

Musical Belonging in a Hearing-Centric Society:
Adapting and Contesting Dominant Cultural Norms through Deaf Hip Hop
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INTRODUCTION

Music is an abstract, intangible medium of human expression that is shaped and determined by the culture in which it lives. Brought to life and embedded within society in a multitude of ways, music serves as an outlet for human emotion that both connects and divides different bodies of people. Although many scholars have attempted to define music, narrow definitions often serve as reflections of dominant ideology limiting what music is and can be, whereas broader concepts tend to spiral down the indeterminate rabbit hole of post-modern rhetoric. Despite the nature of these definitions, descriptions of the term “music” have commonly emphasized aural aesthetics and processes that support hearing-centered constructions of musical expression. Since Deaf culture exists within the context of a larger hearing society, music in Deaf culture has, in turn, been suppressed by hearing rhetoric and forced into a hearing-centric reality that places aural senses at the forefront of musical experience. Composed from a culturally etic perspective informed by ethnographic research conducted with Deaf musicians, this article 1) examines the effect of hearing-centrism on music in Deaf culture and 2) explores how Deaf hip hop artists subvert hearing-centric constructions of music by forging a musical space that both replicates and contests dominant cultural norms of the larger community of which they are a part.

HEARING-CENTRIC PRODUCTIONS

In order to understand how Deaf hip hop artists counter hegemonic thought, it is important to first analyze how a hearing-centric ideology is actualized in everyday life. Similar in nature to ethnocentrism which describes the process of judging other cultures based on values fashioned by an etic perspective, hearing-centrism is defined within this article as the process of judging musical expression based on values formed by a conventional experience of aural sound. Both terms parallel one another by describing absolute valuations that do not provide room for relative experiences.

Language shapes a particular reality of the term “music,” and this reality is reinforced as hearing-centric through musical discourse, products, and institutions. Phrases such as being “tone deaf,” having “an ear for music,” or being able to “play by ear” perpetuate hearing-centric constructions of music that assign value to the ear and its reception of aural sound. This type of discourse perpetuates stereotypes of “music” and “deafness,” imprisoning Deaf expressions of music to the confines of hegemonic thought which places aural senses at the forefront of musical experience. The recorded music industry has packaged, advertised, and sold music in the form of physical audio media that targets audio reception, conforming music to concrete modes of existence that alter how musical expression is received and shared. Devices used to experience these products such as speakers or headphones further support this reality of music, catering to aural reception.

Headphones, in particular, market and confine musical reception to a single sensory realm of the body further fostering a hearing-centric reality. Media also serves as a powerful cultural force that reinforces a hearing-centric reality of music. Movies like *Pitch Perfect* and television shows like *The Voice* produce valuations of music that perpetuate aurally-informed assessments of musical talent which, in turn, expose audiences to hearing-centric qualifications for mainstream musical acceptance. Academic institutions also contribute to this discourse and establish constructions of music through curriculum and learning assessments. Within this setting, performance skill level is evaluated primarily on aural production, music identification is assessed through listening exams, and musical perception is qualified through aural exams. While musical study within educational institutions has not conventionally covered musical styles created and/or informed by a Deaf cultural perspective, the way music is presented and assessed runs the risk of promoting a hearing-centric reality of all forms of musical expression.

LIMINAL STATE OF CULTURAL EXISTENCE

When based on a hearing-centric reality of music, the lack of a conventional experience of aural sound can be equated to an inability to “fully” experience music. This reality, when projected onto music in Deaf culture, forces Deaf musical expression into a liminal state of being by constraining it to a hearing-centric reality of music that linguistically transforms it into something that neither entirely encompasses Deaf nor hearing aesthetics. Within this context, Deaf music no longer exists as a culturally determined form of expression nor does it fully conform to a hearing construction. As a result, when constricted to hearing-centric standards, Deaf music becomes viewed as a limited form of musical expression and its practitioners and listeners, in turn, categorized as unable to fully access music. In this regard, hearing-centrism not only limits an understanding of music in Deaf culture but also undermines a Deaf experience of the world, disabling it and making it a partial experience through its juxtaposition to audist ideologies.

DYSCONSCIOUS AUDISM

The power that hearing-centric ideologies have maintained over the construction of music in Deaf culture has strengthened, what social scientist Genie Gertz refers to as, dysconscious audism.ⁱ Dysconscious audism draws from Deaf scholar Tom Humphries concept of audism and education scholar Joyce King’s notion of dysconscious racism to create what Gertz identifies as an impaired sense of consciousness that values hearing sensibilities above Deaf ones.ⁱⁱ If dysconsciously affected, Deaf people become restricted to a liminal state of being, and their experience of music becomes dominated by a hearing-centric ideology that dictates what it is and how it should be.

Due to this, music in Deaf culture has often been conceptualized as a cultural expression of hearing people.ⁱⁱⁱ While Deaf musicians were interested in expressing music from a Deaf perspective in the early 1990s, their music was not readily accepted in either hearing or Deaf communities because they were considered not up to par by hearing standards and viewed as wanting to assimilate to hearing culture by Deaf standards.^{iv} For instance, when Deaf hip hop artist Warren “Wawa” Snipe first started to perform Deaf hip hop in 1993/4, he was initially labeled by some members of the Deaf community as hearing-minded or wanting to be like a hearing person. Due to this reception, he stopped performing music for a few years and devoted his time to dance until he was ready to return to it once more. Despite the initial reception from

both hearing and Deaf communities, according to Wawa, music in Deaf culture has become more acceptable and common.^v

CULTURAL ADAPTATION

Since music in Deaf culture was not widely accepted within the Deaf community when Deaf hip hop artists were growing up, many of their musical influences came from mainstream society. Sean Forbes, who was raised in a hearing environment, was influenced by classic rock, heavy metal, and music he encountered through his father's involvement in the Detroit music scene.^{vi} In contrast, James "Deaf Thug" Taylor III, a member of an early grassroots Deaf hip hop group called Silent Mob, was exposed to hearing rappers and DJs on the streets of South Bronx, New York.^{vii} Shawn "Polar Bear" Self, a Deaf hip hop artist from Colbert Georgia drew musical influences from artists including Wiz Khalifa, Kendrick Lamar, and J Cole among others.^{viii} Similarly, Darius "Prinz-D" McCall, an independent artist and former member of an early Deaf hip hop group based in Washington, D.C. called the Helix Boyz, drew his musical influences from hip hop artists like Nelly and Jay-Z who influenced his performance style on stage.^{ix} Originally from Philadelphia, PA, Wawa gravitated toward Motown music and early hip hop groups who provided inspirations for his beats.^x

Many Deaf hip hop artists were originally dancers, drummers, martial artists, and actors, yet they gravitated toward hip hop because of its unique aesthetics that enabled them to incorporate their various art forms within a medium that provides a space in which their Deaf identity can be explored and strengthened through musical and cultural expression. While music in Deaf culture is by no means limited to one form, some artists have used hip hop as a foundation from which to express music from a Deaf perspective. By using hip hop, Deaf hip hop artists not only draw from a style of music produced by a hearing society and alter it to represent Deaf aesthetics, but, in doing so, they also produce a cultural space that both replicates and contests the larger cultural community of which they are a part. Through their music, Deaf hip hop artists are able to contest hearing-centric musical norms by adapting a conventional style of music and using it to expand musical experience to other sensory realms of the body. Through this musical process, Deaf hip hop artists represent their dual membership within both Deaf and mainstream communities as they create a culturally relative style of music known as dip hop.

Coined in 2005 by Wawa, the term "dip hop" serves as a categorical distinction between Deaf hip hop and hip hop.^{xi} Some musicians who can be classified within this style do not always apply this term to their work because of concerns that it may cause confusion for those unfamiliar with it; however, it serves as a useful way to identify this particular style while facilitating the formation of a musical category that embodies an unconventional construction of music.^{xii} In addition, dip hop does not carry with it audist notions that may be associated with the terms "deaf" and "music." In this regard, the term dip hop functions as a way to not only classify this style, but also create a categorical space that can embody a Deaf expression of music without using terms that garner hearing-centric notions.

MUSICAL SUBVERSION

Hip hop serves as an accessible medium in which to explore musical expression beyond a hearing-centric reality because its three main components: beats, lyrics, and flow, easily translate to Deaf music aesthetics.^{xiii} With an emphasis on bass beats and the technique of rapping, the

fundamental musical components of hip hop become largely kinesthetic and visual within the context of hip hop, particularly since lyrics are performed in sign language. Due to this, hip hop provides an effective platform for Deaf artists to subvert hearing-centric constructions of music. With the change from an aural language to a manual one, hip hop is transformed from an aural to a visual entity, further enhancing a visual experience of music. Through this transformation Deaf musicians create a new style of hip hop that combats hearing-centered ideologies by expanding notions of music beyond an aural sensory realm. Due to visual aesthetics produced when rapping in sign language, hip hop provides an effective setting from which Deaf musicians can subvert hegemonic constructions of music and promote music based on a Deaf experience of the world.

In addition to the musical structure of hip hop, the lyrics of hip hop songs also challenge hearing-centric ideologies. While not every song explicitly focuses on Deaf culture, lyrics that address a Deaf perspective further aid in contesting mainstream notions of music and deafness that often make the two terms appear incongruent. Wawa, for instance, presents misconceptions he has faced as a Deaf musician in his song titled “We No Hear!” when he raps, “How u gonna fly, ya only feel beats?,” to which he responds, “Who said I gotta ‘hear’ to make ya see? Watch the signs, dats made for your eyez. Throw ur ears out, feel vibes takin ovah.”^{xiv} He also reinforces Deaf pride within this same song through the following lyrics, “Tired of put down/ Let’s turn this around/ Make the world know that it stops right here/ We got our pride/ Our heads held up high/ And lettin you know that we no hear.”^{xv} For Deaf Thug whose music is primarily geared towards deaf audiences, the majority of his songs, like “Deaf wit Attitude,” are about the Deaf community and celebrating Deaf culture and way of life.^{xvi} Prinz-D, who initially avoided discussing Deaf topics in his lyrics when he first started to perform, began addressing Deaf issues and a Deaf way of life through the influence of artists like Wawa.^{xvii} In his song “N.G.U.,” for example, he describes his journey as a Deaf rapper and the challenges he has worked to overcome.

Lyrics performed bilingually, in both manual and aural languages, also foster the opportunity to break down stereotypes of music and deafness because they facilitate access to a wider audience. Within this setting, artists are able to, for example, expand mainstream uses of the word “voice” by applying the term to manual communication instead of aural. In his song “I’m Deaf” Forbes raps, “My hands talk dirty momma washed them with soap/ I play the devil’s advocate against my horoscope/ And if I cut my ear off like Van Gogh/ Wouldn’t matter cause through my ears the wind blows.”^{xviii} Within this context, Forbes broadens notions of voice when he raps “my hands talk dirty” and illustrates his lack of need for aural reception through the description of his ears. Wawa also explicitly addresses this in his song “Pop Ur Cherry” when he raps “Welcome to our world/ a place where our hands are our voice/ so we see words take shape/ that’s our livelihood.”^{xix} With open arms, Wawa invites his audience into his musical world where he alters perceptions of “voice” through his lyrics and use of ASL. In his song, “Watch These Hands,” Forbes expands this application of “voice” even further to encompass not only talking, but singing and dancing as well. This can be seen in the chorus when he raps, “Watch, watch, watch these hands/ They can dance, they can sing, they can dance, they can.”^{xx} Within this context, Forbes not only describes how his hands can talk, sing, and dance, but also demonstrates this simultaneously through his hands.

While lyrics provide the opportunity to promote a Deaf experience of the world, this experience is brought to life through performance. Within the context of live performance, dip hop artists bring new ways of realizing sound to the forefront of music experience and expose their audiences to alternative forms of music making based on Deaf aesthetics. Using bass beats and ASL as their tools, Deaf musicians contest hearing-centered ideologies by forming a new musical world that straddles the divide between their national and linguistic identity. Within this context, they create a forum for Deaf culture in mainstream society and pave the way for Deaf musicians in the music industry. Dip hop artists contest challenges based on audist views of deafness by reappropriating musical structures created by hearing society and adapting it toward Deaf sensibilities. In doing so, they reshape notions of what music is and can be for both hearing and Deaf people while also expanding Deaf participation in both communities. For Polar Bear, music is not just for people who can hear; music is not black and white but exists as a spectrum of expression and Deaf people have their own way of expressing music. While not a required component, dip hop artists who perform in both English and ASL foster an environment that provides the opportunity to break down divisions among hearing and deaf people. Through their use of hip hop, dip hop artists create their own style of music that opens the door to new musical experiences for both Deaf and hearing audiences, which not only paves the way for future Deaf musicians, but also illustrates the vibrant experience of music in Deaf culture.

ⁱ Genie Gertz, "Dysconscious Audism: A Theoretical Proposition," In *Open Your Eyes Deaf Studies Talking*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 219.

ⁱⁱ H-Dirksen L. Bauman, "Audism: Exploring the Metaphysics of Oppression," *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 9, no. 2 (2004): 239.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alice-Anne Darrow and Diane Loomis. "Music and Deaf Culture: Images from the Media and Their Interpretation by Deaf and Hearing Students," *Journal of Music Therapy* 36, no. 2 (1999): 92.

^{iv} Warren Snipe, August 22, 2013, Dip hop artist, Skype, Interview by Katelyn Best, Digital audio recording, Author's personal collection.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Sean Forbes, March 6, 2014, Dip hop artist, Pittsburgh, PA, Interview by Katelyn Best, Digital audio recording, Author's personal collection.

^{vii} James L. Taylor III, December 12, 2014, Dip hop artist, E-mail, Correspondence with Katelyn Best, Text file, Author's personal collection.

^{viii} Shawn Self, November 23, 2014, Dip hop artist, E-mail, Correspondence with Katelyn Best, Text file, Author's personal collection.

^{ix} Darius McCall, November 23, 2014, Dip hop artist, E-mail, Correspondence with Katelyn Best, Text file, Author's personal collection.

^x Warren Snipe, October 15, 2013, Dip hop artist, Skype, Interview by Katelyn Best, Digital audio recording, Author's personal collection.

^{xi} Snipe, August 22, 2013.

^{xii} Forbes, March 6, 2014.

^{xiii} Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on Hip-Hop*, (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 17.

^{xiv} Warren Snipe, "We No Hear!" In *Deaf: So What?!*, CD & DVD, SLYKI Entertainment, 2016.

^{xv} Snipe, "We No Hear!" 2016.

^{xvi} Taylor III, December 12, 2014.

^{xvii} McCall, November 23, 2014.

^{xviii} Sean Forbes, "I'm Deaf," Single/EP, Web Entertainment, 2010.

^{xix} Wawa, "Pop Ur Cherry," in *D.I.P.H.O.P.*, CD, Japan-Only Release, 2008, YouTube, Accessed September 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ky99obz9yXw>

^{xx} Sean Forbes, "Watch These Hands" in *Perfect Imperfection*, CD & DVD, Web Entertainment, WBR-CD-9092, 2013.

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