

Condry, Ian
 2000 "The Social Production of Difference: Imitation
 and Authenticity in Japanese Rap Music." In *Transactions,
 Transgressions, and Transformations*. Heide Fehrenbach and Uta
 G. Poiger (eds.). New York: Berghahn Books. Pp. 166-184.

NOTICE: This Material May Be
 Protected By The Copyright Law
 Of The United States
 (Title 17, U.S. Code)

- Eight -

THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF DIFFERENCE

Imitation and Authenticity
 in Japanese Rap Music

Ian Condry

... Japanese rap is the real thing... For us, raised in a different environment and different language, Japanese rap by rappers raised in the country is much more 'real' (*riaru*) than American rap.

- Ben the Ace, Japanese DJ¹

No matter how much one likes black music and culture, both were born from the situations blacks faced, and the burden of their history and fate. In some ways, it was a brutal process (resistance against whites, the need to be proud of their own identity, their unique labor in the midst of poverty, etc.). If you consider this, I can't help but question the shallow, superficial imitation (*mane*) of us Japanese.

- Reader's letter to a Japanese hip-hop magazine²

As American hip-hop artists devote themselves to "keeping it real," Japanese rappers and fans debate what exactly "real" means in a locale far removed from rap's origins. In Japan, the second largest music market in the world, what started as a dance fad and a style of singing in the early 1980s has grown to become what some call a "hip-hop culture" that encompasses fashion, break dance, graffiti,

and rap music. In the mid-1990s, Japanese rappers even produced their own million-selling hits. What happens when rap music is appropriated by Japanese musicians? How do they overcome contradictions involved in bringing hip-hop across cultural and linguistic boundaries? A lively local debate over whether it is possible for Japanese to produce "real" hip-hop, or whether it is all simply imitation, provides an intriguing example of ways that global popular culture is forcing a reconsideration of the relationship between locality and identity. In particular, the discourse surrounding rap music in Japan shows how constructions of class, ethnicity, and gender are influenced by the appropriation of American mass culture.

This speaks to an enduring question: How does one evaluate the local influence of foreign culture? Whether as "diffusion," "cultural imperialism," or "domestication," a recurring problem is how to analyze such phenomena without essentializing either the local or the foreign culture.³ Analyses are likely to begin with the notion that there are such entities as "Japanese culture" or "hip-hop" and then set out to explore their interaction. But the images from American hip-hop also contribute to Japanese youths' understanding of what Japan is, and conversely Japanese rap may be altering hip-hop as well. In this situation, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson urge anthropologists to explore "the processes of *production* of difference in a world of culturally, socially, and economically interconnected and interdependent spaces."⁴ Hip-hop music in Japan offers a useful vehicle for this type of analysis. In the genre's marketing, its representation in the media, and in the efforts of local rappers to produce an indigenous version of the style, the assertion of "authenticity" contributes to the social construction of class, ethnicity, and gender. For some, hip-hop is above all an outgrowth of black culture, born from the challenges faced in the ghettos of the United States. But for many Japanese youth, rap offers a way of distinguishing themselves from mainstream Japanese, especially as a kind of generational protest. Due to space limitations, I am less concerned here with the reception of rap music. Instead, this essay focuses on the perspectives of Japanese rappers as they try to interpret hip-hop into an authentic Japanese idiom.

There are concurrently processes of production of sameness. In Japan, the 1980s was perhaps the decade of "internationalization" (*kokusaika*), but the catch phrases of the 1990s—"borderless world" and "globalization"—suggest a new conceptualization of links around the world. In regard to music as well, the idiom of a "global hip-hop culture" is promoted by record companies and print media, as well as American and Japanese rappers. The "B-Boy" fashion of droopy,

oversized pants, baseball caps, and Nike sneakers is currently a leading style for teenage boys in the fashionable Tokyo districts of Shibuya and Harajuku.⁵ It is a style recognizable to anyone familiar with American high school students. Specialty record shops in Tokyo provide the same twelve-inch record releases as are available in New York City within a couple weeks of their U.S. release. Also available in Japan are magazines reporting on the latest rap music trends, both in English (*The Source*, *Vibe*, *Rap Pages*, etc.) and in Japanese (*Blast* [formerly *Front*], *Black Music Review*, *Remix*, etc.). Satellite and cable broadcast of American MTV as well as Japanese music channels offers a chance to study the latest gestures, dance styles, and images of popular rappers. Contrasting their sense of a dearth of information in the 1980s, Japanese DJs and rappers note that nowadays they can experience the latest sounds and news in “real time” (*riaru taimu*), thus collapsing the sense of distance between the Tokyo scene and the rap scene in the United States.

Still, one wonders what exactly is conveyed through this extended media and music industry network. In what sense can there be a “global” hip-hop culture? What is shared? What differences are elided? By what processes are new boundaries and new interconnections being produced through the diffusion of this style? One might think that with such global flows, the question of “authenticity” would disappear as people come to accept the playful pastiche of contemporary music. But if anything, the question of what is real seems as important as ever. During twenty months of fieldwork in Tokyo between 1994 and 1997, I found that the most common reaction to my project on Japanese rap was, “Isn’t it merely imitation?” (*mane dake jya nai no ka*). Whether it was Japanese adults looking askance at youthful exuberance towards hip-hop, or record company representatives leery of investing in a genre they worry will not sell, or music magazine editors believing that only African-Americans produce rap, or even Japanese rappers themselves observing the efforts of other rap groups, everyone was quick to use the idiom of imitation as their main criticism of the music. At one level, “imitation” can be interpreted as a gloss for “I don’t like the music,” but deeper probing reveals that the discourse of authenticity relates to central assumptions about the relationship between music and identity.

In this essay, I discuss the identity politics surrounding rap music in Japan with particular attention to class, ethnicity, and gender. Rap music’s origins in black, urban America make it an instructive case. It is tempting to interpret hip-hop music as the voice of marginalized blacks, but this approach falls into a trap: we would have to decide

who, among the cacophony of voices, is the authentic representative—and of whom. A similar pitfall appears if one interprets Japanese rap as the voice of that country’s youth. Instead, I suggest following Simon Frith’s assessment that “we should be asking not what does popular music *reveal* about ‘the people’ but how does it *construct* them.” He adds:

The most misleading term in cultural theory is, indeed, “authenticity.” What we should be examining is not how true a piece of music is to something else, but how it sets up the idea of “truth” in the first place—successful pop music is music which defines its own aesthetic standard.⁶

This idea of truth is closely related to the discourse on imitation and authenticity. With regard to rap music in Japan, how are the lines drawn? What do the distinctions tell us about how popular music is used in the social construction of identity in Japan? In the next section, I discuss how rap’s association with lower-class Americans gives the music a particular authority among middle-class Japanese. Then I discuss race and ethnicity in Japan, and the current appeal of “black culture.” Finally, I examine how gender is related to different types of Japanese rap music. In conclusion, I explore the issue of globalization and how popular culture constructs and transcends social boundaries.

Class: Ghetto, Street, and Club

Many academic treatments of hip-hop emphasize its emergence from an ethnically marked, lower-class context. Tricia Rose, for example, gives the following definition:

Hip hop is an Afro-diasporic cultural form which attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community. It is the tension between the cultural fractures produced by postindustrial oppression and the binding ties of black cultural expressivity that sets the critical frame for the development of hip hop.⁷

Other histories of hip-hop focus on musical influences⁸ or African traditions,⁹ but in each case the genre is linked to a history of collective experience. Rap music and black culture become entwined and mutually construct each other at least partly, one could assume, in a (laudable) effort to valorize the identity of a marginalized people. A theoretical problem arises, however, when one tries

to explain the development of hip-hop outside of the “critical frame” that Rose identifies. How are we to understand the development of hip-hop in Japan?

Hip-hop’s appropriation in Japan is not easily mapped by class distinctions. Rather, the music appealed to people, especially youth, who were dissatisfied with the current range of music options. One Japanese writer explains:

Although hip-hop was born as a street level music of underclass blacks, when it crossed the ocean to the East it was consumed as the “most up-to-date trend.” This discovery was linked to a certain timing, because New Wave music was losing steam and in decline. Hip-hop grabbed the attention of the people who were searching for the new style of rock. So naturally, immediately after it was imported it was never established as music rooted in street culture.¹⁰

In Japan, rap is always represented as “street” (*sutoriito*) music, an implicit reference to class. But while some of the early Japanese hip-hopppers were lower middle class, in general it was not people on the margins who took to the new style. Hence, hip-hop was never rooted in “street culture,” but is better considered club music, which in 1980s Tokyo meant all-night discos. In this context, the style offered a certain degree of cultural capital.

Break dancing, hip-hop’s striking visual aspect carried through movies and live shows, was what first inspired emulation in Japan. In 1982, a low-budget hip-hop movie called *Wild Style* was shown in Tokyo theaters. Performers who appeared in the movie, such as the New York City break dance team Rock Steady Crew, came to Japan at the same time and performed in Tokyo discos. Although the ghetto origins were poorly understood by the audience, the toughness and originality of the style clearly offered some of those present a challenging recreation and a way to show off. Crazy-A, one of the earliest and most successful break dancers in Japan, says hip-hop offered him an alternative to his bad-boy teenage ways.

After all, hip hop has an aspect of battle in it. So, instead of fighting, I started with hip hop, and quit the violence. You see, you can fight and get stronger, but—how can I put it?—in the end, nothing of substance remains inside you. It’s not as if there are brawling tournaments or anything, so nothing lasts. But with dance, there are competitions and a sense of accomplishment stays with you. You can say, I’m number one, and appeal to an audience. And that gives you something lasting.¹¹

Every Sunday, Crazy-A and other break dancers could be found performing in Tokyo’s street-musician haven Yoyogi Park right alongside

rock ‘n’ roll dancers and punk bands. MC Bell, another rapper who started as a break dancer, says that as a teenager he learned the moves in a disco from a black American serviceman stationed in Japan.¹² Break dancing offered a sharp contrast to the Eurobeat and disco styles then the norm, and ensured that he would stand out in a nightclub. Thus, class figured in several ways with rap’s origins in Japan. On the one hand, fans needed money to buy the expensive and rare rap albums in the early days. On the other, some of today’s Japanese rappers were lower-middle-class teenagers who had skipped school and spent a lot of time in nightclubs.

Over time, rap music’s association with lower-class African-Americans became more widely known. Now the style offers Japanese youth a way to set themselves apart from what they see as the country’s homogeneous mainstream. Every year, the prime minister’s survey announces again that 90 percent of Japanese consider themselves middle class.¹³ Ideal typifications of what this middle-class lifestyle means are also widely shared: rice-winner father, education mama, and two samurai school children.¹⁴ Rap music’s link with black Americans from the ghetto gives it particular strength. Similar to white suburban youth who revel in the gun-toting, drug-slitting fantasies of gangsta rappers, Japanese youth far removed from violence in the streets admire the gritty “reality” espoused by hip-hop’s toughs. Even so, it is not the pithy analysis of police brutality or clever turn of phrase that explains the appeal. The various meanings of rap lyrics are mostly lost on Japanese listeners. Instead, the angry attitudes, the swear words (also learned from American movies), and the recorded sirens and gunshots all promote images of what it means to be from the projects. For Japanese fans, the music sounds cool (*kakkoi*), it has a good groove (*noriga it*), and when it is good, it is “seriously bad” (*maji yabai*). Spectacular live shows promote an image that American rappers are from a completely different (and more exciting) world. When Cake-K, one of the earliest Japanese rappers, recalls attending a Public Enemy concert in 1989, he mentions the security guards standing on stage, dressed in military fatigues and armed with fake automatic machine guns. At one point, the security men feigned spraying the audience with gunfire. “It was amazing!” (*sugokatta*), he says, “I’d never seen anything like it.”¹⁵ In the late 1980s, all Japanese rap groups had their own “security” striking imposing postures on stage.

Initially, Japanese rappers’ main worry was not that they were from a too different class setting to produce rap, but that the Japanese language was hopelessly ill-suited to the style. In interviews

during 1994, rappers complained that since Japanese was unaccented (English is accented), it was exceedingly difficult to give their lyrics the rhythmic bounce necessary to rap. Some groups even tried rapping in English, though these experiments were abandoned in light of limited audience appeal. Rappers also complained that the grammatical structure of the language made it difficult to produce engaging rhymes. Japanese sentences are generally subject-object-verb, and, with the limited number of verb endings, rhyming options appeared lacking. Musicians experimented with enjambment (splitting a sentence into several lines) and adding English phrases. They also artificially added stress to Japanese to make it “sound like English.”

Language is a central idiom for identity, and perhaps particularly so in Japan, given the conservative tendency of so-called “Japan theory” (*nihon-ron*) arguments that the Japanese are unique in part because of the Japanese language.¹⁶ One often hears in Japan that everyone speaks the same language, but this assertion disguises an underlying diversity. Along with regional dialects, there is a wide range of slang associated with generational cohorts and gender. Japanese rappers in effect create a new dialect by rapping Japanese with a punctuated rhythm, and adding English words to make compelling rhymes. These linguistic features may add to the shock value of Japanese rap, but what is more important, they work to produce social difference by setting apart youthful rap musicians and fans from mainstream Japanese.

By 1996, complaints about the limitations of the language had largely disappeared, as a growing number of Japanese rap releases were deemed successful. Ineffective “flow,” as an individual’s vocal style is called, is now blamed on the rapper, not the language. Indeed, there is a definite pride in clever uses of Japanese. Rappers say that the main defining feature of Japanese rap is that it is in Japanese. During live shows, what little English was used is gradually disappearing.¹⁷ Contemporary Japanese rappers also laugh embarrassedly that they imitated the security guards of American rap groups. They are clearly rethinking rap’s relation to the Japanese context. With the recent explosion of available information about hip-hop’s origins,¹⁸ however, fans who want to feel they are a part of “hip-hop culture” are faced with a dilemma. They come to understand the connections between rap music and the lives of American rappers—living in the ‘hood, being black and often poor, and growing up with a range of funky music to draw on for samples and lyrical themes. But they also realize they cannot be what the American rappers are. Or can they?

Race and Ethnicity: To Dread or Not

aoi me no eijian, eirian	blue-eyed Asian, alien
chijirekke no eijian, eirian	wavy-haired Asian, alien
eijian wa kokujin ni naritai	Asians want to be black people
eijian wa hakujin ni naritai	Asians want to be white people

– ECD, “Aoi me no eijian” [Blue-Eyed Asian] from the album
ECD (File Records, 1992, 26MF035D)

One of the most conspicuous features of rap’s popularity in Japan is the number of Japanese youth who have adopted “dread hair” (*doreddo heaa*) or “afros,” in addition to hip-hop fashion. Some people even frequent tanning salons to darken their skin.¹⁹ In Japanese, the construction “to tan” can be glossed “to become black” (*kuroku naru*), and it seems as if some of these hip-hop fans wish to do just that. To understand why this is considered attractive by some, we need to examine race and ethnicity in Japan, and the way it is related to rap music.

Ethnicity is, of course, a key fault line in the social production of difference. An oft-cited contrast with the U.S., a multiethnic nation, is that in Japan everyone has the same skin, eyes, and straight, black hair. At the level of official government discourse, the notion of Japan as a land of “one people” (*tan’itsu minzoku*) serves to disguise domestic inequality while promoting a harmonious image of the country’s economic ascendance. In an infamous 1986 speech, then prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone praised Japan as a high-level information society, and noted that “in America, there are many blacks, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, and on the average America’s level [of intelligence] is still extremely low.”²⁰ But identifying the Japanese as a single people effectively excludes residents of Japan who have been denied full citizenship, such as the over half-million “Koreans” who were born and raised in Japan, as well as the roughly three million *burakumin*, who are still stigmatized based on links to the former outcast group.²¹ It is arguable that women as well are excluded as full citizens—if not under law, at least in official practices. The prevalence of ethnic conflict in the U.S. is well known in Japan, usually in sensationalist terms, as in the coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles riots and the O. J. Simpson trial. While there is a general understanding that racial problems are ever present in the U.S., rappers have a special relationship to those problems: they are the ones speaking openly and forcefully about such issues from a position of marginality. Although the English lyrics are difficult for Japanese listeners to understand, Japanese releases of albums usually contain

translations of the songs, and music magazine reviews often describe the themes of the albums.

At the same time, these music magazines represent hip-hop as an African-American genre. In the issue of *Music Magazine* that named their top ten picks of 1994, the albums in the category “rap” were all by African-American artists.²² American rap-influenced musicians who were not black fared well, but only in other genres. For example, in the category “rock (America)” one writer described the top three albums as “mixture rap” (Beastie Boys), “folk rap” (Beck), and “blues rap” (G. Love and Special Sauce), all of which were produced by white musicians.²³ Similarly, record stores tend to categorize hip-hop as “Western music” (*yōgaku*) and within that as “black music” (*burakku myūjikkū*). “Japanese rap” sections have appeared in the larger Tokyo record stores, but they are grouped with Japanese music. In realms closer to the core of devoted hip-hop fans and musicians, however, these boundaries are being redrawn. In specialty record shops that deal only in hip-hop LPs (twelve-inch analog on vinyl), there is no spatial distinction between Japanese and American rap music, and both appear side by side on wall racks. In hip-hop clubs, American rap dominates, but Japanese rap is getting increasing time on the turntables. When American rap groups perform in Japan, there are always Japanese rappers as the front act. In 1996, it was not uncommon for several thousand copies of analog releases of Japanese rap to sell out in less than a week, a sign that for a growing number of rap consumers, Japanese artists have been able to accommodate being both Japanese and hip-hop.

Older Japanese dismiss youthful interest in hip-hop as a simplistic adoration of anything American, but, significantly, rap fans are more likely to point to “black culture,” not “American culture,” as the source of their fascination. A rapper who calls himself You the Rock draws on black history to explain his appreciation for the music.

My school took an intensely moralistic approach to education, and from second and third grade of elementary school they were teaching us about Malcolm X, Dr. King, Lincoln, even Uncle Tom. They taught it all. So when I heard BDP and Public Enemy, I understood it. All of it was real (*riaru*). For example with *buraku* discrimination, even though they are people just like us, they can't get jobs, they can't get married. From when I was little, I saw it with my own eyes, and it pissed me off. At that time, there were Japanese [pop] groups like BOØWY and Rebecca, but I just didn't get it. Then one day, on a TV show called “11pm,” I saw Run-DMC. I ran to the record store the next day.²⁴

Because of its association with black struggle, rap music has an authority that Japanese pop music lacks. But when You the Rock considers oppression in a Japanese context, he does not say he suffered from racial discrimination, but rather that his family was looked down on in the neighborhood because of a chaotic home life (hot-tempered parents, many stepsiblings, and so on).²⁵ In this way, the social protest aspect of hip-hop is reinterpreted into an idiom of injustice in Japan, most often as a kind of generational protest.

As John Russell notes regarding some characters in recent Japanese literature, “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.”²⁶ For some Japanese hip-hoppers, the style of dread hair is a way to illustrate a desired affiliation with African-Americans, while also defying the authority of their parents and teachers. A rapper who goes by the name of Kreva explained that he had two reasons for his dreads: first, to stand out (*medachitai*); and second, to show respect for black culture (*kokujin bunka ni resupekuto*). Nina Cornyetz argues that for young Japanese fond of hip-hop style “blackness is frequently affixed to an antecedent erotic subtext that fetishizes black skin as symbolic of phallic empowerment.”²⁷ I agree that sex appeal is likely to be a goal for youths who kink their hair at beauty salons and darken their skin. This is at best, however, a limited explanation for Japanese interest in hip-hop, because not surprisingly only a small fraction of the fans go so far as to put chemicals in their hair or to lay under the lamps.

Also, there is considerable debate as to whether changing one's hair is an appropriate sign of respect. In a monthly column aimed at Japanese B-Boys, the rapper Zebra addresses the issue as part of his response to the second quotation at the opening of this chapter criticizing the “shallow, superficial imitation of us Japanese.”

Imitation is not good, imitation itself. It doesn't necessarily follow, but I often wonder about Japanese who perm their hair into dreads. It's well known that Malcolm X, when he was young and didn't know any better, went so far as to put strong, burning chemicals on his scalp so that he could have straight hair like those he admired: white people living elegant lives. But even so, I'd like you all to consider how similar that is with Japanese forcing their hair into dreads.²⁸

Thus, some hip-hop musicians and fans (probably a majority) see the adoption of dark skin and curly hair as a mere superficial imitation that contradicts a key element of keeping hip-hop real, namely,

being true to who you are. Another rapper, MC Shiro of the group Rhymester, asserts, "We do not want to be black, although there are lots of Japanese kids that do; we love hip-hop, the music."²⁹

Indeed, Zebra rejects commonsense association of hip-hop with American blacks.

Also, 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. It may be going too far to say so, but I have black hip-hop friends who feel this way. To fight the chaos together, and with all our hearts to spread hip-hop, I am certain that this is the greatest respect that can be paid to the originators.³⁰

Zebra makes a case that spreading hip-hop, and protesting injustice, is the defining feature of a "hip-hopper" and one that transcends ethnic, national, and cultural boundaries. He is also rebutting the implicit argument that middle-class Japanese kids have no right to appropriate ghetto music by arguing that the greatest form of respect towards the creators is to enlarge the circle of hip-hoppers. At this end of the spectrum, ethnicity is no boundary at all, and the transnational identity of "hip-hopper" becomes a meaningful possibility.

Gender: Party Rap vs. Underground Hip-Hop

In 1995, East End X Yuri (the "X" is read "plus") burst onto the scene with several hit songs.³¹ Success in the marketplace signaled a certain kind of authenticity to the decision-makers in record companies and the media, prompting a flurry of label signings and a surge of publicity for the genre that had been largely underground. Some commentators hailed the birth of a new genre they called "J-Rap." At the same time, a debate among hip-hoppers about the relationship between "hip-hop culture" and commercialism began to heat up. In concerts, some groups would make a point of saying they were "not J-Rap" but rather "Japanese hip-hop" (*nihon no hippu hoppu*), prompting raucous cheers from the fans. As it turns out, these cheers were not only about being true to an image of what hip-hop should be, but also about the differences between boys and girls.

Among rap fans themselves there is a sharp difference between what men and women consume. Although it is an overgeneralization, one could characterize two trends in contemporary Japanese rap, namely, party rap and underground hip-hop, both of which share many common features. Japanese rappers and DJs tend to be

in their twenties, and with few exceptions they hold part-time or full-time jobs, or are students. Over 90 percent of these hip-hop musicians are male. Although an increasing number of women are becoming active on the scene, most often as DJs and break dancers, there are few female rappers. Two examples are RIM, who aims for an underground sound, and a party rap group called NowNow, reminiscent of early TLC. But with the exception of Yuri, who recorded with East End, female rappers have yet to gain much status. In contrast, 1999 is witnessing a "Japanese R&B" boom, with attractive young women singing melodic songs on top of hip-hop beats (e.g., Misia, Utada Hikaru, Double, and Rima). These women are not rappers per se, but they often release remixes or maxi singles that feature male Japanese rappers. Hip-hop dancers show a more even split (about 60 percent are male). The fans of Japanese rap are generally in their teens and early twenties, and are mostly students and part-time workers (*furiitaa*).

Party and underground styles differ in terms of themes, audience, production, and marketing. Party rap tends to have light, funny lyrics that speak of themes from everyday life (e.g., video games, dating, teenage love songs). The most striking feature is that the audience for party rap is over 90 percent female, even though virtually all of the artists are male. Record company representatives I have interviewed contend that women, especially teenage girls, are the main consumers of pop music in Japan. One A&R spokesperson stated that females make up around 80 percent of the hit song market. Major record labels deal almost exclusively with party rap. Representative groups include Scha Dara Parr, East End X Yuri, and Dassen Trio. Such rappers also seem more sanguine about commercial success as a goal. Their live shows tend to be in larger venues like auditoriums or concert halls. They are also regularly featured in wider circulation teen fashion magazines. In contrast, underground hip-hop tends to be more abstract, darker, and at times in opposition to mainstream Japanese society. The audience is 80 percent male, and independent labels are the main producers of records. Specialty magazines, free papers, and flyers at record stores and clubs are the main sources of information on these rappers. Groups such as King Giddra, Microphone Pager, and Rhymester would fall into this category. Their live shows tend to be monthly events in (literally) underground clubs that hold at most a couple hundred people. Underground rappers tend to emphasize being true to who they are, regardless of whether it leads to pecuniary rewards.

It would be a mistake, however, to view party rap as superficial and (therefore) feminized. In my opinion, some underground rappers have a tendency to take themselves too seriously, posing on-stage in

a shallow caricature of toughness. Furthermore, party rappers are often quite insightful about Japanese society, in particular the concerns facing youth. The largest selling party rap song to date, East End X Yuri's single "Maicca," reached number three on the pop charts and sold over a million copies in 1995. What is interesting is that the construction of gender relationships in the song is a sharp contrast to much of the male-centered rap of the United States. "Maicca" is youthful slang that translates roughly as "well, no problem, I guess." The female rapper Yuri sings about a clever, perhaps manipulative, Japanese woman deftly keeping her boyfriend(s) guessing. On a date, first she keeps a boy waiting outside, then falls asleep in the car, and finally, after ordering an expensive sushi meal, gets a call on her cellular phone. She answers, and says, "Oh, I am just having dinner with a girlfriend, I'll be there shortly" and hangs up. When her date asks who called, she replies, "Oh, it was a wrong number." The song returns to the refrain:

maikka ittoke maikka	Well, no problem, just say it, no problem
komatta toki wa saa maikka	When there's trouble, well, no problem
fukaku kangaenai de maikka	Don't think deeply, well, no problem
hiraki naotte maikka	Turn everything around, well, no problem

– East End X Yuri, "Maicca" from the album *denim-ed soul 2* (Epic/Sony, 1995, ESCB-1590)

Clearly, Japanese hip-hop does not always reproduce the all-too-frequent misogynist aspect of rap music in the States. Indeed, the most popular of the hip-hop groups in Japan seems to be achieving considerable success with songs depicting the Japanese woman who gets what she wants.

Among underground rap groups, the most characteristic is King Giddra. Composed of DJ Oasis and two rappers, Zebra and K Dub Shine, the group is widely respected for rapping about serious issues in Japan. Both Zebra and K Dub Shine have spent years in the U.S., and carry a certain amount of authority (and coolness) for this experience. Their songs, interviews, and writings illustrate a conceptualization of Japanese rap that sees it as part of hip-hop culture. Originally, King Giddra was a three-headed monster that comes from outer space to battle Godzilla in a movie. Here is why the group chose that name.

First, we realized Godzilla is an international character that would represent (*repurezento*) an international Japan. But Godzilla himself, he's too much everywhere, so we settled on King Giddra. It's exactly us as a three-person group. Also, in the movie King Giddra is the bad guy, but

as a public enemy (*paburikku enamii*) he's doing an extremely positive thing, right? That is, as an enemy of the public, we are an enemy of the system that oppresses us. We see the system as the enemy, and for us, Godzilla is the system. We're like "planetary defense forces" [laughs]. For those who don't understand, we've come to tell the truth.³²

For these rappers authentic hip-hop must embody opposition to authority. The "system" King Giddra opposes takes various forms. The seductive and destructive power of commercialism is portrayed in the song "The Birth of a Star" (*Sutaa tanjō*), which tells the story of a young woman who comes from the countryside to Tokyo to become famous as a singer, but who is tricked into the sleazy underworld of pornographic films. King Giddra also has sharp words for Japan's education system.

kodomo tachi no yume made hakai shite kita gakureki shakai umaku dekita kai? daigaku dereba ii shūshoku asameshi mae ni kutta yūshoku mae ni kutta chūshoku kurai no mono kyōiku mama yūrai wa sono an'i kangae angai kawatte kiteru n jya nai? tada sore damatte miteru n jya nai? kotoshi no daisotsu no koyō chōsa kimaranu yatsu no ōsa sō sa yon'bun no ichi ga mada maji hanahada okashiku tte hanashi ni naranai n da tada	The "credentials society" crushes the dreams of even children, that's a good thing? You graduate from college and you get a good job It's the easiest thing in the world, done even before eating breakfast It's that simplistic thinking that leads to education mamas But things are changing, aren't they And aren't you just shutting up, and watching it happen This year's survey of col grads employment says that almost a quarter of them still have no job, Seriously, that makes it nothing more than empty talk
shinjitsu no dangan ga meichū nōsaibō ni yukkuri shimeichū (x4)	The bullet of truth makes a direct hit Slowly redirecting your brain cells (x4)

– King Giddra, "Shinjitsu no dangan" [Bullet of Truth] from the album *Sora kara no chikara* [The Power from the Sky] (P-Vine/BluesInteractions, 1995, PCD-4768)

In contrast to party rap's "don't think too deeply," this song illustrates that speaking out is a defining feature of underground hip-hop's aesthetic.

Of course, there are many other variations, and, indeed, one could say there are as many styles as there are rap groups. Nevertheless, the distinction is important for understanding how the music constructs its own idea of the authentic. Party rap groups tend to take the style of rap vocals and music construction, but reject the notion that one needs to be oppositional, angry, or negative. They would argue that this is simply imitating a style that is out of place in Japan and inappropriate for their carefree audience. For underground hip-hop, party rappers take only a superficial view of rap, and ignore the cultural and historical background that gives the music its unique strength and meaning.

Conclusion

To create Japanese rap, musicians need to overcome the tensions entailed in bringing hip-hop from one setting to another. I discussed these in terms of class, ethnicity, and gender. There is no objective measure that can settle the question of whether this or that artist is an “authentic” rapper, but such evaluations offer keys to understanding how popular culture is used to construct and transcend societal boundaries. The two quotations at the opening of this essay offer examples. If rap is defined as an outgrowth of black culture, it constructs that culture at the same time. If Japanese rap is considered real for its youthful Japanese audience, then it too helps construct that audience. Thus, the development of Japanese rap music provides insight into more than simply pop aesthetics. Japanese rappers construct social boundaries through the decisions they make in appropriating hip-hop as their own.

Commercial channels provided the initial introduction of rap music in Japan. In the early 1980s, break dancing came first through the movies, and then appeared on Tokyo sidewalks on weekends. From 1989 on, a growing number of American rappers traveled to Japan to promote their albums, and more Japanese rappers were inspired to try rapping and DJing on their own. Over the years, Japanese DJs have honed their abilities to the point where, for example, DJ Krush has become a cult figure among hip-hop fans worldwide. Groups like Rhymester and EDU have collaborated with famous American producers. Most recently, graffiti has become more common in and around Tokyo, as the idea of the “four elements of hip-hop culture”—rap, DJ, break dance, and graffiti—becomes more widespread. This essay has focused on rap music, but each of these activities has involved moving between notions of

Japaneseness and of hip-hop, that is, between local identity and global pop culture.

In what sense is global pop culture actually “global”? When American rap music is enjoyed by Japanese listeners, it is not the lyrical wordplay or cogent political message that is appealing. It is the “cool” (*kakkoii*) sound, the good groove (*nori*), and the energy of the rapper’s delivery. Since the mid-1990s, there is information in Japanese magazines about what American rappers are saying for those who take the time to seek it out. What becomes interesting, however, is the way this mediated information is interpreted and then put into practice as Japanese rap music. These 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. In Japan, various styles have emerged over the years. I draw a contrast between the commercially successful party rap and the more socially and politically oppositional underground hip-hop, but in both cases the rappers are speaking to issues close to themselves and the lives they lead. In this sense, I agree with Ben the Ace, whom I quoted at the outset asserting that Japanese rap is more real for Japanese than American rap. To play on a famous slogan, all cultural politics is local. As the multinational entertainment industry disseminates music genres and images to distant places, theorists of cultural and social change face the task of evaluating their uses and effects. Drawing on the insights of Gupta and Ferguson, I argue that one of those key effects is to construct social and cultural boundaries.

Drawing images of the U.S. from American hip-hop, Japanese fans see their country as peaceful and boring, saturated with meaningless pop icons and lacking the excitement and “reality” of dangerous, inner city streets. But perceived similarities between Japanese and American rappers can provide a new perspective on life in Japan as well. George Lipsitz argues that transnational linkages can be formed through popular culture

to produce an immanent critique of contemporary social relations, to work through the conduits of commercial culture in order to illumine affinities, resemblances, and potentials for alliances among a world population that now must be as dynamic and as mobile as the forces of capital.³³

The rapper You the Rock mentioned above found in rap music a vehicle for expressing his anger at the discrimination faced by fellow Japanese. The group King Giddra argues that problems in Japan are too often ignored, watched in silence with a sense of resignation. For them, fans of hip-hop need to stare with a cold eye on

their surroundings to imagine ways that it could be better, and to learn that speaking up is the most important thing to do. Even the “don’t worry, be happy” rhymes of such party rappers as Yuri can be viewed as “message songs” for youth who spend numerous after-school hours in “cram academies.” For some, the spectacle of adopting dread hair and dark skin is a sign of respect for the obstacles overcome by black American artists. In these ways, we can see how popular culture, deployed in a new setting, takes on new meanings. As Japanese hip-hop matures, we are seeing more critical perspectives on Japan, including recent songs about homelessness, teen prostitution, and drug abuse. In the end, however, it is not “culture” that is exchanged, but rather expressive idioms that are situated in a new context. These new idioms work to build bridges between societies, and can also provide new meanings for local identity. Thus, rather than asking “what influence does foreign culture have?” we should examine how the ideas of foreign and local are produced through various practices, such as those arising in popular culture. Anthropologists and cultural theorists have a large stake in understanding what role these activities play in producing social differences in an increasingly interconnected world.

Acknowledgments

Research for this project was supported by Fulbright (September 1995–February 1997), and Yale University’s Council on East Asian Studies (June–July 1994). I would like to thank Bill Kelly, Heide Fehrenbach, Uta Poiger, and Shuhei Hosokawa for their critical comments. Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the American Ethnological Society Meetings (April 1995, Austin, Texas) and Columbia University’s Conference on East Asia (February 1995, New York City).

Notes

1. All translations by the author. Akihito Kobayashi, “Ben the Ace [interview],” *Front* 9, no. 19 (1996): 55.
2. Zeebra, “For the B-Boys Only: ‘mane’ jya naku ‘shōka ~ shōka’ de aru koto o rikai shiro” [It’s not “imitation” but “absorption ~ enlightenment” that one must understand] *Front* 9, no. 17 (1996): 94.
3. Tobin offers a valuable collection of papers on domestication. Tomlinson analyzes the discourse of cultural imperialism. Joseph J. Tobin, *Re-Made in Japan: Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society* (New Haven, 1992). John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1991).
4. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 14.
5. The term “B-boy” originally referred to “break boy,” that is, a break dancer, but more recently it indicates a fan of hip-hop. See S. H. Fernando, Jr., *The New Beats: Exploring the Music, Culture, and Attitudes of Hip-Hop* (New York, 1994), 5. In Japanese, the terms “B-Boy” and “hip-hopper” are used interchangeably.
6. Simon Frith, “Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music,” in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception*, ed. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (Cambridge, 1987), 137.
7. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, 1994), 21.
8. Fernando, *The New Beats*, chaps. 2 and 3.
9. George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (London, 1994), 36ff.
10. Atsushi Innami, “Japanese Hip-Hop Scene: *Risōteki na seijuku o togeta nihon no hippu hoppu shiin no jūnen* [10 years of Japan’s hip-hop scene and its achievement of ideal maturity],” in *Rap/Hip-Hop*, ed. Kiyomi Matsunaga (Tokyo, 1996), 200.
11. Crazy-A, interview with the author (1996).
12. MC Bell, interview with the author (1997).
13. William W. Kelly, “Finding a Place in Metropolitan Japan: Transpositions of Everyday Life,” in *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. A. Gordon (Berkeley, 1993), 195–97.
14. William W. Kelly, “Rationalization and Nostalgia: Cultural Dynamics of New Middle-Class Japan,” *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 4 (1986): 604ff.
15. Cake-K, interview with the author (1996).
16. Peter N. Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (London, 1986), 56–76.
17. For example, over the last couple of years, when rappers encourage the audience to join in some call-and-response, the English “Say ho!” has been replaced by the Japanese “*Ie yo ho!*” and “Now scream!” with “*Sawage!*”
18. Fernando, *The New Beats*, has been translated into Japanese as S. H. Fernando, Jr. *Hip Hop Beats*, trans. Atsushi Ishiyama (Tokyo, 1996). Books by a rapper named ECD and by music critic Matsunaga focus on American rap history and styles: ECD, *Perfect Beats* (Tokyo, 1996); Kiyomi Matsunaga, *Rap/Hip-Hop* (Tokyo, 1996). The first book to focus exclusively on Japanese rap history and styles is Tadashi Fujita et al., *Tokyo Hip-Hop Guide* (Tokyo, 1996).
19. Andrew Jones, “Black Like Me,” *Spin* (October 1993): 74–78.
20. Quoted in Marilyn Ivy, “Critical Texts, Mass Artifacts: The Consumption of Knowledge in Postmodern Japan,” in *Postmodernism and Japan*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian (Durham, N.C., 1989), 22.

21. George DeVos and H. Wagatsuma, *Japan's Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality* (Berkeley, 1966). DeVos and Wagatsuma refer to the *burakumin* as "Japan's invisible race" because they have no physical characteristics to distinguish them from other Japanese. *Burakumin* face discrimination due to an assumed pollution associated with certain types of occupations (e.g., butchering, executions). This impurity is regarded as inheritable via bloodline, which suggests that what once resembled a caste distinction is now treated more like a racial difference. For a concise history of their meaning and place in Japanese society, see Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *The Monkey as Mirror: Symbolic Transformations in Japanese History and Ritual* (Princeton, 1987), 75–100. For an excellent discussion of their political battles against discrimination, see Frank Upham, *Law and Social Change in Postwar Japan* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987).
22. Yoriko Kawachi et al., "Best 10: Rap," *Music Magazine* 27, no. 2 (1995): 68–69.
23. The albums are Beastie Boys, *Ill Communication* (Grand Royal/Capitol, 1994), Beck, *Mellow Gold* (Bong Road/Geffen, 1994), and G. Love and Special Sauce, self-titled (Okeh, 1994). Eiji Ogura, "Best 10: Rock (America)," *Music Magazine* 27, no. 2 (1995): 56.
24. Fujita, *Tokyo Hip-Hop*, 98.
25. *Ibid.*, 97–98.
26. John Russell, "Race and Reflexivity: The Black Other in Contemporary Japanese Mass Culture," *Cultural Anthropology* 6, no. 1 (1991): 20–21.
27. Nina Cornyetz, "Fetishized Blackness: Hip-Hop and Racial Desire in Contemporary Japan," *Social Text* 12, no. 1 (1994): 129.
28. Zebra, "For the B-Boys Only: *Mane jya naku* [not imitation]."
29. Rhymester, interview with the author (1996).
30. Zebra, "For the B-Boys Only: *Kaigai to onaji kankaku motteru nara jikoku no shi-in ni sanko shiro* [If you have the same sense as those overseas, you have to be part of the scene in your own country]," *Front* 9, no. 15 (1996): 90.
31. "Da.Yo.Ne" sold 992,980 copies and climbed to number seven on the Oricon chart. "Maicca" sold 1,044,720 copies and climbed to number three. Atsushi Inami, "East End X Yuri [Interview]," *Music Magazine* 28, no. 7 (1996): 41. Both singles were released by Epic/Sony. The songs also appear on the album *East End X Yuri, denim-ed soul 2* (Epic/Sony, 1995, ESCB-1590).
32. Ken Kido, "King Giddra [Interview]," *Remix* 55 (1996): 42.
33. Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*, 16–17.