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Hip_Hop Redux: A Plugin with Extensions

The fashionable thing in certain circles—typically those self-identified as "conscious" or "underground"—is to discuss the impending death of hip_hop and to announce one's general ennui with regard to the state of contemporary black cultural production.[1] This sentiment is ordinarily accompanied by assertions supposing hip_hop's declining significance in public life and a deep nostalgia for the hallowed golden era of graffiti writing, b-boying, deejaying, and emceeing. The truth of the matter is that hip_hop has never been merely the sum of its expressive forms. Rather, hip_hop has most often been manifested *through* these particular modes. And I would argue that hip_hop's aesthetic character, in some senses, has outgrown the performative boundaries of its original elements as well as the limitations of its presumed American singularity, anticipating further revisions of conventional representations of blackness and Americanness in public discourse. Many of the better innovations in hip_hop practice and reinterpretation—including those geared toward any sort of human rights initiative—are happening outside the United States and outside the traditional modes of expression, for example, in newer digital media and the fine arts.[2] The continued evolution of the cultural work will require an active progression beyond the insistent regionalism and essentialist tendencies that have been the hallmark of hip_hop production for the past twenty years. In this way, practitioners might resituate useful standards of resistance and redefine hip_hop as a pragmatic operational strategy. This systemic transition is what I am calling *hip_hop redux*.

I am plugging in the premise that hip_hop, as it has been conventionally modeled over the past three decades, is broken in several aspects, namely, as a nationalist construction, as a productive underground movement, as a barometer of the real, and certainly as an adequate sign for authentic black identity. In each aspect, the model is broken ironically in its *exaggeration*. This thematic crisis is attended by a defensive hysteria on the part of those who, until this phase, have been responsible monitors of culture but now lead a mad dash to reestablish the importance of textual elements and patchily documented histories at the expense of cool reasoning about how hip_hop should next be figured. The selective authorization of hip_hop (as) text is coded by occasionally spurious claims about specific spatiality and temporality, the requisite coincidence of which handicaps (often quite deliberately) any otherwise productive cultural critique that does not verify its material grounding in, say, 1970s'-something New York City. For this and other reasons, a solely text-based reading of hip_hop does not work because of its dependence on narratives that have been disrupted and will continue to evidence its ruptures. By no means am I suggesting that we disregard textual analysis entirely; as a matter of record, I go head-over-heels for smart, close readings of the elements, holistically considered, as useful to an understanding of how hip_hop works and of what individuals and groups have been trying to accomplish in terms of the organization of community and the voicing of marginalized viewpoints in response to dire material conditions.[3] However, the troubling adherence to certain limited classifications of text and arbitrarily legitimized readings, as determined by a relatively small but influential set of individuals and groups, can be crippling to thoughtful applications of hip_hop as a *theoretical* apparatus, especially those that result in manifestations of things named

hip_hop which seem to contradict heretofore staid interpretations. Yes, reconceptualizing hip_hop as an operative theory is about undermining proclamations, but it is not about splitting the conceptual bloc for the sake of being contrary or for the fun of drumming up discord which would disturb what has been a lengthy and rather laborious (though varyingly redemptive) agenda of configuring hip_hop with collective dignity in mind and in accord with streamlined specifications. Aimlessly gnawing at the integrity of past narratives has become yet another nauseating time-waster of popular discourse. Likewise, seemingly endless disputes over content and inclusion become practically irrelevant to the project of anticipating discursive futures. At the risk of being bullied by those who do not deal well with change, principled code-breakers must engineer a new aegis by which essentialist strategies can be delicately defused and hip_hop can be recalibrated for operation on increasingly rougher public terrain, inside and outside specified media.[4]

Hip_hop, as the text has been popularly termed, has lost much of its resistive capacity. For whom do rappers speak right now? Whom does their hip_hop reference in terms of actual communities of human beings? If hip_hop has ever been about the business of keeping things real, then whose experience does it reify? And what will we do when the struggle is done? Where will we go with hip_hop culture once the rest have finally wrung it dry and put it down? Where will we go, that is, without moving outside the recognizable idiom of hip_hop as we have known it? At its core the thing that I distinguish as *hip_hop proper* is that which has been about the radical project of (1) repurposing found objects (including colloquial English), (2) rededicating public space (such as sidewalks as dance floors and alleyways as art galleries), (3) redeploying cut-and-paste methodologies (as with record sampling), and (4) rerouting regular cultural narratives (by articulating alternate accounts).[5] Again, I am arguing here that we have exhausted the capacity of hip_hop's classic, assigned performative elements for the useful representation and innovation of culture. What more can a b-boy do to test the kinetic limits of the human body? What can a deejay do with turntables that has not already been done? Text-specific hip_hop and text-based hip_hop analysis, as we have been asked to understand it for the past quarter of a century—what its proponents often reference as "true" hip_hop or "original" hip_hop—is a broken model. But hip_hop itself—hip_hop properly built as a theory (or a set of theories), rather than hip_hop *defined* by its text—still has useful applications, depending on what we want to do with it and what we want to allow it to be. In order to produce and maintain an effective instrument, we must reprogram its discursive function keys until hip_hop has been conceptually chopped and screwed. This hip_hop redux is actually about creating space to move the readership forward with a progressive alternative to the erstwhile "alternative."

And who, pray tell, is hip_hop's target audience in this age of advanced cultural literacy? In textual terms, hip_hop's crowd-sourced content is driven by professional scholars and lay fanatics, rappers and b-people, aerosol painters and record selectors (plus other fine artists who sample hip_hop aesthetics), bloggers and prolific tweeters, journalists and popular critics, media darlings and entertainment tycoons, community activists and grassroots organizers—generators, curators, and archivists all classifiable as hip_hop heads, to some degree or another. So the receiving party is transfigurative, constantly unpacking and reassembling itself. And it is no more static than the audience of this essay, for instance. Smart money says that you, dear reader, dear user, represent at least two of these itemized sectors yourself—each in turn or both at once, making tracks and hyperlinking at the same damn time.[6] Theoretically speaking, hip_hop functions to designate and then variegate its audience—said readership (a scrum of subaudiences, really)—at an expeditious clip. The technologies that facilitate the wide accessibility and deep utility of hip_hop text instigate an ironic knockback to the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos and lifestyle to which we had become accustomed. Of the intersection of cultural identity and technology, particularly the technology of sound production and dissemination, Alexander Weheliye writes:

> As a direct outcome of its growing sonic and visual presence hip-hop has come to define what it means to be black and "modern" within a global context and particularly in youth cultures. Because of hip-hop's pre-eminence, Afro-diasporic youth populations habitually identify with or define themselves against hip-hop culture, creating identities suspended between local and global. (146)

This habitual liminality means that contemporary subaudiences observe and sometimes perform a balancing act in which identity becomes industrialized and globalized, restructuring the representation of race and gender. Diversified and occasionally stratified, we are an amalgamated polity—a consumer base, a producer base—comprised of individuals and groups who may not consider ourselves associated with one another, even as we celebrate similar root systems and participate in the same rituals of public nostalgia, at least on the lower frequencies.[7]

Turning up again, we marvel as so many bright new talents and trending topics come and go. They blaze upon the scene with much fanfare, burst large, and then implode with dubious ceremony. Hip_hop, as it has been popularly understood, can be likened to a dying star, broken and exhausted, exploding at its extremities as it eats its own heart out, filling up on itself.[8] Bigger cars, bigger rims, bigger diamonds, bigger gear, bigger price tags—all of which will eventually fizzle into bottomless uncertainties. When you dig into your orange foil bag of honey barbecue-flavored Lil' Romeo Rap Snacks, ask yourself whether you are consuming the crunchy text or whether the text is consuming you. Whichever you decide in this time of modified hunger for economic uplift and just representation, it is imperative that we refresh the feed. And this is where text-specific, personality-driven hip_hop fails.

Physicist Stephen Hawking has provided us with one of the most generally accessible explanations of hot heavenly bodies and how they work. In *A Brief History of Time*, he writes:

> A star is formed when a large amount of gas (mostly hydrogen) starts to collapse in on itself due to its gravitational attraction. As it contracts, the atoms of the gas collide with each other more and more frequently and at greater and greater speeds—the gas heats up. Eventually, the gas will be so hot that when the hydrogen atoms collide they no longer bounce off each other, but instead coalesce to form helium. The heat released in this reaction, which is like a controlled hydrogen bomb explosion, is what makes the star shine. The additional heat also increases the pressure of the gas until it is sufficient to balance the gravitational attraction, and the gas stops contracting. . . . Stars will remain stable like this for a long time, with heat from the nuclear reactions balancing the gravitational attraction. Eventually, however, the star will run out of its hydrogen and other nuclear fuels. (84-85)

We can view a star's life cycle as a series of collapses and simultaneous explosions hinging on the maintenance of temperature and gravity. When its fuels finally dwindle, a star begins to die, and a number of things can occur. One possibility is that the star starts to cool off and contract, its gravitational equilibrium having been disturbed. On an internal level, as the gaseous body caves in on itself, it becomes extremely dense and may assume the form of a black hole. Externally, the star explodes into a hot and heavy version of itself—hotter and heavier than any other star in its vicinity—and is recognized as a supernova. (Think of a light bulb that burns brightest in the moments before it blows out.) Chunks of the body's outer region may get slung back into the galaxy where they would, as Hawking puts it, "provide some raw material for the next generation of stars" (124).

On November 12, 1973, Afrika Bambaataa, a Bronx deejay and ranking official in the Black Spades street gang, founded the Universal Zulu Nation (UZN) as a unifying social outlet for young blacks and Latinos who were otherwise committing crimes and killing each other in the streets. Among the central tenets of the Zulu Nation were faith in a single god, belief in the Bible and the Qur'an, and an understanding that these books of scripture—not unlike the textbooks being used in schools around the world—had been tampered with and cluttered with misinformation

through the devices of white supremacy. That said, the Zulus' membership was intended to operate on the principles of peace, love, unity, and (safely) having fun. What we often fail to recall is that the UZN was organized a good year before hip_hop was plugged into the equation. In fact, the original listing of "The Beliefs of the Universal Zulu Nation" does not mention hip_hop at all. As legend has it, Bambaataa and the Zulus officially recognized the birth of hip_hop on November 12, 1974. Subsequently, hip_hop programming became the organization's most prominent public feature. Two decades later, in 1996, rapper KRS-One founded the Temple of Hiphop, designed as a hip_hop preservation society which would produce its own set of tenets via *The Gospel of Hiphop*, a required study manual for the "Hiphop lifestyle." Shifting emphasis away from the Bible and the Qur'an as pedagogical devices while elaborating extensively on UZN fundamentals, the emcee decided to write his own good book, an instructive if moderately apocryphal text that centers on KRS as teacher and "Teacha."

The religious overtones of the UZN and the Temple of Hiphop and the zealousness of certain of the organizations' membership may make my statements here borderline blasphemous. Still, individuals are affirmed as cultural arbiters and ordained as pioneers for their having been among the first to practice hip_hop through particular forms—Bambaataa as the "Master of Records," Busy Bee as perhaps the first solo emcee, Crazy Legs as the inventor of the extended backspin, and so on. Even as forty-something Kris Parker, through the auspices of his Temple, takes the liberty of expanding Bam's five elements (which had already been expanded from four in order to accommodate Knowledge, awareness of the approved cultural history) to a whopping nine, there remains a concentration on specific "firsts" whose significance as practical signs of entitlement continues to outweigh the otherwise philosophical doctrine. KRS-One's affirmations—"Rap is something you do, Hiphop is something you live," and the equally ubiquitous "I am Hiphop"—begin to feel more boastful than prescriptive.[9] To be fair, Bambaataa has always defined hip_hop as a "universal" idea, but others have digressed widely from this point. And despite Bam's sincere and consistent call for the emergence of hip_hop doctors, hip_hop lawyers, and hip_hop engineers (plus hip_hop morticians?), his own position at the podium is still predicated upon his supposedly having been there all along. When we celebrate Hip Hop History Month—November—and Hiphop Appreciation Week, a holiday christened in 1998 more or less incidentally, just as BG, the Hot Boys, and the Big Tymers were getting set to release the breadwinners' anthem "Bling Bling," whose hip_hop are we actually preserving? The untimely demise of Christopher Wallace notwithstanding, hip_hop practitioners have never been especially enthusiastic about the whole "death of the author" routine (though the recent trend of picking the bones and the remaindered verses of deceased emcees may suggest otherwise), which is to say that the writer or performer typically remains relentlessly centered in—if not synonymous, symbiotic with—the text.[10] Commenting on the progression of art in the aftermath of 9/11 and on the political climate in which the attacks came about, Paul Virilio writes:

> There are many ways of being iconoclastic. You can burn pictures and those who painted them, erase or tamper with the cartouches of monuments, break religious statues or blow up those of political idols, as at the end of the Communist era. . . . But how is it when the iconoclast is the plastician himself? (47)

In order for hip_hop to *work* in the manner that its elder statesmen *suggest* that they believe it should, some of its central figures must be willing to step out of the way and let it *happen*. If the project is to succeed, their sincere occupation, not unlike that of any principled change agent, must be to put themselves out of a job. Deconstructing iconography from the inside out in order to redefine (or reinstitute) what hip_hop *means* requires a willingness to empty the text and to reinvest from ground zero in a theory that speaks to progressive ideals.

But this program has some glitches. Conversations with individuals who would, it seems, aim to be responsible for mentoring the production of new cultural theory and theoretically informed texts, too often devolve into wars of obstruction in which potential innovators are told simply to mind their conduct and to remember their place. Hoary chaperones of hip_hop culture—both self-appointed and selected by popular consensus—engage in tactics that discourage the inventiveness of forward-thinking theorists and practitioners in a manner akin to textbook conservatism, Bible-beating. Enter the temperamental oldhead, come to mark his territory and to prevent especially those designated as newcomers from acquiring too much latitude. As his boisterous attitude belies a broody angst about his past achievements having been forgotten, he is easily recognizable on the set. He tries to enlist an audience in support of what he wants to do by overtalking his critical opposition, peers who celebrate him for his accomplishments and at the same time find him generally unpleasant to be around. He tends to make threats of violence when criticized in a public forum, creating an environment in which thoughtful disagreement is likely to erupt into a shouting match at the least, or a physical altercation at the worst. He effectively bugs out in front of people. Predictably, these hissy fits are bracketed by fallbacks onto dodgy timelines and geographic links as assurances of his authoritative positioning.[11] Meanwhile, his unsuspecting listeners, still reverential, are made to tolerate the cantankerous trailblazer who wishes to heroize hip_hop and mythologize it as though it had sprung fully formed from his forehead, ever fixed in its definition. Bogged down by aggressive anti-intellectualism and petty confirmation concerns, formulations such as KRS-One's red-letter edition of hip_hop culture—in which turntables become altartops and uprock becomes liturgical dance—begin to sound wacky if not plain wack. And the quiet observer begins to wonder whether perhaps the preachy practitioner's deposition would allow for some much-needed wiggle room.[12]

Kodwo Eshun is on the same page in his *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, when he promises, "no more forcefeeding you Bronx fables and no more orthodox HipHop liturgies" (00[-005]). He argues that "most recent accounts of Black Music—those which form the dominant humanist strain in the commemoration of Black Music—are more than anything wish fulfillments" (00[-002]). The reiteration of certain histories of pure development, pure evolution, is the obsessive-compulsive preoccupation of individuals invested in protecting an idea of genre uninterrupted by cross-patches of worrisome hybridity. What is at stake for the defenders is a sense of their own identity to the extent that it is informed by specific renditions of cultural production as a sign of the times. The prospect of destroying the orthodoxy, of decentering the Bronx as the hub of all hip_hop culture, is the business of destabilizing icons and is perhaps a task best left to the experts. But who are they? Eshun is primarily discussing music critics here—those writing from the outside in—but we have arrived at a place where this is happening from the inside out as well, the dividing line having been eradicated. Everyone is a critic, and everyone is his or her own star. That is why the 2006 *Time* magazine Person of the Year is *You*—followed, naturally, by billionaire Mark Zuckerberg in 2010. We have been uploaded and posted up on Facebook and YouTube ("Broadcast Yourself"), on Instagram and Twitter. We have Logic and Final Cut Pro at our fingertips, live streaming video, podcasts, Tumblrs, and countless "friendship" platforms, all of which may themselves be so many jalopies of reference in a couple of years as we drive forward to the next ironic filters to access, aiming (AIMing) to encapsulate culture, to organize it in a certain way, to keep it at once close and buffered. Google me at any time on any given day. But shoot me an email before you call, and call before you come. Then go ahead and Google yourself as well. LOL.

In a 2006 interview with *The Wire* magazine, rapper Kool Keith (also known as Doctor Octagon, also known as Black Elvis, formerly of the Ultramagnetic MCs) rants a bit about the current situation:

> People aren't communicating anymore. You can't meet a girl or a guy and have a social conversation because people don't meet anymore. They just go to MySpace and all the Websites. I chose New York because I got to see more people. You know, in LA everyone's hiding behind tinted windows. Everyone's in a car—you can't meet nobody at a light. I get tired of seeing people waste a lot of gas. You got a skinny, bony Chinese girl out there driving. She comes to LA and buys a big giant Escalade. She doesn't have a family. She doesn't buy any groceries to put in the back. Why do you have this big, giant SUV burning up gas, smoking up the city? Why are you driving around Beverly Hills with a mobile phone in your hand driving an Escalade? No one knows who you are. You got tinted windows, but nobody knows who you are. (39)

So is it bigger than hip_hop? This *is* hip_hop—acquiring access to technology that can be jerry-rigged into a mechanism for self-expression (or for fluid anonymity). That is the trick. And the demystification of the methodology is the root of much of our recent irreverence. This is the type of cultural materialist MacGyverism that has the fixtures and the luminaries shaking in their old shelltoes. It has become a thousand times more difficult to regulate the disconnect between the austerity of the gospel and the agency of its constituents. And the traffic of mediation is becoming a beast, especially when we remember that the wonderful new technology of virtual identity is primarily corporate-run. So is the strife merely about combating the institutionalization of culture and of hip_hop? Of course not; we petitioned for it for years, then backtracked, and then petitioned some more. All the while, various versions of what was called hip_hop had been institutionalized by the Zulu Nation and other entities since the 1970s. No, the back-and-forth has not been about whether hip_hop *should* be institutionalized. As UZN members continue to deliver lectures and appear at conferences in university venues and other accredited settings, the strife still is about agency, about control, about the authority of representation. The actual contention has always been about *whose* institution it shall be.

Hawking reminds us that time will always move differently for someone on a star than for someone at a greater distance from the surface of its gravitational field, which becomes stronger as the star collapses. He writes:

> According to the theory of relativity, nothing can travel faster than light. Thus if light cannot escape, neither can anything else; everything is dragged back by the gravitational field. So one has a set of events, a region of space-time, from which it is not possible to escape to reach a distant observer. This region is what we now call a black hole. (88)

Likewise, markers of advancement can become trapped—again, fixed—inside the black hole of cultural orthodoxy. Whereas pioneers like Bambaataa and KRS might consider some of their provisional progeny's recent work—say, Kanye West's reflections on his own fiscal extravagance—a departure from what they have been trying to communicate for the past thirty-odd years, it is in fact the unsurprising extension of the program that they helped to set up from the start, and that is the public celebration of the traditional assignment of elements.[13] Again, we asked for this, and here it comes—the exponential outgrowth of decades-long mainstreaming efforts. Take a look at Minya Oh's 2005 book, *Bling Bling: Hip Hop's Crown Jewels*, which consists of photographs of rappers sporting their favorite baubles alongside interviews investigating what these items mean to them. Progressing from Flavor Flav clocks and leather Africa medallions to chunky pinky rings and platinum links, the work chronicles an arc of hip_hop accessories, which mostly means a gradual movement toward flashier and pricier things. When Cash Money helped to popularize the term back in 1999, they surely had no idea what would happen to bling at the turn of the millennium. What is intended as an indicator of means and sophistication comes to appear garish—if not cartoonish—on the page, such that the original meaning is finally lost inside the glitter. André 3000 critiques this tendency to celebrate style over substance on a remix of DJ Unk's "Walk It Out" from 2006. He rhymes:

Your white tee—well, to me—look like a nightgown.
Make your mama proud; take that thang two sizes down.
Then you'll look like the man that you are or what you could be.
I can give a damn (a)bout your car, but then I would be
If it was considered a classic before the drastic change in production
When cars were metal instead of plastic. Value
Is what I'm talkin(g) (a)bout.
Take two of these of these, and walk it out.

On a track that is actually about flossing, André characteristically undercuts the thrust of the song. His critical perspective points back to a haunting anxiety. Even as the item functions to democratize hip_hop fashion, undermining the many years of domination by expensive labels, the white T-shirt is huge in size—quadruple-XL. It must *not* be tucked in; it *cannot* be tucked in. It must be crisp and seen.

Flashback to Jamel Shabazz's time capsule of a photograph collection, *Back in the Days*. No less clean but more truly fitted, the only things oversized in these frames are the frames of Coke-bottle Cazals (or, better yet, Gazelles) and the fat shoelaces strung into magnificently tended suede—that and the unassuming smiles (which are increasingly rare these days). Captured on film across the boroughs of New York between 1980 and 1989, Shabazz's subjects express a sincerity and a vulnerability—short-shorts and T-shirts cut a little bit "young"—that come from working with what they have. And they suggest an openness about what may be coming next over the cultural horizon. In terms of name-brand fashion, the classics are present—Puma, Adidas, Clarks, and, of course, Kangol. Still, the names on the belts and necklaces are overwhelmingly the wearers' own.[14] (For quite a stint, even singular pieces of jewelry are stamped with Jacob Arabo's trademark.) And this is what we have to look forward to: hip_hop will blow up and out while folding in on itself to be reduced to its immediate core. (Indeed, the time is coming. Check out Jay Z and Beyoncé's matching rope chains and old-style kicks in the video for her "Upgrade U," a song essentially about boosting a young lover's cultural cachet through material provisions. Listen again for the shout to Jacob the Jeweler.) As hip_hop text becomes more accessible, things are beginning to tighten up again. (Certain sets of heads in DC are squeezing hard into their skinny jeans, despite the steady prevalence of looser street styles and "urban" fits being transferred on the major bandwidths.) Super-size me; break me down. Perhaps in this process, the broken text itself will be found and repurposed, cut and pasted, transformed spatially, and made useful for the articulation of new and current narratives, cracking the surface.

Where text-based hip_hop, with its reliance on the precise looping of a tale twice told, can be understood as a collapsing entity, hip_hop proper—which I have in other places referenced as *actual* hip_hop—would be best interpreted as a sign of chaotic expansion loosely compared to a fractal set. An important thing to bear in mind is that fractals, which are by definition self-similar, are not exact copies of the original. Rather, they are *distorted* iterations of an initial idea. Pass on the secret, and see what happens. What you receive on the other side of the room may not be an exact record of the original statement, but it likely will be, if anything, a more interesting approximation of the thought. Jeff Chang hints at a similar point in his introduction to *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*. Regarding hip_hop's "internal creative force," he writes:

> In the time that it takes for a group of kids in the neighborhood to go from wide-eyed young'ns to confident teen arbiters of style, slang, swing, and swagger to grown-folk moving on and out (and then declaring the next set of kids to be the murderers of *their* natural-born hip-hop, which, of course, is completely true), the culture has turned over again, leaving the universe with a whole lot of new matter to deal with. (x-xi)

Now, I am not a mathematician, so I would frame all of this in terms of a rough metaphor. I would like to be clear about the fact that this *chaos* that happens is not

as "chaotic" as we might assume. It is generated very deliberately. I would also argue that the *distortion* that occurs should not be at all shocking either. As hip_hop is mediated, commodified, and globalized, it is multiplied by itself, stacked upon its own idea of itself. The current generation of hip_hop generators is consistently (if only subconsciously) attentive to the original configuration, in this case, hip_hop culture represented as an association of certain practical elements and self-accredited histories. As 2 Chainz and Waka Flocka Flame look out into TV land, they are constantly (if only subliminally) reminded that DJ Kool Herc could be watching, listening, and critiquing, if only because, Wiz Khalifa and Kendrick Lamar might imagine, the man recognized as the "father of hip_hop" zones out to the occasional rap video as often as anyone else on the planet. And the fractal arrangement of hip_hop production is held together by the tangled strands of this anxiety, this crick in its neck, this alertness to expectation that regulates the generation of aesthetic results still recognizable as points inside text-based hip_hop idiom. These points would be iterated indefinitely in wild directions but for hip_hop's attention to the historicized formalism that dominates the discourse. Instead, what is manifest is an assortment of seemingly aberrant but ultimately connected forms. Duplicate files always seem to be identical, to satisfy expected norms, but their quality inevitably deteriorates with each copy. This is why a protracted defense of any institutionalized operating system for hip_hop is useless—and a misdirected pursuit.

Perhaps the most popularly recognizable fractal is the Mandelbrot set developed and propagated by mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot (who actually coined the term *fractal*) in the late 1970s. I defer here to science writer James Gleick and his knack for breaking things down into manageable terms. He explains:

> The Mandelbrot Set is a collection of points. Every point in the complex plane—that is, every complex number—is either in the set or outside it. One way to define the set is in terms of a test for every point, involving some simple iterated arithmetic. To test a point, take the complex number; square it; add the original number; square the result—and so on, over and over again. If the total runs away to infinity, then the point is not in the Mandelbrot set. If the total remains finite (it could be trapped in some repeating loop, or it could wander chaotically), then the point is in the Mandelbrot set.

Fittingly, Gleick compares the testing process for the Mandelbrot set to the feedback hazard involved in setting up a mic, an amp, and speakers on a stage. If an amplified sound is too much for the particular settings of your equipment, excess noise from the speakers will loop back into your microphone in an endless, show-stopping snarl-into-a-squeal. Put simply, the calculation for mapping the Mandelbrot set could be read as $z \rightarrow$ (implies) $z^2 + c$, repeated indefinitely. What you want to plug into your iterated equation are figures that will not run off and squeal on you. Enough of these, and the familiar structure of the Mandelbrot set will begin to appear. The z in this equation represents the complex number with which we are working—in this case, hip_hop proper. The c represents a constant figure, the constant of hip_hop as our alertness to prior textual implications, the conventional narrative. This constant is fed into our hip_hop complex as it is steadily doubled over on itself. In most tables of mathematical notation, the arrow ($\rightarrow$) would be read as "implies," often translated as "approaches the limit of." As the value of our complex figure approaches its limit as informed by the constant feed, the fractal set takes shape, and meaning is revealed. In hip_hop, the acquisition of meaning requires that we *attempt* to elude the strictures of set temporality and localism— where you're from, where you are, when you came—that to this point have been definitively key to hip_hop discourse. Although we can never entirely escape our sense of time and place inside the text, it is imperative that we press the boundaries so that the arrow still extends, that we shift the components now and again to remind ourselves that these things *can* be moved around a bit. We *need* the external explosion.

Bambaataa, KRS, and others make a consistent argument about hip_hop as a lifestyle, as a world-view, and I would allow that this argument is well-meaning; they really *want* hip_hop to work a certain way. But their ideals are troubled by a lack of specificity. For instance, what exactly does Bam's hip_hop lawyer look like? Does she stroll into the courtroom to a rap soundtrack? Does his hip_hop doctor roll up in the operating room with a chain hanging low? Probably not. Yet these same life-strategists keep stubbing their own toes when they resort to the insistence that in order to "be" hip_hop or to understand hip_hop, one must, among other things, master one or more of the "original" elements, engage in a regulated style of textual production. (Academic work somehow does not qualify as the performance of knowledge, the UZN's fifth principle.) When they do this, they demote hip_hop from philosophy—a living word, if you will—to a mere set of practices, to an isolated incident rather than a movable idea. You see, for all of the romantic chat about hip_hop being something that one *lives* rather than something that one *does*, it all boils down to a great branding ploy for more of the same authenticity claims. And, if you buy this brand, you are accepting the fact that someone will *always* be more special than you because of something that he *did* in a certain *place* at a certain *time* in history. This living, it seems, is doing after all. But for it to work in the way that we would like, heads have to let the idea of hip_hop breathe, give it space to be applied and reapplied and to grow in various contexts. The founders of hip_hop as culture have to allow some room for more and more new pioneering efforts. What I am suggesting here is not about discrediting beloved gatekeepers for kicks. Hip_hop as I am theorizing it—*as* applicable theory, that is—actually creates space for all of us, including KRS-One, to do *and* be hip_hop in a much larger way. What I want is to help Afrika Bambaataa and company get to the hip_hop that we have always been after, even as we have so often been angled off course. The series of public tantrums we have enjoyed in recent years betrays a frustration about changes in the representation of hip_hop cultural products and about the representation of individual practitioners and histories, challenges to leadership.[15] Unfortunately, in most cases, the response to these challenges (perceived as virulent, systemic attacks) has emphasized, volume and repeated statement over fair reasoning. But, rather than concede to the yanking of the blue-hairs, we have to summon the guts to develop a workable vetting mechanism regarding hip_hop as it is currently situated.

So who controls the culture? Wiki software allows for collaborative and often anonymous contribution to and editing of webpage content and structure. Much like a wiki, hip_hop informs a contemporary text, once directed according to precedents maintained primarily by the celebrity classes, but now being freely determined and critiqued in the public domain. The increased deregulation of the discourse and the sort of open-source textuality which it indicates is actually well in line with the DIY nature of hip_hop production. The fractal—the fracture—happens because there remains a general attentiveness to the politics (and poetics) of respectability. The distortion—the feedback—that we see and hear is an articulation of a generation's claustrophobia regarding a cultural propriety and textual protectivism that resemble moral judgment. This distortion is disconcerting when we recognize that what is actually at stake is the specification of hip_hop as a major operating system for the representation and re-presentation of contemporary blackness and the actual black people around whom it is built. No time to make nice. Avoiding the conceptual decoy means divesting from certain debilitating viewpoints. Hip_hop's utility now lies in the challenge presented to us to redesign it, then to further theorize it.

After the dust has settled, how will we address the immediate crisis in human culture? How will we move on and make hip_hop's operative principles applicable in other areas? Out-of-hand prostration at the feet of certain cultural figureheads suggests that there is nothing else to be discovered through the production and analysis of text, that the pioneering has ceased. Once we have again acknowledged

in a public forum that Herc, a Jamaican immigrant, extended the breakbeat some-place in the Bronx, and once we have recited our Hail Marys, or what have you, where do we go from here? This initiative is not only about ideas being plugged into hip_hop but also about *head theory* being (alternately) plugged into—applied to the reading of—the world of text, of culture around us. Also, if a proper critique of hip_hop text did suggest anything useful, it would be that the breaks and fissures are necessary to honor any realistic mission having to do with cultural integrity or human rights, for that matter. Amid the proliferation of critical work tumbling off the presses, the dozens of university courses springing up each term, and the variety of curatorial projects being funded with private and public dollars, I must ask, with regard to scholarship in the area of hip_hop studies, are we too witnessing our supernova? Have we exhausted what there is to say about hip_hop culture as we have understood it thus far? And have we tired of chasing the decoy that the legit-imizing project has been—so many clay pigeons and pop-up targets? Depending on the answers to these questions, this is either the last thing that needs to be said about hip_hop or else the signal of new extensions, an introduction to the way that we ought to be thinking and talking about hip_hop from now on.

Notes   1. A grammatical note regarding *hip_hop*: I began thinking about the underscore as a useful diacritic during conversations with Torkwase Dyson in the summer of 2006. I had long been frustrated with the inconsistent (even in single paragraphs) and largely unjustified syntactical choices with regard to hip_hop in public media. Some seemed to be the result of poor editing, and others to stem from a lack of critical concern about such ostensibly tiny matters, indicative of a lack of seriousness about nuances in the repre-sentation of black-based culture in general. For some time, I had been interested in formatting the spelling of hip_hop in some logical manner. For instance, I for several years treated the word as a compound, as dictated by *The Chicago Manual of Style*—open (*hip hop*) when used as a noun and hyphenated (*hip-hop*) when used as an adjective. I took this route in part as a way to opt out of the typical quasipolitical argu-ments—including the push for unspaced (*hiphop*) and variously capitalized (*Hiphop*, *HipHop*) forms—among parties who seemed to be heavily invested in certain angles. Of course, any style guide has its agenda as well—perhaps even to *de*politicize and dehistoricize the cultural marker entirely—and I was not after that, either. For some time, I settled on the backslash (as in *hip/hop*), a marker that allowed me to get above the space-flush-hyphen question with a viable alternative that resembled poetic transcription and alluded to lyrical party chants, the oral context from which the term likely emerged. Finally, even this form felt somehow not deliberate enough. After sifting through a whole range of permutations, discarding words split with periods and colons, I determined that the underscore actually functioned to let hip_hop do what it ought to do. I thought it important to nail down this idea with the publication of *Callaloo* 29.3 (Summer 2006), a special issue on hip_hop music and culture, specifically by beginning to theorize the insertion of the underscore while making the editorial decision to maintain each contributor's spelling choices, illustrating the depth of morphological possibilities.

   2. For some current takes, see the very fresh work of visual artists iona rozeal brown, Torkwase Dyson, and Robert Pruitt. For investigations into site-specific hip_hop praxis outside the United States, see Ian Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalization* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006) and Sujata Fernandes, *Cuba Represent!: Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006). I have thought much recently about hip_hop and black cultural diaspora in a social justice context. K'naan and Emmanuel Jal are African-oriented rappers turned activists (or activists turned rappers) who represent themselves as exiles in the Western metropole and make art with a decidedly liber-ationist agenda.

   3. For archival and curatorial projects that demonstrate smart exceptions to the trend, see Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois, eds., *The Anthology of Rap* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010) and Marcyliena Morgan, Hiphop Archive. The record of the cultural moment is best presented as transitional, and the challenge of canonicity is honored by achieving that delicate balance between prescriptivist and descriptivist perspectives. These projects are successful because they operate with eyes trained on the inevitable necessity of reprint and revision.

   4. As a point of comparison at another sound-driven cultural site, consider the perspective of jazz icon Miles Davis, who had much to say about what he called dead music. Having theorized his way through cool and fused vocabularies and steadily progressed from bebop through hard bop to doobob—the hip_hop-

inflected mode with which he was experimenting at the end of his career—he remarked in the 1980s, "Fewer and fewer black musicians were playing jazz and I could see why, because jazz was becoming the music of the museum. A lot of musicians and critics are at fault for letting it happen" (Davis 352). He resented the attitude of younger artists, such as celebrated trumpeter Wynton Marsalis who insisted on perpetually retreading the older idiom—which Davis had helped to invent and had since abandoned—rather than pushing forward into new musical territory. For more on this topic, see Davis 352-53, 359-61.

5. My deliberate leaning here is toward the language of technology. Of what use to us today are all these beige and dusty PC casings, flickering castoffs, and obsolete extension cords?

6. See Future, "Same Damn Time," *Pluto* (Epic Records, 2012) regarding the challenges of multitasking.

7. To see these questions played out in the context of a typical rap track (out of possible hundreds) to which I happen to be listening, note the alienating studio chatter on Scarface (featuring Jay Z and Beanie Sigel), "Guess Who's Back," *The Fix* (Def Jam, 2002). In the warm-up bars leading into his rhyme, Jay Z requests a lift in his headset volume and then mic checks, "Can I talk to y'all for a minute? Let me talk to y'all for a minute. Just give me a minute of your time, baby. I don't want much. Let me talk to these muh-fuckas." To whom is Jigga talking from the sound booth? To his adoring fans? To his emcee counterparts? Who are "y'all" and "these muhfuckas"? All the meddling critics? Or his session engineers and cut buddies seated on the other side of the Plexiglas? Yes and yes; yes and yes. He is speaking to (and maybe for) the whole overlapping lot of us.

8. Although far more preoccupied with strict textuality, Harry Allen has begun to process hip_hop through a somewhat related metaphor. See Allen, "Dreams of a Final Theory," in *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*, Jeff Chang, ed. (New York: BasicCivitas, 2006), 7-9.

9. By no means would I presume to underrepresent the significance of Kris Parker's ideas. These famous phrases have been restated and reappropriated in any number of contexts for many years and still ought to be given greater critical consideration. In person and in print, Parker has gone to great lengths to explicate his thinking on these matters. For some originary points, see KRS-One 58-101, in particular 62-63.

10. Remembrances held at The Notorious B.I.G. *Ready to Die* (Bad Boy Records, 1994) and *Life After Death* (Bad Boy Records, 1997).

11. At Know-the-Ledge: Hiphop Scholarship Meets Hiphop Media, a conference presented by the Hiphop Archive at Stanford University in 2006, Blastmaster KRS-One somewhat famously threatened journalist Adisa "The Bishop" Banjoko with assault, apparently over philosophical differences pertaining to who *is* or is *not* hip_hop. The revered emcee reportedly stated, "What I want to do is jump across the table and beat your fuckin' ass!" Subsequently, speaking on a panel in the same academic venue, KRS admonished the attendees, "You can't go to college, then say you Hiphop. That don't fly."

12. Again, from KRS-One:

> This is why the Temple of Hip Hop offers its apprenticeship to all serious Hiphoppas seeking to live a productive Hiphop lifestyle. Here, an apprentice is one who is bound by indenture to serve one's teacha for a prescribed period of time learning the specifics of the Hip Hop art, life and trade. As an apprentice you are expected to live Hiphop, not just perform Hip Hop. You are expected to assist and serve your teacha in the further establishment and growth of the Temple of Hip Hop. . . . However, if you are not really *Hiphop* then this apprenticeship and most of what KRS ONE teaches is simply not for you, and there is nothing wrong or right with this. But if you are *Hiphop* then don't front! You must take such apprenticeship very seriously. Your Hip Hop life depends upon your successful comprehension of these lessons. (466)

13. "We Kulture!" Kanye West enunciates in a moment of contemporary overlap and/or recovery, recoding. In his hour-long September 2013 interview with Zane Lowe of BBC Radio 1 shortly after the release of the *Yeezus* LP (Def Jam Recordings, 2013), Kanye is *at least* as exuberant as KRS tends to be in his discussion of the creative process, "real rap," and his own artistic temperament (plus, of course, fashion).

14. Back then my Pumas were grey on grey, and my favorite suede Adidas were Carolina blue. See Shabazz.

15. See Ice-T versus Souljah Boy, Lil Kim versus Nicki Minaj, and any number of cross-generational, often Twitter-fed beefs and rivalries.

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