*From the Streets to Billboards & Diamonds from Dirt:* The Meaning of Rap Music & Culture to the Millennial Generation in America & Sierra Leone.

“Globalization is a fact of life. But I believe we have underestimated its fragility.”

— Kofi Annan

My generation is used to this kind of thing. It starts with television and the Internet, because as Americans, we grew up with both of them. As kids, my generation watched billboards become as big as buildings, we woke up to MTV in the summers, and after the footage from Somalia, we tried to ignore CNN. America calls us, among other things, Generation Y, the Millenials, or in more of an underground but fittingly cool way, the 24/7’s. If we saw footage from another continent, we saw things like the McDonald’s golden arches in places like Japan or troops and tanks in desert places. We didn’t know we were in the midst of this thing called globalization, because it was already happening.[[1]](#footnote-1) If we did ignore CNN, it was because MTV was better, more entertaining, and more resonant. While we were tucked safely in our houses, being educated in a way that was unparalleled but normal for us, something different was happening to kids in places like Sierra Leone.

For all intensive purposes, one facet of globalization—whatever that really is, whether through culture or economics or military influence—seems to stir irony and paradox together, if that’s even possible. The segment of globalization that is present in American rap music has something fascinating and even scary to offer in viewing the universal effect of it within a particular generation. According to Crothers, this effect, boldly called “cultural imperialism” (24), suggests “that the interaction of the different values, norms…will inevitably come into conflict as members of one culture are exposed to the ideas and values of other, quite different, cultures” (24). This interaction is still a new phenomenon, especially if we’re to look at America and Africa in the same subject field. A fascinating comment on this conflict between cultures can be found in a 2003 Cato Policy Report called “Globalization and Culture,” where two critics argue[[2]](#footnote-2) over the effects of globalization and the conflicts/benefits it offers. One comment, written by the more critical of the two, Benjamin Barber, pokes aim at American vs. African culture, a comment that—albeit in slightly different form—I thought of after thinking about the way Ishmael Beah uses American rap and culture in his memoir, *A Long Way Gone* as a symbol for something much bigger:

The problem is that when America meets another culture, it’s not, as you might imagine here, just two guys in the woods. It’s not an American wearin’ his Nikes and eatin’ his burgers meeting up with a Nigerian who’s singing a different kind of music, and they have a little exchange, and when it’s done the American’s a little different—a little more Nigerian—and the Nigerian’s a little different— a little more American—and we’re all the better off for it. Rather, you’ve got to imagine the American armed, sort of like the soldiers in Iraq are armed, with all of the goods and brands of modern technology, modern commerce, hard and soft power, hegemonic economic power over the globe, hegemonic military power over the globe. That’s the culture that’s meeting up with some little Third World culture that’s got some Navajo blankets or some fusion music that we’d kind of like to collect (Barber 9-10).

If this statement were any more painfully truthful, Tyler Cowan—the other debater—would probably have said more about it. Instead, I found myself innately skimming his commentary after Barber’s, because he starts going into the politics of globalization and the practical benefits they give to countries. Blah. As Barber hints, however, there seems to be something much deeper going on with how two seemingly opposite cultures are impacted by the scary, giant-like American flag culture that permeates across the ocean. Like the conflicted argument between Barber and Cowan, there seems to be two distinct yet almost-bleeding-over tiers of American influence on Africa. The bigger is the practical stuff like military influence[[3]](#footnote-3), politics, etc. The smaller and more interesting one involves things like popular culture, music, or those T-shirts they make for the Super Bowl that go to African children because they have the losing team on them. If almost humorously ironic and paradoxically poignant are the phrases that come to mind when thinking of how rap music influences a certain community of African youths, then the scary part just takes the backseat, but it’s a backseat that is also occupied by a contradiction that, throughout my research and even as I write, still sort-of puzzles me in a weirdly fascinating way.

In an attempt to quell this puzzlement, a literary baseline for the intensive purposes of this paper will be featured around Ishmael Beah’s memoir *A Long Way Gone.* While Beah’s memoir doesn’t include a particularly deep comment on the influence of American rap music on the people of Sierra Leone, it does offer intimacy and symbolism through its use as a subtle plot device. When I first read of Beah’s liking of American hip-hop, I was close to shocked. I shouldn’t have been. I should have known better, in fact. After I finished the book, my naiveté became an example of how I viewed Africa as isolated, not capable of being influenced by American popular culture. In essence, I should have known better because as a young teenager from rural northern Michigan, raised in a town surrounded by corn fields and one traffic light, I spent a lot of nights in my room with my headphones turned up to 2pac, Eminem, and DMX, among other rappers. I can also say with full confidence that Tupac Shakur—the person more than the rapper, but probably a bit of both—was the first inspiration I had for putting pen to paper, for writing creatively and without hesitancy. It’s true.

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For the young people of Africa, American hip-hop isn’t popular culture, but rather an underground form of music, a novelty that Beah and his friends marveled over and celebrated. Upon discovering hip-hop, he remarks on how the novelty of the music introduced him to a new form of musical celebration, remarking, “I loved the dance, and particularly enjoyed learning the lyrics, because they were poetic and it improved my vocabulary” (Location 113). This is only the beginning of how hip-hop impacted Beah, and these beginning experiences with it start to play a more complex and certainly fascinating role in his life as the circumstances around him start to change. As Beah and his friends are walking toward Mattru Jong, they are engrossed in the hip-hop music and culture, carrying “backpacks with notebooks of lyrics we were working on and…our pockets stuffed with cassettes of rap albums” (Location 122). Later, he reflects on how he and his friends dressed, how their clothes “were fashionable, and we had no idea that this unusual way of dressing was going to benefit us” (Location 129). Already, we see how one American culture carries itself to Sierra Leone, how Beah uses the culture as an unorthodox symbol for something good, something beneficial. For Americans, the effect of hip-hop on African children would likely be more negative, because the name itself is associated with violence, as is the continent of Africa.

In my experience, rap probably shouldn’t be placed directly into the pop culture category, or stereotyped as particularly violent or violent inducing. Rather, I view rap on two distinct levels: the more unpopular kind, with a focus on lyrical creativity, activism, and individual awarness, and the more popular kind, the kind with redundant choruses and a materialistic basis, the kind where the rappers flaunt diamonds, cars, and money as their source of inspiration and lyric. This would help explain the irony behind my use of the term “underground” versus the one that was used so much during the golden age of hip-hop from the late 1980s through the late 1990s. According to Osumare, “most adults over forty get their impressions of hip-hop from the hypersexed…commercialized music videos of MTV. There exists a multifaceted and empowered hip-hop ‘underground’ movement that…tends to promote a more socially conscious rap music” (267). And of course, if irony is the undercurrent to this observation of American rap and African culture, we have to realize that while Beah was discovering rap as something deeply personal and as a means for dance and celebration, Americans were protesting against it, holding signs in the street and smashing CD’s on the sidewalk. If you’ve seen the footage, it almost looks like these protesters are doing some sort of foot stomping dance or celebration while yelling at no one in particular.

Of course, the reason for all the uproar is that rap music has been synonymous with violence, starting in the early 90’s with rap groups like *Public Enemy, Run-DMC,* and *N.W.A,* groups that epitomized this stereotype in the novelty of their time. Indeed, perhaps the music was inciting violence, but what can we say about American action movies, or, in even more of a practical sense, the “foreign aid” we give to countries, who’s significant contribution, of course, is guns?[[4]](#footnote-4) Is music truly the trigger for violence in young people, or is violence so engrained in the United States’ culture that this sort of violent material is just normal thinking, and the artists just have the bravery to rap about it? In one of Eminem’s countlessly vulgar and protested-about songs, he makes this sort of connection by saying, “So who’s bringin’ the guns into this country? I couldn’t sneak a plastic pellet gun through customs over in London. And last week, I seen this Schwarzenegger movie where he’s shootin’ all sorts of these motherfuckers with an Uzi. I see three little kids, up in the front row, screamin’ ‘go,’ with their 17-year-old uncle” (Who Knew). Eminem’s point, of course, is that violence is synonymous with entertainment (no matter the form), and the accessibility of both shouldn’t be synonymous with actual violence. So, now that that claim has been dismissed, the progression of rap—its evolution in America and movement to Africa—should be the focus here.

The timing of rap music’s global movement is key, because just as a generation was growing up, so was America’s global influence, and so was this culture of rising African American artists, known for their “rags to riches” stories, controversial lyrics, and socially aware superiority over other forms of popular entertainment. The early 1990s saw a shockwave of racial injustices and prejudice,[[5]](#footnote-5) and for African Americans, rap music was a way to reach beyond a local audience and into a global one. There is an interesting progression in the evolution of American rap music to Africa. According to an article by Jordan Rich entitled *Rap Music and Street Consciousness,* “African poetic speech and performance (including antecedents of jive) are shown to have provided an artistic and cultural matrix for formal and stylistic developments in American black performance” (1). So the fascinating parallel here rests with the source of rap music (Africa), and how the inspirations for it have moved first to America then back to Africa, to kids like Beah and his friends. Perhaps the most fascinating part about Beah’s hip-hop inspired young life is the way he goes back to those experiences as an older man, refashioning the music to be a symbol in his story.

On multiple occasions, the music saves Beah. Either from death or capture or what have you, it literally saves him. When Beah and his friends get captured by a village, at a point where “people stopped trusting each other, and every stranger became an enemy” (Location 540), the guards that captured them find rap cassettes in Beah’s pockets. The curiosity that ensues on the part of the chief leads to Beah explaining the dance group he started in Matrru Jong. Coincidentally, a boy from the village knew of Beah from the performances he had done. They were released soon after. Later, as the boys were being interrogated by another group of villagers and the rap cassettes fall out of Beah’s pocket, “one of the men told the chief that the only way we could possess such foreign cassettes was either by having looted them or if we were mercenaries” (Location 959). After the chief plays the music, however, and Beah does his performance, he is saved yet again. The music itself works as a symbol for freedom and youth. I would argue it goes further than that, but the coincidence of being saved because of it, the novelty of having celebrated it, points toward this dream of freedom for Beah, something that, at one point, he looks at in a different way. War, for Beah and other child soldiers, was a way of instantly being masculinized, older and more powerful. According to Kyulanova, “the meaning and function of these elements are ironically subverted to construct war as a deviant rite of passage, which yanks the protagonists out of their childhood status yet fails to grant them the new status of mature adults” (1). Beah’s moment of change comes as he was dancing to “OPP” by *Naughty by Nature.* This time, he isn’t dancing just to dance, he’s dancing to be set free, dancing not for fun, but for survival, which brings about a powerful dissection of what it meant to him at that moment:

I didn’t enjoy it, and for the first time I found myself thinking about the words of the song, closely listening to the subtle instruments in the beat. I had never done such a thing before, because I knew the words by heart and felt the beat. I didn’t feel it this time. As I hopped up and down, hunched and raising my arms and feet to the music, I thought about being thrown in the ocean, about how difficult it would be to know that death was inevitable” (Location 981).

This passage demonstrates a spirit within a boy, a spirit that has many different factors, but one that is inevitably based on seemingly petty music and a single moment of invincibility, of freedom.

Not everything about rap’s global progression is great, though. Nearing the end of this golden age of rap comes a drastic change in tone, language, and inspiration for it in the United States. Pointing fingers isn’t the objective here, but the artist known as 2Pac is known as the sort-of godfather of gangster rap, a genre with violence embedded in every facet of it. Yet, if the injustices committed against him and his people in the early 1990s hadn’t been so harsh and controversial—particularly in light of globalization and the supposed “acceptance” of African Americans in society—his controversial image and lyrics may not have happened in the first place. In many regards, the issue of race in America had reached a breaking point, and it was artists like 2Pac whose mission it was to expose these injustices, to use violence in music as a way of exposing the truth, as a way of reaching an audience that was much bigger than anyone probably imagined. His image and personality would reach more people than even he would have ever thought. Evocations of 2Pac in Sierra Leone are hauntingly present in the civil war that spanned from 1991 to 2002. According to Prestholdt, examples of 2Pac’s image and music being taken quite literally in Sierra Leone are some of the most powerful and looming examples of how the youth in Africa have “sought broader relevance for their particular experiences through the imagery of global popular culture” (197). Prestholdt tells a story that comes from the town of Kukuna, Sierra Leone, one that raises questions for the author about the impact of 2Pac’s popularity after his death:

A group of at least one hundred young men and women appeared, all wearing T-shirts bearing the image of American rapper Tupac Shakur. There were so many young people wearing Tupac shirts that some townspeople assumed that Kukuna was hosting a hip-hop concert. But as screams filled the night air and buildings were set ablaze residents recognized those wearing the T-shirts as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a rebel group attempting to overthrow the government of Sierra Leone (Prestholdt 197).

This story would be familiar for Ishmael Beah, who was a part of this type of destruction and witnessed it firsthand. At one point in his memoir, in fact, he tells of a scene he witnessed, how “most of the dead gunmen and boys wore lots of jewelry on their necks and wrists. Some even wore more than five gold watches on one wrist. One boy, whose uncombed hair was now soaked with blood, wore a Tupac Shakur T-shirt that said: ‘All eyes on me’” (Location 1762). And shortly after: “There was no one around to tell us stories and make us laugh at times when we needed it” (Location 1762). As Prestholdt states, “the RUF’s references to Tupac were but one manifestation of a larger fascination with the hip-hop star. Yet his use in Sierra Leone is of exceptional import because it was often of greater gravity, under circumstances more extreme, than almost anywhere else” (Location 198). This is easily one of the starkest examples of how powerful American culture can be, how just one person can unintentionally support and drive young combatants in a completely different Third World culture, so much so, that “many analysts presumed combatants’ embrace of Tupac was little more than a frightening evocation of the worst of American culture: misogyny, violence, and drug abuse. Sierra Leonean government officials blamed Tupac, and aspects of American popular culture generally, for inciting violence” (Prestholdt 203). This type of comment brings out the real scary part of popular culture. It seems, as Americans, we have this mindset that the entertainment we make and experience stays localized, and things like music don’t mean as much as they do to people who’ve never heard or experienced it before.

To build off that claim, and to give some even more ironic background behind the world of American rap music, let me focus on a more modern issue, the one I’ve been building up toward. The exploitation of natural resources has always plagued Africa, but to think in a general sense about Ishmael Beah’s memoir, the war he was involved with revolves around one resource: diamonds. The story of conflict diamonds takes root in Sierra Leone, and the controversy around them has only just recently been brought to light. Hollywood productions, most notably *Blood Diamond* starring Leonardo DiCaprio, have uncovered a facet of globalization and a demand for African resources that may have otherwise been forgotten. According to Duke, “all this delayed outrage over conflict diamonds still can be useful in the battle for hearts and minds. Activists stop short of calling for a diamond boycott but want to put diamond retailers on notice by urging consumers to ask aggressively about the origins of their stones” (2). The distinction between legitimately mined diamonds and those labeled as conflict diamonds is a fragile one, because there are so many players in the business, and sorting the two is near to impossible with such a large demand. The real irony of the diamond business has to do with the rap industry. This reaches beyond the music itself, because in today’s materialistic rap *culture*, diamonds are glorified, collected, *in demand.*

This issue is addressed in a documentary named *Bling: the blood diamond and hip-hop.* It stars several successful rappers, among them Paul Wall, who owns a jewelry shop specializing in things called “Grills,” which are these mouth guard like attachments for the teeth, decked out in shiny metal and of course, diamonds. In the documentary, the rappers travel to Sierra Leone with Ishmael Beah, who gives them a lot of context about his life and about conflict diamonds. The quote that stood out to me, however, was one by an unnamed artist, who spoke of the issue, saying, “you know, I find it ironic that a music culture coming out of the projects with kids who had access to essentially nothing and trying to minimize violence…some thirty years later becomes a multi-billion dollar culture with violence in the music and an explosion of jewelry” (Bling). This hits at the core of American culture impacting African youths, because unlike Beah’s experience with hip-hop, the music has now regressed to a materialistic basis, and the purpose of it has strayed from activism and social awarness to flash, sex, violence, and drug use. Tom Zoeller makes this sort of point in his book, *The Heartless Stone,* where he comments on a conversation he had with a reporter about this very issue:

Miller [Master P] not only promoted the favorable image of thug-cum-business-man, he also helped usher in the era of ‘ghetto fabulous’ in which the primary obsession of rap turned from anger over social injustices (such as the brutality of police officers) through the fetishization of luxury items (such as diamonds). ‘They took all that political content of the late eighties, all the *Public Enemy* stuff, and they wiped it all away,’ one music magazine writer told me. ‘They replaced it with nihilism and excess.’ Artists from all over the rap world began to imitate the style and diamonds became *the* indispensible thing to flash in nightclubs, as well as something to celebrate in verse. Rap was still focused on issues of power, but it became less about the power you did not have, and more about the power you could wear on your fingers (Zoeller 303).

In short, the irony is almost unbearable. Even after diamonds started being exploited and fought over, the people with the real power and the potential to minimize the craze over them were (and still are) in nightclubs swinging them on their necks like crowns of power, are descendants of the place where people die because of them.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, not all rappers today are this materialistic and uneducated. As mentioned, there is an underground genre of rap that still emphasizes some of the same subjects as golden age of rap did, and others have demonstrated a mix of both modern, popular rap, with that of the activist type. Kanye West released a song entitled “Diamonds of Sierra Leone” in 2005, bringing to the rap world a self-conscious viewpoint on this very issue. In the remix of the song, which features Jay-Z, Kanye begins the first verse with “Good morning, this ain’t Vietnam, still, people lose hands, legs, arms for real. Little was known of Sierra Leone, and how it connects with the diamonds we own” (West). The song is also featured in *Bling*, and while the remix does include more of an element of awarness to it as compared with the original and more popular one, it’s an example of how the hip-hop world does care, and does at least know of how their own business has a practical negativity to it. Kanye’s response is, as shown through his engagement in film and music, the most practical form of spreading his thoughts on it to fans and practitioners: through song and verse. Jay-Z didn’t really comment on the issue in the song, just some play on words with the whole diamond emphasis, but I’m sure he does some charity in Africa[[7]](#footnote-7), so there’s his justification.

To take a firm stance in this issue is probably the hardest thing to do, at least for me. My view of rap music, like Beah’s, is intimate and symbolic for being different in my own life. As I mentioned before, I tend to view this aspect of popular culture in two different tiers, and by now, it seems they have been narrowed down to positive and negative appropriations. If anything, I think being educated and aware about how far our culture really reaches is the important part, because as Americans, we’ve been given this obligation, this responsibility—which some people deny and others endorse—to be good. This obligation stretches around the globe, and it’s also more complicated than most people think. If Africa’s problems were as easily solved as, say, making a video, selling a symbolic kit, and gaining clearance to hunt the persons responsible for the conflict down, the world wouldn’t be as real and complex as it really is. The things we make popular here affect others in a much deeper, *real*, way. Even though the message of music has changed and became commercialized, and money has replaced knowledge in the most popular forms of it, there are still people who believe and know how it can change lives in a very real and hard way.

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1. A concrete date for the ‘start’ of globalization is very, very hard to find. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ironically enough, the argument itself is proof that globalization isn’t easy to agree with, either between critics, between countries, what have you. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Or lack thereof, of course. It’s hard to shed light on how America has benefited Africa in a practical sense, and it’s way out of scope for the purposes of my commentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I realize foreign aid has little to do with violence and hip-hop, but if there’s one connection here, it’s that hypocrisy is everywhere. *Everywhere.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I’m thinking of the Rodney King case, where video evidence was captured of police brutality in all of its…brutality. Also, the fact that African American poverty reached an all time low in the 90s. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Let’s not start making stereotypes here. The last thing I want to do is take a firm stance for or against what rappers are doing these days. The first thing I want to do is tell the truth. Rappers would probably agree. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It’s true. Jay-Z was seen in 2006 shooting a documentary called *Diary of Jay-Z: Water for Life.* In his visits to Angola, among other places, he is seen in pictures wearing a red ambassador-like toga outfit. He raised a million dollars. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)