Cultural interventions: Repositioning hip hop education in India

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ABSTRACT

In this article we show how subject positions are assumed when hip hop is used by institutions supported by western nation-states as a 'cultural intervention' in the global south. Focusing on the Indo-German Hip Hop & Urban Art Project 2011–2012, a hip hop educational project sited in several cities in India and sponsored by cultural institutions funded by the German State, we study how actors negotiate between what we identify as a discourse of hip hop authenticity and a discourse of internationalization. Employing a theory of scales allows us to investigate how actors on the ground engage in the semiotic play of repositioning of and in historically situated notions of authenticity and pedagogy. We argue that the findings have implications for future applied and theoretical work on the internationalization of hip hop as an educational and diplomatic endeavor.

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1. Introduction: rescaling authenticity

'Authenticity' is a buzz word in hip hop studies. While 'authenticity' is used analytically in various strands of the social sciences and humanities to discuss seemingly fixed markers of personhood in domains of socio-cultural and historical life, in hip hop 'authenticity' points to an internal cultural principle that allows actors to perform a version of what it means to be real; to be true to oneself and one's 'hood.[1] An explicit and enunciated authenticity, marked by the phrase 'keeping it real', emerged during hip hop's inception as a framework by which to navigate socio-cultural and historical ideologies of class, race, and gender in North American urban contexts (Cutler, 2003; Forman, 2002; Judy, 2004). As hip hop has spread globally and is appropriated locally, artists, fans and the hip hop industry re-negotiate this principle of authenticity in complex ways (Lee, 2010; Magro, this issue; Omoniyi, 2009;

Opsahl & Røyneland, this issue; Osumare, 2001; Solomon, 2005; Westinen, 2014). Alastair Pennycook (2007b, p. 103) captures this phenomenon as "the global spread of authenticity", which he thinks of as

> a tension between on the one hand the spread of a cultural dictate to adhere to certain principles of what it means to be authentic, and on the other, a process of localization that makes such an expression of staying true to oneself dependent on local contexts, languages, cultures, and understandings of the real. (Pennycook, 2007b, p. 103)

In this article, which draws on our ethnographic research on India's hip hop scene, we make two contributions to the study of authenticity in global hip hop. First, instead of considering the tensions that emerge in the local/global binary, or what scholars and mainstream analysts of emerging world systems have dubbed the glocal, we shift our focus to the *internationalization* of hip hop. Utilizing the term 'internationalization' we draw attention to the ways in which western nation states, in this case Germany, actively promote hip hop education in nation states in the global south and that such promotion should be understood in international and national terms, rather than in the ecumenical, post-national or transnational terms like the Global Hip Hop Nation (Alim, 2009, for a related distinction between inter-, multi-, and transnationalism see Portes, 2001, pp. 186–187). Secondly, we suggest that this sort of internationalization of hip hop education entails a *formalization* of the quintessentially informal pedagogies of hip hop. By focusing on talk centered on the Indo-German Hip Hop & Urban Art Project, an

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[1] 'The' 'hood is a central term in hip hop, signifying the importance of the locality from which one produces hip hop's cultural forms. It refers to both a physical place, traditionally the inner-city ghetto, and a discursively produced space of solidarity, authenticity and dangerousness. Taking such a Lefebvrian understanding of space, Forman (2002: xix) explains that 'hood "is literally an abbreviated version of the term 'neighborhood' and, as such, defines a territory that is geographically and socially particular to the speaking subject's social location. Quite simply stated, the 'hood exists as a 'home' environment. It is enunciated in terms that elevate it as a primary site of significance."

endeavor sponsored by the German government in several first tier Indian cities, we argue that such formalization leads to the repositioning of local and international actors in ways which require a rescaling of authenticity.

While we unpack the term 'scale' in a later section, very briefly, we utilize 'scale' to discuss the ways in which linguistic signs and discourses in a globalized era are always hierarchically ordered. The rules of speaking, the normativities and appropriateness of usage that shape language in use, are always operating simultaneously on 'lower' and 'higher' levels. The here and the there, the now and the then, the local and the translocal, the vernacular and the metropolitan, the contemporary and the historical, all mark different temporal and spatial scales of communicative engagement that are imbued with value judgements (Blommaert, 2007, 2010). Importantly, scales are not fixed but speakers control these hierarchical orders of normativity by repositioning themselves vis-à-vis what is being said; for example they can highlight certain normativities and erase others (Blommaert, 2007, 2010). An analysis of the semiotic play of rescaling provides insights, we suggest, into the complex and entangled positionalities of actors involved in international endeavors like the Indo-German Hip Hop & Urban Art Project. We also maintain that such an analysis updates our understanding of the continued effects of colonialism in international relations, especially in north–south development work.

In what follows we first provide a brief description of the Delhi hip hop scene and our collaborative ethnographic fieldwork in 2013. We then review the literature on the formalization of hip hop pedagogy and carve out what effects formalization can have on hip hop's discourse of authenticity within national contexts. We then turn to our experiences of doing ethnographic fieldwork in the hip hop scene in Delhi to discuss how the formalization of hip hop pedagogy becomes a matter of scales when it is being internationalized in cross-border cultural interventions like the Indo-German Hip Hop & Urban Art Project. We draw from ethnographic interviews with international and Delhi based hip hop practitioners to suggest that a formalization of hip hop pedagogy necessarily positions international actors in ways that force them to rationalize as well as subvert state interests to attempt to maintain authenticity on various scales. We conclude by suggesting that our findings reveal some of the dilemmatic and historically sensitive positionalities assumed by hip hop pedagogues involved in the internationalization of hip hop. Hence, we hope that our discussion contributes to a critical understanding of international development work in general, and hip hop as a site for international pedagogy in particular.

2. Ethnographic research in the Delhi hip hop scene

The two authors of this article initially envisaged their ethnographic projects independently from each other; however, we co-incidentally found out about each other's research shortly before commencing fieldwork in India. We first met and got to know each other personally in the field and tentatively decided to work together in the following months, engaging with the hip hop community in Delhi and researching hip hop's relations to migration, globalization, media, resistance and pedagogy. Dattatreyan, then a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, was trained in cultural anthropology and Singh, a PhD candidate at Cardiff University, was trained in sociolinguistics and linguistic ethnography. Our disciplines, while being mutually informative and to a degree commensurable not least because they both utilize long-term ethnography as ways of knowing, involve divergent epistemologies concerning what could be considered 'empirical evidence', politically-nuanced analysis, and reflexive writing, leading to fruitful interdisciplinary dialogs between the two of us. While we take a more sociolinguistic slant in this article, one that allows us

to investigate the micro-argumentative rescalings speakers make in language, a more anthropological account of our collaborative ethnography can be found elsewhere (Dattatreyan & Singh, in preparation).

Regardless of our professional differences, we were both 'diasporic returnee researchers' (Dattatreyan, 2013), drawn to conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the country that our respective parents had left to make a living in the west. Moreover, Dattatreyan, who grew up in New York City, and Singh, who grew up in Frankfurt, were socialized into aspects of hip hop cultural practices. For all these reasons we became interested in the idea of bringing our academic and personal interests and competences together in researching Indian hip hop.

We first learned about the hip hop scene in India through acquaintances and social networking sites, where we started noticing videos of Indian b-boys and b-girls[2] around 2010 or 2011. During travels to our parental homeland we began, independently, reaching out to members of the Indian hip hop scene in Mumbai and in Delhi; connections that we could follow up more systematically in our collaborative and individual fieldwork in Delhi in 2013 and 2014.[3] At that time breakin, the hip hop dance where b-boys and b-girls get down on the floor to the breakbeat of a funk song, was the most noticeable element[4] of hip hop in India, and our ethnographic interlocutors suggest in several interviews that breakin became visible in India's urban spaces around 2006 or 2007, although many also hinted at the fact that Indian b-boys and b-girls practiced the dance long before this, even if they did not video-record these ciphas (circles of dancers). In any case, we observed how groups of breakers, predominantly young men in their late teens, would meet informally in semi-public spaces, like abandoned monuments or courtyards of shopping malls, to practice their moves. Often a mobile phone was somewhere in the corner playing the breakbeats on repeat and a crowd of hip hop-affiliated and -unaffiliated onlookers watched the breakers move, battle, practice and have fun. These informal ciphas would at times be video-recorded with mobile phones and make their way into the prosumer spaces of Web 2.0 for a wider audience to take notice, like and comment. This was not so much the case for the other elements of hip hop, such as emceein, graffiti writin and deejayin, which were much less visible and were often, if at all, practiced by traveling foreigners in India, or diasporic Indians who grew up in the west and returned to India and practiced these forms there (see Dattatreyan, submitted for publication; Singh, in preparation). Gradually, however, during and after our ethnographic fieldwork in Delhi in 2013, Indian emcees, deejays and graffiti writers are beginning to become more visible in virtual and physical spaces. The emphasis on breakin, though, was important in our fieldwork since, as for instance Schloss (2009) and Emdin (2013) also note, breakin is recognized in hip hop connoisseurship as the most authentic and least commercial of the four elements and can thus be understood as a practice that most directly conveys ideological values of the real to hip hop scenes across the world. Within this atmosphere our ethnographic experiences in Delhi were imbued with the global of spread

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[2] The exact meaning of the terms 'b-boy' and 'b-girl' is contested. Most commonly it is understood as an abbreviation for 'break boy/girl', which was used to describe dancers who used to go down to the floor during the break of a record in the early 1970s in New York City (Schloss, 2009). The term 'breakdancer' is refuted by many breakers who align themselves with authentic hip hop as a mainstream term that emerged in the brief media-hype of the dance during the first half of the 1980s (Fogarty, 2012b).

[3] Dattatreyan stayed in Delhi for 18 months, documenting the scene from January 2013 to June 2014. Singh stayed in Delhi for 8 months, from January 2013 to September 2013.

[4] Hip hop is often understood as consisting of four elements (breakin, graffiti writin, deejayin and emceein) (Androutsopoulos, 2003; Emdin, 2013).