



Grantmakers in the Arts
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THE EDGE

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ARTS ON THE EDGE

THE GROWTH AND EMERGENCE OF THE HIP-HOP COMMUNITY

Off site: Langston Hughes Cultural Arts Center

The hip-hop community is operating on the fringes of the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. Its aesthetics are evident in popular and underground theater, literature, spoken-word, performance, and film. In addition to developing audiences for their own fledgling institutions, hip-hop groups are being asked to partner with more mainstream organizations that wish to reach the Gen X-Y-Z constituency. How are they surviving and growing? What innovations do they bring to their fields? And what challenges are they facing in the current economic climate? This session will examine the impact of Hip-Hop on contemporary performance and its role in the age of media-based arts.

Moderator: Roberta Uno
Ford Foundation

Panelists: Kamilah Forbes
NYC Hip Hop Theater Festival

Rennie Harris
Rennie Harris Puremovement

George Fronda Quibuyen
aka Geologic, Poet/Emcee

October 20, 2003, 3:00 p.m.

UNO: My name's Roberta Uno. I'm the Program Officer for Arts and Culture at the Ford Foundation. I arrived there about a year ago, September. I'm new to the grantmaking field. I'm hosting this session looking at hip-hop's impact on arts and culture and the hip-hop community.

I know that people wonder, well, people have come right out and asked me, "Why are you working with hip-hop at Ford? What does that mean?" They're curious and excited and alarmed, all different kinds of responses.

You might be wondering why we're doing a session on hip-hop at an arts and culture gathering like this. I know that hip-hop is an art form and a culture that really evokes passionate responses. On one hand, it is a worldwide, multibillion-dollar industry and cultural phenomenon that people have various perceptions of: That it promotes materialism, misogyny, and violence. Paradoxically, on the other hand, there are those who believe that it is a culture and an art form, and that it provides a space for democratic participation, incisive social analysis, and artistic innovation.

We're aware that other art forms at their inception have really provoked the same type of passionate, polarized responses. We need only look at the beginning of modern dance or modern art. I think one of the closest parallels would be jazz as an art form, which originally was perceived as something that was associated with crime and shady characters and now has been recognized as America's contribution to world arts and is recognized as America's classical music.

One of the reasons why I wanted to bring this particular forum to grantmakers is because a lot of grantmakers are involved in funding different hip-hop efforts, but are not necessarily looking at it through an arts and culture lens. In other words, there's a lot of work that's being done around audiences of tomorrow, and outreach programs, and youth and education, and incredible work that's being done with various social justice and organizing efforts.

We want to ground those discussions in the art form, because people often talk about hip-hop without actually knowing what it is. A lot of times the perception is that this is something that just started yesterday, or, didn't that happen in the '80s, and isn't it over? People are not aware of hip-hop as a continuum art form in terms of the African diaspora. A lot of times people are not aware of the vocabulary of hip-hop and that it's an interdisciplinary art form.

My intention was to bring three wonderful artists to talk to you today. Each of the artists that I've invited has accomplishments as individuals, but also are doing wonderful work with communities and with organizations that has really deepened the work that they are doing.

Our game plan for today is that each of them is going to speak to us, but I've also asked them to weave some type of demonstration or performance into their remarks, so that you will actually get an idea of what they're talking about. And also to make it a conversation so that if you want to raise your hand and ask a question, that's fine. I also invite them to ask questions or make comments during each other's presentations.

I'm going to start with Rennie Harris. And Rennie Harris, as many of you know, has brought hip-hop dance to the modern dance stage. I love this quote that I heard from Rennie, which is, "Modern dance no longer is the contemporary dance. It's hip-hop that's contemporary dance." Because modern dance has been with us for quite a long, long time, and it's looking at where the innovations are from his perspective.

Rennie's most recent stage work is *Facing Mekka*, which was performed at the Joyce Theater, among other venues. I'm sure many of you saw the huge, full, two-page spread review raving about the work in the *New Yorker*. At the same time that that work was critically acclaimed, it showed the really limited critical vocabulary for understanding the work, even though we're talking about one of the preeminent dance critics in this country.

So Rennie has done very large works of scale like *Facing Mekka* and *Rome & Jewels*. He has also made a tremendous contribution to the field through his Illadelph Festival and Legends of Hip-hop, where he's done a lot to create education around what the origins are and who the originators and innovators and pioneers have been in hip-hop dance, and then continuing on with looking at the evolution of the art form.

We're going to begin with Rennie. Welcome. And I'd like to take a pause to just recognize and thank Jackie Moscou, who's the Artistic Director of the Langston Hughes Center, and she'll be hosting us right after we finish the panel. But thank you. Welcome.

HARRIS: We could start from a place that could be theory, but a lot of it to me seems like common sense.

At a young age, when I was, 13 or 14, someone asked me to talk about what it is that I do. They



were field agents of the Smithsonian Institution, who came to Philadelphia to document hip-hop as folklore. That was the first time I actually began to have conversation. This is how I began to teach in the school system of Philadelphia unofficially.

In that kind of awakening, or discovery, or just having people ask me questions about certain things, a lot of things came to light. The first being that the day that slaves were made to dance on the slave ships, and they were called "dancing the slaves." was the birth of African American contemporary art. They danced in shackles, and would dance to teakettles and whatever they could muster up to make music. They took what was traditional, what was understood as tradition, and applied it to current means. And that was the birth of contemporary art in America as far as I'm concerned.

So with that being the beginning for me, and the beginning for hip-hop, it's important to recognize that hip-hop is an extension of traditional African dance and culture, which is inclusive of the African diaspora community as well. A lot of people do not recognize this, like our Latino brothers and sisters who are also part of the community of hip-hop.

The first time that the terminology came about was in the '30s. It was used as a term that meant that you were going out. Back then they would say, "What you doing tonight?" "We're going hip-hopping around all the clubs."

According to Geneva Smitherman, who wrote a book called *Black Talk*, the word "hip" is a derivative of the word "hippie," and "hippie" comes from a language spoken in West Africa called Wolof. She says that the word "hippie" means to open one's eyes, to make knowledgeable.

The hop, as some of you may know, was synonymous with dance because of the Lindy Hop. The Lindy Hop got its name from Charles A. Lindbergh, of course. So it meant the hip people at the dance, the cool people, the people who were smarter than the average person who goes to work nine to five, the hipsters, the hep cats. The terminology has been around for a long time, and it's been passed on.

From that beginning, from Lindy Hop, and swing, tap, and all those things, this movement, jargon, dialogue, language has been continued on throughout the community here in the States, specifically with the Black and Latino communities.

Most people don't think of it as having that sort of history. If you go back and see someone do

Manjani, you'll see West African movement, you'll see hip-hop, what we know as hip-hop proper. You'll see the same exact movements, or *Linjen*, or from the Fulani clan who spin on their backs and on their heads in the dirt at their compound. It's a traditional dance, and they're spinning, and they're just doing their thing.

When I saw that, it was the first time, I said, wow! That's like breaking. These guys were handing this down for years and years and years and years before anyone thought about the term "b-boy" or "hip-hop."

When I went to West Africa, and the first time I heard rapping, I thought it was an African who started rapping. When I met the *griot*, or the *jali*, he rhymed from the top of his head and told me about my family and where I came from. Of course in it was in his language. That's what they do, and they tell you about the past, the present, and the future. So in a way, the MCs became the modern day *griots* of African American culture.

That's a little briefing. We can go really detailed, but I have a certain amount of time, so I have to be quick.

It's also my belief that the actual consciousness of hip-hop began in the mid and late sixties. Of course the world has always been in turmoil, but this was the time you're talking about the Black Panther movement, you're talking about the Sexual Revolution, you're talking about Vietnam. You're talking about all these things. Martin Luther King. Malcolm X. Everything that's happening in the world. I mean the world as we know it was changing at that moment, extremely changing.

To me the consciousness of hip-hop began at that moment, between '65 and the late sixties. From that movement, expression began to happen, to come to light. As you know, expression is based on your experience, your experience is based on your environment, your environment is set by what's going on politically in this world.

I'm going to bypass a little bit. I didn't start off as a hip-hop dancer, I started off as a stepper. A stepper is stepping into rhythm, and the body, and comes from tap. We thought we were tap dancers. We dressed like tap dancers. We had suits with a derby hat, spats, cane. This is a steppish dance. Everybody used to do it.

Stepping is from Philadelphia. I found it to be indigenous to Philadelphia. Hip-hop is indigenous to a state, and cities, and boroughs, and blocks.



I came into the last era of stepping in '75, '76. I was pretty young to learn just the foundation of it.

A stepper had taps sometimes on his shoes, but didn't tap dance. We tapped out rhythms, but we did it to music. You couldn't hear the rhythms, so you had to use rhythms to hit.

Each side would dance and create these rhythms, and they looked like kind of tap moves, but they would all do the splits and all kinds of funky movements.

Steppers have these small little things that they do to dis you, but you have to be quick and watch to see what's happening.

The first movement that specifically falls under the umbrella of hip-hop movement is the "Robot."

The second movement that came out of that was something called "popping." Popping was created by a guy named Boogaloo Sam. He used to dance and go "pah, pah, pah, pah, pah, pah." So they started calling this style of dance popping. That basically is contracting your muscles back and forth. You'll hear your joints cracking a lot.

At that time there was also another thing called "dime stopping" or "Filmore." Strutting. The strut is like stopping on a dime. A lot of people confuse dime stopping with popping. Popping is continuous. Dime stopping is hits.

So you have these styles coming out of the Bay Area, Sacramento, LA, Vegas, everywhere. These styles are known as the funk styles. They do not consider themselves a part of hip-hop culture, but have agreed to be called hip-hops, a dance form associated with hip-hop. Most people see popping, the first thing they say is, "Oh, that's hip-hop." or "That's breaking." or what have you. But it's the funk style. Why is it the funk style? Because funk pre-dates hip-hop. And music defines the dance most of the time.

Boogaloo Sam created this popping, he created a style called Boogaloo. The popper's job is to create an illusion with his or her body. For instance, another style called "waving" came from a bigger style, but the technique is waving. The style is "snake." That's creating illusions that electricity is going through your body, or that you move like a snake. *[Demonstrating]* *[Applause]* I'll tell you I just turned 45.

There's another funk style that actually pre-dates Boogaloo, and that's called "Campbellocking." Campbellocking was created by a guy named

Don Campbell. He originally was in school; he was upset. He was trying to do a road block, or a dance called the Funky Chicken, and he was in the cafeteria; he got up and he went...Let's all come to the dance. And he said he had got a bad rapport. So he got up and went like this. *[Demonstrates]* Everyone started cracking up, laughing at him.

The movement was supposed to be really funky. He "locked" the movement. They started saying, "Say, yo, Campbell, do that lock movement." So after that, they started calling it Campbellocking. And it hit like wildfire across the West Coast. Everybody was doing this movement. It eventually got on Soul Train.

It got on Soul Train, because it moved from Chicago to LA. Then he got kicked off Soul Train, started a group called the Campbell Lockers. He made history because his dance became so famous, he had a song called, "Do the Campbell Lock."

They were the first professional hip-hop dance company to date, from the seventies. It reigned from the seventies to the eighties. He used to open up a concert for Frank Sinatra. So he did some things that even hip-hop companies today could never reach.

Campbellocking, some of you may know some of his students, like Rerun. Fred Barry.

A lot of people were good at that. But he really innovated the whole style of dance. In Japan, he's like Elvis right now. So all these cats with big old packs on, Applejacks, striped sneakers, and shoes, and socks, and there are lots of them, which is really amazing.

So Robot; popping; Boogaloo, which was created by Boogaloo Sam; Campbellocking, created by Don Campbell. We're still trying to figure out who created the Robot. The closest we've come to is Robot Charlie and Robot Slim, were the first everyone had seen, the first that people remember seeing the first time they saw the Robot.

The Electric Boogaloos – which was started by Boogaloo Sam – they're responsible for, along with Don Campbell, all the movement that you pretty much saw in the eighties that was funky and rhythmic. They trained Michael Jackson.

Michael Jackson got his Robot from the hip-hop dancers, the street dancers, this whole dancing machine thing he did. What people know as the Moonwalk is not the Moonwalk, it's called the Backslide, which has been around before, since tap dancing. Tap dancers did this.



The Moonwalk is actually this here. He does it, but they just have it mixed up. This is the Moonwalk. It's kind of like you're walking on the moon. The Backslide is the Backslide.

So these guys are really instrumental in media, dance, and movement.

All this is happening simultaneously on the East Coast. East Coast did not dance to funk, they danced to break beat. A break beat is the solo of the drummer on a particular funk record. Kool Herc decided to play two records back to back and extend the breaking. Before we would dance, we would wait, on the side, for the drummer solo, to get out and dance because that was the funkiest part.

Now he took it back, played it back-to-back, we called this the merry-go-round. He played it back-to-back and the drum solo never ended. They started calling it, break to the music. They used to say b-boys and b-girls. The terms started becoming synonymous with the music.

Also, it's important to know that b-boying or b-girling is a term that's all synonymous. Break dancing as it's known, is something that the media created. It makes sense.

But when you look at it from a b-boy or b-girl perspective, it's a culture. B-boying and b-girling created the foundation of what hip-hop is today. It brought all these different roles or elements together, and singing, breaking, the DJ. They're almost separate in a way but they complemented each other.

Afrika Bambaataa from Zulu Nation, who originally was with the Black Spades, one of the biggest gangs of New York, decided to create a cultural gang called the Zulu Nation. He saw a movie on Shaka Zulu and it changed his life, and he created something called the Zulu Nation, where they would learn about their heritage and culture and be a positive "cultural gang." That's when hip-hop really came under a baton, and created itself after the culture.

B-boy or b-girl is a proper term to use, instead of saying break dancer, because that's acrobatics, that's nothing but acrobatics and tricks. B-boy or b-girl means that she or he is from the Bronx, because South Bronx is where it started. It also could mean, "Yo, boogie boy," which is short for boogaloo. Or you're a break boy or break girl, a person who listens to break beat music. It's a common term to be used as well when you're talking to someone. "Yo, B, what's goin' on? How you goin', B?" 'Cause maybe the way he talks, he

sounds like he's from the Bronx, so I'm calling him B 'cause he's from the Bronx.

But the way he has his clothes, he has this stuff hooked up fresh, with the graffiti on the side. At one time, you could tell when someone was from Manhattan. Used to be you could tell when someone was from the South Bronx. You kind of still can. But it used to be the whole dress that you could really tell where someone was from.

So then you have the b-boy culture, you have the funk style culture happening, and then you have something that now becomes hip-hop.

Now how did this term come about? The term hip-hop, as I talked to you earlier, was around for a long time. People were using it and saying, "Hey, you know, I made it rhyme." Basically miming or mimicking after the DJ. The guy is like Cab Calloway who had all these kind of different languages and terminologies going at the time.

It was said that Kool Herc was being interviewed, and they said, "Hey, what you doin'?" He said, "We just hip-hoppin' around." And that got printed in the papers. They got into a big issue. Zulu Nation met. The dancers came. Everyone wanted to know, "Well, who called this thing hip-hop? This ain't no hip-hop. What the hell is hip-hop?" So they met, and they talked about it, and Kool Herc said, "Well, I called it hip-hop." Because he's an OG, he's older. He started the jargon of it, the sound to listen to, and folks dubbed hip-hop. Everyone accepted the term hip-hop as a cultural movement.

So you have a brief synopsis of East Coast, West Coast, this thing they call hip-hop proper, is basically social dances. The real hip-hop dances, social dances, they were popular in the clubs or at the parties. You had to dance like the Bismarque, you know; the Steve Martin; Steve Laudin; Cabbage Patch. All these things became social dances by which people did through the umbrella of hip-hop. That's what we consider hip-hop proper. That's what hip-hop actually is. Not breaking, not popping, not Campbellocking. Hip-hop is all the social dances lumped together to create patterns of movement.

Of course there's house, training, second line, go-go, all these other styles of hip-hop dance, styles of community dance called by the term hip-hop. But I don't have enough time to go through all of them.

I said all this so that you understand that when you see someone dancing and say, "Oh, that's a hip-hop dancer." That's not just a hip-hop dancer, really. He might be a popper. He might



be a person that does Boogaloo. He might be a strutter. He could be a locker. He's a house head. They are all totally different things.

What we see on television today, as far as I'm concerned, and as far as my peers are concerned, is not hip-hop dance. It is a derivative, a hybrid version of hip-hop. It's usually jazz. Just so we're clear about what's on television is not what I understand as hip-hop.

AUDIENCE: Rockefeller calls it videography.

HARRIS: Videography. It's basically just for show... That technique I kicked off with New Kids on the Block and N-sync. The technique is used with all choreographers who do commercial work. When you have a singer group who can't dance, you have to then narrate the story for them. "Okay step to the left, pick up the apple, take a bite, throw it. [Laughter] That technique is normally used a hundred times to choreograph for artists who can't dance. You have to visualize the story. Great tool for kids, too, by the way, to get them to move.

So it's a technique that became popular with no one really acknowledging it. If you talk to choreographers personally, they'll tell you it's not hip-hop. But on television, they would never tell you that. Because that's their money. All that is said so that you understand the difference between movement that's definitive hip-hop or associated with hip-hop dance.

Some of the movements on television like the shtick of Harlem Shave, or the movement out of Louisiana, with the chicken head thing they do, they're pretty much hip-hop dances because they came from community socializing, and it became popular. All the reggae movement.

Now, I say all this because now we're moving into a different area. That's the foundation. We're moving to a place where hip-hop is now meeting and coming into the theater. So how does that change?

For our own concern, it doesn't change that much because hip-hop is about adapting to its environment. So wherever you are, it's going to be hip-hop. We did it in the street; we did it on the corner; or we did it in the talent show; the church; the barbecue; wherever we could go do our thing, we would do it.

That's just people communing. It had nothing to do with street dances that we could dance in the street. No, no, no, it was a block party, man. It was blocked off. Of course, there were a few people out there busking. Go out there, get their

money. Of course they are always a part of the culture regardless of who you are.

So now you have hip-hop moving to a different place. Not so much different, but really having a place to express and show you where it came from, from the struggles of the sixties. Now, you're seeing it in a whole different light in the theater.

The issue for purists in hip-hop is they don't want to see it in the theater, they want to see it a certain way. You put it in the theater and they think that it's not hip-hop. But the foundation of it is adapting to the environment.

How do you begin to move into that space? Moving to that space is about deconstructing the movement itself to show the beginning. In the beginning people weren't flipping off walls and jumping and doing all these incredible things. It was kind of a slow pace. It had to be developed in different ways.

I'll demonstrate just a little bit of how I see hip-hop and how I saw the connection with theater. Really, theater is just more toys to play with. Here you have a chance to make this connection. Because this has always been a part of hip-hop, hip-hop has always been dramatic, theatrical. It's now just meeting up with theater. It's always been that way since I've known it.

So, I'm going to demonstrate a little bit. This is the difference from what's traditional, and then, where it's going. [Applause]

I'll put it this way. I don't know if you've ever heard a hip-hop dancer say, "Well, it's the way I feel. It's the way I talk. It's the way I walk. It's a feelin'. It's an expression." There's no more words now. You can see it in the movement. You deconstruct it. You see that this is what he's feeling.

The same thing with floor movement, if it's b-boy or b-girl movement. Deconstruct it; it then challenges what you think. It challenges the modern dance aesthetic. Because when you break down b-boying on the floor, the first thing that people say, "Oh, I didn't know that you added modern dance to your movement." Because it changes once you do that. The aesthetic changes. I like to think of it as challenging the audience to say, "Is it hip-hop now?"

UNO: Thanks, Rennie.

We're going to move on to the next presenter, who is Kamilah Forbes. Rennie referred to the four elements of hip-hop; and Kamilah's



background is as an MC. She's also a theater director, an actress, and a playwright. She's the founder of the Hip Hop Theater Junction, which started in D.C. And now the co-artistic director, with Danny Hoch, of the Hip Hop Theater Festival, which is producing the Hip Hop Theater Festival in New York, San Francisco, D.C., Chicago, and, I think, upcoming, Los Angeles. So they are a national network promoting this art form.

FORBES: Let me just give you a quick intro on who I am, the best way I know how to tell it.

Now I was clipping back spins while Huggies grew my black skins. I used to watch adult light meters. Oh, yeah, and rock him. With the knowledge and purpose, I copied their lyrics, verbatim in math class, I had to pass.... [*Rap continues*]

That's just a little verse.

I started out as an MC. I grew up with hip-hop. I was raised on hip-hop, hip-hop culture, the art form, within the generation.

I was in sixth grade writing rhymes, always, because I looked up to folks like MC Light. I wanted to be MC Light. At that time there were very few female MCs to look up to; I definitely tried hard to be like her. I grew up and matured, and my rhymes became a little bit more complicated, a little more complex; and I fell in love with performance. But more so I realized I was falling in love more with language.

I wanted to explore more language. I wanted to explore the use of language and how to communicate, not necessarily just with words, but with rhythms, with tone, with flow. I thought I could be a professional MC or I could go to theater school. So I ended up pursuing both.

I went to Howard University to study theater and got a Bachelor of Fine Arts in theater. I did all of the basics; and when I was there, I fell in love with the classics, ironically enough. I think because of the language, especially Shakespeare's use of language. It was flipped, and very similar to what I was doing in the nighttime, in the club with my group and with the different affiliations that I had with other hip-hop groups in the Washington, D.C. area.

At the same time as my theater training, I became involved with an organization called the Freestyle Union, which is a collection of MCs. It was founded by a woman named Toni Blackman in Washington, D.C. It was a collection of MCs brought together to preserve the art and further

the art of freestyling. Up to that point, I had really only been focusing on written rhymes. Freestyling is improvisation, which is a huge thing, not only with MC-ing and dancing as well, but just within hip-hop culture. Just coming off the top of your head.

The Freestyle Union would meet weekly, and we would focus on the alphabet. We would for the first five minutes only be able to focus on rhyming on the letter A. Then we'd move to B. And then C. It was almost like a drill sergeant.

What it forced me to do was that I ended up reading the dictionary. Broadening your vocabulary so that you can come in and freestyle and have this word bank, is what Toni called it. Always constantly copying down words so that you can come in and flip it.

We then would take it to topical issues. She would have us cut out headlines in the newspaper; and then we would have to freestyle on those topics. What it forced us to do – I think this is a part of the social activism – is to be versed in those topics, and what was going on, and to be able to freestyle on that issue.

I found that absolutely fascinating, at the same time, as theater was fascinating to me. I always wanted to bridge that gap. Once I left theater school, I did a Shakespeare intensive in Oxford, England. That was great and dandy, but I kept leaving to go to London to all the hip-hop clubs and got in trouble for that. But anyway, that's a different story.

The point is that once I left school, all the work that I was getting as an actress was just August Wilson. As a black actress, August Wilson. And I was doing Shakespeare, which was cool. Okay, I liked the language, it was fun. But none of my peers were in the audience. It wasn't work that necessarily spoke to them, their generation, and their personal experience.

As an artist, coming up through this long hip-hop culture and legacy, I wanted to find a way to be able to bridge the gap, not only for the audience, but also artistically. And how to forge these two artistic mediums, to begin to create a new aesthetic, which is now termed as hip-hop theater. Where there's hip-hop dance theater, but hip-hop theater. And my definition of it is taking the performance elements of hip-hop, and using them as storytelling tools.

There were a few artists doing it around that time, around '98, a few years ago. Hip-hop theater is a very new art aesthetic.



Jonzi D in England. Danny had his thing going on in New York. We were down in D.C. doing our thing. Our first piece was called "Rhyme Deferred," in which we used DJs to score a tale of two brothers, Cain and Abel. The Invincible Suga Kain and his brother Gabe, actually, his name wasn't Abel, but Gabe. And the story dealt specifically with the commercialization of hip-hop within the culture itself.

We wanted to fuse movement and fuse the DJs' rhyming and just plain storytelling on the theater, and seeing how they all converge.

There were a lot of other MCs, or folks like myself who were theater-trained or just loved the theater, but at the same time were hip-hop, and wanted to see that happening. So we just saw that happening all over the place.

Now I feel that it's taking on to new levels; because now we have the popularity of the spoken word community. Which to me is almost like what hip-hop rapping, rhyming is, but without the beat behind it. You're focused to listen on the words and that's a whole new aesthetic in and of itself. You see traces of that also within a language aesthetic as we know as hip-hop theater as well.

UNO: I just wanted to ask a question actually about the cipher, as both a central kind of device artistically, but also in terms of how that informs organizing or collective work, etc.

Do you guys know what a cipher is? Because I thought maybe you should explain that to them if they didn't.

FORBES: A cipher is basically a circle, a collection of people, whether it be MCs, whether it be breakers, whether it be a combination of both. The circle theme is prevalent throughout hip-hop culture. You'll see a collection of MCs in a circle, and they're rhyming together, bouncing off ideas. One MC will go at a time, maybe the rest are providing the beat, or there's one beatboxer providing the beat. And they're listening to each other's rhymes.

What that is, the bouncing off of energy, is a cipher. The one beautiful thing about a cipher is that there is no hierarchical system. Everyone is equal. Everyone's on equal footing, and there's that amount of respect that's given within the circle. There are definitely tenets of respect in the circle.

That cipher element of freestyling, of giving off energy, of receiving energy from other folks in the circle, informs my work heavily. It

also informs my work in the company heavily, because the way that we create our work is very collective. Folks are coming in with different disciplines, whether we're dealing with DJs, whether we're dealing with MCs. There's not necessarily the director, the choreographer, the designer meeting. No. We're all sitting within a circle deciding how we're going to structure this piece and how we're going to create the work.

UNO: We're going to go on to George, and then we'll open up for more discussions or more questions or comments. But that's actually a good segue to George's work.

This is George Quibuyen, and he is also known as MC Geologic, or GO. He comes from an MC background as well. And Kamilah talked a little bit about spoken word. The impact that hip-hop has had on both the poetry scenes and the spoken word scene has been enormous.

George has been part of the Isangmahal Collective out of Seattle, which, along with I Was Born With Two Tongues, another very important Asian Pacific spoken word/hip-hop poetry ensemble, has been doing some of the most important organizing around the kind of spoken word/poetry summits in the Asian American communities. He also is a curator and works at the Wing Luke Museum, which I hope you have a chance to stop by because he curated a really wonderful show, a hip-hop show there right now.

QUIBUYEN: Thanks, Roberta. Well, coming from an MC background, and also writing with the spoken word and poetry, I would freestyle like Rennie and Kamilah did. But I'm going to refer to the notes that I took, my writer's side, my spoken word side.

I'm not going too much into what hip-hop is. I think we got a foundation, a feel for it. I want to highlight hip-hop as an art form that emerged as the voice of an underclass, an American underclass, out of working communities, people of color, primarily Black and Latino communities, from its beginnings in the sixties, seventies in New York to other urban areas, and finally into the mainstream media and American pop culture.

Many people come into contact with this phenomenon that we call hip-hop. Rennie highlighted the four elements, so to speak: DJ-ing, break dancing, MC-ing, and graffiti. These have all spanned the globe, as he said, in Japan and elsewhere.

As with many new and innovative cultures, hip-hop began first by borrowing and appropriating



from other musical innovations that spawned out of a long thread of American Black culture, with roots stretching even further back to Africa and the diaspora. Now 25 or 30 years later, arguably even more, as hip-hop approaches its first parenthood, some argue a middle age crisis. We've seen and heard hip-hop influence other art forms. It's like a cycle where at first it was influenced by many art forms; now it, in turn, is influencing others, in some cases even the art form that influenced it in the first place.

It comes into contact with other cultures, other communities. We hear that a lot. But I find this particularly interesting because in hip-hop, which I've always known to be an eclectic and non-elitist art form, the word "other" slowly ceases to exist.

The boundaries are blurring, and for some it's a good thing. Obviously, one of the biggest beneficiaries are corporate industries and the mass media, which has used hip-hop aesthetic in their advertisements, TV shows and films, clothing lines. You have hip-hop toys and collectibles. Jay-Z has his own shoe line now.

While the media initially helped introduce hip-hop to folks who otherwise might have not caught on, myself included, living in Hawaii and growing up there, there's now an increasing rift between the hip-hop that you see on TV and the hip-hop that you'll see in the community. But hip-hop still remains on the front lines of cultural exchange.

As a fan of hip-hop, I guess, you've got the old school. Then you've got the new school. I guess I'm sort of the middle school. Listening to Eric B and Rakim, and N.W.A., Public Enemy. Later on Nas, Common, Tribe Called Quest.

I began to write my own rhymes. Same way that Kamilah talked about. Just getting into freestyling, studying the language, just the infinite possibilities of communication.

But as a Filipino, as an Asian MC, I wasn't really taken seriously. Most of my friends, who are also Filipino and Asian, stayed away. They got involved in hip-hop first as fans; and then when they started picking up, started being practitioners of hip-hop culture, they would mostly become b-boys or b-girls. They would break dance.

DJ Qbert became famous, a Filipino DJ back in the early nineties, who is still going on now. Also graffiti artists too. It required no talking. You could work with your hands. You could work

with visual arts. I guess there's that stereotype in the Asian community, "Shhh, don't be loud."

I was one of the few in my peer group who ventured out into writing, into MC-ing. Got booed off a few stages even before I said my first line. That happened a few times. But the perception of an MC growing up was that it's hip-hop's most visible performer. Break dancing and DJ-ing was kind of being played down, especially in the mainstream media.

So you'd see the rapper. The rapper embodies hip-hop; and it was the media putting this image out there. A lot of times the image that was internalized within the hip-hop community, and even without, is that that MC has to be Black, which led to me not feeling accepted at certain hip-hop shows.

But why hip-hop, then, for someone like me? Well, I identified with something about it, its accessibility. It didn't require taking lessons, paying for lessons, learning about it in a classroom or a textbook. Its affordability. MCs need only a pad and a pen. Break dancers only need a dance floor. Most of all it had this vibrant, rebellious energy that matched what I was going through as a cynical kid.

I grew up in Hawaii, then I moved. My family moved out to the suburbs during my teen years, and I was like, who am I? Who am I as a person of color in America? What do I identify with? I always felt marginalized.

I always recognized that hip-hop was a culture that originated from folks who were marginalized. A lot of the messages that you see in hip-hop are a rebellion against that. It was that energy. There was something liberating about hip-hop, about folks who were traditionally disenfranchised by society and economics speaking for themselves, communicating their hopes, ideas, experiences, emotions.

As an Asian in America, I translated my marginalized identity into a fluid, negotiable one that you will find in cultures, eclectic cultures such as hip-hop. And I and many young Asians or Filipinos began to meet hip-hop; and hip-hop would meet us at this boundary, where we would then begin to imagine ourselves out of the box we were long forced into.

One area where hip-hop has left an indelible influence, as was said before, is contemporary spoken-word poetry. A whole new generation of writers who grew up listening and participating in hip-hop culture now translate that vibrant, rhythmic aesthetic of hip-hop into their poetry.



Slam poetry arose throughout the nineties, and it, itself, is fused a lot with hip-hop aesthetic.

Bob Holman wrote in *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe*, "Rap is poetry, and its spoken essence is essential to the popularization of poetry. Rap has taken its place, aloud, as a new poetic form, with ancient *griot* roots. Hip-hop is a cultural through line to the oral tradition. Word goes public. Poetry has found a way to drill through the wax that it had been collecting for decades. Poetry is no longer an exhibit in a dust museum. Poetry is alive. Poetry is aloud."

This is true. But to say that hip-hop is the biggest driving force in poetry overlooks the fact that it was poetry that influenced hip-hop, as evidenced by the influence of Civil Rights era poets such as Gil Scott Heron, The Last Poets, Nikki Giovanni.

I'm also a member of a Filipino arts collective called Isangmahal. Spoken word poetry is one of our biggest components; but we also include dancers, musicians, visual artists. Even though we're not a hip-hop group – we don't put ourselves out as a hip-hop group – most of our members are either MCs, DJs, graffiti writers, break dancers, or two of the four, or three of the four. Hip-hop inevitably influences everything that we do.

Since 1997 we've run monthly open mics as artists in residence at the Northwest Asian American Theater in Chinatown on 7th and Jackson. What first began as a living room poetry-sharing session, a small cipher if you will, of less than ten people, is now a standing room only crowd in a muggy theater. The creation and maintenance of this safe space for marginalized folks to have their voice heard has attracted many different poets, such as myself. So instead of being booted off stage somewhere else where I'm not fitting a mold, I get to break molds, and create them and break them again at this safe space. So the power in community of this space is essential to the work that we do.

Just as former gang members in New York would communicate through their artwork, I've seen a lot of young Asian youth transition from just hanging out onto the streets to picking up a pen and attending open mics. A lot of them have preconceived notions before that of what poetry was, and that poetry was inaccessible, high art if you will. Or in other words, white. But it was hip-hop as a lens that made these kids see poetry as accessible and something that they could do.

We've come out with two CDs, a handful of chapbooks; we've been invited to perform at many venues nationwide. Everywhere we go the

audience seems to react with the pieces that have fused hip-hop into it, more than anything else.

Seattle also has a veritable spoken word scene, particularly in its communities of color. The Black, Latino, Asian, Native, Pacific Islander, white folks, all in the same audience, all sharing the same stages. The spoken word artists here are Poetry Experience, Youth Speak, Urban Scribes Project, Retro Revolutionary Poets. We all go to each other's shows, but we also bump into each other at hip-hop shows. That connection remains intact.

Nationally, folks such as I Was Born With Two Tongues, Saul Williams, Willie Perdomo, pushing the envelope when it comes to fusing poetry with the hip-hop aesthetic. It's no accident that Russell Simmons, co-founder of the hip-hop label Def Jam, picked up on this link and produced Def Poetry Jam, which features spoken word artists, many of whom fuse hip-hop into their poetry.

While the positive aspects of hip-hop outweigh the negative, definitely, the APA identity, the Asian Pacific American identity within hip-hop is a little tricky, sometimes precarious. As I said, I was not accepted as a prototypical MC. Neither Black nor White, we often get lumped into one group by the other. However, taking racial power dynamics into consideration, Asians and Blacks share a history of racial oppression that continues today. On that level, I and many Asian brothers and sisters recognize our relation to hip-hop culture, which Chuck D calls the CNN of the Black community.

I recently had the opportunity to curate a community exhibit called, "It's Like That: Asian Americans and the Seattle Hip-Hop Scene," featured at the Wing Luke Asian Museum. I have some flyers here available if you would like some. It's some hip-hop elements in a bento box. *[Laughter]* I didn't come up with it.

I had the opportunity to interview many local pioneers. I never knew that Asian Pacific Americans played such an integral role locally in Seattle's hip-hop scene. So it was inspiring to me to know that there were folks that came before me.

I interviewed Nasty Nes, who was an instrumental DJ in this neighborhood. He grew up in Yesler Terrace, the only Asian kid, only Filipino kid, in a predominantly Black neighborhood. He had no trouble making friends growing up. But then, when he began to get into hip-hop, and when he became a DJ, his authenticity would come into question. People would say, "Oh, you want to be Black." But he would later become Seattle's premier pioneer DJ,



establishing the first hip-hop radio show on the entire West Coast in 1980.

I dug deeper and found that the history of Seattle's hip-hop scene included many folks from many different communities who were instrumental in shaping it and community building that would lay the foundations for more generations of new hip-hop heads. One example is the Jefferson Community Center in Beacon Hill, a predominantly APA neighborhood in the South End, where break dancers in the early eighties began using the community center as a practice space, a place to hang out.

Many of my peers were break dancers in the mid-nineties, crews like Boss, who were influenced by those folks. And Boss, during the mid-nineties would mentor some younger folks, some of them who are performing in groups like Massive Monkees and Circle of Fire now. Now those folks are mentoring 14-, 15-, 16-year-olds who are getting into break dancing. Some of them are even graduating from high school soon, and they're going to be mentoring the younger folks. So it's a continuous cycle of community building with hip-hop as a meeting space.

So all around the city, and notably also in the Asian Pacific American community, not to say like the most innovative things are happening in this community, but I think it just tends to get overlooked. Hip-hop manifests itself as a meeting space for communities to exchange and learn from each other, to build, and, more importantly, as my brother, Denizen Kane from I Was Born With Two Tongues, says, to see and be seen, and to hear and be heard.

UNO: Every time I'm with Rennie, he says something that I have to write down, and that statement, "Hip-hop is indigenous to its boroughs." really refracted off of what you just described as a safe space that was created by Isangmahal, and I really appreciate your describing what that looks like in Seattle.

If I can move to the audience, anybody would like to contribute to the conversation?

AUDIENCE: You said that hip-hop borrows from other cultures, and also to the extent that large media companies have appropriated hip-hop. Are there any problems of assertions of rights, like hip-hop property rights and copyrights in any kind of a pop tradition?

FORBES: From the MC-ing point of view, I know that's a big debate in the music industry right now. This is the first time they have to deal with it. Sampling is so much a part of hip-hop culture,

and it's really difficult to get a lot of music cleared. It becomes very expensive to produce. There's a lot of contention going on around that I hear, especially within music entertainment legal circles.

AUDIENCE: Public Enemy just recently wanted to buy some of The Beatles. Chuck D's very, very outspoken about the songs and the copyright. It seemed to me that hip-hop might get it from both angles. Somebody else appropriates it, and then says, "It's mine." Well then can't you borrow from traditional cultures and they want to protect their cultures, they might speak out and say, "No, that's sacred." or, "We don't want you to appropriate it."

HARRIS: I think it's just the nature of America.

FORBES: Completely. Yeah.

HARRIS: It's not just hip-hop specifically. All of the cultures mixed up, and we've all borrowed and have influence over each other. Then it becomes the issue of corporate America, and control and money. Money being the catalyst or being the drive for getting these rights. It's just a make up of how our society in general, and hip-hop is the new champion to jump on right now, as it was with jazz. Every other form went through it.

Hip-hop is just a stamp that we put on to this new form. Not new form, it's the same spirit revisited again, it was called rhythm and blues, then they called it rock and roll, and then they called it jazz. But it's the same spirit.

I just think it's important to also acknowledge us as a society and the American culture is a hybrid culture.

UNO: The other part of that question, going from intellectual property rights back to an arts question, is also the whole issue of appropriation. It's a very interesting genre to look at as one that has been very appropriative. Listen to Truth Hurts. And South Asian music coming into that. Or the way Bonga and hip-hop right now are refracting that in the same way that hip-hop is appropriative of capoeira, of wu shu, of very many different forms.

It also opens spaces for all of those communities to participate as artists, as George was pointing out in his own work. I think there's both positive and negative, or challenges, concerns.

DIANE: In the beginning you mentioned we have a limited critical vocabulary. When I go to see something, and then I read a review of it, or



I see people really trying to say something, and they liked it, but can't talk about it. What needs to happen so that there is vocabulary among the artists, and the people?

HARRIS: One of the reviews I got in South Carolina, I think it was in Charleston, they said – it capped the headline – “Harris Brings His Angst Hip-Hop Dance to Charleston.” And I'm like, “Angst? What the hell is that?”

I wrote the editor, and said, “I'm demanding the job of whoever the writer was because he hasn't got the credentials to even review hip-hop. I want to know what school he went to to learn about the culture, or if he has any kind of studies or a degree in African social dances. And if not, he should not be allowed to write about anything that is African and/or, especially not hip-hop; and I'm demanding his job.” I wrote this, and of course it was a big issue.

But the truth of the matter is that it breaks down to culture. Western culture assumes that everything fits in their box. They can go ahead and just criticize it without having any experience or historical reference. Or even just checking, just double-checking. “Is this what I'm seeing?”

Or recognizing that there are historians of hip-hop culture. You know, I'm 40. There are guys who, when I was doing hip-hop, they said it was old school. “Why are you still doing that? You need to get a job.” So there are people who have the credentials to review and critique it.

I think it's just a matter of work shopping and really acknowledging, specifically with the written media, that the people who are reviewing don't know. To me, I feel like it's more or less a thing that people have to acknowledge that they don't know. And if they don't know, then let's talk about, “How did you feel?” Maybe, even if he thought it was angst, he could have easily said, “Well, you know, that's my opinion. That's how I felt.”

Maybe there was some guilt, being in Charleston. I did a piece called “The Last Poets” and it just continues to go, “Die, nigger! Die, nigger!”

But it was about me. It was about my culture; because at the end of that Last Poets piece, it says, “Die, nigger so Black folks can stand up.” Half of them couldn't make it through the three minutes. But it was personal for me because I felt, growing up, the idea, the identity thing of wishing I was white, and that it's better to be white. So through my own work I was dealing with my own issues.

But at the same time I felt like, if the choreography was bad, the choreography was bad. But don't critique something that you have no history on. And not really talking to me to know what's going on.

I know it's set up that you shouldn't talk to the person you're going to review. But really, I just think there needs to be more workshops. I said all that, there needs to be more workshops. People need to acknowledge that they don't know. And do a little bit more research on hip-hop, because it's not just people break-dancing. There's a whole history of hip-hop from the thirties.

FORBES: I think it's having papers and publications and respecting it as a cultural art form. You're not going to send a dance critic to review “The Misanthrope.” You just don't do that. Or a visual arts critic to go review a dance piece. Well, then you need to send a hip-hop critic to review a hip-hop production or a hip-hop piece and review it against those tenets and how it upholds the performance elements of hip-hop. I feel that right now publications don't have that mechanism in place. Or, don't care to research it. More letters like Rennie's need to go out.

UNO: I just wanted to mention also that Rennie has organized an amazing piece, “The Legends of Hip-hop,” that tours, that brings some of the people that he was talking about to communities to show them, and to really deeply inform. This is like what George was talking about, “Where is this academy? How does it work?” Because it isn't institutionalized.

It reminds me of when I worked with Tito Puente, and he told me, “I went to Julliard to study tympani.” So he could ring a bell every five pages, or something like that. Where did he learn what he was really doing? Which was becoming the pioneer of Latin jazz? East Harlem.

That has not been institutionalized, that kind of knowledge. So, what Rennie has been doing with “The Legends of Hip-hop,” and his Iladelph Festival, is fantastic. Try to go to the festival, and sit in the classroom and hear some of these incredible dancers speak about how this dance developed. It really is laying the foundations of a history that a lot of practitioners don't even know about. They may be even teaching in various places and have no clue what that history is, so much less a dance critic.

HARRIS: The sad part to the festival this year is that we held it at Temple, and none of the teachers from the dance department came. We were really upset about that.



Here are the guys. Here's Don Campbell, who is like 50-something years old, telling you his story and what happened. I couldn't even do it justice telling it to you today. But to hear it from his mouth. He's telling you the story. Here are the Electric Boogaloos, Boogaloo Sam is amazing! Buddha Stretch, who was the first hip-hop choreographer to push authentic hip-hop on video in the early nineties.

You know, all these guys are coming together so that people can take classes from them all week, and then at night we have discussions and video presentations about their work. And all the people that they taught, who are now pushing commercial hip-hop, but not acknowledging them.

So that was the first thing, for us to come and hold this festival so people in the public could come from around the country, the world, and take classes with the actual people who did it, Crazy Legs, all these guys.

The second part was so all of us could get together and begin to define hip-hop dance for us. Because, you know, if they're going to institutionalize hip-hop, then at least we could have some part of defining how it's being institutionalized and begin to have a conference about what it is.

I explained to you earlier one of the first things that came out of the thing was the West Coast: Electric Boogaloos; Medea Sirkas, formerly of Demons of the Mind. All these groups from the West Coast said, "We're upset that they call what we do 'hip-hop.' We never heard of 'hip-hop.' It's called 'funk.' It's funk styles. We dance to funk music. And it pre-dates hip-hop. And we just got thrown and lumped up in it. So we want to be called the funk styles."

And the East Coast is like, "Okay, we're upset that they call it 'break dancing.' It was never called break dancing, and we don't call ourselves break dancers. We're b-boys and b-girls. That's a culture."

Some things started to come out of this meeting which surprised me. It was interesting all the concerns that they had...

They had concerns about the people who are teaching hip-hop in schools and don't have the credentials to teach hip-hop dance, b, breaking, and all these things. They're 20 years old. They're calling it a hip-hop class, or a b-boy class. There's a lot going on, there's a lot of people fired up to move forward with just educating people as much as they can. For the festival we

invite everyone to come, just to chill out. And Philadelphia is hot. But, chill out and just come to some of the sessions, and you'll be surprised.

UNO: Okay, we'll take two more questions, and then we need to move on.

AUDIENCE: Most of the general public learns about hip-hop from the mass media. And mass media tends to focus on that small percentage that is really extreme, or misogynist, or violent. I was wondering if there's any pressure being put on the media by hip-hop artists and if any pressure is put on the artists who do that to expand the general public's idea about what exists, what the whole spectrum is?

UNO: Do you mean as far as the artists who are already established right now?

AUDIENCE: Yes, what's your take on it? Pressure put on the artists, pressure put on the record companies. It just drives me crazy that this is all here and most people don't know about it.

UNO: I think that's one of the biggest debates going on in hip-hop culture right now is that sort of dichotomy. How do you turn the tables to present another view, to present another voice? I'm not quite sure.

What's been happening a lot is independent distribution within hip-hop culture. Artists just putting it out themselves, not relying on one of the major record companies to sign you to a deal in which you are forced to be controlled by another entity.

Collective distribution, in which independent companies would then begin to form their own national and international, networks, so that you can get out there as an artist. Which, I think, is definitely another way that is combating the mass media. That's a huge, huge debate. And I don't know that there are any answers. But hopefully soon enough the tables will turn.

HARRIS: I don't think there's a strong pressure from the media to educate the masses.

PANELIST: We're fighting so much because we're trying to still educate ourselves. The hip-hop community is against each other, too, about who did this and who created what, and when did this start, and this is the guy who did it, it started in this part of the country, in this little spot right here. We're doing everything at the same time.

In the next ten years you'll see a strong foundation move forward with the hip-hop dance, specifically. Because I think the MC



has already created these steps for itself. The commercial thing is going to drop because it's getting so up here. It's coming to its apex, and it's going to fall. The bottom's going to fall out of it. And then it's going to reassess itself, I believe.

UNO: There was one last question.

AUDIENCE: I just have a comment. I have thoroughly enjoyed this session, and I just wanted to applaud Roberta and the Ford Foundation, and Grantmakers in the Arts for providing this platform. And Rennie, Kamilah, and George, thank you for sharing your passion, and for educating us on the origins of hip-hop. I've been to the hospital many times trying to do those dances. *[Laughter]* But I really, really appreciated it, so thank you very much.

HARRIS: Thank you.

UNO: Seems like a great way to close the panel.
[Applause]

END

