Expanding Musical Inclusivity

Representing and Re-presenting Musicking in Deaf Culture through Hip Hop

Katelyn E. Best

Abstract: Products such as headphones, music streaming platforms, and learning assessments foster a hearing-centric realization of music that places auditory senses at the forefront of musical experience. Yet within the context of Deaf culture, a linguistic minority defined by the use of sign language, music takes on new meaning as musical experience is expanded to other senses of the body. Despite this relative construction, music in Deaf culture has been subjugated to a hegemonic ideology that undermines and marginalizes Deaf experiences of sound. However, Deaf musicians have been able to work toward subverting the ideological limitations that have been placed on their music, and by extension their bodies, by adapting musical structures produced by mainstream society and realigning them toward Deaf priorities. Using ethnographic methods including artist interviews, this chapter investigates how Deaf rappers have created a style of hip hop that prioritizes Deaf experiences of sound over hearing ones and considers how, through performance, they subvert hegemonic control over Deaf musical expression and promote the inclusion of Deaf forms of musicking.

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"To build democracy is to include the least amongst us
and society at large does a poor job of bringing others to the table,
so we'll have to bring our own chairs and build a bigger table."
Connell Crooms, Deaf activist and former artist[1]

In 1967, the Music Educators National Conference hosted a symposium on "Music in American Society" to discuss the state of music education in the United States.[2] Known as the Tanglewood Symposium, this meeting brought together a diverse group of people with a wide range of professional backgrounds to participate in an event that "sought to reappraise and evaluate basic assumptions about music in the 'educative' forces and institutions of [US] communities—the home, the school, peer cultures, professional organizations, church, community groups, and communications media."[3] The documentary report from this symposium not only provided a record of the proceedings, but also included a declaration for greater representation of musical diversity in curricula.

Over the years, music institutions have become more interdisciplinary and mindful of expressive forces that lie within and beyond the margins of dominant musical thought, exploring musical diversity at the intersections of race, disability, sexuality, gender, and class, among other categorical crossroads. At the same time, educative forces remain sites of production that shape musical hierarchies as they determine what forms of music are represented, to what extent they are represented, how they are represented, and who represents them. Music production, practice, learning, dissemination, and consumption naturalize and embed basic assumptions of music within society that place ideological restrictions on what constitutes music and how music should be experienced, learned, and evaluated. This results in the production of a musical know-how that upholds certain elements as fundamental to music, generating measurements of musical quality and standards that determine musical inclusion or exclusion.

While musical meaning is relatively shaped and determined, music in Deaf culture, a linguistic minority defined by the use of sign language, has been subjugated to mainstream manifestations that undermine and marginalize Deaf experiences of sound.[4] Products such as headphones designed to transmit

1 Connell Crooms, email correspondence with the author, February 21, 2020.

2 The Music Educators National Conference (MENC) is a US-based organization known today as the National Association for Music Education (NAfME).

3 Robert A. Choate, "Documentary Report of the Tanglewood Symposium," *Music Educators National Conference* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1968), iii.

4 I am employing the practice of differentiating Deaf culture from the condition of being deaf through the use of a capitalized "D," a convention proposed by James

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music exclusively to the ear, music streaming platforms programmed solely for audio file formats, and learning assessments in the form of aural exams, implemented within classrooms to assess musical skill and development, foster a hearing-centric realization of music that places auditory senses at the forefront of musical experience.[5] This ideology, when projected onto music in Deaf culture, delegitimizes the culture because it constructs a reality in which deafness functions as an impediment to musical experience instead of as a component that shapes it. However, Deaf musicians have been able to work toward subverting ideological limitations that have been placed on their music and by extension their bodies. Some musicians have done this by adapting musical structures produced by mainstream society and realigning them toward Deaf priorities.

While music within Deaf culture encompasses a diversity of forms and is not limited to one particular style, some artists have used hip hop as a foundation to express music that is culturally localized, challenging stereotypes of deafness through their work and subverting hearing-centric constructions of music in the process. This chapter investigates how Deaf rappers have created a style of hip hop that prioritizes d/Deaf experiences of sound over hearing ones and considers how, through performance, they subvert hegemonic control over Deaf musical expression and promote the recognition and inclusion of Deaf forms of musicking.

Situating Myself

My own understanding of music has been dominated by my experience as a hearing person. I grew up in a musical household, where singing around the piano was a frequent family activity and vocal tonality was prized. I consumed music through technology that catered to my body and listening practices. I studied music in academic institutions whose music instruction and assessment were designed in ways that were accessible to me and inclusive of my musical experiences. These systems privileged my perspective of music and, in turn, validated my body through the "musical ability" acquired and demonstrated by it. It wasn't until I began graduate studies in ethnomusicology at

Woodward in 1972. See Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 2.

5 Katelyn E. Best, "Musical Belonging in a Hearing-Centric Society: Adapting and Contesting Dominant Cultural Norms through Deaf Hip Hop," *Journal of American Sign Languages and Literatures*, August 6, 2018, trans. Carla Shird, 5, http://journalofasl.com/deaf-hiphop/.

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Florida State University in 2008 that I became critically aware of the musical bias embedded within them and myself.

I first began researching Deaf music in 2011 and, in 2012, I began conducting fieldwork on the development of dip hop in the United States, a style of hip hop that employs the technique of rapping in signed language.[6] I became involved in this research because I was interested in learning more about this style of music, its development, and practitioners, but also because there was a dearth of research on Deaf music that employed ethnomusicological modes of investigation to examine a culturally relative construction of music in Deaf culture.

As a community whose members reside in various geographical locations, Deaf culture is translocalized—existing in transient spaces that extend across localities, and its ethnomusicological study subsequently extends beyond geographical spaces as field locations become transient and realized in both physical and virtual domains.[7] As Deaf scholar Joseph J. Murray points out, "The major features of the new Deaf cultural landscape consist of gatherings at designated public or private spaces situated both in physical, geographical space and at virtual sites that exist only in moments of active creation and consumption."[8] When conducting fieldwork at physical sites such as Deaf festivals, ASL slams, open mic nights, and concerts, I used more traditional means of documentation including written observations, informal interviews, photography, and audio/visual recording. On the other hand, virtual sites, like Twitter, Facebook, SoundClick, and YouTube, became both ethnographic and archival sites of investigation as the electronic spaces in which artists and their followers interact became indefinitely preserved within online platforms. In addition to this, many of my interviews with artists took place virtually, both synchronously and asynchronously, through means of Skype, Facebook messaging, email correspondence, etc. in order to facilitate scheduling, online access, and communication through a shared written language.

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6 A significant portion of this early fieldwork was published in "That's so Def: Redefining Music Through Dip Hop, the Deaf Hip Hop Movement in the United States," Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 2015.

7 Clemens Greiner and Patrick Sakdapolrak, "Translocality: Concepts, Applications and Emerging Research Perspectives," *Geography Compass* 7, no. 5 (2013): 373–74.

8 Joseph J. Murray, "Coequality and Transnational Studies: Understanding Deaf Lives," in *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 105.

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Sound in Deaf Culture

"Strobe lights are DAMN NOISY"
Shannon Dean Marsh, Deaf educator and former ASL *instructor*[9]

Within Deaf culture, deafness is a way of life informed by a shared language, community, and sensory experience of the world; in this context, music takes on new meaning as musical experience is expanded to other senses of the body. Although agreement is complicated by different degrees of deafness, subsequent ranges of auditory perception, and ages of onset, along with a host of socio-cultural factors, a culturally relative construction of music in Deaf culture stems from an intersensory experience of sound that decentralizes an aural-centric framework. Musicologist Jeannette DiBernardo Jones notes, "In a deaf musical experience, the whole body becomes the membrane. Both deaf and hearing people can feel sound vibrations, but hearing people tend to focus only on the auditory perception of these sound vibrations."[10] While deafness naturally subverts the dominance of auditory input over other sensory domains within sonic experience, Deaf cultural practices further shape and determine interpretations of sound. As sound studies scholar Tom Rice reminds, "rather than being a universal set of sensory aptitudes, ways of listening are an aspect of 'habitus,' a set of culturally informed bodily and sensory dispositions."[11] In this regard, culturally acquired ways of knowing, participating in, and navigating the world produce shared realizations of sound within Deaf culture that deviate from traditional associations with the ear.

While the word "sound" is conventionally defined in acoustic terms, sound in Deaf culture is signified across sensory modalities. As Mara Mills observes, "The history of deaf communication makes clear that sound is always already multimodal."[12] Given the form, practice, and centrality of sign language within Deaf culture, words commonly associated with sound in oral language, such as "speaking" and "listening," are applied to other sensory domains. In her book, *Staring How We Look* Rosemarie Garland-Thomson uses the phrase "visual listening" when describing communication in sign language. She remarks, "This kind of visual listening can exceed the range of hearing communication, as when

9 Shannon Dean Marsh, Facebook message to the author, February 3, 2020.
10 Jeannette DiBernardo Jones, "Imagined Hearing: Music-Making in Deaf Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, ed. Blake Howe et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 58.
11 Tom Rice, "Listening," in Keywords in Sound, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 101.
12 Mara Mills, "Deafness," in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 52.

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a Deaf person 'overhears' a conversation across a room or chats with signers far out of auditory range."[13] Since sign language is communicated manually, the reality of "speaking" applies to bodily movement and "listening" to visual reception. In this regard, conversations can be "heard" in environments that do not facilitate aural reception, for instance through windows, crowded spaces, or underwater. As discussed by Jeannette DiBernardo Jones in her chapter titled "Imagined Hearing: Music-Making in Deaf Culture," this concept of visual listening is realized within American Sign Language through the sign LISTEN placed by the eyes instead of the ears, the latter of which would denote aural listening. d/Deaf educator and former American Sign Language instructor Shannon Marsh explains that for the past decade, the ASL community has tried to differentiate between listening in terms of hearing and seeing by using the number "3" handshape and twitching the fingers beside the eyes instead of the ears.[14] This change in placement indicates that the act of "listening" is being executed by the eyes but also signifies a move towards liberating words that have been colonized by hearing priorities and reassigning them to constitute Deaf ones.[15] Marsh attributes the prior use and implementation of LISTEN signed beside the ears to oralism and the Milan Convention, which led to changes in deaf education that discriminated against Deaf culture, linguistic practices, and ways of life by imposing hearing practices and values onto Deaf bodies. Forced adoption of oral communication in place of manual was the most prominent form of oppression that resulted from the Convention.[16] Marsh notes that after the Convention, "The focus on [the] ability to hear and speak was so pervasive in education for the deaf." He further remarks,

> "Listen." That was a word that was preached upon deaf school kids, focusing on using our ears […] as time went on, we realized "Well, listen[,] how do we listen? With our eyes! Not our ears!" So, we modified the signs that were

13 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 121.

14 Shannon Dean Marsh, Facebook message to the author, February 3, 2020.

15 This is not to say that the sign LISTEN placed by the ears is meaningless to Deaf people. As musicologist Jessica Holmes notes in her article that theoretically examines d/Deaf listening experiences, "Many d/Deaf people, including those who are profoundly deaf, have residual hearing […]. The significance and function of residual hearing is, however, necessarily individual." See Holmes, "Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing: Music and Deafness." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 70, no. 1 (2017): 175.

16 Leila Monaghan. "Deaf Education History: Milan 1880," in *The SAGE Deaf Studies Encyclopedia*, ed. Genie Gertz and Patrick Boudreault (London: Sage Publications, 2016), 173–78.

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> centered around ears to eyes [...]. How we process language [and] input information really is ultimately [with] our eyes, not ears.[17]

Rapper and actor, Darius "Prinz-D the First Deaf Rapper" McCall, describes implementing this practice within his performance. For instance, he explains that if he's rapping the phrase "Listen, hear me out," he would sign "hear me out" beside his eyes to reflect how his Deaf audiences "hear" him.[18] Within this example, he attributes the eyes with processes of listening. While the adoption of this practice is not ubiquitous within the Deaf community or consistent among Deaf rappers, its structure and application reflect culturally constituted listening practices that also contribute towards decentralizing the ideological pervasiveness of associations with the ear.

According to Deaf scholars Carol Padden and Tom Humphries,

> There are two ways to think about sound. The most familiar is that sound is a change in the physical world that can be detected by the auditory system [...]. But what is often overlooked is that sound is also an organization of meaning around a variation in the physical world.[19]

Within this construction of "sound as variance," sound can be manifested through patterns of light, colors, motions, or frequencies. While these manifestations can be directly related to acoustic sound patterns, they can also exist outside of them. Musicologist Jessica Holmes discusses this in terms of "imagined sound." In her broad analysis of d/Deaf experiences of sound, Holmes suggests "Through the synchronization of visual cues with corresponding imagined sounds, the image and its movement thus serve as an index of sorts; the visual cue automatically triggers the 'sound.'"[20] This is representative, for example, in switching lights on and off. While this is a culturally accepted way to get someone's attention in the Deaf community, it is also considered "noisy" within some contexts. As Marsh explains from his own experience, "Visual lights that are jarring [are] extremely noisy for me."[21] Here, Marsh uses the word "noisy," one that has been linguistically tied to audible productions of sound to describe disruptive visual input and in doing so extends sonic meaning. These sonic formations and linguistic extensions can be compared to Garland-Thomson's application of "visual listening" but applied to sound to refer to "visual sounding." "Visual sounding" is used here to denote the production

17 Shannon Dean Marsh, Facebook message to the author, February 26, 2021.

18 Darius McCall, M4a audio correspondence with the author, April 6, 2020.

19 Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 92.

20 Holmes, "Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing," 188.

21 Shannon Dean Marsh, Facebook message to the author, February 3, 2020.

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of visual stimuli that are processed as rhythmic and spatial patterns and, in essence, metaphorically "sound."

The sonic landscape shaped by culturally informed realizations of sound redetermines musical meaning based on Deaf aesthetics. As Deaf studies scholar Summer Loeffler remarks, "Deaf people operate in a different sensory universe and thus have formed a unique take on music, one which encompasses visual and tactile forms."[22] When song lyrics are expressed in sign language, music becomes extremely visual. When incorporated, lyrics in sign language become a fundamental musical component, one that is "sonically" visual. At the same time, visual musical elements are not limited to linguistic expression. In her study on music in Deaf culture ethnomusicologist Miriam Gerberg notes,

> David Spayne of Colchester England also spoke of "seeing" music. He says: "I 'see' music in movement, the conductor's baton moving, the violin bows going up and down. Also on the beach, the waves lapping the shore and the trees blowing in the wind. It's the same way I lip read."[23]

In this description, Spayne first provides an example of a traditional musical setting, but focuses on visual stimuli (i.e., the movements of the baton and the violin bows). The latter is directly tied to the production of sound whereas the former prompts it. In instances of acoustic silence within this setting, the conductor's baton still visually sounds. In the second example, Spayne experiences music in unconventional contexts. Here, he describes aspects of nature, which visually sound around him, as musical (i.e., the movement of water and trees).

In their article, Jody Cripps and Ely Lyonblum describe "signed music," which they use to classify musical expression originating from within Deaf culture, as encompassing compositions that incorporate lyrics as well as those that incorporate non-lyrics. They explain that "Non-lyrics do not include language in an explicit manner, but musicians who produce these sounds are expected to possess the necessary language and cultural knowledge."[24] Through their example of a non-lyric signed song, "Eyes" composed and performed by J. E. Cripps, they highlight how the music of the song is sounded visually, noting "She [J. E. Cripps] performed using hand and facial movements in an abstract way […] [and] successfully produced what is visually perceived as music from

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22 Summer Loeffler, "Deaf Music: Embodying Language and Rhythm," in *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 438.

23 Miriam Gerberg, "Falling on Deaf Ears: Musical Meaning and Experience in the American Deaf Community," unpublished manuscript, 2007, 14.

24 Jody Cripps and Ely Lyonblum, "Understanding the Use of Signed Language for Making Music," *Society for American Sign Language Journal* 1, no. 1 (2017): 79.

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beginning to end."[25] In A *Deaf Way II Anthology: A Literary Collection by Deaf and Hard of Hearing Writers*, Melissa Whalen discusses her experience of visual elements intertwined with acoustic ones, writing, "At the Deaf school, we had a special music room in which flashing colored lights represented the different musical tones. When the stereo was turned on, the room became a disco, a kaleidoscope of colors flashing around the walls."[26] While this example employs music that was created outside of the Deaf community, the incorporation of visual components dislodged the centrality of aurality within Whalen's musical listening experience. Similarly, Deaf artist and rapper Sean Forbes provides another perspective of this kind of interrelation through a video clip he posted of his band's drummer, Nick King, playing a drum kit engineered to illuminate with each percussive hit. Adding the tag "visual drummer" to the post, he writes, "Can you feel the rhythm just from seeing this?"[27] By adding the descriptor "visual" to "drummer," Forbes identifies drumming with visual components and correlates the sense of feeling through seeing within his question referring to the rhythmic patterns played by King. These examples, provided by Whalen and Forbes, depict visual musical elements while also demonstrating cross-modal components that amplify an intersensory experience of music.

Music in Deaf culture, as Loeffler noted earlier, can also encompass tactile components which shape musical contour. While, according to anthropologists Michele Friedner and Stefan Helmreich, "phenomenologies of vibration are not singular," tactility can contribute to and function as another component of musical experience.[28] As rapper and Deaf activist Warren "Wawa" Snipe explains, "Letting the music take over has a mysterious way to allow you to enjoy beats or tingling sensations that some deaf cannot hear but feel."[29] Wawa highlights the variation of deaf experience but also indicates towards shared practices of feeling within Deaf culture. Yet, as Holmes remarks,

> The feasibility of touch/vibration as a listening strategy depends on a host of logistical variables, such as the material properties of a given acoustical

25 Cripps and Lyonblum, "Understanding the Use of Signed Language," 86.

26 Melissa Whalen, "The Noisy House," in *The Deaf Way II Anthology: A Literary Collection by Deaf and Hard of Hearing Writers*, ed. Tonya M. Stremlau (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2002), 24.

27 Sean Forbes. "Sean Forbes on Facebook Watch." Facebook Watch. Sean Forbes, April 26, 2019. https://www.facebook.com/deafandloud/videos/348608752677084/.

28 Michele Friedner and Stefan Helmreich, "Sound Studies Meets Deaf Studies," *Senses and Society* 7, no. 1 (2012): 77.

29 Katelyn E. Best, "'We Still Have a Dream:' The Deaf Hip Hop Movement and the Struggle Against the Socio-Cultural Marginalization of Deaf People," *Lied und Populäre Kultur/Song and Popular Culture* 60/61 (2015–16): 72.

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> space, instrumental register, the degree and method of amplification, and music's precise expressive function.[30]

Rapper and founding member of Silent Mob James "Def Thug" Taylor III articulates challenges of not always being able to experience this musical component, noting, "If the music is low I won't be able to feel the beats or vibrate [and] I get frustrated."[31] Prinz-D also describes variables that inhibit this experience, explaining,

> I would love to have speakers on the stage that are facing me. That way I can hear my voice and kind of hear the beat a little better and just kind of feel it more […] having speakers, like floor speakers pointed towards me, I can really get into the feel of it. Because the audience will feel it [either way]; however, I won't feel it as much without them [speakers], but I can still make it rock![32]

Here, McCall highlights the importance of being able to audibly hear acoustic elements and kinesthetically feel vibrational components of his compositions, thus emphasizing the intersensory experience of his music and performance. Within Deaf culture, vibration functions as another component that can be used to shape musical experience. While, as Def Thug and Prinz-D observe, the amplification and directionality of speakers can enhance the acuteness of vibrations, these experiences can also be heightened through tactile interfaces. As Wawa describes,

> With your head on the piano and feeling it—it channels. It heightens your sense, where you know exactly where you want the feeling. I've had a couple of people call me telling me "you know Wawa, the way you hear music is different [from] how we do it but it's addictive." […] I like to use anything to take the sound […] I like to take it apart and find something that gets my interest and zoom in on it. Then I put it all together again and it's like a whole new thing. And people were like "What did you just do?" "Well, I just took the groove." "No, that wasn't there before." "Yes, it was." "No way! How did you know?" "Well I felt it." "You felt it?"[33]

In his description, Wawa not only shows the impact of the tactile components and interfaces that play a role within his musical composition, expression, and performance, but also expands musical experience beyond normative notions. Loeffler observes, "Many Deaf people in history have shown that music has a different meaning for them and thus have reframed the way Deaf people perceive

30 Holmes, "Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing," 209.
31 James L. Taylor III, email correspondence with the author, December 12, 2014.
32 Darius McCall, M4a audio correspondence with the author, April 6, 2020.
33 Warren Snipe, Skype interview with the author, August 22, 2013.

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and enjoy music."[34] While a Deaf realization of sound employs visual and tactile sensory modes, this is not to say that aurality is entirely disregarded. Rather, aural elements share a more equitable role, or in some instances, a lesser role in relation to other sensory domains. These characteristics and intersensory experiences of sound represent a Deaf acoustemology that integrates aural, visual, and kinesthetic modes of sonic exploration.

Hip Hop as a Platform

"I [was] born where Rap [was] Born at
and In The South Bronx where I Grew up we always play loud Musics."
James "Def Thug" Taylor III, rapper, writer, and founding member of Silent Mob[35]

Musically, hip hop[36] possesses characteristics that appeal to culturally informed experiences of sound in Deaf culture. Sean Forbes describes the structural appeal of hip hop, explaining, "When I first heard rap music, it really spoke to me because the beats and the bass lines and everything was just very groove driven especially the G-funk stuff from Dr. Dre and other west coast stuff."[37] Prinz-D also remarks, "I am a huge hip hop head. I like any genre that has a lot of boom in the bass drums."[38] Here, Forbes and Prinz-D highlight the unintended predisposition for hip hop music to register with Deaf experiences of sound. For example, pronounced bass beats can trigger a tactile response in a way that higher frequencies do not. The emphasis on the rhythm section in hip hop music, dating back to DJ Cool Herc's practices of isolating and looping the break beat, creates a musical environment that facilitates an intersensory experience.[39] Although a product of a hearing community, hip hop is a rhythmically driven style of music that does not necessarily heighten melodic elements that would otherwise ideologically restrict Deaf experiences to hearing-centric limitations.

Given its DIY origins and grass-roots aesthetics, hip hop offers a democratizing musical landscape that has provided Deaf rappers with tools to actualize music from a Deaf perspective. As African American Studies scholars

34 Loeffler, "Deaf Music," 440.
35 James L. Taylor III, email correspondence with the author, December 12, 2014.
36 Within this chapter, when using the term "hip hop," I am referring to the overall musical style generally comprised of "rapping" (the vocal or lyrical content) and "DJing" (the accompanying instrumentals), unless otherwise specified.
37 Sean Forbes, live performance recorded by the author, March 6, 2014.
38 Darius McCall, email correspondence with the author, December 20, 2014.
39 Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (London: St. Martin's Press, 2007), 78–9.

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Marcyliena Morgan and Dionne Bennett note, "hip-hop culture is based on a democratizing creative and aesthetic ethos. [...] Because most hip-hop artists are self-taught or taught by peers in the hip-hop community, hip-hop has empowered young people of all socioeconomic backgrounds all over the world to become artists in their own right."[40] As such, hip hop culture and the ethos surrounding it has provided an outlet that does not ideologically constrict Deaf people to relying on hearing people for "musical access," but rather allows them to assert and create music on their own terms. According to American journalist and historian Jelani Cobb, "At its core, hip hop's aesthetic contains three components: music, or 'beats,' lyrics, and 'flow'—or the specific way in which beats and lyrics are combined."[41] Drawing from these fundamental elements, dip hop utilizes heavy bass and low frequency patterns for the beats and incorporates the technique of rapping in sign language, producing an intersensory flow that is tactile and visual at its structural core.

In addition to providing a framework that appeals to culturally relative constructions of music in Deaf culture, hip hop also facilitates representation. Since its inception, hip hop has provided a platform for marginalized voices, creating a musical space that amplifies counter-hegemonic narratives and social critique. This is not to say that all hip hop functions in this way. As Craig Meyer and Todd Snyder point out,

> For some, hip-hop music is misogynistic, homophobic, and promotes violence and drug use among America's youth. For others, hip-hop music is voice as action: a genre of music that exemplifies the oppressed voices of an often overlooked and disenfranchised American demographic.[42]

While hip hop is inhabited in many places and exists in dichotomous ways, within this context, it functions as an educative force where "what is represented," "how it is represented," and "who represents it" can be self-determined, subsequently reshaping and renegotiating politics of representation. According to Morgan and Bennett, hip hop "transcends and contests conventional constructions of identity, race, nation, community, aesthetics, and knowledge."[43]

40 Marcyliena Morgan and Dionne Bennett, "Hip-hop and the Global Imprint of a Black Cultural Form," *Daedalus* 140, no. 2 (2011): 177.

41 William Jelani Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn. A Freestyle on Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 14.

42 Craig A. Meyer and Todd D. Snyder, "The New Political Rhetoric of Hip-Hop Music in the Obama Era" in *Sounds of Resistance: The Role of Music in Multicultural Activism*, ed. Eunice Rojas and Lindsay Michie (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013), 229.

43 Morgan and Bennett, "Hip-hop and the Global Imprint of a Black Cultural Form," 177.

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In this regard, hip hop has been an outlet for some people within the Deaf community to present themselves on their own terms and through their own language, subsequently breaking down stereotypes of deaf people in the process. While hip hop exists in paradoxical ways, capitalized within a commercial market on the one hand and originating from the peripheries on the other, its contradictory existence opens up opportunities for dip hop artists, along with others originating from the margins, to work their way toward breaking down barriers in the music industry and, by extension, mainstream society.

As a musical genre and broader culture that embraces the underrepresented, the illicit, and the taboo, hip hop embodies an ethos of rebellion that facilitates agency. Within this setting, Deaf rappers claim a musical space that redetermines ways music is realized and empowers a Deaf perspective. Hip hop storytelling techniques facilitate exposure that allows Deaf rappers to move beyond a rhetoric of stigmatization and disability naturalized within discourse on "music" and "deafness" and instead create a new picture based on their experience and cultural reality. Within their discussion on the globalization of hip hop and the development of African styles, African studies scholars Msia Kibona Clark and Mickie Mwanzia Koster remark, "African hip hop groups emerged, and many were inspired to express hip hop culture from African perspectives, thus indigenizing and localizing hip hop to be their voice for social protest."[44] In a similar way, Deaf rappers have gravitated toward hip hop and, in doing so, have been able to participate on their own terms as members of mainstream society—to be represented, included, and heard—while "indigenizing" hip hop to embody Deaf musical aesthetics and constructions of sound.

Dip Hop Performance

> "Dip hop is really hip hop through Deaf eyes—through Deaf culture […] You're learning sign language; you're seeing things through Deaf eyes —their view, how they view the world."
>
> *Warren "Wawa" Snipe, rapper, actor, and founder of Slyki Entertainment*[45]

While sign language, coupled with heavy rhythmic bass patterns and the technique of rapping, serves as the primary foundation for dip hop, each performer embodies this style of music in their own way. In order to encompass the diversity of sound experiences within Deaf culture and also express their voices

44 Msia Kibona Clark and Mickie Mwanzia Koster, "Introduction," in *Hip hop and Social Change in Africa: Ni Wakati*, ed. Shaheen Ariefdien, et al. (Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2014), xiii.

45 Warren Snipe, Skype interview with the author, August 22, 2013.

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within mainstream culture, some rappers have made their music both bi-lingual and bi-musical.[46] Bi-lingual in this context consists of the inclusion of manual and oral languages. Employing ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood's concept of bi-musicality, bi-musical within this setting refers to the incorporation of Deaf musical aesthetics coupled with hearing aesthetics that may not necessarily be valuable to a Deaf experience of sound but would appeal to a hearing audience. While not a fundamental component of dip hop music and performance, many rappers compose and perform their music in bi-musical ways, making their music accessible to hearing audiences. For some, this also speaks to their bi-musical identity, as well as the position of this musical style within the larger traditions of hip hop and signed music.[47]

These performance structures can take on many forms. Some rappers perform to a pre-recorded track of their music that they record ahead of time in the studio, while others employ d/Deaf or hearing DJs, and there are also those who perform with a live band or include dancers. Depending on the performance venue and travel logistics, many dip hop artists have employed various combinations of these structures within their performances at one point or another. In terms of performing bi-lingually, some rappers perform their lyrics in both languages simultaneously, others hire a hearing vocalist to interpret the lyrics from sign language, and many others perform in sign language to a pre-recorded track of their lyrics so they can focus their attention on performing in sign language instead of trying to concentrate on rapping in two different languages that employ different grammatical and rhyming structures. While many Deaf rappers perform their songs in both oral and manual languages in order to make their music accessible for hearing people, and by extension market to a larger audience, these translations of lyrics are not a necessary component.[48] At the same time, some rappers, especially those who did not acquire sign language at an early age, do not consider the incorporation of oral lyrics to be a translation since the language is very much a part of their bi-lingual identity.

Other practitioners of dip hop, particularly grassroots rappers and dip hop groups, perform primarily for Deaf audiences and do not incorporate the use of oral language or bi-musical elements. For example, Silent Mob, an early grassroots rap group originating from the Bronx, N.Y., has performed most of

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46 Mantle Hood, "The Challenge of 'Bi-musicality,'" *Ethnomusicology* 4, no. 2 (1960): 55–9.

47 When using "signed music" here, I am referring to Cripps and Lyonblum's definition of the term that classifies it as "original lyric and/or non-lyric musical performances done by native deaf signers" (Cripps and Lyonblum, "Understanding the Use of Signed Language," 78).

48 Best, "'We Still Have a Dream,'" 74.

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their music solely in sign language. Def Thug explains, "I play beats with no voices. That Was My plan, [and] I keep it that way because that's where we started rap, with our hands first, not voices."[49] Instead of incorporating oral and manual languages—for example ASL with English—Def Thug describes creating a mixture of ASL, home signs, and street signs. He comments,

> We have [our] own "Street Sign Language" […] I'm from South Bronx from the Project, and Of course I use street language. So I mixed it with ASL. It's like magic [—] will make your eyez hypnotize. Not only that, I learned from other Deaf Thugs from all Over The Bronx, Harlem, Brooklyn, Queen[s], and [a] few [other] states. They have their own street sign languages so I used it sometime[s].[50]

While performing in an oral language is not a fundamental requirement of dip hop, practitioners agree that if a performance does not include sign language it is not dip hop.[51] While each rapper employs different performance techniques and embodies dip hop musically in their own way, collectively, they have used hip hop as a foundation in which to express and promote a culturally relative style of music.

Some practitioners of dip hop self-identify in different ways. Some instances include "deaf rapper," "ASL rapper," or "signsong rapper," emphasizing the fundamental component of rap incorporated within this style. Some of these artists apply the term "dip dop" to classify their music, while others use "hip hop," "deaf hip hop," or "sign language rap." However, the term "dip hop," which was coined by Wawa in 2005, functions as a way to identify this style of music while facilitating the formation of a musical category that is comprised of Deaf musical elements, one unassociated with words that may evoke etic stereotypes of music and deafness.[52] Furthermore, the creation of the sign DIP HOP also serves to classify a new musical style that is created by and for members of the Deaf community. The sign DIP HOP consists of the ASL letter "F" handshape and is a compound sign, one that combines two signs together. As Marsh notes,

> Wawa's "dip hop" [sign] is an "F" handshape and it's unique… I'd suggest that it is a combination of "find/pick/discover" for the first half of the sign, then sideways movement with the same handshape makes me think of "free," or something a conductor for an opera would do. […] So basically, it's like "Find

49 James L. Taylor III, email correspondence with the author, December 12, 2014.
50 James L. Taylor III, email correspondence with the author, December 12, 2014
51 Best, "'We Still Have a Dream,'" 74.
52 Best, "'We Still Have a Dream,'" 73.

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and be Free." ...he [Wawa] managed to "MORPH" those two separate signs and their facial expressions/cues into one.[53]

The following figure, which is based on a video by Wawa, demonstrates the handshape and movement of the sign.[54]

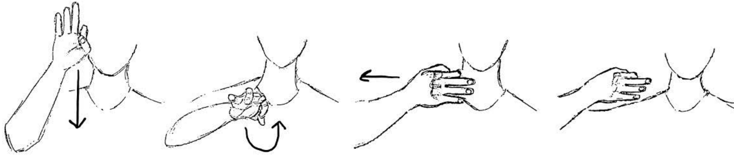

Figure 1: Anne Wood Drysdale, original sketch of ASL sign "DIP HOP," 2021, original drawing. Photo: Anne Wood Drysdale. Courtesy of the artist.

As Marsh notes, the movement of the sign is similar to that of a conductor, traveling downwards in motion but instead of moving outward, it dips inward and then out to the side.

Dip hop is brought to life through live performance. Within this space, dip hop artists create a musical landscape that heightens intersensory experiences of sound and promotes alternative modes of musicking based on Deaf aesthetics. Given this, the musical elements, structures, and tools incorporated within dip hop performances are designed to communicate and appeal across sensory modalities. According to Deaf studies scholar H-Dirksen Bauman, "The traditional parsing out of senses in the West is a bit of a folk belief that links each sense with a particular organ, instead of seeing perception as a more malleable synesthetic process."[55] In order to enhance cross-modal sensory perception within performance settings, some musicians and artists within the Deaf community have creatively implemented and adapted different instruments, media, and technology. For example, musician Myles de Bastion, founder of CymaSpace, draws from cymatics in order to develop new technologies that expand sensory perception within performance contexts. He explains,

53 Shannon Marsh, Skype interview with the author, December 21, 2014. When asked about the creation of the sign and Marsh's analysis, Wawa confirmed and said that it was "on point" (Warren Snipe, Facebook message to the author, March 2, 2021).

54 Warren Snipe, .MOV audio/visual correspondence with the author, December 14, 2014.

55 Joseph N. Straus, Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 169.

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> Our events can be experienced using all the senses. Our team (develop & invent) multi-sensory technologies. For example[,] furniture such as chairs and couches that react to the music and vibrate. And lighting fixtures, guitars and drums are a variety of instruments we make.[56]

Inventions such as these and adaptations of musical structures and tools have been utilized within dip hop concerts, subsequently enhancing the musicking experience across sensory domains. In a virtual performance streamed on February 20, 2021, Sean Forbes called attention to this aspect of their performance, remarking,

> Nick showing up with that light up drum set… really what happened was, we performed in Kentucky for the Kentucky Deaf Festival. The best Deaf Festival out there. And Nick was like "I need to get a drum set that lights up." So, he came back home [to Detroit] and bought one. So, Nick. Thank you.[57]

The use of this kind of technology is not ubiquitous within dip hop performance, nor is it limited to this musical style; however, it represents new technologies and experimentations that are being explored to facilitate intersensory experiences.

Through their expression of lyrics, performers embody and "sound" visual musical elements that expand musical dimension. When rapping in sign language, musical contour becomes manifested within a spatial dimension that moves beyond vertical and horizontal trajectories.[58] The placement of signs, the pace of signing, and features of the movement, along with other visual cues, shape musical dynamics, accent, and tone. When asked about the use of dynamics within conversational communication, Marsh commented that

> [A] form of whisper is when you sign really small. […] As for shouting. Sign way big! When I get excited. During a lecture. Or. A conversation. I really

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56 Myles de Bastion, "D-PAN Interview: Myles de Bastion- Musician." YouTube, dpanvideos, uploaded on 4 March 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brTeroQTRwc.

57 Sean Forbes, Live virtual performance recorded by the author, February 20, 2021.

58 Anabel Maler has analyzed this in her own work on sign language song translations; see Maler, "Songs for Hands: Analyzing Interactions of Sign Language and Music," *Music Theory* Online 19, no.1 (2013) and "Musical Expression Among Deaf and Hearing Song Signers," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, 73–91. This section focuses on the space used by dip hop artists, based on ethnographic research and accounts from its practitioners, and, as such, does not provide a musical analysis of dip hop performances but rather explores a musical epistemology through this research.

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> sign a lot bigger, take up more space. More extreme facial expressions. Lots more. Moving around. Just claiming a bigger space. So that's shouting.[59]

When applied to performance contexts, rappers are able to play with these dynamics, along with other characteristics that shape the "sounding" of the signs. Prinz-D notes the difference of rapping versus conversing in sign language, explaining,

> Rapping in sign language is so much different to speaking in sign language. [...] it [singing] is much easier to rehearse because, with rap, I rap a little faster because the pace of the lyrics [is] much faster. The instrumental, the beat, is also as fast.[60]

Prinz-D describes often simplifying his signs in order to be able to rap at a faster speed. He does this through a process of recording himself practicing a song and then going back and cutting material until the flow is just right. He also describes how he works with the space on stage and alters his signing in performance contexts, stating,

> I use the stage to my advantage. I like to be closer to the audience to be able to showcase my acting skills [...] I'm theatrical and I want people to draw attention towards my signs and my emotions. In the softer moments, I'm signing in smaller spaces closer to my body [...] A lot of times people know I'm doing an emotional song when I start to look down and my head is looking at the signs and they're much closer to my body towards my chest. I get closer to the audience but I slow down the ASL so people can understand it better because it is confined to a small space on my chest.[61]

Here, Prinz-D points out characteristics of his own performance style based on his affinity for acting but also calls attention to how his body positioning, sign placement, and size of movement musically conveys the mood of a song. He uses larger signs on his choruses to signal group "singing" or participation. While each rapper fashions their own style and performance techniques, Prinz-D's account demonstrates that the use of sign language, which is foundational to dip hop performances, conveys visual elements that are likewise integral to the music.

Since hip hop is a rhythmically driven style of music, rhythm plays a fundamental role within dip hop music and is manifested in different ways within the context of performance. When rapping in sign language, artists embody rhythm through the duration and movement of signs while emphasizing an underlying rhythmic beat with their bodies. As Prinz-D explains,

59 Shannon Dean Marsh, Facebook message to the author, February 5, 2020.
60 Darius McCall, M4a audio correspondence with the author, April 6, 2020.
61 Darius McCall, M4a audio correspondence with the author, April 6, 2020.

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> a lot of times with beats, I would try to sign towards the beat—sign towards the line. […] My signs would match that rhythm. Also, I would just shake my body, just like "uh, uh, uh." I would just snap my shoulders side to side. […] So just imagine, if you can just visualize, you can actually see me shuffle, almost doing like a Harlem shake. […] [On certain beats] you can actually kind of visualize my shoulders and head doing a circle motion and my signs go that way too.[62]

Here, Prinz-D demonstrates sounding the rhythm with his body, as it is directly related to the movement of his signing. Cognitive neuroscientist Frank Russo describes a beat as "a pattern of *perceptual* accents that occur at equally spaced time intervals across a rhythmic sequence" noting that "by invoking the notion of a perceptual accent, the beat is ultimately a psychological construct."[63] He explains further, stating,

> There are several reasons for considering the beat in this manner. First, the perceptual accents need not be physically prominent (i.e., louder or longer). Second, the beats of a rhythm do not always coincide with events of a rhythm. Third, the feeling of the beat can persist even after the music stops.[64]

In this regard, the beat embodied by Prinz-D visually "sounds," and continues to persist even if it is not always visible, for instance in moments when he stops rapping or if his body is paused or executing other rhythms. This process of neural entrainment is also realized through other visual, tactile, and aural patterns within dip hop performance that activate multi-sensory experiences of rhythm not associated with linguistic structures. De Bastion comments, "I have experimented with changing sound into light! I connect the sound intensity with the color of light. The human brain is exceptionally good at pattern recognition."[65] As noted by de Bastion's statement, cross-modal sensory experiences associated through patterns are not restricted to rhythmic elements but can apply to melodic ones as well.

Dip hop performances can also include other visual and tactile components that contribute to expanding sensory experiences of music while broadening musical arrangement and structure. Some rappers use video screens to project their lyrics, adding another musical aspect to their performance that visually illustrates both rhythmic and melodic elements. The text on the screen strengthens the visual experience of music through variations in movement,

62 Darius McCall, M4a audio correspondence with the author, April 6, 2020.

63 Frank A. Russo, "Music Beyond Sound: Weighing the Contributions of Touch, Sight, and Balance," *Acoustical Society of America* 16, no. 1 (2020): 39.

64 Russo, "Music Beyond Sound," 39.

65 De Bastion, "D-Pan Interview."

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illustration, size, and placement. For example, musical accents can be conveyed through different colors of words that emphasize or isolate a section of a word or phrase. Word painting can be employed visually through placement manipulation or color signification. Dynamics can also be expressed through alterations in font size. Adrian Mangiardi, who has directed music videos for Sean Forbes as well as other rappers like Wawa, has been a pioneering artistic leader in this medium. He describes his initial experience filming and editing his first music video, "I'm Deaf" by Sean Forbes, explaining,

> At that time there were no words. It was just Sean signing with a white background. I was watching it with my cochlear implants on and then suddenly they died. I was lost. I couldn't follow the beat. So, I got in touch with Sean […] and we both thought it would be good to put the words in the video.[66]

In addition to demonstrating the ways sound is visually realized through film, the inclusion and illustration of lyrics within music videos and screens also provide linguistic access to deaf audience members who do not speak sign language or who, for instance, speak British Sign Language instead of American Sign Language, or vice versa, but share a common written language.

Although prominent components, the incorporation of sign language and video screens, if employed, are not the only ways in which rappers decentralize aural experiences and expand music to other senses. Lights can be used to express musical components and rhythmic patterns, as in de Bastion's work with CymaSpace for instance. Unless the artists travel with instruments or gear, however, the incorporation of this component is largely determined by performance venues and local production engineers. Beyond logistical challenges, some dip hop artists choose not to include lights in their performances because they either find them too distracting or feel that they detract from the primary focus. At the same time, lights remain a component used by some rappers in their performances and/or a feature of performance venues. In addition, the incorporation of live instruments can also provide another visual layer. For example, Jake Bass, Sean Forbes's producer, collaborator, and band member, is often seen playing the keytar within live performances since it produces a more visual experience of the patterns of his movements, which would ordinarily be obscured if he was playing an electric piano.

While these techniques emphasize visualizations of rhythm and melody, tactile components also contribute toward enhancing alternative experiences

66 Adrean Mangiardi, "D-Pan Interview: Adrean Mangiardi—Video Director." YouTube, dpanvideos, uploaded on 7 February 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hYhceJGM6hc.

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Figure 2: Mark Levin (left), Sean Forbes (middle), and Jake Bass (right), video screens and keytar at Performance in Pittsburgh, 2014, digital image, Pittsburgh, PA. Photo: Katelyn Best.

of music. Vibrations of heavy rhythmic bass patterns function as a significant tactile component within dip hop performances. As Russo explains, "Cities around the world host Deaf raves—giant parties where dancers feel the music through powerful subwoofers and bass shakers connected to floorboards."[67] Deaf Rave, an organization founded in England by Troi "DJ Chinaman" Lee, which includes rappers Kevin "Signkid" Walker and Matthew "MC Geezer" Taylor, has used experimental tactile audio technology, produced by Subpac, that is designed to heighten the sensitivity of low bass frequencies through wearable packs. Not Impossible Labs is another business that has produced similar technology for artists' use in the US. In addition to these experimental technologies, tactile interfaces and other vibrotactile stimuli have also been incorporated or provided by some rappers within the context of dip hop performances. According to Loeffler,

> Deaf people do take advantage of architectural surroundings to enhance tactile communication and to embody materials to fit Deaf bodies and needs. […] Deaf people, likewise, have applied architectural materials and

67 Russo, "Music Beyond Sound," 37.

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> objects to enhance their appreciation for music. Examples include using balloons [...] and sitting on top of speakers at concerts.[68]

When Marko “Signmark” Vuoriheimo, a Finnish based rapper, performed in Florida during his 2012 US tour, balloons were provided to contribute to a multi-sensory experience. Some dip hop artists have also traveled with subwoofers and vibrating floors that further enhance tactile musical components.

While technical production components such as lights, screens, visual projections, and subwoofers are not limited to dip hop concerts or used by all practitioners of this style, these performance settings draw attention to elements that redefine what is musical. Within this context, rappers heighten musical experiences that decentralize aural components, subsequently subverting hearing-centric constructions of music that have restricted what music is and can be within Deaf culture. Although musical perception varies from person to person, audiences within dip hop performances become immersed in a performance space where music, culturally defined, is enhanced, Deaf aesthetics are prioritized, and musical elements can be experienced across sensory domains, subsequently, providing a more inclusive performance experience.

Figure 3: Signmark (left), Brandon Bauer (middle), and DJ Weirdness (right), audience member waves balloon at performance in Lake Mary, FL, 2012, digital image, Lake Mary, FL. Photo: Katelyn Best.

68 Loeffler, “Deaf Music,” 451.

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Representing and Re-presenting

> "My music is very emotional. It's insightful. It's story based, and it's based off of my experiences as a deaf person growing up."
> *Prinz-D, rapper, actor, and former member of the Helix Boyz*[69]

Using hip hop as a foundation, deaf rappers have developed a musical style that provides an inclusive performance experience that represents music from a Deaf perspective. Through performance presence, lyrical content, and word play, dip hop artists create a stage in which to reposition deafness on their own terms and break down stereotypes proliferated by an etic perspective.

As Wawa observes,

> We're coming to a point where people are having a hard time believing that we are deaf or hard of hearing cause some of these folks think, "You're not supposed to be able to talk, you're not supposed to even be able to hear the music, how is this?" So, this is our teaching moment, our educating moment.[70]

Within the context of dip hop performance, Deaf rappers negotiate attitudes and misrepresentations through their own voice while expressing their individual and collective identity. Through their music, dip hop artists reclaim their Deaf identity, address discrimination and oppression based on deafness, and raise awareness to the inherent value of Deaf ways of being. This can be observed within the song titles alone, for instance, "We No Hear" by Wawa, "Listen with Your Eyes" by Signkid, "I'm Deaf" by Sean Forbes, "Diamanthände" (Diamond Hands) by DKN, "Deaf Man Dem in the Deafhood" by MC Geezer, "Our Life" by Signmark, and "Story Ya Ma Champion" by Lal Daggy. As Wawa noted,

> Sean Forbes talks about Deaf culture in his work. Signmark was the heaviest person to really talk about Deaf culture in his work. […] I'm more of a storyteller but I have a punch line that can draw you in. The kind of thing where people are like "whoa."[71]

Together through their work and the expressive techniques they each individually employ, dip hop artists create a space within mainstream society to educate and raise awareness while empowering other d/Deaf people through their example. Commenting on his music, Prinz-D notes,

> It [my music] appeals to other deaf and hard of hearing audience members, especially the ones who don't know ASL because they can relate to when

69 Darius McCall, email correspondence with the author, April 6, 2020.
70 Warren Snipe, Skype interview with the author, August 22, 2013.
71 Warren Snipe, Skype interview with the author, August 22, 2013.

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> parents neglected them because "Oh, they're deaf. Oh, he can't hear, She can't do this. Oh, I'll just have her sit where she is or stay where he is and we'll take care of it." They feel like they have to depend on people. People have told them "No" or they can't do this or do that because they're deaf. I have to show, not show, but I have to prove it. […] I can do this.[72]

Through representation, Prinz-D and other dip hop artists subvert ideological constructions of deafness that have historically undermined their identities and stigmatized their bodies while paving the way for other Deaf voices. While not every rapper or every song composed and performed by Deaf artists focuses on Deaf identity, their performance counters ideological Othering and exclusion as they present experiences and perspectives that extend across the deaf and hearing divide.

Drawing from the political and subversive nature of socially conscious hip hop, dip hop artists empower a Deaf musical identity through self-representation while claiming a musical space that is at once representative of individual as well as cultural identity. Deaf activist Connell Crooms addresses the intersectionality of Deaf identity, calling attention to the experiences of Black-Deaf rappers, remarking,

> Hip hop is the story of struggle and triumph in black culture, the documentation of The Black Experience. For Black-Deaf individuals we experience just as much racism and marginalization, deaf hip hop allows us the creative space to express those grievances. We will see more of our own stories being told and the impact that we can have in building democracy by advocating language accessibility and equity in education and the workplace. That's just one issue that both white and black deaf people share in common.[73]

In the hip hop spirit of "keepin' it real," deaf rappers have employed storytelling techniques that represent a Deaf way of life while also illustrating intersectionality. Lyrics, in this regard, provide a platform to creatively address and tackle challenges shared collectively by the Deaf community as well as those experienced at the intersections of individual identity through a style of hip hop that is, in itself, a manifestation of intersectional expression. Within this context, rappers express a voice shaped by culture, race, ethnicity, and class through their own language within a space where it can be amplified. In this way, they represent their Deaf cultural identity and experience of deafness while contributing to a broader representation of the Deaf community. In addition to this, through the musical expression of their own experiences, rappers are able

72 Darius McCall, M4a audio correspondence with the author, April 6, 2020.
73 Connell Crooms, email correspondence with the author, February 21, 2020.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839456576-010 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - [cc] BY-NC

to speak to other people's experiences, creating a space in which their voices are not only recognized but shared. As Prinz-D explains,

> I'll never forget this. I was doing one of my early songs, and there was this one fan. And, the fan was just right by the stage lip syncing every single word of the song—and just knew it from front to back—and came up to me and said "Dude, I really relate to that, your music, because everything that you wrote, you've written about, pretty much happened in my life." And, I believe that's the reason why I wrote music, because there's somebody out there that feel[s] the way I felt growing up. And, if I'm able to touch people and make them feel like someone thinks that they matter too [...]. To be honest, that's the most beautiful thing ever in the world.[74]

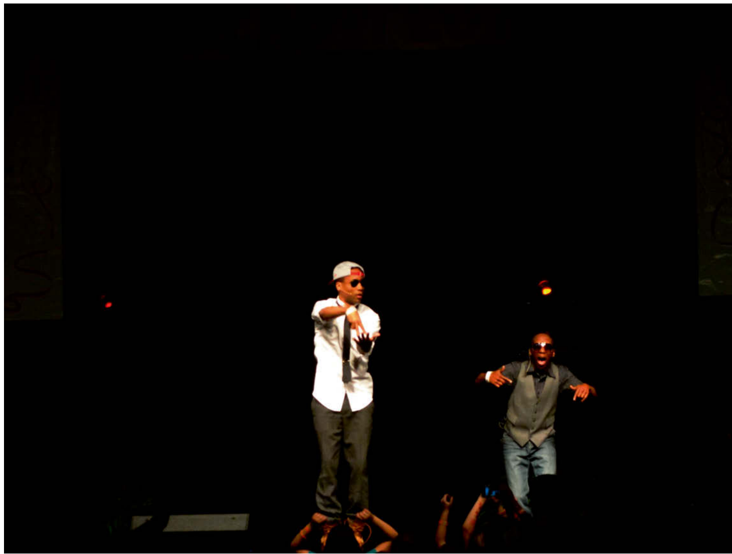

Figure 4: Prinz-D (left) and Sho'Roc (right), Signing to "Stand Up" at the Mississippi Deaf Festival, 2014, digital image, Jackson, MS. Photo: Katelyn Best.

Through dip hop performance, rappers not only cultivate cultural recognition and respect, but also decolonize hegemonic control of music in Deaf culture by performatively re-presenting "music" and "deafness" through the use of musical structures shaped by Deaf experiences of sound. While hearing-centric constructions of music have situated deafness as an obstacle limiting musical access, dip hop artists have demonstrated how deafness plays an integral role in shaping musical expression through their use of hip hop.

74 Darius McCall, M4a audio correspondence with the author, April 6, 2020.

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Within this context, they produce and perform music on their own terms, fostering new ways of musicking—Deaf ways of musicking that expand beyond normative practices so heavily embedded and naturalized within mainstream society. In this regard, dip hop artists are able to subvert power structures that have dominated and limited music in Deaf culture. Through their performance, rappers disrupt singular notions of music, destabilizing musical structure and "know-how" produced by educative forces and embedded within society. While tedious, those that compose and perform bi-lingually and bi-musically foster a musicultural space that is accessible to both deaf and hearing audiences, which generates a wider reach for their music and a more inclusive setting for both d/Deaf and hearing audiences. As Warren Churchill points out when discussing one of Signmark's performances,

> One need not be proficient in ASL to engage with the music; nor do DHH individuals need any special accommodations to experience it [...]. Rather, it suggests something more communal and celebratory. Marko [Signmark], his band mate, and the audience join together in shared *aural* and *visual* gestures of musicking that affirm Deaf cultural pride.[75]

Figure 5: Wawa (front) and audience members, teaching audience members at the Kentucky DeaFestival, 2014, digital image, Louisville, KY. Photo: Katelyn Best.

75 Warren Churchill. "Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Musicians: Crafting a Narrative Strategy." *Research Studies in Music Education* 37, no. 1 (2015): 31.

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Within this setting, Deaf culture is brought to the forefront and hearing audience members become immersed in an environment where they are in need of access and oral interpretation, illuminating the importance of linguistic access and equality that is not always represented within hearing musicking spaces. This positioning reinforces cultural ownership of the musical space produced by Deaf rappers, empowering Deaf authority. As Clark and Koster remark, "Globally, hip hop artists have been important agents for social change, directly impacting shifts in behavior and attitudes toward social institutions and traditions." While the content of dip hop music varies and some songs are more socially oriented than others, dip hop artists ultimately invite their audience to become immersed in their world, acting as agents of social change while fostering inclusion and recognition of music based on Deaf aesthetics.

Little Victories

"I love what I do. I love the community that I grew up in.
And, I love the way that I experience music.
Sean Forbes, Rapper and Co-founder of D-Pan (Deaf Professional Artist Network)[76]

Just a week after its release, on February 28, 2020, Sean Forbes's EP, *Little Victories*, ranked number one in the hip hop genre on iTunes and number one for all categories on Amazon Music, making him the first Deaf musician to make it to the Billboard 200 chart. Coming in at ninety-three for top album sales, Forbes had the support of the Deaf community who rallied behind him to help him achieve this historic goal. As Forbes commented in an interview with the Fox affiliate in Detroit, "The only reason why I'm number one on the charts right now is the Deaf community. Without the Deaf community that would not be possible."[77] From fans to famous icons within and outside of the Deaf community, people shared videos and posts promoting the release of Forbes's album in endeavors to help him achieve recognition within the music industry, in a heightened capacity, for his work as a deaf musician. While the album was released in mp3 format, this medium functions as a way to raise awareness of music in Deaf culture within mainstream popular culture, promoting the work of dip hop artists by extension. This achievement signifies a considerable victory for the Deaf community and demonstrates their combined

76 Forbes, February 20, 2021.

77 Fox 2 Detroit, "Deaf Detroit Area Rapper Sean Forbes Makes History, Shoots up the Charts," 29 February 2020, https://www.fox2detroit.com/news/deaf-detroit-area-rapper-sean-forbes-makes-history-shoots-up-the-charts.

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power to break down institutional barriers, self-represent, promote inclusion, and, ultimately, amplify Deaf voices.

In the epigraph that opened this chapter, Crooms stated, "To build democracy is to include the least amongst us and society at large does a poor job of bringing others to the table, so we'll have to bring our own chairs and build a bigger table."[78] Together, dip hop artists are building a bigger table as they break down ideological divisions between "music" and "deafness" that have and continue to suppress experiences of musicking in Deaf culture. With performance as a platform, dip hop artists raise cultural awareness and expand the hegemonic limits of what music is and can be. As Sean Forbes's uncle once told him "you need to create your own path, create your own world. We have Eminem, we have Kid Rock [...]. Do something different."[79] In following a different path, dip hop artists have explored music based on culturally relative terms. Even though music has historically been considered by members of both hearing and Deaf communities as a cultural product of a hearing society, Deaf artists are finding more ways to acquire musical meaning based on Deaf aesthetics. Brought together through their unconventional experience of sound shaped by shared cultural aesthetics, dip hop artists as well as other musicians within the Deaf community continue to push conventional musical boundaries. Through their work, they represent music in Deaf culture as they re-present it through new forms of musicking.

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78 Connell Crooms, email correspondence with the author, February 21, 2020.
79 Sean Forbes, interview with the author, March 6, 2014.

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