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# Prolegomena to any future synthesis of HIP-HOP and the novel that will be able to present itself as dope and all-the-way-live

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Prolegomena  
to Any Future Synthesis of *HIP-HOP & the Novel*  
That Will Be Able to Present Itself as Dope & All-The-Way-Live

By Austin Krauss

A Thesis

Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

College of Arts & Sciences

Department of English

2016

# abstract

This work will serve as a prologue to any future attempt at further articulating or writing a hypothetical *HIP-HOP Novel*.

Set 1 will be composed of two discrete analyses: the historical origins and functioning of the novel (with Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* as a primary text, and various secondary texts, including Ian Watts *The Rise of the Novel*, and Catherine Gallagher's *The Rise of Fictionality*), followed by a mutually discrete analysis of the origins and composition of hip-hop, (using several documentaries as primary sources, as well as historical analyses like Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* and Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Air*). These analyses will stress the distinct mode of narrative peculiar to each of our subjects, as well as how they treat certain common themes—using the theme of “life” as a central axis of this analysis. The effect of set 1 will be to place Hip-Hop and the novel in an inferred dialectic.

Set 2 will be entirely devoted to an in-depth analysis of the modal functioning of Hip-Hop, subdivided into 7 separate *moduses*, and framed as a necessary provision for any future attempt at synthesizing Hip-Hop and the novel. This analysis will draw heavily on Joe Schloss's *Foundation* and Jeff Chang's *Total Chaos*, as well as the aforementioned texts and documentaries.

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## *DESTROY ALL LINES; an Introduction*

I'm out here to *bomb*. Period. That's what I started for. I didn't start writin' to go to *Paris*; I didn't start writin' to do *canvases*. I started writin' to bomb. *Destroy all lines* ...and that's what I'm doin'. [Q: How long you think you'll do it?] 'Till I'm finished... (*Style Wars*, SKEME).

And there you have it. *Hip-Hop*. But just what is that?

Perhaps it's better to start with what it *is not*.

It is not a *race*, and it is not a *class*. It is not an *orientation*, *nation*, *state*, or *caste*. It is not a *currency* or *commodity*, or anything that could ever be bought with credit or cash.

Nah. Never that! This here is *a culture*. And as *a culture*, few have proven so prolific, so persistent, so resistant as Hip-Hop. “This is the biggest art movement the world has ever seen”

(*Bomb it*, Unknown). And beyond every boundary of Nationality or State, across all distinctions of ethnicity and every striation of class, there is Hip-Hop. Effacing lines. As it stands, Hip-Hop is currently having a third-wind of sorts in the post-colonial world, where in Asia, Africa and the Mid-east, little *B-Boys* and Girls are taking to the streets. Just what is behind this vital impetus? 40+ years; one would think this thing might have spent itself by now, and yet Hip-Hop has unfinished work it would seem. Is there, at its core, the germ of some as-of-yet unrealized project? And, if so, by what means can we bring to light this project? Just what *is* this Hip-Hop?

...Later for that. For now its sufficient to know this: it is *alive*.<sup>1</sup> Let us begin there—for the vast majority of cultural and artistic movements which have come to pass cannot, any longer, boast the same. No one would accuse *Dadaism*, or *Disco* or *Rococo* of having much of a rabid following these days. *Jazz*, *Surrealism*; *Hippies* and *Situationists*... They did much. But most of what they could have done, they did. And if they could have done *more*, they'd have done—did it by now. That potential—which so suffused the 60's—is all but exhausted. Exhaustion in the

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is *all the way live*, as we are apt to say.

sense that a horse would be exhausted, if you asked it to climb a tree—they were not *built* for these problems. Time to put that old horse away. Which is not to say that these things have outlived their usefulness, but only that (and this is my contention:) Hip-Hop can go where the others cannot. And we ain't talkin' about climbin' trees...

HIP-HOP is something you live (KRS One).  
HIP-HOP is about rebellion (Chang, *It's a Hip-Hop World*).

In some ways this exercise in conceiving of a *Hip-Hop Novel* straddles an irreconcilable contradiction—which threatens to render the phrase an oxymoron. For while the one is a way of life—which is the living of art *through* life—the latter is, arguably a way of *escaping* life—the mere *contemplation* of life, through art. A novel is at best a palliative for the *absence* of life—at worst it is an active means of precluding life. In so many ways, sitting on one's ass and reading a book is the antithesis of Hip-Hop. These are two means of addressing modernity, which went in the opposite direction on the axis of life. For, while the one is by nature democratic,<sup>2</sup> the other seems to be, in accord with its nature, hopelessly authoritarian.<sup>3</sup> No novel can escape this tyranny—the tyranny of being *authored*.

Suffice to say that Hip-Hop runs counter to authority at a modal level—the truth of which it will be incumbent upon any attempt at formulating a *Hip-Hop Novel* to reckon with, and which I will, later, attempt to demonstrate. See, Hip-Hop is not some bourgeois hand-me-down, or some mass-produced commodity, issuing forth from the Culture Industry. No intelligentsia, or

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<sup>2</sup> And here it is necessary, and not at all improper, for me to define just what I mean by *democracy* ('cause I'm only ever gonna mean one thing): when *PEOPLE* govern *THEMSELVES*. See, I'm not talking about *representatives*, or *parties*, or co-opted *unions*, or voting once every 4 years. I'm talkin' about what CLR James was talkin' about. I'm talikin' about *real* democracy... and you'll know when it's real, 'cause the *Cooks* will be *Govern-ing*...

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Stalin: "The writer is the engineer of the human soul" (Montefiore 85).

cabal of the leisured classes sat down one day and sought to contrive this. It was arrived at *spontaneously*, and from the *bottom-up*: the product of *poor people*—kids, scribbling their appellations on a wall in north Philadelphia; or doing backspins on some cardboard, in some ally in the Bronx—poor, and marginalized peoples, in the poor and marginalized places of the earth. With these humble means—a marker, a turn table, the shoes on our feet; the *means of cultural expression*—it was as if by a jolt of sudden and sublime epiphany that these kids realized the immense power resting right beneath the surface of everyday life.

Make no mistake; a Wall-Writer will never be recognized as *an artist* by the officiators of *Professional Culture*. But then that is not what our boy SKEME is after, now is it? Far from seeking recognition, he gives himself up to anonymity entirely, and only then *creates* himself, going out into the perilous night to *mark the wall*. He does not mark the wall for the sake of a *market economy*, or because someone had said that he was *good* at it, or because he thinks he might become *famous*. No. We do it because we cannot abide life in modernity otherwise; because if we did not express ourselves we could not hope to be a complete, psychologically-salutary human being—we would lose our fucking minds! This is not a choice of tea or coffee; Hip-Hop is nothing short of the poor-man's means of coping with modernity. Human beings must express themselves. No one should feel creatively alienated in the space of their own home, everyone has the right to be an artist. This is the achievement of Hip-Hop, and the chief supposition on which this prolegomena rests: *HIP-HOP Democratizes Art*.

In this culture of HIP-HOP there is a mode of expression for every inclination. Whether you wish to express yourself orally, sonically, graphically, or physically, Hip-Hop has an outlet. Indeed, seems to me that HIP-HOP is represented in nearly every facet of art... except prose. Of the few sincere pretenses at synthesizing hip-hip and the novel (the most admirable being

those of Adam Mansbach, Danyel Smith, and Victor LaValle among others), there seems to me, in every case, a fundamental misrecognition of hip-hop—the consequence being that these attempts often feel as though hip-hop has been *appropriated* as mere window dressing for the much older and deeper preoccupations of the novel. As to what is called “urban lit” while there is immense potential here—particularly regarding an old line of lineage to hip-hop, by way of the *lumpen-proletarian subject*—in its current, industrial manifestation, these genera will have little relevance to the prolegomena; they are too inured to certain ideologies, in relation to which their existential interests necessitate ignorance. Without the consciousness and autonomy to articulate the problems against which hip-hop is disposed, there’s no hope of addressing those problems.

For most people in the world, peace is war—a daily battle against hunger, thirst, and violation of their dignity [...] we have to use our skills and imagination and our art, to recreate the rhythms of the endless crisis of normality (Roy 15).

Most people do not have time to read but one great novel in their lifetime. The Hip-Hop novelist is not gonna seek to fuck around and dump a bunch of fluffy bullshit on ‘em. She is gonna write that one book, and she is gonna need to write it in a style that is “lucid, compact, vigorous and impassioned” (Althusser 21), marshaling all the resources of rhetoric, logic, poetry and passion of which she is possessed. The people she is trying to reach, are a peoples who don't have a moment to waste. These are people for whom the exigencies of life are too ponderous, the realities too brutal; a people on the precipice of an abyss, beset on every side by problems. These people need something. These people need *a lot*. These people are *us*; nothing but the *grandest* of narratives can begin to address our problems. A large part of this prolegomena will seek to prefigure its end by turning away, at the level of style, from the irony and nihilism of *Post-Modernity*, and instead toward a new *sincerity*, even a *militant optimism* of sorts. What I mean to articulate here is not a literature which perpetuates the defunct stereotypes that so often populate industrially-produced representations of so called “Hip-[P]op” (Stories of violence,



drugs, masochism, unscrupulous decadence, and token success). What I'm after is a new sort of paradigm—a literary act which marries itself to a new (and yet peculiarly atavistic) sort of *righteousness*... and no small portion of Eutopianism.<sup>4</sup> What's more, as Roy indicates, this endeavor will need to make its intervention at the most basal level: the *rhythm* of everyday life.

It is not enough to throw in some rhymes and be done. If we have any hope of realizing this synthesis, it will have to follow from a clear understanding of both the novel and Hip-Hop, at their *modal* levels. And so the thrust of my task will be to posit a set of underlying *metaphysics* and *moduses* which animate Hip-Hop, and which will necessarily inform any earnest attempt to *synthesize*. This project, let me be clear, will not be an attempt to interpolate hip-hop into the dusty paradigms of the novel—a troubling process which I'm in the habit of calling *Hamilton-ization* (later for that.) On the contrary, my loyalties ought to be betrayed now: it will be the novel, here, which gets turned-out by hip-hop.

Incidentally, whenever, in the culture of HIP-HOP, one is said to have rhymed or danced to any given beat in such a way as to have demonstrate creative mastery over it, it is sometimes said that they have *killed it*. The concept of *kill* here is an iteration of *rock*—i.e. to *rock* something—which means not only to overcome it, but, somehow, *realize it*. In this way, even what is by all accounts a fixed material (a beat, a piece of clothing, a novel) is understood to be changeable by our acting upon it—material here is radically subject to our living, human will. Which is why I can say, in no uncertain terms, that my aim here with regard to the novel is simple: I'm tryna' killin' it.

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<sup>4</sup> I distinguish here between *Utopia* (“No-place”) and its original Greek, *Eutopia* (“Good-place”). That said, their status as interchangeable homophones says something essential about eutopia: for it exists only in our perpetual pursuit of it. It is fitting that this distinction exists only on paper, for it is this uniquely eutopian capacity of the novel which I will be attempting (among other things) to draw out

# 1<sup>st</sup> SET

## *WORD... LIFE*

Can the novel ever lead toward life? Or does it only lead back to itself, forever reinforcing its own spectacle, molding all the world into a mere reflection of its subjectivity? The problem as OC has articulated is “Word... Life.” For there, in this movement from the one to the other, is the promise of the *Hip-Hop novel*. And yet, as that rather understated ellipsis attests, there is a vast and fathomless gulf between. This prolegomena will have little breadth to speculate on any hypothetical synthesis. Instead, in this first set we will focus on marking out our two terms, so as to accentuate their antithetical natures. It is this state of **irreconcilability**—from which we can never be permitted to avert our eyes—that will form the necessary grounding of any later attempt at synthesis... Whether or not we can span this perilous divide from *word*, back to *life*, is yet to be seen.

## WORD...

### Dis-embodiment Authority

...for as I am, in reality, the founder of a new province of writing, so I am at liberty to make what laws I please therein. And these laws, my readers, whom I consider my subjects are bound to believe in and obey. I do hereby assure them, that I shall principally regard their ease and advantage in all such institutions: for I do not like a jure divino tyrant, imagine that they are my slaves, or my commodity. I am, indeed, set over them for their own good (Fielding 74).

If there were any doubt about the lineage between *author* and *authoritarian*, this passage does more to clear it up than all the speculation in the world. It is nearly an act of repentance on the part of Fielding—as though this were the inaugural sin of the novel, as inevitable as it is necessary. This comes, notably, after a lengthy apologetics for the new regime of novelistic time

which we will need to prepare ourselves for—what Habermas calls “Trans-Temporal Continuity,” but what it can suffice to call the notion of *Progress*. Granted, Fielding does his utmost to ensure us that he will be, at the very least, an *enlightened* despot; he is, after all, only trying to save us from the monotony of things not “worthy [our] notice.” But caught up in all this, he has very deliberately reserved for himself the right to **omit**—for “we shall not be afraid of a chasm in our history; but shall hasten on to matters of consequence[!]” (74).

Now, in some ways this is the very gesture of all art—selectively juxtaposing materials; creating by *omission*—but then not all art purports to present itself as a “history”, following all the objective rules of *reality*—for it is “Truth” here which “distinguishes our writing from those idle romances” (137). And, indeed, few other manifestations of art have so dissimulated themselves under this guise of *realism*. But it is this dissimulation which, I will argue, functions to obfuscate a certain sort of **theft**.

The inaugural lie of the novel was to omit both the obfuscation of its *material* source—the primitive accumulation of capital which allowed for the printing of books and the leisure to read them—as well as the centuries of *cultural* accumulation which needed to occur in order for novelistic form to crystallize. Both historically (materially) and in its own formal *modus*, the novel is among the earliest technics<sup>5</sup> to have arisen out of the gross and unmitigated state of theft which marked the onset of **modernity**: the *mode* of life as experienced and undertaken following the emergence and subsequent convergence of Capital and the State—an event which was experienced, and continues to be experienced by the vast majority of us, as a **trauma**. The most

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<sup>5</sup> A broader notion of what it means to be *advanced*. For Lewis Mumford, technology is only one part of *technics*, A term which revives the older Greek *Teckhne*, which encompassed language, symbols, artistic forms, social structure and organization. As such it is a word used to reintegrate human concerns back into what has been a vulgar, technology-based notion of “progress.”

dramatic consequence of this convergence was colonialism, chattel slavery, and indigenous genocide—what might be euphemistically called *America*. But, on a more elemental level, this convergence had the effect of an intractable pauperization and removal (both forced and coerced) of the peasants from the land, into the city, where they would emerge as new, urban classes—variably productive and parasitic. This *urban subjectivity*, alienated, rootless, and nested in an unfathomable complex of hierarchically-teared exploitation—euphemistically called “fate”—will be the new subjectivity which inaugurates the novel.

“Theft” here will be of the petty variety—that perpetrated by the abrasive intermingling of the desperate with the comfortable. The macro-theft is always unstated, meant to seem *naturalized*, as the novel itself is presented to us as some immaculately conceived object, the product of pure, artistic “originality.” But then, as I have hinted, theft, in itself, is not the problem here—and indeed, as I will argue, it is the solution! The problem here is that the theft is *privileged, undisclosed*, and, worst of all, *foreclosed*. Because, in the end, the only true and lamentable theft is that which is taken from tomorrow—that which *realism* has achieved.

HISTORY and romance... It should seem that one dealt in fiction, and the other in truth; that one is a picture of the *probable* and certain, and the other a tissue of untruths; that one describes what *might* have happened, and what has *actually* happened, and the other what never had existence (Brown 341).

And you can almost hear it... the sound of all as-of-yet unfulfilled human potentiality, as it goes whooshing out the door...

And so, this act of omission is not always one that occurs on the level of classes or forms. Sometimes it is an omission which, in a rather Procrustean fashion, seeks to delimit all of *human potentiality* itself; because while man is yet “the highest subject” of any novel, “in relating his actions, great care is to be taken that we do not exceed the capacities of the agent we describe” (Fielding 354). Gallagher articulates the paradox in terms of the novel’s formative thought

antagonistic relation to *fiction*, whereby “the novel slowly opens the conceptual space of fictionality in the process of seeming to narrow its practice” (340). In other words, that which it claims for itself, it denies for us, the living.

So, what’s *really real*?

“The stage” “scene” and “pomp” (128,138-39) are a favorite analogy of Fielding’s as he unfolds his *history*. Indeed, *theater* is perhaps a useful metaphor here; for what is *behind* the stage has been deftly spirited away... In the wake of the English revolution—the moment when the novel would be about to come into being—there was an authority-vacuum which could be attributed to the waning of the church and aristocracy. It was a window during which the *plebs* briefly, if spectacularly, asserted a rich and authentic cultural autonomy never before seen. According to E. P. Thompson there was “a radical disassociation—and at times antagonism—between the culture and even ‘politics’ of the poor and those of the great” (22) (...wait for the echoes. They will be sounding back from a place called the south Bronx...).

Up until this moment it had been the main function of the church to safely regulate and dispose of the plebs free time by way of numerous sanctioned ceremonies and holidays—often mere re-cuperations of previously-existing plebeian traditions. But as the Anglican church grew more overtly corrupt and morally defunct, the people began to reclaim their “emotional capital” (51). Thompson: “Above all, the church lost command over the leisure of the poor, their feasts and festivals and, with this, over a large area of Plebeian culture” (50). Indeed, very often the plebs would turn these festivals into mobs in time of want, and sack the graineries of wealthy farmers—known for hoarding supplies in order to induce a vaporizing scarcity. Faced with this *horizontal beast* the patricians fell back on an old, if thread-bare means of invoking authority: “a studied and elaborate hegemonic style, a theatrical role in which the great were schooled in

infancy and which they maintained until death” (45). **Spectacle.** And, indeed, the Patricians “appearances ha[d] much the studied self-consciousness of public theater [...] wig, powder, ornamented clothing [etc.]” (45).

Though the means of *invoking* this spectacle of authority was rather dangerous (putting one’s *self* forth, in plain-sight as its profs; a ploy which ended unpleasantly for the French aristocracy) the means itself—spectacle—has, needless to say, yet to out-live its effectiveness. It simply needed to be displaced, in some other, anterior vessel—one which could carry the authority, without placing the author’s body in harm’s way, and, indeed, without even clearly disclosing that there *was* an Author, or that one was even being interpolated by some authoritative transmission! Such is the subtlety of a *novel*!

There is first the authority of the author—someone writing out the processes of society in an acceptable institutionalized manner, observing conventions, following patterns, and so forth. Then there is the authority of the narrator, whose discourse anchors the narrative in recognizable, and hence existentially referential, circumstances. Last, there is what might be called the authority of the community, whose representative most often is the family but also the nation (Said 77).

When packaged for the under-classes in the form of the novel, this new sort of *dis-embodied authority*—which we can now properly call *ideology*—resembled a sort of *false-consciousness*. A genuine fairy-tail, packaged as “History”, and with all the allure of a “grand lottery” (Fielding 74). A peculiar *lottery*, which I’ve taken to calling the **Bourgeois Dream**<sup>6</sup>. The spectacle of this dream was formulaic enough: it invariably involved some token peasant, profligate woman, or bastard *foundling* ascending to the leisured classes (after requisite trials and tribulations) often culminating in the necessary acquisition of property, professional status, and/or a proper bourgeoisie marriage...

To conclude, as there are not to be found a worthier man and woman, than this fond couple, so neither can any be imagined more happy. They preserve the purest and tenderest affection [...]

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<sup>6</sup> If you are hearing resonances of our own peculiar *American Dream* you should not be confused... its all the same shit.

daily increased and confirmed [...yada yada...] And such is there condescension, there indulgence, and their beneficence to those below them, that there is not a neighbor, a tenant or a servant who doth not most gratefully bless the day when Mr. Jones was married to his Sophia. [ ...and we all lived happily the fuck ever-after!]

*FINIS* [!]

What more can you ask for? The proverbial *rags to riches* narrative, now all but pervasive in pop-culture—not the lest in the *urban novel*. If it is now, more often than not, enacted in negative—as the tragic consequence of *not* attaining the dream—it still comes to the same end: get rich, or die trying. But it is here, at this moment, that we observe it crystallizing... the imaginary bases of a new mode of society.

“Symbolism, in that century,” as Thompson ascents “had a peculiar importance, owing to the weakness of other organs of control; the authority of the church is departing, and the authority of the schools and mass media have not yet arrived” (74). Here was the perfect window for the novel. But just what was the impetus under which this thing arose? Nancy Armstrong reiterates: “unruly mobs of displaced agrarian laborers and a growing number of urban poor assumed the role of chief antagonists to civil society. In that it redefined the body-politic as a corporate body of self-governing (though more self-regulating) individuals, individualism offered a symbolic resolution to the problem” (20). It's the establishment of this **individualism**—a sort of *antidote* to that resurgent form of community called the *mob*—which Watt hails as the singular achievement of the novel. But individualism has always been a tortured project: for though it is a new subjectivity for whom expression has been fully liberated... it is liberated precisely from the one thing to which it might express itself: **community**—the atomized fragments of which now confront it as antagonistic *individuals*.

In the eighteenth century, it was largely by way of the novel that “people were subjected to pressures to 'reform' popular culture from above” (1). As Thompson suggests, the first initiative of this reform was to “displac[e] oral transmission” with literacy. What this suggests is

that the oral tradition was seen as incongruous with the efficient exercise of top-down authority—and for obvious reasons. For one, oral traditions cannot be commodified, regulated, or subjected to mass-production. Oral tradition is inherently democratic in that it is face-to-face, and proliferated from the bottom-up—as opposed to printed material which is subject to the channels of authority in the form of licensing, censorship, and the qualification of the needed capital.

All of this bodes for the rise of the novel, and yet, at the same time there is a distinct trepidation at the unwieldy potential of this medium. Indeed, for some, like Mandeville, any reading or education, *at all*, are “very pernicious to the poor” because of their tendency to “multipl[y] our desires [...] beyond what relates to [our] calling” (Nixon 2). Let's be clear; I don't believe that Mandeville is telling us that we can't be architects, or attorneys, or even astronauts—we can breathe easy there. What he is referring to is a very specific type of *trespassing*: into the realm of politics. If that seems tenuous, let's get our boy Hobbes out here...

Sometimes to an easy reading of histories, politics, orations, poems, and other pleasant books [...] it happens that hence they [the *multitude*] think themselves sufficiently furnished both with wit, and learning, to administer matters of the greatest consequence (ChapXII, Sect X).

...Makin' it plain, as only Hobbes can do! Clearly reading is not good; it incites **participation**, and from this, surely we are not far off from democracy! But then the truth is that it's really too late for all this; the genie is out the bottle after all. Reading is not going away. That being the case, it is but left to regulate the content of what is read. Are we to cultivate this urge to some end? Or safely channel it into the blind-alley of spectacle? And so The novel seems to have two distinct lineages, two ways of engaging the reader. (1) Either it acts as a sink for emotion, safely depositing of our communal impulse in fictional characters (cultivating bourgeois pity), or as Nancy Armstrong suggests (2) it proliferates emotion in the “opposite direction, from spectacle to spectator [precipitating] spontaneous and collective emotional responses” (20) what



Adam Smith called *contagion*, but which can suffice to call the proto-impetus of *community*: a desire to *relate*. For while some novels are rather like a lullaby others are like a rally cry—and this is, in some respects, the difference between *spectacle* and *manifesto*. Neither escapes the tyranny of authority, but at least the later escapes passivity. It is **instrumental**—intended to be enacted—and, this may suggest a way out of this problem called *the novel*.

It is well-established that the novel rose concomitantly with the Bourgeois class and, thus, with its notion of leisure, law, and propriety. For Said the novel is “fundamentally tied to bourgeois society [...] their authority and power” (70-71). What is more interesting is the novel’s ambivalent relation to that class which would at first seem its mortal opposite: the *lumpen-proletariat*, the **criminal**—or at least those who might venture that path. In some ways the novel is *courting* this new and crucial class. Because on this road which brings us out from the agrarian life, and into the city, away from our stricken community, and into urban individualism, there is a fork just as we are reaching the city line. Before it we have the choice of two distinct streets, two distinct modernisms. Though it is the crudest means of distinguishing them, for now it suffices to say that one path is “lawful”, and the other is not.

## The *Enclosure of Virtue*

References to *Law* and jurisprudence are nearly ubiquitous throughout *Tom Jones*. But it is sometimes less obvious the ways in which we are slyly interpolated into the writer's disposition in regard to this Law, and in particular his position *vis* private-**property**. The act of *trespass* is obvious and recurring. But, as we see in this following passage, it is not a matter of misfortune or even the overt flouting of any law, but rather implied in the very architecture of Tom's existential condition, and of all those who, like him, are but mere *guests*: “To repay the civilities and little friendships of hospitality by robbing the house where you have received them

is to be the basest and meanest of thieves” (55). Well, certainly! Who could disagree? But for the undisclosed fact that we are but eternal guests in this *house*, and that, before it was the *masters*, it was but the common property of all... he stole it. What then is the “basest and meanest” inequity, but to have to *ask*, on pain of death (via starvation) for what was only ever rightfully yours to begin with? All of which is, here, called “hospitality.”

Sharing a sentiment that is reminiscent of Rousseau, it is *pity* which is *Allworthy's* crowning virtue. Faced with “the distress of his fellow creatures” Allworthy makes repeated appeals to “generosity” “charity” “compassion” and “bestowing bounty” (89). And, standing as a sort of counter-pose to these is “*Envy*” (160)—the chief vice of the *mob*—and “robbery” (109)—which is *Tom's* inaugural vice. Each of these is given forth as if to enact, in negative, what pity had sought to enact in the positive. Even Spinoza gives a prominent place to these dueling passions—in his political treatise: “men are of necessity liable to passions, and so constituted as to *pity* those who are ill and *envy* those who are well off” (I.5). It stands that, at the very heart of these vices and their corresponding virtues, they are always predicated on *disparity* (often material), and thus are uniquely bourgeois virtues. That is, they reify the logic of private-property—without which there would be no *need* of charity.

And so the extent to which stress is put on these particular passions and virtues to the exclusion of others (i.e. fairness, and equality) they will tend to naturalize what is, for both Hobbes *and* Spinoza, a decidedly unnatural state of **disparity**. But while Fielding has deftly used the novel to envelop us in this logic of inequality, it always stands that these lines cannot be sustained except by the real compulsion of *laws*, for “the truth of laws” as Althusser says “appears as a function of the conflict between antagonistic social groups in the state” (58). And so the novel first suggests this state of inequality, only then to confirm it by enacting its

enforcement. In this way it reifies not only economic disparity, but *political* disparity—the privileging of participation that comes of professional politics, and which resulted from the splitting of the commons, into *public* and *private*. In both cases there is a sort of fission at work, by which immense amounts of authority are released as a results of splitting the formerly self-sufficient matter of community into disparate classes, and placing them in tiered hierarchies—distinct, yet contained by the state in their ceaseless antagonism. This power is then converted into authority, by enacting its policing and enforcement by a narrative. Balibar also sights this and terms it the “transformation of violence into (historically) *productive force* [whereby] violence becomes power and authority.”<sup>7</sup> Misery, as it were, is “the internal energy or power of institutions” (858). It is this miserable antagonism—what some have called *class-war*—which then can only be maintained by *law*, and the repressive organs which enforce it. But the *authority* to establish such laws and institutions must first be established by—among other things—the novel.

For Ian Watt the picaresque novel is largely a result of the rise of the *individual*, but for him individualism revolves around a very particular axis, a very distinct *line*: “a well-defined criminal class, and a complex system for handling it” (95). And so, evidently even as the novel is establishing, and proffering authority to the new state apparatus, it is also working mightily to define its counterpart, the modern *criminal*, without which it cannot justify its existence.

The acceptance of the aims of economic individualism also involve a new attitude to society and its laws. The very distinction between criminal and non-criminal only becomes paramount when

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<sup>7</sup> It's worth distinguishing here between *power* over *authority*. **Power** is simply that which propels or motivates. There are many forms of power. Some are coercive, manipulative, and/or violent. Some are peaceful and righteous. Some, like *sex*, are morally ambiguous, despite being immensely powerful. Some are simply involuntary, bodily, or geological processes. **Authority** is not power in itself, but merely (1) the investiture of power someplace other than it's source, and/or (2) anyone who presumes to have the definitive interpretation, and, thus, assumes and/or exercises power over those who deviate from said interpretation. As a general rule, any power beyond that localized to the body and its innate faculties, is potentially tyrannous. Any power exercised beyond democratically aggregated bodies, is, *by definition*, tyrannous

the individual's orientation to life is determined, not by his acceptance of the positive standards of community, but by his own personal aims which are restrained only by the legal power of authority [...]the *polis* has become the police (Watt 95).

Let's remember Fielding in his own words here when he proclaims that: “as I am the founder of a new province of writing, so I am at liberty to make what laws I please therein...” And, indeed, for Fielding it was not quite enough to *make the laws* for a mere *fictional* endeavor; for as the magistrate of London he would soon make them in *reality*. The very same year that *Tom Jones* was published (1749), Fielding helped to establish the first police force in all of Britain—the *Bow Street Runners*, which was, indeed, one of the first modern police forces in the world... I think we'd be foolin' ourselves if we said that the one did not help to lay the ground for the other.

Whenever Fielding expresses his anxious disdain for “things not worthy our mention” or “many others of inferior note”(71, 94) he provides us with what is, perhaps, the essential insight into that uncomfortable link between author and Authoritarian; for the former achieves on paper what the latter can only achieve by great violence in this world. In each case it is the attempt to omit large swathes of inconvenient souls, or the contradictory narratives they stand to relate. That the novel achieves this without blood is no less a testament to its violence.

Though it seems a forgone-conclusion to us moderns, the necessity of a police force was not at all obvious before the rise of private property. Indeed such a notion as a professional police force necessitated a whole slew of underpinning logics before it could even be realistically entertained—not the least of which was the logic of **professionalism**. Up until the advent of police, everyone could, and was *expected* to be a hero, and to come to the aid of their neighbors—**heroism** was still horizontally dispersed; *virtue* was the de-facto law. With the rise of the *professional* however, heroism is effectively monopolized by the police, and virtue thus

consolidated as the authority to enforce “Law”. Here is the moment when hero's truly die, and it is *the professional* that kills them.

We must accordingly imagine history as a process that makes the world a theater, and then a court. [...] on which the destiny of the peoples is first played out as epic before culminating in tragedy (if not comedy) (Balibar 1147).

Indeed, for Ian Watt the novel's “mode of imitating reality” was most reminiscent of “the jury in a court of law” which Hazlitt echoed in his assessment of Richardson's novels: “It is like reading evidence in a court” (34). What is the consequence? Balibar: “The state of law that is born of this *history* no longer needs heroes or saints [i.e. the exercising of personal virtue] just institutional judges who relegate it to the private” (1164). And so the novel, as the agent of *history* is a sort of altar “on which the virtue of individuals [is] slaughtered” (1139), making the necessity of authority all but inescapable.

In *Tom Jones* the consolidation of virtue is already, arguably, in the works, for as Fielding writes “when a law giver sets down plainly his whole meaning, we are prevented from making him mean what we please ourselves” (124). And in a very important sense, that is what Fielding is doing: codifying virtue in its bourgeois form: laws. It is no accident that his most exemplary character, *Mr. Allworthy*—as an attorney who tries several characters for their indiscretions—is already acting as a *professional* dispenser of authority and the “steel of justice” (127). But then Fielding is of course writing in a time before virtue has been decidedly foreclosed. *Virtue* is here a ground of battle, ambiguously intertwined with matters of property, and justice, constantly shifting—everything that codified law cannot abide. And thus, throughout the whole period of the novel's emergence, the stress on a certain sort of personal virtue is still immense, as the emergent bourgeois culture industry attempts to safely evacuate from this paradigm. Basically the consensus among critics is that the novel is *good* so long as it does not incite aberrant behavior in those to whose station that behavior does not accord.

By in large, virtues do not change. Honesty, courage, and honorability are universally exalted. But to what these things apply is another matter. For what, as Proudhon said, is the *theft* of property when, “property is theft”? “The code of morality” according to Henry Mackenzie “must necessarily be enlarged in proportion to the state of manners to which cultivated eras give birth. As the idea of *property* made a crime of theft [so too] the necessary refinement in manners of highly-polished nations creates a variety of duties and offenses” (236 Nixon). For Mackenzie the paramount of these duties “apply to the great leading relations,” the first of which he gives is obedience to parents. And from here it is not a long distance to get obedience to one's state, and its laws, as the patriarchal family is simply a reproduction of the state at the lowest level.. The point is that, here, *relations* are always profoundly unequal; individuals do not relate to one another as equals, but always defer to a **hierarchy**; virtue is simply obedience. And those who do not obey are condemned to a state of exception. For if we are concertedly fed the individualistic imaginary of a Bourgeois Dream, we are, at the same time fed an imaginary which forever condemns the multitude to inchoate violence.

## The Most Conspicuous Omission...

For Fielding's part—given his manic preoccupation with meticulously cataloging each scene, and carefully discarding all but the *pertinent* and *probable*—we see him, more than once, swaying with vertigo before the bad-infinity of the “mob.” His first representation of this mob is portrayed in almost Hobbesian fashion, as being at war with itself. They are chaotic, irrationally violent, and comically inept. Perched before this vertiginous multitude, Fielding hastens to excise and negate huge swathes of unmentionables—often achieved by the most belittling and

derisive of means: making of them a joke. In some sense he is somewhat remorseful in regard to this treatment—which accounts for his numerous apologetics in regard to the practice of omission—but, never the less, he is compelled to omit. And are we not somewhat grateful that he has chosen to assume this authorial power? If only to spare us from the ponderousness of this thing? Because, here too—in the **voluminousness** of *Tom Jones*—is something of the novel's *spectacle*, since the longer we can be brought into any world, the more assuredly we will be inculcated into its logic (or, at the very least, detained from life).

Length—insofar as it is a sort of congealed temporality—seems to facilitate a *forgetting*. Indeed, in *Tom Jones*, there are numerous **contradictions** between the narrator's various dictates and his actual narrative conduct which the sheer amount of page, between, succeeds in facilitating—such that, at one point Fielding can write on one page “the world have paid too great a compliment to critics” indicting them, amazingly, for the same authoritarianism he had on a previous page claimed for himself: “the critics have been emboldened to assume a dictatorial power, and have so far succeeded, that they are now become the masters, and have the assurance to give laws.” This bumptiousness is, notably, facilitated by deftly enlisting the “process of time [by way of which] the clerk began to invade the power, and assume the dignity of his master” (188). And yet Fielding consistently prefaces each book with what a novel should *not* include, in effect, being the peremptory critic to his own authority. It seems there is an attempt to kick the ladder out from under him, as he sets these rules. But, again, this kicking-away-of-the-ladder is obfuscated by the sheer amount of page between these contradictory statements, which we can then hold together in a sort of double-think. But then, by the same token, there is perhaps a certain loop-hole in authority which this ponderousness threatens to throw open.

Because Fielding is so often telling us what a novel *should not* include, he finds it necessary to follow this, immediately, with his example of what the novel *should* include. But in doing so, the artist in Fielding (perhaps involuntarily impelled to preserve his own creative author) continually pushes over the boundaries he had just set for himself. And so the *artistic autonomy* which he cannot help preserving, cannot help overturning the authority his other half seems so doggedly intent on establishing. This is manifest in the problem of his desire to stay within the realm of “probability” and “history” while at once founding a form that necessitates the need for creative *improbability*—fiction—or what he calls “the marvelous”:

As for elves and fairies, and other such mummary, I purposely omit the mention of them, as I should be very unwilling to confine within any bounds those surprising imaginations, for whose vast capacity the limits of human nature are too narrow: whose works are to be considered as a new creation; and who have consequently just right to do what they will with their own (354).

And here, for once, is a *productive* omission. It would seem that, because authority reserves the right to its *own* unbounded liberty, it cannot help, from time to time, positing its own limitless potentiality—the infectious example of which is highly pernicious to its authority...

Can the novel be used to kill itself? Or does the kernel of the problem still remain: we are, after all, still firmly planted here, on our asses, in this peculiar seizure we call *reading*. The most conspicuous omission of all yet remains. Life. can we be said to be properly *alive*, so long as we are trapped behind our books? But let me be clear as to my definition of *alive* (it is very simple): face-to-face relations with other human beings and with the living world—preferably in a creative capacity. In short, *community*. If it is the case that we cannot attain this object, directly (if we have forgotten how to live, lack the courage, or, most troubling of all, if the material basis of lived life has crumbled away, and no longer exists in our modern society), the next question then is this: can we even console ourselves, in the act of reading novels, with the notion that we are *preparing* to be alive?



The economic system founded on isolation is a circular production of isolation. [...] from the automobile to the television, all goods selected by the spectacular system are also its weapons for a constant reinforcement of the conditions of isolation of 'lonely crowds.' The spectacle constantly rediscovers its own assumptions more concretely (Debord #28).

And before there was an automobile, or a television, what was it that more perfectly inaugurated this **isolation**, if not the novel? Gallagher: “when one closed the book, the emotions it generated were thought to be dispelled. In short, the novel provided its readers a seemingly free space in which to temporarily indulge imaginative play” (347). What is the utility of the novel here if not to dispose of play? Dispose of emotion? Dispose of life? Gallagher: “reading a novel, like sleeping, is a controlled situation within which one needn't exercise control. Pleasure, on this account, would partly arise from the ability to choose a state—suspended disbelief—that could then be experienced in a passive mode” (348). ...To read is to sleep! Not only that, it is *self-imposed* sleep! But then is there even the consolation of dreams here, when, for Gallagher, the chief pleasure in reading is not imagining ourselves as a character, but precisely the sensation of *not* being a character:

The implicit contrast between the reader, with her independent embodied self-hood that pretends to need no alibi of reference in order to achieve significance, and the character [...] forever tethered to the abstraction of type, can even be played upon to produce a vicarious desire, as the imagined desire of the character, for the immanence the reader possesses (361).

So, *the character* here functions to sub-textually flatter us with their desire to *be* us—to be in our place, to be precisely passive spectators, as we take pleasure from our non-participation in life ...your in good company if you feel the need to vomit. For Gallagher, it is “the fictional character's incompleteness [which] allows us to experience an uncanny desire to be that which we are”(361). ...But *are* we? Are we *really*?

Seems to me a sort of desperate assertion of our ontological security: *I am alive!*  
*Oh how I love being alive, unlike you silly characters!* ...Or is it more straight forward

than this? Why do we read, untimely, if not to gain some actionable insight into our own life? In any case the novel is, for Lukacs, in some ways alien to life. It arises, first and foremost, out of “loneliness”—a particular sort of loneliness which “has become a problem unto itself [...] the torment of a creature condemned to solitude and devoured by a longing for community” (45). Is the novel responding to the problem of loneliness, or reproducing it? That there is the “unbridgeable chasm between the reality that is, and the ideal that should be” (78). That there is Word...

## ...LIFE

The remainder of this prolegomena will have little resemblance to what preceded it. Take a breath; this here has to do with **life**; this is about Hip-Hop. And as we proceed it may become clear that much of the death and dysfunction we associate with this culture are merely resonances of the past, from which we are emerged. If the novel is ever to be useful to us again, we cannot merely append hip-hop to it. We can’t take it up as it lies; we must re-imagine it. So, as we pass the remainder of the prolegomena, my hope is that in passing through the living vitality of this culture—of which I’ll do my utmost to give just report—you may find yourself *going native*. That is to say, I hope that we no longer think of how the *novel* can make use of *hip-hop*, and start thinking about how *hip-hop* can make use of a novel.

## A Brief Mythology of HIP-HOP, Part 1 (Imaginary Origins)

Hip hop culture gives its participants the power to redefine themselves and their history, not by omission or selective emphasis, but by embracing *all* of their previous experience as material for self-expression in the present moment (Schloss 43).

The historical origins of Hip-Hop, like those of anything else we ever thought worth remembering, are largely **myth**. But that doesn't mean it's a myth not worth telling... if not for its strict veracity, then for what it says about *us*. After all, where we profess to have come from says less about where we *were*, as it does about where we, the living, wish to *go*. As Jeff Chang put it “sometimes factualities and factologies matter less than the myths we want to believe” (91). I, for my part, cannot live by fact alone. I need something that moves me in my total being—and *reason* is but one of many passions.

A *foundational myth*, in as much as it appreciates the peculiar tyranny of “history” and the stifling limitations of what Bloch called “fact-warship” (xi), is perfectly suited to hip-hop: here is a way to engage the past which allows us to project our creative agency *backward* in time, in order to grasp hold of our present, and propel ourselves into a future *we* choose. At the same time, this, hip-hop's unique means of treating its past, will give us some insight into the way it *tells stories*, and thus its possible narrative mode—one less concerned with “the past”, as with how a past can be *used* to effect a certain present—making history conform to *our* needs, instead of the other way round. In light of this, and in opposition to the supposedly *objective* account we call “history”, I propose **thisory** (this-story): a recognition of the inescapable subjectivity, partisanship, and selective memory, inherent in any remembrance of things past, as well as an appreciation of the multitude of interpretations and competing variations that accompany any truly democratic account of history. This here is simply one account.

This-story begins with the drawing of a line. It starts on paper undoubtedly—a red marker, dragged thoughtlessly across a map of the Bronx. The problem is when it moves off that paper, and into the world...

(In absence of permission rights, imagine here an image. It is a high vista of somewhere in the Bronx, around 1940 or 50. Except we are not quite looking at a *city* here, but rather a gaping chasm where someone's neighborhood used to be. In the bottom, crawling along this open wound of raw NYC earth, we can imagine an army of earthmoving machines, kicking up clouds of dust, and spewing a ceaseless clatter of noise and light, day and night. The trench spans about a hundred feet deep, by 200 feet wide. Its devastation continues off into a hazed horizon, far beyond the power of our vision to see.)

The Bronx, largely peaceful in the post WWII period, was one of the most diverse and vibrant places on earth—notably serving as a cultural hub for Latin and African American music. However, the quality of life in the South Bronx began to rapidly decline in the 60's owing in large part to the construction of the **Cross-Bronx Expressway**. Marshall Berman: "The motive forces in this reconstruction were the multi-billion dollar Federal Highway Program and the vast suburban housing initiatives [...] this new order integrated the whole nation into a unified flow whose lifeblood was the automobile. It conceived of cities principally as obstructions to the flow of traffic, and as junkyards of substandard housing and decaying neighborhoods from which Americans should be given every chance to escape" (307).

The line took 15 years to carve out. Along with liquidating entire neighborhoods in its way, it succeeded in devastating the land value, which, coupled with the emergent suburban/consumerist/car culture induced the flight of the middle classes—literally *driving* them out, at once as it provided their means of escape. The man who lead the exodus, appropriately

enough, was an urban developer named *Robert Moses*:

You must concede that this Bronx slum and others in Brooklyn and Manhattan are unrepairable. They are beyond rebuilding, tinkering, and restoring. They must be leveled to the ground (Berman 230).

There was an idea in currency at this time, amongst those in power, that *the city*—what with its intimate and innately social quarters—was a potential a site of threatening, even revolutionary activity. Moses' predecessor, *Le Corbusier* made it nice and plain: “Architecture or revolution? Revolution can be avoided” (167). And in place of the city he proposed “a spatially and socially segmented world—people here, traffic there; work here, homes there; rich here, poor there; barriers of [...] concrete in between” (169). It was, in a very real sense, an attempt to *kill* the city—an urban policy euphemistically referred to as “benign neglect” by the Nixon administration, but actively engineered as what Berman called the *expressway world*. Because, as Le Corbusier had realized, if we wished to kill the city, “we must kill the street!” (168). It was the street where all things ran up against each other and came into dialogue. The last site of community. And so, as Berman puts it, “no streets, no people” (167).

Indeed, there had been massive rioting in most cities following the assassination of the messianic figures of the previous decade, as well as a high degree of political organization by cadre groups like the *Black Panthers*. This rapid divestment of capital—a sort of economic strangulation of the inner-cities—was quite a deliberate act to kill this tendency, along with the city itself. All but the citadel of course... Chang: “The business interests behind the master plan wanted to transform Manhattan into a center of wealth, connected directly to the suburbs” (11), and consign the rest of the city to fly-over space. Meanwhile, city officials called for *planned shrinkage*: “in which health, fire, police, sanitation, and transit services would be removed from the inner cities until all the people that remained had to leave, too—or be left behind. Already schools had been closed and abandoned, after first being starved of arts and music programs”

(Chang 18). Soon landlords begin burning down their empty properties en-mass to collect insurance, at the same time as “the *removal* of no less than seven fire companies from the Bronx after 1968 [...] Between 1973 and 1977, 30,000 fires were set in south Bronx alone” (Chang 11). By 1970, following the federal government’s refusal to offer any aid to the city during a particularly dire financial crisis, this infamous NY Post headline sums it up tidy: “Ford to City: Drop Dead” (Chang 10).

Naturally, following the ghettoization of the South Bronx, there was an explosion of **gang** affiliation. According to the New York Times in 1973 “virtually every neighborhood” had a gang, composed largely of the children of immigrants, “southern Blacks living alongside Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Jamaicans and a handful of working-poor whites” (Chang, Hoch 350). Partly a product of youthful ennui, partly lack of employment and the general angst of abandonment, they formed mostly as a simple consequence of the age-old law governing that peculiar contagion called *violence*: if the tribe down the way have formed a state, *you* need a state; if the neighborhood next-over has a gang, *you* need a gang. Because, as our boy Montesquieu said, the only way to arrest power is by an *equal* and *opposing* power. And so, as a practical matter, these gangs could defend against roving gangs of unchecked police, and the incursion of marauding biker gangs from the north, who had begun to introduce a steady stream of heroin into their neighborhoods. Schloss: “Neighborhoods knew that they were responsible for their own well-being, and this inevitably drew each block closer together as a social unit” (142). Soon enough these gangs became so powerful that they had all but supplanted the police in many areas. They even joined together engaging in unified campaigns, at times. “Ghetto Brothers, Savage Nomads, Roman Kings, the Brothers & Sisters, and the Black Spades all came down [...] roved down blocks, buildings, and allies looking for heroin addled [junkies]” (Chang

50). ...A pregnant moment. But the same sense of abandonment which drew them closer together, also polarized one gang from the other. They soon turned on one another, carving up the Bronx in a criss-cross of battle lines, inaugurating a state of perpetual war.

There is a profound way in which the absence here of the state has allowed for the real emergence of **community**. But it is hobbled from the start by a lingering dependence. Deep down, there remains a yearning; there is a sense that they are waiting. Still, holding out hope, on the day that some lost authority might return, and, for once, meet them, with something other than the back of its hand...

Is my desire infantile? [or] is the situation we live in infantile[?] That the life is given to us, the law is given to us. In an infantile situation life is given for nothing; and the law is given without anything (sans rien), without a possible discussion. But what I want is the opposite: I want to live my life and if possible to give life [...] The person who is in an infantile level is the person who is apolitical and conformist [...] the person who replaces the private father with the social anonymous father (Castoriadis 83).

In this state of generalized warfare, inter-neighborhood travel in the Bronx was made almost impossible. You could be assaulted, raped, even occasionally killed for your affiliation, or impressed into membership for your lack thereof. The gangs ruled supreme. One of these gangs was called the *Ghetto Brothers*. The Ghetto Brothers were not above any of it, but they still held tight to an ember of idealism from the 60's, sometimes occupying themselves with aiding their community, and even facilitating peace between the other gangs. One of their most beloved members, an ex-junkie by the name of *Black Benji*, who served as a *peacekeeper*. While attempting to broker peace between gangs, he was murdered.

Everyone talks about *reading*. Reading, reading, reading... to me reading is just a measure of the control that we're able to exhibit over these kids. The chief means of communication up there is *talk*. And those kids wanna talk to each other [...] Black Benji was most proud of his rap; a guy with a good rap is a respected man, and that's one of the main reasons Benji was respected: cause when he rapped all kinds of things changed. [...] things got better when Benji opened his mouth (*Ain't Gonna Eat My Mind*, Manny Domingues).

To be sure, there is at this historical moment a collapse of the messianism of the 60's—MLK, Malcolm X, Fred Hampton, the Kennedys—are dead. The vanguardist parties—the

Panthers, Young Lords, Weathermen—have been decimated, shattered into factional gangs under the pressure of COINTELPRO, locked in ceaseless internecine war. Anything that proceeds from this moment will forever be weary of the heartbreak of having leaders. But then **leaderless-ness** is the precondition of self-organization. And **neglect**? That is the fertile ground of self-sufficiency—of self-governance. It was precisely this *neglect* which the State & Capital presumed would kill the city. Instead it seems only to have expedited this, the most unconscionable response of all. For what if someone was to say, we ought to *welcome* our neglect? What if we said *leave us alone*?

What if we said *We don't need you*...

And this is what haunts their dreams... Following the death of Black Benji there was a vocal contingent which called for retaliatory attacks—which would surely have engulfed the whole of the Bronx in a war of unprecedented violence. But then, as the myth goes, *Karate Charley*, the leader of the Ghetto Brothers, went to visit Benji's bereaved mother. And as he set to console her with his ensuing revenge, she rebuffed his consolation. Instead she entreated him to sue for peace and honor her son with that for which he had died. Indeed, the death of Benji precipitated a generalized fatigue of the violence, which, at the behest of the Ghetto Brothers, would culminated in an event known as the **Hoe Avenue Peace Treaty**: a meeting between various street gangs in the Hoe Avenue Community Center, **South Bronx**, 1971, during which—in accord with the mythology—a new era of enduring peace was secured... If Benji serves here as our *martyr*, then Hoe Ave is the moment when we make our definitive break from death, and take the way of life.



## A Brief Mythology of HIP-HOP, Part 2 (...*Metaphysic Acts*)

‘That particular night, one thing I noticed’ a resident would later say, ‘they were not hurting each other. They weren’t fighting with each other, they weren’t killing each other’ (Chang, 12)

It may be that the greatest gift our fathers can give us is the freedom to overcome them. The peace of Hoe Avenue seems to realize this—these O.G's suffice as our fore-fathers. Now the way is clear. And yet, oddly enough, it does not start here in the Bronx. Let it be chisel-tipped in perpetuity that the first blossom to burst through and make for the light, would come out of the shattered sidewalks of Philadelphia.

The first to *mark the wall* is thought to be a teen from north Philly known as “Cornbread”—A prolific and notorious **wall-writer**<sup>8</sup> whose exploits included the swooning of *Cynthia*, death, resurrection, and the *bombing* of the elephant at the Philadelphia Zoo, on which he wrote “Cornbread Lives” (*Bomb It*). He receives this *name* from a cook, while detained in a juvenile detention facility somewhere outside Philadelphia (it is given in honor of his ceaseless appeals for something other than white bread). Shortly after being bestowed the name, Cornbread will *take up the name*, and proceed to *mark the wall*. These are the first two of five archetypal actions which I call **Metaphysic Acts**. They will serve both as *concrete*, inceptive moments in the mythology of Hip-Hop, at once as they are timeless *metaphysical* actions, which connect us back to a founding, and forward to yet greater communities which may remain unseen, but whose presence can be attested to by the symbolic gesture of, among other things, a **Tag**: A small rendition of a word or symbol, which one has some affinity to. Often written with a marker. The foundation of all **graffiti**, innovated and proliferated en-mass by children—

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<sup>8</sup> I.e. a practitioner of *graffiti*, (historically the terms “graffiti”, “rap” and “break-dancing” were not used within Hip-Hop culture. These were terms that were applied by mediating entities outside, and antagonistic to Hip-Hop, as a means of usurping its self-determination, recuperating and codifying it)

perhaps the first act ever perpetrated in the spirit of **HIP-HOP**.

Up to this moment the walls of this particular facility had been scrawled with many given names, and the names of gangs. But Cornbread is the first to write a tag. After he is released he will proceed to writing it everywhere. *Cool Earl, Titty, Chewy*, and *Kool Klepto Kidd* will follow. Philly too is riven with gangs at this moment. One way around this, as *BUTCH* attests: “Write on a wall...”

This was illegal, right. However we didn't see it that way; we saw it as something that was necessary to fulfill our sense of belonging, in neighborhoods that didn't offer a whole lot, you know? Society didn't offer us a whole lot, so we had, pretty much, to make lives for ourselves (*Sly Artistic City, SATCH*)

From here Wall-writing moves to NYC where it explodes, overnight. Mailer: “Names had grown all over walls—a jungle of ego creepers and tendrils had flowered through a series of psychic rainstorms which passed like unwritten history over New York” (8). Indeed those psychic storms are the rain dance of the gangs.

Young graffiti writers were the advanced guard of a new culture; they literally blazed trails out of the gang generation. Crossing demarcated turfs [...] slipping through the long arms and high fences of authority, violating notions of property and propriety (Chang 73).

The significance of the peace treaty cannot be overstated. It allows passage between formerly gang-riven neighborhoods, which in turn, facilitates a new period of cultural exchange. The spirit in the air is celebratory. People want to dance in the open, party in the light of day. **DJ's** begin hosting *block-parties*, and *jams* in the park, and opening them to people from every neighborhood and borough. The large parties are formative events. Former rivals intermingle. Suddenly all those burned-out, vacated buildings become improvised dance clubs in the winter, or clubhouses for kids, as they goad each other on, in strange new dances. There are new ways to express ourselves...

Around this time A Wall-writer known as *Kool Herc* gets himself a James Brown record. Herc comes from Jamaica, where as a boy he sees some of the first *soundsystems*—the complex

of speakers and DJ equipment necessary for large parties. the DJ, though respected, is less of an idol as a mere *facilitator*—what the Jamaicans call a “selector”—beholden to the crowd, deftly reading their bodily cues, and tailoring the musical selection to its rhythms. It is a new sort of musical paradigm, which unlike the music-industrial paradigm, has no artist to foreground, and thus de-centers the focal point of the event from the *professional* on stage, to the crowd itself. The *center* is now anywhere and everywhere. Chang: “The soundsystems democratized pleasure” (29). As Herc and his family move to the Bronx to escape the escalating violence and instability of Jamaica, the knowledge of the DJ stows away within him

As he throws his first parties Herc notices that when he plays a certain part in the middle of certain funk records, the bodies in the crowd become agitated, as by some ecstatic energy. This part of the record is called the **Beat Break**: a percussive rhythm—that portion of a song during which all instruments drop out except the drums, and the drummer proceeds to get funky. This is the moment when “a groove is distilled to its most fundamental elements” (Schloss 18). DJ Kool Herc’s epiphanous notion is to **loop** this part of the song, using two records—an idea which he debuts while DJing his sister’s back-to-school party at their apartment, 1520 Sedgwick ave, South Bronx, 1973. It is this *looping of the break* which is generally considered to be the birth of the culture. And so the myth goes...

Herk had striped down and let go of everything, save the most powerful basic elements—the rhythm [...] the new culture seems to whirl backward and forward—a loop of history, history as loop—calling and responding, leaping, spinning, renewing [...] the seam disappears (Chang 85)

This sort of *releasing* of the narrative from “linear and temporal constraints” (112) can, perhaps, most succinctly be expressed by the simple yet profound act of rebellion first perpetrated by a young *Grand Wizzard Theodore*... the **scratch**: the distinct sound caused by nimbly moving a record under the needle with one's hands. For the longest time turn-tables were kept under a glass case; something to be seen and heard, but never touched so long as they were

in motion. Theodore's mother is credited here with having precipitated the discoverer of the scratch as a creative act, by yelling at her son to turn down his music, which caused him to immediately drop his hand on the record, thereby upending a time immemorial commandment, at once as instigating the 3<sup>rd</sup> *Metaphisic act* of HIP HOP: *the setting of hands on revolution*. It was an act of Promethean courage, rebellion, truly, that these young people, had the courage to reach out and touch that turning plate. That there is HIP-HOP.

No one more actively engaged in the myth-making of hip-hop than a former Black Spade named *Afrika Bambaataa*, himself something of a “myth above temporality” (90). After Hoe Ave, he begins throwing huge parties in the courtyard of his project complex, to which he extends invitation to peoples west of the Bronx River—traditionally the dividing line between Puerto Rican and Black gang territories. At his parties, *Bam* begins to preach certain organizing principles, cohering to this thing that is coming into being... *Peace, Unity, Having Fun...* Chang: “Bam's sound became a rhythmic analogue to his peace-making philosophy; his set-lists had the same kind of inclusiveness and broadmindedness he was aspiring to build [...] he played salsa, rock, and soca with the same enthusiasm as soul and funk. He was making himself open to the good in everything” (97). Here was “something that signaled life.”

In this particular strand of the mythology, there is an echo of the Black Benji incident: In 1975, Bam's cousin, *Soulsky* is killed under suspicious circumstances by police. “the *Peacemakers* gang had already declared open season on police and firefighters. Other gang leaders called Bambaataa to offer their support should he choose to declare war on the cops” (Chang 99). Once again there is a clamor to retaliate, once again the choice is life. The mythology is unmistakably clear... After ascending to its leadership, Bam, almost single-handedly reforms the Black Spades into a *new* sort of gang; a *peaceful* gang which will proceed

to devote itself to organizing and spreading this new culture and its righteous way—the way of life. The new gang is called the *Universal Zulu Nation*, and it will go on to introduce hip-hop culture to nearly every corner of the world...

But lets back spin this joint for a beat; back to that moment of birth... If the “tag” is the moment of *inception*, it is the “looping of the break” which is the moment of *conception*. The heart at the center of this new mode of life does not receive its rightful pulse until that beat-break is looped—definitively transforming the *beat-break* into a *break-beat*. It is this **break** which orders and concatenates the culture that will follow. Out of this come genuine HIP-HOP **DJing** and **B-Boying/B-Girling**—“born as twins, and there mother was the break” (Schloss 19). It is Herc who names them “B” boys after the break, and so the one element seems to give motion to the other. Yet there is no hierarchy in this relation, for as Herc himself ascends, he was merely responding to the captivating rhythms of the people's bodies:

I'd never seen it before. First, they hopped, then they stepped, then abruptly dropped to a squat with legs straight, on the snare drum note and popped back up into standing (Holman 32)

For Schloss “it was the dee-jay's recognition of, and service to, the b-boy's needs that prompted the birth of hip-hop” (28). Like Wall-Writing, I hold B-boying to be a *vanguard* element. As the *physical* element of hip-hop, it is a discipline requiring comprehensive fitness including flexibility, balance, rhythm, strength, endurance, and mental agility. A *dance* firstly, it is also very much sport, both competitive and cooperative, which, at once, allows for near boundless creativity. This continuous mutation as a dance, in addition to its immanence to the body, make b-boying especially resistant to commodification. The dance is composed primarily of *uprock*, *downrock*, *freezes*, and *power-moves*. But what is truly the defining act here—indeed the 4<sup>th</sup> Metaphysic Act—is the act of *getting down*. It is this moment—the first moment that

someone decided to “drop”: to go down, and stay down—which remains an enduring mystery B-Boy mythology.

This is the moment that I question all the time [...] when I think about breaking I just think about just going-the-fuck-off, fast, with footwork [...] there was a moment when I think it happened—I'm leaning toward '74, '75 (*Ken Swift Interview 2012*).

What there is no dispute about is that the act of getting down, and *staying* down came as a natural progression of looping the break: “this moment is the moment that is nasty. When [a DJ] continue[s] a nasty moment, the dancing has to *stay* nasty; it has to continue...” (Ibid) And, to be sure, out of this moment eventually comes the final and most fraught element of Hip-Hop:

**MCing.** DJ's like Herc are themselves the first *Masters of Ceremony*, which initially consists of short rudimentary addresses to the crowd—announcing the occasion, telling somebody their car is getting towed, or just generally rallying the jam. This eventually leads to creatively rhymed refrains which coincide with the beat. Schloss: “The dancers excitement over the breaks led deejays to accentuate those sections” which in turn “provided emcees with an isolated rhythm that they could rhyme over, which gave them the opportunity to develop longer and more complex rhymes” which in turn “gave the DeeJay license to play more breaks, which lead to more rhymes as the cycle continued”(151).

For my part, MCing culture does not hit its stride until the 90's, particularly on the West Coast where the **freestyle** and **battling**—originally developed as a consequence of the improvised, competitive form of B-boying—are adapted to MCing. It's in places like *Lemeirt Park*, and *The Good life* open-mic cafe in Los Angeles, as well as the Bay Area, where MCing is developed to an exceptional degree—not only as the *verbal*, manifestation of the culture, but as a social *practice*. And out of this practice—the freestyle/battling of B-Boys and MCs—comes the next great innovation of hip-hop... **the cypher**: a spontaneous gathering of either MC's or B-

Boys who form a circle and take turns battling in an improvised or freestyled manner. It is in this environment that the final Metaphysic Act can be spoken of: the act of *getting open*.

And with that we have *the 5 Metaphysic Acts of Hip-Hop*: (1) taking up the name (2) marking the wall (3) setting of hands on a revolution (4) getting down, & (5) getting open... All of which may serve as guiding templates for any future hip-hop narrative, and ought to stand opposed to that shallow and worn out narrative of the Bourgeois Dream, but also, the inveterate individualist subjectivity of the novel. What makes these acts *metaphysical*, is that they are all, in a profound way, transcendent of their mere physicality, and thus the individual who performed them. They each invoke what Camus understood as **solidarity**. For Camus all acts of solidarity are metaphysical (17)—by asserting the existence of a community, which may or may not exist, the effect of this assertion is to actually *will* community into being. Coincidentally, for Camus, solidarity in its arche form is none other than the act of rebellion... But this *metaphysics* could constitute an entire chapter of its own, and it ought to be taken as very fertile ground for any future synthesis of hip-hop and the novel.

As it is this also concludes my introduction of *the 4 Elements of Hip-Hop*: (1) Wall-Writing (2) Djing (3) B-Boying/B-Girling, and (4) MCing—the visual, aural, physical and oral manifestations of a unified culture. Is MCing the “last element” of hip-hop? Of course not. There is no justifiable hierarchy in this thing. Indeed, there is not much that is a consensus in hip-hop except, maybe, that one ought to *give it up for the DJ*... But even that is perhaps a matter of dispute. Many wall-writers do not even consider themselves to be part of this culture, so tenuously held together by what Schloss verily calls this “elements mythology” (37). But if there is such a thing as *hip-hop*, then it is simply **the idea** of it which holds it together—our will to give human meaning to the savage incoherence of space and time. As such *The Bronx* is

undoubtedly hip-hop's spiritual homeland. Not because it is the origin of any element—indeed it is not the uncontested source of even one element!—but because it was the mythic place where they first *coalesced*, into one.

Each element has too many strands of influence to mire ourselves in this game of *who was the first...* These basic elements are ubiquitous in human cultures the world over, and of every epoch. Their origins are as old as humanity itself. What, after all, is that first red-ochre hand print on a cave wall, if not graffiti? How are we to believe that no dancer ever *got down* prior to 1973, or rhymed 2 words together, under a tree in Africa? This belongs to the world in the realist sense—it is, in a manner of speaking, a **global-indigenous culture**. And so what truly defines, and truly *distinguishes* this, as *a culture*, is not its discrete and timeless elements, but the extraordinary notion that they could be set into *relation*.

Hip-hop culture is now over three decades old: does it not have its own internal continuities? If it does not, then hip-hop constitutes not only a new musical genera, but truly a new *kind* of cultural practice (Schloss 18).

The thing that truly distinguishes hip-hop from all preceding movements is the notion of connecting the various modes of creation. The visual, the physical, the oral and the aural... why would you even think to connect these diverse elements? Up until hip-hop no other movement had even attempted to make a unitary project of art, with the possible exception of the Situationists. This notion that there is something common, an underlying spirit, connecting all these things—not just to each other, but to all preceding movements in general, and most of all, to life—it must come from an implicit understanding that there is power in the creative act, and thus that there is something to be gained by pooling this power. And this is what forms the ontological foundation of hip-hop; For, in hip-hop, “things” are not what constitute the fundamental constituent of matter. For hip-hop the *real* “thing” is the space *between* things: the **relation**... which is, naturally, the demise of all lines.



## On the *Imaginary* of HIP-HOP

And so the foundational myth of hip-hop is, in many ways, an *epic of unification*. In the beginning, there is nothingness—devastation, neglect, a state of ceaseless and inarticulate violence. Out of this comes unity. But it is against this cosmological backdrop—what Castoriadis calls the **imaginary of chaos**—that hip-hop first imagines itself, and which is, as it happens, the *prerequisite* of unity. For if we imagine that we originate from a universe where everything is already as it ought to be—i.e. the *Abrahamic* imaginary, where all is logically ordered by a benevolent god (later to be handled by our eminently logical state, and its sublimely efficient economy)—if we imagine this to be the case, then what need is there for *us* to get involved? Indeed, if we believe this then there is nothing left for us to do but obey.

But if, on the other hand, it is understood that the universe is chaos, and life has no meaning but what we give to it, then we might as well get-up with one another and build; we might as well make the world as *we* see fit, in this short time we are here. In this way hip-hop's imaginary is strikingly similar to that which gave rise to **democracy**; for it is understood here, right from the jump, that the “gods” are *not* gonna to be looking out for us mere mortals. Schloss: “As [NYC] was abandoned by the federal government and working-class neighborhoods were abandoned by [NYC], youth in those neighborhoods were in turn, abandoned by traditional institutions that were supposed to care” (125). There is generalized neglect. This is a new, post-father world; and we are not so sure that we want them back. That being the case, the matter is quite simple: If we wish to live together peacefully, productively, and in a manner that is funky, we're gonna have to see to it *ourselves*. First things first; no one is going to provide us with a culture. We must make one...

(In lieu of permission rights, imagine here an image of Charlotte St., South Bronx in the 1970s. In the background, on the opposite side of the street, is a row of 6 burned-out brick shells (former tenement buildings) tapering off toward the desolate horizon. Each window is a black chasm, the outsides mottled with the scorching heat of some past blaze, as heaps of rubble from the gutted interiors rings the perimeter of the block. In the foreground, this side of the street, is a battered hydrant spilling itself into the garbage-clogged gutter. There is no life at all...)

As Bill Adler writes, it's an image like this that "helps us to understand one of hip-hop's central paradoxes—it was an arid landscape indeed that gave birth to this endlessly fertile culture" (Chang 112). It is against this backdrop that Ariefdien & Abrahams can describe hip-hop in uncannily democratic terms “as the resilience of the human spirit, that process of transforming yourself and your environment [...] For us hip-hop grassroots-ifies or makes street the magical role of the act of creation in the face of oppression” (Chang 262). And it is precisely in the face of this absurd and pointless universe that we discover our profoundest power.

We affirm our superiority to mere existence because we dare to create (Read 76).

There is one last myth which forms the bookend of hip-hop's early, foundational mythology. This is the proverbial Judas moment—the moment when the revolution is betrayed... the **Sugar Hill Gang** was, as Chang relates it “assembled in a New Jersey afternoon, they were a studio creation that never stepped on a stage.” There one hit, *Rappers Delight*, “was tailor made to travel, to be accessible to folks who had never heard of rap or hip-hop, or the Bronx” (132). But most importantly, this is the moment when MCing breaks from the other elements, becoming a “passive experience [...] the b-boys disappeared and [...] rap became the focal point [...] DJ's were no longer at the center of the music” (Ibid). This is what Chang calls “the first death of hip-hop.” It is of course an exaggeration. Hip-hop is not eradicated so much

as it is split. Heretofore there will be a cohort which views hip-hop as a resource to be exploited for profit, and another which profess to preserve hip-hop's original and subversive function in a metaphysical space known as the *underground*. Roberta Uno explains it like this:

Hip-hop has been globalized on two parallel yet permeable tracks: One track is top-down globalization of the market place and global capital; it is insidious, omnipresent, and incredibly sophisticated. The majority of rap, for example, has been promoted as urban black culture and ironically is sold in the suburbs to white consumers. The second parallel track is the ground-up, grassroots globalization of hip-hop, which has been embraced by communities across the lines of race, class, and ethnicity worldwide (Chang 300)

And so a more complicated image of the **villain** of this *narrative* begins to develop. It is not enough to blame the state & capital and be done. For there is “permeability” here. The true villain of the hip-hop mythos is that which is ever-present *inside* the hero, herself... that inside of us which would succumb to greed and authority and betray the peoples and the places from which we came. And this is why we must “battle” amongst *ourselves*, first. Because MCing, after Rappers Delight (ARD), does not so much split off from the culture as it splits within itself. And from this emerges a culturally hermetic commercial form which can be called **rap**. Schloss, for one, explicitly distinguishes between *hip-hop culture* and *rap music*. The former “suggests something that is lived rather than bought and sold,” and, in particular, “activities like b-boying and graffiti writing are simply not well suited to [**commodification**]” (Schloss 5). On the other hand, *rap music* “is deeply inter-twined with mass media and its needs, largely because it *does* have a product” (Ibid).

As to what's called **urban lit**, it suffices to say it has taken more or less the same track as rap—except that there was never an original, uncommodified form. As it is, the attitude, style, and motivation to write this sort of lit could be largely boiled down to Danyel Smith's aptly chosen phrase: “fuck you—and pay me” (Chang 193). Though I

sympathize with the first part, it's that second part which calls that first part into question. When profit is the primary object, one has to wonder if this "fuck you" is anything but the performance of profitable—easily consumed stereotypes, draped over the dusty, but tried conventions of the novel; an even more desperately inured rendition of the *bourgeois dream*, decked out with the empty signifiers of hip-hop. In any case, like rap, street-lit as we know it, has almost nothing to do with hip-hop. And yet it was this proffering of a commodity (the first being Rappers Delight) which officially inculcates hip-hop aesthetics into the global capitalist market, thereby rapidly disseminating the *idea* of hip-hop to the rest of the world. And what an idea it has been.

Because rap facilitated this ambivalent dissemination, there is a sense in which Sugar Hill was a *necessary* and fruitful betrayal. As Chang says, "the breakthrough may not have happened any other way" (131). Then again, what did hip-hop have to give up to in order to give itself to the world? It comes down to a seemingly simple question which any future synthesis of hip-hop & the novel can never cease to ask itself: Can hip-hop pass through a commodified form—become a record, become a canvas, become a novel—and remain hip-hop? Can life be congealed into this living death, and reemerge as life? ...Can **the end** justify **the means**...?

This will be an enduring conundrum for any future synthesis of hip-hop and the novel. A conundrum which will continue to call its very being into question.

On a final note, the last thing here which is necessary to understand about hip-hop, BRD, is that, not only were the elements still organically related, but, even more, there was no **division of labour**. As BOM5 attests, "almost everybody did everything at one time" (Schloss 54). B-boys wrote on walls, wall-writers DJed, and DJ's MCed. "The

interaction between different forms of expression also naturally led to a kind of artistic cross-pollination that made each form stronger” (Schloss 83), and which is now largely lost, because of the pervasive logic of professionalism... *Professionalism*, which says that one should concentrate on one, abstracted field of knowledge, because if you cannot be *the best* at something, or make money by it, it is not worth doing. For Harry Allen it is Sugar Hill that marks the end of hip-hop as a metaphysically unified phenomena, and its descent back into inarticulate chaos. There is *BRD*, and *ARD*, and the time *BRD* is defined by the integrated relation of the elements “united in a way that they would never be again” (Chang 7).

Is there no way to re-unify them...?

### *Fuck with your Soul, Like Aether...*

There was, for the Zulus, another, lesser known element. Elusively vague, Bambataa articulated the 5<sup>th</sup> *Element* as “Knowledge, Culture, & Understanding.” That this final element was distinct from the others was clear. That it was distinct in particular from the element of MCing should be appreciable; for, muscular though it may be, it would seem apparent that it was understood that the *poetic* manifestation of hip-hop could not be expected to solely bear the burden of articulating and disseminating knowledge/understanding. *Knowledge* here—in accord with the analogy of ancient elements—is that 5<sup>th</sup> element called **aether**: that which binds the other elements together, and without which they go flying off into disunity, and eventual oblivion. Something is needed here to act the aether, which the short-form of the poetic has attempted mightily, but against which it has been pulled asunder. *Knowledge, culture understanding*, so it seems, need a *long-form*,

Before we go any further down that path, it is necessary to understand what we mean by **knowledge** when we talk about *hip-hop*. For, in hip-hop, *knowledge* is not strictly cerebral...

“Hipness and nerdishness both begin with the mastery of a symbolic field; what the latter lacks is controlled economy of revelation, a sense of when and how things are to be spoken of. [...] Knowledge [...] assumes the air of instinctuality only when it is transformed into a set of gestures enacted across time. The stances of hip require that knowledge and judgment be incorporated into bodily self-presentation (Straw 108)

And in this we have the image of the B-Boy stance: as a sort of bodily invocation of historical knowledge—**bodily-wisdom**—which bridges the binary between body and mind, conceptual and lived—which is to say living knowledge. The “hipness” here is, as Straw colors it, a sort of militant intellectualism, which is distinguished from cheap “nerdishness” (insular academia) by its *praxis*—it has been validated by experience, and the material exigencies of the world. But it has also been earned, for this is a guarded knowledge which you must be communally squirmed into, and which is transacted by way of respect. You can’t buy into hip-hop or take an entrance exam—somebody’s gotta actually *like* your ass, first, before they *do the knowledge*, and then you gotta *show-&-prove* in that cypher, which brings us to the “hop”.

According to KRS One’s classic entomology: *hip* = intelligent, *hop* = movement, and so *hip-hop* is “intelligent movement” (*Hip-Hop Lives*). But as we have already noted the aspect of movement is already inherent in the hip as “gesture” and “bodily presentation.” Therefore, the *Hop* is not simply denoting movement, but a particular mode of movement. The *Hop* is manifestly, doubling down on hip-hop’s nature as actively lived, but it does so in order to refine, in yet more bodily terms just what character that movement



Figure 1: The B-boy stance. Stationary, rooted, proud; a supreme gesture of solidarity with one’s place of being, and one’s self—hence the self-hugging. A resounding rejection of the pathology of escape. Photo self

ought to assume: **a leap**. And the 'hop' is, Indeed, in so many ways, a *leap of faith*. Whether mustering the courage to *get open* in a cypher, or to *go down*, to *touch the record*, or to *mark the wall*, or even just to *take up the name*, every time we enact one of the sacred *Metaphysic Acts*, it is a gesture of faith, of **militant optimism**. Schloss: “...one must project an absolute certainty that, if one does something valuable, no matter how subtle, it *will* be appreciated” (43).

But it is also a leap that is meant to look effortless—a mere *hop*. And thus, a *confident* leap... For it has no other choice. The initial leap has no other faith but that which is conjured up by sheer will—you have to consent to provisionally “fake it”. But the miraculous thing about this dialogic of *hip* and *hop*, is that the further it carries on the further it confirms that infinite potentiality which was, at first, posited merely as an article of faith. This is when you “make it”. And this is the utility of *impossiblism*, of *idealism*, of **eutopia**. Any future synthesis of hip hop and the novel will invariably find itself returning again and again to the necessity of eutopianism.

There is, I believe, a certain purposeful vagueness to the 5<sup>th</sup> element, meant to render it something like a wild card: to be played in many different ways, and according to our unique affinities; an open window, by which new things might enter, and by which the spirit of hip-hop might escape out into the wider world. For now we will consent to play this card, provisionally, as the novel. If the novel is to fulfill this task as a binding aether, we must first have a conscious understanding of just what it *is* that binds this culture; its unifying principles—which will be the entire preoccupation of the remainder of the prolegomena.

Before we get to this it might help if hip-hop had a sort of banner to rally itself around—what Harry Allen called a “binding formula [...] as compact, memorable, and all-encompassing as  $E=mc^2$ .” (Chang 5). Here’s what I propose: **Hip-Hop Democratizes Art**. Art is far more than a means of producing aesthetics. It is firstly a *mode of relation*, and this, for Mailer, is what “art

has been saying with more and more intensity” since the start of the modern era: “the nature of the painting has become less interesting than the nature of the relation of painting to society.”

(28). No living culture is more *bodily-aware* of this than HIP-HOP.



## 2<sup>nd</sup> SET

# MAKING LIFE EXPLICIT

People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think what we're seeking is an experience of being alive [...] the *rapture* of being alive.  
(Joseph Campbell & the Power of Myth)

“There is only one meaning of life” Erich Fromm wrote: “the act of living it.” *living?*

What a novelty, in this nihilistic age of suicide... terrorism, *wars of choice*, ecological destruction, technological escapism, and that self-loathing creature called the *MBA major*—all the neurotic manifestations of our barely cloaked death-drive... But the problem of **nihilism** is, in some ways, a very simple one. It is simply a matter of *getting people to want to be alive again...* For Chang “living young and free in the Bronx was a revolutionary act of art. To unleash on a social level these vital urges was the surest way to ward off mass death” (106). This is perhaps the greatest task to which a *hip-hop novel* could attain—even if it remains a, paradoxical task... No matter! We will proceed undeterred, as militant optimists! First: we must turn away—at the level of tone—from the brutal irony and detachment which has typified *post-modernity*.

Life, it must be said, does not begin and end with the 4 elements of hip-hop. But in turning toward this living mode of culture, and peering into it with the wide angle of the novel, we may discern another tone of life. We may also discover new ways in which to inform the rest of life, and perhaps even elucidate *new* modes of life—life as a holistic endeavor. To us who affirm life, the novel can be nothing if not a means of projecting ourselves out of our current nihilism. As Ralph Ellison suggested “the novel could be constructed as a raft of hope” (vii). But at the same time, as Anais Nin suggests, “the active fecundating role of the novelist has been forgotten. He is there to depict man as he

is, but also as he might be. He is there to give an example of the freedom of choice, freedom to transcend his destiny and his surroundings, master his limitations and restrictions. Today's novelist, like the pop artist, has forgotten [...] how to [...] inspire (174). We will begin by parsing this peculiar mode of creation which is not afraid to operate on the basis of *sincerity*, the sincere enjoyment of life... *havin' fun*.

## An Introduction to *The 7 Moduses of HIP-HOP*

Is street art getting too mainstream? The aesthetics you associate with street art might be getting mainstream... but street art isn't getting mainstream (*Bomb It*, Shepard Fairey).

*Fresh, Gangster, Dookie Chains, the Daisy Age...* In hip-hop culture **aesthetics** are in a constant state of flux—what Chang calls “the roar of total chaos” (*It's a Hip-Hop World*). And so these aesthetics, being innumerable and shifting, it is first important to distinguish between them and what is their underlying modality. Except to the extent that they are *a symptom* of this deeper and more persistent modality, aesthetics will not be our concern here. Our concern here is what I have termed **the Modus**. *The modus* is composed of seven (7) interrelated principles of operation (*moduse*) with distinct practical manifestations, which, together, can be understood as hip-hop's irreducible disposition in regard to its *materials* and their *relations*—including, and most important, the way hip-hop succeeds in relating *peoples*: to themselves, to one another, and to their environment. Indeed, the relating of *materials* here ought to be understood as a mere prefigurative means to the end of relating people

As to the relation between aesthetics and modus, it suffices to say that the greater the rate of aesthetic evolution and diversity in any given hip-hop ecosystem, the healthier the state of the modus. Indeed it is this sort of continual state of aesthetic *becoming* which largely constitutes the first moduse of HIP-HOP...

## (1) THE BATTLE,

Hip-hop was born as a need to get rid of—to exercise—the rage [...] when you create from the anger you start to heal yourself (*Freestyle*, Abiodun Oyewole).

If we are *alone* in here, if it is indeed the case that there are no gods, and we are *our own daddies* as it were, then the first question we must face is this: how do we deal with one another?

Hegel poses this conundrum, as the *master-slave dialectic*: “human reality in-itself-for-itself can be achieved only through conflict, and through the risk conflict implies”(Fanon 170). Translation: in order to feel that we exist, we must have our existence affirmed by others. True enough. But “because he who is reluctant to recognize me *opposes* me” we must, sometimes, *forcibly exact* their recognition. And this is a need that must be met, on pain of death... An unpleasant little matter at the kernel of civil society, which cannot easily be overlooked. But also a profound admission: for here even slavery is rooted in the human compulsion to socialize—to relate. Fromm: “The power to act creates a need to use this power and [...] man's failure to use and to spend what he has is the cause of sickness and unhappiness” (219). If the need to relate cannot find expression, or is forcibly suppressed, the result will be all sorts of **neuroses** and self-destructive behaviors. If we do not give it a way out, it will make its own. “[D]estructiveness results from a more complete blocking of productiveness [...] it is the perversion of the drive to live; it is the energy of un-lived life transformed into energy for the destruction of life” (110 Fromm).

And so Human beings need other human beings, one way or another, and in ways that do not always have the immediate appearance of *cooperation*—for if there is no common enemy we can't be expected to fabricate one, and though there are plenty of common tasks to be addressed, we do not yet have any means of formulating them... The matter then is to proffer ourselves up

to one another in a way that is total, and yet which preserves freedom and life. It was Freud who exposed the greater part of this problem, and, luckily, it is he who will provide us with the first hint as to a way out. In the concept of **sublimation** lies this promise: the idea that, by conscious vigilance and direction, we might safely channel, not only our pure will to relate, but even the corruption of that will—our violent or destructive energies—into creative and peaceful means of expression. Once here, “the emphasis is not on one's feeling of badness and remorse but on the presence and use of productive forces within man. Thus as a result of the productive conflict between *good* and *evil*, the evil itself becomes a source of virtue” (Fromm 229). Here again, in accord with the narrative of hip-hop, there is never any truly *external* enemy; only that enemy which is inside us all, and which by recognizing we have turned into a near limitless font of *virtue*—which is here nothing other than creativity: The mode of relation which affirms life.

The productive orientation is the basis for freedom, virtue and happiness. Vigilance is the price of virtue, but not the vigilance of the guard who has to shut in the evil prisoner; rather, the vigilance of the rational being who has to create the conditions for his productiveness (Fromm 229).

And the first *condition* which must be created: *The battle*.

In the wake of Hoe ave. Hip-Hop effected a rapid and expansive sublimation of the once violent gangs into, among other things, B-Boy “crews.” These crews would engage in a sort of mock-warfare—called “battling”—which was at once highly **competitive**, yet **peaceful**. The retention of the tribal/gang-like qualities of these Break-crews is immediately apparent, and visible in the very DNA of the dance. Nowhere perhaps is the lineage of the hip-hop battle to the gangs more explicit than in the Ghetto Brothers initiation rite which “required the prospect to be beaten for the playing time of a 45-rpm record”(136). As Schloss posits, the fact that the same records used would have been previously danced to drew on “subconscious connections” (Ibid) between not only dance and fighting, but between the metaphysical realms of culture and struggle.

It was always posed as an alternative to gang violence. Instead of fighting, people were battling and deciding it on the floor, deciding it on the wall, deciding it on the mic, or deciding it on the tables (Chang 146).

As Pop Master Fable attests even DJing was undertaken as a battle: “one of the DJ's would set up his equipment on one side of the plaza. The other guy would set up his equipment on the other side [...] and they take turns playing. [...] whoever had the most people around their system was the winner” (*From Mambo to Hip-Hop*). It was, hence, that this newly freed up energy of the gangs—a formerly violent and inchoate energy—was refined and channeled into artistic energy. But though the gang has been superseded, it must always remain in the DNA of hip-hop. “The attitude, like the dance itself, requires a controlled aggressiveness, clearly, this expectation derives from the circumstances in which it arose: the New York streets of the '70s often required a position of barely restrained violence” (Schloss 84). And indeed, clear vestigial remnants of that state of violence and gang war remain in both hip-hop terminology, and its actual practice, which is to engage in as a sort of **mock warfare**—the quest to “catch wreck”, to “hit” a train, to “throw” a move, or a tag, as one throws a punch. B-Boy Phantom: “I'm kind of upset when I dance...Number one, your letting out aggression in a positive manner” (Chang 107). Sally Banes called it “a ritual combat which transmutes aggression into art” (*To The Beat Y'all*). Schloss sees it as a sort of “allegorical fighting [...] not only in its physical movements, but in its social and symbolic dimensions as well” (118). And there is perhaps no more succinct symbol for all that the battle entails than that of *a hat worn sideways*.

The turning of a hat sideways, as Schloss unveils, is a telling atavism of hip-hops violent and chaotic origins. Richard Santiago: “it’s just a cap. You put it on your head, boom, that's it. But why aren't we wearing it correctly, with the brim forward? Because if you would get into a fight, all they have to do is drop the brim, and [your blind]. So that's why you move the brim to the side and off. To say you were ready to scrap” (84). Here again we see how the aesthetic is

merely the surface ripple of a deep and abiding modus; what appears to be a playful gesture is really a functional of the battle, and belies an abiding **back-boundedness** to hip-hops imaginary origins. What seems to be a harmless fashion choice is really a profoundly mature recognition of that violence which lay always just beneath the surface of civility—of that chaos from which we came, and into which we must always be vigilant never to plunge backward—even as we undertake our projects with the best of human intentions. What is in a sideways hat? ...a *playfulness* belying *militancy*, at once as it invokes a symbolic *communion* to its past and a clear-eyed *conscientiousness*, as we step gingerly but faithfully into the marrow... the symbol par excellence of the battle.

The clannish aspects of B-boy and graffiti “**crews**” are also atavisms of the gang. Anthropologically speaking, it seems apparent that there is a core of human nature which must be met, and the gang fundamentally addresses; human beings need a means of resolving disputes, of achieving status, and of proving themselves in competition, at once as they have a need to be affiliated in small tight-knit groups. The gang seems uniquely disposed to addresses these needs in a way that our atomized consumer society cannot. The gang's only flaw, however, remains its proclivity to violence. What hip-hop did was to take these perennial energies and socialize them, by synthesizing these needs with the equally perennial need to express oneself, creatively and in harmony with others. Tiny love: “basically it brings that dark energy that we all have inside us and...it filters all the violence out through [an] artistic point” (Schloss 120). And so the battle resolved this problem of violence without disposing of our most natural, effective and comfortable unit of association. In other words hip-hop is the realization of a cultural code most closely corresponding to our **tribal** nature. Hip-hop is, in this sense, *cultural tribalism*.

As Montesquieu said, the only way to arrest *power* is by an equal and opposing power. But he did not say that it had to be the *same type* of power. Where the power of violence had ruled, the power of **culture** won out, the reign of the gangster was supplanted by the b-boy—and it was achieved just by virtue of his being *hip*.

What we do is gonna influence them, because if we shoot dope, they're gonna be shooting dope when they get older. And if they see my brothers, that we get ourselves together, and do something for the community, then they're gonna think that's what's hip. And whatever they think is hip, that's what their gonna do (*Ain't Gonna Eat My Mind*, Karate Charle).

Battling is key for Hoch “it signifies resistance, rebellion, mastery of skill, and competition” (Chang 361). Indeed, it is, as Bakunin might have said, where we hone our *instinct of revolt*. The object is to one-up and “burn” or “diss” your opponent—mock, and mimic them at the level of technicality, style, and versatility, or just plain lewd mimings. Tiny love: “it’s not like trying to kill each other. It’s more like topping the next one and going to the next level” (108). which, as Schloss explains, not only advances the individual, but the entire culture. And here is where at a higher level of abstraction, the *competition* reveals itself to be nothing other than **mutual aid**—cooperation. Because, in hip-hop, any given *battle* is but a localized evocation of the greater war: what we call the proverbial **Style War**.

Once it is understood that the battle forms but a skirmish in a greater struggle we become conscious of the *style war*. Here again, graffiti leads the way. The first wall-writers called themselves *Bombers*. To this day, the common parlance for going out at night and writing is **Bombing**, and an aerosol can is referred to as a “cannon.” WAG: “We are at war, but not with bullets [...] we use written word; typographic terrorism” (from *Bomb It*). As Mailer noted, “an object is hit with your name, yes, and in the ghetto, a hit equals a kill [...] You hit your name and maybe something in the whole system gives a death rattle. For now your name is over their name” (6). This “their name” to which Mailer refers is a reference to the explosive proliferation

of **advertisement** which began to spring up in the 70's. Chang: "Graffiti emerged in the context of an explosion in commercial signifiers. In a bill-boarded environment, graffiti became advertising for the invisible"(117). The simple, utility based advertising of the fifties with its no-frills industrial commodities was at this moment being supplanted by a profoundly manipulative and psychologically invasive sort of advertising, which attempted to subconsciously relate products to our desires using psychoanalytics. Among these desires (a *need*, truthfully) was the desire to express oneself, as a unique individual—a desire which the 60's gave vent to, but which a new model of identity-based marketing in the 70's attempted to safely subsume into consumerism. *Edward Bernays*, a close nephew of Sigmund Freud, was instrumental in this new form of advertising, and was the first to use his uncle's theories to stimulate not only consumer consumption, but to "manufacture consent" for the state—each of which he saw as integrally related, in accordance with his deep disdain for popular democracy.

...I decided that if you could use propaganda for war, you could certainly use it for peace. And propaganda got to be a bad word because of the Germans using it, so what I did was to try to find some other word. So we found the word council on public relations (*Century of the Self*)<sup>9</sup>

It is amid this psychological invasion—a sort of counterpart to the physical invasion of Moses<sup>10</sup>—that we can understand hip-hop as the standard we raise up in this war of style—a war which can only be undertaken, one battle at a time. It is to the end of dis-enthraling ourselves from such psychic and physical assaults that *Immortal Technique* succinctly captures the spirit in which we undertake this battle:

My mission is to take you  
Lyrically break you, lyrically assassinate you,  
Lyrically incinerate your body and recreate you,  
To destroy the power that mentally incarcerates you (*Revolutionary*)

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<sup>9</sup> Coincidentally, Bernays' early book, *Propaganda* was a favorite of Joseph Goebbels.

<sup>10</sup> Each of whose vision—of a capitalist utopia—find an intersection at the 1939 NY World's Fair



And here is where the style-war encompasses the war of **ideology**, and decisively refutes conventional warfare. For if the object is to disenthral ourselves from invasive ideology, what is more absurd than to attack a parasite by killing the host? On the contrary, a style war is eminently **humanist**. It is modally predisposed to preserve human life... but this does not mean that this war will escape the employment of its own peculiar sort of violence. The *mission*, as Technique assents, is nothing less than an all-out assault, on our ontological being, which stops short only of destroying the body itself—which is, of course, merely the vessel of that being. The object here is to *artistically* savage the cozy mores of those in whom ideology has made a home—to *symbolically* incinerate our tainted identities, so as to recreate ourselves as a truly liberated and defensible subjects. Because, while art is *about war*, the battle is not truly about violence, but truly and profoundly about **peace** because. The style war is a *constructive* war; the only war worth waging, the wages of which are true freedom: expression, participation, cultural being.

But this symbolic war extends far beyond the present, for, as we have already noted, in hip-hop history is, itself, a theater of battle. For Schloss “b-boy history, like b-boying itself, *has* to be contentious. Any history that pleases everybody would—by that fact alone—lack important elements of [hip-hop]: competition, [...] aggrandizement, battling” (151). And thus we can imagine a mode of **narrative** that is fractious, and full of competing concerns, *thistories* and mythologies. “Full of mystery and apparent contradictions, it was never meant to be comprehensive. Each person has his or her own perspective, and each perspective is an important part of the overall fabric” (Schloss 154). And here, in what Ranciere called *dissensus* is the surest basis of a profoundly democratic sort of narrative. For in hip-hop “Contentiousness is not weakness but a strength. It indicates that the power to define this community's history

remains profoundly decentralized [...] a sign of respect for individual experience” (Schloss 130).

...Only that novel which has been profoundly re-imagined could ever be achieved under these circumstances. Indeed, we should wonder if such a thing would any longer be called a novel?

Let's keep it movin'...

What is important to know is this: it is precisely because there is no fixed, essential aesthetic that people can compose their own *personal* aesthetics, thereby engaging in the style-war—which, in turn, produces, in circular fashion, new styles/aesthetics out of competition. It's a sort of arms-race, where the funkiest and most fresh prevails. But it is not a battle of brute force, for **style** is less about being “the best” as it is about scouting a niche, and displacing the center of what is “hip.” That said, *roundness*—proficiency in the *foundational* structure and preceding paradigms is always valued. If the generalized state of gang warfare in the south Bronx was the cradle of this culture, then the battle is a sort of **ritualized** return to this—its foundation and the event of birth. The battling is the means of initiating new generations into hip-hop culture—and so it is a ritual which, with each successive battle, simultaneously celebrates one's own birth as an evocation of the birth of hip-hop itself.

## (2) FREESTYLE

...Freestyle, where you just respond to the impulse has to be the most spiritual right? Because you don't have no idea what your gonna say next, because it's coming from something that's not directed. And this is what most of our creative expression does: it's so spiritual we don't *need* a book. We don't *need* an explanation. (*Freestyle*, Eluard Burt)

We see here just how deep this disjunction is between the *book*, and lived culture; for Burt it is based explicitly in the rejection of that authoritarianism which is inherent in explication, and anything else which is “directed”. Here, coincidentally, is the main distinction between rap and MCing: rap is *written*, as opposed to *off the dome*: not **premeditated**, *unmediated*—and here we should associate the *mediated* not just to the abstract sense of a

mediating presence, but to the actual *media*—the actual entertainment and culture industry, and the incursion of its logics into culture, the chief logics being *Professionalism* and the necessity of explication.

In the face of this logic, what Ranciere asserts—and hip-hop implements—is that there are no meaningful differences in intelligence, only in *the will* to assert intelligence: “man is a will served by intelligence” (51). It is not necessary for a mediator to impart explications in order for us to learn. What is first and foremost—indeed all that is necessary—is that we be imparted with a *will*: the will to learn... because we can **teach ourselves** anything we want to know. But this will is also provoked by the material environment and its demands. Ranciere: “there where need ceases, intelligence slumbers, unless some stronger will makes itself understood and says: look at what you are doing and what you can do if you apply the same intelligence you have already made use of” (51). Here you do not choose what will move you; it is a result of material provocation, and so it must be said that the preoccupation of one's will must naturally attain the character of their class. Doze: “when your talking about hip-hop [...] your talking about poor people” (Chang 328). I say that to say this: freestyle is the style of those who cannot afford any other; for they do not have the security of premeditation, or the promise of tomorrow. They have only the present.

In addition to its **spontaneous** and **improvised** nature, there is an extent to which the key to a successful freestyle is harnessing **mistakes**. Poe One: “As I learned as a kid, watching other people, if you do a mistake with style, finesse, and class it's not a mistake anymore. So do all the mistakes you want” (*Cobra Attacking Eagle*). Every time one enters the cypher it is a sort of fall, a stumble, a *leap*, the secret of which is to use your mistakes as a segue, indeed, let the mistakes *lead* you, and then as Poe said, they are not really mistakes anymore, are they? Nasty

Ray: “When I’m crashing—and I’m crashing every time you see me—[...] people always think that’s the move I meant to do, but most of the time I’m just falling into different moves” (*Nasty Ray Teachings*).

In this way we see the profound sort of faith involved in freestyling—it is a **leap of faith**—Indeed it is nothing less than a sheer act of *willing* into being, which is, in itself, a sort of narrative way of thinking, otherwise known as *faking it 'till you make it*: “incorporat[ing] mistakes into a larger framework that re-characterizes them as being correct,” which is, for Schloss, “a skill that is arguably as important as performing them correctly in the first place” (101). There are no *mistakes* in freestyling. Only the lack of will and imagination necessary to project oneself out of any given situation. We see here the utility of the **eutopian** principle at work; it is impossible for us to do something... right up to the moment we do it. It is then that the line between materialism and idealism is obliterated. Freestyling is the act of effacing that line. From here the possibilities are infinite.

This is also where bodily-wisdom becomes essential. To freestyle you must have the sort of fearlessness which is rooted in a practiced and daily confirmed faith—the faith to let your body and mind take hold, and go wherever they lead. There is no freestyle without the unmitigated exposure of the **subconscious**—a terrifying prospect for most; the highest sort of freedom for those who’ve mustered the courage to leap. By the same token, when we tap into this vast reserve of creativity called the unconscious mind, we also expose it to the salutary effects of a community. It is precisely within the space of the cypher that freestyle can help to exorcise the hidden and guarded neuroses we harbor. Now imagine a whole society brought up in the art of freestyle—all neuroses would be aired out in a week! You would also have some

smart muthafuckas, cause that shit activates your brain like nothing else (check the brain scans of someone freestylin’—they’ll be lit up like a Christmas tree).

*LONS* has called it the *noisy meditation*, and indeed, there is something undeniably spiritual at work in the freestyle. For *Supernatural* “music is creativity, and creativity is, I think, the closest energy we have to god. Creativity: being able to do things spontaneously” (*Freestyle*) But then, as he himself says, that creativity must be fueled. And so it is not only fearlessness, and faith, but firstly, as Fromm put it down, the active practice and implementation of the *conditions* necessary for one's own productiveness. In Supernat's case, as an MC, it is the cultivation of a voracious appetite to acquire new words and ideas—from news, films, books, comic books, anything that is available, up to and including life itself—which is to say, to be continually **learning**, at the behest of life. For if the material bonds from which we come are somewhat determinant of the preoccupations of our will, it still stands that our only way of truly overcoming our environment is to learn as much as we possibly can about it. Only then can we hope to have some semblance of agency over our own will. And here is where the *immanence* of the will, and the will to *transcend* become one and the same, and creation reveals itself to be nothing other than **self-creation**.<sup>11</sup> We have nothing to work with but ourselves... and our self reflects a whole universe. And so the freestyle is not spontaneously *conceived*, so much as spontaneously *juxtaposed*.

### (3) BRICOLAGE

...Self-awareness—the oft-lamented paralyzing postmodern condition of *knowing* that one is producing art, *knowing* that it's all been said and done before, fearing that in forging ahead you risk redundancy, irrelevance, pretension—has not produced paralysis in hip-hoppers. Perhaps our immunity from this generational malaise stems from hip-hop's love of collaging, sampling, dislocating, and reconfiguring; the more that's been said and done already, the more we have to play with (Chang, Mansbach 100).

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<sup>11</sup> Self-creation is intimately bound up with the metaphysic act of *taking up the name*.

Part of what gives us this ability to look at repetition as *liberating* rather than *terrifying* is a very basic adjustment in perspective: whereas most of western society needs *linear* progress in order for things to have meaning, hip-hop embraces the eternal-return of **rhythm**. Why should we flee in terror from the thought of life as a cycle? Unless of course there is no life present in that cycle... Hip-Hop does not fear the eternal return, because hip-hop does not need to live vicariously through the glory to *nations*, or *races*, or *civilizations*, or any other extra-human measure of meaning. Hip-hop has meaning on a *human* scale, which is to say every-day life. And so what does it matter if it's all been done before? It hasn't been done by *me*! This is the pleasure of being alive, of going through the rhythm of a life.

As we have already noted, the re-institution of this natural human rhythm—the active, creative, democratic disposition to life—requires a unique imaginary basis, of which Berman provides us some historical context: “One of the central themes in modernism of the 1970s was the ecological ideal of recycling; finding new meanings and potentialities in old things and forms of life” (337). Indeed, a sort of re-**spiritualization** of the sensuous world—of the immediate environment, which we are so often conditioned to overlook... “Many modernism’s of the past have found themselves by forgetting; the modernist of the 1970's were forced to find themselves by remembering” (Ibid). He specifically attributes this *remembering* to those cyclical periods of collapse in a capitalist economy: “At a moment when modern society seemed to lose the capacity to create a brave new future, modernism was under intense pressure to discover new sources of life through imaginative encounters with the past” (332). As it were, the 70's was one of those moments when our over-inflated civilizational-*bubble* burst. And though succeeding periods of economic comfort would, once again, facilitate a degree of *forgetting*, such *psychic* bubbles are not deterministically pegged to the economy. Heretofore Hip-hop would inaugurate a new and

dynamic sort of *remembering*—a remembering which is marked by a notable *lack of shame* when faced with our origins, a *comfort* with our nature, and its rhythms—even if it remains the case that all origins must be mythologized in order for us to bear them...

According to Keven Young hip-hop aesthetic has a certain sense of history, which is that it is “ever-present for taking from [sampling], repeating [and], collage” (iv). Mansbach takes it yet further when he speaks of hip-hop as “intellectual democracy through collage: the idea that whatever's hot is worthy of adaptation regardless of its location or context” (Chang 93). A phrase such as that is pregnant with many meanings—and with the echoes of Ranciere. But one meaning is to suggest that not only does hip-hop marshal the past, but, by way of hip-hop, all bygone movements and aesthetics achieve a sort of **recrudescence**. Which is why, for *B+* “to some degree, hip-hop is the project of saving soul music or saving funk music” (Chang 41).

For Mansbach **collage** is an art of “resonances, echoes, homages, and subversion’s [...] that builds layers of reference and meaning” (Chang 94) which the *reader* is free to pursue beyond the *text*. Consequently, hip-hop is marked by “ecstatic genera crossing and cultural multiliteracy” (Chang 96). This sort of “intertextuality,” is nowhere more strikingly apparent than in DJing. With techniques like *back spinning*, *mixing*, *chopping*, *phrasing*, in addition to the aforementioned *loop* and ever-irreverent *scratch*, the DJ inspires plentiful ideas as to how one might manipulate prose. *Grandmaster Flash* is to be particularly credited with the articulation of foundational DJ techniques, just one of which is... **Cutting**: skipping back to something earlier in order to mock, meditate or luxuriate on more deeply through its repetition. A DJ, by returning to even one small word or sound, at various and imperceptible points in that word or sound can obliterate and thereby resemble it into an entire symphony, thereby teasing out the entire universe, reflected there in that one, single, phrase.

DJing is a dialectic of two turn tables which, together, say this, in the spirit of Lautreamont: “plagiarism is necessary. It implies the idea of progress. It clasps the authors sentence tight, uses his expressions, eliminates a false idea, replaces it with the right idea” (*Comte De Lautréamont*). And here hip-hop embraces notion of the theoretical tool-box: the idea that one ought to pick and choose from the realm of ideas only that which is of *use* to the *immediate situation*, and discard the rest. It is with this attitude that hip-hop resists adopting any given ideology or culture wholesale, and, by course, allows things to be re-framed in ways that our collective line-scarred conscious might not have once imagined. Every culture, every school of thought, ever sentient human being has something to offer—even if we may feel they have misappropriated their own tools.

And so *collage* of material is perhaps the defining characteristic of any creative act in hip-hop. But it is not just any mode of collage. It is very specifically and precisely a *poor man's* mode of collage... **bricolage**: from anthropologist Levi-Stauss: a *Bricoleer* is someone who creates by combining, modifying and/or re-purposing whatever is **at hand**, or at mind—as opposed to an engineer, who creates conflictingly with his surroundings (*Varenne*). To be clear, *conflictingly* here only means *inorganic*—forced, or irrelevant to the immediate circumstance—for conflict, as we know, is indispensable.

It goes without saying that any collage art is predicated on **juxtaposition**. But there is a particular aesthetic iteration of which, though not modal to hip-hop, is exceptionally deeply rooted in the culture. That is the *abrasive* juxtaposition of *opposites*. The juxtaposition of the *emphatic* with the *subtle*, the *refined* with the *crude*, the *high* with the *low*, are all potent style-marks of hip-hop aesthetic, present throughout the elements. It is perhaps best observed in the aesthetics of *funky freshness* and *hot-messness*, each embodying a stylistic ideal of beauty which



is based on the internal relation of seeming opposites. In b-boying, being versatile is highly valued and manifests, among other ways, as the b-boy's ability to blend explosive power with finesse and *flow*. For b-boy Storm it is the careful relation between angular thrusts (the masculine) and flowing curves (the feminine) in one's movements which constitute a persistent aesthetic ideal (*Storm Workshop*). This juxtaposition is inherent really in the raw material of wall-writing, letters, which are naturally constituted of curves and angles, which are in turn accentuated and subverted by the writer according to their stylistic prerogative. Abrasive juxtaposition is also present in DJing where, for instance, innocuous, gentle melodies are often paired with menacing percussion, creating that uniquely irreverent sound which so typifies hip-hop. Indeed, even the *scratch*, itself, is an **abrasion**.

All of these juxtapositions have the salutary effect of obliterating certain **binaries**, not the least of which is that between feminine and masculine. But, nowhere is this juxtaposition more dramatic than at the level of language, where the *high* and the *low*, the *intellectual* and the profanely common, intermingle in profound and socially subversive ways. Schloss: "B-Boy discourse [...] uses aggressive, raw, and often profane language to talk about the most abstract issues of aesthetic philosophy. This juxtaposition [...] is itself an important part of the B-Boy Aesthetic" (364). In this small gesture, of pairing the "high" with the "low," we have far more than a gimmick to imbue our hip-hop novel with emphasis and energy; for, at its essence, the paring of high and low" is nothing less than an endeavor to implode one of the chief (false) dichotomy upon which our society reproduces itself: that between *poverty* and *intelligence*. It is largely on the assertion that these two are mutually exclusive that all hopes of democracy are precluded. But hip-hop goes to war with this notion at the level of form. Indeed, for Mansbach "literature is the last bastion of high culture, and hip-hop [is] a corrupting force" (Chang 96).

For my part, there is nothing so beautiful as poverty and intelligence in union; this is among the highest ideals of beauty toward which hip-hop strives, and ought to be a prominent theme in any future synthesis of hip-hop and the novel.

Because hip-hop is explicitly derivative in nature, it can never make claims to being superior to any other culture—it is literally nothing without the cultures from which it draws substance. At the same time it is unique in its open form, in a way that other ethnic cultures are not. Part of this has to do with these, its peculiar moduses of expression. But greater still is the **inessentialism** of its form. It is rather like a vessel for other, manifold and disparate essences—an *umbrella culture* if you will. If indeed it can be said to have some essential quality, in-itself, it is that sort of essence which is more real than any essence—that being what we have already termed the space *between* essences. It is thus a sort of negatively distilled essence, which defines hip-hop not as what it is *other than*, but, on the contrary, as the silhouette of gravity between those things which it fearlessly and apologetically unifies. As such hip-hop challenges the very paradigm of a *culture*—that paradigm which defines it on nationalist terms as a pure, racially and linguistically congealed entity, spatially and historically circumscribed, and subordinate to a particular mode of production. In light of hip-hop, this can no longer hold.

As Karimi says, “all real living is meeting” (Chang 226). And so, to what Fromm said earlier, we can add this: the only meaning of life is the act of living it, but what is the *act of living* if not an act of relating? Karimi: “We are living convergences in relation with all the living things around us [...] we don't throw away the past—we transform it past, present, future converge inside us” (Chang 229). Mansbach: “It is the way the influences are made to cohere, the way the collage is put together sonically or visually, kinetically or verbally, that is original” (93 Chang). ...There is no immaculate act of originality here; there is only the world as it

accrues inside us, and the only thing that is “new” is the serendipitous ways in which those things run up against one another, in our minds and bodies—“Me” is nothing but the dialectical interplay of all the thoughts and actions of all those who have deigned to act upon my life. And so it is with what I write. It does not belong to me. Karimi calls this...

sampled consciousness: n. a state of self (being) created by the act of sampling different experiences: education, stories, interactions, and observations. The individual samples these experiences, knowingly or unknowingly, and makes them part of their worldview, the way they create/interact. The consciousness is continually in flux, alternating, adding, subtracting, choosing (Chang 223).

I call this the **dialectical theory of creativity**. Simply stated, when you put two or more things together, and you get something new, and this—the collage, montage, and juxtaposition of materials—is the only way that new things ever really come about. How does anything new come of the old? the answer, as Berman articulates it, is *contradiction*... “should works so obsessed with the past be called modernist at all? For many thinkers, the whole point of modernism is to clear the decks of all these entanglements so that the self and the world can be created anew” (345). But of course this clearing of the slate is, and has always been, an illusion. There is no clean slate.

There is nothing real to be seen behind this destroyed wall, critique suddenly looks like another call to nihilism. What is the use of poking holes in delusions, if nothing more true is revealed beneath [...] there is no world of beyond. It is all about immanence (Latour 475).

Latour is on point when he says we must cease with this exhausted practice of pure critique, and begin to *compose*. Where I break with him is in this the notion that, in order to compose, we must first turn Benjamin's “Angel of History” *forward*. He is insightful to note that it is in the backwardness of our flight that we create the destruction, away from which the wind in our wings is propelling us. But then only in fleeing backward through history can we *break off* that refuse which we need to create our compositions. If, on the contrary, we were turned forward, we could not resist the temptation to *avoid* all obstacles—and thereby deprive

ourselves of the very wreckage we need to build... The engine of composition would all but halt; It is *predicated* on our backwardness! For that same reason I also agree that to cease flight is the worst proposition of all, because it will mean the cessation of collision, and thus the deprivation of that wreckage which we need to create.

It is the very definition of the future that we cannot anticipate it, and, what is more, *should* not. For one, there is nothing to “compose” but the refuse of the past. The only way anything new can come about is by the creative-recombination of old materials. Nothing “new” is immaculately conceived. All is theft.

#### (4) SAMPLING (THEFT)

Can it be a surprise that a society that has steadily dismantled or diminished the most basic access to health care, relief for the poor and aged, and decent education [...] should choose to opt out of the debate about the debate that sampling has brought home to roost? (Chang, DJ Spooky 149).

Hip-hop is where the line between artist, criminal and rebel begin to dissolve. If it is the case that you cannot create except by combining found materials, what are we to do in a world where everything is copy-righted, privatized, and owned? As it is, that which is provided I don't want. That which I am taught to want, I can't have. That which I really truly *need* has been stolen... I must steal it back! I must express myself. To do so, I must engage in what bourgeois society calls **theft** and **vandalism**. Graffiti is, PINK says, “an outlaw art. When we train other graffiti writers, we're not training fine artists to exhibit in a museum. We're training criminals” (Chang 121). As we well know by now “many early B-boys were gang members (or affiliated) and modeled their social organizations on gangs” (Schloss 79). And so there is yet one more bequest from hip-hop's extra-legal origins: it *must* break the law...

You can write in a gallery, or on a wall in your room, but you're not really a graffiti artist until you go out and break the law. That's hip-hop: that's a tenant of what we do. For music-making I break the law; that's what I do [...] if you're not breaking the law it does not fulfill (*Thes One, Interview*).

The sort of *breaking* which Thes refers to is a peculiar iteration of theft which DJs call **sampling**. When a DJ composes a song of bricollaged material it is necessary for that DJ to pilfer small sound samples of preexisting records, films, and other pieces of audio, most of which are copyrighted. “Theft” is of germinal importance in the mythology, where it is to be found all the way back at the first park-jams and block-parties. Hoch: “Poor youth could not afford to go to the downtown discos, nor did most Djs own their own clubs, so illegal improvised outdoor parties took place, with electricity provided by the closest street lamp” (Chang 352). The tapping of electricity from street lamps suffices here as our promethean theft of fire; A circumvention of the gods, which renders them obsolete. But, according to Grand master Caz the pivotal event which allowed for hip-hop to burst the boundaries of the Bronx and disseminate out to the rest of the world was the mass looting of DJ equipment during the 1977 NYC Blackout: “the next day there were thousands of new Djs” (Rosen). But why stop there? For Ariefdien & Abrahams: “hip-hop [is looted] Japanese technology, processed by kidnapped Africans on stolen land” (Chang 266). And who, honestly, can dispute it? Hip-hop does not dispute it.

**Hip-Hop owns it.**

Now, this is a profound stance to take! Because, in essence, to own the act of “theft” as a universal premise, is nothing less than to abolish the sanctity of private property. The DJs open flouting of intellectual property is but one manifestation of a generalized rejection of the notion of *property*, which manifests itself across the spectrum of elements, and no element more openly flouts the notion of property than graffiti. There is first, quite literally, the theft of paint—also called “racking”, and more notably, “inventing”<sup>12</sup>—but more to the point, there is the way in

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<sup>12</sup> Mailer even succeeds in subordinating the aesthetic of “oversized ragamuffin fatigues” to its modal function as a means of stealing; originally “hiding [and] conceal[ing]”(12) paint.

which graffiti seeks to appropriate **space**, which links this practice with a form of **de-territorialization**. By this understanding we see why it was necessary for the element of graffiti to have arrived first; wherever it goes it succeeds in dispelling the aura of the authority—not only of the State and Capital, but of all mediated narratives which are superimposed over us and our communities. As Mailer understood, it is an attempt to “clear a space in [the] psyche free of dread” (30). As such, it liberates the space—both cognitive and literal—for the other elements to occur. And so graffiti is the *first* element in a real sense; in some ways the spiritual vanguard of hip-hop. There is something particularly irreducible in this element; it is nearly impervious to co-optation, which is, once again, not a simple matter of attitude, for its attitude is baked right into the very form and functioning—its disposition is always-already the expropriation of space.... “We’re not *asking* for the space. We’re *taking* the space” (*Bomb It*, Unknown).

Of course, “Theft” here is not to be taken in the bourgeois sense, anymore than ownership. For by its own discrete, though internally coherent logic, *theft* is merely a synonym for *invention*! “Which was of course the word for stealing the stuff [paint]” (Mailer 11). Matter here has no existence—indeed it cannot be realized—except, and up until the moment it is being *used*. The idea of “Theft” requires a temporal hierarchical in which the past maintains a valence on the present—an idea which hip-hop has plunged outside of, precisely by refusing to recognize the primacy of what has already come before, over what is all-the-way-live and present. In this way hip-hop predicates a **usufruct** mode of economy... I.E. A type of extra-temporal ownership which is radically immanentized to the present moment: space belongs to those who are using it, and only so long as they make use of it. This, in turn, informs hip-hop’s peculiar notion of ownership, which is not hard and fast, but a matter of respect and prestige. To *own* something it is only necessary that you impress upon it your own stylistic signature, or innovation—which is

called **flipping** something. The assumption of another person's supposed style, and/or supposed technical innovation without *flipping it* is here called **biting**—a rather innocuous charge which is often a matter of perception, but which, never the less has its social consequences. In any case, it should be noted that to own something it is always *first*, and necessarily, to *bite it*. It should also be noted that there is no property here, of any consequence, which cannot be infinitely invented, and simultaneously owned or innovated by numerous people. Property is never material, but only ever a bodily practice, which cannot be honored in any other sense but social. Once again, It would seem that “things” are not the preoccupation here...

What is sometimes called the **derivative** nature of hip-hop should also be owned as “Theft”. B-Boying for instance is heavily, and explicitly derived from African, Latin, Eastern European, and Native American dance, the influence of which is not only visible, but explicitly acknowledged in the names of moves—*Zulu Spins*, *Floor Salsa*, *Russian Kicks*, *Indian Step*.<sup>13</sup> In addition to these influences there are acrobatic and martial art influences, from Brazilian capoeira, to Chinese Kung Fu... you won't be hearin' none of this *cultural appropriation* shit in hip-hop.

We bring our culture into this dance. So, you know, whether you do traditional Cambodian dancing, or traditional Native American dancing, traditional Celtic dancing, clogging, tap-dancing, all of it; its all one. And hip-hop, what it does is embrace all of them. And you make it your own, and you kinda, your sharing cultures [...] Do what *you* wanna do [...] hip-hop is the freedom to be you; to be yourself. That's what hip-hop is to me, and that's what the elements provide. The reason I got into hip-hop dance was because I didn't want to be told *how* to dance! (*B-Boy Remind, Influences*)

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<sup>13</sup> All of these are *foundational* moves which comprised the communal property of the dance. It is out of this foundation that—by way of the individual experimentation with, and customization of just a handful of moves—the countless the other moves and variations which we see today were derived. Here again it is the dialectical juxtaposition of a foundation, with a distinct human body, replete with its own unique thoughts and experiences, which leads to nearly inexhaustible innovation.

There is always a *mutual* appropriation at work here. As Ariefdien & Abrahams reveals, in the South African iteration of hip-hop “we sampled marimbas, mbiras, and west African chants and programmed it hip-hop stylee. This was not just about us stating our geographical/cultural uniqueness. [...] it was a plea not to follow mainstream [...] and a critique of some U.S. emcees who allowed corporates to define hip-hip” (Chang 266). And so here, preserving one’s native culture perfectly coincides with preserving hip-hop itself. But, at the same time hip-hop does not necessarily overwhelm the culture into which it is introduced. Chang speaks of hip-hops ability to “take on the characteristics of each communities quirks and idiosyncrasies” (3). And so, concomitant with its miraculous ability to recrudescence the past, hip-hop also has a capacity to **syncretize** with many cultures which have languished in the face of modernity—and thus fortify them, precisely by bringing them into commerce with one another, *confederating* them, as it were. And all that is asked in return is that you relinquish your culture to the common pool, so that everyone can sample it. Everyone can enjoy it.

If the presence of any explicit theft by bourgeois standards seems least immediately apparent in the element of Mcing, the spirit of appropriation still suffuses it. Indeed, can speaking itself not help being a sort of theft? Joan Morgan: “Hip-hop doesn’t ask for permission to speak. You just let the shit fall where it may; people get upset” (Chang 238). The simple truth is this: where there is righteousness there is no theft. And nothing creative can be wrong.

As Picasso said: “good artists copy; greater artist steal.” “Stealing” other people’s ideas and mixing them together is the only way anything new ever comes about. The difference is that this theft is **explicit**—not omitted. For Justin Williams it is about “the overt use of pre-existing materials to new ends” (217). Never the less, this disposition to the past remains respectful. For Eisa Davis “art forms progress when they mimic other art forms [...] the conscious relationship



that hip-hop has always had to the past [is a dialogue.] When you sample old records and quote lyrics, your not just stealing; your showing respect. A DJ is doing her job when she generates nostalgia for music itself” (Chang 73). But, by the same token, we are not beholden to the past, which is always understood to be at the disposal of the present moment. All of this is inherent in the wisdom of rhythm...

Rhythm implies a certain memory. While mechanical repetition works by reproducing the instant that precedes it, rhythm preserves both the measure that initiates the process and the re-commencement of this process with modifications [...] without repeating identically 'the same', but by subordinating the same [...] to difference (Lefebvre 80).

To its credit, and to its misfortune, hip-hop tends to valorize content over form—which is why the modus is so often buried beneath aesthetics. But this is a versatile vessel. Inside this vessel all the cultures, all the social, political and artistic movements of the past come back into currency. In a way it’s like a *frame narrative*, which takes what’s of use from anywhere and everywhere, *detourning* and *recuperating* every cultural artifact it touches at break-neck speed, and arming the wisdom of our pre-modern cultures for life in modernity. If it is indeed to be thought of as a *world indigenous culture*, it is a natural ally of other native and indigenous cultures, for it can serving as a sort of bridge-language between them, first establishing a common rhythm, and then weaving them together into what Said called a “contrapuntal” narrative—sustaining multiple perspectives at once. And so there is a sense that we are no longer dealing with a *dialectic* here. A dialectic cannot create without destroying.

Throughout the history of art, literature, and philosophy, people destroyed the old to create the new. Hip-hop came along with the sample, a tool that refuses either-or statements. Hip-hop did not reject the past; it said, “it is part of us” (Chang, Karimi 222).

And this is the essential distinction between the *dialectic*, and the **dialogic**: Whereas the one can only achieve synthesis by canceling-out its terms—by saying “either-or”—a *dialogic* allows the old to live on, alongside the new. Because when a man and woman have a child, they

do not destroy each other in the process. And so too there is no reason why the terms cannot continue on, alongside their synthesis, without being ordered according to value, or placed into mortal conflict.<sup>14</sup> Which is another way of saying that the dialogic does not place things in that “objective” form of hierarchy we call *time*. But, just as is the case with its terms, the dialogic does not destroy the dialectic either. It incorporates it, and so preserves the dialectic’s most important capacities: the ability to synthesize. To make something new.

I hope the aptness of the word **Modus** is now more apparent—hip-hop is where the Latin *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* collide. Here it is understood that living cannot escape being a crime. And so, if the novel reserves the right to omit, the hip-hop mythos reserves the right to “invent”, thereby allowing us to inject ourselves back into the space of our absence. It is important to understand here that while I draw on the connotations of *modus operandi*, it is the *vivendi* to which we aspire. “Crime” is always perpetrated as a *movement* back to pure creative expression. For Mailer “there was always art in a criminal act—no crime could ever be as automatic as a production process—but graffiti writers were somewhat opposite to criminals since they were living through the stages of crime in order to commit an artistic act” (11). “Crime” in the bourgeois sense is not meant to be idealized here. As it is the usufruct mode just happens to be called *crime* under this temporal regime... it could just as easily be called revolt.

In any case there is a continuum between these concepts... expression = theft = revolt... freestyle = bricolage = sample... As is often the case with this culture, entities that appear independent at one level of abstraction, turn out to be part of the same whole at another; lines are broken and turned back in on themselves, and what we are left with is...

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<sup>14</sup> I believe the dialectic, coincidentally, is the answer to identity politics; only with the dialectic mind can you sustain both particular, and collective identities in a way that does not contradict. ...Another premise to be worked out by any future synthesis of hip-hop and the novel...

(5) The CYPHER: the circle which B-Boys and Girls, or Mc's form when they gather to battle, and/or freestyle. The participants of the cypher take turns, going around, or in random order, and dance or rhyme to the music, playing off of, or responding to whoever preceded them. The cypher is the place of **play**—completely uninhibited, spontaneous experimentation—where the practitioners of hip-hop communicate with one another in their particular *language* stringing together inimitable combinations of phrases or movements, each of which may never be seen or heard repeated in quite the same way ever again.

A cypher can be 'built' anywhere at any time: all that is required is a group of dancers [or MCs] the cyphers very informality and transience are part of its power; it appears when and where it is needed, then melts away. Rhetorically it is often referred to as 'the' cypher, rather than 'a' cypher, which suggests that all cyphers are, in some abstract way, connected. B-boys and b-girls view the cypher with almost mystical reverence, befitting its status as the most authentic, challenging, and raw environment for b-boying (Schloss 99)

Surprisingly enough, there are here some ways in which writing informs B-boying: “As Ken Swift explains, it is about creating narrative threads, which he actually refers to as “text”: [replete with themes] like, for aggression or for humor or for skills [...] similar to when you write a letter, you got your fuckin' opening, you got your body of your shit, you got your closing” (Schloss 87). In particular, a **set** in breaking is often composed, conceptually, as a sentence: there is style, mood, pace, and it is delivered as an improvised *response* to the previous dancer, and in accord with whatever song the DJ is spinning. “This is a vocabulary” as Alien Ness affirms, “with commas and periods and capitalization and exclamation points and question marks and all type of stuff... Every time I'm on the dance floor, I'm sayin' something” (Schloss 87). One increases one's bodily *vocabulary* with every move one acquires, and creates a sort of slang by *flipping* the move. As with a sentence, each set is diagram-able in some sense, as a proper set must open with top-rock, and contain some combination of down-rock and power-moves in a

tension building manner, before culminating in a freeze, which serves as the exclamation point at the end of a set. Change: “...then they closed another freeze, monumentalizing themselves into statues of middle-finger attitude. Now the story was complete” (118).

But one thing immediately apparent in this is that the set is not a form of *dictation*, but a *dialogue*, between other participating dancers. Which is why, as B-Boy Storm tirelessly asserts, the art of breaking is, at essence, a form of **communication**—that is, *socially embedded, communicative self-expression*. The DJ's function, as it were, is “facilitating positive social situations in general, and a sense of group cohesion in particular” (Schloss 36). Either way, there is no *author* at work here, but rather what Barth's would call a sort of **Scriptor**: any type of organizer (of words, images, ideas, or actions) who does not exercise authority over the meaning his/her work—in this case not even for his/her self, being as nothing in the cypher is premeditated. And so the “the death of the author” here is not the “birth of the reader.” It is, on the contrary, an implosion of the distinction; everyone is both at once.

On the etymology of the word cypher, it was first appropriated from the *5 Percenters*<sup>15</sup>, who “used the term *cypher* to represent anything associated with circles or cycles, including the numerical zero (0), the letter *O*, and especially the circles of people in which their lessons are propagated” (Schloss 98). The word “Cypher” means, literally *zero*, nothingness. And yet, because a circle has no end, the cypher simultaneously means infinity, limitless **potentiality**—the obverse of nothingness. Even at this, the most localized level, the cypher is predicated on, and realizes the same fertile effects of, the imaginary of chaos—once again, ritually enacting the foundational myth, at the most intimate level. This *fractal* quality, or **self-similarity** of

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<sup>15</sup> A heretical sect of Islam, whose spiritual symbology codified letters and numbers with meanings

structure—which we see repeating continually in hip-hop—is coincidental, the most common organizational scheme in nature, at once as it is the form of all democratic structures.

The cypher is not a plotted point, but as a fluid *stride*—the movement from nothingness to infinite potenza. But this movement is achieved only by way of *relation*. The human implications of the cypher are quite astounding: a Cypher = **unity**, and in unity there is community, and in community there is communication, and with this arises participation, and without participation there can be no equality, and without the unqualified equality of all, there is no freedom for anyone. The cypher achieves all of this in one fluid motion. This achievement is largely due to the structural virtue of a **circle**. When composing a cypher, everyone is equidistant from the center. There is no natural beginning, or end, or hierarchy of order. A circle has no segments nor seams. Circularity is sustainable and rhythmic. This confronts linear progression as a distinct challenge...

Where the circle rules, there is [...] potential. For one there is always the possibility that the person who is an onlooker may be brawn into the action and become a performer [...] frequently there is more than one 'performance' going on simultaneously. [...] But this is not to be mistaken for chaos (a cultural bias emanating from those who see linear structure as superior to other possible alternatives). Instead, this is a democracy of structure (Gottschild 9).

In hip-hop when someone is considered knowledgeable they are sometimes referred to as *360*, i.e. as being a complete, rounded human being. Virtue is therefore not in specialization, but versatility. Knowledge here is in some ways a person's internalization of the communal (the cypher); you cannot properly form the cypher, unless you are self-same, i.e. unless you yourself are circular in your attitude and disposition. Circular people naturally form circles and face each other as equals; line people form lines behind the designated leader. These are the conditions of **equality**—which is not to say sameness, but **participation**. “Equality is not given, nor is it claimed; it is practiced, it is verified” (Ranciere 134). And so we can say, as Simone Weil has said, that any truly democratic mode of relation is not founded on “rights” but on

“obligations”(45)—*rights* are merely a concession of authority, i.e. that which we receive in *absence* of democracy...

The free entry into the cypher—the locus of participation—is delimited only by one's courage and willingness to be humbled in battle. The cypher is point-zero for free and liberated expression, where one can reach heightened states of cognition and expression, if only they are able to bypass the neurosis and inhibitions with which undemocratic ideologies burden us. At the start, hip-hop was about “unleashing youth style as an expression of the soul, unmediated by corporate money, unauthorized by the powerful, protected and enclosed by almost monastic rites, codes, and orders” (Chang 111). For Lefebvre “meditization tends not only to efface the immediate, [but also] presence. It tends to efface dialogue. [...] dialogue is reduced to dispute. Language becomes 'soliloquy'; that of the speaker who discourses alone for the masses” (57). **Meditization** is simply the use of some middle agent (technology, money, law, spectacle) to establish uneven relations. This is the nature of all one-way mediums, including the novel, which cannot escape *talking alone*. Schloss's litmus test for hip-hop, on the other hand, is precisely its status as “unmediated, in the sense that most of the practices associated with it are both taught and performed in the context of face-to-face interactions” (4).

For Levinas, the **face-to-face** mode of relation, was that which proceeded and structured subjectivity (95). It is the only mode of relation on which democratic relations can be built, because it is the only mode of relation capable of socializing us for life in a community, and the negotiation of fellow human beings. This is crucial to understanding the lived, participatory nature of hip-hop, for “unmediated hip hop, by definition, cannot be understood without becoming personally involved in it” (Schloss 8). Because of the traditional scholarly tendency to focus on “product” over “process”, this largely process-based culture tends to be entirely lost in

the whirl of commodified rap-product. As with all genuine culture, it is useful to “distinguish between hip-hop that is primarily devoted to the creation of a product, and hip-hop that is primarily an activity performed for its own sake” (Schloss 41), the real *product* of which, is naturally, the relation.

Man is free only among equals... only among equals can one experience true joy. Where there is fear there is no love (Chernishevsky 368).

Here is what one of the OG's, Pop Master Fable, says: “In a cypher [...] dancers can direct their performance uninhibited and free. [...] This freedom is key to creativity since the dancer is constantly challenged with various music, an undefined dance space, and potential opponents among the audience” (Chang 24). In “the transition from cypher to stage” Fable says this: “what were once improvisational forms of expression with spontaneous vocabulary became choreography in a staged setting” (Ibid). As a consequence of the **performing** of B-boying (what then became *Break-dancing*) for a passive audience, one of the destructive consequences of which Fable identifies as “the advent of power moves” or the large, acrobatic moves, that were the most readily consumable to those outside the culture, which became the main focus of the media” and, as a consequence of which “the true essence of the dance was slowly overshadowed” (Chang 21). It is in light of this that we can say that the cypher stands as an existential challenge to the stage. Hip-hop is incompatible with *performance*.

It is important to note that the cypher is an *inward facing* circle, and so structurally refutes the notion of performance as a spectacle for passive consumption. When an MC rhymes in the cypher she faces the center of the cypher, and intends her rhymes only for those who compose the cypher—those who mutually participate—and since everyone is a potential participant, this, naturally, has the salutary and democratizing effect of blasting a profusion of breaches in the logic of professionalization, through which the whack and the skilled alike can

come poring through. The cypher is **accessible** to anyone who is willing to participate in it, and even if they are rejected they can form their own cypher, when and wheresoever they please. As a sort of portable temple, built of ourselves, there is, in a literal sense, no distinction between *the* cypher and *to* cypher. It has no meaning except as a participatory act. The cypher is nothing without that which we bring to it. It is the black abyss into which we must have the courage to reach, and from which we pull our meaning.

Perhaps “saying what we mean” is a revolutionary idea for a generation that [...] has grown up in the throes of cynicism, irony, and disaffection. But these are tremendous luxuries [...] hip-hop is a lot of things, but it has never been ironic. Nihilistic, yes, but not cynical. It has always said what it means (Chang, Mansbach 100).

Because one must, in a freestyle, let the subconscious take hold, it cannot help but telling the truth of that person. The cypher is uniquely—perhaps solely—suited to deal, in a democratic venue, with man on his interior level—as opposed to the exterior, which is what political artifice deals in. The cypher is one of the only contemporary spaces in which the most disparate identities and languages are superseded by way of culture—in the case of a b-boy cypher this can be achieved without speaking a single word. The only way to short circuit the ceaseless and inevitable antagonism of racial, gender, and class-based identity, is to establish an identity around that which is inessential—that which can be universalized. Only an identity rooted in culture holds the promise of **universality**. Only a culture which can encompass all of culture holds the promise of unity. All of this the cypher realizes daily.

The moral of the cypher is basic enough: Life is a fight. Death? That's easy. Being alive is what's hard. And in this age it may well be the case that there is no greater hardship than simply *being alive* while conscious: choosing to *live*—with, or without a cause, or even without the slightest appeal to hope—the heroism of being alive. If *the battle* is an invocation of this original, founding myth—the struggle to be alive, and, therefore, the celebration of life—then the



cypher is its ritual enactment. “Ritual is the enactment of myth. By participating in ritual, you are participating in a myth,” as Cambell says. The function of ancient myths, as he saw it, was “to harmonize. [...] The myths and rites were means to put the mind in accord with the body, and the way of life in accord with the way nature dictates” (*Joseph Cambell & the Power of Myth*). Which is to say, that hip-hop is, in one sense, the art of aligning rhythms. Nothing achieves this more ecstatically than the cypher

In any case, for all of the commercialization of this culture, *this* (getting in a circle and dancing, or making up rhymes off the top of your dome) is something which utterly resists commodification. And this is principally owing to its...

#### (6) PERISHABILITY

The motivation of writing is to make money, is to mass-produce records, and mass-produce songs. Because they put a price on something that's priceless. The goal of free-styling is to throw something out once and you can never do it again—that's what makes it *free*! (*Freestyle*, MR. Re)

Few things are so pernicious to us as the **fear** of losing something. Only when you no longer fear to lose something can you truly be free. Wherever *permanence* is achieved—and it is only ever a provisional achievement—it is invariably at the cost of a sort of death; the sort of death that happens whenever “the temporary and fleeting trie[s] to fix itself as permanent” (Chang 152). Whether it be the virtues which are now set down in codified law, or oral tradition and myth, now frozen fast in the medium of the novel, whenever things are set down in writing, what is it if not the tyranny of people who are dead and gone, over the living? Nowhere can the persistence of anything be justly maintained but in the practices and values of any given individual; and there only for the span of a life. Where these moduses are maintained by individuals in *community* they become the living culture of hip-hop. As to assuring its own self-perpetuation, true hip-hop has never felt the dread of existential peril—it is too vitally necessary

to us in this moment of modernity to be contemplating its mortality. Besides, its **impermanence** its precisely its greatest defense.

Some of the most brilliant rhymes ever spoken, the most unfathomable sets ever thrown, were done in alleyways or on sidewalks, and will never be duplicated in quiet the same way ever again. The confluence between particular opponents, a particular song, in a particular place and time, simply cannot be reproduced. But this is what makes an **experience**, and it is all that stands between a living culture and the listless repetition of something dead and gone. The ephemeral nature of the cypher, of the freestyle, of the tag and the jam are precisely what guard a culture from exploitation, and the death of being commodified.

For Hoch “if hip-hop is to be discussed as art” then it only follows that we ask the question “what are its aesthetics?” (Chang 350). But this attempt to *aesthetize* gives me pause; seems to me nothing other than an appraisers scheme to commodify (in a fixed and cataloged form) what was only ever meant to remain fluid. When we attempt to transpose this—the denatured *aesthetic* of hip hop—onto a stage, or into a gallery, or fix it on a record, we are defusing hip-hop’s attempt to modally address our **alienated** relation to creativity.

Since money, as the existing and active concept of value confounds and exchanges all things, it is the general confounding and compounding of all things—the world upside-down—the confounding of all natural and human qualities (Marx 140)

As it is, **art** under a capitalist regime is in an inverted position. What I mean, is that the standard of “what art is” is decided by people who are generally the most ignorant and artistically alienated. It is precisely the people who are too alienated to attempt to create for themselves (the bourgeois consumers who buy at galleries and auctions) who set the price, and determine what is of value. The buying of art is almost exclusively the domain of the very

wealthiest people in society, and because it is inherent in this position that the wealthiest people are axiomatically averse to *living* a culture (all their passions and efforts being tied up in only what is profitable, I.e commodifiable—a disposition which the market enforces more assuredly than the law of natural selection) because they cannot *live* culture, they must *buy* culture. In this way someone who would have no cultural existence at all, but happens to have a lot of money, can buy vast quantities of cultural-product with which to cloth themselves and their property. To be blunt, art is in the hands of those who have completely misunderstood its point... **Self-expression.**

The art gallery is now obsolete; the people who pay to go inside are objects of ridicule, for they are slaves to a dead logic, and do not know that the true masters are no longer on the *insides* of the walls. What is even more ridiculous, they do not see that they too could be masters, themselves: masters *without* slaves. This is what leads some wall-writers to break completely from the hopelessly alienated notion of art. LOKISS: “For me [graffiti] is not 'art'. If you reject society you have to reject the way this society judges when its *art* and when it's *not art*” (*Bomb It*). but, ultimately, it's not the denatured aesthetics themselves which ought to be troubling to us, so much as it is the insidious process of this denaturing, and the forces which instigate it. If Sugar Hill was indicative of the formula by which *capital* commodified hip-hop, a play like “Hamilton” is the means by which *the state* has begun to co-opt this culture. While Hamilton succeeds wildly at the level of mythologizing—permitting us, the living, to reach back into history and remake it in accord with our sensibilities as a multi-ethnic and pro-immigrant, it fails egregiously at the level of the modus. For in this case it is not really us at all who are reaching back into history, but the state. Once again, hip-hop aesthetics are being thrown over a dusty ideology to liven it up, and we are once more left with another rendition of the bourgeois

dream. This **Hamilton-ization**, an advanced stage of aesthetic cooptation, which we now see occurring, is not only the reoperation of hip-hop by capital, but by older ideological preoccupations—state-ideology, national mythology, historical revisionism etc.—often by way of older mediums which operate on a modal paradigm that is likewise, total contradictory to the modus—anything from theater, to film, to the novel. By way of example Hoch gives Shakespeare when performed as rap: “this does two very damaging things. First, it sends the message that the hip-hop generation has no important stories of its own, and that [...] it must attach itself to such certified texts as those of Shakespeare. Second, it devalues hip-hop as art by relegating rap to humorous accompaniment” (Chang 358). And this is why, as Hoch articulates it, hip-hop is “denied the status of art; it is seen [variably] as radical political thought” or a highly disposable “novelty entertainment” (Chang 349).

The first distinction that must be understood here is that perishable ≠ disposable. On the contrary, it means **Fresh**—*real, raw, all-the-way-live*—the affect of *breaking* from the fast-frozen, fixed, preserved, and/or rotting. “It’s in that moment” (Chang 41). It is like a fruit that begins to expire the moment it is picked. It cannot be cold-stored, commoditized or shipped; it must be eaten on the spot and discover anew, in its thicket by each generation. The old heads cannot bring it to the new; all they can do is give a map to the place where the tree once grew.

This inevitable transience of art therefor calls for a new sort of artist, who, like the wall-writer must be largely free of sentimental attachment to her work. She must consent to have it white-washed and **gone-over** without protest—given freely, on the metaphysical belief that it will be seen, and that if it puts a smile on just one face, it will have been of value. But it is also given on the understanding that if everyone is to *get up*, nothing can remain up for ever—every piece is first an offering, then a sacrifice, given to prevent the culture from growing calcified and

stale. As such, even if no one else *went-over* your piece it would be necessary to go over it yourself, to prevent the past from becoming a blockage to new expression. I call this new sort of artist the **over-artist**: an artist who resolves the dilemma of the need for blankness by painting directly over the past without primer, and without sentimentality, and thus succeeds in making destruction and creation into one fluid motion. This is the only way a culture can escape being exploited, typified, mass-produced and, eventually, burned-out by capitalism. This the price of a living culture.

If it is true that all thought begins with remembrances, it is also true that no remembrance remains secure unless it is condensed and distilled into a framework of conceptual notions within which it can further exercise itself. Experiences and even the stories which grow out of what men do and endure, of happenings and events sink back into the futility inherent in the living world and the living deed unless they are talked about over and over again (Arendt 212)

But then remembrances are talked about only so long as they are of *use*. That which is no longer of use must be allowed to go the way of oblivion, or else it will become a tyranny, codified and implemented by coercion. Coincidentally, as Jacotot asserted “it is precisely because we are all equal by nature that we must all be [made] unequal by circumstance” (Ranciere 25). Coercion is the difference between laws and virtues. Between what is canonized and what is mythic. And this is also the reason why only virtues, and myths persist.

All things being perishable, there is a sense in which hip-hop itself might one day reach a point where it outlives its usefulness. Even I wouldn’t deny the possibility that hip-hop, itself, might one day need to be superseded. If it ceases to fundamentally address our situation, then it must go. For Mark Neil “the question becomes: how do we start thinking beyond hip-hop?” (Chang 40). What I have attempted to illustrate, in so many ways, is that while we certainly need to think beyond its mediated incarnations, we don’t need to *think beyond* hip-hop itself. As I have tried to put forth, in the modus all the tools that we need to address our modern conditions—poverty, violence, powerlessness, and the dissolution of community—are already

present in hip-hop. It is all there. What we need now are ways of enacting the *implications* of all this, which is to say *ways of imaging* the potentialities which lay immanent in hip-hop—of realizing hip-hop. I believe the hip-hop novel could be one of the best means of this, so long as we understand that it is not, *in itself*, the realization of hip-hop. *To live* is not, and will never be *to read*. But we cannot give birth to what we have not-yet conceived.

In 2050 [...] will we still be relevant? Will the thirty somethings be complaining for *us* to give them the keys so they can start their own movement? Or will hip-hop generations keep generating themselves, as poverty and injustice do? (Chang, Hoch 360)

If we do, one day succeed in truly *realizing* hip-hop, then it may be the case that we no longer need it. For every revolution that has succeeded, has necessarily outlived its reason for being, and those that remain often do so only to watch as they become a tyranny of themselves. But hip-hop is not a mere *revolution*. It is a way of life. For my part, I can see a place for hip-hop far *beyond* the end of poverty and injustice. And, if and when the b-boys and b-girls have finally succeeded in slaying these twin oppressions, and inaugurating life, call me what you will, but I see hip-hop there, doing things we never even imagined possible.

## (7)BREAKING/ROCKING

*Rocking* [...] has many senses, but perhaps the most potent is when it's used to suggest that someone has used her creativity to demonstrate control over some area of life [...] It represents the nexus of creativity and power, an important intersection for hip hop (Schloss 33)

We come now to the last piece of the modus. According to Schloss young Latinos first used the verb to “rock” in this potent way, by combining elements Rock & Roll and biker culture, with their own native sensibilities, and those of afro-americans. One can rock anything from a hat to a crowd, and so the possibilities of what we might potentially *rock* are, needless to say, thought provoking. What is important to note here is that in the space of this *nexus*, creativity *is* power itself.

“[W]hen dancers are said to be *rocking the beat*, the implications are that they are actually using their dance skill to [...] force the rhythm to conform to their desires” (Ibid). In this way we see that, like all of the preceding moduse of Hip-Hop, the act of rocking is irreducibly humanist—it seeks to radically humanize both space and time, and all the relations constituted therein, organizing and procuring the given material according to our human agency. What I also note here is that what makes something so seemingly fixed as a prerecorded piece of music pliable to human will, just by the act of dancing to it, is precisely the appreciation of that material's inextricable state of **internal-relation** to the whole of its surrounding...

From the b-boy's standpoint [...] the song is not the recording; the song is the recording being played by a particular deejay [...] in a particular room to particular people at a particular moment in a particular [context]. The song and the social experience of hearing it become one and the same. And that experience—like any social circumstance—can be *rocked* (Schloss 33).

And so we see here that the almost magical agency of the B-boy comes from a very simple philosophical disposition: he sees things as organic wholes.

In this way there is already a conceptual counterpart to the act of rocking, which is roughly synonymous. As we have already noted, the material with which hip-hop builds is invariably the past. Yet, for B+, at the same time as it is about a recrudescence of the past “its about the rupture [...] you can conjure a past, you can imagine a future” (Chang 41). This fluid motion which + calls the **rupture** certainly encompasses the act of rocking, and yet we get the sense that it is somehow more metaphysical in its implications: this is where *to rock*, becomes *to Break*. Let's first, however, distinguish between *to break* and *the break*...

The best artist share a desire to break down boundaries between 'high' and 'low' art” (from “its a hip-hop world (Chang, *It's a Hip-Hop World*)

As Opposed to...

When kids began throwing rebel street parties in the Bronx, people from different neighborhoods came together for the first time since the gangs had taken over, and there was one thing they all agreed on: the break was an opportunity. It was a moment on a record that was so powerful that it could actually overpower day-to-day reality and become an environment unto itself (Schloss 18).

Now, these being made distinct I'm not quite ready to pronounce that there is not potentially some fluid form of movement between the two which cannot be reached—let us not forget that the break was, itself, reached by way of Herc's peculiar act of breaking (from the conventional mode of DJing). But for the mean time we have the verb form and the noun form.

The *acts* of breaking are plentiful in hip-hop. From the DJs scratches, drops, cuts, fades, and various other manipulations of vinyl, to the b-girl's drops, suicides, and freezes. “The freeze calls attention to itself by decisively breaking the moment” (Schloss 91). Not to mention that “b” in b-girl stands for break. But It must be clarified that to *break*, is not to break *apart*—for this derivation of breaking is a social act. For Schloss it is a “Psychological break [...] a break from everyday life, allowing the dancer to enter a heightened world where ideas about time and space and spirituality and style could be addressed through raw physicality” (19).

So the break, in a sense, functions *bio-culturally*—to graft on a piece of Foucault—halting time and clearing a space for the definitive emergence of man. Here is an extra-spatio-temporal dimension (a pointed rupture in the “trans-temporal-continuity” which structures novelistic time, and the state/capitalist narrative of progress) a dimension in which **man** is centered as the prime agent and conductor of matter. And, in exchange for this total—if transitory—liberty, all that is asked is submission to the **rhythm**.<sup>16</sup> Big Daddy Kane: “If I'm a slave I'm a slave to the rhythm.” For Lefebvre rhythm—that “which is lived, tested, touched”—is the “concrete universal that philosophical systems have lacked, that political organizations have forgotten” (53). It is what truly, and bodily binds us back to life. The break tears a hole in

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<sup>16</sup> Rhythm will be a key concept to address for any future synthesis of hip-hop, and the novel. For the time being we can take it as the principle which aligns bodies, both in themselves, and into larger societies, i.e. the catalyst of bodily wisdom.



the everyday, unquestioned dressage of life, in order to create a space for a new rhythm to emerge.

Of course this break is only fleeting, and cannot be sustained for ever—it must *set its own limits* as Camus says (18). But then it is not so much the maintenance of the break that matters, as what we take away from it. And what we take away from it is a profound new appreciation of our infinite potentiality as human beings. A novel *might* perform this function, but it would, itself, need to make a decided break from the nihilistic sort of realism which rules contemporary fiction. What is more, a break must be expressed socially: “A b-boy or b-girl is representing a relationship between dance and musical form [...] a reaction to the psychological stress of poverty (one who 'breaks' emotionally), a commitment to the culture and symbolism of the dance over commercialism (b-boy verses breakdancer)” (64). Perhaps most interesting, Schloss associates this break with “a sense of geographical and class pride” (Ibid). Much more on this will need to be addressed in any future synthesis of hip-hop and the novel.

As a social act the break has no resemblance to the loneliness and willful seclusion of novel writing. As we've already noted, breaking is not about creating division, but on the contrary, about seeing things as radical whole... this, in itself, is what makes breaking/rocking possible, for there is no *destruction* of matter here; there is merely the transformation of its form. And this is how we rationalize that last, and most peculiar type of breaking of which Thes One spoke earlier, and of which every wall-writer who ever lived has been compelled to bear out: the *need to break the law*. What is truly being broken with here is the contemporary definition of Law. Which proffers the question: can breaking in itself be its own law? But that is of course a question for another time; that is the question called *democracy*...

If *rocking & breaking* are what we *do* to the given circumstance and/or material at hand then *the break* must necessarily be the result. But then, is it not the Dj's furnishing of a break which *facilitates* breaking, the result of which is nothing other than us, our heightened state? Here again as with the cypher, if *the break* and the *act of breaking* cannot be understood as an internally-related whole—via *participation*—then the entire thing, *breaks down*... This is the problem of the novel, as regards the distinction between author and reader, the pure demarcation of which, as we now know, does not exist between the DJ and his Jam, who are accountable to one another. And so it's probably useful to conceive of the break in concrete terms, as the cypher, which is itself a form of break—indeed a break from the banal, a hole opened up in everyday life. But this is just one of its possible forms, and but a piece of its limitless applicability.

The psychic break of Hip-Hop should stand in distinct relief to the cognitive **dissociation** of the novel—among whose many binaries, the chief one is Word... Life. This dissociation, inaugurated by the novel, has gone far beyond it in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Indeed, to what extent is the dissociative thinking of the novel, at the root of much of the catastrophes we associate with the modern era? And the chiefest of these catastrophes has surely been the fallout of failed revolutions. The break is, in many ways, analogous to the concept of **revolution**, in that it is simultaneously *repetitive*, and *changing*: at once cyclical, looping and rhythmic, as it is an act of rupturous, halting, change—a chimeral entity, the contradictory natures of which have confounded us since the French Revolution. But here is where we might make our break... for, if we were to reconceive revolution atop a turn table, adhering to our own human rhythms, then this monster would melt into wax beneath the fearless tips of our fingers...

...A mere jumping point for any future synthesis.

As it were, there is an inescapable element of authoritarianism in all revolutions, for a revolution—unlike a pure and spontaneous revolt—cannot escape **preconception**. Even in hip-hop, this authoritarian element is present, in the form of the record, which is then defused and obliterated by the Dj's intervention with it, as a scriptor. But does the necessity of this authoritarian element necessarily mean that hip-hop is, in some inescapable way, *reactionary*? Is authoritarianism necessary to instigate the bodily revolt of hip-hop? Another obscured question to be born out by the future. In any case, this is the only breach into which a novel might enter. Could the novel, which, likewise, cannot escape its authoritarian nature, serve here as an precipitating force? For, while it seems to me that we are all capable of rocking what is present at hand, it is *impossible* to rock what is not there, or what has not-yet been made present even to the mind, let alone to one's hand. There is thus the need for instruments, mediums, forums which might *serve up* the break—serve up new and necessary rhythms by which we might, not just cope with our contemporary situation, but begin to overcome it... And there is no reason to assume that a turntable is the only means. As Schloss suggests “b-boy songs are chosen for their conduciveness to being rocked” (34). And so it seems clear that we need to try and re-conceive the novel for maximized rockability.

If any of this has managed to affirm something of the nature of hip hop, as that which you *live*, it has, perhaps, not yet explicitly defined just what it *means* to live; that is, what it means to *be alive*. This is why, for me the act of Rocking is the definitive moduse—indicative of the entire Modus itself, but also the implications we can extrapolate from it. As “the nexus of creativity and power” it encapsulates the passion for being alive and fully realized, which is none other than hip-hop. Only from here can we begin to venture the form and content of any future synthesis of hip-hop and the novel.

## Final Note on the Moduses

As I see it, these are the 7 Moduses of Hip-Hop: (1) Battle (2) Freestyle (3) Bricollage (4) Sampling (5) Cypher (6) Pershability, and (7) Break. Together they constitute the true, incorruptible modus of hip-hop... is this to be taken as a law? Of course not—it is simply my own mythic interpretation; a cursory look at this fathomless culture, to be rocked as you see fit.

As hip-hop appropriates its aesthetics from all times and places, this *content* should never be held inviolable; only the *act*, and *methods* of *composing* it are, ultimately, inviolable. Only the modus is inviolable, and it is the quality of this container which ensures the virtue of its contents. Adherence to this modus does not imply the application of laws or abstract commandments, but only a very definite mode of being: a being in which creativity is democratized. With the practicing of Hip-hop there is then no need for catechism or law: the goodness is instituted positively as active creation, instead of negatively, in the restraint of destruction. Hip-hop provides a way *to be*, without telling us *what to be*; Hip-hop provides a way to think, without proscribing thoughts. Instead of dictating, it returns a mutual faith in the judgment of mankind—in our natural inclination to be social, to express ourselves creatively, and to act in accord with our innate sense of what is just. But there is a modus, and as they are wont to say, motherfuckers better know-the-ledge...

From the Marxist perspective *form* is only ever the form of its *content*. While It is true that they act mutually upon each-other there is a reason why I chose to pass the novel through hip-hop first, before passing hip-hop through the novel. It was firstly to inculcate us into the logic of hip-hop. But it was also to surround and seize upon the prize of the novel, if only to keep it from seizing upon hip-hop. If we are to think of hip-hop—thus composed of these perennial moduses of operation—as a *vessel*, then its aesthetics are necessarily the arbitrary

*contents* of that vessel. But this is not to say that they are any less important for being mere contents. On the contrary, the aesthetics are the vital fruit beneath this steadfast husk, and, as such, they have never ceased to be the true object of this struggle. If I have elucidated a Modus, it is largely to rendering up an aesthetics that is in accord with it, and that will be fruitful to our human needs. For, if heads have hitherto only *interpreted* hip-hop in various ways, the point, need I remind, is to *change* it.

## Concluding The Prolegomena

In the Spirit of Killin' it...

The ambiguity of meaning in the twentieth century, the whole hollow in the heart of faith [...] It is as if we are looking for stuff, any stuff, with which to stuff the hole [...] something rabid is loose in the century. Maybe we are not converting art [...] in order to stuff the hole, but rather are using art to choke that hole, as if society is so hopeless, which is to say so twisted in knots of ideological spaghetti, that the glee is in strangling [it] (Mailer 27).

That voracious pie hole of which mailer speaks is undoubtedly capital, which has stripped the halo from everything once sacred, and commoditized everything right down to our most sacred need to express ourselves. Marx's method is the most devastating critique ever leveled against this system of capitalism. Fortunately for capital it never had any feelings to be hurt, let alone a mind to be impressed. All it has is a mouth. For all of our unease at the “entropy” and “death” of hip-hop, its peril before this, the voracious mouth of capital, what I have meant to suggest here with these moduses, is simple: a living culture *cannot* die. The structure and functioning of hip-hip at this modal level is such that it *cannot* be co-opted, recuperated or even corrupted. Capital's only recourse then, faced with this incorruptible matter is to *preempt*—to throw up spectacular caricatures and projections, so as to dissimulate and falsify hip-hop's mortal truth: a culture based on things which cannot be bought or sold is the death of capital.

And so any future synthesis of hip-hop and the novel is firstly a struggle over the image of hip-hop. But no struggle over hip-hop can escape the political and economic implications of which it is internally related. What we must do then is create nothing less than a new political, economic and spiritual mode of life, around this rectified culture. My hope is that the *modus*, can serve as that vital kernel at the center of hip-hop, around which to begin this project. Here in this collection of relations, rituals, and modes of expression, is the germ of a living culture. A culture which, just by its existence in proximity to it, negates capital, and corrodes authority. Indeed, how could capitalism or the state ingest such a thing as this? Except on pain of choking to death!? Such a culture as this would serve us as a protective shield against the spectacular intrusions of capital and authority. And as we spread forth, the ways of death would retreat in proportion.

The promise of hip-hop, is that we might “exercise control over the meaning, value, and direction of [our] lives [...] that artistic power can be ideological power” (Schloss 155). It only follows from the peculiar praxis of hip-hop that *culture* is the true *base* of the proverbial superstructure. Ariefdien & Abrahams: “art does not only mirror reality but that it shapes reality [...] art cannot be divorced from the rest of our lives; it's part of everything we do, be it about the spirit, the political, the philosophical, the cultural” (Chang 269). And so if hip-hop democratizes art, can a democratized art democratize society itself? If indeed it is as Chang says, that “the block party—not the political party—[is] the space of possibility (65), if, indeed, culture *is* the focal point of struggle, then is it not “the artists,” as Percy Shelley said, who are the “Unofficial legislator of the world”? And, this being the case, what could all the politicians in the world, or every Napoleon in history hope to leave, but for a fleeting pockmark on the surface of this world which we, as artist, have wholly conceived, realized, and which we, every day, give motion to?

“[I]f power is not available in the larger world,” writes Mark Katz “it is available in the battle world.”(Chang 129) As such, hip-hop culture can be seen as a site of production of extra-political power. A place where, in absence of political agency, the dis-empowered can come together and, by a sort of social fusion, spontaneously create agency from out of thin air. But what we see by way of hip-hop is that democracy does not necessarily need to be transcendental to the realm of culture—there is no reason to assume that politics needs to split away, and be positioned over-above the sphere of culture. And here is perhaps, the most interesting subject of all for any hypothetical *hip-hop novel*: its attempt to recall an earlier sort of politics which was lived.

It is by means of the book that the members of this society would be able to get their bearings. To see themselves and see their situation [...] This awareness of self is a surpassing of self [...] the written work can be an essential condition of action (Sartre 158).

If I have indeed illustrated the 7 moduses of hip-hop, then those of the novel read much bleaker. What are they after all, if not professionalism, spectacle, authority, solitude? What are the novel's *metaphysics acts* if not delimitation of possibility, the postponement of life, the drawing of lines? After several years of studying novels I have discovered that, on the whole, I do not much like novels. But I still believe in them. Because though the lived life is always superior to the contemplation of life, sometimes it is precisely the problem that we no longer know how to live. In absence of life, there is only the contemplation of life, and there is, as yet, no better way to contemplate life than the novel.

Human beings are simple enough it seems to me; we do not need to be *reverse-psychologized*, or *negatively reinforced*. We learn by **example**. What we need are new stories, in places that look peculiarly like our homes, and with heroes who look peculiarly like ourselves. But yet, who are doing thing decidedly unlike anything we have done before. Here is where **fiction** must be reclaimed and realized. Something of a wide, and thorough scope is needed;

something that, like a *dream*, might present us with scenarios in a sensuously believable way, such that, upon waking, we not only have the *knowledge* of how we might proceed, but know how it *feels* to proceed. A good novel can do this. A good novel can *will* bodily-wisdom into being. Whether or not we can escape the soporific spell of the novel is yet to be determined...

Good exploratory writing shows you the man of tomorrow [But] there is no way to become familiar with this new world within ourselves except by fearless exploration (Nin 169).

So, in the spirit of killin' it, I hope that we have attempted to define not only a new and irreverent way of thinking about the novel, but a new sort of novel itself—which, like a Break-beat, is constructed in such a way as to contain its own, **self-supersession**.<sup>17</sup> A sort of novel which affirms the primacy of actual *life* over spectacle, such that when a reader picks up that work, reads it to the last line, and slams home that back cover, it ought to have the effect of *propelling* them out into the world—not only with a renewed élan for the lived-life, but with the desire to facilitate a life *worthy* of living. Any hypothetical hip-hop novel, it should be concluded, could never be anything more than a jumping-off point for life. Which is why it may be positively stated that a *true* Hip-Hop Novel (if, indeed, such a thing is possible) would necessarily contain its own, imminent super-session. That is to say, in a rather paradoxical way, that the *true* Hip-Hop novel must be the *last* Hip-Hop novel. But then what better way to abolish the Novel than to finally and definitively *realize* it...?

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<sup>17</sup>And isn't this sort of radical self-consciousness (*meta*-consciousness if you will) the natural end to which *post-modernity* has been leading? Not surprisingly, Post-modernity here leads back to none other than the unfinished project of modernity.



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