insulted that Barack Obama did not visit their country when he visited Africa for the first time.⁶⁷ United States officials and investors who want to invest time and money in Nigeria are deterred by issues such as political instability, tension between the northern and southern regions of the country, the AIDS epidemic, the Muslim extremist group, Boko Harum, and the situation in the Niger Delta.

Nigeria has Africa's largest Muslim population and approximately two hundred and fifty ethnic groups.⁶⁸ A majority of the Muslim population in Nigeria is Sufi, an Islamic sect that is usually not considered to be extremist. Those groups that are seen as extreme, such as Boko Harum, are believed to be the targets of approach by Al-Qaeda.⁶⁹ Because Sufi Muslims tend to

⁶⁵ Ibid., 153.

⁶⁶ S.J. Timothy-Asobele, *Nigerian Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, (Lagos: Promocomms Limited, 2001) 1.

⁶⁷ U.S. Congress. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations. *Examining The U.S.-Nigeria Relationship in a Time of Transition: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on African Affairs*, 111th Cong., 2nd sess., (February 23, 2010), 27-28.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 11.

be less extreme, northern Nigeria may still provide a space for Americans to gain entrance into the global conversation concerning the Islamic world in Africa.

Nigerian rap was developed in an atmosphere very unreceptive to free speech. That is one aspect of American rap that is not easy for Nigerians to incorporate into their music for it could land them in jail or worse.⁷⁰ Nigerian and American artists continue to influence one another. This is shown in the way Nigerian artists continue to push the limits on free speech. Rappers who gain international popularity may also take a chance voicing their opinions about the Nigerian government because their public positions could be used to draw international attention to any mistreatment.

At least one Nigerian rapper is proving this to be true. Timaya is one of the most popular hip-hop artists in Nigeria. He fuses a local Delta language called Izon with Nigerian Pidgin in his music. He is from Bayelsa state, one of the ethnic groups that has been outspoken against the government's handling and redistribution of national resources.⁷¹ His 2006 album, *True Story*, contains a song called "Dem mama," which recounts the events that occurred in the village of Odi in 1999. The Nigerian military burned the village to the ground, accusing its inhabitants of hiding militants. But the real reason for the destruction of the village was they had voiced their opposition to the presence of Shell Oil in the region and the environmental devastation the corporation wrought upon the area. It is through his music that Timaya incorporates his community's concerns into a public arena open for communication and is essential in forming a public stance on national concerns.⁷²

⁷⁰ Shonekan, "Nigerian Hip Hop," 159.

⁷¹ Okuyade, "Rethinking Militancy," 81.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Hip Hop in Use as a Diplomatic Tool

The Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy determined that not only does the U.S. need to re-examine the best ways in which American cultural values can be expressed as sincere reflections of how Americans see themselves as a nation, but also the way other cultures perceive and describe Americans. American officials believe that sending out troupes not troops better diffuses anti-American feelings.⁷³ Music has been shown as a successful medium with which to facilitate cultural connections. The U.S. Department of State has recognized hip hop as an American made tool capable of reaching people all across the globe by observing that "...the genre's audience has become decidedly multiracial, multicultural, and transnational."⁷⁴ Alina Romanowski, the deputy assistant secretary of state for professional and cultural exchanges, believes that hip hop holds appeal for youths.⁷⁵ After all, it was hip hop that brought black and white audiences together for the first time.⁷⁶

American hip-hop musicians have also noticed the popularity and role music has played in many different youth movements all over the world. "Hip-hop is the most important contribution to the American cultural landscape since blues and jazz," says Fab 5 Freddy, "It is

⁷³ Department of State, *Cultural Diplomacy*.

⁷⁴ Department of State, *American Popular Music*.

⁷⁵ U.S. Department of State, *American Popular Music Groups Enjoy Tours to Middle East, Africa: U.S. State Department sends musicians abroad as cultural ambassadors*, by Phillip Kurata, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2006/04/20060413171351cpataruk0.83222412.html#axzz2yv2EhzyH>.

⁷⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Hip-Hop Culture Crosses Social Barriers: Musical artists tell America's story in rap*, by Carol Walker, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2006/05/20060508165055bcreklaw0.4616358.html#axzz2yv2EhzyH>.

dominant in every youth culture in every country.”⁷⁷ Its employment as a successful and fulfilling means of expression has led to its spread throughout the global youth community. Music producer Mark Shimmel agrees stating, “Hip hop taps into a sense of urgency felt by young adults.” Unfavorable aspects of hip-hop cannot be ignored but Marvette Perez, curator at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History, believes that its impact as a “creative and positive” force must also be recognized.⁷⁸ It is no surprise then that the U.S. Department of State has turned to hip-hop musicians for help reaching its diplomatic goals. Their international appeal already reflects their ability to combat anti-American sentiments on a market level, now their ability to do the same on the cultural front is being tested.

The role of the cultural diplomats is two-fold. While they are sent on missions to absorb information from other cultures, it is also their duty to “offset the impression that America is a monolithic society defined solely by its foreign policy.”⁷⁹ The Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy took note when the British Council pointed out that it was incredibly careful not to let its vision appear as a front for the British government’s agenda.⁸⁰

Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad sends various cultural groups to other areas of the globe in an effort to use “music and culture as diplomatic tools to bring people together and foster mutual understanding.” As of 2011, 155 musicians had visited over 100 countries. Rhythm

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Department of State, *Cultural Diplomacy*.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Road musicians were expected to perform at public concerts, teach classes, facilitate workshops, collaborate and jam with local musicians.⁸¹

Opus Akoben Hip-Hop Ensemble, one of the two American troupes sent on a tour in Africa and the Middle East in 2006, represented the United States as cultural ambassadors. Ezra Green enjoyed the time he spent with local producers and musicians on the tour, playing music and traveling within the hip-hop communities in each area.⁸² Terrence “Sub-Z” Nicholson of the Opus Akoben said he learned much from his journey in Palestinian territories. He noted that the Palestinian people persevered in the face of oppression.⁸³ Carl “Kokayi” Walker, also a member of Opus Akoben, recalled that his interactions with Saudi Arabians were open and pleasant and believed music played a role in the breakdown of cultural barriers. During their visit, Opus Akoben collaborated with the Saudi artists for a concert. The result was blending of “their stuff and our stuff,” which Greer saw as worthy of future collaborations and recordings. He also found a lively hip-hop culture during his travels in Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon and Egypt as well. He said the performers sung in English and Arabic. Overall, the musicians serving as unofficial cultural diplomats for the U.S. State Department reported positive outcomes from their encounters abroad.⁸⁴

Toni Blackman also considered her work abroad as a cultural diplomat both pleasant and productive. The State Department’s American Music Abroad Program sent The Toni Blackman

⁸¹ U.S. Department of State. *Taken Question on Rhythm Road Visit to Burma*. <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2011/08/20110831152109su0.6892817.html#axzz2yv2EhzyH>.

⁸² Department of State, *American Popular Music Groups*.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Hip-Hop Ensemble to tour in Thailand for a month, where she carried out many duties as the American cultural ambassador for hip hop. The performances were interactive and Thai youth got the chance to collaborate with U.S. musicians. Not only did Blackman perform musically, she also facilitated hip-hop workshops.⁸⁵ While in Thailand, Blackman performed in various regions in an attempt to reach more youths. Her performances were also aired on television and written about in the media. She commented that she enjoyed “being able to blend our music with Thai aesthetic.”⁸⁶ Her experience in Indonesia also contained a collaborative element as she “performed with traditional Javanese musicians.” Riza, the front man for Indonesian rap group Kronik, praised the U.S. State Department for making collaborative performance experiences possible.⁸⁷

Blackman’s experiences at home made her the perfect pick as the cultural ambassador for hip hop. Blackman had the students who participated in the workshops write lyrics in a hip-hop style. She encouraged them to use their creativity in arts “to express their feelings and the importance of being open to other cultures.”⁸⁸ This was intended to teach youths to use non-violent forms of expression when they encounter and try to understand different peoples. Blackman used the same approach with American schoolteachers thirty years ago in a program she called Hip-Hop 101 which used “rap as a teaching method.” She believed that teachers who became familiar with the hip-hop lifestyle would have a better understanding of their students

⁸⁵ Department of State, *American Toni Blackman*.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

and the students' obsession with hip-hop culture.⁸⁹ She was also the founder and director of the Freestyle Union, which adopted hip hop to promote activism in communities as rap artists continue to “use their rhyming skills as a social platform to protest, debate and advance social causes.”⁹⁰

OneBeat is another program that fosters “people-to-people” diplomacy through music. Musicians were invited from around the world to come to the United States and collaborate with other musicians. “OneBeat balances three principles: dialogue, creation, and social engagement to foster mutual understanding and cooperation among citizens of the world...”⁹¹ Mpumelelo Mcata, a musician from South Africa, commented, “OneBeat is important in its potential to be a platform for advancing society by building tolerance and understanding and unifying cultures through musical collaboration.”⁹² One of the issues discussed during Mcata’s time at OneBeat 2013 was the Trayvon Martin shooting. He mentioned that the Trayvon Martin story was covered by news media in other parts of the world.⁹³ In the collaborative space created by OneBeat, visiting international artists saw Americans reacted to such events as the Trayvon Martin shooting. The person-to-person contact allowed them to see Americans as individuals concerned with what they perceived as injustice at home.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ U.S. Department of State, *Hip Hop Diplomacy, Worldwide Reach of Rap Topic of Webchat: Rap lyricists, vocalist Toni Blackman to discuss music’s evolution, impact.* <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2006/07/20060726164917aawajuk0.6922266.html#axzz2yv2EzyH>

⁹¹ “OneBeat,” <http://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/onebeat>

⁹² “OneBeat,” <http://foundsoundnation.org/curations/one-beat-2013/week-2/>

⁹³ Ibid.

While hip hop continues to grow as a popular music genre, its role in cultural diplomacy is promising but not guaranteed. It is rather new to the diplomatic scene, with the first hip-hop cultural ambassadors only appearing in the twenty-first century. Only time will tell if its effectiveness will earn it a permanent place in the State Department's diplomatic arsenal. However, if it continues to facilitate cultural transmission with the ease and success that it has so far, the U.S. Department of State is unlikely to give up such a powerful tool. From the inner-city neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, to countries all over the world, the hip-hop journey has been one of cultural expression, collaboration, and results. If the U.S. continues to use it as a diplomatic instrument, the American presence on the cultural front may be more welcomed in the future.

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VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Amy S. Dempsey

dempsey.amysue@gmail.com

Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Bachelor of Arts, History, May 2012

Research Paper Title:

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