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Appropriate meaning:

Discursive struggle and polyphonic semiosis in Indian hip hop

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Introduction: The double sense of ‘appropriate’ in poststructuralist semiotics

This volume suggests that appropriation (*Aneignung*) is neither a process of direct mapping of the other onto the self, nor does appropriation merely construct social and physical reality for appropriators. Rather appropriation is always already imbued with subjectivity, which reconstructs and builds on existent material circulating in and across life-worlds. This chapter will further our understanding of such processes by drawing attention to the semiotic foundations of appropriations, which structure the possibilities for taking subject positions. In particular, I will address processes of appropriation by focusing on the case of polyphonic semiosis, or meaning making through a layering of multiple voices, which has been put forward in poststructuralist strands of linguistics and the social sciences.

In this chapter, I discuss how actors appropriate meaning. In order to understand appropriation of meaning, I suggest that appropriateness of meaning plays a crucial role. I argue that appropriation occurs when appropriateness is changed or rescaled. The term ‘appropriate’ thus has to be read in a double sense: as a verb (*aneignen*) and as an adjective (*geeignet*).¹ I discuss appropriations in Indian hip hop, a subcultural practice that emerged in urban centres of South Asia in the last decade. Hip hop culture in general developed in the 1970s in New York City and it has been codified by one of its founding fathers Afrika Bambaataa as consisting of five elements: graffiti writin (or spraying), breakin (or breakdancing), deejayin (or DJing), emceein (or rapping) and knowledge (CHANG 2005). Over the last 40 years hip hop has become a global phenomenon (MITCHELL 2001; ANDROUTSOPOULOS 2003; ALIM, IBRAHIM and PENNYCOOK 2009; TERKOURAFI 2010), forming what ALIM (2009) calls a Global Hip Hop Nation, in which ideas, aesthetics, forms and practices circulate across national borders and offer youth to imagine themselves as part of a cosmopolitan subculture. Based on material elicited in an eight-month ethnography in the hip hop scene in India (see SINGH, forthcoming), I analyse how actors negotiate appropriateness of meaning by rescaling (BLOMMAERT 2007) contexts of the local and contexts of the global to construct a hip hop affiliated self in the contemporary moment (see also SINGH 2016). The analysis of such rescaling of meaning

¹ In German the distinction between the verb and the adjective that I’m referring to here is marked through the use of different prefixes (*an-* and *ge-*). In English, the spelling of the verb and the adjective is the same, however, the pronunciation differs: the verb has a full vowel in the final syllable (/əˈprəʊ.pri.ɪt/), whereas the adjective has a reduced vowel in the final syllable (/əˈprəʊ.pri.ət/).

informs research on the transculturation of hip hop (PENNYCOOK 2007; ALIM, IBRAHIM and PENNYCOOK 2009).

Understanding semiosis, meaning-making in sign processes, is a key concern in socio-cultural and discourse analytical strands of linguistics. Research has demonstrated how sign users construct meaning interactively by employing semiotic resources that are brought into and are emerging from the interaction (e.g. GOFFMAN 1974; GUMPERZ 1982; BLOMMAERT 2005; CANAGARAJAH 2013). Furthermore, semiosis is increasingly analysed with help of BAKHTIN'S (1981; 1984) notion of polyphony or multivoicedness (RAMPTON 1995; GÜNTNER 1999; WORTHAM 2001; AGHA 2005; BLACKLEDGE and CREESE 2014). The polyphonic and semiotic approach that I am taking in this chapter acknowledges that meanings of signs are situated in social and cultural practices, rather than in the structure of a language system. This follows the pragmatic turn in linguistics and the linguistic turn in the social sciences, or, more generally, it follows epistemologies that are informed by what is now often called poststructuralism (for a discussion of this label, see ANGERMULLER 2015). Here, meaning is never fixed but always dependent on and negotiated through reading positions (FOWLER 1996; HAMMERSLEY 2003) of sign users, their cultural socialisation, their habitus (BOURDIEU 1977) and the archive (FOUCAULT 1972) that defines but also transgresses the boundaries of what can be meant. In the sociolinguistic, linguistic anthropological and metapragmatic strands of such poststructuralist research, which I aim to develop in this chapter, meaning is primarily analysed by theorising indexicality (SILVERSTEIN 1976; 2003; OCHS 1992; AGHA 2003; ECKERT 2008). Before turning to an empirical analysis of polyphonic semiosis in Indian hip hop, I discuss the ways in which indexicality has been theorised in such poststructuralist research.

Negotiating scalar indexicality: Appropriateness to and appropriation of context

The term 'indexicality' tries to grasp the context-dependency of signs and utterances by investigating the links between the semiotic material and its contextualisation of references in the world. For instance, to give a few classic examples: smoke is an index of a fire, footprints on a beach are an index of an animal or human having walked there, or a sign above a door with an arrow and the word 'fire exit' indexes a door that can be used in an emergency. Crucially, these signs are context-dependent. The fire-exit sign for instance will only carry its designer's intended meaning when placed exactly above the door that actually leads to the open and that people can use to be safe from a burning building. If it is placed somewhere else, or if someone removes it from above the door and puts it somewhere else, say on the floor under a table, it loses its intended meaning and, in this case, it loses its function as a meaningful (useful) sign. Thus, without an appropriate context indexes are meaningless, or their meanings have to be re-defined.

Thus indexes are signs that point to, or leave traces of, a context. A context could be a thing in the world, perhaps an object (e.g. a sign indexes a fire exit door), or a practice (e.g. a particular way of speaking indexes a particular identity). In other words, indexicality contextualises signs and this contextualisation is fundamental for people to understand the sign-user's intended meaning or desired uptake (GUMPERZ 1982; LEPAGE and TABOURET-KELLER 1985; BLOMMAERT 2005). However, signs can also be used not appropriate to context and fail

to receive desired uptake, which leads to misunderstanding and instigates a negotiation of the sign's meaning between the interactants (IBID.). When this miscommunication happens, interactants can rescale, they can re-define and re-interpret the sign's meaning and debate the legitimacy of its usage in this inappropriate context. The interactants will put forward different claims for and against its usage in this context. And even if they do this fleetingly and subtly, they engage in what I call a *discursive struggle* over the sign's meaning in this context. If one party in this negotiation is more successful, their subjectivity appropriates the meaning of the sign in this context, and makes it appropriate to this context. Or, alternatively, if this party has the power to do so, it can ban the sign from usage in this context. Such discursive struggles are common in everyday language use, even though they are often subtle (BOURDIEU 1991).

Poststructuralist epistemologies recognise that the meaning of a sign in language in use (or any other pragmatic system of signs) is never fixed and therefore interactants can never be sure how their interlocutors understand the signs they produce. Moreover, in the current phase of globalisation increased mobility and superdiversity (VERTOVEC 2007) enhance these effects of non-fixity and uncertainty of meaning (BLOMMAERT 2010; CANAGARAJAH 2013) and create what HALL (2014) calls 'hypersubjectivity'; a heightened linguistic anxiety of what it means to use globally circulating signs in the local context appropriately. BLOMMAERT (2007) thus suggests that multiple contexts are always simultaneously at work and push and pull meanings of signs into various directions. He grasps such polycentricity of meaning with the notion of scales, which he conceives of hierarchical 'orders of indexicality'. These indexicalities take on higher or lower values in a given community and construct polyphonic subject positions for interactants.

A sign readily contextualises a scale in which this sign has been used regularly or commonly. Using a sign in the context in which it is commonly used is thus appropriate and reproduces the ideological value of this sign in a given semiotic system. To conceptualise this, SILVERSTEIN (2003) theorises indexicality as being composed of two aspects: presuppositions and entailments. He describes presuppositions as "'appropriateness to' at-that-point autonomously known or contextual parameters" and entailments as "'effectiveness in' context: how contextual parameters seem to be brought into being" (p. 195). The relationship between presupposition and entailment is the following. As stated above, signs presuppose contexts in which they have been frequently and usually used, or, in BAKHTIN'S (1981: 293) phrasing, "each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life". Thus using a sign in its presupposed context is appropriate; it tastes just right. Then, signs entail contexts, they contextualise (GUMPERZ 1982), and can be used to bring into being new frames of meaning (GOFFMAN 1974). Potentially contextualisation can subvert, or appropriate, the context in which this sign has been used commonly or usually and lead to misunderstandings, negotiations and re-definitions.

SILVERSTEIN (2003) grasps such appropriations of indexical meanings algebraically. He theorises a 'basic' n -th order indexicality, which presupposes the appropriate context for its usage, and if used in this context it also reproduces, enregisters (AGHA 2003), this appropriateness. In cases in which n -th order indexicals come to be used in contexts not appropriate to their usage, a competing meaning, an $n+1$ st order indexical, might emerge. Silverstein argues that when $n+1$ st order indexicals have enough ideological force, when they spread, become uniform and gain socio-cultural prestige of some sort, i.e. when they enregister,

they come to be used alongside n -th order indexicals as connotations, or they will be used instead of them as semantic shifts.

Such semiotic processes have been documented for instance for the Brazilian terms *favela* and *favelado* (which could be translated into English as ‘slum’ and ‘slum dweller’ respectively). BEATON and WASHINGTON (in press) use online discussion forums to trace the shifting meanings of *favelado* from Silversteinian n -th to $n+1$ st indexical orders, from a referential and ‘neutral’ descriptor to a connotative and ‘loaded’ slur. The added indexical value of the $n+1$ st order leads to a reclaiming, an appropriation, of the term as a marker of in-group solidarity by the group that this slur targets. The $n+1$ st order indexical meaning creates a new context in which the sign *favelado* is being negotiated in a discursive struggle between hegemonic and anti-colonial subjectivities. In the process of appropriation an $n+2$ nd indexical order develops, which valorises the sign, and endows it with a connotation of camaraderie. A similar semiotic amelioration is also described in ROTH-GORDON’S (2009) account of the invocation of the North American ghetto in the talk of hip hop affiliated black *favela* males in Rio de Janeiro. She explores how these speakers, in everyday conversations, sample (or quote) Brazilian hip hop lyrics that display relationships between life in the Brazilian *favela* and life in the North American ghetto. This invocation of the North American ghetto indexes Black toughness and forges a symbolic connection “with what they view as the more empowered racial and political subject positions embodied by African Americans” (p. 74). These examples of semiotic appropriation demonstrate that signs index specifically valued contexts and sign users can reinterpret these values through appropriation through which they make these signs appropriate to a context that they desire to invoke. Furthermore, Roth-Gordon’s study shows that the invocation of the North-American ghetto and the appropriation of African-American Blackness by Black *favela* youth in Rio de Janeiro operates on multiple scales which link up the local with the global. I will now turn to an example of a similar kind of usage of indexical signs in the Indian hip hop scene to make visible both its appropriateness to context and its appropriation of context.

Slumgods: Multiple voices and the rescaling of meaning

During my first days in India, while I was roaming around in what would become one of my primary ethnographic field sites in South Delhi, I spotted various graffiti that gave shout outs to a crew that was referred to as ‘Slumgods’. I was at first intrigued by the use of the word ‘slum’ in hip hop related graffiti in India, and wondered if it was a local invocation of the North American ghetto, similar to the one discussed in ROTH-GORDON (2009). (For an account of the ghetto as an analytical category in the social sciences, see KELLEY 2004; WACQUANT 2013.) I was disturbed by this usage of the word ‘slum’, since I had previously worked on deconstructing the use of the concept of the ‘slum’ to refer to informal settlements in Indian megacities, and interpreted it as an anachronistic concept that served to construct a euro-centric idea of the developed occident in opposition to an underdeveloped orient (SINGH 2011; WENGOBORSKI and SINGH 2013).

However, as ethnographic time passed, I became aware that my indexical footing was entirely wrong. I met Hera, a famous hip hop activist in India, who told me the actual story

behind the name ‘Slumgods’. He also referred me to an interview he conducted with the journalist Mona Lalwani, who writes for the Indian lifestyle magazine *Platform: Creative Lifestyle*. I will cite an excerpt of Lalwani’s article here:

Bboy Akku helped name this unique collective – *SlumGods*. His response to the western word slumdog was, “main kuta nahi hoon” [I am not a dog]. From there it was flipped by LA rapper Mandeep Sethi in conversation with me, from dog to god, recounts Hera. He strongly believes, ‘the notions of “poor” and “poverty” don’t reflect the cultural richness of people who inhabit a world that may be materially poorer than others’. And so a word that doused the slums with a negative connotation, took on a whole new, cleverly inverted meaning.

(LALWANI 2012)

It is clear from this account that my search for the meaning of the word ‘Slumgods’ focused on the ‘wrong’ part of word. It focused on the first part of the word, whereas b-boy² Akku’s search for meaning focused on the second part. I was offended by the use of ‘slum’ in the graffiti I spotted, without paying much attention to the significance of ‘gods’, while Akku seemed to be offended by the use of ‘dog’ in the international blockbuster film *Slumdog Millionaire* (BOYLE 2008).

Such misreading on my part is certainly due to my own ethno-centrism as a European ethnographer operating in the east or the south. My reading hinged on my own interpretation of the anachronistic usage of the word ‘slum’, which historically referred to impoverished working class quarters in the East End of London in early Victorian times, that I saw as now travelling around the world to orientalise the inhabitants of informal settlements in the global south. In contrast, Akku’s reading seems to critique the mass-media representation of his hometown Dharavi, one of Asia’s largest informal settlements in the middle of Mumbai, where many scenes of *Slumdog Millionaire* were shot. Our interpretations thus operated on different scales. These scales are different because of our own reading positions and our different subjectivities at play in our readings.

Let us then spell out the negotiation of meaning, the discursive struggle, that occurred in my ethnographic encounter with the sign ‘Slumgods’. We can identify a number of voices that utter in this encounter. At the beginning we have me, the ethnographer, being riddled by the use of the word ‘slum’ as a self-descriptor of a hip hop crew in the graffiti I spotted. Then, we get Hera, an Indian hip hop activist, who speaks to me and points me to another communicative event, namely an interview he gave with an Indian magazine. Reading this article, I encountered a number of further voices: b-boy Akku, a local hip hop dancer from Dharavi, Mandeep Sethi, an American-Indian rapper, as well as “the western word slumdog”, which we can associate with Danny Boyle’s popular film. We could thus reconstruct this encounter in the following way:

² The terms ‘b-boy’ and ‘b-girl’ are hip hop jargon and short for ‘break-boy’ and ‘break-girl’ respectively. The terms emerged in the 1970s in New York City to refer to dancers who get down on the floor during the drum break of a song, and it now more generally refers to dancers who practice the art of b-boying and b-girling, or breakin, which in popular usage is also often called breakdancing.

- Graffiti writer: (Writes) ‘Slumgod’
 Jaspal Singh: What does ‘slum’ mean in these graffiti? Is it an anachronistic, orientalist reference to India’s informal settlements?
 Hera: No, read this article.
 Article: Danny Boyle depicts slum dwellers as dogs. B-boy Akku rejects this idea. Therefore, Mandeep Sethi flipped ‘Slumdog’ to ‘Slumgods’.

Apart from these voices, which exist ‘in reality’, namely they exist on text surfaces, as a graffiti on a wall, in my conversation with Hera, and in a magazine article, there are a number of voices that are not existent textually, but which murmur in the background (ANGERMULLER 2014). They are presupposed and entailed contextually. These voices become clearly audible if we consider in more detail Akku’s utterance “*main kuta nahi hoon*” [I’m not a dog]. Akku, at least in the description by Hera and Lalwani, ‘responded’ to another voice, whose author is named as the west. Nevertheless, the west’s utterance is not a fully formed utterance, i.e. its text surface is not fully represented in the article, where we merely get “[...] his response to the western word slumdog [...]” (LALWANI 2012). The west is only implied here through the use of the adjective ‘western’, which describes a relationship of possession, or more abstractly it specifies the cultural heritage of the author of the voice that utters ‘slumdog’. However, the text surface cannot be merely the word ‘slumdog’, since this is not a logical prompt for Akku’s response ‘I’m not a dog’. The word ‘slumdog’ must have been uttered by the west towards Akku and his fellow Dharavians in a degrading and stereotyping way, maybe, we could imagine, by pointing the finger at Akku and saying ‘slumdog’ in an offensive way. Thus we could gloss the west’s utterance as ‘you are a dog!’ This sets up Akku as the receiver of this message and he takes a legitimate turn to respond to this utterance by negating it. In order for Akku to respond ‘I am not a dog’ the west’s stereotyping is presupposed. This presupposition changes the indexical orders of the word ‘dog’ from a denotative n -th order (a four-legged mammal of the family Canidae), to a connotative $n+1$ st order (an abusive term for humans living in informal settlements).

Common media literacy, lets us associate the word ‘slumdog’ with the blockbuster *Slumdog Millionaire* directed by Danny Boyle. Boyle is thus the last nameable voice in the polyphonic play, although one could definitely find more voices involved in this, for instance orientalist voices that make the film (and the concept of ‘slumdog’) a success in the west, or the author of the book *Q&A* (SWARUP 2005) which was adapted into the film by Boyle.

To get rid of the negative meaning of the word ‘slumdog’, it becomes necessary to appropriate and rescale the word ‘dog’ (and interestingly not necessarily the word ‘slum’) and construct an $n+2$ nd order indexical. This was done by an American rapper with Indian descent, Mandeep Sethi, who visited the Indian hip hop scene in 2012. The appropriation and rescaling is accomplished through the consonantal inversion from ‘dog’ to ‘god’. This inversion results in the crew name ‘Slumgods’. The intention for this playful inversion could generally be read as charging positive value to a previously abusive $n+1$ st order indexicality, while retaining phonological and graphical similarity to this previous term. The flat rationale for this inversion would be: ‘god’ has a more positive meaning than ‘dog’, yet they sound and look similar. However, there is another level of meaning that hasn’t been mentioned in the Lalwani article cited above, and that Sethi might or might not have been aware of while coining the crew name:

‘God’ is a term of address amongst African-Americans (‘Yo God, wassup?’). It emerged in Harlem when Clarence 13X split from the Nation of Islam and their leading figures Farad Muhammad and Malcom X in 1964. 13X founded the Five Percent Nation (a.k.a. The Nation of Gods and Earths) and stated in the seventh Tenet of the Five Percent Nation “That the black man is God and his proper name is ALLAH — Arm, Leg, Leg, Arm, Head” (qtd. in JOHNSON 2006)³. The Five Percenters teach the ‘supreme mathematics’ and the ‘supreme alphabet’ that help members to re-interpret the numerical and the linguistic landscapes that surround their life-world in a way that guides them. The Five Percenters and their teachings are popular with many New York based rappers, especially the Wu-Tang Clan and Brand Nubian, who circulate the message and the concepts of the Five Percenters in their lyrics across hip hop scenes around the world (see MIYAKAWA 2005). The consonantal inversion from ‘dog’ to ‘god’ thus does not only potentially index a universal amelioration, but it also indexes a specific intertextuality to the Civil Rights Movement and African-American history.

The word ‘Slumdogs’ can thus be characterised as hybrid and transcultural. It is the result of an encounter with a concept from another culture (a western cinema representation of the orient) that the person encountering deems inappropriate in the local setting and therefore someone tinkers with it (HEBDIGE 1979) so that it becomes appropriate. Graffiti writers all over India use this sign with its new indexical order to spread the message translocally. This appropriation is inscribed in the word. The word does not fully conceal the discursive struggle that had happened over its creation, however, this struggle is not fully transparent either. The term ‘Slumdogs’ carries traces on its textual surface that partly make its appropriation visible for readers. Yet, these traces are opaque and not interpretable just from looking at the text surface, as is evident in my ‘misreading’ of the word when I encountered it for the first time in a graffiti in South Delhi. The text surface leaves a number of enunciative sources unsaturated that have to be saturated with voices (NØLKE, FLØTTUM and NØRÉN 2004). Polyphony markers, like ‘not’, saturate these sources with specific voices and subject positions of the other, which the speakers can keep at a distance and against which they can construct opposite positionalities (DUCROT 1984). Ethnographic research (which here comes in the form of my encounter with some graffiti in Delhi, my conversation with Hera, my analysis of the magazine article and my general media literacy) provides us with voices that saturate the enunciative sources.

Let us then reconstruct a polyphonic structure for the text surface ‘Slumdogs’ in a dialogue between the actors involved in the discursive struggle.

Danny Boyle:	Slumdog Millionaire.
The west:	Danny Boyle says “Slumdog Millionaire”, hence we say “you people living in the slums are dogs”.

B-boy Akku:	I am not a dog.
Mandeep Sethi:	Let’s flip it (like the Five Percenters) and say ‘Slumdogs’.
Graffiti writer:	Writes ‘Slumdogs’.
Jaspal Singh:	I want to analyse this word.

³ I thank Gabriel Dattatreyan for pointing out to me this indexicality.

We get here a dialogue between several actors that are involved in the creation of the word ‘Slumgods’. I initially had access only to the last voice, a written graffiti on a wall in Delhi. At this level the data represents a text surface that any casual linguistic landscape researcher equipped with a digital camera surveying Delhi has access to. The researcher could then travel back to the university she or he is affiliated with and analyse the text surface captured in the photograph by arguing that the concept of the ‘slum’ gets appropriated by teenagers in Indian megacities as an in-group marker of solidarity. The researcher could claim that they might do this to construct post-colonial identities.

While this is an accurate analysis and certainly also valid and reliable in linguistic landscape research, it lacks ethnographic detail. It lacks a thick description (GEERTZ 1973) of the spatio-temporal context in which this text surface occurs. My ethnographic engagement with members of the Slumgods crew, eventually provided me with another text surface, namely the Lalwani magazine article. This article brings forth two further voices who also have named authors or referents in the real world: b-boy Akku and Mandeep Sethi. I here begin to understand that what is at stake is not the word ‘slum’, but rather the word ‘dog’. Because Akku takes a definite and confident stance against the hegemonic western word ‘slumdog’, Mandeep Sethi appropriates the term and adds a playful consonantal inversion to create a hybrid compound that promises to positively valorise the term in the context of global hip hop.

Note that such an analysis does not make any efforts to reconstruct ‘what really happened,’ rather it follows the markers of polyphony that are found on the texts’ surfaces (ANGERMULLER 2014). However, while doing this kind of analysis, it is also important to keep an ethnographic eye and ear on the possibly conflicting interpretations of other participants, which can be then included as voices in the polyphonic play. The analysis discovers that the voices that lead to the coinage of the word ‘Slumgods’ are antagonistically situated against each other. They are arranged in a dialectic way – thesis, antithesis and synthesis – which we could associate with subject positions of the ‘hegemonic’ (Boyle and the west), the ‘subaltern’ (b-boy Akku) and the ‘diasporic, hybrid, transcultural’ (Mandeep Sethi).

Conclusion: Appropriation and appropriateness as a transcultural process

Appropriation is a central theme in postcolonial accounts of transculturation (e.g. ORTIZ 1947, PRATT 1992, BHABHA 1994; SPITTA 1995, WELSCH 1999). When the colonising powers of Europe took, or appropriated, land overseas, which was often complemented by genocide and the forced re-settlement and uprooting of the slave-trade, the subjugated peoples also appropriated the colonisers’ languages, religions, cultures and habits. This double appropriation has been glossed transculturation. In ORTIZ’S (1947) original formulation the term ‘transculturation’ is employed to critique the then widespread understandings in anthropology of cultural contacts as being ‘acculturations’ and ‘deculturations’. Ortiz argues that rather than just making one group acquire the other group’s culture (acculturation) and losing its own (deculturation), the cultural contact also involves ‘neoculturation’ (ORTIZ 1947: 102–103); the emergence of a hybrid culture which becomes meaningful in the struggle for identity and decolonisation. With SPITTA (1995: 2) we can thus gloss transculturation as a

“complex process of adjustment and re-creation – cultural, literary, linguistic, and personal – that allow for new, vital, and viable configurations to arise out of the clash of cultures and the violence of colonial and neo-colonial appropriations.” Although the hybrid neoculture that emerges from transculturation highlights the agency of the colonised in their struggle for decolonisation, transculturation is structured hegemonically, insofar as “subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, [yet] they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for” (PRATT 1992: 6).

Pratt’s final mention of “use” was of central concern in this chapter. A pragmatic analysis of language in use revealed that signs that circulate in the Global Hip Hop Nation (ALIM 2009) as well as in other globalised media flows are appropriated and, importantly, rescaled, in order to help speakers assume subject positions in the discursive struggle. Nevertheless, different from the employment of transculturation in the philological analysis of the colonial Americas (PRATT 1992; SPITTA 1995), hip hop’s metropolitan culture, the ‘original’ U.S. American version of hip hop, is not so much seeking to actively colonise other places around the world and export its culture, as did the empires of Portugal and Spain from the 15th to the 20th centuries (but see SINGH and DATTATREYAN, in press). Rather than being an actively construed ‘export’ of culture for domination, as was for instance Christianity or the racial economy during European colonial expansion, we can understand the various hip hop scenes around the world as actively appropriating the hip hop culture for voicing resistance and upliftment. Crucially, the ‘original’ U.S. American hip hop culture is itself transcultural, recycling and appropriating a number of Afrodiasporic, Hispanic and European musical and cultural traditions (TOOP 1991; CHANG 2005) and it is also positioned counter-hegemonically towards the mainstream culture of White America (ROSE 1994). In global hip hop cultures, this transcultural and counter-hegemonic American hip hop culture is appropriated by hip hop affiliated youth around the world, it highlights their hypersubjectivity and also enters into their own de-colonising struggles.

By negotiating the word ‘Slumdog’, which signifies a western discourse of orientalisising people in informal settlements in India (inspired by Boyle’s film), the Indian hip hop scene appropriates meaning. It tinkers with the word, so that it becomes appropriate for the usage in the context of global hip hop. The polyphonic analysis in this chapter has shown up a few of the voices that utter in this negotiation. These voices could be associated with subject positions of the hegemonic, the subaltern and the transcultural. While it is noteworthy that the tinkerer, Mandeep Sethi, inhabits a diasporic and transnational subjectivity and is perhaps therefore disposed to take such a transcultural, hybrid positionality, it is also important to recognise the circulation of the sign ‘Slumdogs’ amongst Indian hip hop youth. The graffiti that I encountered in Delhi, are just one manifestation of the expressive uptake of this sign among Indian hip hop heads. The Slumdogs crew has also garnered recognition in print and online media, they participate in b-boy and b-girl jams, release music and produce merchandise, like T-shirts, and they also run an organisation that offers ‘slum-tours’ of Dharavi for tourists, raising funds for charitable purposes. All these objects and practices presuppose and entail more voices that enter the negotiation of the sign. Therefore it seems safe to assume that a polyphonic lens on the term ‘Slumdogs’, as well as numerous other, similar terms, provides important insights into the discursive struggles that happen over globally circulating and locally appropriated meaning.

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