



Universidad Sin Fronteras Class, April 10, 2013

IV. HIP HOP: SOUTHERN SOUNDS, MIGRATION, AND URBAN REBELLION

Central Question: How can culture and music advance people's liberation in the U. S. South today?

Visiting Faculty: Will Copeland from Detroit

Coordinator for the Stand Up Speak Out Youth Program of the East Michigan Environmental Action Council (EMEAC)

Poet and MC

Member of the Organizing Committee for the U. S. Social Forum in Detroit in 2010

Introduction

I honor the theme of hip hop southern sounds, even though I'm from Detroit. My family migrated from Georgia and Mississippi, from the 1940s to the 1970s.

Migration and urban rebellion are key themes for us to consider.

My approach will be to focus on the practice and praxis of hip hop, rather than covering the details presented by historians.

I have a cultural organizer's passion for finding the points of intersection and impact.

The transition from the Blues to hip hop has led to hip hop becoming a global commercial force and an image of hyper-integrated black culture since it moved from the barrios and parks to the corporate board rooms.

How can we liberate ourselves from the corporations and their programs?

Individuals' answers to the question, **What is hip hop to me?**

Rebellion; youth; something created from oppression that gave life and liberation

How I learned about history in Chicago; the neighborhoods and what went on there

It speaks to a kind of liberation and self-determination.

Rebellion is youth and youth is rebellion. The black version of youth rebellion.

Poetry in action

A source of rich oral history

Memories of my brother introducing me to hip hop

A mystery with many contradictions

Life; a journey; for many, learning away from school; expressions of community involvement; struggle for authenticity. Many see the forces controlling it and what goes into people's minds, with some negative messages like misogyny given more space.

Cultural experience lived out and projected onto people's lives in many ways, including dress and how they understand the world

Teachers teaching about life as it is, about what's happening; a window into what's real

Poetry, the beat, rhythm, creative expression, art, liberation; freeing people

Revolutionary expression of culture

Will: I'm surprised at the positive aspect of all of the responses; without identifying with all of hip hop, you still see it as having value.

Question answered after watching “The Signs,” a hip hop video about dealing with the media’s influence on underage drinking (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJKsHtLSTAE>):

What signs do you see about the connections between corporations and rap music?

Control over youth and over the rights to a song; the lack of copyright respect; the artist is eliminated from products’ brands.

Much of what we see in different communities has been canned by the beer companies; it should be for our culture, not for theirs.

There’s no resistance; youth are too ready to absorb whatever these artists say.

Capitalism coopts it.

Music in general involves people wanting to make money. Corporations sell the brands/images of a person to sell their products. They use all kinds of music, not just hip hop to get people to buy stuff. It is degrading to black women. They don’t portray men and women together building a family.

Brainwashing by the corporations; artists selling out and giving power to the corporations; wrong and evil things such as bad talk about women; drugs and sex as social problems. Hip hop is mirroring the community, but the corporations control it and determine what can go on the radio.

It’s not a true reflection of everything that’s going on. Showing very young children drinking is unreal. Some hip hop stars actually went to private schools.

Corporations and the music business are going to sell whatever they want to sell. Advertising involves a form of mind control.

Propaganda for smoking even though most people don’t smoke.

What is the cooptation for, beyond selling products? They are controlling how we see and relate to each other.

We said it is poetry; free style is special, not commercial. Why are they trying to control it?

The corporations have us on the idea of copyright, accepting the concept of intellectual property, which was created much earlier. Some people are pushing that idea, along with others. The structure of the bottom line of profit shifts the priorities of hip hop.

Big business controls most of what happens, from politics to art; there are so many hands in the pot, controlling images, forces, and institutions. Systems are set up to give certain images to groups as a way to strip the groups’ power. The introduction of other controlling images makes it easier for the majority to accept violence and materialism.

Media are central for communication, as sources of information. The corporate system tries to be complete and holistic, with something for everybody, including the CIA and FBI making money off of drugs. The news is more and more corporate. Entertainment reaches people who skip the news. Positive rap is a new approach. Even if you don’t buy the system, they still have products to offer you. We need a clear look at what we mean by “our culture,” identifying with a rap artist as if they were just anyone on the street and not someone specially prepared to be handed to our community. What is our culture and our community and how do we own it?

Product names are used in popular culture of all kinds, a form of product placements. What is displaced when they put those things in? What goods are displaced even though the artist wanted them? The attitude that you’re not an artist producing culture until you’re selling it downplays more people being involved in playing music.

The most commercialized and negative images of hip hop artists too often become some of the primary images of African Americans that most white people see.

The saying that every word brings forth a world has a context and a history. We relate to those words in particular ways; words trigger other thoughts. Hip hop articulates worlds. It’s been so profitable because some of the most profound things come out of struggles which provide a pathway to allow people to connect. This also makes it a profound vehicle for control and governance. In this period of history, society is governed by targeting the heart, desire, the fundamental things we long for. The plantation is a more powerful bond when a slave is in love with the master; the whip is easy to rebel against. Corporations have figured out how to use hip hop to educate and touch our desires. The signs are pathways of control. It’s like the O Jay’s song, “For the Love of Money,” when they say money will make you “do bad things with it,” a profound analysis of capitalism.

The images in the video need to be connected to the words as metaphors. Even the vibrations need to slow down so people can follow it. Culture is the immune system for oppressed people. It is dangerous for

the people in power if global movements can control their own culture.
We need to address the issue of when hip hop is or is not art. Art should liberate us and push us forward, give us something to grab onto. When it doesn't do that, it is no longer art.
No one is taking responsibility for the part of the culture that is happening. Someone who does well does not necessarily have P.R.; they promote what will get the music out.
The songs tend to be mad, confrontational. I can't relate to that image, so I don't watch those shows which depict black men as womanizers, even though many men are not like that. Young people buying into stereotypes can lead to the society becoming that all over again. We're still buying into the old syndromes. The Malcolm X movie shows people joining together to support him. I wonder where those leaders/people/images are today. We need different heroes. The rap stars should not be our role models.

Will's thoughts in reaction to those comments:

We, especially young people, need heroes. Are there heroes at Project South? Where are we expecting heroes to come from? Do we expect them to come from BET or the corporations as a whole? The people in charge of the news are sophisticated enough to include only bits of social commentary in the news. Getting the media's attention cannot be so central today; we can't depend on the media to do that for us. Every generation has a different relationship with media. Some live on line as much as in the world. The challenge of creating heroes is multi-disciplinary and deep.

A new environmental justice hip hop group is an example of a collective experience in Detroit to connect culture and liberation. We formed it in reaction to a banker lying when he claimed that he should be able to buy a lot of land because most of the land in Detroit is abandoned. There were massive protests against the sale, but the City Council still approved it. Does the community own the land or we going to sell it to the richest?

[I didn't catch some of what Will said here, but he may have been referring to a documentary about Detroit called "We're Not Ghosts." You can see his review of it through this link:
<http://www.ussocialforum.net/node/406>]

Song: "Own It." ("Anybody could be famous....Go out and own it....Will I make it is what I wonder....I wanna own it.")

Other examples from Detroit of the spirit of community and liberation connecting to hip hop:

A monthly event, Food Justice Friday, is produced by the Food Justice Task Force to create more discussion around healthy eating in order to help people avoid long-term health problems and disorders. These events include an open mic. We need to be able to choose better food than what is readily available. The youth need to identify with green vegetables instead of with pizza and chicken. At these events, young people can learn about and eat in the whole environment while hearing different songs. [For a brief introduction to Food Justice Friday, go to <http://common-breath.com/?p=2845>]

My music group is planning more performances, including at festivals.

Individuals from different social justice groups are putting a variety of things out there. A new group, Rise Up, did hip hop shows in different parks, with break dancing, boards for graffiti, a mic with a DJ. They encourage young people to participate, stimulating them to ask why they are rapping about things like OP (old people) trying to stimulate youth to think about new things, including different spiritual principles. One young man responded positively to political things put on facebook.

When a weekly event began that was organized by women of color in hip hop and that included a female MC, it was difficult for some people to accept. In the first meetings, the host had to check disrespectful behavior. Now the audience does it, showing a collective responsibility. This is an example of how to transform a space without isolating people and kicking them out, indicating that anyone who wants to be there has to grow and accept and internalize certain principles.

One expert on Detroit hip hop history believes the social justice groups are helping a hip hop gallery because the artists at that gallery can put their messages in a language that more people will listen to. They are showing new ways to flip misogyny and criminal injustice. They're reaching the hip hop community, not by asking hip hop people to change but by

developing a relationship that will lead to their deciding to change.

Young Educators Alliance (YEA) participated in producing a video, "Take Da Houses Back," about single mothers moving into abandoned houses with the help of Occupy. They taped a woman and various things that show the cost of living going up. They then put her messages into music, rapping for the court to allow the women to take the house back. This is a way for hip hop to maneuver with the other organizers.

We need entertainment justice because we've had a long history of unjust entertainment. The youth today are sophisticated listeners but are used to being entertained. Their attention span is hitched into an entertainment process that leads to their figuring out the truths, as opposed to reading essays that tell them the truths. We need to combine messages with entertainment to socialize people positively.

Too many poets and musicians today are wishy-washy, avoiding confrontational, challenging music like Public Enemy's "Fight the Power." The ability of the Governor of Michigan to appoint emergency managers has meant that over 60% of black people in Michigan are now under them. They've abandoned city councils. By imposing a neo-colonial form of labeling black cities as failed and incompetent, they can engage in fast privatization, with no public process. They are able to do whatever they want to do

Performance by Will of his new song, "Emergency." (See handout for the words.)

Answers to the question, **What can entertainment justice look like for your community?**

Operation Peace activists using hip hop for public speaking with kids. Hip hop can gain the attention of kids who ordinarily do not listen to people trying to teach them. I have memories from childhood back home, skipping class and being involved in talent shows. I want the kids to connect with the non-evil version of hip hop. Using hip hop as a business has been a tool used to get the kids. I'm tired of going to movies and laughing at myself, but I enjoy spinning to hip hop. Empowering our kids is the first step. My daughter is mentally able to turn any negative situation into something positive. We don't listen to the radio, so it won't be embedded in her.

Women in music videos were portrayed in a materialistic way when I was young. Parents need to help children see beyond that. Kids are being raised without much parental involvement in their everyday life, relying on outside forces, putting children with nannies. It's a shame, but it's the reality. What do we do to give children better care?

I'm too old to relate to hip hop; it's so negative; I didn't let my kids listen to it, which embarrassed them, but I did play jazz for them. One friend convinced them jazz could be cool. I introduced them at a young age to alternative approaches. I'm now raising a grandson with no radio, so we listen only to jazz or kid's songs. I don't like the negativity. It's degraded, the way they dress, the way some of us carry ourselves. It's going to a hard turnaround for our neighborhood; we copy what we see.

At the Final Four show last weekend at Centennial Park, people dressed in overly sexy ways, with body parts showing and using negative language. Little kids watched the adults and were fed alcohol. We don't have enough martyrs any more willing to die for the cause

I stay quiet about these issues because I know I'm alone. Where are our heroes?

Spending time with some of the young people, I'm amazed at their knowledge and what I'm learning about hip hop. There is a struggle between the language of the colonizers and that of the decolonizers. Cultural production should come from our cultural workers. We should fight for that kind of change. I am concerned about people suffering without cultural production to help them. Lawyers are not enough and they don't put investments back into the entertainment community. We need to deal with environmental racism, the intentional poisoning of our community. We used to do theater; today, we're too embarrassed and ashamed. In the 21st century, we can see what was built and changed in the 20th. We now need to put things back into our communities, stop the destruction and the deaths at the border, in Detroit, in New Orleans, and in many other places.

As a young artist, I do music for everybody. My grandmother can listen to my music and feel mellow. I'm an organizer putting the art into the community to benefit my people and to use music as a tool to inspire young people. This culture is us because our people created it. I'm doing it to show how I want the world to be, trying to get us out of this box that we've been forced into.

[Loud sirens interfered with hearing well at this point, so I missed some specific comments about using tools called entertainment.]

We've lost the art of holding a celebration. We need to reclaim the block party and our culture.

Writing: **How can we connect entertainment justice to dismantle cultural denomination and colonial or neocolonial programming here in the U. S. South?**

Niqua will be leading the last class, which has been postponed until April 24.

This summation of the main points made at the third class of the Course on Culture and Liberation in the U. S. South on April 10, 2013 is selective, to some extent organized by topic rather than in the order in which they were stated, and often paraphrased. I encourage anyone who was present to suggest additions or corrections.