Yellow B-Boys, Black Culture, and Hip-Hop in Japan: 
Toward a Transnational Cultural Politics of Race

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My name is Yellow B-Boy
I’m all that, and number one
—Rhymester, “B-Boyism”

A Japanese rapper who calls himself Banana Ice released a song in 1995 called “Imitation + Imitation = Imitation,” in which he ridicules young hip-hop fans who darken their skin as a sign of respect toward African American musicians. “Your parents, your grandparents are Japanese,” he raps. “You can never be the black person you want to be.” Although the percentage of Japanese rappers, break-dancers, and hip-hop fans who tan their skin or wear dreadlocks is quite small, such body practices symbolize a dubious two-sidedness to the uses of hip-hop in Japan. Kreva, of the group Kick the Can Crew, put it succinctly when he explained of the dreads
he wore: “First, it’s meant as a sign of respect towards black culture, but secondly, I want to stand out [medachitai]” (personal communication, 1997). Banana Ice, rapping more generally about skin-darkened hip-hop fans, sees above all the mark of conspicuous, mercurial consumption:

- in summer, black at the beach: natsu wa umi de kuroku
- in winter, black on the ski slopes: fuyu wa yama de kuroku
- with free time, going to tan salons: hima arya hiyake saron itte
- skin always black: itsu mo hada wa kuroku
- take a half day to get dreadlocks: hannichi kaكاتate kamigata doreddo
- then give it up to be a skinhead: yamete yoshite sukinheddo

(Shitamachi Kyôdai [1995] “Mane + Mane = Mane,” Pony Canyon, PCCA-0084)

The spectacle of young Japanese spending lavishly on “dread hair” and tanning salons is perhaps the most striking expression of hip-hop devotion in Japan, and for critics both in the United States and in Japan it symbolizes a misappropriation and misunderstanding of black music, culture, and style. Yet regardless of whether overseas hip-hop is seen as superficial imitation or conscientious respect (or some of both), hip-hop is taking root in a substantial way in Japan as in many parts of the world. Not only are non-American rap groups gaining success in their national markets, hip-hop’s influence is becoming increasingly widespread in the aesthetics of musical production, lyrical skill, fashion, dance styles, and graffiti art, in addition to influencing ideas of beauty in hair and skin. In urban centers throughout Asia, Africa, Europe, South America, Australia, and beyond, hip-hop is performed in clubs and on the streets, prompting some artists and fans to proclaim the emergence of a “global hip-hop nation.” But as hip-hop goes global, what happens to the cultural politics of race inherent in American hip-hop?

This essay explores the evolving role of hip-hop in Japanese youth culture to consider how the music, and especially the messages, of the rappers relate to questions of race. Some might wonder whether “race” is a useful lens for viewing hip-hop in Japan since, compared to the United States, Japan is fairly racially homogeneous, and because the Japanese rely on somewhat different notions of race, for example in considering themselves to be from a “single ethnicity” (tan’itsu minzoku) while tending to use the term race
to describe white/black relations. But it is precisely such differences in setting and contrasting understandings of race that provide an analytical frame for thinking about the racial politics of global popular culture. In this essay, I discuss some of the limitations of viewing Japanese rap music from a hip-hop studies perspective (i.e., as emerging from black culture) and from a Japan studies perspective (i.e., as emerging from Japanese culture), and instead I propose considering how Japanese hip-hop contributes to a transnational cultural politics of race. In particular, I would argue that the projects of Japanese hip-hoppers can be usefully viewed in terms of what Cornel West calls a “new cultural politics of difference,” which among other things rejects racial or ethnic essentialism in favor of a more complex understanding of how identity is constructed and enacted in diverse ways. A traditional kind of cultural politics, for example, might use positive portrayals of the black community to counteract negative images of African Americans. In contrast, West’s notion of “new cultural politics of difference” highlights the critical interventions of African American writers and artists who demystify the ways such representations of a singular black community are often biased toward patriarchal, heterosexual, and middle-class standards. In so doing, he aims to open up identity politics in a way that can inspire new alliances. For West, “this means locating the structural causes of unnecessary forms of social misery (without reducing all suffering to historical causes), depicting the plight and predicaments of demoralized and depoliticized citizens caught in market-driven cycles of therapeutic release—drugs, alcoholism, consumerism—and projecting alternative visions, analyses and actions that proceed from particularities and arrive at moral and political connectedness.” This perspective offers an alternative formulation of cultural interventions in the sense that it focuses on a politics that can be applied in any particular place and transnationally. West’s perspective emerges from a different setting, but the lessons for a study of black culture in Japan are profound because he exposes the limitations of searching for the “local” or the “Japanese” in overseas hip-hop. Indeed, although I use the term “black culture,” we should bear in mind that the term is shorthand for a complex range of practices, ideas, and discourses, never meaning one single thing. Similarly, highlighting the “local” features of hip-hop in Japan risks reproducing images of the Japanese people while underplaying
the ways Japanese emcees are engaged in critiquing mainstream standards of what it means to be Japanese. In this, I would argue that Japanese rappers, by drawing alliances to African American rap, engage in what might be called “a new cultural politics of affiliation.” As we will see, the character of these politics, and the ways they are expressed in some songs, produce a kind of transnational cultural politics of race.

I would add a caveat. While there is great positive potential for hip-hop in Japan, both as a space for articulating alternative visions of Japanese identity and for providing a comparative context for thinking about hip-hop’s border crossings in the United States and elsewhere, it would be misleading to suggest that the hip-hop reaching mainstream Japan is only, or even primarily, a vehicle for progressive change in Japan. Generally in Japan, corporate support has flowed more quickly to those who either accommodate the marketing world’s fetishization of blackness as hip, sensual, and rebellious, or to those who de-emphasize blackness in favor of aligning themselves with Japan’s traditionally lighthearted and inoffensive pop music realm. For those whose exposure to Japanese rap music comes from television, radio, or the mainstream music press, one is likely to see the edginess of hip-hop, which is not only “cool” (kakkoii) but also “bad” (yabai, meaning, of course, “good”), promoted through racially coded imagery, often combining an outlaw stance with conspicuous, brand-name consumption. It surely is a sign of globalization that in addition to McDonald’s, Disneyland, and Starbucks, Japan now boasts its own gangsta rappers, complete with “thugged out” fashion, gold teeth, and platinum chains. Alternatively, J-Pop versions of hip-hop that appear on the charts tend to be stripped of any racial nuance.

My research, however, focuses on key sites of cultural production, mainly nightclubs and recording studios, which offer a wider range of musical expressions and in general more politicized messaging than is commonly found in major record labels’ offerings. In particular, I began with extended fieldwork in Tokyo (eighteen months, 1995–97), during which I attended over 150 club events and around 50 recording sessions. I have made brief return trips almost yearly since then, most recently in March 2005, checking in with artists and writers and attending events. I supplement my fieldwork with ongoing interviews, listening to CDs, reading books and magazines, and Web-based research. I have interviewed artists, writers, music magazine
editors, record store owners, and numerous everyday fans. I am primarily concerned with the cultural production of hip-hop in Japan, with an emphasis on the musicians, who not only make the music but who also can be seen as expert consumers. My aim is to take seriously the voices of Japan’s artists, critically evaluate their messages, and convey an understanding of the contexts that give life to their voices. Examples of superficial, imitative, and, frankly, racist uses of hip-hop abound in Japan, but a balanced look at Japanese hip-hop can nevertheless help us understand the stakes and the promise of the music’s cultural politics. The “blackness” of hip-hop in Japan is central to its cultural meaning, and yet it is a blackness that operates somewhat differently outside of mainstream U.S. culture where white, patriarchal modes of dominance remain a standard for judging oppositional stances. The relationship between race and “realness” in the two countries offers a place to begin.

What’s “Real”?

The rhetoric of realness in American hip-hop encompasses a wide range of concerns, including debates over whether the negative images in “gangsta rap” are actually “just reflecting reality,” what distinguishes “pop, commercial rap” from “real, underground hip-hop,” and whether a white rapper such as Eminem can be “real” because he comes from a working-class background. Of course, being African American does not in itself confer “realness,” as illustrated by emcee Gift of Gab from the duo Blackalicious, who, in one of his songs, debates with an imagined fan who wishes for more “real” rhymes:

“but that won’t sell ’cause you got to keep it real
so that we can feel where you’re coming from, because these streets is ill,
so if you ain’t killingiggas in rhymes your whole sound’s just
bubblegum.”

I said I won’t contribute to genocide, I’d rather try to cultivate the inside and evolve the frustrated ghetto mind,
the devil and his army have never been a friend of mine
(Blacklicious [1999] “Shallow Days,” Nia, Quannum Projects, MWR112CD)
Claims of realness, or lack thereof, are weapons in debates about “who is black enough” among African American rappers as well. The lyrics above also point to a volatile mix between sales, death, celebrity, and realness that is not unique to hip-hop, but which hip-hop marketing has managed to refine.5

Like Banana Ice and Gift of Gab, hip-hop enthusiasts around the world commonly voice their unease about the uses and abuses of hip-hop. Although the most common criticisms revolve around commercialism, an underlying concern about race is never far away. What would it mean to know hip-hop, and what would be required to participate in the production of hip-hop, in a language other than English and for people with little (if any) historical connection to the largely African American communities that gave birth to the style? I would argue that hip-hop in Japan can and at times does operate as a gateway to deeper understanding among diverse social groups—a gateway that can work to deepen both American and Japanese understandings of difference—but also that a historical perspective on ideas of race and nation must be acknowledged in order to comprehend the voices and messages that make hip-hop in Japan distinctive. This tension between looking backward (respecting the pioneers) and acting in the present (keeping it real) animates the debates about hip-hop’s significance, though it may be impossible to identify once and for all how to balance these competing concerns.

**Hip-Hop, Blackness, and Border-Crossing**

In the United States, the discussion of the social and political significance of hip-hop rarely includes foreign artists, revolving instead around American hip-hop’s contributions, positive and negative, to problems facing African American communities and around what American hip-hop says about race in America.6 Tricia Rose, in her pathbreaking study of hip-hop in the United States, defines hip-hop in terms of its black roots and its social location: “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.” Rap music and black culture become entwined and mutually construct each other, at least partly in the laudable effort to valorize the historically maligned identity of black Americans. Over the years, other axes of analysis emerged as well in the growing scholarly literature on hip-hop. The publication of a “hip-hop studies reader” speaks to the value of hip-hop as a teaching tool, providing insights not only into racial dynamics in the United States, but also into media power, music and technology, fan cultures, gender oppression, and a wide range of poetics, politics, and performance practices. Moreover, recent critical work deepens our understanding of the links between “blackness” and hip-hop, for example, with Imani Perry arguing that the aesthetics of hip-hop arise essentially from New World black culture rather than from a diasporic culture of the black Atlantic, and with Raquel Rivera exploring the complicated relationships between Latino identity and blackness among the “New York Ricans” who contribute to hip-hop culture.

But as hip-hop’s production and consumption exceeds the critical frame that Rose identifies, the challenges to interpretation become increasingly complex. Does wider acceptance of hip-hop in mainstream America constitute a gain for African Americans? Leon Wynter, a columnist for the Wall Street Journal, argues that the ubiquity of black artists in U.S. popular culture means the “end of white America” in the sense that mainstream America “is now equally defined by the preferences, presence and perspectives of people of color.” Although Wynter acknowledges that the success of black popular culture is often viewed skeptically because it lacks a measure of redress for a long history of racial discrimination, still he voices optimism: “The triumph of African-Americans in a self-sustaining transracial commercial popular culture will one day be seen as the final catalyst to the wholeness of identity embodied in the phrase ‘One race, human, one culture, American.’” I am not yet convinced.

The problem with imagining a transracial utopia through popular culture is that media “connectedness” does not by itself guarantee action for greater equality. As writer Greg Tate puts it, what do white people take from black culture? Everything but the burden. If a sense of responsibility, of shared burden, extends little further than buying a hip-hop CD or going
to the occasional show, it is easy to understand skepticism regarding any “political” potential of hip-hop. In this context, the work of scholars and critics who describe hip-hop in terms of the deep and enduring connections between African American struggles and aesthetics is political in the sense that it disrupts the too-easy assumption of many privileged white fans that by listening to hip-hop they are getting close to black people. A potentially more promising avenue for progress in moving from hip-hop representations to engaged politics arises from scholar Bakari Kitwana’s critical and practical efforts to transform hip-hop from a “cultural movement to a political power.” This included his organizing of the Hip-Hop Convention in the summer of 2004, which attempted to mobilize young Americans during that year’s presidential election by drawing attention to the problems of urban poverty, the prison-industrial complex, incarceration rates, and the nation’s failed military policies. Yvonne Bynoe, the founder of Urban Think Tank, a resource center for African American youth, argues persuasively that the hip-hop generation should not depend on celebrities to lead, but rather must develop leaders who can motivate people across class and race divisions. This represents an important goal for addressing the limitations of hip-hop’s political potential.

In terms of analyzing hip-hop overseas, however, we may get a very limited view of the political potential of the music if we judge foreign artists primarily in terms of their contribution to African American struggles. I support Yvonne Bynoe’s important efforts in the United States, but I worry about her contention that “getting real with global hip-hop” means acknowledging that foreigners don’t, and can’t, really get it when it comes to understanding hip-hop culture. She says “technical aspects” of rap music can be learned by foreigners, but “the central part of hip-hop culture is the storytelling and the information that it imparts about a specific group of people,” namely, “Black people in America.” She levels particularly harsh criticism at the Japanese youth. For them, she says, “‘Blackness’ became a fad to be consumed, without the obligation of learning about or understanding Black people.” The impetus behind such criticism is understandable. Japanese youth who express an interest in another culture should take the time to try to understand where others are coming from, just as white fans
must consider the appropriateness of their own uses of hip-hop slang and racial epithets, even when intended as signs of inclusivity. Where Bynoe stumbles, however, is in committing the same offense that she levels at the Japanese, namely, she stops short of understanding the links between history, identity, and expression that draw Japanese youth to hip-hop. It is valid to ask what kind of obligation there is to learn about other people’s cultures in consuming their styles, but should everyone read a book about Japan, or better yet live there, before eating sushi or watching an anime movie? Should there be some cultural entrance exam before we can try out the styles of other people, whether it is hip-hop, manga comic books, or ukiyoe woodblock prints? Where is the line between appropriation and respectful borrowing?

Real in Japan

Consider the artwork for two albums released in 2002 (see fig. 1 below) and ask yourself, which could be considered more “real”? For many Americans seeing the image on the left, Dabo’s body language, clothes, and accessories are likely to reinforce the idea that the Japanese hip-hop is “merely imitation,” superficially copying the styles seen on MTV and in music magazines,

**Figure 1** Album covers for Dabo, *Hitman* (Def Jam Japan, 2002, UICJ-1005), and Uzi, *Kotodama* (Future Shock/Pony Canyon, 2002, PCCA-01825)
missing the deeper significance of hip-hop, and reinforcing stereotypes about African Americans. Doesn’t Dabo’s cover suggest that what Japanese youth learn from hip-hop is that black Americans, if they are successful, are most likely gun-toting gangstas, microphone-wielding emcees, or professional athletes? On the other hand, when Japanese rappers like Uzi on the right incorporate conspicuously Japanese elements, aren’t they ignoring or, worse, disrespecting the origins of hip-hop culture?

Note the double-bind that tends to shadow all foreign emcees. Japanese rappers are expected to respect the African American roots of the music while also producing something uniquely authentic and original, but how to achieve this balance depends very much on the eye (or ear) of the beholder. Uzi represents a model of “local creativity” by relying on recognizably exotic markers of Japanese ethnicity, namely, samurai imagery (and Uzi claims descent from a samurai family), as well as printing the title of his album in the kanji characters for kotodama, an archaic concept roughly meaning “the spirit of words.” In contrast, Dabo uses a gun, do-rags, platinum chains, and prison walls with concertina wire as signifying elements, thus relying on “globally recognizable” markers of hip-hop style.

If you ask the average Japanese hip-hop fan to choose between Dabo and Uzi and to identify which is the more authentic (honmono) or “real” (riaru), most would choose Dabo. Why? Because he performs with a more skillful flow, better musical production, more provocative lyrics, and a stage presence that commands the crowd. Rather than seeing his style as imitative, Dabo’s supporters are more likely to see him as competing directly with the best (i.e., American) hip-hop in the world. At one level, Dabo can be seen as trying to participate as an equal in a shared world of hip-hop iconography, a more respectable stance perhaps than relying on clichéd images of Japaneseeseness. Indeed, from a Japanese perspective, samurai may be viewed as at least as highly mediated icons of toughness as U.S. gangstas. Conversely, if Dabo is troubling, should we be equally upset when the Staten Island–based hip-hop crew Wu-Tang Clan uses kung fu imagery and sound samples in their videos and songs, or produces Wu Wear shirts with gibberish Japanese writing? Dismissing such gestures as Orientalist or racist implicitly invokes notions of cultural authenticity that may be ill-suited to these transnationally oriented productions. If anything, a transnational cul-
ultural politics should encourage the perspective of locating the meaning of gangsta or samurai or kung fu rappers in broader contexts, not simply in terms of the appearance of album covers.

In considering this broader context, we might note that appropriation is hardly unique to hip-hop fans. In Japan, given the constant adoption and reworking of foreign musical styles, especially since the opening of Japan to Western influence in the Meiji era (1868–1912), it would be surprising if rap music had somehow not appeared alongside Japanese versions of rock, jazz, R&B, heavy metal, punk, glam rock, reggae, folk, country, techno, salsa, etc.19 Part of hip-hop's significance in Japan arises from contrasts with these other styles. The same applies to fashion. Anyone visiting the youth shopping and play district of Shibuya in Tokyo will likely be struck both by the range of fashion statements and the extremity of the styles, as if the famed iron-fisted conformity of Japanese society forces between the knuckles a kind of ultra-non-conformity among those who choose to stand out. Alongside blue-suited salarymen and prim office ladies, you will see pierced punk rockers, flower power hippie girls, Rasta-style dreadlock boys, deep-tanned kogal cuties, geek chic otaku, skateboarder/surf bums, and others wearing homegrown, hard-to-get trendsetting styles such as Bathing Ape. Young Japanese in Afros or dread hair coexist with others in bleach blond and all shades of chapatsu (brown-tinted, literally “tea-colored” hair). B-Boys and B-Girls, the hip-hop enthusiasts with baggy jeans, perfect sneakers, and sometimes even gold chains, parade as part of a fashion landscape that is omnivorous, quick-changing, and subject to constant remixing. Japanese hip-hop’s distinction lies in its connection with a contemporary, urban black American culture, a connection driven by films, videos, CDs, magazines, and fashion outlets more than direct experience of living with or interacting with African Americans. Of course, some early proponents of hip-hop in Japan, such as MC Bell of B-Fresh, learned of black music and dance by going to clubs frequented by American military servicemen stationed in Japan, and FEN, an English-language radio station broadcast in Japan, often gets mentioned by early artists as pivotal in introducing them to new music in the eighties. More generally, however, borrowing through media representations constitutes the most prevalent form of cultural exchange.

How then should we interpret the never-ending charges of “imitation”
as related to hip-hop musicians? First, it is important to recognize that in one sense Japanese hip-hop is, in fact, imitation. All of it is. If the question is whether the Japanese are trying to create something “completely new” or “completely new within hip-hop” then it is the latter that most hip-hoppers seek (by definition). Even for those musicians who express distaste for placing themselves in genres, which after all is the business of music journalists, not artists, we can still observe differences in the ways that musicians work (sampling or live musicians, rapping or singing lyrics, self-identification as hip-hop, etc.) that suggest genre alliances, while acknowledging numerous exceptions. But if we define imitation as working within a genre of music, in the case of hip-hop perhaps characterized as sampled and programmed tracks over which emcees rap rhythmically nuanced rhymes (“two turntables and a microphone”), then all contemporary hip-hop, in Japan and anywhere else, for that matter, is imitation. Second, the idea that a certain background is necessary to be an authentic rapper obscures the fact that assertions of authenticity almost always come after musicians have proven their talent by standards other than their background. Skill as an artist seems to define the tipping point after which questions of authenticity begin. If our definition of hip-hop is, as Bynoe argues, a form of storytelling about black Americans, then there is no place for Japanese, French, or even black South African rappers. Yet these emcees exist, and they are part of an emerging global movement taking up issues of economic oppression, government injustices, diverse forms of racism, and other important political battles, alongside, it must be added, more playful and innocuous productions. Whether they are authentic or not is an arbitrary identification, but one that helps us understand conventions of inclusion and exclusion.

“The Elvis Effect”

The unease that many Americans, and perhaps especially African American musicians, feel toward Japanese mimicking not only musical styles but also clothes, jewelry, and even gestures associated with black culture is at least partly related to a long history of appropriation of black music by others without acknowledgement or recompense. The August 2002 cover of Vibe magazine, a monthly American magazine, featured the following headline:
“Wanna-Bes: The Weird World of Japanese Dancehall Fanatics.” The article discusses the popularity of both reggae and hip-hop in Japan but questions their significance: “Any Black-music fan knows about the ‘Elvis effect’. . . Black folk make music, and whites remake it and make big bucks. . . . Where is the line between cross-cultural influence and cross-cultural theft?”20 The author acknowledges that some Japanese hip-hoppers pay homage to the originators but asks, “what if their teenybopper fans, the ones who met hip-hop through Zeebra instead of Dre, never do their homework?”21 Here we see another element of the debate about appropriation: African American artists won’t get paid. The charge of theft is striking, but the fears are misplaced. The spread of Japanese hip-hop is also leading to a deepening appreciation of American hip-hop, and it seems likely that one will not replace the other, but that both will grow in popularity together. The larger question is more poignant; are Japanese fans “doing their homework”?

Many Japanese artists and fans of hip-hop do in fact make an effort to learn about hip-hop history and its relationship to black Americans, through books, films, and Japanese magazine articles. Frequent songs by Japanese emcees outline histories of hip-hop in the United States, describing the Jamaican connection with DJs like Kool Herc and some other key pioneers like Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash. But this introduces another conundrum. The more an outsider learns of the links between black history and hip-hop, the more removed he or she may feel. In a column he wrote for a Japanese hip-hop magazine in the mid-nineties, Zeebra, one of the leading Japanese rappers, quoted a fan letter expressing this anxiety about Japanese hip-hop: “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.”22 Strikingly, this Japanese fan describes concerns quite similar to the criticisms one finds from Bynoe and from the author of the Vibe magazine article, suggesting that the interpretations of authenticity speak less to an American versus Japanese difference, but rather to different understandings about how histories and musical creativity are related.
ECD, who was one of the early pioneers in hip-hop in Japan and who remains active today, struggles with these multiple intersecting histories in his own lyrics. His working-class background and radical take on Japanese society make his messages about the failures of education and the healing powers of popular culture relevant to grasping the political messaging of some of his songs. In an interview with the author in 1996, he described how his initial physical feeling (*nikutaiteki*) for the music of Grandmaster Flash and Africa Bambaataa was gradually replaced by a more nuanced understanding of hip-hop and black culture. When he was young, he dropped out of high school at age seventeen, got involved with a motorcycle gang, but “graduated” when he turned twenty. He worked in temporary jobs like construction and moving, while pursuing his musical career. His first release in 1992 on the independent File Records label included songs that detailed the forefathers of U.S. hip-hop, his own transition from an interest in punk music to reggae and hip-hop, and also a paean to the Japanese world of *manga* comics. He also included a song called “Blue-Eyed Asian,” in which he rapped about Japanese fascination with other races, questioning why “Japanese want to be white people / Japanese want to be black people.” Most strikingly, however, he noted that the idea that “the Japanese are simply Japanese” misconstrues history. In lines that were bleeped out of the final version of the CD because the record company viewed them as too inflammatory, he points out that the Ainu were the original people of Japan and that the original emperor came from Korea; the Japanese themselves are interlopers on Japan’s soil, or “aliens” as he says in the refrain. While Japanese youth are often represented as being innocent about race, musicians like ECD have, in fact, a rather nuanced understanding of racial identity and are willing to express such ideas in lyrics sensational enough for record companies to censor them.

**From “The Color of Resistance” to a Diversity of Meanings**

In the United States, the leading music trade magazine *Billboard* refers to hip-hop and R&B as “urban” music, a codeword disguising class and race origins, but in Japan, hip-hop is above all “black music” (*kokujin ongaku* or *burakku myujikku*). Record stores have black music sections, and music
magazines, such as Blast, Woofin’, Black Music Review, and Music Magazine, carefully document the African American music origins, canonical artists, key albums, and their relationship to cultural styles, such as signifying or playing the dozens. Even if most Japanese hip-hop artists and fans disapprove of tanning salons as a means of devoting oneself to hip-hop, the widespread presence of the clothing, headgear, body language, slang, and twisting of the Japanese language to sound like Black English shows that a general disapproval of darkened skin does not eliminate the use of others’ racial signifiers. Yet the debate about cultural appropriation of blackness has also shifted depending on genre and historical contexts.

Popular music scholar Shuhei Hosokawa describes several contrasting examples of Japanese adopting black music and styles, from jazz to blues to doo-wop to hip-hop. He notes that in the 1960s, black was “the color of resistance,” and, prefiguring later alliances through rap, “the blackness of the blues makes Japanese performers more conscious of their racial status than rock and new American folksongs.”24 The doo-wop group Chanels (later, Rats and Star), whose singers paint their faces minstrel black, prompted sharp debate in 1980 with letters to national newspapers in Japan either condemning the Japanese singers’ use of blackface as racism, or defending the practice as a way to “get as close to black people as possible.” 25 Hosokawa draws connections between such racially transgressive adaptations and the cross-gendering in all-male Kabuki, the all-female Takarazuka Revue, and in the gender ambiguity in Visual-kei (a kind of glam rock featuring cross-dressing costumes). He also argues that “representing” for Japan, that is, making one’s Japaneseness a central element in ideological assertions of authenticity, is a hip-hop innovation, especially compared to earlier rock and folk characterizations of authenticity in terms of the feelings and experience (rather than national identity) of the performers. Hosokawa’s key insight revolves around locating “blackness” not as some historical core, but as a vehicle for shifting politics of difference and affiliation. E. Taylor Atkins, in his excellent history of jazz in Japan, shows how over the course of the twentieth century a wide variety of strategies have been used by musicians and writers to assert the authenticity of Japanese jazz performers’ efforts.26 He demonstrates that the discourses surrounding authenticity, although varying dramatically depending on the era, are seldom about the quality
of the music per se, but instead revolve around shifting assumptions about
the relationship between musical genre and the race and nationality of the
performers. As local artists develop, and fans become more knowledgeable
about foreign scenes, a dynamic relationship between old and new sets in
motion new definitions of otherness. Anthropologist Marvin Sterling’s study
of reggae dancehall culture in Yokohama, Japan, for example, shows how
the image of the “Jamaican other” shifted over time from a “‘pure,’ ‘simple,’
‘natural,’ Rastaman” of roots reggae toward more “materialistically and sex-
ually savvy ‘rude boys’ and ‘divas’ of Jamaican dancehall culture.”27 We can
observe some similar transformations in Japanese hip-hop.

In Japan, as elsewhere, hip-hop’s origins are traced to the South Bronx in
the mid-1970s. Hip-hop soon began traveling overseas. In 1979, the hit song
“Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang played in Tokyo discos, and in
1983 the film Wild Style introduced the four elements of hip-hop—rapping,
deejaying, break-dancing, and graffiti art—to Tokyo audiences through a
theater run and also through live performances of some of the film’s stars
including Grandmaster Flash and the Rock Steady Crew. This, along with
the break-dance scene in the film Flashdance, inspired some Japanese youth
to start break-dancing in early 1984 in Yoyogi Park in Tokyo, and before
long Japanese DJs, rappers, and graffiti artists began to appear as well. This
is a story repeated worldwide, often with break-dance leading the way and
key hits, initially by U.S. stars like Run DMC and later by homegrown art-
ists, prompting succeeding generations of artists everywhere to make hip-
hop their own.

Since the earliest uses of the style in the mid-1980s, Japanese musicians
and fans were inspired by the racial underpinnings of rap music’s aesthet-
ics and politics. Early rappers, like Ito Seiko in the late 1980s, saw in rap an
opportunity to free the Japanese language from the overly managed styles
of Japanese rock, exploring the percussive potential of rap flow and high-
lighting the uses of black vernacular slang and rhyming.28 Yet these prac-
tices were deemed “imitative” not “innovative” by major record companies,
and the artists were generally ignored. A sea change occurred when a few
J-Rap singles sold around a million copies each in 1994 (Scha Dara Parr) and
1995 (East End X Yuri). This spurred a flurry of signings and ushered in a
heated debate over whether “party rap,” which the major labels supported,
or “underground hip-hop,” which they did not, was the most “real” for Japanese audiences. By the late nineties, however, formerly “underground” artists like Rhymester, Zeebra, K Dub Shine, and You the Rock became more central to the image of Japanese hip-hop, and the idea that “me-ism” (ore izumu) was the core aesthetic took to the fore. Toward the late nineties, many groups worked to define hip-hop culture for a national audience. For example, Rhymester’s song “B-Boyism,” quoted in the epigraph, epitomized an individual and an explicitly Japanese identity, likening the toughness of hip-hoppers to Barefoot Gen, the protagonist of a famous manga (comic book) series about a boy who survives the Hiroshima bombing.

Since around 1998, however, a wider range of approaches has led to a diversification of the scene into a variety of streams less concerned about “Japaneseness” and more focused on a kind of identity politics that upsets singular notions of “Japan.” For example, when Japanese artists and fans adopt the catchphrase “keep it real” these days, they are often responding to what they see as the emptiness of consumer culture. In contrast to pop celebrities (tarento) who dominate television, Japanese emcees voice complaints about contemporary failures of middle-class ideals (e.g., hard work in school will lead to a good job), especially after a decade-long recession, which began in the early 1990s, left many in the younger generation struggling to find satisfying work and forced them instead to become “freeter,” that is, part-time, temporary, often menial service-industry workers. In this context, the affiliation with blackness in hip-hop may still mean “resistance,” but rappers are more likely to resist commercialism and failed government policies than societal racism.

**Blackface Japan**

As hip-hop became more readily recognized in Japan in the mid- to late-nineties, advertising and fashion industries rushed to exploit (they might say “celebrate”) racialist iconography, which tended to reproduce stereotypes—the gangsta with guns, the promiscuous club girl, the youth gang members flashing signs and riding in tricked-out cars—that are visually shocking because they rely on racial stereotypes to convey a sense of danger. Understandably, this fashionable trend has upset people like John Russell, a
scholar living in Japan who has written extensively about images of African Americans in that country. He argues that “constructions of blackness, even those regarded as positive, are based on stereotypes that deprive blacks of their humanity, individuality, and heterogeneity.”

Even if hip-hop fans in Japan acknowledge the individuality and heterogeneity of African American rappers, such as grasping the stylistic differences between East Coast, West Coast, southern U.S. “crunk,” and Miami bass, to name just a few key distinctions, distinguishing between hip-hop styles is hardly the same as recognizing the diversity of black lives. On one hand, we cannot deny that Russell, along with many other African Americans, feels discriminated against by Japanese attitudes. On the other hand, Japanese rappers, of all people, are precisely the ones thinking about race and culture in ways that are more subtle than the average Japanese music fan. Where can we go from here?

Perhaps something can be gained by resisting a Western desire to have Japanese choose sides in an American racial conflict. Instructive in this regard is a brilliant essay by Joe Wood, the late African American writer who traveled to Tokyo to see “blackfacers,” young Japanese who darken their skin and kink their hair. He not only describes their scene, but also explores his own ambivalent fascination with them. At one point, he wants to ask a Japanese writer in his twenties whether Japanese people see a colored person when they look in the mirror. Even before Wood gets a response, he realizes something: “I already knew what I wanted him to say: ‘We hate black people. We love white people. . . . We see ourselves as white.’ Like Russell, I believed that the Japanese see themselves as white, even when they black up.”

But as he talks to more people, he comes to understand that black versus white is only one dimension of a differently configured racial context.

Historian Gary Leupp suggests that the complicated history of images of blacks in Japan shows how Western European racism has shaped Japanese understandings of blacks, but also how Japan developed its own distinctive interpretive models. From the mid-sixteenth century, a significant number of black Africans came to Japan as crewmen, servants, or slaves, and because of their treatment by Portuguese traders, those Japanese who came into contact with them generally learned to view blacks as inferior. At the same time, in distinguishing civilized from barbarian people, skin color played less of a role than national origin. For most of Japan’s history,
all foreigners were regarded as “barbarians” (yabanjin) regardless of their skin color. Leupp notes that in Japan’s early history, from the eighth century onward, whiteness in skin color (of Japanese) was generally associated with high birth, while darker skin tended to be associated with farmers and others who had to toil outside in the sun. Even so, in some cases the color black had positive connotations, as an Englishman writing in 1863 pointed out that blackening the teeth and having the blackest hair was a sign of beauty. Leupp also points out that the Buddha, when not depicted in resplendent gold, was often illustrated with a dark, sometimes even black, skin tone. Nevertheless, by the late 1880s, as Japan began its march toward modernization, it imbibed the ideologies of Western imperialists, and prejudices toward blacks were imported as well.

Yet as Joe Wood explores the contexts of Japan’s blackfacers today, he notes that both whites and blacks are gaijin (foreigners) first, and then white or black. Moreover, he finds that the blackfacers, even in their hair, Michael Jordan jerseys, Nike shoes, and darkened skin, are trying to be something, but maybe it’s not primarily to be black. Wood acknowledges a visceral reaction to these blackfacers: “I suppose I should be embarrassed to confess that my heart was actually racing when I saw my first one of them,” a blackface Japanese girl in line at a club, along with her black friend, who Wood surmises is African. Wood reports a short conversation with her:

“Do people in school think you look good?” I asked her.
“No,” she said. “But it doesn’t matter.”
“Why do you choose to look like me?” I asked.
“You?” she asked. “Who?”
“Black,” I clarified. . . .
“Because it’s cool,” the girl said, shrugging her shoulders.

Although Wood perceives that the woman desires to be black like him, she is, in fact, more concerned with how others perceive her “look,” or style, in a fashion sense. In some ways, her appearance is meant to be cool even more than it’s meant to be black, and a certain context is necessary to make sense of it.

It is also worth noting that not all “blackface style” is associated with hip-hop. The “ganguro” (literally, “face black”) style among teenage girls
addicted to tanning salons reached its peak in the late 1990s and was seen as completely separate from hip-hop fandom. *Ganguro gyaru* (gals) would be expected to go to House or all-genre music clubs, dance in large groups *parapara*-style (i.e., waving the hands and shouting in a way that resembles a Japanese *matsuri*, or festival, dance), and would be expected to dislike the ways hip-hop B-Girls put on airs (*kakko tsukete*). The U.S. visual artist Iona Rozeal Brown seems to confuse these two streams of Japanese popular culture in her art when she calls the subjects of her Japanese woodblock—style (*ukiyo*) paintings “*ganguro*” who are into hip-hop. She says, “I find the *ganguro* obsession with blackness pretty weird, and a little offensive.” Yet if it is acceptable for a non-Japanese painter to use *ukiyo* woodblock style (I think it is), why should Japanese be admonished for using hip-hop?

The female clubber mentioned by Wood, with her getup and dark skin and black (African) boyfriend, might sometimes get denigrated as a *burapan*, especially by jealous Japanese men. The term relates to an earlier era’s term for prostitutes, namely, *panpan* or *pansuke*, especially those who attended to American servicemen during the Allied Occupation after World War II. Thus, a *burapan* is a woman who prostitutes herself for black men, *bura* being the abbreviation for *burakkū* (black). Yet this longing for “forbidden fruit” can also bring liberation. Novelist Yamada Eimi’s stories of Japanese women having sex with black men have brought her both fame and notoriety. As Karen Kelsky shows, some Japanese women escape oppressive gender relations in Japan through their relationships with Western men.

Japanese men also face criticism. Nina Cornyetz argues that, for male hip-hop fans, “blackness is frequently affixed to an antecedent erotic subtext that fetishizes black skin as symbolic of phallic empowerment.” While some of these blackfacers may well seek, and may perhaps even gain, a sexual advantage in adopting this appearance, I would caution against reducing the uses of black culture in Japan to a desire to be more sexually attractive. Joe Wood concludes that Japanese hip-hoppers’ fascination with and use of black skin and style reveals, at the very least, a conspicuous questioning of the homogeneity of the Japanese people. We can, however, build on both Wood and Cornyetz by exploring the historical dimensions of racism in Japan and by examining how the messages of Japanese rappers may deepen our understanding of race in popular culture.
"Racially Homogeneous" Japan?

Japan is often portrayed as a homogeneous society, and, in terms of racial differences, this seems to be an accurate characterization, at least compared to the heterogeneous United States. From an American perspective, the Japanese are clearly “Asian.” They have straight black hair, unless dyed or curled, and they share certain other physical characteristics that Westerners associate with “the Asian race,” mainly, eye features and skin color. Yet these seemingly obvious differences betray deep cultural conditioning among Western beholders who see these differences as significant. The notorious Western notion that Asians have “slanty” eyes, as depicted for example in the Disney animated film *Mulan*, is foreign to Japan, where eyes are evaluated based on the number of folds in the eyelids. This reminds us that “race” is, scientifically speaking, a meaningless category. Although we can imagine prototypical “Caucasoids” or “Mongoloids,” the boundaries between races are impossible to identify. Taking the analysis to the level of molecular differences does not solve the problem either, because there is more genetic variation within so-called races than between them.40

Race is a relatively recent invention in human history, arising in the eighteenth century as a new mode of understanding human differences in part to justify and institutionalize the structuring of brutal inequality in the New World, in particular, the conquest and treatment of Native American populations and the perpetuation of slavery for imported Africans.41 Even today, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. puts it, “race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application.”42 But the fact that it is an arbitrary, socially constructed concept seems to have done little to undermine the continuing inequalities that cut along lines of race. In the United States, some visible examples include racial profiling, drug convictions (black people form 12 percent of the nation’s population, consume 12 percent of illegal drugs, but suffer nearly 70 percent of the convictions), and the disproportionate number of African Americans on death row.43 The plight of American children is another national disgrace that is even more disgraceful when it comes to African Americans. One out of every five children in the United States lives in poverty, but for black children, the rate is one in two, and for Hispanic children, two in five.44 When considering race,
we must foreground that we are talking about the ways race is perceived and experienced in the social world, not race as a biological reality.

Since the Japanese tend to refer to themselves as a “single ethnicity” (tan’itsu minzoku), some might conclude that it is a misnomer to speak of a Japanese “race,” but the presumed biological signifiers of Japaneseness suggest that the distinction between jinshu as “race” and minzoku as “ethnicity” is in practice blurred. Kosaku Yoshino describes how the Japanese have a strong tendency to perceive of themselves as a distinct racial group, a notion he traces to the late-nineteenth-century ideology that viewed Japan as a “family state” (kazoku kokka), in which the Japanese are related to one another and to the emperor by “blood.” Such notions persist today, Kosaku shows, in that Japanese perceive Japanese Americans as likely to have less trouble than Korean-Japanese in assimilating to Japanese culture because they have “Japanese blood.” Similarly, current immigration laws in Japan put into practice the myth of Japanese “blood”; foreign migrant labor is generally prohibited except for Nikkeijin, descendants of Japanese people. Most Nikkeijin working in Japan are second- and third-generation descendants of Japanese emigrants who settled in South America after 1899, most of whom worked on sugar and coffee plantations. These new migrant workers are designated “spouse or child of a Japanese national” and given long-term resident visas that allow them to live and work in Japan for three years. Along with their spouses (who may be of any race), they numbered around 175,000 in 1993. By 2003, Brazilian residents in Japan totaled 275,000, and Peruvians 53,000. As anthropologist Joshua Roth shows, however, legal status of shared blood does not guarantee societal acceptance.

Demographic differences between Japan and the United States help explain why Japanese hip-hop deals less with racism and more with hierarchies of class and gender, as well as with youth issues. According to the 2000 U.S. census, blacks and Latinos each make up a little over 12 percent of the population, and Asian Americans constitute another 3.6 percent. Among Japan’s population of roughly 127 million, there are roughly 1.7 million registered foreigners, or less than 2 percent. This includes over 600,000 “Koreans” from both North and South Korea, many of whom were born in Japan. There are also roughly 2 to 3 million burakumin, that is, descendants of an outcaste group of butchers, leather tanners, and executioners.
Because they are physically indistinguishable from other Japanese, they are sometimes referred to as the “invisible race,” yet they face terrible discrimination in terms of getting jobs and getting married. Even so, this internal racism does not go unnoticed. The rapper You the Rock describes seeing the plight of *burakumin* as one reason he was deeply moved when he first heard the U.S. groups Boogie Down Productions and Public Enemy. He also notes that he was primed to understand the struggles of African Americans that he heard through rap music thanks to school textbooks that included Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and others, a reminder that, as Yukiko Koshiro describes, African American literature has had a deep and enduring impact on modern Japan. Recently, Japan has also witnessed the appearance of an artist, namely, Jin Back, who raps about living in a *burakumin* neighborhood in Osaka, as well as a rap duo called KP who are “resident Koreans” (*zainichi kankokujin*) and who rap in Japanese, in some cases about relations between North and South Korea.

“*Respect*” (Rhymester)

The nation’s history of racial military atrocities may be one reason why a 1999 hip-hop album cover provoked such a harsh reaction in one of Japan’s leading daily newspapers. In the United States, slavery is the definitive atrocity that sets the stage for the current debate on racism, but in Japan the imperialist aggression of World War II provides the key historical pivot around which questions of race revolve. As John Dower argues, World War II was in many ways a “race war,” not only because of the Nazi holocaust of Jews, but also in the ways that the Japanese and the Allies conceived of and treated their enemies. Japan’s rhetoric of allying itself with other Asians against the white, European colonial oppressors was integral to the notion of building the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, a sphere nevertheless premised on the belief that the Japanese were destined to preside over a fixed hierarchy of people and races, and which involved massacres and forced labor. This helps explain a public reaction to the cover of Rhymester’s third album, which featured the three musicians dressed in Meiji-era military uniforms (see fig. 2).

The European-style uniforms mimic those adopted after the Meiji Res-
The album is titled “Respect” (“Risupekuto”), pronounced as a loanword. Using the album cover as a springboard for discussing the popularity of the term among Japanese youth, the author of an Asahi Shimbun (Asahi Newspaper) article criticizes youths’ lack of understanding. A Japanese sociologist quoted in that article explains that hip-hop in the United States is a weapon for transforming the circumstances of black people, and the word respect is meant to remind the current generation of youth about the importance of remembering past struggles. He takes offense at the use of the word in the context of images that seem to promote a militaristic nationalism:

Youth should be expressing the pain in their hearts and bodies, not with some hackneyed phrases, but with their own words. So why, in bars, are they expressing the kind of preachy, empty morals of old folks? Plus, the members of hip-hop groups are mostly men, not women who have felt what it’s like to be a minority. Japan’s hip-hop groups also come mainly
from the upper middle class, and I guess they reflect an era that is calling for the flag and the national anthem. Even in Japan, there are minorities such as Okinawans and Koreans living here, and I think the rappers should imagine their standpoint a little more in their songs.59

One of Rhymester’s emcees, Utamaru (seated on the left), responded with anger, and for good reason. In the hip-hop scene, he is one of the more outspoken opponents of the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party that has been in power in Japan virtually throughout the postwar period. According to Utamaru, the cover’s image refers to a time of ferment in Japan following the isolationist Tokugawa era (1600–1868), when the military government prohibited foreigners from entering and Japanese from leaving Japan:

Around 1868, at the time of the battles surrounding the restoration of the Meiji Emperor, Edo [old Tokyo] culture had matured, and Western culture came rushing in. Those two styles mixed. For example, samurai sporting traditional topknots [chonmage] and wearing their swords would also dress in Western clothes, sometimes even wearing the old style sandals [zōri]. As Western culture came in, there was a sense that Japanese things needed to be improved, and in that chaotic mixing, entirely new things were created. We feel a lot of sympathy with that because that’s the stance we’ve taken ourselves.60

For some, hip-hop likewise challenges young Japanese to think about how they can improve their culture through selective mixing.

To be sure there is a tension between the desire to make hip-hop Japanese, and a reactionary militant nationalism, but we can also see glimpses of a transnationalism in the ways politics are imagined by the rapper Utamaru. A notable song that concerns such a transnational cultural politics of race is a collaboration between Utamaru (of Rhymester) and DJ Oasis (of King Giddra).61 The song is called “Shakai no mado,” which translates literally as “society’s window” but is a colloquial expression meaning “zipper on one’s pants.” This is a song about opening the zipper, but this “window” does not open onto just anyone’s private parts, as the song’s refrain suggests:

when something’s rotten, put a lid on it [but] sometimes it’s fun to open it up

kusai mono ni wa futa o shite

tokidoki akete tanoshimu n da
As the song progresses, it becomes clear that this zipper hides the rotting phallus that is the Japanese political system. Utamaru criticizes impotent politicians who are “smoking in a gunpowder shell,” obsequious journalists, and a public that simply “nods in unison.” Utamaru also blasts the Ministry of Education for approving history textbooks that downplay the atrocities of the Japanese military against other Asian peoples during World War II, a perennial source of friction with South Korea and China:

completely closed, the sacred inner sanctum, how long has it been from the last restart?

the rusted zipper on the fly of the pants completely rotten, in there it’s big

if left alone, it’s a cancer on the world
do you want to make such a strong stench?

I can’t understand you, you shitty old men entrusted with the textbooks, you make up a smoldering fantasy on the pretext of representing Japan’s “pride”

Huh? I misheard you, you must mean “blind”

(DJ Oasis [2000], “Shakai no mado, Part 2,” Sony Music Entertainment/Associated Records, AICT-1274)

It does seem that the politicians who approved such misleading textbooks did so because they wanted them to represent Japan’s puraido (pride). A member of a Tokyo school board that approved textbooks with pale versions of World War II atrocities explained to the scholar and translator John Nathan why he thinks such textbooks are essential for the future of Japan: “Our children have been taught they mustn’t love our flag, our rising sun. They are taught to think of themselves as the grandchildren of the devil.
What good can that do us? And is that an objective account of history?" But Utamaru says that is not pride; that is being blind. For Utamaru, pride in Japan depends on acknowledging Japan’s history, including learning from other cultures and acknowledging the enduring anger, especially in China and Korea, regarding the textbooks’ portrayal of history. He explicitly aligns himself with Japanese historians who critique the failings of Japanese textbooks. Moreover, at the end of the verse, the emcee makes clear that the misguidance of the government requires the younger generation, his listeners, “to do a pile of homework, or else we are all going to fail,” suggesting there may be more to learn from rap than from textbooks. I would argue this represents an example of transnational cultural politics of race, inspired by an affiliation with African American struggles but focused on critiquing the enduring racism among right-wing Japanese toward their Asian neighbors.

Although this example from Japanese rap music points to the potential for politically oppositional messages, entertainment companies do censor some kinds of lyrics. In an earlier version of the “Shakai no mado” song recorded for release on one of Sony’s imprints, Utamaru takes more direct aim at the late Emperor Hirohito who was in power throughout World War II and was a postwar figurehead until his death in 1989. Utamaru accuses Hirohito of being a sex criminal, a reference to the “comfort women” from Korea and China who were raped by the thousands to service Japanese troops during World War II. Utamaru explained that a few days after recording the lyrics, high-ranking management at Sony decided the song was too inflammatory (personal communication). Fearing the lyrics could provoke Japan’s right-wing extremists to set up enormous sound trucks (tractor trailers with huge speakers) outside corporate headquarters, Sony refused to release the song under its label (though the rappers managed a small-run, self-produced vinyl pressing). As we saw with ECD, corporate Japan acts as a self-appointed gatekeeper of what is and what is not acceptable to consumers of popular culture; criticism of the emperor is off-limits.

One could argue that Utamaru’s call to “open the zipper” illustrates the emergence of a cosmopolitan identity. John Tomlinson and others see great promise in such cosmopolitan identities as a step toward a transnational politics that can deal with the tragedies associated with globalization. But
what I find most promising is not the identity per se, but rather signs of an emerging transnational cultural politics of race in the sense of promoting action on racial issues that transcend national borders and of doing homework to share the burden of history. What is still uncertain, however, is whether such political messages will be transformed into focused political movements. Vijay Prashad argues that having a sense of what he calls “poly-culturalism” can in itself be a tool in combating racism, yet we see in the examples here that a transnational cultural politics of race requires thinking not only of the multiple origin points of heritage, but a reimagining of the links that can lead to a more promising future.

The importance of grasping the “trans” rather than “local” in hip-hop in Japan was poignantly brought home to me through the example of Lafura Jackson (a.k.a. A-Twice), an African-American-Japanese rapper and DJ, whom I saw perform in June 2000 in a small, underground club called Web in Tokyo. He came on at around three a.m., urging the sparse crowd of about twenty people to crowd him in, as he rapped in both English and Japanese. After the show, I asked about his stage name, A-Twice, which he explained was a reference to the Japanese term *haafu* (half) to describe people who are half-Japanese, half-something else. “I’m not ‘half’ anything,” he said. He was African American and Asian American and the doubling of A’s made him “A-Twice.” He grew up in both the United States and Japan, attending high school in Tokyo and college in Massachusetts and then California before returning to Tokyo to pursue a musical career. What he did not tell me when we met was that the previous fall he had been diagnosed with cancer, and a couple months after his performance, he died in a Tokyo cancer ward at the age of twenty-four. When I met him, I didn’t think there was a place for him in my study of Japanese hip-hop, in part because I tended to look down on American artists who were rapping (selfishly, I thought) in English. But A-Twice made a mark on the scene, prompting a stunning tribute song by DJ Krush and Tha Blue Herb emcee Ill-Bostino called “Candle Chant.” By not choosing “either/or” or simply representing his “Japanness,” A-Twice helped me see another “both/and” aspect of hip-hop in Japan. This encounter provides insight into the limits of defining authenticity by primarily looking for a core meaning at the risk of underplaying the performative character of activities in the present.
Conclusion

Japanese hip-hop does deal with race issues, but often in ways that contrast with hip-hop in the United States. In both countries, however, hip-hop creates a space for questioning race and power by laying bare the constructedness of racial identity. Japanese hip-hoppers are not engaged solely in transforming hip-hop style into something purely indigenous, but rather in reconfiguring the cultural politics of affiliation such that the issues do not revolve primarily around dichotomies of “Japanese” versus “other.” Rather, many emcees use their lyrics to highlight divisions within Japanese society (e.g., between impotent politicians and outward-looking youth). In this they echo Cornel West’s call for a new cultural politics of difference. Japanese rappers also contribute to a new cultural politics of affiliation, one that eschews national distinctions in favor of thinking about transnational connectedness among different groups, for example, in the ways Utamaru promotes a politics aimed at easing tensions with Korean and Chinese neighbors while criticizing the Japanese government. From the nineties on, the rise of black music, as well as black culture, more generally, in Japan demonstrates that outside cultural influence can no longer be conceived of as coming solely, or even, primarily from national cultures. “Black culture” and not “American culture” is the object of desire and the defining feature of these fans’ and artists’ commitments in music, film and video. This draws into question the interpretation of this cultural phenomenon as primarily an example of “Western” cultural hegemony and points rather to the possibilities for further grassroots connections.

If hip-hop is defined primarily as possessing “four elements” of artistic expression — rap, deejay, break-dance, and graffiti — then hip-hop is open to everyone. But like jazz and blues before it, hip-hop is also seen fundamentally as black music, and, as such, a desire to “participate” in hip-hop can also be seen as unjust “appropriation.” Intriguingly, the presumed agents of misappropriation may be shifting. In Japan, the United States, and in other countries, too, we are witnessing a widening discourse that views hip-hop as a “culture,” and a “way of life” or a “lifestyle.” In the United States, a growing number of hip-hop artists, fans, and writers point to a fifth element of hip-hop, as well, namely, “knowledge” (or “overstanding”), which
encompasses not only aesthetics of music, performance, and art, but also a deep recognition of the history and political promise of the style, an orientation that coincides with fans’ desires to “protect the culture” of hip-hop in the face of increasingly intense cycles of commodification. Perhaps, before long, the “appropriation" deemed most worrisome will be less focused on the ethnic identity of the artist and more on the ways that entertainment companies often exploit artists regardless of their background. We see this in Japan, as well, where the idea of hip-hop as a culture (bunka or karucha) indexes a desire on the part of artists and fans to distinguish hip-hop praxis from the marketplace. During the nineties, artists, fans, and writers agreed that nightclubs constituted the “actual site” (genba) of hip-hop, because they symbolized a realm where skill as an emcee, not celebrity in the marketplace, was the measure of success. This suggests that global culture may be best defined not only in terms of shared ideologies (“we are all hip-hop”), but shared burdens and shared practices (“what will it take to move hip-hop forward?”). If Bakari Kitwana’s political movement for the hip-hop generation in the United States links up with similar movements overseas, we may see the beginnings of new kinds of political potential.

Before such politics can take hold, however, we in the United States may need to rethink a common American ethnocentrism that tends to equate foreign interest in U.S. popular culture with a desire to be American, or, by analogy, Japanese interest in black culture with a desire to be black. Not only does this oversimplify the kinds of engagements that diverse people have with popular culture, such dismissals play into the hands of Japanese critics of local hip-hop culture, who also see youthful uses of rap music as imitative and misguided, and who use such critiques to reinforce notions of Japanese homogeneity and essential difference from people of other races and ethnicities. The tendency to defend hip-hop as black culture at times works in Japan as a double-edged sword to reinforce discrimination on the basis of race. The critical articles in the American magazine Vibe and the Japanese Asahi Shimbun both focus primarily on album covers, clothing, and hairstyles but fail to consider how young Japanese talk about hip-hop and how their uses of the music relate to their struggles with what Utamaru calls “shitty old men’s” politics and their desire to stand out among their peers. By looking at what Japanese rappers are saying, and relating this to
Japanese debates about corporate entertainment, politics, and inequalities that bear the traces of racism but are constituted through other social differences as well, hopefully we can move the discussion of world hip-hop away from “local versus global” to questions of what transnational cultural politics can accomplish and how. Hip-hop has tremendous potential, in part because there is a sense of shared commitment, a broad-based desire to participate that necessitates speaking for oneself from one’s own position, but the potential of such politics has yet to be fully realized.

Tricia Rose calls hip-hop “Black noise,” an abrasive affront to the quiet certainties that support racism, economic inequalities, and other forms of discrimination in the United States. Yet Japanese hip-hop is in no way simply “yellow noise,” because it is not so much the binding ties of Japanese (or Asian) cultural expressivity that holds hip-hop together, as it is an unfolding history defined by shifting battles and widening battlegrounds. When Mummy-D calls himself a “yellow B-Boy,” he is more interested in reminding new fans that race is a necessary part of hip-hop consciousness than in asserting a Pan-Asian racial identity. The criticisms aimed at Japanese hip-hoppers illustrate that certain kinds of assumptions observers make regarding how to judge the music can work at cross-purposes to the very politics that progressive students of hip-hop hope to support. Seeing beyond these criticisms can lead us to a deeper understanding of the mutual inflection of race, popular culture, and nationality.

Notes

1 Banana Ice (Shitamachi Kyôdai), “Mane + Mane = Mane” (“Imitation + Imitation = Imitation”), maxi-single CD, Pony Canyon (Tokyo, 1995), PCCA-0084. All translations by the author.


5 So, too, in Japan. In 2002, Tokona-X, the star of the Nagoya-based group M.O.S.A.D., broke new ground for Japanese hip-hop with raps about selling cocaine. When his first solo album failed to live up to the expectations of his record label, Def Jam Japan, he was cut from the roster. Yet when Tokona-X died in late 2004, reportedly from a drug overdose, his record label promptly announced the release of a “tribute” album, raising the question: who is paying tribute to whom?
11 Ibid, 281.
14 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 83.
21 Ibid., 138.
23 ECD, self-titled, File Records (Tokyo, 1992), 26MF035D.
27 Marvin Sterling, “In the Shadow of the Universal Other: Performative Identifications with Jamaican Culture in Japan” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2002), vii.
34 Ibid., 314.
37 See Russell, “Consuming Passions.”
44 Ibid., 13.
49 Ibid.
57 The “resident Korean” CD is *Neverland* by the duo KP, Toshiba-EMI (Tokyo, 2003), TOCT-0909.
61 DJ Oasis, “Shakai no mado, Part 2” (“Society’s Window, Part 2”), Sony Music Entertainment/Associated Records (Tokyo, 2000), AICT-1274. This mini-album was released by DJ Oasis, but the song lyrics quoted were written and rapped by Rhymester rapper Utamaru.
64 The tribute song produced by DJ Krush and MC Boss (a.k.a. Ill-Bostino) of Tha Blue Herb is DJ Krush featuring MC Boss, “Candle Chant,” from the album *Zen*, Sony Records (Tokyo, 2001), SRCL-4995.