

## Transculturation of the Black radical movement of Hip Hop Kulture in India

### Contributors name:

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**SAS AMOAH:** Good. Brilliant. Hello, everyone. Thank you very much for joining us this morning. And welcome to this Black History Month event titled, tran-- tell me if I get this right-- Transculturation of the Black radical movement of Hip Hop Kulture in India. I've not heard that word before. So you're going have to tell me and let me know what it means, Jaspal. So I'm Sas. I'm the co-chair of the Black and Minority Ethnic Network here at The Open University. And I'm delighted to introduce our presenter today, Dr. Jaspal Naveel Singh, who is a certified hip hop head. But he currently works as a lecturer in applied linguistics and the English language at the Open University. So today, he will present narratives from his research on hip hop.

So today's event will run for about 45 minutes until about quarter to, and is being recorded. But if published in OpenLearn, we won't include the Q&A. And the presentation itself will run for about 25 minutes, I think, and then after that there'll be an opportunity to ask questions for about 15 to 20 minute Q&A.

But please feel free to pop in any questions that spring to mind during the presentation in the chat, and we promise you we'll get around to answering those later. So without any further ado, thank you very much Jaspal. Feel free to set the presentation off.

**JASPAL NAVEEL SINGH:** Thank you, Sas. Thanks, Pepta. Thanks everybody in the Black History Month Committee for inviting me and introducing me so kindly. And I'm really looking forward to this talk. So, hello, everybody. My name is Jaspal Singh, and today I will talk to you about the transculturation of the Black radical movement of hip hop culture in India.

But before we do that-- no wait, I'll just run you through what I'm going to do. So we have-- the first thing we will do is actually ask you guys to type into the chat what hip hop means to you. And this is in good hip hop tradition. I'm going to check the cipher, the group of people who is here. And check-- rather than me talking to you about what hip hop is, which I will do, and

what trans acculturation is, which I will do, I also want to get a sense of what people think hip hop is or what it means to them.

And then I will talk a bit about hip hop as a Southern theory, and also introduce very, very briefly the notion of transculturation, which we can gloss as complex cultural appropriations. And then I will present three narratives from India Prabh Deep, Seti X, and Manmeet Kaur. And at the end, I will give some props and then we will go into the Q&A.

So before I even want to start, I want to invite you to just briefly type into the chat what hip hop is for you. What does hip hop mean to you? So take half a minute or so, type something in, so I can get a bit of a sense of the knowledge, the emotions, and the sort of attitudes towards hip hop that you have. So if everybody could write down their thoughts. What is hip hop?

Right. So we got resistance, we got dance and song, music we can relate to, good storytelling, expression, energy, emotional expression through rap and beats, good vibes, representation, cultural expression through art, spoken word with music, hip hop is universal urban cultural expression, storytelling and rhyme.

Wow, I think I'm joined by a couple of proper hip hop heads here. These are amazing responses. Thank you. Thank you so much for it. Wow, I'll just keep it at that. And might come back to that at the very end. Barry writes, hip hop is knowledge wisdom and over standing of universal culture. Hip hop is the modern-day expression of people of African origin. Very important stuff here. If you're interested in the concept of over standing, that very just dropped into the chat there, I have a paper out on over standing and how it sort of is different from understanding. And yeah, thanks Paul for bringing in the African roots. This is definitely something that I will mention as well today.

OK, let me just see. Anyway, hip hop is, according to one of the most important hip hop teachers, KRS-One, a knowledge movement. And I'm sure many of you will have-- will be familiar with this particular song that I'm going to play you. The first verse where hip where KRSOne breaks down the meaning of hip and hop. So I'm just going to play you this, I hope you can hear it. Turn up your speakers. Here we go. We going into the first verse now.

So yeah, welcome to listen to the song in your own time in the second and third verses as well. But in this first verse, KRS-One, in 2007, really sort of gives us a definition of what hip hop is. And it is more than music. A lot of people in the mainstream kind of equate hip hop to music. And specifically to sort of misogynistic, homophobic music and capitalist, sort of, celebrations.

And yes, it is that, all of that, as well. I'm not trying to say hip hop is not commercial, bling-bling, sexist, homophobic rap. But it is more than that, at least for the cultural practitioners themselves, it is a five-elemental culture, which consists of like five different elements. And one of them elements is knowledge. And knowledge is, here, sort of equated to the term hip. Whereas hop is equated to the term or the notion of movement and this kind of idea of transformation as well.

In the third part of this first verse here, KRS-One also talks about an ancient civil-- that hip hop is an ancient civilization born again. And this is sort of very important, I think, for our understanding of hip hop, to see it not just as one, sort of, cultural phenomenon that happened in isolation in the 1970s and the South Bronx, but that has a long tradition of Black people's cultural expression in the Americas as well as in Western Africa.

OK, so I mentioned and KRS-One mentioned, you could see it in the video, the South Bronx as this sort of birthplace of hip hop in 1973 to '79. These were sort of the founding-- the years in which hip hop sort of emerged for the first time as a culture that encompasses different elements, like, for instance, breaking, graffiti writing, emceeing and DJing, as well as knowledge seeking.

And Tricia Rose-- and we can see some of the documentation of that era here, late '70s, early '80s, by the wonderful photographer, Martha Cooper, who has really done a lot of work in documenting this moment in time in which hip hop is was born in some ways, metaphorically speaking.

And Tricia Rose, in her book, *Black Noise*, which is considered to be the first book in hip hop studies, which really laid the foundations for the field of hip hop studies, writes about the urban context of the South Bronx in the 1970s. Which was a very impoverished, inner-city neighbourhood, which saw abandonment of social infrastructures. And the white flight, the white people moved out into the suburbs. There were motorways and freeways built that crossed right through the Bronx, dividing communities. There was a lot of geographical and urban planning devastation done at that time in the Bronx.

And the communities that lived down there in the Bronx, just North of Manhattan, found a way of using all of this, sort of what she calls here, these industrial trash heaps, and transformed them into sources of pleasure and power, right. And she also says that these transformations, and these kind of cultural-- transculturations, as I would call them, have become a basis for digital imagination all over the world. So already in the early '90s, Tricia Rose notes that hip hop has become global.

And I will try to present to you, or I kind like to think of hip hop as a Southern theory. And this is, of course, a sort of more recent term that is circulating in decolonial scholarship, Southern Theory, a theory of the South, right. Sort of a decolonial theory, we could say.

Hip hop is a Southern theory that offered new potentials for transforming abandoned urban environments into sonic spaces of African diasporic celebration and conviviality. It is a certain theory that samples and remixes all the religious, artistic, spiritual, literary, oral and embodied practices, such as playing the dozens, mambo dancing, nyabinghi drumming, the funk, freestyle jazz, and philosophies and practices associated with the Five Percent Nation, the Nation of Islam, and the Black Panther movement.

It is a Southern theory that allows pleasure and power to be appropriated by those who are marginalized by coloniality. And hip hop is a Southern theory that now connects marginalities across the globe, as Halifu Osumare says in her chapter-- in her article, "Connective marginalities of the hip hop globe."

All right, so this is hip hop. What is transculturation then? Sas, you wanted to know what transculturation is. Let me give you a two-minute breakdown of what I think transculturation can do for us. Transculturation really is born. The concept of transculturation was born out of Latin American literary studies in the second half of the 20th century. And there was an interest in understanding and accounting for the complexities of colonialism, and of the cultural flows, and the processes of cultural contact that colonialism, and the aftermath of colonialism, left in the Caribbean and in Latin America.

So there was this kind of-- before, I guess, in the first half of the 20th century, anthropologists and sociologists and researchers tried to sort of explain away the complexities of these cultural contexts, in order to develop sort of neat theories of social and cultural transformations.

But then there was Fernando Ortiz, who, in 1947, wrote this very important book *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. And in this book, he formulated, for the first time, the notion of transculturation. The term was employed by Ortiz as a critique against the then widespread anthropological understandings of cultural context being acculturations that lead to deculturation.

So the dominant culture, the dominant European culture, arrives and imposes its culture, acculturates, its culture on to the native population, or the enslaved population, or the descendants of slaves, that then lose their culture. So deculturation. So that was sort of the Malinowski model of cultural flow.

But Ortiz said that, yes, that happens, acculturation and deculturation. But there's also another process that happens, and he called that neoculturation. The emergence of a hybrid or creole culture which becomes meaningful in the struggle for identity and decolonization. So in her book, Sylvia Spitta writes, *Between Two Waters*. Narratives of transculturation in Latin America, Sylvia Spitta writes that transculturation is a complex process of adjustment and recreation-- cultural, literary, linguistic, and personal, that allow for new vital and viable configurations to arise out of the clash of cultures, and the violence of colonial appropriations. Very important. Other book is Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes*. Travel, writing, and transculturation, where she talks about transculturation and neoculturation as being complex because, quote, "subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, yet they do determine, to varying degrees, what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for."

And in my own book, '*Transcultural Voices. Narrating Hip Hop Culture in Complex Delhi*', which came out this year, I use Pratt's notions of ownership and usage to come up with my definition of transculturation, which is about the usage of appropriation, rather than the appropriation of things, right. It is about formulas of appropriation rather than appropriating forms. And this usage of appropriation is never fully one's own, and it is not entirely the other's either.

So that is where the "trans," for me, comes in, right. It is that in-between liminal space, between appropriating something that is fully my own and never fully the other's either, right. So that is kind of the tension that I found very helpful, working with.

OK, enough of theory, let's go into some interviews that I conducted in India. This one was with the rapper, Prabh Deep, who's become really famous after our departure. And on the left hand side, you can see my anthropological colleague, Gabriel Dattatreyan, who did field work with me, one year fieldwork in India, and we conducted interviews and conducted participant observation together.

So in this extract, Prabh Deep, who is a Punjabi migrant to Delhi, talks about his friend. So he's just-- Prabh Deep opened his own little recording studio in his own house in a neighbourhood in East Delhi. And at the time, there were lots of Africans in Delhi-- there are lots of Africans, especially West Africans and East Africans in Delhi, and they experience a lot of racism.

And some of these African nationals were really into hip hop and singing and music. So Prabh Deep formed a friendship with one man from Nigeria, and he invited him over to come to his home studio at his parents' house in East Delhi. And this is the narrative he tells us.

Right, so you can read it on the left and I'm going to play it, so you can listen to it again. So I cut out the name of the Nigerian man, for the sake of anonymity.

Right, so in the little narrative that Prabh Deep tells us here, he talks about his own neighbourhood, and the neighbours that are, sort of, suspiciously looking at the Nigerian man walking into their neighbourhood. And there's an interesting, I think, tension that Prabh Deep's narrative opens.

Namely, the question of, what is a community? Right, so we kind think of a community as a neighbourhood, a sort of a localized space where people live together, right. And that's the kind of picture he brings in. But then there's this Nigerian man who comes in and people are being suspicious.

Now Prabh Deep protects his Nigerian friend from his neighbours, and he calls him a homie, a friend, right. Homie is, of course, a term that comes from sort of American slang, and it's sort of short for homeboy. Which, literally, at one point, might have denoted or connotated someone from your neighbourhood, from around where you live.

But now in hip hop terminology, a homie can be someone who lives on the other side of the planet, right, or who is from a very, very different background. But you connect over your appreciation and your love for hip hop. So there's something interesting about what counts as community here. Is it really the local community in which Prabh Deep lives? No, for him, a more important sense of community is the global hip hop nation, or the global hood, where he and other people from the post-- from around the post colony can sort of enjoy protection from each other.

OK, so that's kind of the first narrative that I wanted to show you. The second narrative was recorded by Mandeep Seti, or Seti X, as he calls himself now. Who is a man-- a Sikh rapper from California who, at the time of my fieldwork, came to Delhi. He stayed in Delhi for a few weeks to connect with local musicians and give some shows.

And in this particular instance, we are in Mayday bookshop, which is a left-wing, communist bookshop in East Delhi and Shadipur. You can see the picture of Karl Marx on the top hand right corner over here. Which is a-- bookshop as well as a cafe and a theater.

And on this day, which was May the 1st, or Labour Day, May Day had a big celebration. There were around 80 people attending this event where you had poets, and you had activists speak about issues of the working class and casteism and sexism and so on. And part of the show was the invitation of a couple of musicians. You can see Delhi Sultanate two SKA and

reggae-- Indian SKA and reggae artists. And you can see Mandeep Seti, or Seti X, right in the middle of the stage there.

And in this excerpt, which I will play next, Seti X is discussing what hip hop is to this audience of cultural outsiders. So none of these people in the crowd are necessarily hip hop heads, or he at least thinks that they are not, and hip hop needs to be explained to them. OK, let me just play this-- play this passage.

All right. So in this excerpt, Mandeep Seti compares, literally compares, the five elements of hip hop to Indigenous artistic practices like poetry, drumming, kalakari, which is sort of an Indigenous-- not Indigenous, I say Indigenous because he says Indigenous. Actually not Indigenous. In the strict sense, it is an Indian form of wall painting, as well as the Indian types of dances.

And then in lines 13 and 14 and 15, he does something quite interesting, I think. So he mentions two founding fathers of hip hop from the South Bronx, 1973. These canonical founding fathers, Afrika Bambaataa and Kool DJ Herc. And then in line 14 he says, they have ancestry that come back to this land, meaning India, as well as Africa, and then there's a little break.

No one really, in the audience, reacts to this statement, possibly because they don't know who Afrika Bambaataa and Kool Herc are. But for those people who know who Afrika Bambaataa and Kool Herc are, it might come as a surprise that Seti X says that they have ancestry that come back to India. So as he compares the different elements of hip hop, emceeing compares to the poetry, DJing compares to the drum, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, breaking compares to the Indigenous dance move of our people.

He goes further even and says that the actual founding fathers of hip hop have ancestry that come back to India. And I don't know if that is true or untrue or where SetiX get that from, but the important thing, for me, as a sort of analysis of narrative, is that he deploys this idea of Indian ancestry and the connections to hip hop's connections to India to even to extend to the people who founded hip hop.

And then he goes on to talk about the commercialization of hip hop. And that this is not the real hip hop, and the real hip hop is the culture, as he calls it. It is a culture rather than sort of a commodified version of pop culture. A culture for the people, of the people, by the people. Echoing sort of the Marxist rhetoric of the evening.

All right, let me go into the final narrative for today, and then we open for questions. This is a narrative by Manmeet Kaur. I'm interviewing Manmeet at Chowpatti Beach in Mumbai in

January 2013. Here's a picture that our friend, Baba Apna, took who was also there, and who you can hear laughing in the excerpt in a moment.

Manmeet is, at that time, I think around 20 years old, and he she's just started to experiment with rapping in different venues on hip hop gigs as well as on more in activist spaces. Let me just play the recording for you. It's a bit longer but I'm not sure if you can read it, it's a bit small. But hopefully you can hear it.

In this final narrative excerpt, Manmeet talks about watching videos of veterans like KRS-One on YouTube and tapping into their way of thinking. And she says here in lines 38, 39, very emphatically she says, I need to think like him to make my life better.

And there's something really interesting in this statement, I think. It is-- coming back to this notion of appropriation, it is not that Manmeet is appropriating African-American styles of talking or-- perhaps she does-- or dressing, or rapping, or music, or anything like that. The cultural appropriation here is to do with thinking. With a theory, perhaps. A certain theory that KRS-One promotes and puts out there, right.

So there's something interesting here about appropriating thought rather than appropriating things, right. Like hairstyles or something like that. And this appropriation of thought of Southern theory, we could say, allows her-- or she hopes at least-- to make her own life better, and teach it to other people.

The rest of the narrative is, of course, about her going out to activist spaces, to non-hip hop spaces, and telling the people in those spaces about the culture and the history of hip hop. And she mentions a few cultural practices that she presumably saw or learned through YouTube, namely that the early hip hop founding fathers attached wires to the lamppost, or to the streetlight, in order to power their mobile sound systems and play in the parks and on the street corners. Right.

She also sort of mentions in line 25 this Afrika Bambaataa sort of formula of hip hop, peace, love, unity, and having fun, that he also recorded as a song together with James Brown. So in some ways, there's all this intertextuality here, all this appropriation of ideas and practices that Manmeet uses to teach people in India about hip hop as well as to improve or transform her own life.

All right, so with that being said, I think I've come to the end of my presentation. I want to give mad props to the entire Indian hip hop community. And to everybody who is in-- who has been involved and helped me to put together my ideas over the last 10 years, Shukriya.



And if you have any questions or any comments, I would love to take them now. And of course, if you want to email me, my email address is here. You can ask me any questions or request the PowerPoint, if you like to. Thank you.