Hip Hop Histories

By Priscilla Page

At New WORLD Theater's 2008 conference, ***Intersection V: Creative UpRising(s)***, one session in the "Artistic Praxis" track centered on the origins of Hip Hop culture, and the multiple perspectives that shape its community-based trajectory of development. *Hip Hop Histories* was a roundtable conversation that featured author and historian Jeff Chang, choreographer Millicent Johnnie, performance artist Baba Israel, and MC Will Youmans, a.k.a. The Iron Sheik. This dynamic group of artists and scholars gathered to share their knowledge about the origins of Hip Hop and their cultural points of entry. During the session, we also learned about the connections they share through the culture, as they discussed its local, regional, and global manifestations. This article continues the conversation begun on that Saturday morning in April, sharing multiple perspectives on Hip Hop and its many forms and iterations, from its political roots to its commercial aspects, the role of women and women's contributions, to ideas about Hip Hop theater and performance.

Jeff Chang defines the "mythical moment" of 1968 as the where the history of Hip Hop begins. In "Can't Stop Won't Stop, Q + A", an interview with Oliver Wang available at www.cantstopwontstop.com, Chang states:

> It is this moment [1968] when students around the world are protesting—from Columbia University and San Francisco State to Paris to Mexico City—the year that Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy are assassinated, the year that Tommy Smith and John Carlos raise the black fist at the Olympics, the year that riots break out in Chicago, Washington D.C., Cincinnati. The anti-war movement and the black power movement are at their peak. 1968 is when the baby boomer/civil rights generation come of age.
>
> But something very different is happening in the Bronx that will profoundly shape the following generation. The seeds of what will happen politically, socially, and culturally over the next three decades are being planted. 1968 is when heroin floods the streets, the gangs come back and the fires begin. What follows leads to the emergence of Hip Hop culture.

Priscilla: What is your relationship to the history of Hip Hop? When did Hip Hop enter your vocabulary?

Baba: It was a Saturday night 1985 and I remember listening to the radio, huddled close to its sound. It was silver and blue, a Panasonic adorned with graffiti scrawling. I loved the LED lights that would flicker to the beat. The music was Hip Hop, and it filled my ears late at night through headphones. It was a moment of discovery that took me from one world into another. It took me from the world of my family, a world of sixties counter culture, Jazz, and utopian dreams to the current intensity of New York City life. The radio waves translating emotions into tangible audio bytes.

The radio program was the Mr. Magic show, and I waited eagerly as each new song would enter the mix. Beats pulsed and my imagination ran to the futuristic sounds of "Jam On It" and "Planet Rock." These were songs produced by Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force and Nucleus. They were part funk part electronic and out of this world. Hip Hop, the perfect soundtrack for a kid into science fiction and political awareness. I was born in 1974 and my parents raised me with a sixties ethic, a diet of non-violent anarchist revolution in the wrappings of poetry, story, and imagery. Hip Hop music fused the world of thought and tone. The song by Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five, "The Message" (1982), delivered a particularly powerful tale of street reality. Afrika Bambaattaa invoked peace, love, and having fun over dense drum machines and eerie synthesizers. It was the future, and my ears had found it.

The movements and fashion of Hip Hop were from the future, blending graffiti and the space age aesthetic of performers Sun Ra and Parliament, with the traditional imagery of Egypt, Zulu, Native American, and eastern martial arts. The human instinct for mythology was satisfied for the youth of my generation via heroic and villainous characters found in the pages of Marvel comics and in the Saturday morning cartoons. The Robotic movements and dance style of popping brought these animated images to life.

How did a white kid in SoHo connect to this rich culture from the Bronx? The graffiti on the trains were the smoke signals sending beacons of artistic reverie in the forms of gigantic murals or burners that brought color and breath to lifeless metal. Every morning, my eyes gazed in wonder as the trains pulled into the station bringing with them tales of adventure proclaimed in bold characters and images found on the subway's skin. The New York of the mid-eighties was Hip Hop. It began in the Bronx, but made its way to me through a very connected New York. No matter what neighborhood you came from, you could get on a train and make money or get fame in any borough of the city. A lot of dancers and artists came to SoHo to street perform and hang in the downtown art scene. That was my first exposure to Hip Hop culture—"Live and Direct."

My first Hip Hop friend was named Sebastian. He was older and had the unique experience of being part French. He turned me on to the beats and rhymes of Run DMC, who made the wearing of fat shoe laces and Adidas shell toe sneakers a must. I went to my first Hip Hop show in 1985 at the Beacon Theater. The doors opened to a mixed crowd "amped" with energy. It was a vision of flashing lights and the poetic bravado of Hip Hop. It was in that moment that I connected to the mix of confidence and eloquence. When the emcees were on the microphone, they were in complete control; it was a subtle dance between knowing yourself, the culture, and the audience.

Hip Hop stayed close to me; it gave me strength to deal with a difficult city and the growing pains of youth. Hip Hop gave me an identity that was my own—it was not my parent's, it was a language and a rhythm that made me feel connected, and was a passport in the urban maze of youth where you could get beat up for not knowing the right dance move or word to say.

Millicent: In 1984, my mother converted our garage into a make shift studio/bedroom for my older brother who was a b-boy. He and his crew would practice there all the time. As a little girl, my brother was my idol and hero. I was always trying to be around him, so I would attempt to sneak in and watch what they were doing. Naturally I was

always getting kicked out. I was too young to be hanging out with his teenage friends, and like most teenagers...he thought I was a bother to him anyway. I'm not sure if my mom encouraged my brother to teach me on the side, or if he did this by his own merit, but he ended up using me sort of like his muse. He would work out certain breaking techniques, movements and foot work on me before he shared the ideas with his friends. In essence, he became my first dance teacher. At four years old, he taught me everything I could possible retain and know about break dancing at the time.

There was one time I can remember when our mom bought me an Adidas suit, and I so proud of myself because it matched with everyone else in the crew who happened to be 10 years older than I was. That particular night she allowed me to go to the skating rink with them. I was dancing on the side of the cipher in my own little space and I guess someone saw me. In the middle of the battle...someone picked me up and placed me in the middle of the circle and set me loose. I was no older than 5 years old, so my memory is a little vague to what happened next or what I did or how I danced—but I do remember the crowd going crazy. I guess in a sense, that was the start of my journey into the dance world. I must have talked about it everyday after that, because about a month later, my mother enrolled me and my cousin Marla in dance classes at Hamilton Academy of the Arts.

From what I understand, I am one of the few female choreographers from the southern region of the United States who tours and teaches dance vocabulary and concert dance works, who is based and influenced by the Hip Hop aesthetic found in the South. It is also important for me to form connections between the Africanist aesthetic in dance as it relates to Hip Hop culture, found throughout the southern region of the United States, or what we refer to as the northern frontier of the Caribbean.

I grew up in a culture that embraced something (Hip Hop) that did not necessarily have a name, but it had an identity; and because of that specific identity, you knew what it "was" and you were damn sure of what it "wasn't."

As an adult attending college at Florida State, I took courses that help me articulate this phenomenon that was such a huge influence on me and my community as a young performance artist. Some of my courses included "English for Hip Hop Artists," English with a focus on Race and Ethnicity, African American Dance History, Cultural Anthropology, Literature with a focus on Race and Ethnicity, "Math for Liberal Artists," "Writing with a focus on Hip Hop Culture," and more. I was encouraged by one of my mentors, Dr. Gaynell Sherrod, to begin including Hip Hop history components into the various master dance classes I had been teaching outside of the university. I think this is what really set me apart from the other Hip Hop instructors that were around at the time. I was also bringing a southern-specific dance vocabulary that had not previously been embraced or included by Hip Hop historians and scholars.

Will: Hip Hop is a global phenomenon. As for my personal history: my school was 95% Arab American. It was in Dearborn, on the border of Detroit. There is thick segregation between Blacks and Arab Americans. Run DMC and NWA were very popular. My life was changed when I went into a store and asked for the two best tapes that they had. One was *Fear of a Black Planet* by Public Enemy, and the other was a tape by A Tribe Called Quest.

We listened to black music, but we didn't really interact with the culture. Growing up, I was very connected to Arabic culture. Arab Americans are consistently portrayed and thought of as foreigners. No one really has any idea that we are here [in the U.S.].

I wrote rhymes. I got on stage to freestyle. I got up, and I got booed. The other thing that was happening for me was that I developed my political consciousness. In 1990, I got on a bus to DC to go to a protest. On that bus, there was a split between what videos to play. The Arab Americans wanted to play Public Enemy, and the white activists wanted to play *The Wall* by Pink Floyd.

Also in the 1990's, President Bill Clinton began the sanctions against Iraq. I put my politics on paper when a friend of mine called looking for an MC. I told him that I could

MC for his film, *A Tale of Three Mohammads*. From there, I started using Hip Hop as a form of resistance.

When September 11th happened, I thought, "I don't know who did this, but we are all fucked." Arab Americans became visible at this moment. I started to have a voice.

Priscilla: Jeff Chang writes about the political roots of Hip Hop, and how labels (like "political rap" and "conscious music") are used by the music industry to distort, limit, and confine expression. Can you talk about the artists who are political and how they spread political messages and ideas? Can you also talk about commercial Hip Hop, its links to violence that are made by mainstream media? How does censorship work in the industry?

Baba: In the mid-late eighties, almost every Hip Hop album had a political song. Albums by artists like Run DMC, MC Lyte, and Big Daddy Kane had some combination of a party song, a bragging song, a smoothed out love song, and a message song. These songs dealt with current events, Black pride, and social justices issues. There were other groups that were explicitly political, like Public Enemy, whose identity as a group was rooted in their politics. The rise of Gangster Rap with NWA and Ice T introduced the west coast gangster to the Hip Hop arena. Ice Cube's solo work created a hybrid of gangster/political content with albums such as *Amerikkkas Most Wanted*. That record fused Gangster imagery with a scathing critique of the American Government. This echoed an earlier use of politics and violence in the work of Hip Hop activist and educator KRS ONE. His first record, *Criminal Minded*, also merged poetic political content with the rude boy ethic of guns and bravado. KRS later transformed his efforts to the Stop the Violence movement, and became a voice for peace in the Hip Hop community. KRS lost his DJ and mentor Scott La Rok to gun violence and had first hand experience of the trauma of violence. I feel that Gangster Rap's hyper characterization of violence exhibited in NWA and ICE T is linked to the Hollywood industry and LA sensationalism. In fact, Hollywood has reabsorbed and nullified Ice Cube's and Ice T's radical and violent content, transforming them into palatable members of the media. Hip

Hop's current violent tendencies are less in the mainstream; 50 Cent's mythology as a gun-brandishing and gun shot-surviving rapper has moved towards the saccharin of the Candy Shop and other R&B-driven tales of hyper sexualized female pursuit. I see the current violence more in the portrayal of women as sex objects and the limitations of gender. The industry does not support a diverse range of content, and artists do not create diverse records.

Priscilla: During the session at Intersection, Will stated that the values of commercial Hip Hop are killing our communities. What values do you find in Hip Hop? How you use Hip Hop as a form of political resistance?

Baba: America has a history of violence, patriarchy, sexism, racism, homophobia, and elitism. Hip Hop emerges from the Black and Latino experience in the Bronx, with musical and dance influences that span the Caribbean DJ culture, west coast funk music and dance, southern blues, and European electronic music. Hip Hop's early years are a mix of youthful rebellion, innovation, and organized social movement. Afrika Bambaataa had a structural intention to organize and create community events and groups. His ethic did connect to a legacy of civil rights activism, Black power organizing, and a futuristic inclusive vision on a global level. At the same time, the content of early Hip Hop reflected a mix of social commentary, political history, braggadocios rhymes, and material desire. Much of today's mainstream rap is devoid of any social or political content. This leaves the communities who listen to it without an important complimentary influence. Hip Hop's role as resistance remains at the grassroots level with countless organizations with platforms from immigrant rights, prison reform, counter recruiting, and youth advocacy using Hip Hop skills to promote and disseminate information and encourage movement building. In the face of the Iraq war and immoral recruiting, I wrote a song called *Recruit*. I distributed the song to youth groups, gave it away online, and performed in schools to challenge the co-option of Hip Hop as a recruiting tool.

Millicent: It is my experience that historically, Hip Hop has been viewed as a community art form. Usually when we use this term "community art," we are witness to the preservation of culture, identity affirmation and validation, and spiritual transformation between a collective of individuals. Historically, Hip Hop has been cultivated out of these experiences. While Commercial Hip Hop has made this creative and artistic expression more accessible to multiple communities, it has grown to become a mass media phenomenon that has completely disconnected itself from the communities from which it originally thrived, and served. The ideals and methodologies have been altered to support the sustainability of people in positions of power controlling and marketing the industry—thereby removing the process of community building & community art, creating a broad disconnection from the people, and a misrepresentation of multiple and culturally diverse communities. We have to figure out a way to reconnect the community with the artists. We have to teach the various Hip Hop histories that exist, in order to bring awareness to the historical and cultural significance of Hip Hop's impact on American History. Youth culture must feel reconnected to the music and dance making of this expression, so that its historical relevance is valued not only by the artists who are creating it, but also by the various communities that support it. When we allowed Hip Hop to leave our communities uncensored, we gave our control to mass media. I think the further we move and pull away from its' history, the more disconnected it grows from the community.

On Hip Hop as a form of political resistance: I think each of us has a tendency to create work that is reflective of our life experiences. I grew up in an extremely segregated town about an hour and a half outside of New Orleans, LA. Because of my mother's organizing efforts, I grew up being quite visible in my community as a young activist. Because of this visibility, I've had the KKK try to intimidate me on multiple occasions. I was met by the Klan in the parking lot of a studio where I hosted a social justice television show as a teenager. They were dressed in their white hoods and gowns while waiting for me, in hopes of intimidating me from airing the show. After several attempts of seeking employment with the school board, the grand dragon gave up his quest to become a substitute teacher at my high school. Like most African American youth in my

community, I was met with racial discrimination in sectors such as sports and the performing arts. I was told things like, "Too many black people are starting on the team...we are going to try something different tonight;" or, "You will never make it as a professional dancer with your body type." As an adult, fighting to receive proper health care for my mother who was on her death bed grew to become quite a challenge, particularly knowing she worked for the school board for thirty years while paying into a system that promised to take care of her.

With all of this being said, I knew early on, since childhood, that I would have to bring awareness to the social injustices that I faced in my community, wherever they might be or wherever I might find myself. I didn't know quite how long the journey would be, but I knew that I was given tools early on that would help support me through these transitions. Currently as a professional choreographer, dancer and educator, I use Hip Hop in addition to other Africanist and contemporary forms of movement, as a form of expression that is politically charged and driven. These are the artistic responses to my own personal experiences. The stage becomes my political platform.

I consistently explore, research and study diverse dance forms from around the world. I choreographed and toured with the Urban Bush Women for their works *Hair Stories* and *Shadow's Child.* The work *Hair Stories* specifically addresses the cross-cultural representation of hair, and the issues that arise from this expression. Performances of *Hair Stories* have enabled people to reflect, think about and dialogue with others about important cultural issues related to hair, and more importantly, allowed dance to become a tool for self-expression in these communities.

This performance and dialogue has provoked my interest in the dance origins of Hip Hop. I have studied its history and believe many of its movements are reflections of the cultural retentions found in the Mississippi Delta region of the United States. I believe that researching, identifying, and clarifying similarities between various forms of dance will allow me to create a hybrid form of movement, distinguishing itself uniquely as a part of Hip Hop culture.

My graduate studies program provided an opportunity to continue my research on the evolution of Hip Hop culture. Re-examining Hip Hop through the lens of the black southern American experience provided insight on the evolution of Hip Hop in American popular culture. I choreographed *Sincerely, Katrina Jones* to illustrate cultural influences indigenous to Louisiana and its affect on Hip Hop culture. It specifically focuses on Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. It uses the Hip Hop aesthetic as a vehicle for providing an artistic response to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. This attempt to provide a new way of looking at Hip Hop culture used factual documentation and cultural influences from Louisiana, encouraging a new perception of Hip Hop culture told from a southern perspective.

Will: The rapper Excentrik believes strongly that Arab-American Hip Hop is its own sub-genre because its "angst" is unique; its "social anger is the most complex." Arab-Americans are made to feel they do not belong here, and at the same time they do not belong back home, in the Arab world. He said, "our nationality is here, but we feel like we're from somewhere else." That is the product of "our rampant misrepresentation. Twenty-four seven, we're known as terrorists." Hip Hop music emerged among the "present absentees" of American society – those who are here, but relegated to invisibility in society's margins. Given perceptions of who Arabs are and what they do, Arab-American Hip Hop is precisely a "surprising new configuration," with the artists partaking in "hybrid cultural work."

Arab-American Hip Hop is fuelled by an identity in flux—the life experience of exile and diaspora. Many Arab-American MC's use Hip Hop to relate to a larger community in America, to make inroads into an America they may not fully belong to. An Arab-American DJ in Philadelphia named Dirty South Joe related his heritage to the problem of life in exile:

> I'm half-Palestinian and grew up moving around a lot. I didn't have any Palestinian friends, so I never felt there was one particular ethnic group with which I could identify. [Hip Hop] makes it easier to relate to different kinds of people. (Ariana Speyer, DJ Deluxx, 2003, *Index Magazine* 2003.)

Similarly, Louise Cainkar, a sociologist at Marquette University, found that other communities increasingly considered Arab-Americans "non-white" after September 11th. Arabs in the suburbs of Chicago "claimed that they were socially and politically excluded, that their children were taught anti-Arab materials in the schools, that they were subject to more frequent police stops than whites, and that their organizations were hounded by federal agents." She found that Chicago's Arab-Americans adopted a "people of color" identity, and built coalitions with the Latino and African American communities ("Space and Place in the Metropolis: Arabs and Muslims Seeking Safety," *City & Society*, Vol. 17, Issue 2, (2005): 181–209).

But Arab-American Hip Hop artists considered themselves people of color well before September 11, 2001, even if many within the community disagreed. Def Jam poet Suheir Hammad was the longest-serving female columnist at a Hip Hop publication—*Stress* magazine. In a 1997 interview, Hammad, the "older sister" of Arab-American Hip Hop, discussed the meaning of her poetry collection, *Born Palestinian, Born Black*:

> Audre Lorde, who was a famous African-American poet, discussed black as being a political identity as well as a cultural identity. Within the Palestinian culture, we have the concept of black being a negative force, and it is seen that way all over the world. What the book tries to do is take back the negative energy that is associated with black, reclaim it, and say that this is something that is about survival, something that is positive.

Hammad's challenge to existing social norms—namely the significance of blackness—foreshadowed the post-9/11 rise of politically conscious Arab-American Hip Hop, which like Hammad, turns away the pressures of assimilation and rejects notions of whiteness as superior. However, most Arab-Americans define themselves as White. For instance, 80% of the respondents to the US census who reported Arab ancestry define themselves as "White" (U.S. Census reports on Arab-Americans for first time" *USA Today* 11/21/03). By joining a minority-majority artistic movement, Arab-American MC's are manifesting Hammad's subversive vision of the politics of color. Arab-American MC's, even those who could pass for White, are in a sense rejecting it. Scholar Helen Hatab Samhan argues that Arab-American identity is confused between the government's classification of them as "White," or the indecisive "other" category, and their actual

experiences as minorities. Well before September 11, 2001, she wrote, "some Arabs have become accustomed to perennial 'other' status, or to straddling their technical white identity with their practical affinity to 'people of color'—i.e., every other non-European national origin group."

Several Arab-American MC's take as their starting point political views they recognize as marginal within American society—another form of the Arab-American "other" status. This rejection of mainstream views exemplifies their internationalism. Some Arab Americans in Hip Hop—DJ Khalid, The Terror Squad—these folks don't necessarily have a political agenda, they are connected by identity. The Philistines, ASH ONE, Euphrates (in Canada), the N.O.M.A.Ds, Iron Sheik, and Patriarch support the Palestinian desire for self-determination, the rights of Iraqis, and criticize the war on terror and media bias. Arab American Hip Hop is political, and identity-based.

Priscilla: Can you describe how you bring Hip Hop and performance together? I am interested in Hip Hop and theater, specifically. I am also interested in how you each respond to the term "Hip Hop Theater." For some, this is an emerging genre and for others, it's a marketing label. I am certain there is a wide range of perspectives on this term which has taken center stage in the past decade or so.

Baba: Hip Hop Theater is a recipe for my excitement and engagement in the theatrical tradition. Hip Hop Theater expands Hip Hop's storytelling, allowing for greater range of content, emotion, and dynamics outside of the hype of the club/party. Theater can embody human and political conflicts directly. Instead of a solo rap challenging racism, you can stage a battle between an oblivious White and a militant Black rapper, as we did in our Hip Hop Commedia piece *What You Say White Boy*? This intersection connects contemporary performance to the global language of Hip Hop. This creates current work that invites new audiences to the theater. At the same time, what is lost moving into the theater? I see this tension as a vital place to examine process, venue, and form.

One of my concerns is that "Hip Hop Theater" is already being used as a marketing tag and a way to attract audiences. My concern is that there are artists who use the tag Hip Hop Theater expressly for the purpose of securing funding, getting exposure, and expanding audience. I am disturbed that so early in the creative genesis of this Hip Hop Theater movement, it already faces these contradictions. I naively had hoped that Hip Hop Theater would be a sanctuary from the market-driven metamorphosis of Hip Hop music.

My other concern is one consistently highlighted by the group Universes, who have purposely stayed away from the term Hip Hop Theater. While Universes' experience, skill set, and perspective are shaped by Hip Hop, and they incorporate beatboxing and vocal sampling in their work, they do not want to be trapped by the word Hip Hop. I have felt that in creating Hip Hop Theater, we would be breaking open the box of theater to create a space where the Hip Hop generation would find reflection, connection, and representation. Or are we creating a box to limit our possibilities around form and expression?

I live with a constant concern, which is my own race. As a White man, there are many challenges and contradictions that I must keep mindful of, and face in my participation in Hip Hop. For the most part, my experience has been positive and supported, and the moments of challenge have been essential in the development of a critical race analysis. My concerns around privilege contribute to a hesitance to take a central role in this process of creating a new aesthetic. At the same time, I feel that I have come too far and invested too much to shy away from my role in the Hip Hop Theater community, as well as Hip Hop culture in general. I will just have to stay open and committed to being in dialogue with both supportive and challenging voices.

The use of poetry and movement in theater as a meta-form that reaches into the unconscious, dreams, and primal and emotional territories is vital, in my opinion, to creating a rich and layered theater. The use of, specifically, Hip Hop and related forms such as house, drum 'n bass, and Spoken Word to create a new contemporary

aesthetic—that, for me, is Hip Hop Theater. An artist could use modern dance, Jazz, or another poetic form to add that layer. Hip Hop Theater allows for the Hip Hop generations to integrate the rich and diverse languages of Hip Hop, to tell stories in new ways. The continuum of theater as a vital human ritual for negotiating the complexities of our experiences is made richer and more inclusive by the making of Hip Hop Theater.

I sit with hope for Hip Hop Theater. I dream of stages alight with insight and poetic rigor. I await tales of reflection and new dramatic works that challenge and surprise me. I crave a ritual to process the maddening nature of our world. I have seen and felt the genius of our Hip Hop Generation. I also see the traps and pitfalls snaring our creative expansion. It is my sincere hope that Hip Hop Theater will provide a space for innovation, for a greater diversity in theater making, and give a new venue for Hip Hop's culture and language.

Millicent: The term "Hip Hop Theater" is very new to me, because of my background in concert dance. As a concert dancer/choreographer, our performance space traditionally is the theatre. Historically, people like Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton and other choreographers that came out of Judson Church, have used components such as text synthesized with movement to represent their choreographic ideas, since the sixties. We could look back further to Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus's works that were taking specific cultural ideals and representing them in space using song, text, lighting design, theatrical and dramatic markers, and movement ideas that were reflective of their generation. I think Hip Hop Theatre is repeating the same cycle—a phenomenon representing popular culture being performed and manipulated in the theatre or various performance spaces.

Priscilla: Can you describe some of your experiences with Hip Hop in a global context?

Baba: Hip Hop is truly worldwide. I have collaborated with emcees, dancers, DJ's, and beatboxers from Australia, Japan, Cambodia, Czech Republic, England, and Holland. In each place, I found a mix of local slang, politics, and culture merging with the

foundations of Hip Hop. That is what I really enjoy and am excited by. I also witnessed the “wackness” of international emcees rapping with American accents and fronting like they are west coast gangsters or east coast thugs. I really appreciate international artists who bring their own culture to Hip Hop. This is happening in the music coming out of Senegal with indigenous language and instrumentation fusing with Hip Hop beats and samples.

Millicent: When I travel abroad, I usually try to find the underground locations that house the social dance forms reflective of that particular society or community. Usually I'm faced with the same energy—reckless abandon, improvisation, poly-rhythms, multi-meter, call and response through movement and/or music, dialects mirroring the native tongue of the people, small intimate spaces, strong sexual energy and celebration, circle, ciphers or implied "bantabas" (term in African dance meaning dance space). Most often, these communities have undergone some type of social injustice, political abandonment or manipulation, multiple tiers of racial and sexual oppression and discrimination. I have found that the movement ideals usually mirror and are in response to what the communities are witness to, and have experienced, in their particular societies.

Will: Hip Hop is a global phenomenon. The Arab diaspora has been connected to Hip Hop for a long time. French Algiers, Canada, and Egypt. The best show I ever did, the one best audience I ever had, was in Egypt. After I performed, old school break dancers came out onstage and performed.

Priscilla: At the Intersection conference, Jeff told the story of the party in the Bronx that Cindy Campbell threw in 1973, to raise money to buy back-to-school clothes. He called her the mother of Hip Hop. In response to a question about how elders in his community respond to his work, Will answered that “political work is often supported by the moms.” This is another story that we don’t hear in mainstream media. What has the role of women in Hip Hop been historically, and where and how are women showing up now?

Baba: There are so many dope women Hip Hop artists. From the dancing of Rokafella,

the beats of Butterscotch, the cuts of Kuttin Kandi, and the rhymes of Bahamdia and Invincible, women bring their power, emotion, intellect and soul to Hip Hop. Women are marginalized in the mainstream, and it is so frustrating. I see this marginalization also happen in the underground scene. I have seen a lot more women move into the spoken word scene, and feel the absence of female perspective in the Hip Hop arena. At the same time, if you look at major community Hip Hop events, you will find women like Kuttin Kandi, Rokafella, Trey (Australia), Maya Jupiter (Australia), and Aruna (Rotterdam) behind the scenes as organizers, and on stage tearing it down!

Millicent: I remember listening to JJ FAD, 357, Salt-N-Pepa, Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Monie Love, Big Liz, The Ghetto Twins, and so many other Female MC's just as much as I listened to the men. However in dance, traditionally it was almost unheard of for women to dance in the cipher. It was extremely male dominated. We didn't see female background dancers until Queen Latifah became the queen of Hip Hop in the mid-to late eighties. Before that—it appeared that the female MC's did their own dancing, or men were the background dancers.

Today, women have become scholars of Hip Hop culture, master dance teachers, artistic directors of break dance companies, while maintaining visibility as MC's, dancers, songwriters, spoken word artists, fashion moguls, music and film producers. Although it is still very male dominated cross-culturally, I think it's important we acknowledge that our continuous presence in Hip Hop culture as women is catalyzing some type of social change. Our contributions through education and scholarship produce resources that help create models & initiatives geared toward the preservation of Hip Hop culture told from a more accurate and gender balanced perspective.

!It is interesting to note here that only within the past decade, the term b-girl has been implied to represent female break-dancers within the culture.! “Hip Hop dance has provided the arena for expression and affirmation of masculinity” (LaBoskey 2005, 1).! Built into the Hip Hop Africanist aesthetic are domination, competition, sexuality, and

hero worship.! These elements of the break dancing aesthetic parallel the role of the male dancer in African culture, which exudes brief acts of male dominant heroism.!!!

In an interview, Rennie Harris, choreographer and spokesman for Hip Hop culture, defends his omission of women from his evening length concert dance work *Rome and Jewels*, by stating that it was “true street psychology.”! He said it was about “men’s bullshit—who they think they are and how they conjure women into what they want them to be;” that is, not human beings but projections, status symbols (Acocell 2005, 1).! His choice to omit women from the work, and his explanation behind their absence, illuminates issues of male dominance existing within the culture and projects women as inferior subjects in the Hip Hop.!

In an attempt to represent the female voice in Hip Hop, Harris then choreographs *Facing Mekka*.! In this work, the “female” is used to represent “lyricism” in Hip Hop culture.!! The presence of the female voice on stage along side men reflect the “calm and sweetness” of lyrical accompaniment found in rap music.! By allowing b-boy “dives” to transform into modern dance “falls,” Harris believes he “achieves his goal of deepening Hip Hop” (Acocell 2005, 2). Manipulating the movement in *Facing Mekka* through female energy exemplifies athletic grace, luminosity, smoothness, coolness, all which are elements of the Africanist aesthetic.

My most influential role model was my mother, Genevia Johnnie.! She was smart, beautiful, brave and an advocate for women's rights and education.! She integrated her high school, and was most often known for her organizing efforts with the NAACP and the city of Lafayette Adult Literacy programs.! She owned a Creole gift store where I worked on the weekends.! It was here that she taught me the importance of understanding my culture and gaining more historical knowledge to help preserve what was left of the southwestern Creole descendents of Lafayette, LA.! She later opened a research center dedicated to the preservation of the Louisiana Creole.!

While working in the store, I met Marie Washauum, who was a local television producer.! She was impressed with how much I knew about Creole culture and the merchandise in the store that she invited me as a guest on "Those Tender Years"!television show.! After a few tapings, she offered me the job, and I hosted the show my entire high school career.!!She was a wonderful mentor.! She taught me everything!there was to know!about speaking in front of an audience and conducting interviews.!

Towards the!end of my!high school career, I met Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, artistic director of! Urban Bush Women.! From!our first meeting, Jawole took me under her wing.! We met at International Association!for Blacks in Dance Conference in Durham, North Carolina.! I decided to stay an extra day in order to do the Jacob's Pillow!audition with Ron Brown.! Jawole and I rode in!the same cab together on the way to the airport. I had never flown by myself before, so when the skycap attendant asked if anyone!had handled my bags, my response was, "Sure, the cab driver, the bell hop, a few friends at the hotel...”! Jawole quickly interrupted!with a chuckle and told the attendant that it was my first time flying alone and no one had handled my luggage.!!After a few laughs, we became good friends.! We had lunch together and I told her “I would never be a professional dancer."! Who would have thought!I'd be touring with her right out of college.! Since then, she has been like my honorary Auntie (pronounced Aunt-TEE) as we say back home in Louisiana.!

About 23 years ago, I met the owner and director of Hamilton Academy of the Arts.! When I was five, my mother enrolled me in her academy, after seeing how much I loved dancing with my older brother and his friends.!!I was extremely shy and quiet (can you believe that?), so I didn't go out of my way to make new friends.! One day, I arrived at the studio and found myself to be the only student for the day. Instead of canceling class, Ms. Grace gave me a private lesson.! After that lesson,!she promoted me to the teen class.! I was the only!five year old in the!class—all alone with mean teenagers who teased and picked on me!for being little.! My mom told me that they were just jealous...so I decided to continue my training with Ms. Grace.

*   *   *   *   *

Jeff Chang has written extensively on race, culture, politics, the arts, and music in mainstream, specialty and scholarly publications. His first book, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, won the American Book Award and the Asian American Literary Award, among other honors. He edited the anthology *Total Chaos: The Art & Aesthetics of Hip Hop*. Jeff was a founding editor of *ColorLines* magazine and a Senior Editor/Director at Russell Simmons' *360hiphop.com*. Born of Chinese and Native Hawaiian ancestry, Jeff was raised in Hawai'i. In 1993, he co-founded the influential Hip Hop indie label, SoleSides, now Quannum Projects, helping launch the careers of numerous artists. He has a master's degree in Asian American Studies from UCLA.

Baba Israel is an emcee, producer, poet, theater artist, beatboxer and Hip Hop performing artist who has toured the USA and around the world. He co-founded the Playback NYC Theater and co-directs Hip Hop Connections, a touring education assembly program. Baba has performed in Hip Hop Commedia's *What you say white boy?* and Full Circle's *Soular Power'd* and has collaborated as a musician with Rha Goddess and Renita Martin. His solo piece *Boom Bap Meditations* was presented by the Hip Hop Theater Festival as part of Critical Breaks. His latest record with Yako 440 is *Beatbox Dub Poetics*. Baba holds an M.F.A. degree in interdisciplinary arts, uniting his passion for Hip Hop and education. openthoughtmusic.com

Millicent Johnnie is a dancer and choreographer whose merging of Hip Hop forms, Brazilian capoeira and folkloric dance, and Caribbean-influenced movement has created a hybrid form of contemporary dance vocabulary. A native of Lafayette, Louisiana, she received a BFA and MFA in Dance at Florida State University. She served on the Tulane University and Dillard University dance faculties after touring as resident choreographer and rehearsal director of the Urban Bush Women. Millicent co-founded the Phlava Hip Hop and Jazz Dance Company based in Tallahassee, receiving a Prague International Dance Festival "Best Choreography" award and "First Place International Dance Title" for Hip Hop Choreography entitled *Wrath*.

Priscilla Page, Program Curator at New WORLD Theater, is a dramaturg whose main interests include new play development and translation. Her current dramaturgical explorations include working with Migdalia Cruz on PELO, a Spanish language translation of the play FUR, Un/Knowing Desire and Empire by Mango Tribe, and production dramaturgy on *Lydia on the Top Floor* by Terry Jenoure. She is also in the early stages of editing an anthology of plays by Migdalia Cruz. Priscilla also teaches in the Department of Theater at UMASS and is developing a Multicultural Theater Practice Certificate with Andrea Assaf and Harley Erdman. She has served as the chair of the Advisory Board for the Women of Color Leadership Network, a program of the Center for Student Development.

Will Youmans (The Iron Sheik) is considered by many to be the grandfather of Arab-American Hip Hop. Mixing politics and Hip Hop, his music focuses on the Palestinian movement for freedom, the war on terrorism, U.S. foreign policy in general, the Arab world, and growing up Arab-American. Since releasing his first album, *Camel Clutch 2003,* and his follow-up, *Yet We Remain,* the Iron Sheik has performed all over this country and internationally, including the UK, Egypt and Lebanon. Media as varied as the BBC, Al-Jazeera, *The New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle,* CNN, and *Rolling Stone* (France) have reported on his music.