

# global **noise** and | global **englishes**

ALASTAIR PENNYCOOK

*Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA*, alluding to Tricia Rose's US rap-music book, *Black Noise*, aims to do much more than merely extend the reach of the study of rap and hip-hop beyond the USA, as its subtitle might suggest.<sup>1</sup> While acknowledging the importance of the work of both Rose and Potter,<sup>2</sup> this collection's editor, Tony Mitchell contests their respective views that rap and hip-hop are essentially expressions of African-American culture, and that all forms of rap and hip-hop derive from these origins. He argues that these forms have become 'a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world'. (1–2)

Indeed, the argument goes one step further, suggesting that more exciting developments can be found in different contexts around the world:

For a sense of innovation, surprise, and musical substance in hop-hop culture and rap music, it is becoming increasingly necessary to look outside the USA to countries such as France, England, Germany, Italy, and Japan, where strong local currents of hip-hop indigenization have taken place. (3)

While, at one level, local development of rap and hip-hop can still be seen in terms of appropriation of African-American cultural forms—and there is still a tradition of imitation—at another, the local context in which the form evolves may engage a quite different range of cultural, musical and linguistic forms, mobilising a politics that may include anti-globalisation and anti-Americanism.

In a discussion of *na mele paleoleo* (Hawaiian rap) developed by Sudden Rush, for example, Fay Akindes argues that by bridging elements of political self-determination with popular culture, this Hawaiian hip-hop has become ‘a liberatory discourse for Hawaiians seeking economic self-determination in the form of sovereignty. Sudden Rush ... have borrowed hip hop as a counter-hegemonic transcript that challenges tourism and Western imperialism.’<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Tony Mitchell claims that if Sydney rappers of Fijian and Tongan background, such as Trey and Posse Koolism, combine with King Kapisi’s ‘ Samoan hip-hop to the world’, and if Sudden Rush’s *Ku’e* (Resist) has been influenced by Aotearoa–New Zealand Upper Hutt Posse’s *E Tu* (Be Strong), then what we see is a ‘Pacific Island hip-hop diaspora’ and a ‘pan-Pacific hip-hop network that has bypassed the borders and restrictions of the popular music distribution industry’. (31) Clearly this happens elsewhere in the world, as is shown by Zuberi’s discussion of British, South Asian and Caribbean musical connections, which have produced a ‘digitally enabled diasporic consciousness’.<sup>4</sup>

*Global Noise* looks at indigenisation of rap and hip-hop in France, the UK, Germany, Bulgaria, the Netherlands, the Basque region, Italy, Japan, Korea, Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and Canada; it also considers Islamic hip-hop, particularly in France and the UK. As Mitchell explains, these studies aim to avoid glib uses of postmodernism as an explanatory framework:

The essays in this book explore these national and regional appropriations of rap and hip-hop within their different social, cultural and ethnic contexts. In doing so, they avoid the clichéd Eurocentric rhetoric of postmodernism too often invoked in academic attempts to explain rap inadequately in terms of pastiche, fragmentation, the loss of history, and the blurring of boundaries between ‘high art’ and popular culture. (10)

As with any book that tries to look at the global context, there’s inevitably an enormous amount missing. You won’t find South America, Africa or South Asia represented here. Overall, however, the book provides enough cases to carry the argument that localisation itself is differently inflected when occurring in diverse contexts.

Alongside the specific themes that the book addresses—various music scenes; the need to understand hip-hop in terms of local appropriations; and issues such as cultural imperialism, globalisation, commercialisation, authenticity and localisation—other key ideas cut across these and are worth discussing in greater depth. Two I would like to mention briefly are captured in the tensions between globalisation and appropriation, and resistance and normativity. Related themes that I will pursue are language and localisation, and directionality.

First, globalisation and appropriation. Writing about Bulgaria, Claire Levy remarks that hip-hop constitutes:

a global urban subculture that has entered people's lives and become a universal practice among youth the world over ... From a local fad among black youth in the Bronx, it has gone on to become a global, postindustrial signifying practice, giving new parameters of meaning to otherwise locally or nationally diverse identities. (134)

Similarly, Ian Condry suggests that 'Japanese hip-hop and other versions around the world are interesting in part because they help us understand the significance of what seems to be an emerging global popular culture'. (222) Such statements, however, present a certain dilemma, as the central argument of the book is that hip-hop can no longer be seen as derivative of African-American culture, but rather needs to be considered as locally indigenised and expressive of local cultural and political concerns. So what constitutes this 'global, postindustrial signifying practice', this 'global popular culture'?

Ian Maxwell points to this concern when he warns of the dangers of:

the historico-documentary approach, subsuming specific cultural experiences to totalizing narratives (for example, the kind of writing that takes as its theme an unproblematized transcontextual continuity—say 'hip-hop'—and views any local narrative engaging this theme as an effect of that continuity). (266)

The point here is that while the book addresses the theme of localisation (not, it should be said, without some 'historico-documentary' fabrications of continuity in national or ethnographically construed local hip-hop scenes), it does *not* answer the question of what 'a global urban subculture' or 'an emerging global popular culture' might be in relation to such localisations.

This question is not merely about the relationship between global and local cultural forms (a relationship never very adequately addressed by neologisms such as 'glocalization'), but rather a more difficult question: If the global is always also local, what is it that constitutes the global? If global hip-hop is not the spread of this North American cultural form but rather its local appropriation, is global hip-hop culture the sum of the parts of the localisations or something else?

With regards to resistance and normativity, a commonly discussed tension lies between the commercialised, sanitised world of the popular-music industry and the critical, resistant roots of hip-hop. But there is, I believe, a strong case that can be made for the political significance of hip-hop. Ted Swedenburg's discussion, for example, shows how the relationship between Islam and hip-hop bands such as Fun-Da-Mental in the UK and IAM in France is significant and often overlooked. We need, he suggests, to realise the 'importance of paying close attention to popular cultural manifestations of "Islam" in Europe, given the ethnic, political, and cultural importance of "Islam" to youth of Islamic backgrounds in Britain and

France'. (76) Indeed, post–September 11, we would do well to pay even closer attention to the ways in which anti-racism and new formations of Islamic identity are being articulated through popular culture. But hip-hop researchers are often in search of a local, disenfranchised politics and only reluctantly admit to it if 'their' rappers lack marginalisation:

In Japan, too, hip-hop is associated with place, but not any kind of marginalized residential neighborhood or region. On the contrary, Japanese hip-hop is generally associated with Shibuya, a trendy shopping district in Tokyo where many of the key nightspots and record stores are located. (241)

Maxwell points to an aspect of this problem when he criticises work that 'over-emphasizes a purported "political" dimension to cultural practices, overreading them perhaps, from the position of a nonreflexive organic intellectual'. (266) But the issue is not only that there is the possibility of reading desirable politics into hip-hop and engaging, at times, in a romanticisation of resistance, but also that there is, I believe, a non-reflexive normativity to those politics. This is perhaps most obvious in a writer such as John Hutnyk, for whom the only good music seems to be that which conforms to his anti-global capitalist and anti-racist politics.<sup>5</sup> In this book there is a tendency to admire those who distance themselves from the violence of US 'gangsta rap' and espouse causes such as language maintenance, education, the environment or anti-racism. There is, then, a normativity here that suggests not only that mimicry of the US is problematic, and that syncretic, hybrid appropriations are preferable, but also that adoption of certain political formations over others is preferable. There is of course nothing wrong with this, but without a more reflexive accountability for their politics, writers can collapse together aesthetic preferences and normative values because the cogs of the critical machinery have worn out.

Turning to language and localisation, what interests me is the extent to which the language in which rap is performed is linked to levels of appropriation and forms of politics. *Global Noise* would have benefited from greater attention to issues of language use, which was signalled by Mitchell in his introduction. Because the issue of localisation is central (including the argument against US essentialism and authenticity) to the book, each contribution necessarily operates around a distinction between the US and the rest. But to what extent is this an issue of rap in English versus rap in other languages? With regards to the Netherlands, Mir Wermuth argues that there is a local 'Nederhopper' culture, despite the constant struggle over what is 'authentic', the small size of the Dutch market, the lack of political commitment, the absence of a strong black (Dutch African-Caribbean) presence and the tendency to use American-style rap English rather than Dutch. In the context of the Netherlands, then, it seems possible to localise while using English.

In the UK the issue is rather different, the question being what version of English to use. With the strong African-Caribbean musical force in the UK, it has often been Jamaican English that has predominated. One of the most interesting developments has been the growth of Asian hip-hop bands, in which young British Asians have appropriated the forms of their African-Caribbean neighbours. According to David Hesmondalgh and Caspar Melville: 'The productive syncretism of diasporic cultures is further demonstrated by the creative use British Asian musicians have made of hip-hop as the basis of musical-cultural statements about how they are negotiating new ethnic identities'. Thus, hip-hop is 'only one node in a complex web of postcolonial cultural elements'. (87) Regardless of the use of South Asian music and Bollywood film samples, the issue for British-Asian hip-hop artists is generally one of appropriating a form of English to articulate a new localisation.

For some, the dominant force is the 'English speaking world'. Mark Pennay, writing about hip-hop in Germany, suggests that 'generalizations made about the characteristics of a genre on the basis of its development within the *English-speaking market* cannot be transferred wholesale to other national contexts'. (128, my emphasis) The use of German, therefore, takes on considerable significance in this mode of appropriation. Similarly, with regards to Italy, Tony Mitchell discusses the shift from English to standard Italian and then to Italian dialects. Meanwhile in Quebec, according to Roger Chamberland, the growth of French-language rap has, of course, been influenced by the large hip-hop scene in France (where, as André Prévos and Tony Mitchell note, French has also been greatly influenced by Caribbean and North African languages and creoles). This move to rap in local languages was partly a result of difficulties with English. The development of German rap, for example, was to some extent a result of the inaccessibility of Black-American English, particularly for former East Germans. The use of local languages is also a political move. The Basque group Negu Gorriak uses Basque language as a political statement about nationalism. And, as Jacqueline Urla tells us, that group's decision to use Basque (over Castilian) did not appear to weaken its appeal elsewhere, giving it instead a sort of localised authenticity.

So what is the relationship between localisation and language? While it might be tempting to assume that the development of rap in some minor language signals a greater level of indigenisation, we should be cautious as the relationship between language and culture is not so simple. Tony Mitchell's discussion of the Upper Hutt Posse shows not only that its use of Maori is part of a strong political and cultural statement, but also that there is compatibility between rap and Maori forms of oral discourse. Fijian-Australian rapper Trey has made the same point about hip-hop and Pacific Island cultures, suggesting that dance, graffiti, MC-ing and rap have strong links to the traditional oral cultures of the Pacific. Of course, there is a danger here of essentialising, and of suggesting intrinsic links between so-called oral

cultures. But at another level, it suggests that as the cultural forms of hip-hop become indigenised through other languages (though Trey is discussing English-language rap), they may have a better chance of encountering analogous forms within those cultures.

Given the extent to which language can be a difficulty for some in engaging with rap, it is worth noting that hip-hop gets taken up in differing forms. In a number of contexts where English is not the first language, break-dancing first gained people's attention—in part because of the cultural and linguistic difficulties in understanding rap, in part because of the more immediate appeal of the physical. Thus, as Condry comments, 'A striking feature of global flows of popular culture, then, is that dance—movement of the body—moves easily across linguistic and cultural boundaries, and that movies and videos are a primary channel for this exchange'. (229) He goes on to conclude:

Language is a key variable for understanding Japanese hip-hop and for transnational exchanges more generally. When we consider cultural globalization, we need to examine what actually moves across the cultural divide, because that is how to get a sense of what kind of divide it is. (231)

Language, then, is a crucial factor in processes of transfer and localisation. But in what direction is the transfer?

The North American cultural forms of rap and hip-hop may be in the process of becoming localised, but is there an influence in the opposite direction? As Pennay comments in his discussion of rap in Germany, 'Regrettably, the flow of new ideas and stylistic innovations in popular music is nearly always from the English-speaking market, and not to it'. (128) Similarly, Jacqueline Urla points out: 'unequal relations between the United States record industry and Basque radical music mean that Public Enemy's message reaches the Murgurza brothers [of Negu Gorriak] in Irun, and not vice versa'. (189) David Hesmondalgh and Caspar Melville suggest a more reciprocal relationship between black cultures in Britain, the Caribbean, and the US, where they can be seen as 'linked in a complex network of cultural flows'.<sup>6</sup> But to what extent is this an issue of language and to what extent an issue of market size? Certainly, French rappers such as MC Solar have influenced music in North America.

In a number of ways, the study of the global spread of English provides a useful parallel to these studies of 'global noise'. The issue of ownership—who owns English—has been widely debated, and consensus seems to be moving towards those who use the language rather than those who facilitate its spread. Hardline accusations of linguistic imperialism have been countered by studies of periphery resistance to the spread of English and by descriptions of new indigenised versions of English, such as Indian, Singaporean and Nigerian English.<sup>7</sup> Most recently, Janina Brutt-Griffler has argued convincingly that:

the spread of English was not simply a unidirectional, top-down process. Rather, Africans and Asians have significantly shaped the process of English spread. The formation of language policy in British colonies shows the centrality of the struggle *against imperialism* to the creation of World English.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, then, globalisation, commodification, resistance and localisation are all key issues when considering the spread of English. Indeed, some authors discuss English as a ‘glocal’ language just as Tony Mitchell discusses rap as a ‘glocal’ phenomenon.<sup>9</sup>

While emphasis has been increasingly placed on issues of agency, resistance and appropriation in the global spread of English within language studies, almost no work has taken popular culture seriously. Rather, the focus of world Englishes has been predominantly on the development of standardised versions of new national Englishes.<sup>10</sup> These studies have been largely based on a small sample of written language, ignoring the vastness of popular language use and the political struggle bubbling beneath the surface. Arjuna Parakrama argues that the ‘smoothing out of struggle within and without language is replicated in the homogenizing of the varieties of English on the basis of “upper-class” forms’.<sup>11</sup> This approach to world Englishes, he suggests:

cannot do justice to those Other Englishes as long as they remain within the over-arching structures that these Englishes bring to crisis. To take these new/other Englishes seriously would require a fundamental reevaluation of linguistic paradigms, and not merely a slight accommodation or adjustment.<sup>12</sup>

Hip-hop, then, provides an excellent context for the study of these ‘Other Englishes’, and particularly as they interact with other codes. As Mitchell suggests, ‘a common feature of the hip-hop scenes in most of these countries is their multiethnic, multicultural nature as vernacular expressions of migrant diasporic cultures’. (10) It is exactly this sort of dynamic that seems to be missing from most studies of world Englishes to date. Further, Bent Preisler points out in the Danish context that although formal classroom learning may previously have been the principal means through which people came into contact with English, this is no longer the case:

informal use of English—especially in the form of code-switching—has become an inherent, indeed a defining, aspect of the many Anglo-American-oriented youth subcultures which directly or indirectly influence the language and other behavioural patterns of young people generally, in Denmark as well as in other EFL countries.<sup>13</sup>

Preisler goes on to show the broad knowledge of hip-hop slang among a group of Danish hip-hop street dancers. The language of hip-hop may be, then, one of the best candidates when looking for emergent global Englishes.

If we can develop an understanding of how global rap and hip-hop and the spread of English are related, there are important considerations for educational and curricular outcomes. Since these are the forms of popular culture in which many people are investing, as educators, we too need to start engaging with these forms. In the case of the African youths he studied in Canada, Awad Ibrahim asks: 'whose language and identity are we as TESOL professionals teaching and assuming in the classroom if we do not engage rap and hip-hop?'<sup>14</sup> There is, then, the need to incorporate 'minority' linguistic and cultural forms into the classroom: 'To identify rap and hip-hop as curriculum sites in this context is to legitimize otherwise illegitimate forms of knowledge'.<sup>15</sup> Further, it is important to get those in dominant cultural groups (teachers, other students) to 'be able to see multiple ways of speaking, being, and learning'.<sup>16</sup> Ibrahim concludes that, 'maybe the time has come to close the split between minority students' identities and the school curriculum and between those identities and classroom pedagogies, subjects and materials'.<sup>17</sup>

*Global Noise* is a fascinating book. Its central theme is that rap and hip-hop have moved far beyond what are still claimed by some as their intrinsic US contexts. Mitchell stresses that rap and hip-hop:

now operate in a global conglomeration of different local contexts, where many of the same issues of roots, rootlessness, authenticity, appropriation, syncretization, and commodification in notions of 'world music' ... have again come into play. The diverse 'glocal' musical and social dynamics that hip-hop scenes from Greenland to Aotearoa-New Zealand have developed in establishing their 'other roots' illustrate that the globalization of rap music has involved modalities of indigenization and syncretism that go far beyond any simple appropriation of a U.S. musical and cultural idiom. (33)

This book is very useful in thinking through issues of appropriation and globalisation in relation to the spread of English, and the inevitable gaps in its coverage leave me wanting to read more. Further work might fruitfully consider modes of organisation other than the nation. If hip-hop is such an urban phenomenon, what does rural hip-hop look like? It might also consider the implications of English and non-English appropriations; the forms and implications of white middle-class hip-hop appropriations; or how non-national, diasporic alternative identities operate in relation to the national formations discussed here. There is certainly scope for a follow-up volume to *Global Noise*.

---

ALASTAIR PENNYCOOK is Professor of Language in Education at the University of Technology, Sydney. His interests include the cultural and political implications of the global spread of English.

---



1. Tony Mitchell (ed.), *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA*, Wesleyan University Press, Connecticut, 2002.
2. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, 1994; Russell Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1995.
3. Fay Yokomizo Akindes, 'Sudden Rush: Na Mele Paleoleo (Hawaiian Rap) as Liberatory Discourse', *Discourse*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2001, p. 95.
4. Nabeel Zuberi, *Sounds English: Transnational Popular Music*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2001.
5. John Hutnyk, *Critique of Exotica: Music, Politics and the Culture Industry*, Pluto Press, London, 2000.
6. Mitchell, p. 87. See also Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Verso, London, 1993.
7. The classic expression of the linguistic imperialist position is Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992. The most cogent response to this book is Suresh Canagarajah, *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999. There is now a massive body of work available on the ways in which English has been appropriated and indigenised; the classic is Braj Kachru (ed.), *The Other Tongue: English Across Cultures* (2nd edn), University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1992.
8. Janina Brutt-Griffler, *World English: A Study of its Development*, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon, 2002, p. 107.
9. See for example Anne Pakir, 'The Development of English as a "Glocal" Language: New Concerns in the Old Saga of Language Teaching', in Ho Wa Kam and C. Ward (eds), *Language in the Global Context: Implications for the Language Classroom*, SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, Singapore, 2001.
10. For an extended critique of this work, see my article 'Turning English Inside Out', *Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 25–43, 2002.
11. Arjuna Parakrama, *De-hegemonizing Language Standards: Learning from (Post)colonial Englishes about 'English'*, MacMillan, Basingstoke, 1995, pp. 25–6.
12. Parakrama, p. 17.
13. Bent Preisler, 'Functions and Forms of English in a European EFL Country', in T. Bex and R. Watts (eds), *Standard English: The Widening Debate*, Routledge, London, 1999, p. 244.
14. Awad Ibrahim, 'Becoming Black: Rap and Hip-hop, Race, Gender, Identity and the Politics of ESL Learning', *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1999, p. 366.
15. Ibrahim, p. 366.
16. Ibrahim, p. 367.
17. Ibrahim, p. 367.