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BOOK REVIEWS

***BUILD: THE POWER OF HIP HOP DIPLOMACY IN A DIVIDED WORLD,*
MARK KATZ (2019)**

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In a 2014 article in *The Atlantic* magazine, Hisham Aidi offers a critical analysis of US cultural diplomacy, focussing on post-9/11 US State Department initiatives that explicitly mobilized hip hop arts and culture as a ‘tool’ to engage Muslim youth. He asks, ‘Just how did rap come to be seen by European and American governments as both a radicalizing genre and a tool of public diplomacy and de-radicalization?’ (Aidi 2014). The article ends with a reference to the launch of *Next Level*, the latest iteration of US cultural diplomacy efforts to tap the creative talents of hip hop artists.¹

Build: The Power of Hip Hop Diplomacy in a Divided World picks up where Aidi’s essay ends, detailing the formation and evolution of Next Level. Next Level is:

an international program that sends teams of US hip hop artists to work with youth in underserved communities around the world, and subsequently brings representatives [...] to the United States for artistic and professional training. It is a form of people-to-people diplomacy, where private citizens of different nations come together to seek common ground and forge mutual understanding.

(3)

As programme founder and the organization’s director from 2013 to 2018, Katz is superbly positioned to tell the story of how Next Level was conceived, developed and executed, bringing his administrative insights to bear on the discussion of the programme’s triumphs and stumbles.

1. Aidi takes up the issue of US cultural diplomacy, music, hip hop and Islam in an earlier essay as well; see Aidi (2011). For further analysis of hip hop diplomacy that also explicitly addresses Next Level, see Salois (2015).

2. Full disclosure: I have also participated in several hip hop-oriented education and cultural programmes underwritten by the US State Department. Sponsored by the US embassy in Berlin (in 2007 and 2009), speaking events were organized in Germany, Czech Republic, Italy and France. In 2019, I participated in a hip hop cultural exchange programme in Moscow, organized by the Russian non-profit agency Da Exit NGO and the US Forum for Cultural Engagement with funding from the US State Department.

Katz opens with a deep dive into the history of US cultural diplomacy initiatives, beginning with the nation's 'Good Neighbor Policy' (introduced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his 1933 inaugural speech) which was, simultaneously, a means of fostering productive and respectful international relations with Central and South American countries; a strategy to thwart or otherwise stall potential incursion of European fascist influence in the Americas and a soft-power mechanism through which to establish paths of trade and exchange and open new markets.

This historical perspective is an essential component of the book, situating Next Level's hip hop diplomacy along a continuum of well-intentioned but often fraught governmental initiatives. According to Katz, the history of US cultural diplomacy since the 1930s has largely been shaped by a kind of nationalist resistance to what he identifies as three main threats: fascism in the 1930s–40s, communism in the 1950s–80s and terrorism since roughly the 1980s. Katz identifies some of the political contradictions that complicate Next Level's progress, at least in its interactions with the US State Department, yet he also explores the ways in which the programme – and hip hop – is well suited to the nation's overarching diplomatic strategies and the circulation of transnational good will.² The traditional dictum of the Universal Zulu Nation (UZN) – peace, love, unity and having fun – seems ready-made for hip hop diplomacy initiatives; the original UZN mission shared common values with Next Level, including a desire to build bonds that might mitigate sociopolitical differences, reducing misunderstandings, mistrust and outright antagonism.

Over the decades, numerous cultural programmes have been executed by a variety of government departments and non-governmental agencies, jostling for budgetary resources with other bureaucratic divisions and, in a competitive and often partisan political environment, contending with the bile and ill-will of 'haters'. These factors were clearly evident at Next Level's founding. Katz maintains that the complexities of hip hop can make it a risky choice for the State Department as well as for its foreign counterparts, each of which harbour a degree of ignorance about hip hop, passing judgement according to negative stigma and pernicious stereotypes. He describes the arguments against public funding for programmes including Next Level, suggesting that scepticism can – and did – arise in the United States as well as in foreign host nations as Next Level evolved. In some instances, hip hop's creative and artistic *elements* were simply deemed as lacking sufficient artistic merit and that hip hop is unworthy of being touted around the world (a stance that mirrors conservative ire against the famous 1950s State Department 'Jazz Ambassadors' programme that featured artists like Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong and Count Basie).

Katz introduces participants from the United States and around the world working in various administrative contexts. It is appropriate that Katz pays such close attention to the different entities and individuals involved in developing, planning and executing Next Level programmes. As he explains, there are myriad moving parts in any bureaucracy and this is only exacerbated when multiple players come together, including representatives from governments (bureaucrats and elected politicians), small non-profit agencies and larger NGOs, universities, and hip hop crews and artists in 'six continents and more than two dozen countries'. While one expects Katz to celebrate the artist-ambassadors of the programme and the community organizers and activists on the ground in the host countries, he also applauds the efforts of government administrative officials (some of whom were clearly hip hop savvy, and some who were considerably less so) who, at crucial junctures, supported and

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aided Next Level. In a manner reminiscent of the 'shout-out', he specifically names many individuals involved in 'building' the programme, applauding their commitment to the programme's success.

The verb 'build' is altogether apt for both hip hop and bureaucratic agencies, as the co-creative efforts of Next Level bring together people from an impressively broad cultural spectrum to produce something new, ideally of an elevated and valuable nature. Katz reveals the complex and extensive ground-work performed among Next Level teams in order to facilitate encounters among US artist-educators and those running youth centres, hip hop music and dance studios, and working in media outlets in the host countries. Katz also offers 'cypher' as a metaphor for how hip hop diplomacy works, with all stakeholders and participants entering the circle to 'show and prove', presenting their best abilities, skills, talents and experience in their own ways. Katz does not ignore the fact that there is considerable room for the display of artistry among government and agency bureaucrats as well, recognizing that their expertise is every bit as skilful as the best b-boy power moves and vital to Next Level's success.

With so many individuals and agencies involved in Next Level, each bringing their own sense of priority and urgency to the mix, the collaborative character of the programme is central to the narrative. Katz outlines some of the barriers and outright conflicts that arose as Next Level participants interacted across policy and language differences, cultural values and ideologies and other differentiating forces such as religion, gender and age (not to mention the practical issues of acquiring proper visas and passports, negotiating travel itineraries and securing viable accommodations, etc.). As Katz recounts, this is the real work of any cultural diplomacy initiative and he outlines in considerable detail how Next Level navigated the accumulated variables, sometimes with grace and finesse and a considerable degree of luck but sometimes with clumsy, error-filled lurches, prone to misstarts and miscommunication requiring nimble adjustment.

The book introduces the conceptual theme 'zone of ambiguity', with Katz noting, 'Hip hop diplomacy, and US cultural diplomacy in general, exists within a persistent zone of ambiguity, a state in which palpable, inescapable tensions and uncertainties hang over one's every action' (83). For the Next Level teams, part of the learning process involves figuring out how to navigate ambiguities through artistic collaboration. This is not a one-time matter either as dilemmas arise each time Next Level relocates and initiates new programmes in different countries or communities.

As this suggests, Katz does not solely paint an idealistic picture of Next Level's processes but, rather, directly addresses the bumps along the path of creating and sustaining Next Level, identifying successes *and* failures in order to portray how hip hop diplomacy works *and* does not work. For instance, he discusses the inherent suspicions among many of the artists who joined the programme, drawing on interviews with artist participants from the United States and host nations. They were at times understandably leery of signing on with a programme sponsored by the US government and that was, thus, explicitly and implicitly implicated in the diffusion of American policies and values and tainted by the disconcerting image of an aggressive rogue state. Artists commonly expressed a concern that they might be deployed as pawns, and Katz validates some of their deeper doubts by analysing the discourse among government leaders and spokespeople who regard hip hop diplomacy in purely instrumental or utilitarian terms.

3. Fabian defines 'the denial of coevalness' as a rejection of shared time and an imposition of what he calls 'allochronism', which is the placing of other cultures in another time, emphasizing differences and separation within a temporal setting. In this sense, reflecting power discrepancies common in colonial and global neo-liberal relations, 'their' present (the time of the cultural other) is 'our' past.

Katz explores the artists' diverse sentiments, probing their apprehensions and the ensuing debates that arose about personal exploitation and hip hop's cultural appropriation (what Katz refers to as 'misrepresentation and cooptation' or as 'complicity'), noting that in the end most of the artists communicated a sense of pride, honour and certitude that their engagement in hip hop cultural diplomacy was a good and important decision, not just for them personally, but for the betterment of hip hop culture more widely. The artists understood that it was not their role to be either explainers of American foreign policy or apologists for American misadventures. They are, first and foremost, expert practitioners and aficionados for whom hip hop is a way of life. For some, involvement with Next Level is described as a culmination of sorts, simultaneously signalling their status as 'masters' of their art forms/elements and their status as elder statesmen/women within a global hip hop diaspora (or what was in a previous era commonly termed 'the hip hop nation').

As with prior cultural diplomacy programmes, Next Level must also contend with the powerful global dissemination of US media and culture, including the content promoted by transnational entertainment conglomerates. A fascinating story of self-reflection and adjustment emerges around how Next Level advances the *culture* of hip hop, which is to say hip hop's prosocial or 'conscious' dimension and the ideals associated with the fundamental 'fifth element' of knowledge, while accounting for the desires and expectations of international programme participants and audiences, many of whom are steeped in globally dispersed commercial representations replete with 'bling' and imagery of capitalist accumulation. As Katz painstakingly explains, the programme involves plenty of listening and an open mind in order to meet their international collaborators on an equal footing and with a respectful demeanour. It also requires an ongoing collective ego check to ensure that the programme and its US ambassadors do not slip into a casual sense of hip hop supremacy or neocolonial dominance, potentially succumbing to what Johannes Fabian refers to as 'the denial of coevalness' or 'allochronism'³ (Fabian 1983).

The issue of hip hop, diplomacy and Islam takes up the book's last full chapter. Katz acknowledges that Next Level, like other government-funded initiatives, is situated within the State Department's objective of mitigating perceived Muslim threat, militancy and terrorism. His thinking here reflects some of the same themes raised by Aidi and others about hip hop diplomacy within Muslim communities, yet via numerous interviews with Next Level artists and organizers, he teases out the ways in which hip hop may be considered 'haram' (forbidden) or 'halal' (permissible) depending on context and point of view. He illuminates such factors as generational awareness of hip hop's possibilities and the potential for artists to maintain a strict Muslim practice while advancing positive aspects of the faith in and through hip hop's expressive forms.

Throughout *Build*, Katz is highly self-aware and self-critical, at one point stating, '[a]s I was conducting, I remember thinking, "My God, am I an imperialist in 4/4 time?" How different was I from the Western missionary who insists that the "natives" abandon or compromise their traditions' (56). In this instance, he was explaining a failure to form a quick bond between US hip hop artists and a renowned Thai musician playing a traditional instrument called a *chakhe*. Struggling to find a mutual groove, the artists were initially at a loss, but they persisted and eventually locked into something with that all-important hip hop component of *flow*. Recounting the incident, Katz notes:

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Even within a casual jam, hip hop diplomacy is unavoidably political, and consequential [...] Artists who gather to play, dance, sing, or paint are doing more than making art. And when they reach across national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries they can transform barriers into bridges – or widen the gulf that separates them.

(56–57)

Katz proves to be a thoughtful and engaging raconteur, inviting the reader to *step into a world* as he provides background context, beautifully describing settings and scenarios and the people who bring hip hop to life within them. He introduces dozens of hip hop educators, activists and artists from the United States and around the world, sending the curious reader to YouTube or other online sites in order to see and hear their artistry. The book itself functions as a furthering device, amplifying the work of Next Level and critically analysing the entire enterprise of hip hop diplomacy even as it extends the potentials of global understanding in and through a shared hip hop sensibility.

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