

CALL FOR PAPERS

Transcultural Hip-Hop: Constructing and Contesting Identity, Space, and Place in the Americas and beyond

University of Bern, Switzerland, October 30 – 31, 2020

Almost fifty years after its birth, hip-hop is considered a truly global phenomenon that combines elements of uniformity with local symbols and expressions regarding musical forms, lyrics, performances, and social content. It can be said that within the US context, hip-hop emerged during the 1970s as an African American subculture. However, from its very beginning hip-hop has been a highly transcultural and hybrid phenomenon that integrates various musical elements and forms of cultural expression. In addition to African American popular culture, for example, Caribbean and Latin American music styles, language and dance played a vital role in the formation and development of hip-hop on both coasts of the US. The entanglement of diverse cultures and diasporas on the evolution of hip-hop as a music and as a movement, in the urban settings of New York and Los Angeles, for example, encourages us to think of these different musical, cultural, and social traits in more fluid or hybrid terms. Furthermore, diasporic identity in the multicultural neighborhoods where hip-hop first emerged is also fluid concerning the interaction between diasporic “peripheries” and their centers of origin. This conference aims to focus on the transcultural, inter-ethnic and diasporic exchanges that created hip-hop and helped to spread it within the US and beyond. The conference asks how identity markers bound by ethnic, cultural, and spatial categories are being negotiated in hip-hop. While concentrating on the Americas, the conference will also include papers that focus on other world regions and on transregional entanglements.

Within the framework of transculturality, the organizers wish to focus on three principal areas of enquiry:

A. Identity Politics in Hip-Hop

In the context of US hip-hop, many scholars argue that hip-hop should be understood with regard to its African American “centrality” (Ogbar 2007; Perry 2004). While this is not disputed by the conference organizers *per se*, we ask how can we better understand the hybridity of hip-hop music and culture, both at its point of origin, and as a global phenomenon? Furthermore, how do other minority groups and diasporas draw upon ‘African American’ cultural markers to legitimate their contributions to the genre? How do

local and global hip-hop movements reproduce and adapt such identity markers to different social and political contexts and agendas? In doing so, notions of identity and authenticity are contested and broadened over time.

B. Movement, Reproduction and Hybridity of Cultural Signifiers in Hip-Hop

Following on from these themes and borrowing from Appadurai's (1996) understanding of cultural flows or 'scapes' in an era of globalization, one way of understanding the myriad creations of hybrid identity constructions in hip-hop is to identify and unpack the reproduction and merging of cultural signifiers, be they musical, visual, linguistic or otherwise. Which cultural symbols are (re-)produced in a particular context, and how do local or national cultural forms interact with transnational and global cultural flows? How does cultural politics shape the negotiation of cultural signifiers? Finally, for minority groups establishing themselves in different diasporic contexts, what is their relationship with their home or national culture from afar, and how do they shape the transcultural dynamics of centers of hip-hop production?

C. Space & Place in Hip-Hop

Like no other musical genre, hip-hop reflects a unique importance of space and identity (Rose 1994; Forman 2002). From its very inception in New York City, representing one's neighborhood at battles was a central part of hip-hop culture. When Los Angeles became the center of gangster rap in the late 1980s, African American and Latino rap artists highlighted the intermingling of hip-hop with gang culture on the West Coast. The East Coast/West Coast feud in the mid-1990s, culminating in the deaths of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, pointed to the collision of geographical and musical spaces when negotiating spatial identities and affiliations. Thus, in its myriad forms and expressions in the US and around the globe, hip-hop's "powerful ties to place" (Forman 2002) are omnipresent and reflected by artist names, languages and local slang as well as references to specific geographical markers and signature musical styles of a particular locality. How are common issues of marginalization and contested localities being negotiated in hip-hop? What can these place-identities tell us about the political, socio-geographic and cultural context hip-hop culture is produced in?

The conference will be held in English and prospective participants should please send a title and abstract of up to 300 words to keith.cann@hist.unibe.ch by March 15, 2020.

Travel and accommodation costs will be covered thanks to funding from the Swiss National Science Foundation.