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HIP-HOP FUTURISM: REMIXING AFROFUTURISM AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF IDENTITY

By

Chuck Galli

An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Honors

in

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Preface

Before I introduce this thesis, there are a number of concepts which need to be defined and stylistic points which need to be explained. I feel it is better to address them right from the beginning than try to suavely weave them into the main body of the paper.

On The Creation of the Black Race

There are numerous points in this thesis where I reference the history of Blacks in America, the start of Black history, and so forth. It is important to know that when I speak about the "Black race" I am not referring to the peoples who have traditionally inhabited Africa since the dawn of the human species. Since, as history and anthropology have shown us, up until the fifteenth century there was little recognition of a homogenous, pan-African, and most importantly *inferior* "Black" race, I do not consider those Africans who lived before the early modern period and before direct and frequent contact with Western Europeans to be Black. Just as Europeans had little concept of what it meant to be "White" until the modern era (few would have considered the Irish, the Italians, the English, the Slavs, and the French to all share one common identity), the idea of Blackness as a racial phenomenon was largely unfamiliar to Africans and Europeans alike. Therefore, when I make statements such as "for the majority of Black history," I am not ignorantly asserting that people of African descent have no history prior to contact with Europeans, but that within the context of this thesis, it is not functional to refer to Africans of pre-early middle ages times as "Black."

On Postmodernism

Postmodernism, to some, is scary. To others it is an intellectual fraud – mere nihilism dressed up in the garb of academia. The former fear that postmodernism does away with value and meaning, thus rendering everything pointless; the latter claim that it is merely a label attached to a set of ideas which either have not been intelligently completed, have nothing to say, or advocate an intentional ignorance of theory. For me, postmodernism is a challenge. It is a direct questioning of the supremacy of reason and rationalism, while at the same time a dissector of superstition and religion. It drags the subaltern into the focus to argue with modernist assumptions that humans have been, are, or could be “advancing.” It is also, in my opinion, the product of a European pomposity which decided that there must be a universal truth for everyone, which arose in the era of long-range transportation and which was buttressed by the shock and trauma of two world wars. I find, then, that since postmodernism cannot claim that anything its practitioners create is “superior” lest it implode by its own beliefs, it shifts the focus from *being* to *becoming*.

Here, my explanation of postmodernism is weak, and thanks to spatial and temporal constraints, insufficiently long. I refer readers unfamiliar with postmodernism to the book *A Primer on Postmodernism* by Stanley J. Grentz (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996). Grentz is, by his own admission, an ardent modernist and a believing Christian, which is exactly why I prefer his book for those not terribly familiar with postmodernism. Grentz does not come to the (assumedly) modernist reader from a postmodern outpost, but rather wanders into postmodernism *with* the reader from a modernist starting point.

On Capitalization

Though it is by no means the norm in academic writing, I consistently and intentionally capitalize White as well as Black and Latino. Many have objected to this grammatical style on the basis that the capitalization of “White” has been a tool used primarily by White supremacists. However my reason for capitalizing the word is quite different from that of White racists. I believe, and have believed for a long time, that the idea of race is so unnatural to humankind that words denoting racial groups are inherently “proper.” To write that “white people are of European descent” is troubling to me as it implies that Whiteness is so natural as to need no special capitalization (like short, tall, fat, and skinny), while Europe is still acknowledged to be a manmade geo-political construct. Capitalizing “White” represents not a belief in White supremacy, but rather a recognition that the term is wholly unnatural to humans and deserves no assumption of normalcy in English grammar.

On Sex/Gender

It will become very clear to the reader that women and gays are almost completely absent throughout this thesis. Though many notable females have influenced hip-hop through both music and visual art, their numbers have always been few and their voices diminished by patriarchal tendencies within the culture. This is not to say that hip-hop *per se* is inherently patriarchal, but given its influence from Jamaican sound system culture, the male gang dominated social context in which it began, and the larger patriarchal social context in which it proliferated (i.e. American popular culture), it is no surprise that androcentrism has bread itself within the genre. When the scope of hip-hop is further narrowed down to the futurists, the percentage of female and gay representatives drops to an even smaller fraction of a percent. Hip-hop has the potential to create a context which questions sex and gender and which does for these constructs what it has largely done for race. Unfortunately, it has not yet done so on a massive scale.

Females will continue to assert themselves and claim their rightful places in hip-hop and gay artists will hopefully expand on the burgeoning “homo-hop” movement. Indeed, I was tempted to include these small communities and relatively unknown artists into this work, yet I ultimately did not for want of avoiding a descent into the practice of hyperinflating the importance of obscure artists. MC Syng of Austin, Texas may be groundbreaking in areas of sexual orientation, philosophy, and politics, but has anyone heard of her? Since no one has, how can anyone rightly say that she has had an impact on anything? More importantly, how does one know that she is real? Perhaps I just made her up. In fact, I did. As disheartening as it may be to hear for artists who are still largely unknown, reception is ninety-percent of meaning, and if no one is receiving you, how much relevance do you have? Certainly a lot of *intrinsic* relevance and importance, and the possibility that you will become a legend, a pioneer, or a person greater in death than in life is very real. But these are possibilities of the future, and most of us are not there yet.

To briefly address sex and gender from a grammatical standpoint, I have tried to use “he” and “she” with relative equity throughout this work. Some say that the masculine form is the grammatically correct third person singular pronoun to use according to the “rules” of English because it has historically referred to all humans. Others, including myself, contest this idea based on the simple principle that the universality of the masculine has little empirical proof supporting it. For instance, it sounds awkward and erroneous to say “man menstruates once per month.” There is also the point that the English language has natural gender, but not grammatical gender (unlike the Romance languages.) If I have used one gender’s pronouns grossly more frequently than another’s, do not interpret the fact to mean that I necessarily abide by the “universal he” rule.

Introduction

The following work has a relatively simple thesis, which is only rendered complex by the associations I make between hip-hop and more esoteric ideas of identity and modernity. The thesis can best be understood as the addressing of two separate subjects linked by a third.

I argue that hip-hop's modes of production reflect a sometimes conscious, sometimes subconscious embrace of futurism and that a sufficient amount of explicitly futuristic hip-hop works have been created to provide empirical evidence buttressing many of the arguments I make to color the modes of production as futuristic.

I also contend that the construction of identity in a historically Black context (largely drawing from the scholarship of Paul Gilroy and Aimé Césaire) provides some useful insights into how humans might cope with some of the "crises" of postmodernity which seem to threaten identity itself, and thus the value of human life and activities. These insights are enhanced and made more understandable within the context of hip-hop, which has some roots to a phenomenon dubbed "Afrofuturism" (which is defined at length), but which also provides unique tools for constructing identity.

These two larger themes are integrated into something which I call "hip-hop futurism" which, among other things, provides a means of creating identity from *process* rather than *product* (my most concise definition of hip-hop futurism can be found in the introduction to the last segment of chapter four entitled "Hip-Hop Futurism: In-Definition.")

Chapter one provides a brief history of hip-hop, which is intentionally geared toward my greater thesis topic and thus gives disproportionate focus to certain aspects over others.

Chapter two explains how various intellectuals have defined “Afrofuturism” and provides some of my own insights into the genre.

In chapter three I examine the modes of production in hip-hop and argue that they are inherently future-oriented and create an intriguing culture in which identity can be constructed in very postmodern fashions.

Chapter four is the largest and most theoretical portion of this work. In it, I provide examples of futuristic hip-hop artists and examine their work, propose the term “hip-hop futurism” and provide a concise “definition” of it, and allude to the implications that such a theory may have for human identity.

Chapter five elaborates on these implications and bluntly states that hip-hop and hip-hop futurism provide tools for better understanding, constructing, and defining of identity in the collapsed ruins of modernity.

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I have debated whether to provide information about myself at the beginning of this thesis, at the end, or to omit it all together. Yet I think that, if I am to be deconstructing and analyzing “identity,” it is only responsible that I provide some background on myself. I was born in Portland, Maine, United States in 1984. I grew up mostly in poverty in what I commonly refer to as a “White ethnic” setting; that is, most of the people I knew were White, but had a conscious connection to a European ethnic or national group. In my case, being raised by my mother, I identified first as an Italian-

American, but to a lesser extent as an Irish-American. I had a very liberal upbringing and attended public schools all the way through my undergraduate career.

Given my age and birthplace, I was not part of the early “hip-hop culture,” nor was I a part of any latter-day culture. My relationship with hip-hop can best be described as one of consumption, appreciation, and above all respect. I recognized from a very early age that I was not part of the hip-hop movement – I had no influence on its trajectory or aesthetics – but I knew that it was the only genre of music which really made sense to me (I have always been a fan of punk rock, but not from an intellectual standpoint.) I listened to the Beastie Boys, A Tribe Called Quest, Run-DMC, Grandmaster Flash, Busta Rhymes, Heavy D, Spoonie Gee, Cold Crush Brothers, Jurassic 5, Blackalicious, Kurtis Blow, Rahzel, Slick Rick, 2 Live Crew, The Fat Boys, NWA, Eric B. and Rakim, Funky 4+1, and innumerably more hip-hop artists. I would go out with my friend Zeb and scrawl anti-war messages, anti-racist images, and quotes from a soap-producing religious mystic on walls and overpasses as he put up graffiti pieces. I bought an analog four-track cassette recorder and began making songs with my friends, almost exclusively for fun. I recognized that I was largely listening to music informed by places in which I had never been, events which I would never witness, and backgrounds with which I could not identify. Hip-hop controlled me – I did not control it. This, I felt, was the only way a “White boy” from Maine could be “down” with hip-hop respectfully.

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The idea to write this thesis first came to me in 2008 while reading an article on an online humor blog which referenced a debate on the user-generated online encyclopedia Wikipedia as to whether or not the character Geordi La Forge (of the science-fiction television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) was an “Afrofuturist.” Having never before seen the term, I began reading the relatively few journal articles and online writings about the genre. The concept intrigued me: that futuristic works created by Blacks and/or which dealt with Blacks and Blackness shared some common theme informed by the very broadly titled “Black experience.”

Wanting to pursue the topic further, I decided to narrow the scope of what would become a thesis by looking at Afrofuturism in a certain context; however I found that many artistic genres in which Afrofuturism arises (novels, funk music, and science-fiction films and television series) were too foreign to me and would require an amount of research which, because of time constraints, I would not be able to perform. I had exhausted the bank of possible topics involving Afrofuturism about which I could write, when I remembered reading something by an intellectual named Paul Miller (aka DJ Spooky) involving hip-hop. Hip-hop was, I felt, the one musical genre in which I had sufficient knowledge to carry out a study of Afrofuturism. Thus was born the first provisional title for my thesis project: “Afrofuturism in Hip-Hop.”

As I grew more and more deeply immersed in my research, I found the lines between hip-hop as a genre and Afrofuturism as a genre blurring to the point of near total obfuscation. It was not that hip-hop and Afrofuturism were one and the same, but simply that no line of demarcation could be drawn identifying when one began and the other ended. I read Paul Girloy, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Paul Youngquist by day and listened to X-Clan, Afrika Bambaataa, and Deltron Zero at night. I interviewed hip-hop legend and ardent futurist RAMM:ELL:ZEE (who directly challenged the entire notion of

Afrofuturism) and Dan the Automator (an often futuristic hip-hop producer who turned out to be Japanese-American, not Black.) I began to see Afrofuturism as inapplicable in some ways to what I was hearing from hip-hop.

After much rethinking, many encounters with contradictions, a few discoveries of new works, and a fair amount of tea, I came to the conclusion that placing Afrofuturism into hip-hop and saying “look at how it fits” was impractical and boring. “Hip-hop futurism” was born out of my attempt simply to articulate how hip-hop provides a *mode* for creating futurisms, but not a futurism itself. My thesis slid into the field of cultural studies – an area in which I had been dead set against entering and which my thesis advisor had urged me to consider – and found its nesting grounds without much trouble. I soon realized that I would be spending the bulk of my thesis on identity politics in hip-hop, not on Afrofuturism.

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The body of the thesis follows, which is in turn followed by a series of correspondences I conducted through email for this thesis (these correspondences are labeled as the appendices.)

Chapter 1 – Hip-Hop: The Beginning

“Money is the key to end all your woes.
Your ups, your downs, your highs and your lows.
Won't you tell me the last time that love bought your clothes?
It's like that, and that's the way it is.”

- Run-DMC

“It’s Like That” was released on analog cassette tape in 1983 by rap trio Run-DMC and was credited with beginning the first “new school” of hip-hop. The tape featured only two songs: “It’s Like That” and “Sucker MCs”. Both songs were starkly different from every other rap single and album put out in almost every way. Rap artists had been drawing samples mainly from disco and disco-era rock and roll records until that point, looping them and incorporating them with synthesized tones of similar aesthetics or other disco/rock samples.[1] Joseph Simmons, Darryl McDaniels, and Jason Mizell (DJ Run, D.M.C, and Jam-Master Jay, respectively) broke with this tradition, preferring to use crisp, hard, snare-intensive beats created by electronic drum-machines with little or no instrumentation over them. The effect was to eliminate the disco ambiance of earlier recordings by artists such as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Spoonie Gee, Busy Bee, and Kurtis Blow which imbued rap records with a discotheque party feel and replaced it with a more intense, militant, rap-as-business attitude. The massive popularity of the single and the subsequent success of the self-titled debut full-length LP “Run-DMC” would prove conclusively that the people who inhabited the birthplace of hip-hop were no longer content going to parties to escape their problems.

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[1] Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2005), 203.

They would bring their problems to the party. Thus was born the first major overhaul of hip-hop since it had been established almost a decade earlier. But since we're talking about it… where *did* this "hip-hop" come from?

The Roots

"So listen close so you all don't miss.

As we go a little somethin' like this. Hit it!"

- Slick Rick

Rap music, and more broadly hip-hop culture, is generally considered to have been born in the South Bronx of New York City, but to find its roots one must travel a bit more southerly to the Caribbean, specifically, Jamaica. Jamaica was the epicenter of what were known as "sound system" shows and the greater sound system culture which grew around them. When one thinks of a concert, regardless of which musical genre it is from, a certain set of things and ideas come to mind: instruments, an ensemble, and the performance of either original music or "covers" of previous pieces. But sound system shows were decidedly unlike other musical genres in many fundamental ways.[2]

A person would acquire pieces of a public address (PA) system over time, perhaps with the help of close friends and associates until he had obtained the requisite parts; replacing equipment with superior pieces as he and his group came into money.[3] The leader of the sound system, the DJ, would then dissect and manipulate the various intricacies of the inner electronic components of the sound system in order to make it perform at, and sometimes above, its stated peak levels. In addition to assembling the actual system, the DJ was also in charge of procuring the records which would be played on it, being careful to choose a mixture of pop-hit, classic, and lesser known records which would best please the crowd for which the sound system would eventually play. When the system was complete, the group would set it up in a large public space and announce what was essentially a community party. The DJ would take his position behind the turntables (there were always more than one so that songs could be seamlessly faded into each other so as not to disrupt the music even for a moment) and the mixer and begin playing records for the people, paying close attention to gage how the audience was responding to the songs, whether to build up the energy, cool it down, or change the attitude of the night.[4] The sound system shows were thus difficult to locate within previous understandings of what a musical concert should be like. It was not the originality of the music which was celebrated, nor the instrumentation, nor the character of the ensemble. Rather, what became the defining characteristics of what was a “good” sound system and sound system show came down to how good the equipment sounded, how good the DJ was at creating the most pleasure in the crowd through song selection, and how the DJ manipulated the people in attendance to party, scream, and forget their worries. All of this was done of course without the DJ ever touching a traditional musical instrument. The DJ of the sound system shows was engaged in technological manipulation, reproduction of music, and an intimate connection between man (both him and the audience) and machine. It was neither completely the DJ nor completely the sound system equipment which the audience praised, but the events that occurred when the two organisms – one biological and one mechanical – melded into one.

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[2] See Jeff Chang's book *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* for background to Jamaican sound system shows and the birth of hip-hop.

[3] Chang, 28-33 – Where a citation to a source on sound systems would be in order, refer to Chang's work for the remainder of this paragraph.

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[4] To clarify, a mixer is a piece of sound equipment which controls the volume, pitch, and levels (bass, mid-range, and treble) of sound.

The sound system DJ thus became a moving and thinking part of the sound system itself, much like a computer's central processing unit (CPU.) Without the equipment, the DJ was essentially useless, and vice versa. It could be argued quite validly that the same goes for a flautist and her flute, that one without the other is useless in a musical sense, and this would be largely true. It is in the fact that the DJ relied on something which was not intended to actually *be* a musical instrument to produce his craft and that the thing which he operated was of such a comparatively complex technological nature that sets him apart. Being able to run a good sound system show required a knowledge of electronics and technology that was unthinkable to ask of a cellist or a guitarist. Both a traditional musician/vocalist and a sound system DJ were involved in the production of music, but the DJ was so not in the sense of producing sound with an instrument, but rather in the sense that he controlled the medium through which the notes and sounds passed; as if a drummer were controlling the air in which his percussive tones were contained. The DJ thus left the realm of musicians and embraced the roles of engineer, sensor, processor, physicist, and ultimately, cyborg.[5]

The Place

"South Bronx… South, South Bronx."

- Boogie Down Productions

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[5] "Cyborg" is word meaning "cybernetic organism," or a biological organism comprised to an undefined extent of mechanical parts (think of the 1980's RoboCop movie character.) In its most literal sense, a cybernetic organism could be a person who makes use of a mechanical limb of automatic pace-maker, yet could also be used to describe science-fiction characters who blur the lines between life and technology. I employ the term "cyborg" when describing the DJ to emphasize the intimate relationship between him and his machinery.

Jamaicans and other Caribbean Islanders have been making their homes in the urban areas of the United States for as long as the country has been around, but as was true for many other ethnic/regional groups, Caribbean immigration experienced a spike in the middle and latter parts of the twentieth century. Having left their poverty stricken, often turbulent countries, many Islanders found themselves immersed in the South Bronx of New York, which at the time could hardly be described as a major improvement. By the mid-1970's, the South Bronx resembled a conflict zone immediately after a defeat in war. Rubble, abandoned buildings, and fires populated the city. Drugs, violence, and unemployment were chronic problems for residents, who were suffering from a youth unemployment rate of between sixty and eighty percent and a massive exodus of the middle-class to the suburbs.[6]

These conditions were not native or normal to the South Bronx, but rather were largely the result of a massive modern transit project undertaken by New York during the previous forty years. In 1929 the New York Regional Plan Association drafted a vision for Manhattan to make it "a center of wealth" by building a massive expressway connecting the suburbs of New Jersey directly to Manhattan, and then carrying on to Queens.[7] The mastermind of what would be the Cross-Bronx Expressway was a city planner named Robert Moses – arguably the most infamous, talented, and influential modern metropolitan builder in the world.[8] Moses envisioned a highway that would not only make Manhattan an economic hub, but would also change the way New Yorkers moved around the city and organized their communities.[9] Unfortunately for about 60,000

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[6] Chang, 13
[7] Chang, 11
[8] Chang, 11
[9] Chang, 11

Irish, Jewish, Latino, and Black residents of the Bronx, their houses fell directly in the path of the massive public works project, and those who could afford to (mainly the White ethnics) moved to the suburbs.[10] Many predominantly Black and Latino residents who were left behind were forced into the newly constructed towering South Bronx apartment buildings which were located in areas largely devoid of jobs.[11] Remaining in their old neighborhoods was impossible both because of the concrete blade of Moses which would slice through their homes and because businesses had been frightened away from the Bronx after having realized that the area was no longer home to an economically vibrant citizenry. All of this destruction and social reorganization took place in an era when US economic policy began taking more economically conservative positions regarding residential urban investment, culminating in the infamous presidency of Ronald Reagan, who slashed urban aid by sixty-percent by the end of his reign.[12]

The already depressed South Bronx was suddenly inundated with unemployed people with no recourse to find jobs. By the 1970’s, the Expressway was finished and the Bronx at-large was in a sorry state. City officials abandoned it. Landlords took out valuable insurance policies on their properties and then paid petty criminals to burn them down.[13] The “informal” economy had taken over since few legitimate jobs existed. During the broadcast of game two of the 1977 World Series, after Yankee fans had stormed the field and thrown smoke-bombs in frustration at New York losing to the Los

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[10] Chang, 11-12

[11] Chang, 11-13

[12] Russell A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 128

[13] Chang, 13-14. Chang also provides insight into the policy of “benign neglect” advocated by American politicians such as New York Democratic senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan who stated that abandonment of issues dealing with race (which apparently included urban aid) might be what the country needed. “Benign neglect” and the politics of abandonment are more or less on and the same and abide by the most infantile of human rationalizing which holds that if one ignores something, it will go away.

Angeles Dodgers, a helicopter camera panned over the Bronx and broadcast images of smoke and fire rising from the city. “The Bronx,” said anchor Howard Cosell, “is burning.”[14]

It is only fitting that the South Bronx – an area which most closely resembled a post-apocalyptic world that had been abandoned by the agents of modernity who had sacrificed it for the sake of automobile travel, wealth, and the suburbization (i.e. white flight) of New York – would birth a culture built around creating with what was left behind. Youth growing up in this collapsed society of lawlessness would become formed by the politics of abandonment, and would respond by abandoning the parameters of what was considered music, visual art, and production.

The DJ

> *“From a lime to a lemon, a lemon to a lime, he cuts the beat in half the time. Then sure as 3 times 2 is 6, you’ll say Flash is king of the - quick mix.”*
>
> - Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five

It was in the midst of the immediate aftermath of the completion of the Expressway that a young boy from Kingston, Jamaica named Clive Campbell moved to the chaotic South Bronx. Reared in the tradition of the sound system shows, Campbell developed an early fascination not only with music, but also with the electronic components of stereo equipment.[15] He would spend hours dissecting amplifiers, speakers, and other components to better understand how they worked and to manipulate them into performing at levels beyond their intended capacity.[16] He assembled a sound system and began playing at parties, running with a graffiti gang, and making a name for himself as DJ Kool Herc (Herc for Hercules.)[17] Herc's signature move was emphasizing the "break" in the various songs he played on his system. Most songs Herc and other sound system DJs played at shows had a point where the instrumental beat was played alone, often without much accompaniment, and sometimes differing slightly from the beat during the verse and the chorus. This "break" was favored by dancers in the crowd, so Herc attempted to extend it by putting duplicate copies of a record on two turntables, allowing copy A to play through while copy B was queued up at the start of the break, and then switching over to copy B as soon as A had finished – rewinding A to the start of the break and using a mixer so as not to have the rapid rewinding noise broadcast over the PA system.[18] In essence, the break was simply drawn out and made to be the main part of the song when it had originally been intended to be a mere "break" in the track.

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[14] Chang, 10

[15] Chang, 68-70

In addition to playing the break over and over again, Herc elaborated on an already extant Jamaican sound system cultural tradition of "toasting," or giving instructions to and providing verbal camaraderie with the crowd, much as a square-dance master of ceremonies (MC) might do.[19] Herc, along with his friend Coke La Rock, began using popular expressions and creating rhymes which they "rapped" into the microphone during the breaks to keep things exciting.[20] With this, Herc laid the first blueprint for rap music: the repetition of a beat taken from a pre-existing song and the saying of rhymes in time with the music. Herc can thus be titled the first rap DJ and MC – the crowned prince of hip-hop.

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[16] Chang, 68-70
[17] Chang, 75
[18] Chang, 79
[19] Ivor Miller, *Aerosol Kingdom* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 12.
[20] Chang, 78

Much like its recent ancestor the sound system, hip-hop music was technophilic and centered on borrowed, recorded music instead of new instrumentation. One major thing that differentiated hip-hop was the trajectory in which the genre took the art of borrowing breaks. Throughout the late 1970's and early 1980's, rap artists primarily used one sample breaks to create a track and would then rap over it, though there were some exceptions such as legendary MC Kurtis Blow who often created original instrumentation for his songs.[21] These single-sample beats were often reused by other rappers attempting to prove that they could do more with a beat than another MC. Sometimes this was done through the release of singles by more than one artist with the same beat, but oftentimes MCs tried to outwit each other over a beat live in what were termed "battles."[22] A major innovation in the hip-hop DJ world came sometime in the early 1980's when Grandmaster Flash developed the art of "cutting" (later to be termed "scratching"), which I will define later. As time passed, instrumental tracks evolved to include multiple samples, some of which were mere blips of sound lasting no longer than a second, creating ever more complex, rich hip-hop works. The greatest manifestation of sampling as an art-form came into being in 1989 with the release of "Paul's Boutique" – a full-length LP by Manhattan/Brooklyn rap trio Beastie Boys, which featured 105 samples spread over twenty-three songs.[23]

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[21] Kurtis Blow's self-titled album (1980) has ample examples of his style.

[22] Charlie Ahern, *Wild Style*, DVD, Rhino Home Video (2007) – Provides a great scene of the Fantastic Five and Cold Crush Brother's "battling" over the same beat.

[23] The website http://paulsboutique.info provides the most extensive and detailed sample list for this monumental album (active as of 26 March 2009.)

The MC

"When you hear me talk, you can bet your last dime

everything I'll say will be in a rhyme."

- Lil Rodney Cee

The rapping itself also greatly diverged from its ancestral roots in Jamaican toasting. While groups and solo acts like Funky 4 + 1, Kurtis Blow, and Cold Crush Brothers generally stuck to light, upbeat songs, there was incredible diversity in lyrical content from the outset of rap music. Before artists such as Afrika Bambaataa even came close to a microphone, they had crafted a message for the entire world to hear. Bambaataa began his career hosting hip-hop parties much as Kool Herc had, but his previous involvement in Bronx gang culture led to his creation of the Zulu Nation; a predominantly Black socio-political group inspired by the Zulu uprising against South African apartheid rule and the "Shaka Zulu" movie and television series. The Zulu Nation developed a religious doctrine, foundational texts, dedication to proselytism, and strong inclination to futurism – all of which could be heard on Bambaataa's European-electronica inspired early recordings.[24] In 1982 Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released "The Message" – a song that was completely devoid of inspirational and fun-loving messages and was instead laced with descriptions of the blight in New York's ghettos, social dysfunction, mental instability, and violent death. The group Treacherous Three released "Xmas Rap" in 1983 which complained of Reaganomics, poverty, and acute hunger, but which retained a decidedly tongue-in-cheek attitude. The point here is that rap lyrics could not be categorically classified into one stylistic category even in the genre’s infancy, and any attempt to do so would only result in confrontation with a dozen examples to the contrary.

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[24] A more detailed examination of Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation as well as relevant sources will be provided in chapter four.

The Paint

“Yeah, I vandalism alright, but still in general I know what I’m
doin’. I did something that make yo’ eyes open up, right? So
why is you talkin’ ‘bout it for?”

- KASE 2

“Graffiti” is a style of visual art (namely, painting) often associated with hip-hop culture at large. Though very frequently considered a fundamental element of hip-hop, some see it as a product of a distinctly different artistic movement which was simply merged into or co-opted by hip-hop. The legendary DJ Grandmaster Flash said in an interview: “You know what bugs me, they put hip-hop with graffiti. How do they intertwine? Graffiti is one thing that is art, and music is another.”[25] The word “graffiti” (coming from the verb “graffiare,” to scratch or scrape, in Italian) is itself a loaded term because it was not what the original graffiti artists used to describe their work. These artists typically used the more literal terms “writing” or “aerosol art,”[26] but also commonly referred to the act of putting up a piece of graffiti art as “bombing.”[27] Graffiti gained notoriety through a number of avenues, but primary among them was its use of an intriguing canvass: subway train cars.

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[25] Nelson George, “Hip-Hop’s Founding Fathers Speak the Truth” in *That’s the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* eds. Murray Foreman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004) 45-55, 45
[26] Miller, 3
[27] Henry Chalfant and Tony Silver, *Style Wars*, DVD. Passion River Studio, 2005

Graffiti gained notoriety in New York City as youths of many ethnic and racial backgrounds began writing names on the insides and outsides of the city's subway trains. The first instances of this were manifest in "tagging," or using a simple marker or monochromatic paint to write a name in an intricate fashion.[28] Eventually, the designs became more and more elaborate and utilized wide varieties of spray paint colors and tints until the mere writing of names came to produce masterful pieces of art. The names painted on these trains were not simply the first or last names of the artists writing them, but were *noms de plume* taken by the writers, which sometimes had a connection to the neighborhood in which they lived (such as the case of TAKI 183, often considered the first "tagger," who lived on 183rd street in Manhattan.)[29]

Writers would often sneak into train-yards (where subway cars are stored overnight) in the wee hours of the morning and paint their assumed names (and sometimes other messages) onto the sides of trains. Other times a writer might sneak into a subway at night and traverse abandoned or cordoned corridors and catacombs to get to trains parked underground. Many of these young writers knew not only the enormous contemporary New York transit schema, but also the older, unused subway map better than transit authority employees who had been working the lines for decades.[30] Writers would memorize train schedules and utilize maps to find trains which would take their paintings to as many points in New York as possible. The writers also faced the very real dangers of oncoming trains and the "third-rail" (an electrified rail which provides the train with massive amounts of power) which claimed the lives and body parts of many young writers.

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[28] Miller, 6
Although "tagging" is now generally acknowledged (even by the legendary New York graffiti artist PHASE 2) to have been started by a Black teenager called CORNBREAD in Philadelphia circa 1965, it is believed not to have developed as a style or formed a community until it reached New York by way of CORNBREAD's associate TOP CAT in the late 1960's. (Chang, 74 and Miller, 129)

[29] Chalfant and Silver

[30] Miller, 90-92

The name, rather than the person writing it, became central in train writing. The goal of the graffiti writer was not to get *personal* notoriety for his work, but to gain *nominal* fame for his chosen name.[31] A popular goal among train writers was for their names to go “all-city”; that is, to get their works up on trains which would take them to every borough and show them to potentially millions of people. But as this art of “name fame” grew in popularity, so it grew in complexity.

Distinct artistic styles began to emerge in graffiti as writers sought to make their names stand out among the numerous others along side theirs on the trains. With an advance in style combined with competing space on the ever crowded sides of trains, qualitative judgment became a factor in the work of artists. If an artist created a piece on a train and another artist thought he could create something much more visually stimulating, the latter artist would paint over the original piece with his name. This was considered to be a normal, acceptable practice, unlike the works of “toys.”[32] A toy was someone who was not very artistically skilled and could not compete with truly talented writers, but who would still put his simplistic tag over the sometimes genius works of renowned artists. Toys were not interested in associating their names with superior quality and skill, but merely with getting their names to as many areas as possible.[33] In the famous graffiti documentary *Style Wars* a toy named “CAP” begins painting over some of the best New York City train writers of the time with his simple, monochromatic tag. His actions infuriate the writers so much that they begin discussing how to arrange an attack on CAP personally to stop him from “going over” pieces. But if an artist was indeed more skilled than another, he had the right to superimpose his works over others when the original paintings had their run and became stale. One of the styles which marked a great artist was called “wild style.” Wild style saw lettering morph into a sort of visual cryptography and calligraphy at the same time. The style usually featured letters which were so bent out of shape, rearranged, and distorted that they were illegible to most people who were not schooled in the art form.[34] Adding arrows (but also stars and other small accouterments) to letters was another defining characteristic of wild style technique.[35] Wild style was used by numerous artists to go over the works of lesser talented artists through a tactic called “the burner.” A burner was a piece of aerosol art done so well, in such complex wild style, and with such brilliant colors that it “burned” the older piece right off of the train, leaving no trace of it behind.[36]

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[31] Chalfant and Silver (This idea will become crucially important in chapter three.)
[32] Chalfant and Silver
[33] Chalfant and Silver

All of this was done, of course, much to the chagrin of New York City transit officials, politicians, and many private New Yorkers. The transit authority created a caustic cleaning solution that was intended to blast the paint off of subway cars, but which realistically only resulted in a dulling of color and a blending of colors into a murky brown, making the trains look even worse.[37] Clearly, the goal of the transit authority was not to actually make their trains look nice, but to discourage painters from using trains as canvasses by threatening to make their works as ugly as possible with the cleansing solution. The plan failed, however, and city officials resorted to even more extreme means. Double walled, barb-wire fences with German Shepherd attack dogs in the middle were erected around train yards by the early-middle 1980’s to keep graffiti writers out and the trains “safe” from painting.[38] All New York City trains were given a fresh, white coat of paint, upon which one writer managed to paint “DUMP KOTCH” (referring to then-mayor of New York Ed Kotch.)[39]

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[34] Miller, 78, 87
[35] Miller, 78
[36] Anthony Haden-Guest, *True Colors: The Real Life of the Art World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), 123
[37] Chalfant and Silver

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As is true for the arts of DJing and MCing, much more remains to be said in this writing on graffiti, but for now one should have a relative grasp of the three hip-hop phenomena with which I shall be working in coming chapters.

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[38] Chalfant and Silver

[39] Chalfant and Silver

Chapter 2: Afrofuturism

"Armageddon been in effect."

-Public Enemy

Engaging with new technology, possibilities of alien life-forms, and the future as a spatial-temporal location is a common practice among any class of people who might call themselves "futurists": science-fiction (sci-fi) and speculative-fiction (spec-fic) writers, cosmologists, certain religious leaders, and so forth. As many similarities as there are among futurists, there are an equivalent amount of differences: stylistics, themes, utopian/dystopian results, particularities, etc. For as long as they have been producing literature, art, and music, Blacks have had some share in creating the futurist canon in, but certainly not limited to, the United States. A recent group of academics have, in the last couple of decades, begun arguing that a distinct Black essence has run through the long lineage of Black futurist artists. This "Afrofuturism" came into prominence in the 1970s and has continued as a relatively popular aesthetic genre to the present day, inspiring a slew of critics to ponder what social conditions led to its rapid increase in popularity and production and what this futuristic bend means for Africana Studies and other fields of cultural studies.

Particularly germane to this thesis is the sudden popularity and frequency of Afrofuturist music which arose in the 1970's funk scene. According to Paul Gilroy:

> This period of intense musical creativity arose between the demise of Black Power and the rise of popular Pan-Africanism triggered by Bob Marley. It was dominated by the desire to find a new political and ethical code in which the contradictory demands for blackness on one side and postcolonial utopia on the other could be articulated together under the bright signs of progress, modernity, and style.[40]

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[40] Paul Gilroy, *Against Race* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 342

There was, essentially, an intellectual vacuum during this transitional phase as regarded how Blacks were to carry over the spirit of a proud “Blackness” of the civil rights and Black Power era into a new epoch which was defined in large part by the failure of these very movements to produce their full emancipatory promises. Until “popular Pan-Africanism” assumed this role as navigator to the future, an outer-space oriented musical and artistic aesthetic took hold. The disappointment resulting from the end of the civil rights era inspired an artistic genre which had given up hope of an earthly refuge for Black people and instead turned to a mothership, an alien planet, or somewhere “out there.”

Problems with Defining Afrofuturism

“There is no such thing as Afro Futurism.”[41]

-RAMM:ELL:ZEE

Afrofuturism, like any cultural/ethnic studies idea, certainly has its discontents and objectors, and it would be unfair to give these questioning/opposing voices only a terse treatment granted I will be citing many of their works to buttress my arguments. I take this queue from the essay “300 Years of 1984” written by surrealist/fantastical African-American novelist and poet Ishmael Reed. Reed’s essay, in which he critiques George Orwell’s *1984* from an openly Black standpoint, begins with a caution/complaint about writing of the “Black experience” or of “Black” art in general. Reed criticized what he sees as an automatic blackening (that is, the affixation of the label “Black art” or

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[41] RAMM:ELL:ZEE, correspondence with Chuck Galli conducted via email, questions sent to RAMM:ELL:ZEE on 8 October 2008, response received on 12 October 2008 (From henceforth referred to as “Galli and RAMM:ELL:ZEE #1.”) Entire interview appears in appendix I for the first time as a public document.

"African-American Studies" or "Black experience," etc.) of any piece of art or literature that he makes, regardless of whether he actually intended for it to be seen as a product of the Black experience or speaking from an overtly Black standpoint.[42] Aside from whatever affront this may represent to his artistic intention or integrity, Reed also makes the case that such blackening of his (and other Black artists') works is at its base opportunist; his argument deserves quoting at length:

> "… people can define me and even profit from interpreting what they call 'the black experience' (think of all the millions non-Afro-American producers, artists, and writers have made from interpreting 'Afro-American culture' through novels, film, music, and television – so much so that it's debatable whether the culture is 'ethnic'). Afro-American culture, it often seems, is every American-European's third heritage."[43]

Reed goes on to bemoan that White artists face little objection when creating authentic Black characters, yet when even highly esteemed Black writers attempt to speak from Jewish, Italian, or other European perspectives, they are accused of, what Reed calls, "reckless eyeballing" – looking where they should not.

A similar complaint is launched by hip-hop artist and legendary graffiti artist RAMM:ELL:ZEE. Afrofuturist scholar Mark Dery uses Zee (as he sometimes calls himself) as an example of a Black producer of Afrofuturist works on account of his creation of a complex ideology, religion, language, and sub-culture based around his early train paintings (Zee's works and belief structure will be examined at length and depth later.)[44] In doing so Dery, a White man, may be adding clout and breadth to his argument for Afrofuturism, yet he is also committing the very sin that Ishmael Reed decried in "300 Years of 1984." RAMM:ELL:ZEE, who is of Native American, Italian, and African descent,[45] somewhat identifies himself as Black (though it is by no means a complete description of himself nor a very important identifier for him), but objects to his work being considered a product of the Black experience or having any more or less authenticity than a work created by a non-Black.[46] Zee asks: “Where do us as a people get off thinking that we, because we are the oldest of people, have dominated anyone's belief that we are the dominants or dominators of the Hueman species [sic]? And why do you care?”[47]

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[42] Ishmael Reed, "300 Years of 1984" in *The Reed Reader* ed. Ishmael Reed, 235-246 (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 235-236

[43] Reed, 236

[44] Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, 179-222 (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1994), 184-185

We thus have two men who are frequently referenced as exemplars of the Afrofuturist phenomenon opposing the essentialist lumping of their art into a “Black art” classification. The question naturally follows: does anyone have the authority to classify such artists into such a genre when the artists feel a discomfort with, and outright hostility to, that very lumping? I believe that the answer is yes, for two reasons:

Firstly, these two men in specific would unquestionably be considered Black within current and past American racial frameworks and the ideas which developed in those (i.e. hypodescent), and the fact that they are advocating for a race-neutral reading of at least some of their works represents, in a circuitous way, a notable phenomenon in Black artistic history and art history in general.[48] To explain this within another context, I do not believe that my Italian ancestry (or my Irish ancestry for that matter) plays any role in my academic writing and the writing of this thesis, yet if someone were to do a survey of Italian-American academic writing in history, I think it would be relevant to note that in 2009 some Italo-Americans were not considering their backgrounds and traditions when writing cultural studies essays and were taking on topics largely unfamiliar to the Italian scholarly canon (such as Afrofuturism.) Since ethnic and cultural studies focus primarily on groups, the wants of the individual in regards to his own classification are subordinate to the group identity.

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[45] Miller, 59

[46] Galli and RAMM:ELL:ZEE #1 - By using the term “authenticity,” I mean to say that RAMM:ELL:ZEE does not believe that Blacks have experienced anything as a socially constructed racial group which provides them with any special authority or uniqueness in developing futurisms. “Authenticity” is a loaded term, and the counter-argument could be made that if it were not for RAMM:ELL:ZEE’s African ancestry, he would not have authority to declare that Blackness provides no special tools in futuristic thinking. Nonetheless, his statements are his and must be accepted accordingly.

[47] Galli and RAMM:ELL:ZEE #1

[48] Speaking of “race neutrality” often arises suspicion among Black studies academics that an author is ignoring social realities and attempting to be “colorblind.” What I mean by “race-neutral” in this sense is that Reed seems to wish that other lenses were used to view some of his works other than a racial lens. Why are his works not seen as a result of the absurdist experience or the surrealist experience, but only the Black experience? As for RAMM:ELL:ZEE, his feelings (given my knowledge of his larger philosophy, which I will explore later) seem to lend to a desire for his works to be seen as “post-racial” (another

Secondly, no attempt is being made to overwrite someone's history with an artificially constructed one; there is only the desire to make sense of a dizzying body of work by identifying themes and ideas and labeling them for better mental retention. Perhaps I do not consider my works to be part of any homosexual canon – firstly because I am not a homosexual, and secondly because I do not intend for my works to speak to a field of queer studies in any specific sense – but it is conceivable that one day some of my past writings will have some special relevance to homosexual/queer studies. No one would be diminishing my work or my identity, only using my creations to craft a new understanding.

This second point is particularly important to keep in mind because the re-appropriation of pre-fabricated works in order to create a new, bricolage literary or

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allergen for Black studies scholars.) Zee, as we will see later, believes that he is largely living in future centuries at a time when race has ceased to have significant meaning. Although Zee may be operating post-racially, his works cannot be received except by recipients, and the vast majority of them (since they, like myself, likely live in the present) cannot help but see such productions in a racial context.

artistic piece which contains new understandings and feelings is a process which is very close to the heart of hip-hop.[49]

Popular Definitions of Afrofuturism

"For us the problem is not to make a utopian and sterile
attempt to repeat the past, but to go beyond."[50]

-Aimé Césaire

Mark Dery is usually credited with the introduction of the term "Afrofuturism" in a 1993 interview with Greg Tate, Tricia Rose, and Samuel Delaney in *South Atlantic Quarterly* where he defined it as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th-century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future."[51] Speculative-fiction author Alondra Nelson, who is considered both a critic of and contributor to the Afrofuturist canon, elaborates on Dery's definition, stating that Afrofuturism is the result of African-American traditions and practices creating "other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come."[52] It is toward Paul Gilroy, however, that I shall predominantly turn for a theoretical basis for Afrofuturism due to what I consider to be his superior ability to show a philosophical and historical lineage for Afrofuturism amongst Black peoples throughout time.[53]

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[49] "Bricolage," a term made popular by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, refers to the appropriating of ideas or materials from outside one's community (either taken from a "foreign" community or from a separate social echelon or culture) into a new identity. Pieces of other cultures are taken and reassembled in a patchwork which often distorts the original meaning of whatever was taken.

[50] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 176-177

[51] Dery, 180

[52] Paul Youngquist, "The Afrofuturism of DJ Vassa," in *European Romantic* Review 16, no. 2, April 2005 (181-192), 183. Youngquist rightfully objects to Nelson's limitation of Afrofuturist thought strictly to African-Americans.

Gilroy contends that thinking about the future has a distinctive character in Black traditions and has roots in the material history of many Black peoples. He references the high frequency of Black spirituals based on "deliverance" and postulates that the mind of the Black slave was firmly planted in the future because the present was so hopeless and wretched. To grossly summarize his very brilliant works and arguments, Gilroy proposes that since the Black present has so often provided no impetus to survive or hope of personal and group betterment, the future became a mental and spiritual location for Blacks on the plantation, wherever that may have been.[54] Gilroy considers himself to be a successor in this theoretical lineage (though obviously not informed by the same lived conditions as slaves and colonial subjects) and admits that when considering issues of race theory, racism, and anti-racism, he prefers to "[invoke] the unknowable future against the unforgiving present."[55] Gilroy believes that "Corrective or compensatory inclusion in modernity should no longer supply the dominant theme" of anti-racist discourse and says that people should "self-consciously… become more future oriented," drawing his inspiration from Franz Fanon, who advocated that one should know his history, but break from it if he is ever to be free.[56]

In his book *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy deals with what he sees as a stark ideological differentiation between Western peoples and peoples of the African diaspora regarding their respective eschatologies.[57] On the one hand, he identifies the theme of a futuristic “utopia” in the Western literary tradition. Western futurism, he claims, operates within a framework of European modernity and holds to the idea that society is progressing through rationalism, and that such progress will lead humans to better lives.[58] Essentially, in the popular Western tradition, technological advances and material gain are seen as indicators of progress, and such progress can be followed along a rational path (that is, a path which rationalizes the continued perception of increased technological complexity and material gain as measures of advancement) toward a utopia where basic needs are no longer extant thanks to innovation, labor, and the removal from society of things which interfere with progress. Conversely, Gilroy points to a long tradition of “the jubilee” in Black literature and history that is inconsistence with the Western belief in utopia.[59] If utopia is a state of perfect being achieved through a process of societal progress, jubilee is a process of being perfect regardless of the eventual destination.[60] Gilroy relates the story of a female slave who fled to a free state with her children before the American Civil War and took refuge in a house. Upon finding her whereabouts, slave hunters surrounded the house with firearms and demanded that the woman and her children come out. Rather than do the “rational” thing and surrender in hopes of receiving less punishment for herself and he children, the woman grabbed a knife and slit the throat of one of her small children, making for the others in hopes of achieving the same ends.[61] For the slave woman, the murder of her children is a jubilant thing, for it defies slavery as a practice and institution, terrorism, White supremacy, and American law. The act of perfect being in the moment supercedes the hope of attaining personal, material betterment.

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[53] It is not my intention to imply that Gilroy is the definitive voice on matters of Afrofuturism or that his theories are superior for all considerations of Afrofuturism. I only mean to say that his theories make the most sense to me, are the easiest to assimilate into this work, and best help to provide a structure upon which some of my theories will be built.

[54] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 36

[55] Gilroy *Against Race*, 334

[56] Gilroy *Against Race*, 335-336

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[57] Gilroy does not, I should make clear, state that there are biological or inherent racial differences between those of European extraction and those of African background. As we shall see later, he is indeed very much against rigidity in race (as if the title of his book *Against Race* was not a clear enough clue.) It is within the historical phenomena found in any abundance in cultures of “the West” and cultures of the African diaspora where Gilroy draws his generalizations about Western versus Black eschatological futurism.

[58] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 68

[59] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 68

[60] Think of a machinist working for a company he knows to be despicable, yet fully aware that once he completes his machine he will retire on full pension for life. The machinist who labors tirelessly until the machine is complete and retires to his cabin has clear utopian motives for himself; the machinist who stops working, smashes the machine, and ridicules the nefarious company for which he works has committed an act of jubilee. What comes after the jubilee is unknown, but the spirit of the jubilant worker is now free, as opposed to that of the utopian worker, which is comfortable in its body.

Gilroy credits this phenomenon of the jubilee in Black thought partially to the relationship between Blacks and labor.[62] As Europe entered the Modern era and individual rights began to (slowly) replace the feudal labor system, Europeans began to see a correlation between their labor, personal progress, societal progress, and the betterment of everything through work.[63] Blacks, Gilroy argues, were not infused with the same (some say Protestant) work ethic, tending to associate Modern labor with terror, slavery, colonization, and a *diminishing* of individual rights. As he succinctly puts it:

> This inclination towards death and away from bondage in fundamental. It reminds us that in the revolutionary eschatology which helps to define this primal history of modernity, whether apocalyptic or redemptive, it is the moment of jubilee that has the upper hand over the pursuit of utopia by rational means.[64]
>
> The repeated choice of death rather than bondage articulates a principal of negativity that is opposed to the formal logic and rational calculation characteristic of modern western thinking and expressed in the Hegelian slave's preference for bondage rather than death.[65]

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[61] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 65

[62] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 56 – "…the slaves' perspectives deal only secondarily in the idea of a rationally pursued utopia. Their primary categories are steeped in the idea of a revolutionary or eschatological apocalypse – the Jubilee… the advances of modernity are in fact insubstantial of pseudo-advances contingent on the power of the racially dominant grouping… the critique of modernity cannot be satisfactorily completed from within its own philosophical and political norms, that is, imminently."

[63] As Marx and Engels wrote "The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation." (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [New York: New American Library, 1998], 55)

[64] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 68

[65] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 68

This resulted in a vastly different interpretation of the technological, economic, and civil advances created through work. Rather than seeing these European markers of cultural "progress" as proof that work was directly related to a more perfect life, and as a basis for hope that future benefits can be attained through more work, Gilroy argues that Blacks interpreted their work as antithetical to their own interests and perceived as a lie the notion that labor led to advancements, which led to a better life. The modern labor ethic was/is thus seen as Middle Ages feudalism gone through metamorphosis and reemerged with a new selling-point of universality.[66]

Music critic and writer Mark Sinker says that the "central fact" of Afrofuturist art is "that the Apocalypse already happened."[67] The queue to take this post-apocalyptic position can arguably be drawn from a number of instances in Black history: the abduction of Africans and subsequent transportation to an alien land, the institution of generational slavery and the construction of a legal hell, or even the subjugation of a people to the needs of the Cross-Bronx Expressway and the abandonment of the society which followed. It seems to follow that if Afrofuturist thought has been constructed in a mindset of post-apocalypsis, that the concept of the jubilee would very easily come to be a prime futuristic aspiration since the march of modernity led to the apocalypse in the first place.[68]

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[66] Indeed, Gilroy points to a comment made by Fredrick Douglass who saw the slave plantation as "out of place" in the "modern world" and more akin to "feudal Europe." (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 59)

[67] Mark Bould, "The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF," in *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 34, Part 2, July 2007 (original pagination unknown), 3

[68] I should note that in referencing "the apocalypse," I am not referring to the similar concept of "dystopia" in science-fiction. By my understanding, a dystopia results from either the abandonment of a utopian, modern path or some perversion/reversal of it, which leads to a condition where the goals of the utopia have been replaced with their moral and physical opposites (instead of individuals living with freedom, they are all slaves for an elite or an alien/robot society.) The apocalypse, conversely, is simply the end – usually of the world. I interpret the Afrofuturist and hip-hop definitions of "apocalypse" (which I will explore later) to say that there has been no major deviation from some just path, but that this is where the

We have, then, arguments that postulate the existence of *something* which occurs with such frequency in the futuristic imaginings of Blacks that it warrants a prefix such as Afro- or Black- in describing it. I would add this *thing* to Dery's and Nelson's definitions of Afrofuturism – that there is essentially a challenge to the entire European notion (which, thanks to modernity, has practically issued an official, though not *de facto*, statement of monopoly to the world) that progress is tied to labor and that such progress is necessarily "good." A muted rebuttal has been made for centuries to the grand structure by which humans of various colors and backgrounds have been told to measure goodness – this progress-hermeneutics superstructure.

The aim here is to grasp some relatively broad, generally recognized definitions and characteristics of Afrofuturism. We have identified the popular definitions of Mark Dery and Alondra Nelson as well as the concepts of utopia, jubilee, apocalypse, and what I have termed the progress-hermeneutics superstructure. All of these concepts will play a major role in the treatment of my coming proposition that "hip-hop futurism" be considered a unique and important praxis in its own right. For now, however, I will move on to illuminate the many futuristically oriented modes of production in hip-hop which will hopefully lay sufficient groundwork for the introduction and exploration of hip-hop futurism.

Western utopian path was going anyway (perhaps not for those who were chosen to benefit from it, but certainly for those who were the builders of the future.) Again I implore the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway as a foundational event in hip-hop. The Expressway, for all of its devastating effects, is considered to be a modern marvel; and Moses to be a genius and credit to New York. There was no divergence in the modern ideal for progress through technological advance and increased production – the destruction, isolation, and abandonment of the South Bronx (i.e., the imposition of an apocalypse upon it) were perfectly natural phenomena in the march of modernity.

Chapter 3 – Hip-Hop's Modes of Production as Futuristic

"Now we just boarded on our futuristic space-craft.
No mistakes Black, it's our music we must take back."

-Deltron Zero

Examinations of Afrofuturist music tend to focus almost exclusively on the aesthetics of the performers and the music itself. George Clinton, Parliament Funkadelic, and Sun Ra are often pointed to as exemplars of Afrofuturist music due in large part to their manners of dress, lyrical subject matter, and the philosophies they have espoused. What is less commonly examined is the way in which these artists create their music, whether talking about the sound equipment, the instruments, or the tones themselves. As the twentieth century proceeded toward its end and technology grew more complex right before the eyes of humanity, technologically advanced instruments (not necessarily in a musical sense) became more and more familiar to most people. And although musicians have been utilizing technology since the beginning of musical history itself, few musical genres have been as enamored with technology as has hip-hop. As British novelist and playwright Patrick Neate notes, "Practically, hip-hop was the first musical genre to rely exclusively on technology, in its use of turntables and mixer, drum machine and sampler."[69] Not only did hip-hop musicians embrace high-technology, the technology itself became the focus of hip-hop/rap music and led to hip-hop being constructed as a postmodern, futuristic art form. One of the primary reasons why hip-hop artists became so engrossed with high-technology, which will hopefully become clearer by the end of this chapter, is because such technology (in the hands of the hip-hop artists) greatly improved the artists' ability to re-appropriate music and art in ways that would have been largely impossible had they not employed relatively complex technology in their producing.

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[69] Youngquist, 188

Not only is hip-hop a structurally futuristic art form, it is, to a large extent, a representative of some of Afrofuturism’s main themes and phenomena due to both its modes of production and the content of a fair amount of overtly futuristic hip-hop music and visual art produced since the late 1970’s. It is toward these modes of production which I shall now turn in order to flesh out their futuristic tendencies.

The Music, The DJ

“Lookin’ for the perfect beat. Searchin’ for the perfect beat.

Lookin’ for the perfect beat. Seekin’ for the perfect beat.”

-Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force

Recalling the portion of this essay which earlier explained the interaction between the DJ and his sound system in the context of Jamaican sound system culture, I mentioned that it was the fusion of the thinking biological being with the mechanical, technologically complex electronic equipment that led to, essentially, an appreciation for the interaction of human and machine. Given that hip-hop’s first official DJ (Kool Herc) was a Jamaican sound system DJ, it is not surprising that this cybernetic human prototype was carried over into hip-hop culture, along with a mode of production which would become ever more developed.

I have already explained the concept of “the break” in hip-hop and how this continuation of one, usually very short, instrumental section of a song by using two identical records led to the creation of the first hip-hop instrumentation. What were not explored at any length were the practices of “scratching” and “sampling.”

The Scratch

"Ain't no other way to play the game the way I play.

I cut so much you thought I was a DJ."

-Snoop Dogg

"Scratching" (or "cutting" as it was known as in its infancy) is one of the most recognizable and misunderstood elements of hip-hop music. Most people unfamiliar with hip-hop culture and rap music are at least somewhat familiar with scratching as it has been parodied, isolated, and oversimplified in stereotypical fashions in popular entertainment. Scratching is, in its most basic form, performed by the DJ playing a vinyl record on a turntable, stopping the record with his hand, and rubbing it back and forth across the tone needle to create a unique sound.[70] Often times a mixer is used to mute the record while it is being rewound to a specific point, to control when sound will be created, or to switch the output of sound to another turntable attached to the same mixer. In its more complex forms, scratching utilizes records especially produced for DJs which feature only sound effects, spoken quotes, musical breaks, and various instrument sounds. A DJ may "scratch" the entire background instrumentation for a song, use scratching like an instrument (i.e., with regular frequency and in time with the rest of the music), or add scratching as an accouterment to a pre-recorded hip-hop song.

Scratching is similar in process to (and I believe a musical/technological descendent of) the manipulation and contortion of PA system equipment by Jamaican sound system DJs in that what becomes the focal point of the music is not necessarily the original instruments used to create whatever noise is being scratched, but rather the medium through which these pre-recorded sounds are now passing. Consider briefly the products which most of us have become familiar with since the dawn of the information era:[71] cellular telephones, the Internet, email, digital video and audio, and satellite technologies. All of these creations have profoundly affected the quality and quantity of things produced, but they have more starkly affected *how* produced materials and information are sent from one point to another. This is, in my opinion, the most defining characteristic of twentieth and twenty-first century technological advance.

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[70] This is a somewhat antiquated definition as digital sound equipment has brought forth numerous devices which reproduce this sound using compact discs and digital music formats (such as mp3s.) These devices, however, seek to mimic the sounds originally created with vinyl records, and therefore it is most relevant to present scratching using a slightly older definition.

Scratching, in keeping with the theme of relatively recent technological advance, transports data (music on a record) from one place to another. But scratching does not merely facilitate this information communiqué; it also manipulates the data and appropriates it toward and end for which the data was not originally designed through what Samuel Delaney calls a "specific *miss-use* [sic]" of technology.[72] Buttressing the point, though also placing it within a Black diasporic context, Nabeel Zuberi asserts that this practice of misuse (or "*miss-use*") of technology is a continuation of a Black customary attitude toward technology,[73] and Ken McLeod explicitly declares that scratching is yet another occurrence of this cultural practice.[74] When British heart-throb pop-rock group The Monkees produced "Mary, Mary" in 1967, it was probably unlikely that they imagined their singing of the actual words "Mary, Mary" would become an instrument in the hands of Run-DMC's DJ, Jam-Master Jay, in 1988. Nor would the actors, writers, singers, politicians, poets, commercial jingle writers, and radio personalities of the past hundred years envision that they would become a beat or an instrument for DJs such as Mix Master Mike, KutMasta Kurt, and DJ Shadow.

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[71] This era is sometimes referred to as the "technological era," however I prefer the term "information era" because I believe the proliferation and liquidity of information wrought by most technological breakthroughs has been more impressive and important than the technologies themselves. The advent of the printing press (to use a pre-information era example) was not a major breakthrough because stamping letters onto paper with ink was somehow intrinsically important. Rather it was the dissemination of information which was the truly revolutionary advance.

[72] Ken McLeod, "Space Oddities: Aliens, Futurism and Meaning in Popular Music," in *Popular Music* 22, no. 3, 2003, (337-355), 347

[73] McLeod, 347 – Specifically, Zuberi points to the use of "the broken bottleneck applied to the blues guitar, … the oil drum bashed and buffed to create Trinidad steel sound, … [and] the Roland 808 drum machine."

Scratching is but one technique in the repertoire of the hip-hop DJ that accords with futurism, and in fact is only an introduction into the study of "turntablism" – the art of the hip-hop DJ. To come closer to a holistic understanding of turntablism, the older and more widely used practice of "sampling," which I have also defined earlier, must be critically examined.[75]

The Sample

"Well I'm the Benihana chef on the SP-12.

Chop the fuck out the beats left on the shelf."

-Adrock (Beastie Boys)

Sampling has been derided by many music critics, musicians, record labels, and advocates of copyright protection for what they see as an attempt to obfuscate the fact that hip-hop DJs are essentially stealing. In the historic *Grand Upright Music, Ltd. v. Warner Brothers Records, Inc.* (1991), a US District Court ruled that any and all samples used in a recording must be cleared with the original artist before it can be used on another record.[76] The ruling made sampling time-consuming and costly and seriously reduced the amount of sampling that many artists could do.[77]

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[74] McLeod, 347

[75] I should make it clear that when I refer to an ambiguous "sample," it could mean a piece of music, a lecture, a TV advertisement, or almost anything that was once recorded. Samples are usually derived from songs, though non-song samples are omnipresent in hip-hop.

Sampling is theft if one remains within a more Western-leaning mindset that fixates on the concept of the “original inventor”; that is, a worldview which believes that something can be originally invented and that, once it comes into materialization, it is the property of that original inventor. However, leaving this preconception behind and embracing hip-hop’s outlook on originality, one can come to see how sampling is a legitimate means of cultural production and a future-oriented practice. This outlook on originality includes two major tenets which are largely absent from the traditional Western idea of the original inventor; that is, the belief that all “original” works are merely fragments of older works re-manipulated and reorganized by different manipulators/organizers living in different times (and thus different cultural contexts) and that all works enter, to a great extent, into a common, public domain and are freely available for further re-manipulation and reorganization. That this concept of bricolage arose amongst youth living in the South Bronx of a post-Cross-Bronx Expressway is not terribly surprising given the post-apocalyptic-like condition of the borough at the time. With no jobs, no money, high crime, the literal burning of an entire world, and the politics not of oppressive intervention, but of abandonment, it is easy to see how the South Bronx and the hip-hop aesthetic which grew out of it are very much informed by a cultural and social context formed, in essence, after the apocalypse. Everything which stands to be built must be built *by* communal effort and *with* whatever is left behind –

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[76] 780 F. Supp. 182 (S.D.N.Y. 1991) United State District Court for the Southern District of New York.

[77] The album “Paul’s Boutique” (1989) by Beastie Boys, which I mentioned in the first chapter, is often pointed to as the exemplar of a pre-1991 hip-hop record which would be nearly impossible to create today.

whether that be a pile of rubble or a pile of vinyl disco records. The politics of post-apocalypsis is a foundation for hip-hop's view of originality, and will be an important factor later in my treatment of postmodernity.

When a DJ takes a sample, he is not attempting to deny the original artist any claim over having first recorded the sound or to pass off the sample as his original work.[78] The DJ takes a sample to create out of it both a unique sound and a unique emotion. Having one's music sampled, far from being an insult, can easily be interpreted as a compliment since, the logic goes, an artist's work was so good that there is no point in trying to imitate it – just use the actual piece. One's work is thus taken whole and placed into a new work and, most importantly, manipulated through various DJ techniques (altering the tempo or pitch, scratching the sample, etc.) and through the juxtaposition of the sampled bit with other samples. Aside from the surprise of finding their works on a rap album, it may be doubly intriguing to find Jimmy Smith's keyboarding and Myra Barnes' vocals blended seamlessly in rap duo Gang Starr's song "No More Mr. Nice Guy." From Michael McDonald's and Bob James' merger on Nate Dogg and Warren G's "Regulate" to Kool & the Gang's and Steve Miller Band's amalgamation on EPMD's "You're a Customer," hip-hop takes data and synthesizes it into a new "whole" which provokes emotion not only from the primary experience of hearing the sounds, but from understanding where the sounds come from and what impacts such an understanding may have. To sample a speech by Adolf Hitler and blend it into "Hail to the Chief" would obviously have a two-layered meaning and thus a two-layered reaction from a listener.

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[78] And when a hip-hop artist does attempt to pass off sampled work as "original" work, he is cast in a negative light. The most well known example of this was pop-rapper Vanilla Ice's use of a sample of "Under Pressure" by Queen and David Bowie. Ice claimed that the bass-line for "Ice, Ice Baby" was an original creation and not a sample, even though it was clearly taken from Bowie and Queen. Ice suffered both from the scorn of the record company owning the rights to "Under Pressure" and from hip-hop fans who used his "foul" as cannon fodder against what many already considered to be a mere parody of a real rapper.

Why, then, does sampling represent some sort of inherent futurism? Because it draws its appeal and mechanics from a space where data are brought together.[79] There is nothing special about hearing Michael McDonald's music on someone else's album, but when the lines "Sixteen in the clip and one in the hole / Nate Dogg is about to make some bodies turn cold" are placed over the sample, McDonald's blue-eyed soul instrumentation takes on a creepy, dark feel.[80] A particular bit of data (McDonald's music) is transported to a new audience (assuming there is not a lot of overlap between Michael McDonald fans and West Coast gangsta rap aficionados), acting essentially as high-technology does with its emphasis on data transfer. The manipulation of McDonald's music represents hip-hop's divergence from seeing its goal as the mere dissemination of information and toward a duty to synthesize such data and push it to mean something new.[81] Phil Collins could easily cover a Michael McDonald song, and perhaps that juxtaposition would create some special sensation, but it would be decidedly different from a hip-hop sampling because one would not be hearing Michael McDonald himself. Hip-hop does not imitate data so that it may ad lib and change the meaning – hip-hop is in the business of reconfiguring *what things mean*. Drawing from present day “givens” and supposing, proposing, suggesting, and proselytizing about them is par for the course for any futurist, whether she be a software designer, science-fiction writer, or religious prophet.

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[79] Here I am thinking of "space" both in the more literal sense and also in the "outer-space" sense. Entering "space" frees one from the confines and regulations of earth and its worldly regulations. Space is an area of new possibilities due to its lack of norms. To quote Star Trek: "Space – the final frontier."

[80] Warren G, "Regulate" on the album *Regulate… G Funk Era*, 1994

[81] This ability to create something "new" is important if one considers the context in which hip-hop formed. People living in urban communities where hip-hop took hold (whether that be the South Bronx on the east coast or Oakland and Compton on the west) were largely excluded from creating new possibilities by two means: lack of both physical and financial resources and the effects of abandonment thanks to benign neglect. As urban areas crumbled under Reaganomics (and economic policies which predated Reagan), material wealth became acutely scarce, and thus did the ability to manufacture anything new. The politics of abandonment and benign neglect were essentially signals from the US and state governments that people living in urban areas were to be left out of American progress and the process of creating wealth. To create something new in these contexts requires a complete rethinking of what "create" and "new" meant and the development of skills of construction without the assistance of the state or any readily available historical example from which to draw inspiration.

Not to be sidelined is the obvious connection one can see between the hip-hop DJ and what one might call classic surrealism. Surrealism, in the words of founding member André Breton, is “based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought.”[82] It is the first part of Breton’s definition which most directly pertains to hip-hop (though the “disinterested play” will factor in greatly once we begin looking at the hip-hop artists who have produced overtly futuristic works.) These “neglected associations” are exactly what hip-hop DJs tap into when mixing samples to create special feelings and sensations within the listener. Buttressing the argument for seeing hip-hop’s modes of production as futuristic is the point that uncovering “neglected associations” (or better, connecting minds which would not otherwise have met in order to facilitate complimentary findings and understandings) is one of the paramount objectives of creating more advanced technological applications and instruments and was one of the stated intentions for the creation of the Internet.

Not only do these unorthodox juxtapositions lead to the immediate sensational experience, they may also inspire a listener to approach a genre of music or a musician which she would have otherwise overlooked because there was no initial feeling that pulled her toward such a genre or artist. 1970’s acid-induced alternative-folk/rock music may not have (though it very well could have) allured many Black San Francisco teenagers in 2002, but hearing Harry Nilson (a strong representative of this remote genre) and his instrumentation on Bay Area rap duo Blackalicious' 2002 album "Blazing Arrow" may spark a curiosity into who this old guy is.[83] Surrealism will be more important to this thesis later, but for now we must move on.

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[82] Patrick Waldberg, *Surrealism* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1978), 75

The Remix

"Cuz I don't really care what they think
Tomorrow they'll be doing my song and will be claimin' its new…
I tell you what, I'll give you my style right now to save time
Cuz it takes time for you to chew – obviously."

-Pigeon John

In any genre of music, one will find artists performing versions of someone else's songs and recording their own songs at different studios with different band members. Hip-hop artists engage in this as well, but two major elements of what DJs and MCs call "remixing" sets the practice apart from more traditional forms of song alteration and constructs the art of remixing as a futuristic act: the mode in which a song is remixed, and the intents hip-hop artists have when producing songs and engaging in remixing.

"Covering" is usually the verb used to describe the performing or recording of a song by an artist other than the song's creator. Naturally, not only is the artist performing the cover differently from the original artist, the entire manufacture of the cover is usually different from the process that led to the original song: different studio/PA equipment, different studios and arenas, different instruments, etc. The ultimate objective of a cover is thus to appropriate someone else's song and perform it according to your own tastes and within whatever capacity you have.

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[83] Personally, I have traveled this musical route a number of times, discovering my now-adored Jimmy Smith, Buddy Rich, Johnny Cash, Bad Brains, and countless other musicians through hip-hop. It would be much more difficult (if not impossible) for even the most contemporary rock and roll music to work in the complementary reverse – inspiring an appreciation for Grand Wizard Theodore, Notorious B.I.G, Mos Def, or any other group of hip-hop artists.

Remixing shares this motif of appropriation, but the art of the remix is a decidedly more technologically inclined one and involves a deeper engagement with digital and analog data – the term "remix" alludes to this. "Mixing" a song typically refers to the assemblage of multiple tracks of instrumentation and vocalization into one cohesive track.[84] To remix, then, is to separate the various tracks used to create the song and delete and manipulate as many as necessary. New tracks are often blended into the new mix (the *re*-mix) and may be either new instrumentation or new vocals. New instrumental tracks may consist of original music created with traditional instruments and synthesizer keyboards or may be a patchwork of samples.

The defining theme of the remix that sets it apart from the cover song is the direct engagement with the musical data by way of high-technology to manipulate, rather than imitate, a previously recorded song. When Whitney Houston covered "I Will Always Love You," which was originally written and recorded by Dolly Parton some twenty years earlier, she was essentially performing her "take" of the song; coloring it with her voice, style, and production quality of her studio team. What Huston was not doing was manipulating Dolly Parton herself. Hip-hop DJs, on the other hand, are less interested with re-performing someone else's song than with engaging in deconstruction and reconstruction of the song and utilizing the art of sampling juxtaposition we examined earlier. When hip-hop production duo Panjabi Hit Squad remixed the popular "Dude" by dancehall artist Beenie Man in 2008, Beenie's vocals were left untouched (aside from perhaps slight tempo adjustments) while an entirely new instrumental track was superimposed on the lyrical track. Panjabi Hit Squad drew from their South Asian roots and incorporated Punjabi instrumentation into a traditional Jamaican dancehall drum pattern to create the effect not that Beenie Man was being taken into a foreign and altogether dissimilar musical genre, but that there is a workable commonality between contemporary Punjabi and Jamaican music. The juxtaposition of these two cultures with one another leads to sounds and sensations which would not have been possible to accomplish without leaving intact at least some of the original "Dude." Just as in our previous discussion of sampling, the remix is not an attempt to imitate the original data, but to reinterpret what it means.[85]

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[84] Not to be confused with "mastering" which is the adjustment of levels and stereophonics to create a "better" sounding piece of music.

Remixing also has the power to prolong the life of a particular piece of music by reinvigorating it with new ideas and sounds. Holding to the Western appreciation of original ownership/creatorship, it is easy to see how the new soon becomes the stale, and how the stale eventually becomes the unpopular. Remixing acts much like a cybernetic organism (whether it be an artificial heart, prosthetic leg, or science fiction cyborg), providing the "host" music with enough structural support to keep it popular and enjoyable without obfuscating what the song "originally" was. The remixer thus gains popularity through his talent and musical taste, while the initial artist receives resuscitation and is appreciated for providing some raw material for others to use.[86]

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[85] Why does remixing strive to reinterpret rather than reproduce? Hypotheses abound, but I think it has something to do with hip-hop's postmodern tendencies, which I will explore later. Basically, hip-hop can be seen as valuing "becoming" over "being" – as seeing "the process" as the destination. Keeping identity in flux is one way of expressing a preference for becoming over being.

[86] A great, contemporary (to the writing of this thesis) example is the remix of the song "Paper Planes" (2007) by musician MIA. Having achieved high acclaim and popular reception in 2007, a few words from "Paper Planes" was sampled by rapper Jay-Z and used in the instrumentation for his widely popular 2008 song "Swagga Like Us" featuring himself and rappers T.I., Lil Wayne, and Kanye West. I can specifically remember rarely hearing "Paper Planes" on Providence, Rhode Island's main hip-hop station in 2007, yet

Remixing in hip-hop is not, as it may seem thus far, strictly limited to the manipulation of the instrumental elements of a song, but can extend to the supplanting of new vocals over the original instrumental track. The most recent example of this was the "Milli" phenomenon begun by rapper Lil Wayne in 2008. Lil Wayne released his single "A Milli" to a hip-hop community ready to bond over the art of remixing. The instrumentation for "A Milli" was extremely minimalist, featuring one spoken sample, a snare drum, an artificial clap noise, and one note of synthesized bass. The song was a hit unto its own, and almost immediately after its release was remixed by some of the most contemporaneously popular hip-hop artists such as Cassidy, Ne-Yo, and Jadakiss, (to name a very limited few) who kept the instrumentals more or less intact, adding only their vocals.

"A Milli" was remixed by so many artists that each additional remix brought the song closer to a farce, but the phenomenon made a statement about hip-hop which is very germane to my argument about remixing as a futuristically inclined art form. That is, hip-hop artists intend that their music will be, to use the "original inventor" lexicon, "stolen" by other artists and manipulated without their input. The clearest evidence that this mindset exists amongst hip-hop artists can be found by examining the hip-hop "single" or "EP" (extended-play record.) Traditionally, when a hip-hop artist releases an album, he releases a "single" immediately beforehand containing what will come to be the hit song on the album. The term "single" is a bit misleading however, as the single usually contains at least four versions of the same song: the album or single version (how the song will appear on the album, usually complete with profanity and at its full run-time), a

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hearing it, as well as "Swagga Like Us," multiple times daily in 2008. The appropriation of MIA's work, though not a full remix, extended the life of its popularity and even increased it in certain areas.

"clean" or "radio" version (expletives removed and the song sometimes shortened for radio play), an instrumental version, and an *a cappella* version (just vocals.) The album and clean versions are generally intended for personal use and commercial broadcast (respectively), while the instrumental and *a cappella* versions are designed to more easily facilitate the remixing of the initial song. Rather than force a DJ to include the original music or oblige an MC to rap only between the initial rapper's lines, the creator of the single provides each with exactly what she needs to remix the song. Once the single, and more broadly the album, has sufficiently circulated the airwaves and record shops, an EP is sometimes released containing the initial version of the song, a number of remixes of the song performed by different artists, and a few songs by the initial artist (either album songs or songs which did not make the cut to appear on the album.)[87]

Why, then, is this intent to facilitate the remixing of one's own music inherently futuristic? Because it represents an acknowledgement on the part of the hip-hop artist that his work will not forever be his own – that once it leaves his studio, it becomes a commodity on the remix/appropriation market.[88] The phenomenon of the remix has forced hip-hop artists to envision their creations as fluid in nature and, to some extent, antiquated as soon as they are released.[89] Aside from interpreting the initial messages and feelings contained within a song, a follower of hip-hop will also consider what she can do to reinterpret/re-appropriate/revitalize/*remix* the song. Hip-hop artists must thus be at least somewhat futuristically inclined in order to engage in the production of music with not only the knowledge that what they are creating is only the convergence of different lines in space-time ("space" being the various genres of music contemporaneously occupying various locations in the musical world and "time" being a point in musical canon teleported to the present, or future from the song's perspective), but that other artists will jettison the song into, essentially, new dimensions as quickly as possible.[90] Clearly, Irish pop musician Gilbert O'Sullivan (the plaintiff in the aforementioned *Grand Upright Music, Ltd. v. Warner Brothers Records, Inc* case) did not have such futurist ambitions for his song "Alone Again (Naturally)" when DJ Cool V sampled it on rapper Biz Markie's 1991 album "I Need a Haircut." Biz Markie, on the other hand, posed no objection to having a line of his 1988 single "Nobody Beats the Biz" transformed into an entire chorus by DJ Ali Shaheed Muhammad for A Tribe Called Quest's 1993 "Midnight Marauders" album.

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[87] I should make it clear that this is not the only instance in which an EP is released. EPs can be produced when an artist simply does not have enough individual songs to necessitate an LP ("long-play album"), when he wants to publish "B-sides" (songs which did not appear on the album), or for any number of reasons not related to remixing. EPs are also sometimes released before the full-length album is released.

[88] The clash of this mindset and the "original inventor" mindset is, I believe, the root of a great amount of animosity between hip-hop artists and non-hip-hop artists.

[89] Indeed some rap singles, which make a song available to the public for the very first time, come complete with remixes of the "original" song.

The remix (along with the sample) also has important implications for conceiving of postmodernity (and whatever "crises" may have developed from such a movement) and the applicability of Afrofuturism to hip-hop as an art form. These implications will be examined later, but as for now there remains more to be said on the futuristic inclination of hip-hop's modes of production.

The Rapping

"Music orientated since when hip-hop was originated

Fitted like pieces of puzzles – complicated."

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[90] To clarify, "space-time" in this usage refers primarily to the act of sampling as a method of producing hip-hop music. The spatial component amounts to the taking of samples from artists in various genres of music who all produced songs around the same time. The temporal location is the taking of samples from various eras in music (jazz, punk rock, classical, etc.) Since these two almost always have a great deal of overlap, it is most appropriate to use the term "space-time."

-Rakim

Rapping as a mode of production has, admittedly, fewer aspects which may reasonably be considered inherently “futuristic” than its partners remixing, sampling, and scratching; but the few that it does have are worth illuminating. The two aspects of rapping which I will focus on are the preoccupation with time rather than tone that characterizes the art and the practice of “freestyle” rapping. Let us first gain some background into the modes of production in rapping to adequately familiarize ourselves with the practice so that the futuristic elements can be better understood. Rapping, in large part, is an extension of “toasting,” which we have already examined in chapter one. Rapping is, however, far more complex in structure and performance and relies on well defined senses of rhyme, a large vocabulary, and a refined understanding of meter and cadence.

Rhyme: Rappers have traditionally formed their songs by stringing together a number of couplets, all in standard rhyme. Like any poetic art, however, rap very frequently implores slant rhyme and alternative rhyme schemes (e.g. limericks.)

Vocabulary: Given the heavy use of rhyme in rapping, it is necessarily important that a rapper have a large and complex vocabulary to ensure that he can complete any rhyme he begins, that redundancy in word-choice is avoided, and that not only do his lines audibly rhyme, but that they are witty. To be more precise, it may be better to say “rappers’ vocabularies” since “standard” English vocabulary is often blended with various dialects of slang found predominantly in Black, Hispanic, and White ethnic vernaculars. Again similar to poets, rappers often employ words in their songs which would not be normally found in the common lexicon they use in everyday speech. The common speech of rappers oftentimes belies the breadth of their lingual knowledge. Such is the case of MC Aesop Rock who speaks rather plain, “standard” English infused with some traditionally Black American colloquialisms, yet who bombastically raps “Double park the shuttle, some will arc the funneled Cutty Sark where budding narcs target the gushing heart in the muddy Clarks.”[91]

Meter and Cadence: As we shall soon see, rappers by and large value “time” much more than “tone” in hip-hop. It is therefore not surprising to find meter and cadence to be of great concern for a rapper creating a song. Rap is almost always performed in standard 4:4 time, but the variations from that point are numerous. Some artists “speed rap” – essentially rapping in sixteenth notes. Others stick to more traditional quarter notes, and still many more syncopate their rhymes in the tradition of jazz and be-bop.[92] Rap is more like poetry than singing, and the synchronization of words with the beat supporting them is paramount for a class of artists who openly object to being labeled singers. Says Run of Run-DMC, who consider themselves more like orators than vocalists: “Like Martin Luther King, I will do my thing. I’ll say it in a rap ‘cause I do not sing.”[93]

It is in the consideration of what “time” means to the rapper that some of rapping’s futuristic tendencies and inclinations come to light. Understanding some fundamental differences between traditional singing and rapping can be facilitated by thinking of the differences between an analog signal and a digital signal. Singing, like an analog signal, is mostly concerned with wave formation. Like analog radio signals which must be of a proper frequency or amplitude, vocal waves also must be of an equally proper frequency and amplitude in order to attain a desired pitch and note. Rapping, more akin to a digital signal, relies on bits of information being in a proper order. A computer disc may be able to save a recording of a woman singing, but it saves it as a constructed series of ones and zeros (binary code) which can later be decoded to reproduce another sound wave. The wave itself, then, is not actually preserved as it would be in an analog medium (such as a vinyl record.) Rapping, unlike singing, is not terribly concerned with attaining proper pitch, tone, note, or certain other musical elements traditionally associated with vocalization. Rappers are more concerned with their words being in proper time, matching whatever syncopated cadence they may have chosen, and making sure that the words, instrumentation, and time are "fitted like pieces of puzzles – complicated."[94] I can remember hearing endlessly from older generations how "that rap isn't music," and to an extent, they have/had a point. Rapping is so dissimilar from more traditional forms of singing (from yodeling, to chanting, to opera, to blues, etc.) that it could hardly be considered as such. But this does not mean that rap music is "noise" and not real music – it is simply an encoded music that cannot be understood *prima facie*, much like a digital code.

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[91] Aesop Rock, “Citronella” on the album *None Shall Pass,* 2007

[92] Rappers Busta Rhymes and Twista are good examples of speed-rappers, while Lyrics Born provides great examples of both “standard” rapping and syncopated speech rhythms.

[93] Run-DMC, “Proud to Be Black” on the album *Raising Hell,* 1986

This inability to understand digital code unto itself is the qualifying characteristic which renders such code futuristic. To human sensory organs, digital code means nothing. Neither does FM radio modulation, but the *form* of frequency waves is something which humans can detect through sense.[95] Digital codes and signals have taken on an aura of futurism due to the requirement that some rudimentary form of artificial intelligence be present to decipher them and make them *categorically* coherent to human senses. Digital signaling removes human data from the human realm by means of its formatting. Rapping certainly does not remove anything from the human realm (which is why the analogy between rapping and digitization is not a perfect one), but it does digitize music to a certain extent. Rappers can get emotion, feeling, meaning, and messages across as well as, if not better than, any singer without using what I call "wave-form music." What are required are more bits of data to perform this task both in the sense of a wide array of words and a large number of whole words. Rappers, owing to their inclination toward data-based over wave-form music, have the advantage of simply being able to fit more words into a shorter period of time. There is thus more of an onus on the brain, the human computing component, to interpret data in hip-hop songs than there is, generally speaking, in non-hip-hop genres.

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[94] Eric B & Rakim, "Microphone Fiend" on the album *Follow the Leader,* 1988

[95] Humans cannot eat poisonous berries, but they can eat raspberries. My point here is to show how analog signals may be undetectable to humans, but not categorically, whereas no matter what a size a digital signal is, how quickly it is moving, through what it is moving, or how complex it is, it means nothing to the humans senses.

The brain must be able to not only interpret more data, but in the case of what is called "freestyle" rap, must also be able to predict and think in the future. Freestyle rapping is the art of rapping without having thought of what one will rap about or what words he will use before he begins. Keeping in mind that the "rules" of what constitutes good rapping are not suspended when a rapper is "freestyling," the practice becomes all the more impressive. Not only must a rapper choose his words *while* he is saying them, he must try to ensure that his lines will rhyme, that his word choices fit the cadence and meter of whatever beat is playing in the background (or, if there is no music at all, that his words follow some sort of natural sounding meter), and that what he is saying ultimately makes sense and is not just an amalgam of random words which have appeared in his head. Some rappers will use "fallback" lines while freestyling – lines which they have used before and store in their memories to “save” them if they encounter a mental block while freestyling – but this practice is largely decried as disingenuous and proof that one does not possess much talent as an MC.[96]

Freestyling thus requires a rapper to allow his mouth to move in the present while his brain is contemplating future words. Almost all speech, admittedly, exists as a thought before it exists as a sound, but the defining difference from regular speech in freestyle rap is the necessity of the rapper to be in two temporal locations at once. The rapper does not think of a rhyme, say it, stop, think of another rhyme, and then say that one. Rather, she is constantly rapping about something, stopping only briefly to breathe, and constantly thinking of the next thing to say. The roots running from freestyle rap to jazz improvisation are clearly obvious to anyone with even basic knowledge of jazz, and the process of having one’s mind in two different locations at once (both creating the physical movement of the lips and throat and thinking of what to say next) exists within jazz musicians. The one major objection I would make to establishing too close of a comparison between freestyling and jazz improvisation is that doing so may overlook the possibility of muscle memory in jazz instrumentalists. Since jazz instruments such as the saxophone, piano, bass, and so forth involve fingers, lips, hands, and other body parts to operate, there is the likelihood that muscle memory (of scales, keys, etc.) accounts for a significant part of jazz improvisation. Freestyle rapping can utilize no such biological feature since all of the “instrumentation” (the rapping itself) is performed as speech and can be created only by the brain. There is thus, I believe, more separation of the mind between the present and the future in freestyle rap than there is in jazz improvisation.

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[96] I can recall being at a Jurassic 5 concert at Colby College in Lewiston, Maine and witnessing MC Akil use a line while “freestyling” which I had heard him use a few years before at another concert. A few people around me apparently also had heard this line before, and responded by sucking their teeth and rolling their eyes, even though the rhyme was clever unto itself.

Freestyle rapping is thus futuristic in its treatment of what it means to "be present." Where is the MC while he is freestyling? Obviously, his physical person is on a stage, in a circle with fellow rappers, or even in his shower while his mind is a few seconds in the future, piecing together phrases informed by data in the present. The rapper is thus in a solid physical state and a fluctuating mental state at the same time; a personified example of the concept of "wave-particle duality" found in quantum mechanics.[97] The freestyle rapper cannot exist without engaging in futurism.

Graffiti

"It's like three-card Monty, and pick-pocketing, and shoplifting,

and, uh, graffiti defacing on public and private walls.

They're all in the same area of destroying our lifestyle."

-New York City Mayor Ed Kotch

A number of futuristic modes of production can be found in graffiti, but equally interesting are the connections to postmodernism and surrealism which are more explicitly articulated in graffiti than in rapping or DJing. Though some may not consider surrealism or postmodernism to be necessarily "futurist" schools, I contend that since both philosophies have such strong ties to Afrofuturism, for our intents and purposes in this essay it is proper and useful to consider them futuristically inclined.[98] The aspects of graffiti which I shall examine will be: graffiti's use of trains as canvasses, the adoption of pseudonyms by artists, and some stylistic elements that lend to postmodernism and surrealism.

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[97] For more information on wave-particle duality and quantum mechanics in general, see David J. Griffiths, *Introduction to Quantum Mechanics*, 2nd edition (San Francisco: Benjamin Cummings, 2004.)

[98] Surrealism and postmodernism, whether called by those names or not, are very much a part of Afrofuturism as I and others have defined it. The idea of a falling out or detachment from modernity's goals and modes of operation is an idea shared by Afrofuturism, postmodernism, and surrealism. If the

The Train

"Just looking at that thing, a black silhouette just sitting there
with red blinking lights sticking out. It's alive!"

-Lee Quiñones[99]

Much like its hip-hop companions rapping and DJing, graffiti grew in occurrence during a period of great urban neglect which colored much of the 1970's and 1980's. In tandem with the decline of urban quality of life and the setting in of the "apocalypse," the appropriation of public spaces for the purpose of making art grew in popularity and spawned a culture which would create both an intensely private and explicitly public form of visual art.

Before discussing the graffiti itself, it would be helpful to consider some of the special characteristics of subway trains and how these would come to be utilized by graffiti artists. Subways are, by some definitions, mechanisms created to facilitate the smooth operation of labor in a socio-economic system where labor is a commodity and where people do not work on the land they own (peasant economy) or rent (feudal economy) – namely capitalism.[100] Subways, being largely physically underground, not

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notion that humanity's modern "advancements" have actually not necessarily been progressing in any positive direction is a founding tenet of what the West has called postmodernism, it must be said that such a concept was inherent in many of the Black experiences we have explored earlier.

[99] Miller, 90

[100] Miller, 87 as quoting graffiti writer Lee Quiñones who says "They [the subways trains] are just sitting – waiting, for the imperialist country to bring its clones to its factories to pump out more bombs." Miller himself says of Quoñones' that he "regards his paintings as an attempt at readjusting the distorted values of

only remove people from their community for the purpose of laboring, but also remove any continuity one would have in making such a trip (such as walking or biking from Harlem to Chinatown, passing through all neighborhoods in between) and literally blot out the very existence of neighborhoods and people along the way, much like an expressway does. Subways are, in a sense, very ends-oriented mechanisms; they will take you from one place to another in box, which largely travels underground, so that you can work. Subways in New York were meant to be cold, expressionless people movers as shown by the desire of public officials and the transit authority to keep the cars shining white, free of blemishes, and for use by respectable New Yorkers who (according to transit authority workers) would be cheered up upon being greeted by a solid white, art-less steel carriage and who wanted nothing from the trains but to sit inside them and be taken to their jobs.[101]

Graffiti artists had other plans for the trains of economic progress. Living in a world where the urban poor were being written out of the human story and where concrete structures such as the Cross-Bronx Expressway (constructed with the explicit intent to make Manhattan a center of economic wealth) took precedent over the lives and livelihoods of those who lived in its projected path, artists began sending out messages to worlds which were not considered their own. Subordinate to the master plan to generate wealth no matter what the cultural costs, the graffiti writers used the only things with

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[New York City's] downtown corporate workers." Of course, people use subways and commuter rail services for non-labor related reasons such as visiting friends and family, shopping, or for connection to another mode of transit. Yet given that many rapid transit systems operate at an annual net loss or yield only a small profit, it can be concluded that the metropolitan areas have a financial incentive to continue funding such projects. If most people used subways to visit their grandparents, few to no cities would take on an annual debt to ensure this familial connection. But since cities are largely dependent upon a healthy wage-labor economy where people work where they do not live, it is imperative that the government create a way to distribute these productive capital creators from their homes to their places of work.

[101] Chalfant and Silver, *Style Wars*

mobility between the apocalyptic urban slums to express themselves, build connections with those far away, and remind those productive labor organisms that worlds existed above the subway tunnels.[102] Not only would paintings done on the sides of train cars send the messages of emotions of disillusioned artists to people who otherwise would not have either known or cared about them, these paintings would also transform the trains into personalities rather than utilitarian work horses. Famed graffiti artist Lee Quiñones once said that he actually felt sympathy for subways trains, which he saw as “lonely,” and felt that his painting of them did not mar them, but rather made them “so special.”[103] For Quiñones, painting the trains liberated them from their modern utilitarian slavery and gave them something to live for, so to speak.

The challenges to modernity here are relatively clear. Rather than viewing the trains as tools for use in furthering the accumulation of wealth, graffiti artists saw them as expressers of emotion and feeling. The fixed identity of the cold, white, sterile (at least in appearance) subway cars was replaced with a fluid identity where a car could one day be the expression of hard times in the Bronx, and the next could be a playfully absurdist cartoon of Mickey Mouse giving the middle finger.[104] As this identity traversed the boroughs of New York, it would be interpreted according to its current context (maybe aggression in wealthier neighborhoods, maybe solidarity in other poor areas, perhaps accomplishment and pride in the borough which housed the piece's artist.)[105] This was the creation of an identity on the move (and more importantly, *of* the move) and a proposition that such identity was somehow life-giving and illuminating unto itself.

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[102] Miller, 28-29
If we hearken back to chapter two and my comments on Afrofuturism as, among other things, a direct challenge to the Western progress-hermeneutics superstructure, we can see connections emerge between Afrofuturism and train graffiti. If subways (and expressways) were constructed for the proliferation of wealth, but this wealth was not privy to an enormous number of (mostly non-White) people who lived within such paths, where is the rationale that wealth-creation is inherently “progress” or an end unto itself? We must also consider the historical devaluation of the “merits” of labor within many African diasporic traditions and include this in an interpretation of subways where the value of their labor-providing capacities might not be as revered from a Black perspective (Kelley, 164-165.) Of course, Latinos and some White ethnics and Asians would be consumed by urban blight as well. The creation of what I call “functionally Black” non-Black persons in certain contexts and situations is something bell hooks points to as a result of postmodern conditions which lead to “a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding, even if it is not informed by shared circumstance” (Potter, 9). Hooks sees this momentary “Blackening” of non-Black groups as a potential area of connection and collaboration among many oppressed groups, and may help to explain why graffiti was so multiracial even in its early years.

[103] Miller, 95

The Name

"It's a name. It's just like, I'll give you a name and say,
hey, how big can you get this name up?"

-DUST

Graffiti artists generally assumed pseudonyms when writing, and quite often these names became the basis for the artworks themselves. When Samuel Clemens became "Mark Twain," he used it as a name under which to publish literature; but when graffiti legend PHASE 2 adopted his name, he used it as an identity (in specific, a connection to his Africa ancestors and an objection to his being given an European name at birth) and as a material.[106] "The name" in graffiti became the artist's clay, but also the artist himself.

From its beginnings in tagging, graffiti developed an obsession with popularizing the name over the physical artist, as we explored in chapter one. Graffiti legend

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[104] Miller, 37 (unfortunately, no photograph of Mickey Mouse or his injurious hand gesture is pictured in this source.)

[105] These are the politics of reception and evidence for the postmodern nature of graffiti. Certainly all art is perceived and received differently when it is brought to a new venue, but that graffiti was consciously created on a surface whose sole function was to move into and through different contexts testifies to the inherent postmodern mechanisms of graffiti and the intents of the artists.

[106] Miller, 68

RAMM:ELL:ZEE explains this historical phenomenon in his typical scattered, unregulated manner of speech:

> The 1980’s and 70’s, really when it started, was more a collective result of how people poverishly inhibited by society used their lack of ability to write letters on walls for a simple explanation of themselves – *expotential* for themselves [sic]. Fame. *Name fame*. [italics mine][107]

I italicized RAMM:ELL:ZEE’s pseudo-word “expotential” because, even though it is not an English word (though that is hardly a concern for Zee, as we shall later see), Zee used it to say exactly what it means. “Ex” (out of) and “potential” combine to signify a potential which exists outside of something, in this case, the graffiti writers. Though impossible to know what each piece of art means to each artist, the works that graffiti writers painted on trains meant a great deal to them, perhaps (as Zee suggests) because it provided them with a potential that present life within the politics of abandonment could not.[108] Of course, this potential needed something to manifest in, and due in part to the illegal nature of graffiti and the effects of poverty preventing the artist from providing the host-body, the fame and acclamation for the art shifted onto the name itself, thus vicariously providing the artist with a means of realizing a potential, if outside of himself.[109] The artist thus found an “expotential” in his taken name. Fame. Name fame.

It bears noting at this point, though it may seem a bit of a digression (when this is in fact a very germane moment to make such a comment), that assuming names is a common practice among all participants in hip-hop: MCs, DJs, break dancers, and even producers. As if not evident from every MC and DJ mentioned thus far, stage-names are almost always taken by artists, but the practice has much more depth than simply providing a relatively plain-named person with a catchier moniker for entertainment purposes (so as not to overload the reader with too many extraneous names, I will limit my examples to futuristic artists whom I will be referencing in the next chapter).[110]

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[107] Ahern (note: this quote is taken from an interview with RAMM:ELL:ZEE which is only found on the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Wild Style*, which is the one cited in this paper.)

[108] I do not want to simply gloss over how important the work of graffiti artists was to them. Young men and women (many of Latino or African descent) tempted the New York City police, the unknown caverns of old subway routes, oncoming trains weighing tons upon tons, and the deadly third-rail in order to spray their art onto the sides of trains, knowing full well that the vast majority of people who saw the works would have no idea who made them, nor would such spectators even be able to find out.

[109] It is interesting to note that in the documentary *Style Wars*, this is the sentiment espoused by SKEME who famous said his ambition in writing graffiti was to “destroy all lines” (that is, subway lines) with his name while the wealthy Anglo-American graffiti writer LSD OM started using a pseudonym (he had been using his real name, Chad) to avoid “celebrityism.” (Miller, 64)

Del tha Funkee Homosapien is a well-known West Coast rapper who has released a number of albums under his stage name. In 2000, however, Del collaborated with DJ and producer Dan the Automator to create the *Deltron 3030* album, on which he used the moniker "Deltron Zero." The change of name coincided with a drastic change in style and subject matter on the record, which was a heavily futurist influenced work containing a relatively consistent storyline taking place in outer-space. Obviously, the actions of a person are often closely associated with his name,[111] and it is perhaps partly because of this phenomenon that Del tha Funkee Homosapien chose to use a new name on the *Deltron 3030* album – to start with a "clean slate."

An even more relevant example is that of Kool Keith who boats around a half-dozen aliases. Known as Kool Keith while performing more mainstream-style (if now considered "old school") rap with his first group Ultramagnetic MCs, Keith assumed the name Dr. Octagon in 1996 when he and Dan the Automator released *Dr. Octagonecologyst*. The album (which I will examine later) was a bizarre, sexually perverse, and surreal (all three typical for Keith regardless of what name he uses) record on which Keith developed the new name through chronicling Dr. Octagon's interplanetary terrorizing of his unfortunate patients. Keith abandoned the name (though assumed a few more) until 2006 when he released *The Return of Dr. Octagon* and once again utilized the name Dr. Octagon.

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[110] There are some notable exceptions in hip-hop of people who use their legal names in their work such as Erick Sermon and Kanye West.

[111] One need look no further than the 2008 United States presidential elections where Barack Hussein Obama's middle name was malevolently bandied about by conservative news media in an attempt to associate the person Barack Hussein Obama with the person Saddam Hussein Abd al-Majid al-Tikriti (late leader of Iraq 1979-2003) through their shared name.

Such examples are endless, but suffice it to say that it is very common in hip-hop for artists to take on new names in order to achieve new goals and do new things on a musical level.[112] For graffiti artists, naming has a paradoxical nature in that it simultaneously allows for a potentially great amount of fame and an intentional anonymity. An artist's name becomes a work of art, is used to express what he has no agency to otherwise express, and is transported to millions of people for free. Yet the artist himself is invisible in this process until he finds a way (if he wants to at all) to make his physical voice heard and face seen. It is the name which becomes the subject.

Wild Style

"It's not words, it's not a name anymore.
It's more of a living thing that you have created…"

-Lee Quiñones[113]

The artistry of graffiti writing/painting cannot be appreciated without at least seeing such works in a photography book, if not in person. However for the sake of practicality, I will try to explain a stylistic element known as "Wild Style" and draw from it its postmodern and surrealist tendencies.

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[112] Aliases and naming in hip-hop will be fleshed out and examined as they pertain to hip-hop futurism in chapter four.

[113] Miller, 39

One of the most remarkable aspects of graffiti writing – aside from the often brilliant colors, incredible coordination needed to do it, and ability to create amazing works of art from spray paint on walls, trains, and other rather pedestrian surfaces – is the script in which names and phrases are often written. Just as names become subjects in graffiti, scripts become art in a calligraphic fashion.

Artists constantly innovated script writing within the graffiti movement, but as graffiti culture progressed into the 1980s, certain scripts began moving from an embellished Roman alphabet to a more cryptic, camouflaged writing form.[114] Letters began to slant, bend, explode, and grow appendages with increasing frequency as they proceeded to blend into each other, creating labyrinths of lines and curves obfuscating words.[115] The most popular form of this writing style was called “Wild Style” and featured all of the aforementioned elements with the addition of characteristically brilliant and eclectic colors, spikes or arrows coming off of letters, and three-dimensional effects.[116] The result of Wild Style was the creation of scripts and words usually illegible to the average person and even other graffiti artists who were not skilled in the style.

As personal computers and the near monopolization of letter-shape by software publishers lurked at the gates of society in the early 1980s, ready to explode across the world in popularity, a renaissance of calligraphy was taking place in the world of graffiti. But if graffiti was all about name fame and the transmission of messages to the “outside” world through art, what sense did it make to start writing in Wild Style? Certainly, each artist had his own reasons: personal fulfillment in creating art, wanting to make a political statement against the established authority, or any number of reasons.[117] The rationales for creating works in Wild Style are interesting and important, but most pertinent to this thesis is the result of such practices. The post-apocalyptic Bronx (and other depressed areas of New York) to which I have referred a number of times began producing yet another response to modernity. The concept of the original artist had been overruled by the hip-hop DJ, music as an analog wave had experienced the digital interference of the rapper, and now the very foundation of Western intellectual life – the letter – had been appropriated and broken down by graffiti artists. Let me entertain the most elementary example of postmodern rhetoric I first encountered some years ago. Say you have a large, tall cup made of soft clay, but still hard enough to hold water. Now pry this clay cup open slightly – your cup is now slightly wider and shorter. Continue this process over and over again. Eventually you will find your cup to be stout, wide, and more resembling a bowl. Continue the process even further and your piece of clay will soon become a plate. The question is: at what point did your cup become a bowl and your bowl a plate? How would you determine such a point? The postmodern thinker would say that there is no point – that the clay can be called whatever one wants and its definition will change depending on setting and context. This rudimentary postmodern thinking can easily be applied to graffiti, firstly because the art form rendered the distinctions between names, writing, and visual art useless by making all three interdependent upon each other, and secondly because the actual letters had been so manipulated by the writers that distinguishing between a letter (which is highly utilitarian) and an embellishment (which is mainly aesthetic) became difficult and words became totally contextual. Perhaps a piece of Wild Style graffiti explicitly said something, but it would be equally likely that a woman staring at the work as she approaches a train would mistake it for a mere (if visually stunning) series of squiggles and scratches.

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[114] Miller, 119

[115] Miller, 119

[116] Miller, 77-79

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[117] Miller, 78-79

Messages could now be sent from one graffiti artist to another, passing through potentially millions of lines of sight, without anyone else (save for a relative thimble-full of other graffiti writers) understanding it or even recognizing it as a series of letters. Messages of friendship, antagonism, braggadocio, challenges, or anything else could be put out into the world, but what is most impressive is the fact that a re-appropriation of modernity had been completed within the very pool of people and places designated as the byproduct of a modern synthesis of wealth, transportation, and social/ecological reorganization. The utilitarian trains had begun serving a completely “non-productive” artistic and expressive purpose while the Roman script, being increasingly standardized and codified in style and function with the increased prevalence of word processors and computers, became perverted beyond recognition for the vast majority of those in the mainstream, modern world. A cultural civilization made up of rapping, DJing, and graffiti, which was unintelligible and beyond the intellectual reach of the society which “owned” all of the appropriated equipment used to construct it, existed parallel to normative civilization.[118]

The modes of production in graffiti, especially the art of Wild Style, not only have very postmodern aspects, they are also deeply entrenched in a surrealist aesthetic. Perhaps not the most visible, but still the most salient example of this comes from the practice of naming in graffiti. As RAMM:ELL:ZEE explained earlier, artists created names-as-subjects for an “expotential” for themselves. The dreamt, invented, *extra-corpus* subject (i.e. the name) lives a life full of the potentials not available to the painter writing the name on the sides of trains and on walls – fulfilling the desires of the "poverlishly inhibited" artist. But the more optical surrealism comes from the canvasses most often used in graffiti and the manipulation of the Roman script. One of the most characteristic and special aspects of graffiti is its tradition of doing art where art is not to be done: overpasses, abandoned buildings, trains, and other public edifices. Graffiti, with its often exotic colors and mesmerizing shapes, is injected into the rational, commercial world in which most people live their lives devoid of dreaming.[119] Among the tall financial buildings, transit buses and trains, store fronts and restaurants, and offices of any urban area, there may be an illegible, colorful piece of work incorporating anything from cartoons, guns, people, geometric shapes, and unrecognizable lettering into a piece of art which one may not be able to read, but can certainly detect on some emotional level (whether that be fear, admiration, or confusion.) Graffiti, owing to its projection onto areas typically intended to be sterile by their creators, forcefully confronts society with the dreams of artists.

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[118] Many would add break-dancing to this list, and they would probably be correct in doing so.

I hope that by now I have made the postmodern and surreal natures of graffiti relatively visible to the reader, though I admit that the futurist elements may still remain a bit unclear. Since the adoption of pseudonyms often did not position itself in some future time period, it may be difficult to detect the futuristic aspects of graffiti. However, if one considers what I wrote in chapter two about Paul Gilroy's assertion that dreaming about the future was a critical part of Black culture for, most likely, the bulk of Black history, connections can easily be seen running between this early form of Afrofuturism and graffiti created by both Black and non-Black artists.[120] According to Gilroy, the futurism of jubilee and deliverance espoused by Black slaves was more a tool to provide strength for continued living in a present which, unlike the South Bronx of the post-apocalypsis, most closely resembled a hell.[121] Though living in different contexts, artists in the post-apocalyptic urban areas (first in the South Bronx, later New York City at large, and later the world) appropriated this strategy and created their "expotentials" to reap the benefits they themselves could not. Therefore, delineation between Afrofuturism and graffiti can be seen if one examines the production-aesthetics of both rather than merely the explicit content.[122]

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[119] Or dreaming a dream which was dictated to them, such as the "American dream."

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Hip-hop should not be seen solely as a futuristic cultural movement or art form, nor should any futurism found there within be heralded as the most important or influential aspect of the culture. Futurism is but one lens through which to view hip-hop; however I believe that peering through such a lens provides insight into new understandings of where Afrofuturism is going (or where it has gone) theoretically and how hip-hop may be able to help us consider the future in our current social climates. In the next chapter I wish to examine Afrofuturist occurrences in hip-hop, futuristic hip-hop works (by mainly Black artists) which are quite unlike typical Afrofuturist aesthetics, and how, generally speaking, hip-hop has dealt with futuristic imaginings – what hip-hop futurism looks like.

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[120] To avoid a gross misunderstanding of what I mean by "Black history," I urge the reader to go back to the preface and examine my working definition of "Black" which I employ in this context.

[121] My reasoning for using "hell" over "apocalypse" to describe slavery comes from the way in which damages were wrought in both contexts. While the South Bronx (and other urban areas in the United States) was leveled and left to rot, slavery consisted of an *over*-presence of dominant Whites in the lives of Blacks. Harm was actively inflicted as a primary directive in the plantation context (in order to lead to something else, namely, more crop production or sexual access to slave women) whereas the harm in the post-apocalyptic South Bronx was the fallout from dominant (primarily) Whites who were actively pursuing the reorganization of urban life. In the hell scenario, the Black person is a focus. In the apocalyptic scenario, she is a byproduct.

[122] However I urge that one not take this to mean that graffiti is perfectly in accordance with Afrofuturism. As I will show in the coming two chapters, the wider hip-hop culture disagrees with classic Afrofuturism on a number of fronts.

Chapter 4: Hip-Hop Futurism

"If a cat had kittens in the oven, would you call them muffins?"

-KRS-One

KRS-One's rhetorical question posed above was in reference to his belief that persons of African descent who were born outside of the African continent are still "African" – not generic Americans, not Afro-Europeans, but Africans.[123] Indeed, Pan-Africanism is a core belief for a sizeable percentage of hip-hop artists. However many artists do not express any particular sentiment of solidarity with Africa or Black people as a whole and still others explicitly state that their personal ancestries play no role in the creation of their works. All of these viewpoints and opinions on identity are found within the category of hip-hop artists who also cross-reference as futurists, which creates for the appearance that there is no significant commonality in their interpretations of identity amongst these artists or that their ideas on identity share a common theme.

I argue, however, that despite their differences in how they perceive their individual identities, futuristic hip-hop artists share common traits as concerns *how* they go about constructing their identities. I argue that this commonality comes from the historical intersection of postmodernism, surrealism, hip-hop, and a realization of what Paul Gilroy has called "the black Atlantic" and is central to the concept of what I call "hip-hop futurism." Firstly, I will summarize the ideas of identity-in-the-future held by some of the most well known futurist hip-hop artists. I will then argue that, although their conclusions on identity are very different, their processes and tools of constructing identity all share very similar means. These means will come to signify the most defining characteristics of hip-hop futurism.

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[123] Potter, 149

Afrika Bambaataa

"From a distant solar system many, many galaxies away,

we are the force of another creation. A new musical revelation."

-Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force

Afrika Bambaataa is one of the founders of hip-hop culture and serves excellently to combat any idea that hip-hop was just about disco parties and carefree fun coming out of youth culture in New York. Aside from producing some of the most renowned rap songs in history, Bam (as he is often called) began one of the most important spiritual and social movements in the hip-hop world before he ever stepped into a studio: The Zulu Nation. The Zulu Nation is decidedly future-oriented and concerns itself deeply with encounters with alien life and harkening back to a more pristine past which has been, allegedly, corrupted by White supremacists.

As a youth, Bam was heavily involved in Bronx gang culture; not due to any inclination toward violence, but because being on one's own was unsafe in the South Bronx in the 1960s and 1970s. Bam's gang, the Black Spades, had existed long enough to see the turf wars and feuds among rival cliques exacerbate the effects of poverty and abandonment: social dysfunction, injuries, and premature death. Seeing that gang culture was eating itself alive, Bam became active in forming peace treaties among rivals and creating a higher consciousness among many members to see beyond their concrete prison.[124] Bam's message was decidedly spiritual, and soon he founded the Zulu Nation.

The Zulu Nation is not, contrary to what preconceptions its name may lend, exclusively African-American. Though it acquired its name after Bambaataa saw the popular *Shaka Zulu* movie and television series, the organization is more of an ecumenical, universalist spiritual association which draws much of its philosophy from traditional (or what is perceived as "traditional") African civilization than a Black Power organization.[125] The Zulu Nation's philosophy is founded in its "Fifteen Beliefs of the Universal Zulu Nation" and articulated at length in the "Wisdom and Understanding" of the fifteen beliefs. This creed professes an overall belief in one supreme god (who goes by various names such as God, Jah, Amen Ra, Allah, etc, but who is frequently referenced as "The Source" by the Zulu Nation), in one truth discernable through reading and mathematics, and that history and the holy texts (mainly the Hebrew and Christian Bibles) have been corrupted by believers of White supremacy in order to credit all human achievement to White people.[126]

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[124] Chang, 56-62

Another important aspect to the Zulu Nation's beliefs is the abundance of references to the future, aliens, and extraterrestrial planets. About fourteen-percent of the Zulu Nation's Universal Prayer is dedicated to an appeal to The Source for protection against "Earthly enemies, Subterranean Worlds enemies, Interplanetary enemies, Solar System enemies, Galactic enemies, Star Systems enemies, Dimensional enemies, [and] Universe and Universes enemies."[127] The Zulu Nations holds that "beliefs" were the valid operating system of past generations, and even its own to come extent, but that it (the Nation) are moving into an era of "factology" where previously held erroneous-beliefs are discredited through mathematics and logic and right-beliefs are affirmed through the same process.[128] The logic of the future will be based on empirical evidence of both the seen and “the unseen.” The “seen” refers to events and objects which can be witnessed by sight, hearing, or touch. Therefore, if someone from outside the Zulu Nation approaches it with evidence of the existence of something which the Nation has not recognized in scripture, the Nation will accept that person’s revelation as truth. If the thing brought forward is of the “unseen” (such as wind or history), it is likely that it will be subjected to a mathematical test to prove its existence.[129]

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[125] David Topp, "Uptown Throwdown" in *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* edited by Murray Foreman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004) (233-245), 233-234

[126] "The Wisdom and Understanding of the Fifteen Beliefs of the Universal Zulu Nation" http://www.zulunation.com/beliefs.html (accessed 28 March 2009) (Http://www.zulunation.com is the official website of the Zulu Nation) (No pagination provided.)

[127] "The Universal Prayer of the Universal Zulu Nation of this Planet So Called Earth" http://www.zulunation.com/zuluprayer.html (accessed 28 March 2009) (No pagination provided.)

The Zulu Nation is but one in a series of predominantly Black hip-hop cultural organizations which has been influenced by beliefs very much related to the Nation of Islam and the Nation of Gods and Earths (NGE) (often called “The Five-Percent Nation.”) The NGE was founded by a man named Clarence 13X who broke away from the Nation of Islam in the 1960s after disputes over group politics and teachings.[130] Clarence founded the NGE and taught that man was God, that all men were manifestations of God, and that women were Earths (since God used Earth to create life.)[131] The NGE also created the infamous “Supreme Mathematics” – a religious numerology akin to that found in certain branches of Sufism whereby a meaning is assigned to each of the Arabic numerals from zero to nine. The Supreme Mathematics operates according to mathematical laws (one plus eight still equals nine), however the numbers have an intrinsic meaning obviously contrary to standard mathematics. RZA (pronounced “rizz-ah”) of hip-hop group Wu-Tang Clan is one of the most vocal supporters of the Supreme Mathematics, though he is certainly not the only hip-hop artist in this category. For RZA, conducting scientifically accurate mathematical equations within the definitional framework of the Supreme Mathematics has helped him become a strong influence on hip-hop and a more enlightened spirit.[132] His very name "RZA" is taken from a relative of the Supreme Mathematics called the "Supreme Alphabet," which operates by a similar set of rules where letters of the Roman alphabet have intrinsic meanings.[133]

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[128] “Fifteen Beliefs”
[129] “Fifteen Beliefs”
[130] Jane I Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 102
[131] Smith, 102-103

For the Zulu Nation, then, the future is not to be a place of beliefs as it is professed to be in the traditions of the Abrahamic or East Asian faiths. There does not need to be a leap of faith or an acceptance of that which man cannot understand, because mathematics, the alphabet, and science will provide "rational" means by which to solve all universal queries that may lie ahead. The professing of a method of social development through "rationalism" might seem to be in stark contradiction to what I have said earlier regarding massive disillusionment with modernity and "progress" in the African diaspora. Quite the opposite, the emphasis on mathematics and science espoused by the Zulu Nation represents a modernity for sure, but one which is not a result of a Hegelian synthesis of competing modern theories thus far. More simply, Zulu Nation modernity does not assume to be the valid inheritor of modernity, but positions itself as outside of the progress-hermeneutics superstructure which has hitherto been the breeding ground for all modernities hitherto. While "Zulu modernity" and more traditional Western modernity both proclaim the ability to decipher the Newtonian physical world with the Cartesian mind,[134] Zulu modernity essentially proclaims the ability to liberate *from* the material world rather than *through* the material world. Its means are their own ends in the sense that the comprehending of mathematics and the Fifteen Beliefs is the goal of Zulu members in contrast to Abrahamic religions and Western modernity.[135]

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[132] The RZA and Chris Norris, *The Wu-Tang Manual* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 41-43, 48-50

[133] The RZA, 4-5, 46-47 – RZA's name in particular deciphers as "R" for ruler or rule, "Z" for Zig-Zag-Zig, and "A" for Allah ("Zig-Zag-Zig is shorthand for traversing knowledge to wisdom to understanding in NGE numerology and alphabetology, whereas "Allah" refers to the true name of the original man; the Asiatic Blackman: arm-leg-leg-arm-head.)

The Zulu Nation's and Afrika Bambaataa's engagement with alien life and alien planets deserves significant attention as well. Mark Dery, the foundational thinker in Afrofuturist discourse, has said that "African-Americans are, in a very real sense, the descendants of alien abductees," referencing the people-stealing which took place during the trans-Atlantic slave trade.[136] "The Wisdom and Understanding of the Fifteen Beliefs of the Universal Zulu Nation" explicitly dictates that "if someday we do meet Aliens from another planet, then the whole Universe must be ruled with equal justice for all. Peace."[137] The insistence repeated throughout Zulu Nation texts that racism and other forms of discrimination be renounced even regarding life forms we have not yet encountered seems to represent a mindset which developed from an "alien people" (Africans) who were not afforded such rights when they arrived on someone else's mother planet (Europe and the New World.) The Zulu Nation abandonment of Western ideas of alien encounter fits a theoretical framework articulated by Fredrick Douglas who objected to Hegel's assertion that in the mater-slave narrative, the slave eventually becomes enlightened to the master's way of thinking and accepts this new paradigm over death. Douglass, buttressed by the history of jubilee in slave societies, argued that the slave prefers death to adaptation into a philosophical framework which led to his own enslavement.[138] Though no longer subject to immediate death as punishment for insolence, the Zulu Nation has preferred to let die the modern idea of betterment through superiority over others by both respecting alien life forms which are not even known and by respecting phenomena of the seen and unseen which are brought to them from outside.

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[134] Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 67 – Grenz does not reference the Zulu Nation, only Western modernity at large, however his summarization of how the human interacts logically with the world ("The modern world turned out to be Newton's mechanistic universe populated by Descartes's autonomous, rational substance") is the most succinct I have ever read.

[135] Christianity (as an example of an Abrahamic faith) teaches that prayer and subordination to the God Christ Jesus will lead to one's arrival at a utopian place called "heaven." Western modernity has historically resulted in processes of progressing which are often not emancipatory, nor good for certain groups (historically of the darker races), but will theoretically and eventually lead to a world of balance and peace.

[136] McLeod, 341

[137] "Fifteen Beliefs", belief #12

Though I have spent the great bulk of my treatment of Afrika Bambaataa on his socio-spiritual creation, I hope I have not led one to believe that his music is a mere afterthought. Afrika Bambaataa is a pioneer of rap music, and although one might not have guessed it, the genre which has produced gangsta rap and top forty hits has its roots in his futuristic styles. Arguably his most famous song, "Planet Rock" was released in 1982 and features synthesized music taken from German techno group Kraftwerk. In the song, Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force rap about an imaginary planet located on earth where people live in harmony and in a persistent state of celebration of humanity. One year later Bambaataa released "Renegades of Funk" and "Looking for the Perfect Beat" – both of which had similar synthesized instrumentation and laser-like sound effects. "Renegades of Funk" explained that the group saw itself as a successor not of a geographic, racial, ethnic, or national group, but of a philosophical group of social renegades such as "Chief Sitting Bull, Tom Paine, Dr. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X."[139] Again, one can see Bambaataa's fixation of jubilant modes of identification. He does not profess a linear heritage (such as being German, which has some proud progressive moments, but also some rather dark periods), but rather an ecumenical ancestry encompassing those who refused to obey the marching orders of progress which included their own subordination and/or obliteration. “Looking for the Perfect Beat” proclaims that Afrika Bambaataa possesses the “perfect beat.” But “beat” in this song is often referenced as more than just a music tool; it also has a spiritual meaning for the individual. “Keep looking for the perfect beat, and it will help you reach your peak. Keep dancing to our perfect beat, and it will help you reach *your* peak, [emphasis mine]” says the Soul Sonic Force. I italicize “your” because I think it is relevant that Bambaataa chose not to use “*the* peak.” The peak is within *you*; it is not something to which you must go.

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[138] Gilroy "The Black Atlantic", 63

[139] Bambaataa "Renegades of Funk" released as a single, 1983

The importance of Afrika Bambaataa to hip-hop cannot be overstated. I have spent a fair amount of time on him because he, the Zulu Nation, and the Nation of Gods and Earths have influenced more hip-hop artists than I can properly treat in this thesis. From the Wu-Tang Clan to A Tribe Called Quest, the Zulu Nation has made mathematics and futurism (and implicitly, Afrofuturist elements) part of the lives of numerous hip-hop stars. MC Guru of rap duo Gang Starr testifies to the power of Zulu and Five-Percent wisdom:

> “Let’s go to the fullest capacity. I got tenacity, because I have to be the brother who must live and give with much insight. Foresight to ignite, excite and delight. And you might gain from it, or feel pain from it. Because I’m ultimate, and I’m about to let off. Knowledge. Wisdom. Understanding.”[140]

X-Clan

“Voo-doo! They thumpin’ to my magic.
Too Black, too strong, I sing songs of mathematics.”

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[140] Gang Starr “Words I Manifest (Remix)” on album *Full Clip: A Decade of Gang Starr*, 1999

-X-Clan

X-Clan is perhaps the most explicitly pro-Black, Afrocentric hip-hop group of all time. It also makes no secret of its futuristic gaze and belief in an explicitly Black future based on the teachings of ancient African civilizations. However the term "African" in the context of hip-hop (and indeed in plenty of other contexts) has a unique and less literal meaning than in does in modern history and anthropology. Firm believers in the Supreme Mathematics, a pristine pre-European African past, and outer-space as a place closer to us than we think, X-Clan represent one of the most extreme and clear examples of what is sometimes called "Afro-modernity" in hip-hop; similar to Afrika Bambaataa.[141] I will treat X-Clan with relative brevity, but the theories and practices which are manifested in them should not be ignored, as they will be important in the final chapter of this writing.

X-Clan is more of a hip-hop collective than it is a traditional "group." Members of X-Clan have released their own albums and done various side projects, but have remained true to the central messages of the group.[142] The main MC of the group is Brother J, and it is he who most frequently articulates X-Clan's philosophy and futurism.[143] Brother J states that the members of X-Clan are vanguards of a lost pre-European African way of life based on community, humanism, and traditional African cultures. “Africa,” however, does not refer strictly to the geographic continent of to any one particular group of people living there within. Africa is idealized to a perfect state, its people credited with all worthy inventions (including religion, mathematics, science, and the arts), and its history revised to portray a people (note the singularity) living in perfect harmony. “African culture” is the originator and sole propagator of justice, truth, knowledge, wisdom, and right-living. This school of thought it not unheard of and has been advanced by groups sometimes referred to as “Africologist” – that is, a group which eclipses what most historians agree is nuanced, realist African history with an Eden-like portrayal of Africa and its people.[144] Rapper KRS-One (who made the “muffin” comment at the beginning of this chapter) is another such subscriber to the immaculate African past, though he more eloquently explains his stance on the issue. KRS knows that Africa had slavery, conflict, disease, and prejudice before European contact, but he is not talking about the literal Africa of the eastern hemisphere. KRS is using the term “Africa” as “an act of political imagination” to articulate his desires for the present, much in the same way the authors of the Bible invented a utopian past to give people living in the very imperfect present a lighthouse toward which their lives should be directed.[145]

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[141] For further reading on "Afro-modernity," see Alexander G. Weheliye, "I Am I Be: The Subject of Sonic Afro-modernity" (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003)

[142] This practice is relatively common in hip-hop with collectives such as Quannum (formerly Soul Sides), Native Tongue, and Cash Money being alternate examples. Wu-Tang Clan, of which the aforementioned follower of Supreme Mathematics RZA is a member, is yet another instance of a hip-hop collective. Though Wu-Tang Clan has released albums as a singular group, its members (most famously RZA, GZA, Ghost Face Killer, and the late Old Dirty Bastard) have released their own works with many concurring messages and themes.

[143] I will very much be generalizing X-Clan's messages in my treatment of its works. In almost any X-Clan song, and at almost any point in that song, messages of Afro-centrism, Black Power, Black pride, proselytizing, of a Black future can be heard, so choosing individual quotes is largely unnecessary. See the "discography" of this thesis for references to X-Clan materials.

X-Clan thus sees itself as the continuation of this perfect African lineage, but also as the frontiersmen for the lineage as it barrels into the future: “From pyramids, to the mosque, to the tee-pee my bloodline is deep seed. And deep rooted, I stay black booted. Pimp struttin’ ‘cross the globe for intelligent recruitments.”[146] Brother J believes that his traditional African past will prevail after the modern world consumes itself, which is why

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[144] Robin D. G. Kelley uses this term as he portrays such academics in a farcical manner. See the epilogue to his book *Yo Mama’s Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998)

[145] Potter, 149

[146] X-Clan “Space People” on the album *Return from Mecca,* 2007

"people get nervous when I speak upon matters like cosmological schemes. The universe has a fixin' for all our dreams."[147] And if anyone doubts that the burning flame of the flawless African past will triumph in the future, X-Clan responds: "Booya-ka! Booya-ka! From East Coast to West. Rebels vibe with the spirit of immortals – we never fear death."[148]

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Afrika Bambaataa, together with X-Clan and a smattering of other hip-hop artists, represent a school of hip-hop futurists who borrow heavily from Afrofuturism: the jubilee, the disdain for modernity, the "other stories to tell," the engagement of Blacks with technology and cybernetics (via the modes of production in hip-hop.) What they do not represent, however, is any definitive voice in what the future looks like in rap music or hip-hop culture at large. There are other schools of thought which run contrary (though not always totally contrary) to Afrofuturist values which seem to have been passed on to futuristic hip-hop by funk and jazz. These voices ruin theoretical continuity and propose ideas which many in Black Studies would be very uncomfortable with. However, they exist. It is time to turn to them and see what they do to the conceptualizations about futuristic hip-hop and Afrofuturism we have thus far established.

RAMM:ELL:ZEE

"You call me an Afro Futurist....I am of the Gothics."

-RAMM:ELL:ZEE

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[147] X-Clan "Space People"

[148] X-Clan "Atonement" on the album *Return From Mecca,* 2007

If Afrika Bambaataa is the patriarch of the hip-hop school of thought which possesses an inclination toward Black pride, some belief in an absolute truth (either through spiritualism or mathematics), and a decidedly modern (if "Afro-modern") and humanitarian philosophy, RAMM:ELL:ZEE represents the founder of a school in staunch opposition.[149] RAMM:ELL:ZEE gained notoriety in New York as a top graffiti artist on the subway circuit and somewhat as a rapper through his single "Beat Bop" and his on-stage appearance in the canonical hip-hop film "Wild Style." Little is known of his personal life, but his paintings, sculptures, recordings, and philosophical writings have made him one of the most intriguing personalities in hip-hop as well as an important player in my conceptualizing of hip-hop futurism.

RAMM:ELL:ZEE began his artistic career as a highly talented graffiti artist in New York City. He embraced the aforementioned "Wild Style" technique of graffiti writing and, like many of his contemporaries, visited the subway trains at night to create intricate murals on their sides. For Zee however, this artistic endeavor, which certainly had a very important and personal meaning for many writers, evolved into an obsession.

Not content with creating new art works in the Wild Style fashion, RAMM:ELL:ZEE created what he considers to be a further evolved style known as "Ikonoklast Panzerism."[150] This style, which was similar in aesthetic to Wild Style, introduced a motif of armament and militarism to the lettering, often substituting the simple arrows and spikes added to letters for cannons, guns, lasers, other weapons, and vehicles similar to race cars or jet skis.[151] For reasons unknown (at least by me and every source on the matter that I could find), Zee developed a firm belief that letters (in particular the Roman alphabet) and languages were more than simply written and spoken means of communication; rather, the letters were independent actors with the ability to, in a sense, come to life, while languages were a result of a disease inherent to the human species.[152] Zee believed that, when he was painting letters onto the sides of trains, he was arming these letters and providing them with mobilization which they would one day use to battle in the material world. Letters were created by languages, which Zee insists were invented for malicious (or at least militaristic) purposes, but required an equation to prepare them for their inevitable combative mission – this equation was algebraic and expresses as RAMM:ELL:ZEE.[153]

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[149] Occasionally, the capital "E" letters in RAMM:ELL:ZEE are replaced with the Greek letter Sigma.

[150] The word "Ikonoklast" refers quite plainly to the word "iconoclast," with the "c" letters replaced with "k" so as to engage in actual iconoclasm in the very word itself. "Panzerism" comes from the word "panzer" originally found in German which means "armor," but which more contemporarily describes German battle tanks. What these two non-words mean when placed side by side will become clearer in coming paragraphs.

The man RAMM:ELL:ZEE (which is his legal name) thus assumed this role and title and began the process of what he calls "weapon-slaving" letters through his art onto trains, which were considered important because they would provide the transportation for his armed letters.[154] He does not, unlike Afrika Bambaataa or X-Clan, assume himself to be on any morally, ethically, or religiously “right” path or assuming any such function. He is but a custodian of a process which will lead to what he considers an inevitable destruction of all human life after our inherent disease (manifested in language) consumes us. His role is to prepare these letters to destroy not only each other, but everything humanity has created through lingual and written communication (which is, I dare say by definition, everything humanity has created at large) by arming them with weapons.[155] In other words, he will apply “Panzerism” to our icons for the purpose of performing iconoclasm – “Ikonoklast Panzerism.”

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[151] Miller, 86 – For detailed illustrations of these letters, visit http://www.gothicfuturism.com (the official website of RAMM:ELL:ZEE) (active as of 29 March 2009)

[152] RAMM:ELL:ZEE, "Ionic Treatise Gothic Futurism Assassin Knowledges of the Remanipulated Square Point's One to 720° to 1440°" (2003). This is RAMM:ELL:ZEE's *magnum opus* as far as non-artistic writing is concerned and can only readily be found in its entirety on his website: http://www.gothicfuturism.com/rammellzee/01.html (active as of 29 March 2009)

[153] RAMM:ELL:ZEE, "Ionic Treatise"
If my description of Zee or any of his ideas seems excessively bizarre and illogical, it is only because Zee has rarely produced anything which can be easily understood by anyone but himself. To understand even one paragraph of his formal writing necessitates an incredible amount of research and deciphering. For example, Zee writes ""A So Called' element of graffiti is base-derived from Gothic text subconsciously. The Futurism is PANZERISM-design a subconscious development. WILD STYLE: ELEMENT TECHNIQUES, CLASSIFIED." What Zee is asserting in this madness is his belief that the manipulation of letter scripts commonly found in graffiti has roots in the traditions of Gothic Catholic monks who created elaborate script styles when transcribing the Christian Bible. This adoption of Gothic traditions by New York youth was "subconscious" because the letters were the ones truly acting; the writers being mere agents for the militant letters. The future of graffiti was (and is) Panzerism, or the arming of letters with armor and weapons much like a tank. Wild Style thus segues into this Panzerism, but the elemental techniques which are used to "panzer" such letters are classified. This brief pair of sentences, like dozens upon dozens of similar phrases and statements by Zee, took me months of daily research into European history, papal lineage, the histories of calendars, and many other obscure routes of study to decipher. Once one understands some of what Zee is saying, however, it is eventually easier to comprehend more complex writings (such as his description of the letter "c": "Structure knowledge incomplete O, 60 (point-point+) missing from cipher=C, representing third letter. Since O is broken, C cancels out itself because its outline does, not go around and come around. In this formation XC equals finance.")

Zee’s ideas about language, though often couched in his typical dizzyingly scattered and *prima facie non sequitur* ridden style, did not develop in a vacuum. Again, graffiti-history expert Ivor Miller writes about the tandem relationship between the formalization of language and the subjugation of humans. He references the case of Antonio de Nebrija who proposed a formal grammar to Queen Isabella of Spain in 1492 in order to better facilitate the colonizing of the New World. Upon Christopher Columbus’ landing in the West Indies, Nebrija’s grammar took root and soon developed into standard Spanish.[156] Famed anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss buttressed this point when he stated quite frankly that “The primary function of writing, as a means of communication, is to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings.”[157] Whether or not he was familiar with Lévi-Strauss' work when he told me in 2008 that "The formula for any language, slanguage,[158] and dialect is for war to conquer, enslave, and control.....and most importantly....to police. And last, but not sure, to sieze" [sic], RAMM:ELL:ZEE finds himself an heir to those who believe language to be a tool of enslavement.[159]

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[154] Ahern

[155] Galli and RAMM:ELL:ZEE #1 and RAMM:ELL:ZEE, correspondence with Chuck Galli, cpnducted via email, questions sent to RAMM:ELL:ZEE on 20 October 2008, response received on 27 October 2008 (From henceforth referred to as “Galli and RAMM:ELL:ZEE #2.”) Entire interview appears in appendix II for the first time as a public document. See also RAMM:ELL:ZEE “Ionic Treatise.”

[156] Miller, 74

[157] Miller, 86

Another peculiar aspect of RAMM:ELL:ZEE is his tendency to speak in very definite, specific terms about the future in regards to Ikonoklast Panzerism and the fate of humanity. This may be partially explained by his ideological basis in factually accurate, mainly European history. Preferring to draw inspiration for himself and an explanation of himself from Gothic monks rather than from a theoretical people or culture (e.g., the "African" societies of X-Clan and the Zulu Nation), Zee grounds his history in papal declarations, medieval publications, and other historically supported occurrences. In such, the futurism he espouses is peppered with time-sensitive sagacity and proselytizing, such as his prediction that money will cease to exist in AD 2400[160] or that in less than two-hundred years there may be four more letters added to the alphabet.[161]

RAMM:ELL:ZEE also takes a fairly consistent approach to Black identity: he says it has almost no relevance. Zee (who, as I previously mentioned, is of Italian, Native-American, and African-American descent) somewhat identifies as Black, however he seems to do so only in the sense that he acknowledges that his skin color has some meaning for other people. I asked Zee if he thought there was anything in "the Black experience" which instilled in Black people any unique or special tools in regards to futuristic thinking, to which he responded: "No. Where do us as a people get off thinking that we, because we are the oldest of people, have dominated anyone's belief that we are the dominants or dominators of the Hueman species [sic]? And why do you care?"[162] RAMM:ELL:ZEE, much to the disappointment of many Black Studies academics I am sure, roundly objects to being called an Afrofuturist and denies that Afrofuturism exists. Zee is "of the Gothics," and it is to this group of Europeans that this heralded exemplar of Afrofuturism traces his lineage – "Black as a culture has nothing to do with it."

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[158] Zee considers only languages for which alphabets were created (by his standards, Latin, Chinese, Arabic, and a few others) to be valid "languages." All others he considers "slanguages" since they misuse the letters of a valid language (as in the Roman script being superimposed over English pronunciation.) (RAMM:ELL:ZEE, "Ionic Treatise")

[159] Galli and RAMM:ELL:ZEE #1

[160] RAMM:ELL:ZEE, "Do We Have to Show a Resume?" on the album *Bi-Conicals of the RAMMELLZEE* (2004)

[161] Galli and RAMM:ELL:ZEE #2

How then is one to examine RAMM:ELL:ZEE, who is identified by Mark Dery (the originator of the term "Afrofuturism") as an Afrofuturist, and his thoughts on the future? Harkening back to my discussion of Ishmael Reed and his very valid complaints about being essentialized as a Black writer, I would contend that if the term "Afrofuturism" is (in this case) very broadly defined to simply encompass any engagement of Black people with technology, then there is a compelling reason to include Zee into this canon. For all the bemoaning by race critics against racial essentialism, the face remains that race in the United States (and areas which have been influenced by American raciology) is an essentialist construct.[163] Though Zee denies that his African heritage has any bearing on his futurism (which, incidentally, he calls "Gothic Futurism"), it is important to include him into Afrofuturist considerations. Afrofuturism should thus be considered a cultural phenomenon in which Zee is counted as a relevant point, but the term should *not* be used as an adjective to describe his works.[164] To include the works of RAMM:ELL:ZEE in some massive bibliography of Afrofuturism is harmless enough, but calling his creations Afrofuturist gives the impression that there is some shared motif or values system between his work and that of artists such as Sun Ra, George Clinton, George Schuyler (author of *Black No More*), Afrika Bambaataa, and Ralph Ellison.[165]

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[162] Galli and RAMM:ELL:ZEE #1

[163] I believe that this is largely true in mainstream America even with the introduction of greater numbers of Latinos. Despite being oft-identified as a "mestizo" people from countries where racial lines are more fluid, I think that the US racial framework has withstood their influx and retained its essentialist, hypodescendant nature, creating a veritable "one-drop rule" for Latinos. (Take New Mexico governor Bill Richardson, who, in his 2008 bid for the US presidency, created news as his possibly becoming the first Hispanic president, despite the fact that Richardson is three-quarters European and one-quarter Mexican – which could be of any percentage European.)

Thus in considerations of Afrofuturism, it would be wise to include some study of RAMM:ELL:ZEE; however there remains a very compelling question which may supercede this suggestion. That is, is Afrofuturism the most effective canon/genre in which to read the works of Zee? I would say no – that less time is wasted trying to connect relatively disparate elements between Zee's work and Afrofuturism if one elects to see him as part of a Euro-Arabic calligraphic tradition or even as a religious leader. Indeed, critics of cultural phenomena which spring from racial minority communities may be lured into overly focusing on race and/or ethnicity as the central (or at least prime) pivot of a movement, practice, or genre from which all other elements draw their meanings. RAMM:ELL:ZEE is but one example of a "Black" (according to people other than him) artist who believes, much like Ishmael Reed, that in many cases the deference to "Black" as an aesthetic identifier is either opportunistic or instinctive or both. Other Black futuristic hip-hop artists exist who should not be considered post-racial, but who should be viewed primarily for other personal and artistic elements other than race.

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[164] Consider the difference between placing a copy of *Mein Kampf* in the Jewish Studies section of a university library and calling the same book a "Jewish" political writing. Categorically, *Mein Kampf* is relevant to the study of Jewry, but aesthetically I do not suspect many Jews (or non-Jews) would consider it an inherently "Jewish" work.

[165] I am sure that some would contend that there are in fact numerous, subtle similarities between Zee and the latter-mentioned artists. I simply disagree that the similarities would be very abundant.

Dr. Octagon

"Dr. Octagon, paramedic focus on the east.

For priests my anesthetics prescribe a certain fertilizer."

-Dr. Octagon

Dr. Octagon is a man also known as Kool Keith whom I briefly examined in chapter three in my writings on aliases and multiple naming in hip-hop. At the risk, again, or making this person sound too bizarre for serious academic inquiry, I think it is important to explore exactly who Dr. Octagon is and what his futurism looks like in order to better understand the racial freedom (that is, not freedom of races, but freedom from races) which seems to inform certain hip-hop artists.[166]

Much like RAMM:ELL:ZEE who will inevitably help usher in the destruction of all humanity, Dr. Octagon is a malicious futurist, though his motivations are less informed by a sense of obligation to fulfill a role as by a personal desire to extract pleasure for himself. Dr. Octagon's first album was entitled *Dr. Octagonecologyst* (released in 1996) and chronicled the deeds and internal thoughts of a sadistic, perverse, juvenile gynecologist from Jupiter in the year 3000. The central theme of the album is Dr. Octagon's victimizing of his patients, rap opponents, and common pedestrians through brutally unsound medical procedures, general cruelty, usage of futuristic (sometimes comical) weaponry, and skills as a rapper. In the song "I'm Destructive," Dr. Octagon asks:

> What would you do, if I hit your face with dog doo-doo? Smear poo-poo flies on your forehead. Spit in your salad, vomit on your brother's breakfast. Take your ass outside, burn your mother's house. Bring pet

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[166] Though Dr. Octagon and Kool Keith are the same physical human, I shall treat Dr. Octagon as his own subject since, as we have established in the previous chapter, names are often subjects in hip-hop – not merely titles given to preexisting subjects.

> mice, and scare your sister with my gray mouse. Then drop him under the bed, and leave him there dead. Take out your parakeet, with scissors, clip his head. Then get the charcoal, whassup, burn your dog's legs. Walk by the barbershop, and hit the glass with eggs.[167]

This juvenile tormenting characterizes much of Dr. Octagon’s activity in relation to other people in the future. Some people fall under his regency as a doctor and experience similarly grotesque, though medically oriented, treatment:

> I gotta cut off your ear, first behind your neck. Rip out your stomach, and open rectums to dissect. Shine the light inside, roaches crawling in your throat. I don’t have tools, my hammer’s gone, my drill is broke… Some primitive screws, and my, yes, and perhaps. A little sprinkle of chlorox in their vocal box. Some Pepto Bismol, Pepsi Cola, pack of Pop Rocks. [168]

These two citations provide a general idea of Dr. Octagon’s rapping style and attitude regarding other people (whom he clearly sees as vulnerable to him.) However it is Dr. Octagon’s explicit treatment of the future and technology which best illustrates his tendencies toward surrealism – an important part of his futurism. If we recall surrealism’s role in the modes of production of hip-hop as a means to explore new possibilities through “disinterested play,” we can see Dr. Octagon’s futurist work as the extraction of surrealism from the mere modes of production in hip-hop into an aural manifestation. Dr. Octagon (and even more so the guest artist Sir Menelik, who appears twice on *Dr. Octagonecologyst*) employ technological and scientific terms repeatedly, though not in a decidedly workable, rational order. Technological and scientific terminology is juxtaposed in verse to convey, in Dr. Octagon’s case, a sense of technological understanding and the possibility that one may be vulnerable to Dr. Octagon’s violence. Both Dr. Octagon and Sir Menelik provide ample examples of this usage of surrealism:

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[167] Dr. Octagon, “I’m Destructive” on the album *Dr. Octagonecologyst*, 1996
[168] Dr. Octagon, “Waiting List” on the album *Dr. Octagonecologyst,* 1996

> With power meters and heaters gauge anti-freeze. Octagon oxygen aluminum intoxicants… Space Ranger, contact tubes, and synthetics. I program one and go to Earth through the fax machine. My number's seven-oh-nine-seven-five-five-six-E-L-three, computer file: nine-three. (Dr. Octagon)[169]

> Bio-production is greatly increased, magnetic fields. Velocity of projectiles, electro-liquid experiments Theoretical observances and critical procedures, cool to seventy-seven Kelvins, by submerging, steel cylinders. Secure capacitated it in the cryogenic containing the crude samples. One millimeter, in diameter since the last explosion, December 3rd, 1992. Reinforce mixing copper nickel-beryllium oxide. Concentric layers, proportional carbon density of the radius. Undisturbed existence if it does produce contradictory statements or quantum, wave functions, mechanic mind out of matter. This behavior is accompanied by conscious experience. Remains astral, flexing as ever. Ask Copernicus about pushing limits. (Sir Menelik)[170]

Concerning one's vulnerability to Dr. Octagon's technological violence:

> More ways to blow blood cells in your face. React with four bombs and six fire missiles. Armed with seven rounds of space doo-doo pistols… I got cosmophonic, pressed a button, changed my face. You recognized, so what? I turned invisible. Made myself clear, reappeared to you visual. Disappear again, zapped like an android… My seven X-L is not yet invented.[171]

What is equally interesting and important to this particular discussion of futurism is Kool Keith's decision to create Dr. Octagon for his futuristic endeavor rather than retain a singular identity in both the present and future as RAMM:ELL:ZEE, the members of X-Clan, and Afrika Bambaataa do. The assuming of new names allows an artist to create a piece of work which will less likely be read within the context of the entirety of his past works. For instance, if Kool Keith had released *Dr. Octagonecologyst* under the name Kool Keith, it may have been seen as an attempt to overhaul what is essentially the Kool Keith "brand." However by having Dr. Octagon release the album, it can be better seen in its own, unique environment rather than that of Kool Keith. Fittingly, Kool Keith did not implement the Dr. Octagon name again until a decade later in 2006 when the album *The Return of Dr. Octagon* was released (excluding the use of Dr. Octagon's name in 1999 on the Dr. Dooom album *First Come, First Served* where

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[169] Dr. Octagon, "Earth People" on the album *Dr. Octagonecologyst*, 1996
[170] Dr. Octagon, "No Awareness" on the album *Dr. Octagonecologyst*, 1996
[171] Dr. Octagon, "Earth People"

Dr. Dooom kills Dr. Octagon.)[172] Dr. Octagon explicitly addresses the intentional abandonment of Kool Keith in the song “Technical Difficulties”:

> As Dr. Octagon, walkin’ through a polygon. My first impression was to give patients a lesson. Who’s the best to put me to the test? I’ll battle Ultramagnetic, my own self as well… A&Rs will go crazy trying to find someone to duplicate Dr. Octagon.[173]

In case it has been forgotten, “Ultramagnetic” is a reference to Kool Keith’s original hip-hop group Ultramagnetic MCs. What we then find is that Dr. Octagon, in his quest to “give patients a lesson” as to who he is, battles himself from a previous time and dimension, presumably so as to distinguish Dr. Octagon. Following, the A&Rs (Artist and Repertoire executives from record companies in charge of discovering and developing new talent) will “go crazy” attempting to find someone comparable to Dr. Octagon primarily because of his musical skills, but also because Dr. Octagon’s very identity is fluid and he is known to disappear (as stated above by Dr. Octagon himself.)

What must be considered for the purposes of this examination is, of course, the race of Dr. Octagon. He is, by his own admission, a Black man, though much like RAMM:ELL:ZEE (who acknowledges his visual “race,” but does not employ it for any artistic purpose) he largely places it aside on both albums. Dr. Octagon most explicitly states his race on the *Dr. Octagonecologyst* track “Waiting List” where he says “You are the patient and I, your Black doctor,” however this racial reference is one of only a handful which appear on the album (while the sequel contains almost none.) Dr. Octagon’s future is extremely individualistic, does not contain any semblance of a jubilee or a utopia, and does not seek to implement any sort of “Black” or “African” (even in the revisionist sense of the word) aesthetic on morality or life. Dr. Octagon appears to have abandoned race rather than gotten past it, resulting in a future where race may still be a signifying factor, but not a unifying (or dividing) force. This sentiment is not unusual in hip-hop and has been echoed by others including the White rapper Mike D who claims "not to understand 'white' cultural codes, even though he himself is 'white.'"[174]

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[172] Dr. Dooom is also the same physical person as Kool Keith.

[173] Dr. Octagon, “Technical Difficulties” on the album *Dr. Octagonecologyst,* 1996

Free of the burden of incorporating a shared racial meaning or history into his future, Dr. Octagon, like RAMM:ELL:ZEE, constructs a future which seems to be more tailored to his individuality. Also, by largely disassociating himself from Blackness, Dr. Octagon can engage in "disinterested play" without as much worry of wrongly associating such things with his racial group as a whole (and one could imagine what sorts of implications a criminal, juvenile, perverted sex maniac would have if he were to blatantly trumpet himself as a Black futurist representative.) The extra-modernity of Dr. Octagon is probably his most relevant feature and most important tool for surrealist thinking.

It may appear that the Afrika Bambaataa school of futurism and the RAMM:ELL:ZEE school (if we were to improperly create such a binary) are such polar opposites that little can exist between their magnetic pulls without being torn into stylistic and intellectual tatters. This is not the case, however, and for a final example of futurist hip-hop, I shall turn to a man who, in many ways, lives in both the world of Bambaataa and the world of Dr. Octagon simultaneously.

Deltron Zero

"Yo it's three-thousand thirty. I want ya'll
to meet Deltron Zero… and Automator."

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[174] Potter, 139

-Deltron Zero

Deltron Zero is the futurist alias used by the rapper more commonly known as Del tha Funkee Homosapien – a West Coast rapper known for his positive social messages, witty rhymes, and objections to the hypersexualization of women and materialism prevalent in mainstream hip-hop. Though he has a number of variants on his name, Del does not usually use them as independent aliases, but simply as creative nicknames. Deltron Zero is his one of his major exceptions.

In 2000 Del teamed up with *Dr. Octagonecologyst* producer Dan the Automator to create a futuristic album (almost a rap-opera) entitled *Deltron 3030*.[175] While Dan the Automator kept his working name on the album, Del tha Funkee Homosapien elected to create the Deltron Zero character, who would take the message of earthly Del to the outer reaches of the futuristic galaxy. I have two reasons for including Deltron as the final example in my treatment of futurist hip-hop works: firstly because Deltron made his debut after Afrika Bambaataa, RAMM:ELL:ZEE, X-Clan, and Dr. Octagon, and secondly because I find his message to be somewhat of a hybrid of the Afrocentric/Afrofuturist informed artists and the non-Afrocentric artists we have seen (though much of Deltron's style and message resembles neither group.)

Regarding the Afrocentrists, Deltron wages an overt war against what he sees as the hidden, though always historically central, motivation of modernity, which is to create as much monopolized wealth as possible and subjugate humanity to labor. Unlike a good lot of dystopian science-fiction, nothing has gone awry in Deltron's hellish future:

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[175] I use the term "rap-opera" because the album contains such subject continuity and formulaic progression that to understand what is happening in latter parts of the album, one is often obliged to listed to previous tracks. (As of the writing of this thesis, *Deltron 3030* is the only album released under the "Deltron" moniker, although a sequel is expected to be released in the near future.)

no alien invasion, no robot usurpation of human power, no environmental catastrophe. The present state of the real world in which we all live, brought on by technological and political "progress," is enough of a nightmarish scenario for Deltron to be prompted to leave for another planet and to fight to take back earth.

Concerning the non-Afrocentric branch of futurists in hip-hop, similarities are equally replete. Deltron more openly identifies as Black, and clearly his animosity toward the effects of modernity follow an Afrofuturist tradition, but in his future his race is largely personally irrelevant for his mission. Deltron's aim is structuralist in orientation, focusing on the institutions of the modern world and the way in which goodness has been tied to production, consumption, and labor.[176] Deltron states that "Enterprisin' wise men look to the horizon, thinkin' more capitalism is the wisdom."[177] Given such, his alliances are with those who are in accordance with his message, and he seems to have no sense of responsibility to "raise up" his racial group in particular.

The first musical track on the album is entitled "3030" and paints a vivid setting of the state of the world in which Deltron finds himself in addition to providing some context into Deltron's personal past as a pawn of (what used to be called) "the establishment."

> I used to be a mech [mechanical] soldier, but I didn't respect orders. I had to step forward, tell 'em this ain't for us. Livin' in a post-apocalyptic world, morbid and horrid. The secrets of the past ain't hoarded. Now we just boarded on our futuristic space craft. No mistakes Black, it's our music we must take back.[178]

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[176] I do not mean to overload this sentence with meaning by employing the often very loaded term "structuralist." By structural, I only mean to imply that Deltron's targets in his futuristic warfare are more socially constructed institutions and practices than any particular group of humans (such as Europeans, modernists, etc.)

[177] Deltron Zero, "3030" on the album *Deltron 3030*, 2000

[178] Deltron Zero, "3030"

One may assume from this introduction and reference to a “post-apocalyptic” world that something catastrophic has occurred to bring on the apocalypse, especially considering that Deltron is living over a thousand years in the future from the present. For Deltron, however, any detestable conditions in the year 3030 are merely fulfillments of our present “modern metropolis [in which] they try to lock us up under preposterous laws that’s not for us [sic.]”[179] As he further explains in his song “Virus:” “Ghettos are trash dumps with gas pumps. Exploding and burnt out since before the great union… Human rights come in a hundredth place. Mass production has always been number one.”[180] Here Deltron’s lyrics are explaining what he sees as a sameness (i.e. the overvaluing of production to human dignity) which bonds the past (or our present) to the distant future, however they could also be taken and directly applied to the very real, very tangible foundational landscape of hip-hop – the South Bronx. The South Bronx was literally “exploding and burnt out” to make room for the Expressway which was intended to generate wealth by making production more efficient.

There is an escapism which runs through much of *Deltron 3030* that can be related to the notion of the jubilee. Deltron expresses his incredulity that earth can provide for him a hospitable environment and exclaims “Fuck earth, I wanna live on Mars, somewhere closer to the stars. And farther away from dumb civilization with no mental stimulation.”[181] In the clearest terms found on his very loquacious album, Deltron expresses that civilization has not been a gift to humankind in any important capacity (material perhaps, but not mental.) Deltron’s response to living in a world where the very aim of society and the ultimate goal of modernity – the perfect civilization – does not satisfy him is to leave and wage a war against it. It is in this war where we see a falling out with Afrofuturist traditions and Afrocentrism.

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[179] Deltron Zero, “3030”

[180] Deltron Zero, “Virus” on the album *Deltron 3030,* 2000

[181] Deltron Zero, “Turbulence (remix)” on the album *Deltron 3030,* 2000

As Deltron takes to the outer limits of our solar system and the galaxy, he begins his war against the modern capitalist structure and for an egalitarian system divorced from the entrenched progress-hermeneutics superstructure. Deltron is, however, a pragmatist and does not consider all oppressed people (including Black people) to be his natural allies or dependants. He believes that some people are either co-opted by capitalism or of such an inferior mental status that they are not worth saving. In regard to his fellow Blacks, he says “my niggas cookin’ some crack and moms get the first hit. That’s ok with you? That’s ok with me. I’m not here to judge the way you be. I got my own complications – the government’s shoeless rations.”[182] Deltron has thus placed any responsibilities he may supposedly have to his race aside for his greater obligations to the struggle against “the government” – referring to both the United States government and the world-governing capitalist bodies. His demeanor is reminiscent of Richard Wright’s notorious character Bigger Thomas in that he reacts to a system of oppression by fulfilling its suspicions and abandoning the idea that his social inclusion in the Black community places any burden of responsibility to that community upon him. Much like Bigger, Deltron is comfortable with denigrating those hapless individuals who have been mentally stunted by the dominant establishment by referring to them as “creatures who either slave their lives away in outdated factories, or may be bounty hunters in a land of apathy” and explaining that, despite their hapless ignorance “all ignoramuses [are] reduced to savage half-beasts off a crack piece.”[183] Unlike Bigger, however, Deltron does not hint that his oppression, which led to his falling out with the dominant establishment and his earthly companions, was leveled against him on account of his race or the race of the perpetrators. Deltron, like Dr. Octagon, is not post-racial, but he is acting in a supra-racial atmosphere where race is no longer a main focus and where his actions need not be informed by or included in any sort of “Black experience.” This aspect of Deltron’s philosophy is a testament to the power of naming in hip-hop since Del tha Funkee Homosapien is a constant advocate of Black pride and empowerment.[184] However in the future, race has been swept aside by the pressing need to combat the millennia-long entrenched capitalist system.[185]

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[182] Deltron Zero, “Memory Loss” on the album *Deltron 3030,* 2000
[183] Deltron Zero, “Turbulence (remix)”

Something that should not be overlooked as a matter of relevance in the works of any futuristic hip-hop artist is the question of who is taken along on the futuristic journey. Whereas groups such as X-Clan, the Zulu Nation of Afrika Bambaataa, and Public Enemy[186] project a future in which their comrades in battle and travel are Black (or, in the case of Bambaataa, are part of the Afrocentric Zulu Nation), Deltron is largely an individualistic actor, however he does have one frequently referenced companion: Dan the Automator. Dan, who produced both the *Deltron 3030* album as well as the *Dr.*

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[184] Del tha Funkee Homosapien even partakes in the revisionist defining of “African” through his use of the word “Nubian” to refer to Blacks who stay “true” to their roots. Similarly, he espouses the beauty of Blackness (“Dark skin girls are better than light skin. Light skin girls ain’t better than dark skin”) and of Black solidarity (“No time for tiddlywinks. If ya titties is pink then you are White and I’m not the right man”) on his songs “Dark Skin Girls” on the album *I Wish My Brother George Was Here* (1991) and “No Need for Alarm” on the album *No Need for Alarm* (1993), respectively.

[185] Much could be written on the semantics of the specific technology referenced on the *Deltron 3030* album as well as on the albums of each group I have mentioned thus far. However for our purposes here, a technological dissection would be, I believe, distracting and not relevant enough to warrant extensive inquiry.

[186] I have left Public Enemy out of my treatment of futuristic hip-hop not because the group (which recorded numerous albums including *Fear of a Black Planet*) either posed a threat to any of my theories or because it was not materially relevant, but because so much commonality existed between it and the other artists mentioned that its inclusion would have merely belabored many points already made. Not wanting to make this essay unnecessarily long, which I fear I have already done, I elected to omit the group; however the more curious reader should absolutely take a look at its work.

Octagonecologyst album, is mentioned on a number of Deltron's songs as a crucially important part of Deltron's war on earth, mainly as a machine/computer operator (fitting since Dan is a DJ and producer – the central processing unit of hip-hop music recording.) Dan is also Japanese-American, which, he says, has no special relevance to his artistic work, but which is worth noting given the relative dearth of Afrocentrism in the works of both Dr. Octagon and Deltron Zero.[187] While Dr. Octagon rarely references Dan the Automator on his *Dr. Octagonecologyst* album (Dan did not produce the second Dr. Octagon album, *The Return of Dr. Octagon*), Dan was the sole producer of the album and provided all of the samples (many of them futuristic) on each track.

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Dan the Automator states that, "being a multi-ge[n]erational [A]merican, [A]merican culture has more of an impact" on his work than does his Japanese ancestry, and considering the relative fluidity of the term "American culture," we may find ourselves as a prudent point from which to leave our examination of overtly futuristic hip-hop works and finally focus on what I have termed "hip-hop futurism" – which is largely defined by fluidity.[188] The promise of the remainder of this chapter is to propose hip-hop futurism as an inherently "imperfect" cultural phenomenon.[189] The fifth chapter will employ hip-hop futurism as a salient means of thinking in a future which seems to be leading humanity away from the modern era of establishment (whether referring to the nation-state, authorship of original works, identity, or meaning, to name a few contexts) and toward a postmodern world of perpetual, unyielding vicissitude.

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[187] Dan the Automator, correspondence with Chuck Galli, questions sent to Dan the Automator on 8 November 2008, response received on 18 November 2008 (From henceforth referred to as "Galli and Automator.") Entire interview appears in appendix III for the first time as a public document

[188] Galli and Automator

[189] Here I use the term "imperfect" in a more grammatical sense. In grammar, the perfect tenses denote some action begun and completed within a designated time frame and before a given temporal point. Perfect, in a more conversational sense, also means something which is lacking no part of the whole (a "perfect" flower lacks no qualities deemed important to the quality or character of a flower from an observer's standpoint.) I use "imperfect" here to say that hip-hop futurism does not provide an artist tools for creating a completely original, static, or permanent subject. It is the way in which hip-hop futurism operates (or better, is operating) that is important here.

Hip-Hop Futurism: "In-definition"

"I can't, won't, don't stop rockin' to the rhythm
cuz I – I get down! Cuz I – I get down! Cuz I – I get down!"

-Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five

Hip-hop futurism is a hermeneutic device – informed by the post-apocalyptic social context in which hip-hop began, the modes of production in hip-hop, and the friction between Western modernity and African diasporic experiences – which interprets the subject in such a way that there comes no crisis of identity or of meaning as the subject enters a future where contexts and social realities change, and that the subject enters a state of jubilee rather than counts itself as a beat in the march to utopia.

The heavy use of (re)appropriation in hip-hop and the purposeful juxtaposition of disparate sources in order to create "new" materials (and within these materials, feelings) characterizes the creation of the "hip-hop subject." While sampling transforms preexisting subjects into objects (i.e. components and instruments in the music), which then come to constitute a "new" subject, the rapper breathes a code into the creation in order to give it not only a feel, but a message; creating a Frankenstein's monster of past subjectivity manipulated for a new purpose (the "scratch" aids this process by employing formerly static songs for use as instruments.) Equally important, the new subject is being created within the context of the remix – a specter which looms above the subject from its birth – and is equipped with mechanisms to facilitate its own re-manipulation (whether explicitly in the form of a "single" or implicitly, though inherently, by its very conscious bricolage nature.)[190] What the new subject lacks is the static aura of original ownership which is such a fundamental concept in modernism, even if such a modernism accepts the theories of cultural diffusion and syncretism (since these theories imply that some existing "whole" is either adopted or purposefully misused by an alien group.)[191]

To replace the concluded subjectivity absent in hip-hop, identity becomes drawn from intersectionality and temporality.

> A piece of paper with my name on it. I'm surrounded. I surrender. All. All that I am I have been, all I have been has been a long time coming – I am becoming all that I am. – Saul Williams[192]
>
> The day I took my mask off my face was missin' for two days. For the record G, came back a year later – whole new identity. – Ghostface Killah[193]

Perhaps a hip-hop song is "finalized" and pressed to a solid format. The song is then, of course, subject to reception in whichever social climate it was released, which is true for a song of any musical genre. However the song itself cannot be received and interpreted as a holistic subject since its patchwork nature exposes it to potentially very different, yet simultaneous, receptions. There is of course the possibility that a certain song is "organic" in the sense that it does not contain samples – perhaps the music was completely generated with a synthesizer keyboard, a computer, or live instruments. Truly it lacks the subject-challenging powers that more "traditional" hip-hop songs possess, yet it is still open to the possibility of being remixed and sampled later, which can affect its subjective-identity through similar contextual/temporal means.[194]

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[190] As the reader will see, the notion that hip-hop's re-appropriations, re-manipulations, and bricolage are conscious acts is crucially important. All of the three aforementioned acts are committed by every society and every cultural movement at some point or another, but that doing so has become so central to hip-hop and is heralded as a primary mode of producing within the hip-hop aesthetic gives hip-hop the ability to avoid conflicts over authenticity, originality, ownership, and plagiarism, and thus helps curtail the retardation of its continual remixing, which increases its ability to speak with consistent relevance as it (and humanity) keeps moving into the future.

[191] I am aware that the terms bricolage, syncretism, and diffusion are all commonly used together in anthropology in very modernist ways. I have been using "bricolage" as somewhat oppositional to traditional conceptions of diffusion and syncretism. I have no problem admitting that I am not employing the term "bricolage" in the way that Claude Lévi-Strauss intended. My use of bricolage is a result of an attempt to affix to one word some ideas which would otherwise require lengthy rewriting of explanations. I find appropriating the term easier for me and a relevant manifestation of the modes of production in hip-hop on which I have been writing at great length.

[192] Blackalicious, "Release Part 2" on the album *Blazing Arrow,* 2002

[193] Danger Doom, "The Mark" on the album *The Mouse and the Mask,* 2005

Hip-hop futurism's abandonment of the subject as a whole, perfect entity makes sense given two of its main influences: the Black experiences in the Americas and the politics of abandonment in American urban areas. In a very real sense, Blacks were only "subjects" in the sense that they were subjects of dominating empires for the bulk of Black history. In other respects, Blacks have been constructed by White nations and histories as *objects* of various political and philosophical *subjects*: the Black was to be civilized by Western culture, to be evangelized by Christianity, to be modernized by industrialism, or to be exterminated by any means necessary. Blacks, whether those remaining in Africa or those taken abroad, were treated, if we think metaphorically, as avenues of possibility for the realization of Western ambitions rather than subject-creators of such ambitions. Though Blacks produced almost the entire crop and mineral wealth for European colonizing nations in Africa and the New World, provided invaluable labor and raw resources for the United States, invented some of the most revolutionary technological innovations of their times, and contributed their foods, music, and words to "Western" cultures, they are often portrayed not as authors of such endeavors, but as tools employed in them. Whether it be the White House or the pyramids, those who actually built societies are often times not credited for their creations. Hip-hop is often treated in the same way; the creation of fantastically rich, complex, enjoyable, and important works are brushed off as "illegitimate" because the true labor is perceived as having been performed by those outside of hip-hop. DJs and MCs allegedly do not make music; they just steal it from other artists who apparently created their records in a total intellectual vacuum and can claim originality over their work.[195] If originality and authenticity are one and the same, are privy only to socially dominant groups, and are the largest measures of "progress" in a modern sense, then what incentive do hip-hop producers have to remain loyal these ideas? The Baganda cotton farmer is not credited with the vitality of the British Empire, the American Negro slaves are not considered the founding fathers of the United States, and the hip-hop artist is not considered to be constructively creating.[196] There is a serious bone of contention here, supported by empirical evidence, between Black communities and Western modernity.

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[194] An example might be "Ignition" by R Kelly, which spawned a remix which eventually became exponentially more popular than the original. The question becomes, what happens to the "original" subjectivity of "Ignition" when the remix is more widely known?

A point of concession must be made here. Sampling, conscious and welcome appropriation, and remixing have been staples of hip-hop since its foundation. The occurrence of computer generated, sample-free recordings which are vigorously rights-protected by record companies (especially in the "Top 40" radio market) is a phenomenon which must be dealt with. Though it is an unfortunate stereotype that older generations are wont to kvetch and bemoan the wayward paths of newer generations, I must submit to my apparent natural role in this equation and express my concern that "hip-hop" as a cultural mode of production has had aesthetic elements taken from it and employed by what is essentially "pop music" for ends (cementation of "original work" ideals, pure capitalist profits, etc.) which do not fit well into hip-hop as a production theory. Free and open appropriation has been such an important factor in hip-hop that I dare make a biased judgment call, injecting my White, New England voice into a culture in which I had no hand in creating, and say that if an artist shuns the transformation of subjectivity into objectivity and the open appropriation so central to hip-hop, then he or she is not "doing" hip-hop. It does not matter how the artist couches himself or herself or his or her work – bearing a piece of work which violates hip-hop (not in the sense that it fails to live up to some standard of quality of aesthetic pleasure set by the older duffs of the culture, but that it cannot be reconciled with the very *process* of creating art which has come to be known a hip-hop) under the title "hip-hop" does not automatically waive the inherent contradictions. Incontestably, hip-hop music has generated sounds and effects which would be desirable to many artists of many genres, and so it would not be uncommon to find an aesthetic inspired by hip-hop in the works of another genre. To repeat KRS-One: "If a cat had kitten in the oven, would you call them muffins?" I would not call them muffins, and baking such works in a hip-hop oven does not render them hip-hop muffins. That is my opinion – open to re-appropriation.

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[195] This oft-repeated argument that other genres of musical art (e.g. folk, blues, rock, etc.) are legitimate because every artist created her own work is laughable to many defenders of hip-hop including myself. Arguing this point with a co-worker, I once hummed the melody for a standard blues song, then clapped the drum patters for surf-rock, finishing with a typical folk chord progression. "At least they played their own instruments" was the response I received, to which I could not help but think of the DJ toiling over electronic equipment far beyond my understanding while tapping into his incredible mental bank of songs from all genres while the MC sat with his notebook parsing out select words from his wide vocabulary which best fit the rhythm *and* got his message across. These are not brass or woodwind instruments – they are the instruments of the technology that surrounds us and the mind that defines us.

If a Gilroyan approach to the creation/construction of Blackness is adopted, one can see even more clearly the delineations from Blackness as a phenomenon and hip-hop futurism. Gilroy's seminal work *The Black Atlantic* proposes that attempting to locate the birthplace of the "Black race" on any one continent, or to define the common essence of Blackness as emanating from one location, is insufficient for conceiving of Blackness as history has rendered it. Instead, Gilroy suggests that ships were the true birthplace of "Blacks" (as we understand the term in a social-sciences sense) and Blackness. It was the transformational powers association with the slave trade, the non-human commodities trade, the colonial enterprise, and the creation of an African diaspora which constructed Blackness. In other words, there was no "Black" cultural phenomenon per se on a global scale until the transportation of Africans began, and most all cultural phenomena associated with Blackness (from Caribbean creoles to Confederate Negro spirituals, Santa Ria and Vodun to Pan-Africanist movements on the African continent) relied on the knowledge that a diaspora exited and on a communication amongst these diasporic communities. Blackness, then, is a transit. It cannot be wholly defined by looking at one group, nor many groups, but only by watching the *movement* of ships ("ships" being literal and also metaphorical, meaning information, music, foodstuffs, religions, political movements, etc.)

Hip-hop bears an uncanny resemblance to the Black Atlantic and should be viewed in much the same fashion. In terms of its genesis, it was largely a phenomenon of

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[196] I do not mean to upset the sensibilities of anyone by placing hip-hop artists, colonized Africans, and Negro slaves into the same sentence. I only mean to show the disenfranchisement of all three, though I am well aware that tangible conditions were quite different.

Black youth, but also of Latinos and some Whites who were cast into very similar conditions in the era of urban abandonment. The social reorganization which characterized the context for the Cross Bronx Expressway disproportionately and negatively affected Blacks, but the problem with collective punishment vis-à-vis abandonment is just that – it is collective. All who were snagged in the dragnet of modernity likely felt the disenchantment with social progress – owing to their clear disenfranchisement – and could find a common point of unity. The fear of indiscriminate violence, of being hated on account of a personal background which you cannot control, and of having no immediate recourse to improve your situation were sentiments felt by Negro slaves which Cornel West also attributed to Americans at large during the September 11, 2001 attacks.[197] I argue that the conditions of many youth in the era of hip-hop's genesis were not as extreme as chattel slavery, nor was the suffering as awesome as that of the September 11th attacks, however the apocalypse generation shared many of these same definitive qualities, and thus a common understanding arose amongst people of many backgrounds. As West stated "On September eleventh, everyone was a nigger."[198]

Well Ruby D is my name and I'm a Puerto Rican. You might think I'm Black by the way I'm speakin'. – Ruby D (of the Fantastic Five)[199]

But the most vivid similarity between Gilroy's Black Atlantic and hip-hop is found within the modes of production in hip-hop. I will not belabor the matter by reviewing hip-hop's modes of production again, but it should be sufficiently clear that hip-hop has never stopped sharing information within the culture. Hip-hop, though the music has some relatively easily definable aural characteristics, can best be understood as a method. The appropriation, remixing, and reinterpreting done through the DJ and MC cannot be pinned to a specific location or group, but rather to a practice and to a motion itself. Hip-hop, then, is very much geared toward non-stop production and envisioning, and this outlook profoundly affects its futurism. Hip-hop can't stop, hip-hop won't stop, hip-hop don't stop.

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[197] Cornel West, "The Life and Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.," (lecture, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, February 2, 2007)

[198] West

[199] Ahern

How then does all of this, along with the examples of Afrika Bambaataa *et al* provided above, help to define hip-hop futurism? The historically strained relationships between the African diaspora and modernity is largely replicated in hip-hop as an abandonment of modern ideals of identity being achieved through original invention or authorship. The alternative of movement as a defining characteristic means that identity can be formed in a more fluid state and is not dependent upon "forward" motion or (and this is important) creating well defined and located points of ancestry to validate itself. As humanity moves into the future (which it does constantly), the burdens of retaining anchorage or defending identity in a changing world are not placed onto those who abide by hip-hop's "standards" for identity and heritage – this becomes the hip-hop futurism which may be of great use in comprehending "collapses" of identities.

Hip-hop futurism can thus be seen as a state of jubilee since the act of producing is the source of identity.[200] If production is the ultimate state of being, then there is no need to look toward a utopia. RAMM:ELL:ZEE considers himself an equation – a mathematical *process* – rather than a worker trying to get somewhere. X-Clan is a continuation of a glorious (if mythical) African past, not as agents of Black improvement through incrementalism. Afrika Bambaataa is leading the Zulu Nation out of the era of belief and into the era of "factology" (provable through mathematical *process*) and toward Planet Rock. Dr. Octagon, though a less than savory character, is a doctor with no intention to progress medicine, only to continue his self-gratifying endeavors. Deltron Zero has left earth, its "dumb civilization," its "mass production," and its values system which only leads to the retardation of the individual in the name of progress. No one is laboring within a system to achieve a utopian synthesis. As MC Rakim would say: "It ain't where you're from, it's where you're at," to which Paul Youngquist would add "And where you're at is on the move."[201]

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[200] Paul Gilroy, in his explanation of the black Atlantic, famously employed his "roots/routes" allegory. In his own words: "…modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of a movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes" (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 19.) This is, says Gilroy, a great mistake in modern Black identity construction. He prefers to see Blackness as being a routes-oriented phenomenon which finds its identity in *becoming* rather than *being*. (As a point of minutia, "roots" and "routes" are apparently homonymous in British English, which may help explain the pun to certain non-British speakers of English who pronounce "route" exactly like "rout.")

Since hip-hop futurism relies on identity being drawn from process, its tangible appearance is subject to change. Kurtis Blow's disco-sounding music contrasted with Afrika Bambaataa's techno style, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's kazoo laden beats were relegated to the archives by Run-DMC, and Grand Wizard Theodore's "cutting" became a far cry from the turntable technique mastered by latter-day DJs such as the Invisibl Skratch Piklz, yet all are considered hip-hop practitioners thanks to their shared modes of production. At the start of this section, I used the term "in-definition" to refer to hip-hop futurism. I intended the (not terribly clever) play on words to have a double and concurrent meaning: that hip-hop futurism will never "finish" an identity (thus identity is indefinite) and will freely and without intellectual crisis allow for the fluctuation of identity as contexts and material realities change (thus these "indefinite" identities will not be mere nihilist, freefalling fallacies, but processes *in definition* without conclusion.)

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[201] Youngquist, 191

As information technologies create an unmanageably large network of knowledge-sharing, the stability of identity becomes shaky. Some fear that talk of a postmodern future means the end of meaning in life or the denial of very real social constructs (such as race.) Admittedly, it is not a far walk to the border of nihilism from such an intellectual location, but I contend that it is only a mode of creating identity which is dying on earth, not identity itself. In fact, the future may hold a richer, more fabulous set of possibilities for identity as humans continue living on earth (and beyond.) These possibilities, as articulated by hip-hop futurism, will constitute the final chapter of this essay.

Chapter 5 – Hip-Hop Futurism's Implications for Life on Earth

"The universe is one. I see what rap can be – glorious."

-Deltron Zero

What does hip-hop futurism mean for humans? Or better, how can humans use hip-hop futurism as they are carried into the future? Humans, it seems, spend most of their lives dealing in one way or another with identity. Money, religion, political orientation, sexuality, philosophy, and labor all help inform humans' identities, and conversely their identities largely dictate how they will interact with all of the aforementioned things. In my treatments of modernity, I may have given the false impression that identity has been an unchangeable cultural and personal marker. Of course identity can change: people can switch religions, eat different things, gain citizenship in another country, new identities can be created, and so on. What hip-hop futurism adds is not a new identity or a reinterpretation of any number of pre-existing identities, but a *mode of producing and conceiving of* identities which may be useful to the material and mental well-being of humans as they continue living into the future.

Of the many "crises" of postmodernity (a term I dislike because it implies that modernity supplied people with something so wonderful, that to alter its state would precipitate panic, fear, and despair), one of the most heralded is the fear that the whole notion of "identity" will collapse and no one will have any purpose in life other than existing as a biological organism.[202] Though I disagree with this outlook, I can sympathize with those who worry. Globalization and the information era have brought people and cultures together in a way humanity has never before seen, yet it has also confronted modernity with the unforeseen complication of generating so much information, inter-ethnic sharing, and cultural revision that identity-anchorage has been largely uprooted, or at least thrown asunder into a frenzied cyclone of confusion. Those fearful of a future of what one could call "over-stimulation" and postmodernism should not despair, however, as their fears are (I believe) misplaced. It is not identity and meaning which are being challenged by the postmodern era, but rather the way in which these identities and meanings are constructed.

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[202] I once had a philosophy professor (who was a Lutheran minister) define postmodernism as "whatever." He explained that postmodernism dictates that nothing matters because nothing has identity.

"The debate" (if there could ever said to be just one) between science and religion has been, among other things, a proxy for a raging debate between the creation of identity through faith-based creation myths and material-based scientific history.[203] Either God created humans or humans evolved from earlier primates. Either filmmaker Frederico Fellini was Italian because his family has always been Italian or he was a Langobard, a Gaul, and a Roman because anthropological evidence and historical records have shown that these groups (among many others) have occupied and inhabited the Italian peninsula. Both approaches, though very dissimilar, share one crucial aspect: they attempt to tell us who we are and what we do. Hip-hop futurism moves the focus of identity off of "being" and moves it to what we are *becoming*. It cares less about what we are "doing" and instead wants to know *what's happenin'*.[204]

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[203] The term "scientific-history" is a bit awkward, but I mean to imply a history which relies on material sources for its construction as opposed to a revisionist pseudo-history which uses counter-factual points to piece together a story of a group of people, a culture, or a place.

[204] I use the term "what's happenin'" instead of "what's happening" because the latter is simply a question of what is occurring contemporaneously with a given conversation, while the former, being a colloquial greeting in many Anglophone cultures, is a way of both asking what is currently happening and *how* these happenings are affecting a person. "What's happenin'" means "What is new in your life?" "How are things?" "What is happening with you?" "What is happening *to you*?" Though innocuous and pedestrian enough when uttered in the wee hours of the morning at a doughnut shop, "what's happenin'" is a direct way of asking how the context is affecting the subject.

As we saw earlier, Paul Gilroy makes the case for the “black Atlantic” and insists that Blackness should be conceived of as a process and a transitory state defined by the information which was shared amongst groups of African people displaced by colonialism and slavery. This is in opposition to what he says is the modernist definition of identity:

> The development of territorial sovereignty and the cultural and communicative apparatuses that correspond to it… were bound up with the struggle to consolidate the transparent working of the national states and governmental powers to which the term modernity refers. That combination promoted a new definition of the relationship between place, community, and what we are now able to call “identity.”[205]

The similarities between the “black Atlantic” and hip-hop’s modes of production have already been made clear, but now I feel it is prudent to expand these observances and theories into praxis.

Synthesizing the act of remixing and sampling with the instilling of a new code (rapping) within a context which supports this practice (hip-hop) eliminates the politics of authenticity. Gilroy argues that many Black, Afrocentric organizations which create mythical lineages to pristine African pasts and establish Black essentialisms lapse into the category of proto-fascism since they usually oppose capitalism “while remaining utterly alien to democracy.”[206] For Gilroy, Afromodernities do not necessarily represent an affront to Western modernity from a structural standpoint, only from an aesthetic one. Hip-hop futurism, I have argued, possesses this opposition to the very foundations of Western modernism (and thus cultural imperialism) and contains one of the most democratic modes of production in the world… but if this is so, what are we to make of futuristic rap artists like X-Clan who echo many of the “proto-fascist” sentiments Gilroy decries? Interestingly enough, to answer this I reference Paul Gilroy – particularly some of his statements made in the very beginning pages of *The Black Atlantic*:

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[205] Gilroy, *Against Race*, 55
[206] Gilroy, *Against Race*, 333

> Though largely ignored by recent debates over modernity and its discontents, these ideas about nationality, ethnicity, authenticity, and cultural integrity are characteristically modern phenomena that have profound implications for cultural criticism and cultural history… Any shift towards a postmodern condition should not, however, mean that the conspicuous power of these modern subjectivities and the movements they articulated has been left behind. Their power has, if anything, grown, and their ubiquity as a means to make political sense of the world is currently unparalleled by the language of class and socialism by which they once appeared to have been surpassed.[207]

Extrapolating upon this theoretical base, I contend that, just as Gilroy argues that the overtaking of the world by the postmodern condition will not eliminate or weaken modern subjectivities, the nature of hip-hop as a routes-oriented rather than a product/subject-oriented phenomenon allows for “proto-fascist” futures to exist next to egalitarian, humanist, democratic futures. Hip-hop futurism is not equipped or intended to police the futures created via its modes of production, however (this is important) it is immeasurably helpful in maintaining a harmony amongst futurisms and identities. We have seen that identity in hip-hop is created through sampling (which allows for the free appropriation of ideas and feelings) and bricolage lineages.[208] It is clear, then, that the genre is completely hospitable to a vast and eclectic array of identities, and because the idea of original authorship is replaced by the remix, none can claim more authenticity over another. Therefore, although X-Clan is a highly regarded rap group and RAMM:ELL:ZEE is seen as a pioneer of graffiti, neither imposes an essentialism on any other artist who wishes to engage in hip-hop, whether he be an escapist revolutionary (Deltron Zero) or an opportunistic surrealist (Dr. Octagon.)

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[207] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 2

[208] The concept of “bricolage lineages” may not sound familiar, but examples of it are numerous. Looking at the District of Columbia, we can see a clear assumption of kinship to the Roman Republic by the Anglo-Saxon fathers of a republic founded in a non-European part of the world, who also saw fit to trace the country’s judicial heritage to a disparate lot of people, including the Muslim prophet Muhammad (pictured on the main frieze of the United States Supreme Court building.)

It can thus be concluded that the crisis of "authenticating" (or perhaps "establishing" is a better word) identity in a postmodern condition can be ameliorated through hip-hop futurism. But what of the concern that identities at this stage will have, essentially, no meaning (or that their meaning will be diminished from their "pre-postmodern" state) since they are so subject to fluctuation and having bases in bricolage histories?[209] To assume that such a case is likely in a hip-hop futurism inspired framework is to ignore the significance of appropriation in hip-hop at large. Elements of music, visual art, other forms of cultural production, and even machines (such as subway trains or turntables) are not stripped of their *value* in hip-hop, only of their initial *meaning*.[210] The open acceptance of incorporation and manipulation vis-à-vis shifting contexts means that one is not obliged to becloud the pieces which comprise her assembly in order to portray some sort of static, perfect "whole." Identity thus becomes a celebrated patchwork of particularities. Such a world was sought by Aimé Césaire, who articulated his desires in his letter of resignation from the French Communist Party:

> I'm not going to entomb myself in some strait particularism. But I don't intend either to become lost in a fleshless universalism… I have a different idea of a universal. It is of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all.[211]

It is worth reminding the reader that Césaire was a self-identified surrealist and happened to articulate many of the aspects of hip-hop decades before the culture came into existence. The surrealist idea of "the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations"[212] has had extremely important impacts on hip-hop's construction of identity.

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[209] "Bases" as the plural of basis, not the plural of base.
[210] Examples of this are nearly infinite in every culture. The Christmas tree has been stripped of its original "pagan" meanings by latter-day Christians, but has not been devalued.
[211] Kelley, 178-179

More, there is the matter of incorporating the jubilee into praxis for hip-hop futurism. This idea is, I hope, the simplest one I have presented thus far. Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic and his identifying of the jubilee form a harmonious marriage within the context of hip-hop. To use my own algebra in explaining this: if the Black Atlantic postulates process as the basis of and for identity, and if entering a state of jubilee requires immediate "right-acting" (whatever that is perceived to be) regardless of the practicality of such an action in a modern, utopian-driven sense, then a context which defines process as meaningful identity (and *vice versa*) *and* which allows for the *conscious* (a critical adjective here) creation of the self by these means is a natural fulfillment of the needs and desires of the former two concepts. The subject in hip-hop is a fluid. No longer is the thesis-antithesis process, which leads to byproducts, necessary.

Why is the Hegelian process no longer necessary? Because some kids in the South Bronx realized they were this byproduct and started doing something about it. Other byproducts got hip and got down with this notion. And before long these byproducts made their way to modernity's house, knocked on the door, and said "*what's happenin'?*"

The Outro

We will never live in the future, only the present. The past is what we think, hope, and debate happened, but the future is a vast ocean, full of currents of possibilities which our ships must traverse. Visibility is limited, and the curve of time prevents us from seeing what lies beyond, and thus we cannot be sure that what we are now will be satisfactory, even by our own standards, once we arrive at the next shore. So we can set our coordinates and run our engines at full-thrust, taking the blows from storms of change as they come, and losing crew and cargo in pursuit of a predetermined destination. And we could very well get there (or not.) Or we can leave the ship behind and use the water as our vessel, reconfiguring our coordinates, mission, and destination as the winds change, and building our flotilla out of whatever debris floats our way. We can start off fluid, made up of a thousand particular particles, each complementing each other and drawing out their neglected associations, and let ourselves be open to the remix. Who is to say which is better?

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[212] Waldberg, 75

> “The genetic code of the species does not dictate past tense. It allows us to dream.”[213]
>
> -RAMM:ELL:ZEE

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[213] Galli and RAMM:ELL:ZEE #1

Appendix I

Email Correspondence between Chuck Galli and RAMM:ELL:ZEE (Questions sent 10/8/2008 – Answers received 10/12/2008)

CG: Novelist Alondra Nelson writes that "Afro Futurism arises out of an engagement of dispersed people with technology", and Patrick Neate notes that hip-hop is unique in its exclusive reliance on technology for production. How has technology informed Gothic Futurism and/or Ikonoklast Panzerism?

R: There is no such thing as Afro Futurism. Because of Sun Ra, George Clinton, Bootsy Collins and the 5% nation are our view on thoughts of Futurism. A time table has become Mapamatical. Wepons technology and the Alpha Bet system, the A was dropped from Beta, concludes the Barbarian that I am....these secrets are of the "Hidden". Black as a culture has nothing to do with it. The Romans stole it from the Greeks. And we still instill it. Language dies. The Hueman species also does. You will run out of genes shortly....I suggest space travel for you. Then you may extend your life expectancy.....or you will all die from cancer from inter-breeding.

CG: Would your ideas on Gothic Futurism and Ikonoklast Panzerism have come about had the hip-hop culture/phenomenon never happened?

R: (LOL) The Gothics and Futurism are 2 different subjects. It takes one of 14...maybe 15 people that I know of in my life span that dare think and tear apart them both. Those who refuse this thought of thinking.....may not like what they find. For us, the idea is to get you and your readers to cellulize......what is the most fundamental.

I can be wrong...but that's all right....I have not graduated from school. I am a school.

I was never taught, but it seems you have to be. All the better, I was never trained for schooling. But you will be.....good and bad for you!

CG: Author Paul Gilroy writes that a major difference between the future-oriented writings of prominent Black authors and White authors is the importance that Black authors give to "the jubilee" over "the utopia." In other words, African-American writings are more often concerned with a life/the world/the universe culminating in a flare of just-ness and righteousness (regardless of the material destruction) than humankind achieving a utopia in the modernist, materialist, rationalist sense. Do you think humanity will/can reach a material utopia? What does a jubilee look like to you?

R: There's no difference between a white and a black author. Astonishment....called "universe" cancels itself out to the conclusion known as "Transversus". As a quantum physisist, time has no meaning. Dimension is of a sum known as the equation 1 over n n over 1.

CG: At the risk of coming off as an essentialist, I'm curious... do you believe there is anything about "the Black experience" that gives Blacks certain special tools in futuristic thinking and construction?

R: No. Where do us as a people get off thinking that we, because we are the oldest of people, have dominated anyone's belief that we are the dominants or dominators of the Hueman species? And why do you care?

CG: You mention popes, Roman law, and Gothic script (which are mostly products of European civilization) in your treatise and other writings quite frequently. To what extent, if any, do non-European histories (especially African) inform your thinking?

R: The formula for any language, slanguage, and dialect is for war to conquer, enslave, and control.....and most importantly....to police. And last, but not sure, to sieze.

CG: You deal primarily with the Roman alphabet in your writings on Ikonoklast Panzerism, though you also mention the importance of Arabic, Hebrew, Chinese, Mayan, and other valid languages. To your knowledge is there anyone arming these other alphabets? If so, will there be inter-alphabetic confrontations in the future? If there is no one arming these, will Roman eclipse other alphabets?

R: Only if I start it. And that day may come. But it will be in the middle of the night.....and boy.....you better be awake.

CG: You mentioned in your "Yearly Conclusional" posted on your website that you were once down with the Five-Percenters, but left them in 1979. What caused you to break with them?

R: This answer is of "the Hidden".

CG: How does your music act as a vehicle for, or contribute to, your futuristic thinking?

R: I'm a method actor.

CG: Why should humans bother thinking about the future beyond their lifetimes if they will not live to see it?

R: The genetic code of the species does not dictate past tense. It allows us to dream. Futures think for us. In time, some of us, stay awake longer than most...and that is "ism". We do not dream. We do not nightmare. We simply view. As a musician, It is hard to think for myself. I can make policy....but then, I have a wife. I have to be tollerated. Then with course, if paid enough, I'll do what I want.

CG: Do you believe there is an absolute truth (God/s, universal law, unchanging physics, absolute morality, etc.)?

R: No! There is Alpha Positive and Lord's Minus. They're the implosion/explosion of mapamatics. The design of the Transversus and time has no tables....it is like a glass that doesn't leak water...but still sticks to the tray.

Appendix II

2nd Email Correspondence between Chuck Galli and RAMM:ELL:ZEE (Questions sent 10/20/2008 – Answers received 10/27/2008)

CG: You wrote to me that "The genetic code of the species [human] does not dictate past tense. It allows us to dream." What, if any, relevancy does history hold for humans? Is history a crucial part of our lives or an idle obsession?

R: As forth, with the policeing of the hueman species, deliberates
essential politics for the digestion of the common man or wombed-man.
Genetic code is your Reaper Grimm.

CG: You gave an emphatic "No!" to the question as to whether or not a universal truth exists and referred to the "Transversus." Can you elaborate on this theory and give an example of what is possible in the Transversus that is not possible in the "universe"?

R: First of all, uni can not verse itself, in the equation as its own
usage in quantum physics "string" theory applies in vibration as
re-verberation. Transversus does not vibrate....it is a membrane of
the womb. It expands and contracts......as your "so called"
universe does.

CG: After the Roman letters are armed and begin fighting, do you think any of them will be destroyed?

R: All of them! Language, slanguage, dialects of all Earth's icons.

But there is one more possibility....in less than 200 years.....4 more

letters will be added to the Alpha Bet-a call!

End of period! It will be no longer.....AD....it will be AE meaning

After Extinction of the planet Earth.

CG: What are you thoughts on human war? How do you see human war (bad, good, inevitable, pointless, etc.)?

R: The good and the bad....share eachother. You call me an Afro

Futurist....I am of the Gothics.

Appendix III

Email Correspondence between Chuck Galli and Dan the Automator. Questions sent 11/8/08, answers received 11/18/08

CG: How'd you get "the Automator” title?

DA: Automation is a component of mixing and at the time was one of the more futuristic/technological components of mixing

CG: Do you feel that technology has improved your life, merely changed it, made it worse, or has had no real effect?

DA: Improved/changed. Example cel phones keep me in touch and i don't have to wait for calls. Computers/protools how I record and do things now

CG: Why create futuristic hip-hop records? What can they do that traditional ones can’t?

DA: I like to do both, but futuristic ones tend to have a different message as you can extrapolate on what is happening now and the future impact as you see it.

CG: You collaborated with Del the Funky Homosapien on the Deltron 3030 project, which, with its space-age/futuristic themes, was a fairly big break from his previous works. Why did Del choose to do a concept album about the future, of all subjects? Were you influential in this decision?

DA: Del always wanted to look at the future and this was a good fit for the both of us.

CG: Kool Keith's lyrics can pretty safely be described as surreal on Dr. Octagonecologyst. Del's were pretty disconnected on the Deltron 3030 album as well. Why the surrealist feel to these projects?

DA: In the case of keith, that is his style. In the case of del i think you might want to relisten a little bit carefully as there is a lot of point and direction in that lp. It has a clear subject rolled into the storytelling

CG: Blackness and Black cultural heritage are often seen as a sources of inspiration for many rappers and DJs. In your case, does your ancestry have any influence on your music?

DA: No more than any other influence. Everything that happens around me is an inspiration of sorts and being a multi-gererational american, american culture has more of an impact.

CG: How do you go about finding sources for sampling like the older, B-grade sci-fi samples on the Dr. Octagon album?

DA: I go with how I'm feeling and my decisions are based on what I think sounds right.

CG: Do you talk philosophy with some of the hip-hop artists with whom you work? Do you find any commonality among their views contrasted with non-hip-hop artists with whom you work?

DA: Yes but I think for the most part everybody has their own opinion which can be tempered by their experiences. For example, hip hop people might be more comfortable with urban culture while a rock guy might be more familiar with other parts of life.

Appendix IV

Email Correspondence Between Chuck Galli and Dr. Ivor Miller (Questions Sent 10/23/2008, Answers Received 11/5/2008)

CG: In reading some snippets of the conversations you had with some of the original bombers of New York I noticed that they repeatedly recounted the danger involved in bombing trains and being "underground" in general. Did you get the impression that the willingness to take a potentially fatal trip just to bomb a train was a result of their hoping for a better future or was it an outcome of fatalistic thinking based in present, wretched conditions?

IM: about bombing: youth take risks, it's fun, and they don't mean
to get hurt.

CG: You write in your book Aerosol Kingdom of the affinity that young aerosol artists had with trains and the transit system in New York in the 1960's, '70's, and '80's and go on to relate this to a longer tradition African descendents have had of incorporating iron and steel technology into their religious beliefs (originating with Ògún.) The irony that the New York City trains, which were icons of the modern, capitalist, labor-oriented world, were so embraced by the dispossessed and abandoned (of many backgrounds) is clear. I was thinking that this was a product of hip-hop's re-appropriating/sampling qualities, but that didn't explain the pre-hip-hop legacy of this appropriation. Why do you think those of African descent have embraced these antagonistic modern creations so often in history?

IM: About technology, people of African descent have "embraced these antagonistic modern creations so often in history" because they use them for their own purposes.

CG: You mentioned to me that looking at indigenous African cultures might be a good route to take. To the best of your knowledge, are there any groups you have encountered or studied that are very future oriented?

IM: (no response)

CG: Postcolonial critics have often asserted that the Western realization that we may be in a postmodern era is only another sign of Europeans' intellectual pomposity. It is leveled that the acceptance of diverse and plural truths was already extant in pre-colonial, indigenous African and Australian (to name a couple) cultures. What are your thoughts on this theory? If the postmodern was known (if not by that name) to non-Europeans, then what was modernism all about?

IM: About POMO, yes, there is plenty of Euro-centric pomposity in academia. Of course there are multiple truths . . . .

CG: Rammellzee mentions on his website that your book Aerosol Kingdom somewhat misrepresents his Gothic Futurism by positioning it as an evolution of Five-Percenter numerology. When viewed in combination with my interaction with him, his responses to critics and other artists, and his insistence that the arming of the Roman alphabet took place in the 21st and 22nd centuries by a secret formula known as the RAMM:ELL:ZEE, I get the impression that he does not think anyone besides him can grasp his ideas. What are you thoughts on Ramm? Do you sense a god complex with him?

IM: About RAM, I wrote what he told me (or what I heard him say); if he wants to say something else now, that's OK!

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PEACE!