

## Moderator's Report on Professor Iida's Presentation

YAMAMOTO Shin

YOKKAICHI UNIVERSITY

### **I. Professor Iida's Presentation**

Starting with the definition of hip hop as the second wave in the history of African-American cultural movements after the Harlem Renaissance in the early 20th century, Professor Iida described the difference between the two using the following 5 factors; cultural categories, the age of the producers, the cultural roots, the amount of wealth, and, the quickness and power of response. Because of these differences, he concludes that hip hop is more influential than the Harlem Renaissance in African-American cultural movements.

With this reason, Prof. Iida focused on "rap music" in the general topic of this session "Hip Hop and Social Justice". He started by explaining that rap music had been born in the poor districts of New York City in the 1970s; that many of early hip hop DJs came from the Caribbean or Caribbean relatives; that early rap DJs were using the techniques called "break", "loop" and "scratch" with various examples. The first hit record of rap music, as he explained, was Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" in 1979, which is a simple musical composition with a melody borrowed from an African-American pop group Chic's "Good Times". He also pointed out that, in spite of the melody that was directly borrowed from other pop music, the words were very unique because it was written in an African-American inner city vernacular, called "ebonics", and he continued to emphasize that this common tongue made this style of music more communicative and expressive rather than other musical styles. This instantly made me think of "griots", a traditional poet in Africa, who carried stories, news and social messages from area to area speaking while standing in the crossroads of a society without letters. They were the so-called spokespersons with critical insight towards the social context.

As I predicted and expected, Prof. Iida started developing his opinion into the main stream of his presentation from here that rap music is not only musical expression but a social message. In order to clarify how assertive rap music is, he again compared it with other African-American music "blues" that, in his words, "we can hardly find political, social, or racial claims". What he explained here about blues may be controversial, but it is true that rap music carries more social messages than blues.

Prof. Iida, then, focused on the rhymes that carry these social messages first by classifying them, and then along with his categorization he explained one by one about rap rhymes as verbal play, rap rhymes as message 1 (with aggressive and destructive mode), rap rhymes as message 2 (with persuasive and creative mode), rap rhymes as literature, and finally about rap rhymes after the 1990s. Throughout his explanation of these categories, such names as Grandmaster Flash & Furious Five, MWA, Ice T, Public Enemy, KRS-One, Salt 'n' Pepa, Queen Latifah, Yo Yo, MC Lyte, De La Soul, Arrested Development, M. C. Hammer, Janet Jackson, Lauryn Hill, Carlos Santana, Bob Marley, and Michael Jackson emerged and made the audience excited. What made them even more excited was some rap music played along with his presentation.

In the end, Prof. Iida summarized from the aspect of social justice that rap music was easy to access and the rhymes in ebonics, on the contrary, were very informative. He also concluded that rap music echoed the affirmative action in it and opened the economical possibility for African-Americans, and thus contributed to breaking the racial barriers in order to better understand the values and ideas of others.

## II. Professor Honjo's Comments

Responding to Prof. Iida's presentation, Professor Honjo started by pointing out that hip hop involved many factors such as race, gender, language, ideology, related art, historical perspectives, and so on. Carefully indicating that rap music also has negative perspectives of sex discrimination (abusing females) or black nationalism/Afro-centrism, Prof. Honjo asserted that hip hop is one of the important African-American art forms inherited from African cultural and language traditions.

Contrary to Prof. Iida's presentation that highlighted music, Prof. Honjo focused on movies and novels in this genre, which made this session more complementary and substantial. He briefly introduced hip hop movies, so-called "hood (= neighborhood) movies", by referring to two African-American directors, John Singleton and Matty Rich, who both focused on the harsh realities in the ghetto and the desperately limited opportunities of life for young urban blacks. Like hip hop music, hip hop movies were one of the crucial African-American means of art to express themselves.

Prof. Honjo then went into detail about hip hop novels. Building on Prof. Iida's discussion of the language of hip hop, he discussed a novel *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) written by Sister Souljah, a female rapper and radical activist. This novel is important not only because it sold 400,000 copies but because it started a new genre of street literature. The most characteristic feature of hip hop novels, as Prof. Honjo mentioned, was the focus on ghetto girls who had to fight against both the white system and black men at the same time. Hip hop novels also have another aspect, Prof. Honjo added, that they could be a means of

making a living as other hip hop culture like rap music or graffiti arts by, for example, Jan-Michel Basquiat, a Haitian-American artist.

The most important message written in *The Coldest Winter Ever*, as Prof. Honjo asserted, was “to stay cool even when describing the hard realities of the ghetto”, and then he referred to the rap song by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five mentioned in Prof. Iida’s presentation. I could soon recall the refraining lyrics of the rap as “Don’t push me, ’cause I’m close to the edge. I’m trying not to lose my head. It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder how I keep from going under”. It seemed to me that Prof. Honjo tried to assert that some philosophical ideas or attitudes had come out of the harsh ghetto life that was full of anxiety, anger, hatred, violence and materialism.

Hip hop novels reflecting the social injustice towards African-Americans, as Prof. Honjo concluded, it means that they were trying to pursue the social justice like the other hip hop culture, all of which have the “inner beat” that African-Americans have heartedly asserted to recover their dignity and kept it fundamentally as it should be.

### III. Floor Discussion

Professor Sollors from Harvard University made a brief comment on Prof. Iida’s presentation saying that his presentation had given us a historiographical account of black music, raising the related questions on the relationship between hip-hop culture and prison culture, racism, and social justice towards women. He also mentioned white urban consumer culture had been produced in the process of these black phenomena of hip hop culture. Prof. Iida responded especially about the third point answering that it is true that some rappers tended to despise women as was shown by the case of Dr. Dre’s attack on female journalist about 10 years ago.

There were several comments and questions from the graduate students on the floor. One student commented that it might sound too simplistic to relate hip hop culture with power structure in America, and the other commented that it might be difficult to distinguish professional from amateur in hip hop arts and music. Concerning the latter, Prof. Honjo, instead of Prof. Iida, answered with an interesting aspect that Aretha Franklin was originally from an amateur choir with the same ability after becoming professional, but the only difference being that she could afford to live by becoming professional. There was also a question asked about what were the languages used for hip hop culture in the United States, and Prof. Honjo answered, mainly English and Spanish. Corresponding with this, there was a comment from the floor that Reggaeton is one of the uprising hip hop music in Spanish, and I mentioned the name of Teriyaki Boys, a Japanese rap group who used Japanglish on purpose although their English pronunciation was the same as native speakers, and I emphasized that it was an assertion of their own identity.

Lastly, then, Prof. Sollors again asked two questions, if Japanese hip hop music or culture was substantially pursuing social justice, and what kind of records he should buy along with Teriyaki Boys, which I mentioned before. Prof. Iida responded that there is such content in rap music by Zebra, Dragon Ash, Orange Range and so on.

#### **IV. Moderator's Impression**

It was a great honor for me to have the opportunity to moderate this session, especially this time. What I mean "this time" here is that we have a great gain and a loss at the same time this year. We have gained the first black American president, Barak Obama, in the history of the United States, and have also lost the king of pop, Michael Jackson. I thought about these historical incidents over and over from the perspectives of the general topic, "Americanism and Social Justice", and came to realize that things will change both from inside and outside in the balance of globalization and localism. Hip hop culture represents the momentum of African-American existence with the best balance of the time and the space. In this balance of the time, the momentum helped President Obama to be elected, and made Michael Jackson the perfect figure of the best hip pop artist in the history of the United of States.

I hope to have another opportunity to have such a session that enables us to feel like grabbing the big movement of the globe by a tiny little touch to the bottom of music player.