

Hip-Hop Is More than Music

A Response to Hein and Blackman

Puya Bagheri in conversation with Linus Eusterbrock

Abstract *Puya Bagheri is a graffiti artist as well as the founder and leader of Outline e.V., an association for urban youth culture located in the Chorweiler district of Cologne (www.instagram.com/outline_ev/). The association offers open creative workshops in graffiti and rap, in addition to Hip-Hop based arts education projects where young people engage with their lives and their neighborhood—which has long been portrayed in the media as a tough neighborhood, but whose cultural diversity, as Bagheri points out, is a valuable resource. Bagheri himself grew up in Chorweiler after fleeing Iran with his parents and founded Outline e.V. in 2014.*

The interview was conducted by Linus Eusterbrock. It took place in December 2023 at the association's premises in Chorweiler. While we talk in the studio, about ten young people aged twelve to eighteen are working on their drawings in the open writing workshop next door. Rap and Afrobeat music are playing.

Linus Eusterbrock (LE): We've talked a lot about it, but could you briefly summarize for the interview: What do you do here at Outline, and what distinguishes your work?

Puya Bagheri (PB): Outline is an association for urban youth culture. Our main focus here is on graffiti, so writing, as well as rap. We have a studio here—we do rap production, lyric writing, etc. But we also do a lot of cross-over stuff, for example with photography. All of it, though, is clearly embedded within Hip-Hop culture. And one thing that really matters to us: Hip-Hop culture means creating. You should be the one painting, rapping. That's why we don't have participation fees or sign-up lists or anything like that. What matters is whether you create. And: we are not a youth center, we are not a school, but precisely something in between. You can come in, and I want you to learn something.

Sure, it's fine to hang out, do a bit of trash-talk, a bit of ciphering, that's all okay, it's all part of our culture. But in the end, everyone should leave with something, knowing they've created something, they've made their drawing, recorded their rap. But of course, it's also about the community.

LE: One issue that many educators grapple with when working with Hip-Hop are problematic lyrics. How do you deal with that?

PB: You can't forget where Hip-Hop comes from. For me, Hip-Hop is the rebel. It's showing the musical middle finger toward a majority society, and sometimes toward yourself, too ... Sometimes the kids just want to act tough, just to show off, even though they're not really tough. They paint themselves a gangster fantasy, an illusion. I don't tell them: "You can't do that," but rather: "That's not you." Being authentic, realness, is super important in Hip-Hop. And most kids are not gangsters in reality. So, as the leader and someone who has lived Hip-Hop long enough, I take it upon myself to say: What's up with you? You've painted so many fantasies, how many more? That's not authentic, that's not real. At some point, there must be a maturation process. When we make an EP, I also take the liberty to look over the lyrics again. Like a friend. As someone who is part of the scene. For me, this is part of "Each one teach one." This only works because I know what I'm talking about.

LE: Do you see ways to integrate what you're doing at Outline into a school context?

PB: It's difficult ... starting with the grading system! It's such a tool of power. I love teaching people. But I know that I can show you everything I know, and you'll still not be me, you'll make your own thing out of it. So what are the standards I should use to evaluate you? Hip-Hop means taking what came before you and making something unique out of it. Something new will always emerge. And then there's the fact that we Hip-Hop heads, when we're serious, also see ourselves as ambassadors of Hip-Hop, as guardians of the holy grail. And the guardians of the holy grail don't want everyone to join in. Hip-Hop is something special, something exclusive. We want people to come to us and ask: Can you decode this secret for me? Can you show me how to cast spells? [laughs] That's the aspiration. But of course I also want as many people as possible to understand Hip-Hop culture. And I want to convey its values. That's perhaps the most important thing, especially when you look at the mainstream

and see what has become of rap [...]. Hip-Hop has taught me a lot. Hip-Hop has made me into a person who thinks deeply and critically. Perhaps the most important thing is passing on values, knowledge [...]. Hip-Hop is more than rap, than breakdance, than painting a tag. I visit a lot of schools. And they call Puya to put on a cool show, then I'm the clown, the entertainer [...], but Hip-Hop is so much more. If you want Hip-Hop in schools, then you have to pay tribute to Hip-Hop. Hip-Hop is more than music: of course, I understand if you, from your perspective as a music educator, say you're primarily interested in Hip-Hop music. But hey, the music requires knowledge. How much knowledge do you have? Why do you have the right to rap just now, you crazy fool? [laughs] To put it quite harshly [...]

LE: In our book, there's a text by Ethan Hein and Toni Blackman, where they write that it's crucial for educational work with Hip-Hop that educators themselves are or become actively involved in the artistic scene, in performing and creating themselves. What's your view on this, what experiences have you had?

PB: I absolutely agree. The only thing that counts in Hip-Hop is creating, doing. Walk the walk, talk the talk. You can talk as much as you want, but if you can't deliver, if you can't perform, there's no point [...]

LE: Hein and Blackman also write that Hip-Hop practice offers the opportunity to develop a critical stance towards racism, sexism, and exploitation, and to empower young people who have experienced discrimination. What's your take on this? And could this also be something that works in schools?

PB: It depends on how often Hip-Hop classes are held. How much can Hip-Hop take hold within the school? If we only have two forty-five-minute sessions, I don't know where there would be room to talk about these important topics. So, it can definitely be done in schools, but you need time for it. This would also mean critically engaging with mainstream rap and its values. You need time for this and also the right people. When it comes to criticism of racism, when it comes to other forms of discrimination, it really depends so much on the people. I wouldn't leave it to people who have just briefly read something about it, especially because of the importance of the matter. They need to be idealists. And they need to be people who have experienced discrimination themselves. Because only then can they understand the experiences of the young people. These are very serious issues; you can't just deal with them on the side. Then

you really need the right people. It's not just like: "Hi, I'm here to teach you the notes, here they are, C-D-E-F-G ..." It's about very emotional topics. I don't want to sound presumptuous, but that's why it works so well with me and the guys at Outline. They are nice, they are friendly, but they've also messed up a lot, gone through a lot of crap, have experiences of having to flee, etc. And I have that too. I understand them. Unlike you. You are no doubt an empathetic person. But there's a difference between saying: I'm an empathetic person, and saying: I know what it's like [...]

LE: What would you say, how do schools, how does the university need to change to be able to integrate Hip-Hop into the curriculum?

PB: It depends on the willingness of professors, of educators, to accept that Hip-Hop is not just music. Otherwise, you'll stay on the surface. But I think it's good that you're even asking this question. It shows that you're not putting yourself above us just because you work at the university. When it comes to Hip-Hop in schools, the question is, of course, how ready is a music teacher—who may not come from the Hip-Hop culture—to say: it's not just about rap, about developing rhyme schemes, and maybe making some beats with Fruity Loops, but to say: Hip-Hop is more than rap. That's the challenge of Hip-Hop—and it's enormous strength, too. That's the power that lies within the culture.