

**“HipHop: Art, Commerce and Politics” - Panel Discussion at the Frankfurt City Library
October 30, 2007.**

Remarks Prof. Forman (panel)

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(Words that could not be identified are marked “???”.)

Professor Murry Forman: First of all, before I get started, my respect and love to all the Frankfurt crews ??? to see you all here and I'm honored to be on a panel with representatives of Hip-Hop in Frankfurt. I've been hearing a lot about it in the past two days and I know that thee individuals have been doing the street work for a good many years, so this is an honor and privilege. I also want to thank the US consulate here and all the really excellent people who've helped out so much in getting me here and been so kind while I'm here, so thank you so much. And I suppose I should also thank the corporate sponsors for this part of the event as well. I'm learning really quickly that a lot of hip-hop wouldn't happen if we didn't have all this range of support from different places, so my respect also for that.

I want to start maybe – I teach hip hop and have been working on hip hop in the university system for about 20 years and I'm learning that it's maybe not quite as far along now across Europe. But one of the things we always have to start with with our students: they're coming and they want to know who I think is better, and we talk about who's better, ??? or ???. And once we've had that discussion, and it usually takes about seven weeks, what we talk about then is that hip hop is a whole way of life, and I use that in all of our cultural studies concept. It involves everything. Even things insignificant and sometimes things that are not on the everyday radar. What you decide to put on in the morning, the language you use when you interact with people around you. These are the factors that really make hip hop what it is at this point. I'll leave talking about the four elements to everybody else who's a practitioner in these elements, but one of the things we can talk about is the expansion of this idea of four elements that people ??? as one in the temple of hip hop into ten or so more possible elements. Most of them have to do with some aspect of the street. Street entrepreneurial or some street style or street language. And I want to maybe also introduce the concept of getting some street knowledge, and knowledge as a facet of hip hop. We can talk about the various ways that knowledge functions in the contemporary hip hop context in the United States. On the one hand it's an important aspect to know our cultural history. To know the history of race and class and ??? of oppression in the US context and beyond, before that. So that's a lot of knowledge that I think people in hip hop have worked very hard to keep at the forefront. The other part is a different part of knowledge perhaps around musical history. Understanding where hip hop

and rap music comes from and the depth that it owns to various musical styles that come before, whether you're talking of music from the civil rights movement through the funk and disco period after which hip hop really takes shape. We can also talk about it in terms of understanding forms of cultural expression and cultural movements that expand across the arts, and increasingly this is an important part of hip hop. And I'm learning as well from my colleagues here in Frankfurt that there's collaborations across the arts all the time. And knowing what the various trajectories and evolutionary histories are of those different art forms is an important way down to understand what you're doing and how these collaborations might work. Then the last part of knowledge that maybe is more familiar is knowledge of contemporary social issues. The racial politics as politics, the actual politics of life in ???, life in American cities, life under a particular administration and government regime. And this kind of knowledge is important to make social change. You need to know the history, but you also need to have a strategic sense of what's happening right now and how it affects you on the broad. And hip hop is one of the ingenious in understanding and responding to some of these immediate political issues.

Knowledge can agitate against commercial appropriation at its best, but I wanted to just add one thing. We talk about conscious rap sometimes as being some higher, maybe more morally grounded sector of hip hop, but i want to say that hip hop has been commercial right from the beginning. And I challenge people who give ???, a prominent speaker and elder statesman of hip hop. At the parties, people are selling drinks. You know, hip hop was starting and right now, in this moment, Red Bull might cost a dollar fifty. People sold food at the parties, so there was this commercial element that was still part of it, and as DJs have mixed tapes and the like they were selling them, so they were trying to make a dollar or two. So this commercial arm can be looked at as fundamental in hip hop at its beginnings. We can also look at – from the reverse, flip the script a bit – is that conscious rappers like ??? and the Common and Mos Def and the Roots and ??? , they're commercial, right? It's not like they're operating in some place out of commercialism. They like to be paid even though they talk about pro-social positive aspects and they bring their political commentaries. Immortal Technique would never be on a major record label but you can be sure that through his mail order on-line he's selling CDs. So this commercial aspect sits alongside with conscious and knowledge factor. In a political sense, hip hop is the primary, I'd say the major expressional tool among African American and Latino youths in the US. They see the world through terms that are defined by hip hop, they express their identities, they speak and write and dance themselves into the world in a hip hop fashion. They do so in other ways as well, but hip hop is the primary way. Some people in the us have referred to hurricane Katrina and the devastation in New Orleans, which I'm sure you all saw on the television and experienced over here it he same way that many of us in the US

experienced it who weren't in New Orleans. A lot hip hopper have said this is our 9/11. for black and poor people this is the moment where we see how the nation and how the administration responds to our crisis. And as you know the response was poor. There was far more, and there are still people not living in homes, there are still people living in trailers. I believe there are still dead bodies in the houses that have not been cleared away in New Orleans. Hip hoppers are responding to these things on a daily basis. There are other issues as well. Hip hop is taking up these issues and giving voice them when the media turns its cameras to the next sensational item. When public opinion maybe shifts towards something that maybe seems more pressing at the moment. Hip hop is keeping the focus on some of these crises that affect black people, Latino people, poor people., most directly. And this is one of the services they provide not just for other people in hip hop but for all of us, not just in America, but for all of us around the world and i know that the hip hoppers are doing it here in Frankfurt, I'm learning that, they're doing it in London, they're doing it in Buenos Aires, in Caracas, in Sydney, Australia, in every country around the world, except maybe china. I'm, not sure if they're doing it in china. So this is one of the things that we can look at and point to for hip hop.

Just really quickly the last thing: there are political organizations that are defined in and about hip hop solely. One comes from the top down, formed by Russell Simmons and other major music executives, ??? on the executive board, called the Hip Hop Summit Action Network. ??? politicians to make social changes, to make policy and political changes, and they've been very effective. They have the money, they have the influence and they have the connections. When they call, governors and senators pick up the phone and they respond. From the bottom down we have the Hip Hop Political Convention. And this is organized across the country by political activist community workers who are hip hoppers. Some of them have been in and out of the prison in the justice system. Who better to talk about justice than a hip hopper who has been in prison and knows the deal, right? So this kind of political forces from the bottom., from the top, really shows that hip hop is more than, you know, light entertainment. It's more than you hear on the radio stations. It's more than 50 cent posturing and styling on stage. It's about so much more on live. So I think I'll leave the discussion and the panel to the four who are ???. Please. [applause]