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21M.775 Hip Hop, prof. Thomas DeFrantz

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Hip hop in America, besides being an integral part of pop culture, began as a lifestyle and art form that many people used as a means of self identification and community empowerment. Despite the fact that in recent years community empowerment and motivation for social change has become less prominent in American hip hop, it still holds immense power to effect social change on a large scale – power that artists in other countries are just beginning to tap. One of the most prominent places using hip hop as a means of reacting to a corrupt or unjust government is Bolivia, and specifically, the capital of La Paz/El Alto. Whereas in El Alto, the attitude, socioeconomic space, and ideals of hip hop are very similar to that of the original New York roots from whence hip hop came, there exist some staggering differences in the direction that hip hop in this area is moving, with respect to its interaction with young people and the government, as well as the environment or “hood” in which it is being created that lead to a very different portrait of a relatively new lifestyle in an equally troubled area. If hip hop activism can be described as “toothless” (DeFrantz:2006) here in the US, then Bolivian hip hop might be in the teething stage of its own development: the potential for a unified activist effort in Bolivian hip hop is still a great possibility.

In order to understand the development of hip hop culture in other areas of the world, it is useful to first understand how hip hop developed from its early years in America. Hip hop here started with the five elements that are typically recognized as composing hip hop: graffiti art, disc jockeying, break dancing, emceeing, and knowledge of self and the past. Emphasis in the creation of hip hop was on the “break beat”, which Davey D describes as being utilized first by DJ Kool Herc who started early raps by “shouting over the instrumental break... It wasn't long before people began drawing upon outdated dozens and school yard rhymes” (D, 2). Even in this early stage, where elementary rhymes were taken from what youth had heard growing up, individual style played a big role as “Many would add a little

twist and customize these rhymes to make them suitable for the party environment” (2). Thus, it was from the origin of the DJ that emceeing, the most prominent element of hip hop culture today, seems to have evolved.

Graffiti as a modern street art and element of hip hop developed around the same time as the other elements, however, writing on buildings and other public areas has roots as far back as ancient Rome, where Romans would draw politically charged images and messages in public spaces for all to see. Since then, up until the foundation was laid for graffiti back in the late 1960's “hippie era”, where people would again draw politically charged and critical images on the walls of buildings, street art was primarily used as a sort of public editorial. The graffiti movement of tagging, which became widespread with media coverage of Taki 183, a graffiti artist in New York, can then be analyzed in the familiar manner of hip hop visual culture as taking a trend and “turning it upside down” (Specter, 125).

As cited in the above example of graffiti, hip hop developed as a means of allowing young people, originally minorities who did not have other means to do so, a way of expressing themselves and reacting to the world around them. Davey D states “Rap caught on because it offered young urban New Yorkers a chance to freely express themselves. More importantly, it was an art form accessible to anyone. One didn't need a lot of money or expensive resources to rhyme.” (D, 3). It is perhaps for this reason that hip hop so easily became a basis for making young people aware of their own surroundings and politics.

Hip hop's era of consciousness in the US was started by Afrika Bambaataa, whose Zulu nation “were originally members of the black spades, one of NYC's largest and most feared gangs” (D:1991). Bambaataa stated that his group of reformed gangsters with a focus on break dancing provided a means of lowering the gang violence and drug dealing that they once participated in by providing urban youth with a means for channeling their energy into a viable alternative to gang life. Today, there is a distinction between the mainstream “pop” rap and so-called conscious rap, which is more prominent in the underground scene where it, unfortunately, does not always reach the correct audience to the extent

that it should. As a result, hip hop that has a clear intention in mind and fights to educate its listeners often is not as popular as other, less socially charged material.

Like New York at the early stages of hip hop, Bolivia is currently in a social and political crisis that spans the entire country, but most readily affects the poor and lower middle class people that constitute the majority of Bolivia's capital La Paz / El Alto areas. Although Bolivia has had a history of unrest between the public and the instated political system for much longer, the current conflict began in the early years of the new millennium. A major spark in the fire that is the current social uprising came from interference by the US in Bolivian politics, starting with the “forced eradication of Bolivia's staple crop, coca” as a result of the US's controversial “zero tolerance war on drugs”. While coca may be refined to create cocaine, it is “chewed to alleviate the effects of extreme altitudes and, owing to its high nutritional content, helps reduce malnutrition in impoverished Bolivia.” The US followed shortly after by threatening the congress of Bolivia to “cut off aid if they installed Evo Morales as president in the 2002 election” stating that Bolivia was attempting to instate a “narco-dictatorship” (Skeels).

Since the instatement of President Lozada, the young people of La Paz were especially active in Bolivian politics. During his first presidency from 1993 until 1997, Lozada “started the privatization of Bolivia's natural gas companies, as well as telecommunications and energy” (Chavez). This put the control of Bolivia's most abundant natural resources in the hands of private corporations in Brazil, Europe, and the US. In addition to the aforementioned eradication of coca plants this was another move that President Lozada made towards poverty for a vast majority of his country's citizens. By the end of his first presidency, Bolivia was one of the poorest countries in South America, despite being the richest in natural resources. His second term as President was short-lived, however, as an attempt by him to make deals with American gas companies to “pipe Bolivian natural gas through Chile for transport to North America” (Skeels) landed the largest political uprising that modern Bolivia has ever seen.

The “gas war” started in response to the aforementioned agreement to pipe gas to North America

with a hunger strike by congressman and campesino leader Felipe Quispe. The lower income, urban-rural “campesino” population of La Paz followed suit, resulting in thousands of other hunger strikes by the time Lozada was removed from the presidency in September of 2003. What is interesting about Lozada's forced resignation was the demographic of people that participated in the protests, who Benjamin Dangl, a freelance journalist and political activist in Bolivia, recalls; “the vast majority of which were in their mid-20's” (Dangl:2006). This is a stark contrast to the older view of the activist we have come to see in America, with such events as the Million Youth March turning out “about 6,000 people, while rganizers had expected 50,000” (AP:1998), while the Million Man March “... surpassed the 250,000 who gathered in 1963 for Martin Luther King Jr.'s historic "I Have a Dream" speech.” (Smithsonian:1995).

The staggering difference between the observed demographics of activists here in the US and those in Bolivia lead one to wonder what makes Bolivian youth more conscious of political events or rather, what makes these youth more active than those in the US? Abraham Borjorquez, a rapper in El Alto, had this to offer as an explanation “Young people in Bolivia are more directly affected by the government's decisions. In the US, the poor young person is an unheard minority... In El Alto, we are the majority” (Dangl:2006). Bojorquez describes that the govenment's decision, for instance, to allow coca crop eradication directly affected the young people of El Alto, who either worked on these crops themselves or whose parents worked the fields. In this manner, the “... the government is taking support right out of our pockets” (Dangl:2006). This is one major difference that outlines hip hop consumption in the US as opposed to that of Bolivia: In Bolivia, hip hop is still very young and the youth demographic has more in common with that of the original hip hop movement in the early 70's than to today's pop culture crowd. In fact, there is a dualism between the current hip hop generation in El Alto and the original US hip hop generation of the 70's. Whereas the US generation was physically cut off from the world by the building of an expressway through New York city, which shows the lack of influence these people had in their own government, government moves to privatize gas and eradicate

crops cutoff the youth of El Alto from their original rural/urban heritage.

The aforementioned rural/urban heritage is what separates the youth of El Alto from the underprivileged youth we saw in New York during the 70's. The space that is El Alto differs from that of New York on the basis that the chief source of income for much of the lower class, poor community in El Alto is agriculture. This leads to a sort of “Rural / urban mentality in the places that we in the US would call the projects. This meeting of rural and urban lifestyles has become increasingly prominent with the eradication of coca crops causing many to move into the poor areas of El Alto” (Dangl:2006). However, similar to the black youth of New York, the Bolivian hip hop generation is “discriminated against for being dark, for not having money.” (Ferero), and we see the same age old issue of color playing just as large a role in the development of Bolivian hip hop as it did in the US, as the poor youth of El Alto have a darker skin color than those from more wealthy areas on account of working farms for a living.

In hip hop throughout the world, there is an emphasis on “the real”, where hip hop should have some basis in the real life of the artists. This is often an issue of credibility, when rappers will often rhyme about things from their native “hood” and their past in drug dealing or gang banging, and the audience does not have a good sense of whether or not the events the rapper describes are factual or not. This also leads to hip hop artists having a large sense of “pride in their hood”, or the area that they grew up in. Hip Hop in El Alto is no exception as “youth in El Alto have a big sense of pride in their rural roots” (Dangl:2006), as can be seen in such songs as “Proud to be born in my Bolivia”, by Lyrical Urban Movement. Credibility has not yet become an issue with Bolivian artists as none of them are using hip hop as a source of income and often enjoy seeing their product “... sell robustly in the streets of El Alto, pirated by hundreds”, since what the rappers really want is there music to reach as many as possible and influence them (Forero).

It is clear that hip hop in Bolivia has not yet reached the fork in the road that separates commercial hip hop from the underground as hip hop in Bolivia has not yet been commercialized.

What this leads to is all artists who have a voice in the hip hop scene having credibility within their communities. This is important because, as Rosa Clemente, Jay Woodson, and a number of other urban studies scholars and journalists insist, “Hip Hop's contribution in the Black Liberation Movement will come from revolutionary activists leading a grassroots current” (Woodson), since the artists at the event are still considered part of the community in attendance. This is one thing that has proven to be a large obstacle faced by activist hip hop here in the states as large conferences such as HSAN, led by Russel Simmons, have attempted to get the hip hop generation involved by registering voters at shows, yet have shown little or no impact on the number of youth that turn out to vote. According to Craig Watkins, “.. the HSAN can enlarge its impact on politics by down-sizing its current vision... a focus on turning out the hip hop vote in key battleground states could be highly effective” (Watkins, 161).

Whereas the current state of hip hop activism in the US is in a conflict with itself in terms of size, political and street credibility, and actions taken by the generally passive consumers of the music, the state in El Alto is quite the opposite. The consumers of hip hop in Bolivia seem to have a much closer connection to the artists through a common struggle with the government. Because of this, one artist turning out to a protest can quickly become a whole club's worth of people turning out to the same event. Dangl has stated, “Everyone in the audience comes out to the rallies” (Dangl:2006), in reference to the shows that Bojorquez puts on in El Alto. This exemplifies a greater coherence between words and actions on the part of both the artist and the audience in Bolivian hip hop.

It is in fact in Bolivia's nature to come together as a community in order to tackle large tasks. Since the ancient times, Andean culture has been one of cooperation and working together to achieve larger goals. That is manifested today in the justice system of El Alto, where “neighborhoods are organized to get roads paved, and if a crime is committed, it is the community that assembles and finds the person who committed the crime” (Dangl:2006). This culture leads to citizens of El Alto playing a much more active role in shaping their community.

Despite the fact that Bolivian hip hop seems to be developing, or may already have, the teeth

that US hip hop is missing, there is still only a very small effect on the overall activist state in El Alto. However, this is not a fault on hip hop's part, but rather an issue of pure numbers. Even though a great majority of the youth at hip hop shows turn out to political rallies and the like, they are still an overwhelming minority with respect to the total numbers that turn out at these events. One of the main reasons for a lack of mass appeal for hip hop has to do with the pre-hip hop generation and the old-fashioned ideals of the Bolivian social system. Bolivia is dominantly Catholic and there is currently very little separation between the church and the education system. As a result of the strict adherence to such ideals, "As it grows, hip hop's limiting factor is the older, strictly religious and rural generation" (Dangl:2006). That said, the older generations in Bolivia don't see the usefulness of hip hop and discourage young people from participating in it.

The growth of hip hop in Bolivia is going to prove to be the key determiner in whether or not hip hop becomes a viable means for inciting widespread action. Currently an overwhelming majority of the music put forth by artists in Bolivia has the goal of educating people in mind. The current state has done such a good job of mobilizing its participants because of the respect it pays to the rural/urban roots of the people, while moving forward with politic messages. The content of hip hop in El Alto particularly has been "... focused on past mobilizations. We are still processing the past and thinking of ways to deal with the violence and revolts we have seen" (Dangl:2006), says Bojorquez, whose lyrics frequently refer to the close to 60 people that were killed when Lozada's army descended on protesters shortly before his forced resignation. Because of this look at the past, hip hop has a way of educating youth in a manner that other music has not been able to. One critical way that hip hop in Bolivia must grow is to more explicitly rap about the present and future, using the past as guidelines for action.

As hip hop grows in Bolivia, the government has come to recognize the potential for inciting young people and gaining participation in assemblies. The current government, led by President Evo Morales, is looking to hip hop as a means of getting young people involved in politics. There has been a convening of a new assembly in Bolivia with a focus on rewriting the constitution and the president

has contracted rapper Abraham Bojorquez on a number of occasions to write songs about the importance of participation in such assemblies. Additionally, in an attempt to better separate the church from the education system, Bojorquez has been contracted to write songs about separation (Dangl:2006). Whereas in the US, we saw hip hop's interest move from social reform to primarily socioeconomic advancement, it would seem that Bolivian hip hop is taking a very different route. Instead of the large recording industries that commercialized hip hop in the US, the government is attempting to commercialize hip hop and make it appeal to the masses in an attempt to incite participation in political conventions and assemblies.

Hip hop in Bolivia is at the point that, although the majority of the people that consume it are active in politics, only a small minority of the population consumes it. Growth in the direction of the government will only hold onto the current active nature of the audience if the commercialization by the government does not jeopardize the credibility of the artists being contracted. While commercialization in the US inherently means losing credibility in favor of money, there is no such incentive in Bolivia, besides inciting action amongst the artists peers. Hip hop in Bolivia is currently concentrated in the poor regions of La Paz and El Alto, and works in much the same way that Africa Bambaataa discussed to keep youth out of drugs and violence and give them way to express themselves. Through the collaborative nature and the pride that the youth of these areas hold, hip hop in Bolivia can grow and, so long as the sharp teeth it currently has grow with it, will become a viable means for affecting social change. While the demographic of underprivileged people and the minority atmosphere that El Alto harbors is very similar to that of hip hop's birthplace in New York, the direction that Bolivian hip hop is moving leads to a conclusion that, provided adequate growth, the hip hop movement can remain just as credible and active as it is now, with larger numbers. The idea that the poorest country in South America is actually the richest one when it comes to natural resources is a fact that hopes to be reconciled by Bolivians, and it seems that hip hop can become a viable means of achieving that.

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