



## **Youth: Our New Cultural Theorists**

—Awad Ibrahim

And what these young folk do with the language is nothing short of remarkable. They don't simply replicate what they've been given—they stretch it out, break some of it off, reconstitute it, and prove that Derrida is right in saying that we “only ever have one language” that is really “not at one with itself,” which ultimately means that we have a plurality of voices and speech and rhetoric, and that there's “no such thing as a language.” We should practice linguistic humility—and not rhetorical condescension—and be mindful of our children's sheer verbal wizardry and inventiveness.

—Michael Eric Dyson in conversation with Meta DuEwa Jones

Indeed, there is no such thing as a language. Language, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has argued, has always been in the plural and has never been a simple instrument of communication. Language is and has always been about power, is and has always been both a producer and a product of power. Read within a cultural-studies framework, Stuart Hall pushes Bourdieu's contention a bit further by arguing that not

only is language a producer and a product of power, but also it is a producer and a product of culture (20). Semiotically articulated, language is a container in which culture is both formed and performed and in which people and objects are turned into “texts” to be read with infinite possibilities of meaning. The meaning of these “texts,” furthermore, does not lie within the text but within those who signify and make sense of it.

In this sense, objects become meaningful only within a *semantic field* (Hall 23), where power intervenes discursively to close its infinite possibilities of meaning, thus reducing the meaning of the object in people's imagination and everyday language to only one meaning (Foucault 114). A rose is a rose is a rose.

Juxtaposing these contentions with Global Hip-Hop Nation Language (GHHNL), a category I have explained extensively elsewhere (Ibrahim, "Global"; Ibrahim, "Takin"; see also Alim), one may conclude that not only are youth mindful of these arguments but also they put them into practice. Youth, I argue, are no longer just consumers of culture. In fact, this is historically true: youth have never been just consumers of culture (see Danesi; Kellner; Talburt and Lesko; Tilleczek). They have always been originators, creators, and fully agentive. Recently, however, this has been taken to a *whole nother level*. Thanks to an intense moment of global cultural exchange and facilitation of musical, artistic, and cinematic representational exchange, new cultural theorists are emerging, ones who are not waiting for the so-called cultural critics (who are supposedly highbrow, academic, and intellectually superior) to make pronouncements about what counts as the cultural. New cultural theorists are putting semiotics into practice and *grammaticalizing* (in other words, creating, regularizing, and normalizing their own conventions and grammar) their own musical, cultural, and linguistic rules and styles (Alim).

Indeed, the so-called cultural critics (academics) are playing catch-up. The new cultural theorists, namely youth, invent, express, and grammaticalize their own lives and, in turn, so-called cultural theorists (academics) come in some time later and attempt to theorize and to make sense of youth's lives.

To suggest that the two processes (performing and doing versus researching youth culture) are parallel and separable and that they do not meet is to enter the unnecessarily ridiculous. My point is twofold. First, there is an intense moment of youth cultural production now that deserves a lot more attention than it is getting (Ibrahim and Steinberg). Second, it is not only the intensity of their production but also the uniqueness of that production that forms the basis for my argument that youth are our new cultural theorists.

Let me explain by taking Global Hip-Hop Nation Language as an example. Recently, youth have moved "language" from the reductive Saussurean division of *langue* and *parole* into the domain of semiotics. Here, the so-called non-verbal elements of clothes, hair, the body, dance, and other *linguistic excesses* are "speaking" so loudly that they become as important, if not more important, than verbal utterance (spoken or written word). While their mother tongues might be Portuguese, Wolof, Danish, Urdu, Japanese, or Swahili, Hip-Hoppers can and are talking to each other using semiotic languages of dress, walk, bling, dance, and attitude, among others. One can see this

in the video “#Hiphopishiphop—Hip Hop for the World” (SanEofficialVEVO). KRS-One, the oldest and most intellectual artist hip-hop has ever produced, opens the video. The camera then takes us to fourteen countries around the world. Each artist speaks in his or her language, yet there is a semiotic field that is created in the video where, if users turn off the volume, the “language” of the body, the gaze, the dance, and the graffiti is grammaticalized: it has rules, norms, and regulations. Not everything goes. To be a citizen of the Global Hip-Hop Nation, one has to know and to respect its rules, norms, and grammar.

To be a citizen of this Nation, in other words, one has to speak this semiotic and metaphoric language, including verbal and non-verbal utterance. Speaking that language, however, is not for its own sake. Indeed, I am arguing that young people speak that language to theorize, to speak about, and to make sense of their lives. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the recent intensive and extensive production of the spoken word. We see this with Hiwot Adilow, a sixteen-year old young woman performing in the 2012 finals of Brave New Voices, talking about her Ethiopian name and along the way *culturally theorizing* what it means to be young, immigrant, with a non-Anglo name, self-assured, and educationally successful (hoplessable). One witnesses an intense theorizing that is no less theoretical than a Derridean deconstructionism, a Foucauldian poststructuralism, or a Lyotardian postmodernism.

Obasi Davis, a sixteen-year-old young man, awakens our intellectual curiosity, theoretical understanding, and social analysis by *culturally theorizing* what it means to be young, Black, and intellectually gifted growing up in the Bay Area of California. There, Davis tells us, racial economy, poverty, and systematic apartheid are an everyday reality. In Davis’s performance at the Sixteenth Annual Youth Speaks Grand Slam Finals in 2012, we hear a Gramscian Marxism, a Freirean critical pedagogy, a Ladson-Billings Critical Race Theory, a Toni Morrison social critique, and a Langston Hughes prophetic future (Youthspeaks).

If one is present in Brave New Voice and Youth Speaks festivals where these two young people perform their hurts, one cannot but convincingly argue that *our new cultural theorists are in da house!* We desperately need to pay attention to them and, above all, we need to learn from them. As we listen and learn, let us pay more attention to the poetics of their theorizing and the intensity of their language, and, more significantly, let us decipher, without reductionism, the semiotic language these youth speak. That “language” is a GHHNL, which is no different than the language in #Hiphopishiphop or the one spoken through dance in the 2014 Hip-Hop International World Finals, whose title was “Uniting the World of Hip Hop through Dance” (Official HHI). It is clear that this unity is not happening haphazardly

nor without its cultural theorizing. Youth are its new cultural theorists, and their theorizing is grounded in an interdisciplinarity of radical possibilities, innovative grammaticalizing, and social consciousness. They are asking us academics to make a choice: either we can be with them as allies, by letting them

speak and by listening and learning from them, or we can become unintentionally their enemies, by turning them into objects of study and by theorizing and, in the process, silencing them. I think it is high time we shut up and listen to these new cultural theorists. WORD!

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