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From the Gutter, Not the Garbage:
Why Hip Hop is a Legitimate Oral Poetic Form

On December 1st, 2016, Killer Mike and el-p gave a riveting and compelling performance at the 2016 Video Game Awards, but the youtube livestream comment section was overflowing with gamers cringing and complaining about the hardcore rap that was accosting their ears so accustomed to digital AK47s, ogre grunts, heavy death metal guitars and anything else that I am assuming is not quality hip hop music. I distinctly remember one person commenting “garbage music for garbage people.” While I, like conservative news anchor, Tomi Lahren, support diversity of thought and freedom of opinion, I, unlike Tomi Lahren, believe it is unacceptable to demoralize and marginalize a people’s culture. Hip Hop is a staple in African American culture and history, just as pivotal as jazz, the blues, the Black Arts Movement, and Black poetry. Hip Hop is not “garbage music.” Hip Hop is a legitimate poetic form that spawns out of African heritage and draws on the deep roots of Black culture.

To see how hip hop grows from the roots of African culture, it is imperative to examine the roots of hip hop. In the clubs of Bronx, New York during the late 70s early 80s, Disk Jockeys (DJs) were experimenting with different ways to keep the party moving, keep the dance alive. DJs would search for rare drum breaks from records of all types of genres and loop them to make a continuous beat, thus inventing the breakbeat. The heavy rhythmic base of the breakbeat resonated with the primarily Black audiences that frequented the clubs, subconsciously reminding them of their African heritage and the primarily drum based sub saharan music. For

Africans and African Americans, dance has always been a way of expressing the soul. Malcolm X writes in his autobiography about what he felt when he first began dancing. He explores the difference between White and Black dancing and describes White dancing as an orderly pattern of steps whereas Black dancing was a submission to music, letting it carry your soul as your body follows along. He writes: "I discovered it was simply letting your feet, hands and body spontaneously act out whatever impulses were stirred by the music" (67). It is freeform expression, completely improvisational, similar to a lot of Black culture, such as jazz and the Dozens (the oral tradition of humorous insulting discourse between a party). The breakbeat inspired a new form of improvisational dance, a type no one had ever seen before. Due to its musical counterpart, this style was coined "breakdancing."

Not only was breakdancing born but so was a new oral tradition to accompany the music. DJs would hire Masters of the Ceremony (MCs) to amp up the party, and they would chant over the breakbeats: trivial things just to get the people involved such as "everybody throw your hands in the air, wave them like you just don't care!" Similar to their precursor slave songs, call and response became prominent in the music. Without knowing what else to call this brand new sound and culture, people would refer to it as "hippity-hoppity" and the people shortened it to "hip hop" (The Hip Hop Years Part 1). For a while, rap was just that, hip, bouncy, simple lyrics, up until 1982, when Grandmaster Flash and the Furious 5 came out with the revolutionary song "The Message." It was the first time that rap music was more than just partying; it literally had a message. "The Message" was simple and fairly easy to understand, "don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge, I'm trying hard not to lose my head." It was a song about the true struggles of

living in a ghetto neighborhood and the everyday depressing images that you must deal with.

“The Message,” was the beginning of a new form of hip hop: conscious hip hop.

Conscious hip hop is essentially poetic hip hop. It is where rap is turned into the unofficial acronym “rhythm assisted poetry.” Since “The Message” came out in 1982, rap has evolved in many ways and has paid homage to the poetic roots of lyricism that was inherent to the earlier forms of Black music such as the blues and jazz. Hip Hop is especially reminiscent of jazz accompanied poetry. Poets like Amiri Baraka, who would perform fierce poetry backed by live jazz instrumentation last as great influences on hip hop. The sonic aesthetic of jazz accompanied poetry is very similar to that of rap, and some rap artists have revitalized the tradition. For instance, Baraka’s work would tie together extreme political values and preach for Black nationalism, pride and unity over sometimes ethereal free flowing bebop and sometimes experimental jazz. His album “It’s Nation Time” is a great example of how poetry and music can be intertwined into one body of work, where the lyrics are reinforced by the music and vice versa. Baraka’s work as a jazz poet is quite similar to modern day rappers, such as J. Cole, Childish Gambino, and especially Kendrick Lamar.

Allow me to focus solely on Kendrick Lamar and use him as the representative for poetic hip hop. His latest album, “To Pimp a Butterfly” is brimming with metaphors, motifs, and even monologues. It is more than just a collection of songs, but rather a long thought out album with a deeper message about corporate America “pimping” him and the Black community out, commodifying them and dampening their potential. On the album, that is so classically hip hop, there is a track titled “For Free?” which is more classically jazz accompanied poetry. The track is an extravagant display of spoken word over a fantastic jazz produced instrumental. Similar to

Baraka's work, the music follows his change in tone and vigor. When Kendrick hypes up, so do the saxophone, piano and drums. They are in balance, able to stand alone, yet compliment each other so well it would feel incomplete to hear them separate. The music then becomes just as poetic as the words. Lyrically speaking however, the song beckons for deep analysis.

The intro to the song plays as a conceit for the capitalistic values of America, and how these ideologies have brainwashed the people to believe that wealth is more important than dignity. Personifying this ideological belief as a gold digger relates it to a more physical sense, something that is literal, and evident in society, while playing as a segue into the more existential piece of the track in its main body. The repetition of the phrase "this dick ain't free," plays as a response to the gold digger's requests for materialism, while mainly directly challenging Uncle Sam's oppression of Black people, acting as a cry for Black liberation from the after effects of slavery. It also acts as an elaboration of the forty acres and a mule demand that freed slaves requested, which he also references in the song. He then brings it full circle to drive that point home by disestablishing the woman in the beginning as a generic gold digger and really as an allegory of America with the closing lines, "Oh America, you bad bitch, I picked your cotton and made you rich, now my dick ain't free" directly followed by the woman replying "I'mma get my Uncle Sam to fuck you up. You ain't no king!"

The album does not confine the poetic aspect to just this song, but to every track, and even offers mini readings before and after certain tracks. Kendrick is known for his elaborate lyrics and is regarded by many as a poet before a rapper. This has been true throughout his entire career. On his debut album, "Section.80," there is a song titled "Rigamortus." This song is especially important because it not only highlights his lyrical ability, but also another key

element of hip hop: sampling. While “For Free?” is performed over a live band, “Rigamortus” is performed over a sampled horn loop. Sampling evolved from drum breaks to melodies. A prime target for sampling has always been jazz. Rigamortus sampled Willie Jones III’s “The Thorn.” While some see sampling as thievery, many others see it as an art form in it’s own right. If you listen to “Rigamortus” and “The Thorn” you will see that they are completely different songs and have utterly different tones and moods. Tricia Rose wrote in her book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*:

“At the same time as rap music has dramatically changed the intended use of sampling technology, it has also remained critically linked to black poetic traditions and the oral forms that underwrite them. These oral traditions and practices clearly inform the prolific use of collage, intertextuality, boasting, toasting, and signifying in rap's lyrical style and organization.”

Sampling is in its own way a form of poetry. It is similar to blackout poetry. Blackout poetry takes a page of literature and “blacks out” all of the words besides a few to create a new piece. Similarly, sampling takes a smaller portion of a larger work to create something new. As a producer myself, I can speak from experience that sampling is much more difficult than people make it out to be. There are many producers who are clueless as to where to begin with a sample and there are others who base their entire careers on it. Sampling is a craft in and of itself that takes hard work, determination, practice, and hours upon hours of searching for music. When sampling jazz songs, hip hop is then resemblant of jazz accompanied poetry. It draws on similar

principles, but with its own aesthetic. Considering that they are jazz samples, it is almost as if they are rapping over jazz music. However, it is hip hop and is unmistakably hip hop and not jazz, which then provides itself as something else. Perhaps hip hop accompanied poetry? No, perhaps it is just poetry. Actually, no again: it is hip hop and hip hop is poetry.

In my whole hearted opinion, if LeRoi Jones was born in today's era where hip hop was more prominent than jazz, Amiri Baraka would be his stage name instead of his legally changed name, and he would be on a level equivalent to Kendrick Lamar as one of the greatest rappers to ever live. Hip Hop as a whole is more than what meets the eye. On a surface level, especially with what is supported by radio and mainstream sources, hip hop can seem trivial, degrading, and worthless. I agree, there are some people who do not take the lyrical aspect of hip hop with the same poetic intensity as Kendrick Lamar or TuPac, but they too are true to the roots of hip hop as party anthem-ers. Hip Hop became a culture, with its own music, fashion, dance, speech, and personality. There are people who dedicate their lives to Hip Hop and share their souls on every track, a level more intimate than most can even imagine. As Common said in "The 6th Sense," "It's real hip hop music, from the soul, y'all."