# Introduction  Japanese Hip-Hop

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| *kakumei datta.* | It was a revolution. |
| *nimai no rekôdo o hikkaite* | Scratching two records |
| *hitotsu no ongaku o tsukuridasu.* | and making one music. |
| *. . .* | *. . .* |
| *sono kakki wa buronkusu,* | That vigor came from the Bronx, |
| *tsumari hippu hoppu ga saisho ni* | the place where hip-hop was |
| *hakken sareta basho,* | first discovered, |
| *soko kara umi o koe nihon ni mo* | from there, across the ocean, to Japan |
| *tobihi shita no de aru.* | a spark flew and lit a fire. |
| *sô, densetsu no hajimari da.* | Yes, it is the beginning of the legend. |
|         — ECD [1] | |

It's 3 a.m. in a humid, smoky, basement nightclub called Family in Tokyo. "FG Night," a monthly Japanese hip-hop event, has been going since 11 p.m. After three live acts, the show is winding up with an open-ended freestyle session as two microphones circulate among the 15 or so people milling around the low platform that serves as a stage.  One after another, newcomer rappers grab the mic and shout a minute or two of their rhymes before someone else dives in and starts it again.  Most of the rappers, in their late teens to mid-twenties, are men, but a couple women try out too.  It's a free for all, ruled by the ability to hold the stage through a clever turn of phrase and a catchy delivery.  Then there's a pause as one of the more well-known rappers takes the front.  The scritch-scratch of the DJ's turntable counts time as Gaku-MC holds the microphone to his lips: "*Moriagatten no ka?*" ("Are you having fun yet?").  Gaku tries to move the crowd by screaming "Yo!" but we've been exhorted by the previous 15 freestyle MCs to yell "Ho!" a few too many times.  Gaku has his work cut out for him. "Do you

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[1]  ECD, "Intro" on his album <u>Big Youth</u> (1997, Cutting Edge, CTCR-14075).  Although spoken on the album  by ECD, the lyrics were written by Egaitsu Hiroshi, a writer and DJ.

know what FG stands for?" he yells.  "Funky Grammar!" yells the crowd.  This is the name of the hip-hop collective which organized this event.  "Eeh?" says Gaku. The crowd, louder: "Funky Grammar!!" Still not enough, Gaku demands another response.  Then he signals to DJ Yoggy that he's ready and the opening riff of the Jackson Five's "ABC" starts up, looped over and over as the DJ switches back and forth between two records on parallel turntables. Gaku gets his freestyle going, syncopating his rhymes against the catchy track, referring to the club, the heat, and the sweat drenching everyone's clothes.  The flow of his lyrics gives us all a bounce, as he says he's going "show us his manhood," punning on "sweat" as a reference to sex, threatening to take of his clothes, then saying, "if you feel like I do, bring your voice together with mine and yell!"  Now we're all moving, and with an explosive yell, we throw our hands forward and scream.  Gaku says, "Yo, peace, I'm out" and he leaves the stage.  We in the audience smile and nod to each other.  This is what we came for.

Although we will explore the history of hip-hop in Japan in more detail as the book progresses, it is worth noting that the style has undergone momentous changes since being introduced to Tokyo audiences with the showing of the film *Wild Style* in 1983, a movie depicting New York City graffiti artists, breakdancers, rappers and DJs.  Inspired by that film, and bolstered by breakdance images in the film *Flashdance*, some Tokyo youth began gathering every Sunday at Yoyogi Park, where musicians and others perform on the streets every weekend. Through the 1980s, a growing number of clubs and some radio slots began focusing on hip-hop and by the end of the 1980s, some rap albums in Japanese were appearing on record store shelves.  But at that time, many Japanese questioned with hip-hop would ever take root in the land of the rising sun.  When

I began this research during a summer trip to Tokyo in 1994, I interviewed  music magazine editors, record company representatives, and some musicians, many of whom doubted that hip-hop could ever catch on in Japan.  According to the skeptics, the Japanese language was ill-suited to rapping, there was no true street culture, the musicians were simply trying to be little New Yorkers, and their understanding of the urban, largely African-American social and cultural settings out of which hip-hop emerged was superficial if not completely misguided.  Hip-hop in Japan was simply faddish consumerism, they said, and, like any passing fashion, would disappear like bell-bottom jeans.  They were wrong.  In 2003, hip-hop is one of the fastest growing genres of music in Japan, and it has spawned a widespread engagement with hip-hop performers and fans in the U.S., in Asia, and around the world.  Some hip-hop musicians who spent a decade or more working day jobs while pursuing their music careers can now make a living as musicians, appearing on TV shows, in commercials, and finally garnering major record label contracts and promotion.  In the early 1990s, rappers and DJs were struggling to educate their audiences about what hip-hop is, explaining at shows and in magazines the "four elements" of breakdance, graffiti, rap and DJing, its origins in New York City in the 1970s, the characteristics of rap flow and rhyming, and the musical production style based largely on sampling and mixing. But by the end of the 1990s, as one DJ said to me, "Even old grandmothers have a notion of what a DJ is."  In 2003, some Japanese rappers are bragging about driving in Cadillac SUVs and wearing platinum chains, while others condemn "pop idol" rappers as a discredit to the music.  In the early years of the twenty-first century, there has been an explosion of different styles, an emergence of diverse regional takes on the music, and a burgeoning underground scene is

providing a new perspective on Japan, as rappers criticize the status quo and imagine a better future.  Over time, hip-hop has become a central feature of the Japanese popular culture scene, and having studied it for close to 10 years, I would argue that it tells us something about the emerging dynamics of transnational cultures, and suggests ways that cultural politics may be increasingly important for understanding the workings of power in the economy, government, and society in today's world.

Although it may seem strange to some people that there are hip-hop musicians in Japan, it is hardly unusual.  In cities around the world, youth are adopting the fashion and the musical style as their own.  One can now hear rap music in dozens of languages, including French, Italian, German, Korean, and Japanese. There are even Basque separatists, Maori tribesmen, Australian aboriginals, young Tanzanians, and Native Americans producing their own rap music.[2]  Although distinctive features of each group's, indeed each artist's, style can be identified, it is difficult to ignore the apparent dominance of American pop culture.  After all, these musicians call themselves MCs and DJs, and they identify themselves as part of a global hip-hop culture that originated in the United States.  In some ways, foreign appropriations of hip-hop seem to prove that American entertainment industries have the power to determine other people's expressive styles, if not in terms of what they say, at least in terms of how they present themselves and how they evaluate others.  In Japan, local rappers clearly adopt the clothing, body language, and sometimes even the heavy jewelry of American rappers they see on MTV.  If some kind of "world

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[2]  See Mitchell (2001).  Tanzanian rap is discussed in Weiss (2002).

culture" is developing, it does seem to be appearing in clothing, music genres, and leisure styles among relatively well-to-do urban youth around the globe.

Even so, the assertion of American dominance begs the question:  To what extent is hip-hop in Japan "American"?  As a growing number of people in Japan and elsewhere conceive of themselves as part of a global hip-hop movement, there are ways in which the Americanness of hip-hop is becoming increasingly attenuated, in part because hip-hoppers everywhere express the importance of grounding their music in the realities of one's language, one's crew and one's 'hood.  Moreover, for the Japanese who are attached to the music, hip-hop is viewed as "black culture" not "American culture," which highlights the racial and ethnic dimensions of the music much more than its national origin.  America is still a central reference point, with New York City of the late 1970s recognized as the origin (*genten*) of hip-hop.  The American market  also remains the most commercially successful and the largest productive center for the genre today.  But as time goes by, the younger generation of Japanese listeners are increasingly hearing hip-hop in the Japanese language, speaking to issues and topics of their own lives, and raising the possibility that eventually hip-hop will be seen as Japanese as karaoke.  This tension between hip-hop as black and American and hip-hop as transracial and transnational highlights one dimension of its importance, namely, as a window on the character of cultural dialogue in today's world.

To some people, this dialogue is little more than shoplifting.  A writer for *Vibe* magazine, based in the U.S., discusses Japanese reggae and hip-hop with a jaundiced eye, asking, "Where is the line between cultural appropriation and cultural theft?"  (Dreisinger 2002: 134).  In Japan as well, some commentators

view the attempts to make hip-hop more Japanese paramount to promoting a dangerous nationalism that denies the racially charged underpinnings of the music (Asahi-Shimbun 1999). Such attitudes point to the importance of looking at popular culture not merely as an example of media power, but as a window on some of the things that are most meaningful to the daily lives of Japanese. As hip-hop grows in visibility and popularity in Japan, we can use this as a case study to evaluate the music's social and cultural ramifications. A series of questions suggests some of the ways this debate relates to race, language, nationalism, and globalization in trying to evaluate the power of transnational popular culture. Is Japanese hip-hop innovative cultural production or merely imitation? Is this resistance to, or complicity with, entertainment industry capitalism? Is this the emergence of a "global hip-hop culture," or merely the latest foreign cultural style to be seamlessly integrated into "Japanese culture"? Is this the spread of "Western-style consumerism" or a process of "Americanization"? Is it the mark of a new, emerging "Empire" that is transnational in scope but not centered in any particular nation? What kind of social and cultural effects are associated with the spread of music styles? What drives the spread of these styles, and to what extent is it "top-down" or "bottom-up"? (Indeed, what is the "top"? America? Media conglomerates? Dr. Dre?) If it is "bottom-up," organically emerging from local artists, lifeways, and politics, does this mean we have nothing to fear from the consolidation of media businesses and the transnational spread of popular culture? One premise of this book is that we cannot decide these questions by abstract reasoning alone. The significance of Japanese hip-hop emerges from the actual practices of the producers and consumers, from what the music communicates, and through its

circulation, both as business and as cultural form. Not surprisingly, the uses of popular culture in society are perhaps best characterized by a deep ambivalence, a foundational questioning of the relationships between identities and expression, between conflicted histories and imagined futures, and between diverse, contested local arenas swept up in the currents of global flows.

This case study of Japanese hip-hop, through an approach based on fieldwork and ethnography, can help us answer these and other key questions for cultural studies suited to today's world. If the twentieth century demonstrated the power of the nation-state as ideology and organization with both destructive and creative potential, it seems as if this new century demands that we grapple with the interconnections that cross national borders, whether as diffuse terrorist networks and military complexes, multinational corporations, international non-governmental organizations, global media conglomerates, or as transnational social and cultural movements. It is clear that cultural connections do not end at national boundaries, yet to understand what these new connections mean requires extending our understanding of culture in new directions. Studying Japan through the voices of hip-hop music provides a stage from which to unravel the kinds of gestures toward dialogue that create new bridges and define new boundaries.

Japan provides a key locale for studying these problems in part because it is a key nexus for the consumption and production of popular culture styles, but also because of its central position in international political economy. Japan is the second largest economy, and the second largest music market, in the world, yet it is facing a crisis in capitalism and challenges to its democracy that illuminate problems which people around the world face. Japan provokes

debate in part because of its contradictory character as a non-Western, capitalist, post-industrial nation, the envy of Asia during its postwar economic boom, but now suffering a debilitating, decade-long recession.   Despite an aging population, affected by low birth rates and a long life expectancy, Japan boasts a vibrant youth culture that is often at the center of arguments about how Japan is changing.  To a striking degree the question of the place of consumerism among youth has become a lightening rod for anxieties about Japan as the land of the setting sun.  Although today's twentysomethings grew up during the economic heyday of the 1980s "bubble economy," they witnessed the steady decline of Japan's economic fortunes during the 1990s, and are now facing troubling job prospects.  Youth are paradoxically viewed as both a cause and a product of difficult economic times, and as symbolic of some disturbing relationships towards capitalism.  A relatively new social category, that of the "freeter" (*furiitaa*), which refers to youthful part time workers in dead end service industry jobs, has been regarded in the media and government reports as a symbol of "lack of commitment" to working, while these people also exhibit a slavish devotion to crass consumerism.  Although the audience for Japanese hip-hop is rapidly spreading into the mainstream, most of the fans at live shows tend to be college students or self-described freeter.  Teenage girls in the 1990s were also the focus of a moral panic, as high school prostitution rings, teen girls' "paid dates" with older men (not necessarily including sex), and a rash of brand name consumerism made headlines.  Youth, consumerism, and a discomforting entrepreneurial spirit among girls who, in their school uniforms, considered themselves a "brand name" item, all came together as symbols a crisis in the economic realm that was seen to have as much to do with an unsettling

commodification of youth vitality and sexuality as with non-performing bank loans (Iida 2000; Miyadai 1994).  While the media focused on the failure of parents and the dubious morals of these young women, youth throughout Japan were facing declining job prospects, an uncertain future, and the broken promise that years of hard studying would result in a comfortable adulthood. In this setting, Japanese hip-hoppers sought to stake out a space of performance that drew inspiration from hip-hop's outsider status and oppositional spirit, in effort to speak to an audience that had grown disillusioned with the pop icons dominating the mainstream media.  In some ways, they seek to reclaim their identity by proclaiming that it is not what they sell, nor what they consume that defines who they are; rather, it is what they have to say.

What I have learned from these musicians is that their creative approaches to expressing themselves can help us develop new ways of thinking about the relationships between culture and place, culture and the economy, and culture and power.  It is these three dimensions of cultural analysis that animate the argument which follows.  Japanese hip-hop illustrates that these concerns are not simply the province of academic cultural theorists, but are also actively debated in the construction of identities that seek to build on the ground of changing societies,  while drawing on a wide array of cultural resources to imagine a different future.  My strategy is to work outwards from the particular practices and understandings that motivate Japanese rappers.  My hope is that this project can awaken us to the kinds of transnational cultural politics that offer new possibilities in a world that, for better and worse, is becoming increasingly interconnected.

**PLACE**

**"The Power from the Sky"  (King Giddra, 1996)**

When the rappers Zeebra and K Dub Shine along with DJ Oasis were thinking about a name for their group, they wanted something with an international cachet, a Japanese flavor, and also a specific perspective towards mainstream Japanese society.  Zeebra describes in a music magazine interview why they settled on King Giddra, a three-headed space monster that battles Godzilla in one of the many films of that series.

> First, we realized Godzilla is an international character that would represent (*repurezento*) an international Japan.  But Godzilla himself, he's too much everywhere, so we settled on King Giddra.  It's exactly us as a three-person group.  Also, in the movie King Giddra is the bad guy, but as a public enemy (*paburikku enamii*) he's doing an extremely positive thing, right?  That is, as an enemy of the public, we are an enemy of the system that oppresses us.  We see the system as the enemy, and for us, Godzilla is the system.  We're like "planetary defense forces" (laughs).  For those who don't understand, we've come to tell the truth. (Kido 1996: 42)

For them, King Giddra offered a symbol that is both international *and* Japanese. It is becoming a truism to assert that the local and the global are not exclusive categories but that they operate in a dialectical relationship, each informing the other.  As Jennifer Robertson (1997) finds in her analysis of the interactive relationship between Japan's efforts to internationalize and at the same time to revitalize rural towns as *furusato*, or nostaligic repositories of native Japan.  She quotes a Japanese sociologist, Kurita Isamu, who makes the following

connection: "the international-ness of the lifestyle makes the traditional Japanese arts appear quite alien and exotic. We look at our tradition the way a foreigner does, and we are beginning to love it" (Robertson 1997: 97). Other scholars have analyzed Japan's distinctive understandings of cultural change in terms of looking forward and back in terms of "rationalization and nostalgia" (Kelly 1986), or as a discourse of vanishing cultural forms (Ivy 1988). But for King Giddra, they recognize that the border between "foreign" and "Japanese" is precisely what is being drawn into question by their efforts as Japanese rappers, as well as in the style of producing music which relies on samples from other people's recordings.

> Zeebra: The idea is that we are not looking at the world as if we are on the planet, but from the perspective of being apart from it and looking down. With that meaning, we chose the title "power from the sky." . . .
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> K Dub Shine: There was also an element of the unexpected in choosing the title and the name King Giddra. Partly it was just that when we were doing some scratches of a Public Enemy song, "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos," we took the part "power from the sky / From the tower shots rang out." (Interview with the author, April 1996)

The practices of sampling as a new model of cultural creativity, and the understanding that Japan is not the only source for their identity, nor the only target for their expressions, illustrates two aspects of the rethinking of the relationship between identity and place in Japanese hip-hop. George Marcus suggests the term "the activist imaginary" to describe how indigenous groups can use media in part out of a desire for "emancipatory projects . . . raising fresh issues about citizenship and the shape of public spheres" (Marcus 1996) quoted

in (Ginsburg, et al. 2002a: 8).  Yet the liberation that is sampled from and the liberation imagined by King Giddra is quite different.  The Public Enemy song details a prison escape from death row, and "power of the sky" refers to gunshots from the guard towers.  For King Giddra, they are the power from the sky, celebrating their movement above and beyond the boundaries of nation as they imagine and articulate a new Japan, and perhaps eventually even speaking to fans beyond Japan's borders.

What is "the system" that they seem themselves opposing?  On their 1995 album, they have sharp words for Japan's "credentials society" that emphasizes rote learning for school entrance exams.  Saying it "crushes the dreams of children," they criticize both the "education mamas" who force their kids to study and the students themselves who buy into the idea that educational perseverance will land them a good job after college.  Zeebra even raps about recent government statistics showing that one in four college grads remain unemployed.  In a live show held outside in 1996, K Dub Shine calls on the audience to scream at the Ministry of Health, which was visible from amphitheater, to protest the scandal surrounding blood tainted with HIV that the Ministry tried to cover up.  The themes, and the at times hectoring attitude this album takes towards its audience, suggests some of the ways that the global style of hip-hop is used to engage local concerns, but to conclude that this is simply another way that globalization does not lead to simple homogenization is to oversimplify the dialogue that produces rap in Japan.

One of the recent challenges for cultural studies has been reconceiving the relationship between culture and place, as processes of globalization intensify the contacts and collisions between cultural practices.  It is worth noting that the

movement of cultural forms across geographical boundaries has a long history, as long, no doubt, as the history of humanity. Yet the rise of the nation-state, and the linkage of the imagined communities of nation with the institutions of state governments, has solidified ways of thinking about culture as bounded geographically, and as part of the instrumentality that lends coherence to the world system (Anderson 1991; Wallerstein 1976). The oft-cited homogeneity of Japan, which carries troubling racial overtones and is problematic for smoothing over the diversity within the society, is nonetheless still used as explanation for both domestic politics and attitudes towards other nations, for example with respect to immigration and trade policies. This linking of place and national character is promoted by Japanese as well, in a large body of writing known as *nihonjinron* ("theory of Japanese people") (Befu 2001). According to this line of writing, Japan is characterized by homogeneity, in race and in national character, and as such is best understood through its contrasts with the West. Ironically, the Japanese rappers who work to highlight the social injustices disguised by such assertions of homogeneity are criticized by pundits for not having any ground to stand on because they are just middle class kids, like everyone else in Japan, and their use of hip-hop is simple as a fashion statement. "To the youth who are flocking to hip-hop culture simply as a style, in Shibuya and Harajuku, I feel strongly this sense of incompatibility. And even if one sticks up one's middle finger with a big 'fuck you,' it only leaves a chill." (Tachikawa 2002). When Japanese youth express their affiliation with hip-hop culture, and their enchantment with black expressive styles in film, music videos, and on TV, it is clear that this transnational and transracial imaginary disrupts our linkage of culture to place and specific people. Yet one wonders about the extent to which

this imagined affiliation is actualized in changing social and cultural patterns of organization?

One element of the debate about the deterritorialization of cultural forms concerns the question of whether some kind of cultural homogenization is underway.  On one hand, it seems as if diverse locales are becoming increasingly the same.  It is more than a little eerie to fly from New York to Tokyo and see teenagers in both places wearing the same kinds of fashion characteristic of rap fans:  baggy pants with boxers on display, floppy hats or baseball caps, and immaculate space-age sneakers.  In Shibuya, Tokyo's trendy shopping district for youth, rap music is the background sound of choice.  Graffiti styled after the New York City aerosol artists dons numerous walls, posters, and the interiors of stores.  In public parks, it is common to see breakdancers practicing their styles either in the afternoon or late in the evening.  In all-night dance clubs throughout Tokyo, Japanese rappers and DJs take to the stage and declare that they have some "extremely bad shit" (*geki yaba shitto*) — meaning "good music" — to share with the audience.  In music magazines, on the radio and more recently on TV, Japanese rappers discuss how "hip-hop culture" can interact with Japanese identity, thus drawing on the past while creating something new in a transcultural arena. For many urban youth, hip-hop is the defining style of the era.  In the 1970s, the paradigm of high school cool was long hair and a blistering solo on lead guitar.  Today, trendsetters are more likely to sport "dread" hair and show off their scratch techniques with two turntables and a mixer.  But at the same time, there are reasons to think that such surface appearances of sameness disguise differences at some deeper levels.

Indeed, there is growing body of scholarship demonstrating that initial fears of cultural imperialism were misplaced. Even the leading icons of Americanization – McDonald's and Disneyland – are reinterpreted when transposed to Asian settings (Brannen 1992; Raz 1999; Watson 1997). In Taiwan, students appropriate McDonalds as a youth hangout, undermining any semblance of "fast food."  In Beijing, McDonalds is a luxury restaurant of sorts, and in Japan, children who have grown up with *Makudonarudo*, as it is called, seldom recognize its American origins.  There is even a verb in Japanese "to go to McDonalds" (*makudoru*).  Visitors to Tokyo Disneyland meet a vastly expanded shopping area, compared to Disneyland in the U.S., in part because the Japanese are culturally obligated to buy more gifts for family and friends than is common for American visitors. Moreover, the narrative that dominates the layout of Disneyland in the U.S. is subtly transformed in the Tokyo version.  One might think that the question of whether a given phenomena represents "global homogenization" or "local heterogenization" is primarily a matter of scale.  But while it is true that any supposedly global phenomena will reveal local characteristics if one simply "zooms in" for a more fine-grained perspective, it should also become apparent that the question of whether something is "global" or "local" ignores the important question of the nature and consequences of the mixture that occurs. In other words, it is becoming clear that the importation of American cultural products does not lead to a simple Americanization, but how then can we understand the influence?

To return to the example of King Giddra's first album, their themes suggest a "local" perspective appropriate to Japanese hip-hop, yet at the same time the music and the lyrics are also mixed with foreign elements.  The backing

track features samples from Public Enemy ("the power from the sky") and the Beastie Boys ("Get ready, 'cause this ain't funny"), as well as other Western music, thus making explicit the connection to a larger hip-hop world.  King Giddra's lyrics portray their discovery of American hip-hop in underground Tokyo record shops and their desire to spread the culture in Japan, which they see as involving "planetary defense" through the use of "the bullet of truth that redirects brain cells."  In contrast to much Japanese popular music which frequently incorporates English words into the chorus, these rappers' use of only the Japanese language suggests a strongly national orientation, and yet the Japanese they use is altered from standard Japanese by adding rhythmic stress that the language does not ordinarily possess.  Their dense rhyming style, common to almost all Japanese rappers, is a feature of largely absent from Japanese poetics.  Neither wholly global nor entirely local, the music enacts a certain kind of engagement with Japanese language and cultural politics that gains its force from both global and local references. It would be a mistake, therefore, to view all localizing practices as "resistance" to global homogenization, because what is of significance is how both local and global dynamics are interwoven.  Moreover, these global and local contexts are changing as the interest in hip-hop from other countries expands, and as cross-fertilization among diverse scenes becomes more widespread.   Even American rappers are increasingly adding Japanese words to their raps, after years of touring in Japan have generated a familiarity with the language.

Jonathan Friedman argues that an adequate "global anthropology" must maintain a perspective in which "cultural processes are understood as embedded in life worlds, life spaces, and social experiences that are themselves susceptible

to analysis" (1994: vii). The point is that even though we can be amazed by the spectacular hybridity of transnational cultural forms and identities, they do not appear out of nowhere, but are produced by particular people living out their lives at the crossroads of both global and local forces. It is clear that cultures and places are still related, but the relationship cannot be characterized simply by drawing new geographical boundaries. Indeed, what is particularly striking about the global hip-hop nation is that it overlaps (or tunnels through) other cultural groupings in a way that challenges to distinguish the ways that "local" is not always "Japanese," as when K Dub Shine represents his Shibuya homeground, or Zeebra, as in later solo efforts, calls himself as the "Jonan hustler," referring to a rather upscale section of Tokyo. These situated references – the local within the national within the global – point to the importance of developing readings of culture that move beyond an "area studies" approach, in the sense that there are overlapping cultural orientations within and across areas. This is one of the burning questions for cultural analysis, not only in the interest of deepening our understanding of culture, but also for giving us the analytical tools to approach a shrinking world with ever increasing points of cultural contact, exchange, and conflict.

If culture is no longer bound to specific geographical locations or even specific groups of people, then how are we to conceive of culture? It is becoming more widely accepted that culture is not something seamlessly inherited from one's forbears, but rather is constructed through processes of reproduction and transformation. Instead of viewing culture as a bounded, coherent totality, shared more or less equally by all members of a group, it makes more sense to view culture as a field of negotiated meanings. These meanings are shared *only*

*to some extent* and are shot through with contradictions and ambiguity.  Rather than rehearsing the various critiques of the "culture concept," I would simply like to point out that the culture cannot be defined in a way that will please all, and this should be clear for hip-hop fans as well, who constantly debate the true meaning of hip-hop culture.  What is important is that a focus on culture allows us to see a certain dimension of human existence, one that is given too little attention in fields of economics and politics, especially in an era where the media and entertainment capitalism increasingly revolve around cultural meanings. Jean and John Comaroff offer a working definition of culture as

> the space of signifying practice, the semantic ground on which human beings seek to construct and represent themselves and others – and hence, society and history. . . .  It has form as well as content; is born in action as well as thought; is a product of human creativity as well as mimesis; and, above all, is empowered.  But it is not all empowered in the same way, or all of the time  (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 21)

Thus, if we consider the ways that culture draws our attention to the meanings that guide people's actions, and the ways practices and experiences reinforce (or contradict) those meanings, we can see how cultural studies provides a certain context for analysis. What is clear is that in some ways this space of signifying practice is less and less constrained by the limits of geography, and in this sense, the deterritorialization  of culture is a very real phenomenon.  Japanese musicians hear the latest music from the U.S. within weeks of releases in New York and L.A.  They follow closely the styles of the different producers, comparing themselves to DJ Premier, Swizz Beats, Timbaland, and the RZA. There is a global connectivity in this sonic realm, mediated on vinyl, but inspired

by the recombinatory potential of digital remixing equipment. The challenge is to find ways of characterizing culture without relying exclusively on the tautology that the culture of a place (e.g., Japan) is that which happens in that place (e.g., the Japanese islands). It is also worth underscoring that the ways culture empowering is one of the more pressing concerns for cultural theory.

This helps explain some of the importance in Arjun Appadurai's formulation for analyzing global cultural flows. In moving beyond an analysis of "political, economic, and cultural" globalization, he focuses instead on media and migration as two globalized features of modernity. As Louisa Schein (1999) has written,

> his emphasis is on the mobility – of persons, of signs – effected through these contemporary modes . . . His key point is not that people live increasingly similar lives under modernity but, rather, that they can imagine – and sometimes actualize – more and more different lives through the potentials of media consumption and geographic mobility. (Schein 1999: 362-363)

I would like to draw attention to the term "actualize" because this seems to me to be the central question. For Schein, the rural Miao minority in China actualize modernity through contradictory performances, at weddings for example, which show how their assigned identity as "traditional" by majority Chinese is negotiated and transformed to incorporate symbols of modernity. Schein's innovation is to draw our attention to how a focus on modernity as something performed can help us understand how people actualize their identity through specific, contextualized uses of global styles and practices. Most importantly,

perhaps, she demonstrates that understanding these signs of modernity requires situating their uses in the everyday lives of the Miao.

Appadurai maps the mobility, through media and migration, by introducing the idea of a disjuncture between different "-scapes" of global flows, which he divides into people, media, technology, finance, and ideologies. His model emphasizes the disjunctures between these "-scapes" by arguing that they are "non-isomorphic." In other words, flows of money (financescapes) do not necessarily entail flows of ideas (ideoscapes). Appadurai's goal was to suggest that different locales and topics entail a different mix in the importance of each of these "-scapes." He pointed out, for example, that the Japanese are very open to flows of ideas, but fairly closed to immigration. Unfortunately, few people have taken up this insight, and instead the main use of Appadurai has been to choose a single "-scape" and focus on it, or, alternatively, to invent new –scapes, such as "sacriscapes" for religious diasporas (Waters 1995), "sportscapes" of professional sports, "foodscapes," and so on. The point that these phenomena spread beyond national boundaries, and the desire to map these emerging formations is fine in and of itself, but the proliferation of such -scapes raises the question: Is there some way these different dimensions of flows be connected together?

Responding to this challenge requires shifting the emphasis in our interest in the deterritorialization of cultural forms away from identifying "global" and "local" features of transnational styles and instead turn our attention to analyzing the ways in which such styles are embedded in certain social contexts. Understanding this embeddedness should not solely depend upon bringing out the "local" elements, but could better serve our understanding of cultural power by interrogating the ways that commercialism and cultural politics of Japanese

hip-hop engage with broader social, political, and economic changes within Japan, and even beyond Japan's borders. In other words, while the efforts to show how cultural globalization is not leading to a simple homogenization of culture have been important, the burning question for today's cultural analysis revolves around the question of how the new cultural movements articulate with capitalism and politics in a globally networked world.

## ECONOMICS

**"Protect Him (from what he wants)" -- Scha Dara Parr (1993)**

For improving our understanding of the link between culture and capitalism, I would highlight two main issues. The first concerns the accusation that Japanese youth have turned hip-hop culture merely into a fashion statement. As critics like Yvonne Bynoe assert (2002), "getting real" about global hip-hop means acknowledging that the Japanese have largely turned hip-hop into an object for consumption. A second, and related, question is how we can better understand the feedback loop between cultural production and consumption. For if it is true that consumers increasingly drive today's entertainment industries, how is this power exercised and what kind of power is it?

One perspective on the links between culture and capitalism in Japan's hyperconsumerist youth culture comes from a three-person group out of Tokyo. Scha Dara Parr is one of the more successful Japanese hip-hop groups, building a strong following through their distinctive style of wordplay and amusing songs. Even the name of their group is basically nonsense sounds, but which suggest someone with an empty head just wasting time. Composed of two brothers, Ani (MC) and Shinco (DJ) and frontman MC Bose, SDP has managed to keep

producing albums, and touring successfully, throughout the 1990s, when most other Japanese rappers were struggling to make ends meet with day jobs. During the mid-1990s, Bose was one of the hosts of a popular TV show for children called "Ponkiki Kids," and even the hardcore Japanese acts that take issue with SDP's humorous style give the group credit for bringing rap style to a very young audience. The group's name is made of nonsense sounds SDP, as the group is also known, express a more playful look at youth culture when compared the dire portrayals of King Giddra, but their playfulness does not preclude a questioning of the consumerist obsessions of their fellow youth. In one song called "Protect Him (From What He Wants)" (title in English), the protagonist can't help himself from buying records, a music sampler, CDs and T-shirts at shows, and "even more than he can carry." They rap, "his basic principle: just buy it!" (*toriaezu katchau, sore ga kihon*). That the SDP members criticize blind consumerism may seem hypocritical, given that they are quite fashion-conscious themselves, but what is significant is the way that, through their music, they invent a world in which buying things may be important, but only to the extent that it invigorates friendships with their peers. It is this theme which offers one of the more important entry points into a deeper understanding of Japanese rap music, namely, the question of defining alternative values in a world in which capitalist exchange is increasingly viewed as the prime arbiter of value.

Commercialism is an important topic for analyzing Japanese hip-hop in part because these Japanese B-Boys and B-Girls are most often dismissed by outside observers for turning hip-hop culture primarily into an object to consume. With high-priced vinyl record boutiques, hair salons charging

upwards of $400 to create "dread hair," nightclubs that cost around $30 to enter, and CDs made in Japan that cost almost double what they cost in the U.S., it is easy to say that the middle- and upper-middle-class youth who are attracted to hip-hop fail the test of "keeping it real" precisely because all the money changing hands lays bare the commercial backbone of the movement.  Even to the extent that hip-hop in the U.S. is "all about the Benjamins" in an era of "bling bling" materialism, as in the conspicuous display of platinum and diamond accessories, there is an ethic of performance and lifestyle commitment that rejects spending money as the prime indicator of engagement with hip-hop.  But as even this one example from SDP illustrates, the Japanese are concerned with the dangerous role of consumerism in youth culture as well.  In some ways, the quickness with which American observers of Japanese hip-hop dismiss their efforts as "merely consumerist" is best related to this stereotype of Japanese youth.

Concerns about the place of economic relations replacing fuller, more meaningful social relations is not unique to Japan, but Japanese youth are caught up in these debates in instructive ways.  Japanese youth in the U.S. media are currently represented in a somewhat paradoxically as obsessive consumers and as lackadaisical laborers, perhaps representing a larger shift in our understanding of contemporary capitalism as driven increasingly driven by consumption rather than production.  In Japan, a term that captures the dual character of youth and the economy is "freeter" (*furiitaa*) which comes from the word *arubaito*, meaning part-time work and derived from the German *arbeit*, and the English "free." In attending hip-hop club events, I found that most of the clubbers were college students, and a few high school students, but a large proportion of the rest referred to themselves as "freeter."  Although the clubbers

could express some pride in being a freeter, after all, they were unconstrained by the rigid tracking of large corporations, this self-confidence would evaporate when I asked what they *really* did. It was not uncommon for these fans to hesitate, or look sheepish as they explained their no future jobs as waitresses, convenience store clerks, sewer workers, construction workers, welcome girls at department stores, and so on. It was clear that freeter, with its emphasis on freedom was attractive for diverting attention from their otherwise dull and, from the youths' point of view, subservient jobs.

Japanese youth may tend to be dissatisfied with their labor positions, but they are also represented as world-class consumers, among the few who can rival America's youth in their choosiness. Consider this excerpt from a New York Times article about a global beverage company's marketing efforts in Japan, because it captures one image of the burgeoning, new era, transnational consumer.

> Above all, the world's consumers are getting choosier. It is truer in richer nations than in poor ones, but almost everywhere consumers are becoming more demanding. We want more options. We want bottled water. We want health drinks. We want a brand-new thing we have never seen before, and three months later we want another one. We want endless choices, in dozens of categories, and it wouldn't hurt if you let us buy drinks with our phones. In short, we are all becoming Japanese teenagers. (Stevenson 2002)

This desire for the "brand new thing" is fueled, of course, by various "lifestyle industries" and their constant drive for new markets and styles, but it is interesting that Japanese ethnicity is increasingly defined by this consumer

sensitivity. Each issue of *Wired* magazine even has a "Japanese schoolgirl watch" page, where they report on the latest fad from these J-Girls (e.g., multiple cell phone straps as fashion accessory, August 2002). This characterization of Japan also highlights the tension between hip-hop as consumer item and hip-hop as cultural production that plays itself out in a variety of ways. The question this raises, however, is how ideas of youth are incorporated into these visions of cultural capitalism. That is, as consumerism, contra mass production, is increasingly viewed as the linchpin to the global economy, does this not change the dynamic of evaluating "fashion" and "leisure" as central, while moving questions of production to the secondary status of "responding to demand"? Japanese teens, therefore, provide a test case for evaluating these dual changes in the post-industrial economy, namely, an increasingly flexible labor force.

Fredric Jameson is one of the leading theorists in thinking about the intersection of culture and capitalism. He asks whether "in our time, the relationship between culture and economics has fundamentally altered. At any rate it does seem to me that fresh cultural production and innovation – and this means in the area of mass-consumed culture – are the crucial index of the centrality of a given area and not its wealth or productive power" (Jameson 1999: 67). This idea of "fresh cultural production," which he clarifies as ""new and original, better still, new forms" (personal communication), is useful for drawing attention to the *production* of culture, but it introduces another conundrum: Fresh in what way? And for whom? For record companies, "fresh" means reaching a wide market, perhaps even creating a new genre of music. A few million selling hits can do a lot to shift the orientation of large record companies eager to catch the wave of the next rising fad. And "fresh" for fans of hip-hop in

the U.S., as I'm often told by people who ask questions at my talks, seems to require that the Japanese be more explicitly Japanese, perhaps incorporating traditional instrumentation. But "fresh" for the artists and fans in Japan means a wide variety of things – catchy lyrics, socially-pointed topics, a distinctive flow and phat beats – which may or may not be the same things that attract Japanese record company executives or foreign listeners.

Jameson uses the example of Japanese companies buying U.S. entertainment companies in the 1990s, when Matsushita bought MCA and Sony bought Columbia Pictures. This "invasion" of Hollywood was, at the time, seen as a test case for evaluating the creativity of American and Japanese companies. For several years, Sony's failure to produce a big hit in Hollywood suggested that "even despite ownership itself and private property, the Japanese were unable to master the essentially cultural productivity required to secure the globalization process for any given competitor" (Jameson 1999: 67). But in 2002, Sony's Columbia Pictures produced the number one film of the year in box office receipts: Spiderman. The film's commercial success, but dubious cinematic value (in my humble opinion), seems to me to force a reconsideration of this debate. Although we may agree that "fresh cultural production" is a key measure of a nation's centrality, we should be cautious in equating commercial success with freshness. The role of record companies is important, in this regard, but as we will see in Chapter 3, although these entertainment companies exert tremendous control in terms of gatekeeping, that is, deciding which artists and which songs will get support, nevertheless the creative content of the music itself is most often generated by the artists themselves. Understanding this process requires looking at the Japanese rap world from a variety of perspectives, as the different chapters

of the book will attempt to do. The key question is, how do we evaluate the commercialization of hip-hop culture? Or, to put it another way, how do we untangle the pull of commercialization and the push of cultural creativity in the making of products that generate a meaningful difference?

One dimension of debate, for example, concerns whether producers or consumers are the central agents in constructing the meaning of mass culture texts. Elizabeth Traube (1996) draws attention to some shortcomings of work that focuses on either the production or the consumption end of popular culture.

> Yet both productionist and consumptionist approaches to mass-produced popular culture have tended to represent its ideological influence in terms of homogenization, differing only in their assessments of how successful the culture industries are in shaping social consciousness. Where the older, production-centered approach emphasized the ideological effectivity of mass culture, reception studies found active "resistant" audiences who use mass-cultural forms to define themselves against dominant norms and values. Neither view adequately accounts for the operation of culture industries. On the one hand, the receptionist assumption that asserted cultural differences have oppositional political value needs to be reconsidered in light of the culture industries' heightened interest in marketing diverse forms of distinction . . . . On the other hand, industrial cultural production has never been a seamless process, and it can be argued that under the prevailing structural conditions, contestation and contradiction are becoming part of the routine. (Traube 1996: xiv)

This move in cultural studies to develop more nuanced understandings of both production and reception leads us to consider different national settings for understanding this process. While the commodification of culture on the part of the entertainment industries is turned around into the culturalization of commodities by consumers, what is still missing from our analysis a deeper understanding of the ways the consumers and the producers condition each other. In the hip-hop world, this includes a deeper investigation the processes involved in the commodification of culture, as digital technology, copyright laws, artistic practices of sampling and remixing, increasingly draw into question traditional media business practices. But it also means that fans have a somewhat different array of resources to draw upon in giving meaning to the music, particularly in the densely packed lyrics and the intertextuality of the music as it arises through sampling and remixing. The key question regarding commodification in Japanese hip-hop is this: How can we grasp the business practices, the performances turned into commodities and the experiential pleasures that together generate the emergent character of Japanese hip-hop? Rather than seeking some underground space that is removed from money changing hands, we must examine the ways that commodification tells only part of the story. It is this that brings us to the cultural politics of hip-hop in Japan as a way of refocusing our efforts in a way that situates the value of the music in the settings where the music makes a difference.

**POLITICS**

> **"It's true, we lost the war / But don't dis us on scene today"**
>
> **-- Zeebra (1999)**

The axes of global versus local, and of economics versus culture, lead us to evaluating Japanese hip-hop in terms of a more diverse array of cultural politics. There is no single "Japanese" approach to hip-hop, and instead we find a wide range of styles, some more pointedly political, others aimed at the polymorphous pleasures of music in general. The "freshness" of the Japanese styles should not be evaluated simply on the basis of whether they are sufficiently Japanese, which would require us to determine what exactly might be "Japanese" beyond using the language: using traditional instruments, or talking about samurai, geisha and sushi? In terms of commercialism, it also makes no sense to fetishize the "underground" sound as opposed to major releases, in other words, to start with what is often taken to be more "real" versus more "commercial" because, as we will see, the production of both types of music may differ little, and the character of the songs themselves do not map neatly into one or the other category. What this suggests is that while we consider the Japaneseness of the music, and the ways in which the music and the identities are commodified, we want to work outwards to clarify the ways the music brings to life an array of political subjectivities. The two examples I use in this section illustrate that hip-hop in Japan leads neither to blind adoration of things American, nor a simple fetishization of things Japanese. Again, it is the shifting character of the middle ground, recirculating through the world of hip-hop that can help us understand the significance of the broad ranging networks of global popular culture.

One of the assumptions worth examining about American popular culture overseas is the degree to which it makes people "want to be like us." As King Giddra rapped about the dangers of believing in a fantasy of the life of the celebrity, "just to be able to sing in front of people," so too does the image of a

hip-hop world on MTV contain a certain kind of appeal. But this appeal, which the rappers describe as "a dope feeling from the streets," may not entail a love of all things American. A recent film by Kitano Takeshi called "Brother" plays on the idea of the kinship between Asians and African-Americans, with Kitano's starring role as a Japanese mobster (*yakuza*) exiled from his organization, who goes to see his brother living in L.A. with an African-American played by Omar Epps. The story follows Takeshi, his brother and Epps who violently take over the L.A. drug dealing business, gunning down everyone and anyone who gets in the way. The mobster himself speaks almost no English, and this is one of the film's conceits as Takeshi bursts into ultra-violence instead of speaking. Sadly, perhaps the true global language is not English, but violence. The three entrepreneurs kill their way up the ladder, gunning down all "the Mexicans" who formerly ran the area's drug trade. In one of the movie's pivotal scenes, Takeshi and his brother meet with the higher ups, ostensibly to make a deal to take over the Mexicans' place. The scene is sampled (and slightly edited) in a song by Zeebra that is inspired by the film. The sampled scene opens with one of the mobster's challenging Takeshi and his brother for the recent killings.

> <u>American Mobster 1</u>: "So you think you can get away with what you did?"
>
> <u>Mob Boss:</u> "Just relax, okay? Let's discuss this like gentlemen. [Speaking to Takeshi and his brother] From now on, you're going to be in charge, just as it always was."

[In the film, Takeshi's brother leaves the room, and the mobsters speak in front of Takeshi, assuming he understands no English.]

<u>Mobster 1, challenging the boss</u>: "You telling them you're going to let them have the territory? Now why would you do that for these fucking Japs."

Takeshi sits smiling as if oblivious. Takeshi's brother returns to the room, and sitting down, he and Takeshi pull out guns they have previously hidden under the table, and they proceed to gun down all the mobsters. Looking over the carnage, Takeshi gets the last word, "I can understand 'fucking Jap,' asshole."[3] This story of a Japanese mobster going to L.A. and winning the battle there with lots of gun play resonates with a postwar history of relationship between America and Japan, such that Japan's expected role is one of being a grateful for all the help America has provided. But by the late 1980s, those days seemed numbered, with right-wing politician Ishihara Shintarô and the head of Sony, Morita Akio, penning the diatribe *The Japan that Can Say No* (Ishihara 1991). Zeebra, in his song inspired by the film *Brother* makes a similar kind of assertion:

| | |
|---|---|
| *tashika ni maketa ze, sensô jya* | it's true we lost the war |
| *da kedo* DIS*rarenee, ima no genjô wa* | but don't dis us now |
| *orera tafu de, haado na kokusaiha* | we are tough, hard internationalists |
| *masa ni erabinukareta toppu faitaa* | the top fighters who made it through |

-- "Neva Enuff"(Zeebra featuring Aktion) 1999

It is important to recognize that Zeebra is rapping from the perspective of the Japanese mobster, and this is not necessarily Zeebra's own opinion, but nevertheless it is striking to see the ways that "American" popular culture can be

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[3] In the film, *bakayarô* is translated as "asshole," though in Japanese, the word is more literally translated as "stupid idiot."

used to undermine the attractiveness of Americanness.  Later in the song, fellow rapper Aktion laughs, "I can't even understand your English – ha ha!"

The political place of American cultural forms in Japan goes through waves of transformations.  The historian Carol Gluck points out that twentieth century Japan witnessed two concentrated phases of Americanization, one in the 1920s and another in the decade following WWII.  In her words,

> The influence of the United States took diverse forms in the 1920s, including Fordism and Taylorism in industry, flappers, jazz, and Hollywood movies in popular culture, and the rationalization of household management and creation of a new women's culture.  Many in the urban middle classes welcomed American influence as speedy and efficient, others as empowering and emancipatory.  But in the face of their enthusiasm for American ways, most of the public talk focused instead on the negative impact of a culture its critics regarded as superficial, materialistic, and a threat national values and social order alike.  (Gluck 1997: 578-79)

By the 1930s this Americanization was being replaced by a rising tide of nativist ideology, backed up by violence and coercion, both at home and abroad.  In the immediate postwar period, Japan embraced America again as a model of wealth and democracy that would bring Japan out of the "dark valley" of war  (Dower 1999).  But this love affair with things American began to take on the character of a love-hate relationship, with the opposite poles moving further apart.  In the entertainment world, the desire for Western music was gradually replaced by homegrown artists, and from 1968 onwards, sales of Japanese artists steadily outpaced those of Western musicians.  As the 1980s and 1990s progressed, a

widening array of media choices, and a more cosmopolitan perspective seems to have introduced a greater distance between American and Japanese people, one that is being sorely tested at the time of writing by opposition to American forces in Okinawa and questioning of the Bush administration's policy towards North Korea.  In this setting, hip-hop can even be used to question the military dominance, as K Dub Shine raps about the international trade in weapons "made in goddamn USA" (*meedo in fuzaketa* U.S.A.) in a song called "Organized Crime." It is widely argued that postmodernism and globalization are bringing about a change in the relationship between societies of the world, and this new fluidity, and emergent forms of political organization and transnational citizenship are illustrated in a variety of ways through Japanese hip-hop.

One might think that with this anti-Americanism, there would be a parallel emphasis on the beauty and originality of Japanese culture, but here too, the lessons are mixed.  Take the case of the rapper Kohei Japan.  On the surface, he appropriates cliché aspects of Japanese culture, actively parodying both Japaneseness and hip-hop. On the cover of recent CD, rapper Kohei Japan is shown as woodblock print, giving the "funk sign." The funk sign on his kimono as well.
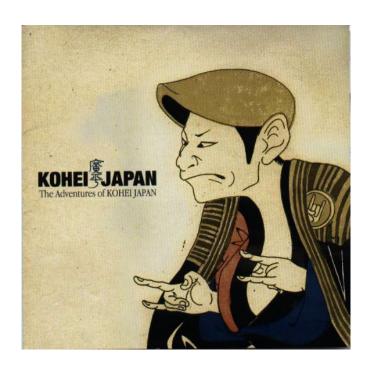
**Figure 1: Creative Localization? Kohei Japan (2000) CD jacket**

Kohei is the younger brother of a more established rapper. They both grew up in Yokohama, and Kohei lived with his parents until his late 20s. While he has been pursuing a music career with a rap group named Mellow Yellow, he has been working as a chef in Yokohama. An excerpt from a song by Kohei from his solo debut album "The Adventures of Kohei Japan" (2000, File Records) exemplifies one approach of Japanese rappers in playful lyrics that contrast Japan with the West:

> always all-natural  completely Yoga
>
> not bread, but rice; not ramen, but soba
>
>
> not meat, but fish   not cooked, but raw
>
> not flowers, but dango    my cap is from Kangol

> wearing a hunting cap, it's my time
>
> K-O-H-E-I, the Japonica

These lyrics show how "global" hip-hop is used to emphasize a kind of Japanese national identity. He likes it raw, not cooked; soba (Japanese noodles) not ramen (Chinese noodles); and so on. Here again we can see that "global" and "local" are not best viewed as dichotomies, but rather that they are mutually implicated in producing each other. But this approach is not, in fact, the mirror image of dissing the U.S. by praising Japan, because an important facet of Kohei's approach is the use of parody, which offers a contrast to the direct, in-your-face style of Zeebra.[4] Parody, in this example, also illustrates the drawback of interpreting this kind of song as a reassertion of the local. Kohei is clearly drawing on images of essential Japaneseness, the food preferences, the kimono he wears in the woodblock print cover of his CD, even his decision to add "Japan" to his name. As an anthropologist, my initial reaction was to see this as an illustration of the ways that a foreign style, hip-hop, can be used to reinforce traditional elements of Japanese culture, and, at a superficial level this is the case. Kohei is partly saying that being Japanese is cool. But if we consider the perspective of his audience, what becomes clear is that he is not so much rebutting assertions of an emerging homogenized world culture, so much as a tongue-in-cheek style to contrast with the sincere, tough guy assertiveness of Zeebra's style. Here we begin to see the usefulness of situating cultural texts in the context of the audience that is interpreting the music. A fan of Kohei's said

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[4] Thanks go to Bret De Bary for suggesting this connection.

she like his style because he was "fun" and, unlike the more hard core style of

Zeebra, he is not just putting on a tough stance (*kakkô tsukete*).

Placing the song in the context of his audience gives us a further insight into his

use of the term "hungry," which has an intriguing double meaning.  Kohei is

hungry for certain things (a desire to consume), but "hungry" is also a common

way of describing musicians who really want to make it in the music world.  This

is a hunger to be recognized, to be a successful artist, and to become a

"phenomenon" (*genshô*) among a large group of fans.  One of the things I want to

suggest is that power of popular culture comes in part from the two-sidedness of

this hunger:  to consume selectively, and to produce something noteworthy.

These examples of Zeebra and Kohei Japan, therefore, begin to give us a sense of

the dynamics of the cultural politics of Japanese hip-hop.

This suggests that analyzing culture depends on identifying not the

patterns that characterize all Japanese, but rather the lines of debate that produce

shifting notions of what it means to be Japanese.  Where as *nihonjinron* (theory of

Japanese people) encourages a focus on the foreign/domestic dichotomy,

Japanese hip-hop forces us to develop a more nuanced analysis of the dynamics

producing contemporary Japan emerges.  Along these lines, we may gain a

deeper appreciation of the relationship between culture and place by seeing how

global, national, and local provide certain axes of identity.  This brings us to a

view of transnationalism is emerging in specific interconnected spaces, rather

than being characterized as "forces" from outside affecting "local places" (Tsing

2000).

From its inception, cultural studies has been concerned with the activities

of marginalized groups, often in an effort to map the ways that studying

subaltern groups can expose the injustices of the mainstream, hegemonic cultures. An important strategy in cultural studies is showing the ways that marginal groups can deny authority to the authorities. But this focus on resistance becomes complicated by the fact that resistances can often lead to different kinds of complicity. Just as "local hip-hop" helps build interest in foreign forms, so too can efforts of communities to become "self-sufficient" lead to an increasing integration into dependence on the global economy. This is not to say that every progressive aim is hopeless, but rather that we need to develop more subtle ways of understanding cultural politics.

My aim is to work towards developing a model of engagement that can attend to the cross-cutting dimensions of interaction that produce shifting modes of complicity and resistance, and to develop appropriate ways of characterizing this new world disorder. Lawrence Grossberg (1996: 88) argues that cultural studies needs to move beyond models of oppression, "both the 'colonial model' of oppressor and oppressed, and the 'transgression model' of oppression and resistance." Instead, he argues, we need to move the concept of identity towards "a model of articulation as 'transformative practice,' as a singular becoming of a community." This notion of "transformative practice" is important because it draws attention to the ways that identity is not something merely inherited in one's genes nor something fully defined by elites, but rather something that emerges over time through day-to-day activities, which entail engagement with a variety of moral projects. This view suggests that identity is shifting and contextual, built on the past, but actively constructed with a vision towards the future. Thus, we might conceive of identity in ways analogous to freestyle sessions which unfold according to certain genre conventions, but which also

depend for their success on unexpected innovation that, over time, can become transformative. Moreover, it is the participation in the cipher, as freestyle sessions are also called, that, for a brief period at least, characterizes this notion of a "singular becoming of a community."

But how do we proceed? How can we capture the global/local dynamics, attend to the processes of commodification, and work outwards from hip-hop in Japan to evaluate the cultural politics of contemporary Japan that make a difference?

**GENBA POWER**

**Ethnography and Fieldwork on Global Popular Culture**

Interestingly, the question of how to do this is similar to the problem I faced in beginning to study Japanese hip-hop. As a Ph.D. candidate in cultural anthropology, I set out to find an appropriate fieldwork site where I could engage in participant-observation, tracking the lifeways and perspectives of the natives I had chosen to study, namely, the B-Boys and B-Girls (hip-hop enthusiasts) of Tokyo. In the fall of 1995 I began a year and a half of intensive fieldwork in Tokyo. I wanted to understand the various aspects of Japanese hip-hop, but the number of potential sites was daunting. There were places where the music was produced: record companies, recording studios, home studios, and even on trains with handheld synthesizers. There were places where the music was promoted: music magazines, fashion magazines, TV and radio shows, nightclubs, and record stores. There was the interaction between musicians and fans at live shows, or in mediated form on cassettes, CDs and 12" LPs. To complicate things further, rap music is part of the larger category of

"hip-hop," which also includes breakdance, DJ, graffiti, as well as fashion. One of the tenets of anthropological fieldwork is that you cannot understand a people without being there, but in the case of a music genre, where is "there"?

As I began interviewing rappers, magazine writers, and record company people, I found a recurring theme that provided a partial answer. Everyone agreed that you cannot understand Japanese rap music without going regularly to the clubs. Clubs were called the "actual site" (*genba*) of the Japanese rap scene. It was there that rappers performed, DJs learned which songs elicit excitement in the crowd, and breakdancers practiced and competed for attention. Clubbing is an odd combination of excitement and lull, focused attention on the stage and mobile circulation among the crowd. I was also surprised to learn how much networking and business planning goes on in the clubs. Magazine writers covered club events, and often conducted interviews before or after the shows. Going to the clubs also revealed how, over time, the music and the social networks evolved together, with different "families" of Japanese rap groups performing together for years, and developing a distinctive style, as well as a cohort of artists and fans. In sum, these all-night clubs offered an entry point for trying grasp the experiential pleasures of the participants within a variety of business practices.

Live shows are central for understanding the paths that Japanese hip-hop has taken, and they also are the events around which many musicians' lives revolve, at least, the musical part of their lives. At the same time, it was clear that artists, magazines, and, of course record companies, also measured developments in terms of CD releases. After attending various artists events for several months, and as they became aware of my interests, I got the chance to

observe recording sessions. Recording studios offered a different but also revealing *genba* of musical, cultural, and business interactions. This is the material objectification and commodification of performance. Moreover, the making of recordings, because it is in the transformation of the performances into records and CDs that is, for now at least, the path to widespread success, both in terms of financial rewards and public recognition. Therefore, I use the recording studio as a second "actual site" for understanding the character of hip-hop in Japan.

This notion of the *genba* (pronounced with a hard "g" as in given) suggests that the power of popular culture can be understood to some degree by looking at the intersecting relationships in the nightclubs and recording studios. Such an approach is part of a broader move within anthropology to move away from seeing fieldwork as situated in bounded, geographical locales. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) argue that it is important to see anthropology's distinctive trademark not as a commitment to "the local" (as in the people of some local community) but rather to emphasize anthropology's "attentiveness to epistemological and political issues of location" (p. 39). In their words, "Ethnography's great strength has always been the explicit and well-developed sense of location, of being set here-and-not-elsewhere. This strength becomes a liability when notions of 'here' and 'elsewhere' are assumed to be features of geography, rather than sites constructed in fields of unequal power relations" (p. 35). To this end, Gupta and Ferguson stress the importance of foregrounding questions of "location, intervention, and the construction of situated knowledges" and to focus on "shifting locations" rather than "bounded fields" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 5, 39). It is this approach which to me offers a way of

reconsidering cultural studies an era in which area studies is being reshaped by transnational connections.

By focusing on nightclubs and recording studios as *genba*, or actual sites, we may be able to develop ways of moving beyond the clash between consumptionist and productionist perspectives to a more careful reading of the different kinds of power that actors have. As I discuss more fully in Chapter 3, I would propose thinking about power in the culture industry of music in terms of four groups: artist-entrepreneurs, record companies, media outlets (retail and publications), and fans (or, consumers and audience). Each of these actors has a different kind of power, yet the power of each depends in part on the power of the others, not unlike a socially diffuse game of rock-paper-scissors. One's power depends on one's location, the reactions of the other participants, and the breadth of circulation that cultural products attain. What's more, a notion of location helps us grasp the ways that global and local, as commercial and cultural, are intertwined. Moreover, a growing number of people are mapping different approaches to an "ethical cosmopolitanism" which may offer some possibilities for new kinds of cultural politics of the future (Ginsburg, et al. 2002b; Tomlinson 1999). .

**What this book does and doesn't do**

The goal of this book then is to develop an understanding of the nuanced cultural politics of Japanese hip-hop. We will consider the ways ideas of globality intersect with ideas of nation, region and locality, but what we find is that a singular "Japanese" understanding of hip-hop is impossible to define. What does emerge, however, is a quite distinctive range of debates, about the

role of economics in cultural life, about the power of expressions, and about the problems facing Japanese society and the world at large. Each chapter discusses a different aspect of these cultural politics, including race, language, history, the club scene, the recording industry, digital technology and copyright in recording studios, and the social contexts for rap fandom. [This section will be expanded to include somewhat more detailed descriptions for each chapter.] In sum, this books aims to give a broad overview of the cultural politics that enliven the Japanese hip-hop scene, and to use this as a case study for rethinking today's key questions for cultural studies.

My research methods are based on extended fieldwork among the musicians and fans, focused primarily on nightclubs and recording studios in Tokyo. After my first research trip to Japan during the summer of 1994, I began extended fieldwork between September 1995 and February 1997. I have made brief return trips almost every year since then, most recently in January 2003. I have attended more than 120 club events, mostly in Tokyo, though some in outlying suburbs. I have also witnessed over 50 recording sessions, from small home studios to multimillion dollar studios. I interviewed numerous musicians, fans, event organizers, and club owners at the club events, or arranged times to meet at a more quiet location. I supplemented this fieldwork with interviews with record company representatives, record store owners, and music magazine writers. During my extended fieldwork, I also attended monthly editorial meetings of Remix magazine, which covers a wide range of club music.

I have chosen to focus on the musicians of Japanese hip-hop, with particular emphasis on the rappers and the things they talk about in their songs. My initial inspiration for studying Japanese hip-hop was hearing some of the

early CDs by Rhymester and Scha Dara Parr, for example, which convinced me that introducing American audiences to their view of Japan would be a worthy goal in and of itself, and to a large extent this remains one of the goals of this book. There could easily be books written about the breakdance scene, the turntablism scene and DJ competitions, and the graffiti art scenes. Although I will talk some about each of these, my focus is on the music and particularly the words of the MCs, because it is here that the intersection of ideas, media and culture come out most strongly for me.

That said, there are many other sides of Japanese hip-hop that will receive only scant attention. I do not, for example, engage in a close comparison of the scenes in Japan and the U.S. This could be a very interesting project, but I believe the most important first step for understanding Japanese hip-hop is to hear it in its own terms. Too often a Japanese group is likened to an American group, or the scene is likened to some era (always in the past) in the U.S., and this tends to reinforce an ethnocentric reading of the Japanese scene as always a little less, and a little behind, "us." Although I have attended about a dozen shows of American artists in Japan (EPMD, Snoop Dogg, Das EFX, and Nas, to name a few), I also leave this side of the Japanese hip-hop world to a later study.

In short, I hope to introduce the readers to the world of Japanese hip-hop, while exploring its implications for understanding the emergent cultural formations of the present, their intersection with business practices, and their potential for a diverse range of politics. In many ways, I see the example of Gaku-MC, described at the beginning of this chapter, trying to build up the energy at Club Family, and then succeeding, as analogous to the ways the youth culture movements are produced through a collective excitement that, when they

work, create something new, and potentially something greater than the sum of the original parts. This may open us to rethinking the boundaries implicated in dividing diverse peoples, and for understanding the connections that are reconstituting today's world.  It may also lead us closer to an as yet unfulfilled promise of globalization, namely, a richer dialogue based on mutual respect and sympathy among the peoples of the world.

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