



## Whitman graduate to bop around world

**A fellowship will allow her to study the rap and hip-hop scenes.**

Updated: Saturday, May 23, 2009 8:10 PM PDT

By **MARIA P. GONZALEZ** of the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA — To anyone who has ever doubted the power of following your dreams, consider the case of Aisha Fukushima.

On July 1, Fukushima will embark on a yearlong trip around the world, visiting six countries with the goal of melding with local hip-hop communities to document “raptivism” in action. The concept, which draws on a combination of rap and activism, is the focus of Fukushima’s work as a 2009 Watson Fellow.

During her year abroad, she plans to not just study the rap and hip-hop scenes, but also collaborate on original tracks with the local artists she meets.

As a fellow, she gets \$28,000 to support her studies and research, which will cover her living expenses and also the cost of heading to the studio to create an album.

The 21-year-old Whitman College senior, who will be among 350 graduating today, had already spent much of her life exploring the power of arts and music. Specifically, the complex emotions and call to attention around social issues generated by rap and hip-hop.

As a student at the International School in Bellevue, one of the top public schools in the country, Fukushima saw opportunities to challenge the status-quo and get others thinking more critically about society’s injustices and inequalities.

Her senior project, “Turn off the Stereotypes,” called on her classmates to talk openly about discrimination. She raised money to put on workshops geared for youths and meant to help them be more tolerant.

A call to activism came naturally to Fukushima, who is Japanese and African-American. But art and music held her equal attention. And the proximity of a vibrant art scene in Seattle, where she was born, to the comfortable Bellevue community drew that passion out further.

“That really inspired me to sing it, to say it in a rap, to say it in a song,” she said.

As a Whitman College student, Fukushima joined the school’s only rap group, the Raptivists, as its lyricist. She wrote her senior thesis on emerging rap artist Lupe Fiasco. Her thesis complemented her major in rhetoric and film studies. She also minored in French and gender studies.

But it may have been the time she spent studying abroad as a junior that helped her shape her future study on raptivism around the world.

While living in France, she tapped into a local hip-hop community, and eventually collaborated on tracks with one artist.

“I thought, hmmm, I could spend a year doing this,” she said. Hip-hop’s reach across the world, with its origins in 1970s New York, showed Fukushima the power it had to draw cultures together, to give people voice, and in some cases call them to action.



Photo by Greg Lehman/Whitman College Aisha Fukushima talks with fellow students during this year’s Whitman Undergraduate Conference in April.

Used as an outlet, hip-hop and rap become a powerful medium to speak about social issues, she explained. It takes word play, and understanding of rhythm and delivery, and a consciousness of local politics and problems. And it is a way of delivery and expression that anyone can try.

"Pretty much anyone can grab a mic and start rapping their thoughts," she said.

The Watson Fellowship is a program that offers recent college graduates the chance to engage in original, and often unusual studies for one year. The paid fellowship demands its fellows do every step of the project on their own.

"You wake up in the morning saying, this is what I'm going to do today, this is who I'm going to talk to," Fukushima said.

That means Fukushima is on her own to get herself to each country, make the right connections, and get her research completed.

"They really encourage students to follow their intuitions," she said.

She is among 40 students in the country, and the only one from the state, chosen this year.

Fukushima's proposal, called "Rhythms, Rhymes, and Raptivism: The Globalization of Hip-Hop Activism," will take her to Denmark, India, Morocco, South Africa, Senegal and the United Kingdom. She will likely spend a couple of months in each country.

The fellowship is giving Fukushima the chance to pursue her passion. It is a love of spoken word, rhythms and rhymes, political activism and a drawing together of people she sees embodied in hip-hop.

Raptivism, a concept first coined by Chuck D of Public Enemy, appears to have lost some of its drive and purpose since the early years of rap and hip-hop. But artists like Lupe Fiasco, and even Fukushima herself, are keeping it alive.

"I think I'm trying to revive it," she said.

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#### Watson Fellowship

The mission of the Thomas J. Watson Fellowship Program is to offer college graduates of unusual promise a year of independent, purposeful exploration and travel outside of the United States to enhance their capacity for resourcefulness, imagination, openness, and leadership and to foster their humane and effective participation in the world community. Students from participating colleges may apply.

From [www.watsonfellowship.org](http://www.watsonfellowship.org)

Aisha Fukushima's proposal

Rhythms, Rhymes, and Raptivism: The Globalization of Hip-Hop Activism

Denmark, India, Morocco, South Africa, Senegal, United Kingdom

I will focus on the ways in which Hip Hop has become a medium for social change in Denmark, India, Morocco, South Africa, Senegal, and the United Kingdom. I plan to explore "raptivism" (rap activism) by observing and participating in the vibrant Hip Hop scenes of each locale. During my travels, I will also record a compilation of songs that reflect the musical styles and the political climate of each country I visit.