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The Hip-Hop Sublime: On the Phenomenology of Hip-Hop's Sound

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Hip-Hop's aesthetics have traditionally been associated with literacy in hip-hop scholarship, focusing on how sampling and written lyrical content mirror the production of literary poetry. However, this type of association with literacy relies on an ideology of literacy that places literacy at the top of an aesthetic hierarchy. This hierarchy is particularly problematic given the racialized stakes of literacy in the United States. In practice, however, Hip-Hop resists this association with literacy, particularly in the realm of the sonic. Hip-Hop's sound functions phenomenologically—evading the capture of the sign—in a formation that this paper refers to as the Hip-Hop sublime. Building on a tradition of signifying beyond words in the Black expressive tradition, the Hip-Hop sublime refers to the affective communal registers of sound that are only available in relationship with the musical culture itself. Attention to the Hip-Hop sublime not only impacts theorizations of Hip-Hop's sound, but it also proposes a disposition of listening that insists on a communally interpretative relationship between listener, artist, and community.

Keywords: Hip-Hop, Hip-Hop sublime, Black music, literacy, phenomenology

From the earliest iterations of Hip-Hop studies scholarship, Hip-Hop has been claimed as post-modern poetry, a suggestion that has been reaffirmed and extended by others as the field has developed. Much has been made of Hip-Hop's connection to literacy. Such a literacy superimposed on Hip-Hop's aesthetics is not limited to its connection to writing. Likewise, musicologists have tried to formulate notational methods[1] to represent how Hip-Hop emcees and producers use sound to make meaning in their compositional processes. While these approaches often have merit to help an academic audience—influenced by a racialized ideology of literacy[2]—comprehend a form that developed outside of that ideology, these approaches often strip Hip-Hop of the principles that govern its composition and modes of meaning-making. Resultantly, many academic critiques of

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[1] Please see Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (2000) or Kyle Adams, "On the Metrical Technique of Flow in Rap Music" (2009) for examples of scholars that develop notation to analyze hip-hop's sonic expression.

[2] Soltow and Stevens in their 1981 historical study *The Rise of Literacy in the Common School in the United States* define the ideology of literacy as the "hierarchical view" that "sought to establish links between intelligence, virtue, and literateness" (8). This ideology was a formation of "social control" connected to morality, civic participation, and "proper socialization" (59-61). While Soltow and Stevens do not connect race to this ideology of literacy in their study, I suggest that such an ideology is strongly interconnected to the ways in which Black expressive cultures and their aesthetic innovations were dismissed or erased throughout US history. In other words, the ideology of literacy has been wielded as a tool of racialization to exclude Black creatives, and Black people more broadly, from categories of Humanity and Being in the West.

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Hip-Hop's aesthetics characterize Hip-Hop's sonics either as the vehicle for an emcee's lyrical creation[3] or as referential literary artifacts, especially in the case of sampling.[4]

Rather than making meaning through some notated process or analog to literate aesthetics, I argue that Hip-Hop signifies sound's ineffability—a formal quality that can only be known through phenomenology or the experience of that sound. It is precisely because of this ineffability that some scholars have avoided and critiqued the use of notation[5] altogether in their discussion of Hip-Hop's sonic production. Hip-Hop aurally communicates through what I call the *Hip-Hop sublime*, a sonic practice in Hip-Hop that creates meaning outside of the literate definitional frame (i.e., sign and signified) while holding immense communicative power. The Hip-Hop sublime operates in proximity to the verbal, such as Biggie's guttural grunt before he begins a verse ("unhh" [6]), but it can also be non-verbal like in the wall of horns that open Pharoahe Monch's "Simon Says." The Hip-Hop sublime refers to any Hip-Hop utterance or sound that signifies beyond words through the phenomenology of sound, tapping into a much broader Black expressive history that signifies underneath linguistic practices.

Musicologist Adam Krims originally made a case for a Hip-Hop sublime in the context of late 1980s/early 1990s rap. Referring to the production practices of groups like Public Enemy's super-producer group The Bomb Squad, Krims argues:

> The incompatible timbral properties both contribute to the sound sources' aural separation and also form their own sublime counterpart to the incompatible pitch combinations...The Hip-Hop sublime may help to account for the widespread impression that rap music soundscapes sound menacing and aggressive, quite apart from the lyrical content.[7]

Krims' account attaches the significance of the Hip-Hop sublime to the incommensurability of Hip-Hop's sonic characteristics to Western musicological understanding, suggesting that these timbral qualities are "incompatible," thus producing what people often hear as "menacing and aggressive" in Hip-Hop's sound. I seek to extend this theory of the Hip-Hop sublime, leaving behind Krims' musicological rooting to place the sublime entirely in the phenomenological, thus attempting to understand the Hip-Hop sublime through its affective power, not through its proximity to music notation and Western scales.

I argue that the Hip-Hop sublime is more than Western musicological dissonance and instead serves as a significant way that communicates meaning in Hip-Hop's sound—a meaning that is a-

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[3] Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois, introduction to *The Anthology of Rap*, edited by Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010), xxxiv-xxxv.

[4] This argument is made in Adam Haupt, *Stealing Empire: P2P, Intellectual Property and Hip-Hop Subversion*, (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2008) and Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, xxx. Joseph Schloss argues against this theory in *Making Beats: The Art of Sample Based Hip-Hop* (2004): "While such anachronic collages would seem to hold a great deal of interpretive promise for semioticians, producers are not particularly concerned with using samples to make social, political, or historical points. In fact, symbolic meaning (as opposed to pragmatic value within the musical system) is almost universally overstated by scholars as a motive for sampling (e.g., Potter 1995, Rose 1994, Costello and Wallace 1990). Generally speaking, producers value the meaning of a particular sample not primarily for its own sake, but more as a venue for ambiguity and manipulation" (132).

[5] In addition to Schloss *Making Beats* (2004), please refer to Justin Williams, "Beats and Flows: A Response to Kyle Adams, 'Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap,'" *Music Theory Online* 15, no. 2 (2009).

[6] See the beginning of Notorious B.I.G.'s "Hypnotize," "Big Poppa," or right before his verse in "Mo Money, Mo Problems" (right around the 2:05 mark on the Spotify recording) to hear this utterance. It is his standard vocal warm up to his verses.

[7] Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity,* 74

literate,[8] affectively communicated and communally constructed. This article first contextualizes the Hip-Hop sublime in the Black expressive tradition of communicating beyond words—what I call the Black sublime—before turning to how the Hip-Hop sublime functions as a semantic strategy. Throughout this article, I also contend that the Hip-Hop sublime emerges from Black womxn's[9] theorizations of sound and meaning-making, insisting that the sublime is one of the many critical innovations of Hip-Hop culture by Black womxn that go unacknowledged or un(der)appreciated in critical discourse. The article concludes with brief case studies of the Hip-Hop sublime featuring Yasiin Bey and Missy Elliott.

The Black Sublime: Resisting an Ideology of Literacy

In the tradition of the long history of Black aesthetic resistance, the Hip-Hop sublime refuses what I call the ideology of literacy (and its relationship to racial subjugation), carving out a space of signification underneath that of literate communication. This method of meaning-making defies words themselves, as Fred Moten argues in his discussion of Arendt's discomfort with illiteracy:

> In other words, there is something that defied the political constitution of the word itself—something below even dark speech and its circumscription, something beneath the political underbreath, something correspondent to what Arendt characterizes as illiterate and which she recognizes as a more absolute danger to the political, even if it is beneath her recognition.[10]

For Moten, there is revolutionary potential that signifies under (and beyond) the political construction of the word. The Hip-Hop sublime evades literacy in its insistence on making meaning through the non-linguistic sound—like a shout, moan, or any particularly emotive sound. It communicates affective messages ranging from the attestation of an emcee's skill to a cry of pain to the moan of the erotic or the pleasure of the party. The sublime emerges from what Paul Gilroy calls the "topos of unsayability,"[11] which Moten figures as a communicative form that "lies below speech, as speech's dislocation, is a serially dissed location."[12] This dissed (or willfully inarticulate?) speech is foundational to Hip-Hop's matrix of meaning-making in that it communicates the affective belonging and pleasure that the form is infamous for invoking. At the same time, it pushes beyond what literacy can offer in terms of political subversion. The Hip-Hop sublime sublimates the literate messages of speech to the affective messages that speech cannot capture, those ineffable moments that are unspeakable in their horror or beauty, pain or pleasure.

The signification of the sublime renders for listeners who do not seek to listen to Hip-Hop in its own key. Placing a concept of the sublime in a broader context of Black political expression, LeRoi Jones details how white enslavers found the affective messages of the spirituals aurally incomprehensible in his analysis of the diaries of New Orleans' enslaver Miss Kemble:

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[8] I say "a-literate" instead of "illiterate" or "non-literate" here to signify that the Hip-Hop sublime signifies apart from literacy's semiotics altogether. The Hip-Hop sublime is neither lacking literacy ("illiterate") nor is it primarily defined by its non-literacy. Instead, it signifies in a semiotic sphere altogether separate from literacy, and thus is a-literate.

[9] I use "womxn" to include non-cisgender women in the long history of racialized violence against female-identified Black people. This spelling seeks to call attention to the erasure of many Black womxn whose critical theorizations, stories, and voices have been erased in the violence of the archive.

[10] Fred Moten, *Universal Machine*, (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2018), 102.

[11] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), 75.

[12] Moten, *Universal Machine,* 102-3

> Except the extemporaneous chants in our honor...I have never heard the Negroes...sing any words that could be said to have any sense...I have heard that many of the masters and overseers on these plantations prohibit melancholy tunes or words, and encourage nothing but cheerful music and senseless words, deprecating the effect of sadder strains upon the slaves, whose peculiar musical sensibility might be expected to make them especially excitable by any songs of a plaintive character, and having any reference to their peculiar hardships.[13]

The "sense" that Kemble is likely searching for cannot be found in the songs she hears, as such "senseless" words occur in a radical context in which the word is politicized. This sound occupies Moten's conceptual space of the serially dissed location. For the enslaved, literacy was a matter of life or death, and on the plantations that Kemble describes, so is the wrong word at the wrong time. Such senseless words likely held multitudes of meaning for enslaved people who did not have the freedom to articulate the existential pain of enslavement in a (white) literate sense. The word—both written and spoken—was thoroughly regulated in the space of the plantation. Kemble's aural ineptitude regarding these senseless songs exemplifies how the sublime traditionally evades white literate understanding. As Baraka writes later in his essay "Language of Defiance," it is often these "senseless" elocutions that carry the deepest signification in Black expressive practices: Scat and Bebop have always impressed me as a black people trying to re-understand their ancient tongues. What the past laid on is, is interpreted in the now."[14] Such forms of elocution below linguistic communication carry significant meaning in the resistance of the American racial regime. Within this context, Biggie's "unhh" has more purpose than simply warming up his voice to record in the booth. Instead, the utterance below linguistic meaning can signify a sound knowledge that remains unspoken, allowing for a register of Black life that avoids white literary metrics that roundly devalue such expression as "senseless," frivolous, or inarticulate. The sublime utterance contains multitudes.

Music is a particularly apt vehicle for the sublime because of its affective register and how affect can sublimate messaging underneath literate semantic processes. As Brent Hayes Edwards argues, Black music exists at the "edge of semantic availability,"[15] constantly pushing the ways that meaning is made and prodding the limits of literate articulation. "In vocal expression in music, scat falls where language rustles with alterity, where the foreign runs in jive and the inside jargon goes in the garb of the outsider…it is the very point at which the music polices the edges of its territory."[16] As Edwards suggests, music provides an apt landscape for expressive alterity, where language fades from expressive power and scat—the non-sense/un-sensed words that Kemble perhaps heard—express the inarticulable under the aural blanket of musical pleasure. The text, limited by type, page, and signs, cannot capture the inexpressible at the edges of literate understanding since the text's ultimate mode of meaning-making is linguistic and lexical. On the one hand, text functions to capture words, not free them from their political boundaries and referents. On the other hand, music unmoors words from their lexical meaning, allowing them to be sonically bent and reshaped through affective communication.

This musical unmooring of sign/signified meaning also moves beyond the articulation of pain. White literate frameworks of racial aesthetics can hyper-focus on the pain inflicted on Black bodies. Instead, the Hip-Hop sublime emerges from the pleasure of articulating Black life in a linguistic environment designed to bind that Black life to pain. As Mount Vernon emcee Niko Brim

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[13] LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1963), 77-78.
[14] Amiri Baraka, "The Language of Defiance," *Black Issues Book Review* 3, no. 5 (2001), 28.
[15] Brent Hayes Edwards, *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination,* (Boston: Harvard UP, 2017), 16.
[16] Ibid. 36

suggests of the process of honing his flow, his vocal play taps into the power of sound to articulate the unspeakable elements of Black life—especially pleasure—at the boundaries of meaning:

> Niko: You know what I mean? So it's like, if you're looking to dance or move, you're not trying to create your own flow over the beat. You want to be in it, you know what I mean? And it might just be a random word, like [makes a nonsense word up] but it makes you move, you know?[17]

In making a non-sense word up, Brim highlights the ability of that word's sound to make you move. Hip-Hop's sublime excavates the power of pleasure at the boundaries of conventional speech. The development of flow—the undefinable quality of being "in it"—is one of the under-theorized practices of Hip-Hop aesthetics that eschews any analog of literacy. To understand Hip-Hop's semantics, in other words, one must be "in it," listening to the key of life in the borderlands of semantic availability.

However, the Hip-Hop sublime does not emerge from a vacuum in Black expressive history. The concept of the sublime or the semantically opaque grows out of but is not limited to the expressive practices of Black womxn, whose expressive practices are often illegible to the Western theoretical canon. As Hortense Spillers suggests in her foundational essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Black womxn enter the white literate American imagination beyond words, outside of the grammars of Being that recognize their humanity.[18] By mapping Black womxn's life (and its expression) outside of the American grammar book, Spillers pushes her audience to *read* differently, searching for the grammar of non-Being. Such anti/antegrammatical.[19] Being calls for a rupture of grammatical aesthetics, perhaps most obviously in what Saidiya Hartman labels as the semantic "opacity" of sorrow songs like spirituals and the Blues.[20] When Black womxn like Anna Julia Cooper[21] and Pauline Hopkins[22] wrote about Spirituals, they always included descriptions of the anti/ante-semantics of the sorrow songs to signify pain, hope, and community in a racial grammar that refused to recognize the political possibility of such expression. Put simply, Black womxn's vocality through the moan, cry, song, laugh, etc. signifies beyond writing, developing an expressive practice underneath literate structures while creating a space underneath white surveillance to articulate aspirations, sorrows, and impossible futures.

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[17] Niko Brim in conversation with the author. Dec. 9, 2019.

[18] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2003), 156.

[19] The "antegrammatical" is theorized by Moten in *Black and Blur* (2018): "What we be trying to talk about all of the time, amongst and against ourselves and all up in the air and under the ground and water, is antegrammatical—a general beyond of the analogy, whose very invocation remains a kind of sterile double entry." (221)

[20] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) 36.

[21] Anna Julia Cooper writes in *A Voice from the South:* "There was something truly poetic in their weird moanings, their fitful gleams of hope and trust, flickering amidst the darkness of their wailing helplessness, their strange sad songs, the half coherent ebullitions of souls in pain, which become, the more they are studied, at once the wonder and the despair of musical critics and imitators" (1892, 180).

[22] Pauline Hopkins writes in her novel *Contending Forces*: "The voices of the slaves could be heard droning out their weird and plaintive notes, as they sought by song movement to lighten the monotony of their heavy tasks and bring solace to their sad hearts. Some, in their simple ignorance, may not have known why they were sad, but, like the captive bird, their hearts longed for that which was ever the birthright of man —- property in himself" (1900, 60).

Black womxn's writing phenomenon creates a tradition of resistant aesthetics in the sonic. It is what Daphne Brooks calls the "wordless work"[23] of the femme vocal register:

> These women of the lower registers, like their brothers up high, push our imagination, our desires, our quotidian needs to engage with the traces of suffering by challenging us through sound to go to (other) extremes and border regions, to tarry in the boundaries of the elsewhere. By way of their location on these 'lower frequencies,' they 'speak for' us.[24]

While this wordless work is indeed connected to a survival imperative in the context of totalizing racial violence, Brooks locates a significant function of Ellisonian lower frequencies to articulate not just the immediate danger of America's racial system but also to provide space for the fulfillment of quotidian needs. The sublime functions as a channel of Black life when that life remains inarticulable in the grammar of America's racial regime. Such wordless work enables Black womxn to express perhaps the most illegible aspect of life in the American racial grammar system—their pleasure. Whether considering Shange's configuration of dance as holding liberatory potential in *for colored girls*[25] or the way that Morrison uses the sublime to articulate reconciliation and healing in *Beloved*,[26] the Black sublime activates a safe avenue to share the pleasure of living underneath the limitations of language that have been repeatedly policed in the American racial regime. While the sublime is indeed interconnected with racial terror, it primarily serves as an expressive vehicle of the complex joys of Black life above such violence.

My identification of Black womxn's use of the sublime seeks to do more than simply historicize the development of the sublime in Black definitive history. Instead, I intentionally point out that Black womxn not only use the sublime but innovate it as a technology of racialized communication. Thus, while the sublime is not limited to Black womxn, it emerges from their expressive practices. Put simply, any understanding of the sublime is heavily indebted to Black womxn's theorizing. This observation is particularly salient in Hip-Hop's history of erasure and devaluation of Black womxn's aesthetic innovations.

However, the sublime has resonance in the Black literary tradition more broadly, which situates the sublime's full expressive potential, not in letters but in music. Refiguring Moten's question

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[23] Daphne Brooks, "Afro-Sonic Feminist Praxis: Nina Simone and Adrienne Kennedy in High Fidelity," in *Black Performance Theory*, ed. Thomas Fr. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014), 219.

[24] Ibid. 220

[25] Shange writes, "i dont wanna write
in english or spanish
i wanna sing make you dance
like the bata dance scream
twitch hips wit me cuz
i done forgot all abt words
aint got no definitions
i wanna whirl
with you"
Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 1975), 5.

[26] Morrison writes in *Beloved*, "They sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings. They and the women they knew; the children they had been; the animals they had tamed themselves or seen others tame. They sang of bosses and masters and misses; of mules and dogs and the shamelessness of life. They sang lovingly of graveyards and sisters long gone. Of pork in the woods; meal in the pan; fish on the line; cane, rain, and rocking chairs." Toni Morrison, *Beloved,* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 128.

as a declaration: it is only music, the only sound that goes there,[27] forming a communicative haven outside of the bounds of the ideology of literacy. For example, Baraka figures the wail as not simply a cry for pain, but a musical method of making meaning when words will not do:

> We sing philosophy. Hambone precise findings. Image Masters of the syncopated.
> Wailers & Drummers.
> Wailers & Trumpet stars.
> Wailers & Box cookers.
> Wailers & Sax flyers.
> Wailers & Bass thumpers.
> Wailers and Hey, wail, wail. We Wailers![28]

Of course, Baraka is playing on Bob Marley's band, The Wailers, and their revolutionary music. Still, he pushes towards what Gloria Naylor recognizes in her novel *Mama Day*, that "some things can just be known without words."[29] Put simply, Black music's expressive exploration beyond words develops a communal space illegible to an ideology of literacy.

The potential of the Black sublime almost serves as a trope in the Black literary tradition, ranging from the descriptions of the wordless communication of the enslaved that Cooper and Hopkins discussed above to the descriptions of the ineffable messages of sound in the work of writers like Ishmael Reed,[30] Ralph Ellison,[31] Baraka,[32] and Hip-Hop poet Saul Williams. Williams, in particular, explores how Hip-Hop foregrounds the Black sublime in its aesthetics. In his love letter to Hip-Hop, *The Dead Emcee Scrolls*, Williams writes of the limitations of conventional speech in Hip-Hop's aesthetic organization:

> Mere language
> Is profanity. I'd rather hum. Or have my
> Soul tattooed to my tongue. And let the
> Scriptures be sung in gibberish. 'Cause
> Words be simple fish in my soulquarium.[33]

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[27] Moten writes, "Words don't go there [in Cecil Taylor's *Chinampas*]. Is it only music, only sound that goes there? Perhaps these notes and phrases will have mapped the terrain and traversed (at least some of) the space between here and there." Fred Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics Of The Black Radical Tradition*, (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota Press, 2003), 42.

[28] Amiri Baraka, "Wailers," *Real Song*, Enja Records, 1995.

[29] Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, (New York: Random House, 1988), 267.

[30] Reed wrote on the phenomenon of "Jes Grew": "It's nothing we can bring into focus or categorize; once we call it 1 thing it forms into something else" Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, London: Penguin Books, 2017), 4.

[31] Ellison writes in *Invisible Man*: "I moved with the crowd, the sweat pouring off me, listening to the grinding roar of traffic, the growing sound of a record shop loudspeaker blaring a languid blues. I stopped. Was this all that would be recorded? Was this the only true history of the times, a mood blared by trumpets. Trombones, saxophones, and drums, a song with turgid, inadequate words? My mind flowed." Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), 443.

[32] Baraka writes in *Dutchman*: "Belly rub is not Queens. Belly rub is dark places with big hats and overcoats held up with one arm. Belly rub hates you... Old bald-headed four-eyed ofays popping their fingers ... and don't know yet what they're doing. They say, "I love Bessie Smith and don't even understand that Bessie Smith is saying, "Kiss my ass, kiss my black unruly ass." Before love, suffering, desire, anything you can explain, she's saying, and very plainly, "Kiss my black ass." And if you don't know that, it's you that's doing the kissing." Amiri Baraka, *Dutchman*, 1st electronic ed, (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2001), 9.

[33] Saul Williams, *The Dead Emcee Scrolls: The Lost Teachings of Hip-Hop and Connected Writings,* (New York: MTV Books/Pocket Books, 2006), 66.

Mere language / is profanity. What profanity, even heresy, it is to an ideology of literacy—especially one that celebrates Hip-Hop's written words—to call language itself "mere." Williams instead gestures toward that which is ineffable as the ultimate power of the Hip-Hop sublime. His "soulquarium" refers to the group of creatives in the late 1990s called the "Soulquarians" that included immensely influential musicians like the Roots, Erykah Badu, D'Angelo, Bilal, J Dilla, Common, Q-Tip, Talib Kweli, Yasiin Bey (then Mos Def), James Poyser, Roy Hargrove, and others. While these artists represent some of the most lyrically complex wordsmiths in Hip-Hop history—Q-Tip, Talib Kweli, Yasiin Bey, Common, and the Roots' emcee Black Thought could arguably produce the most intricate lyricism of any other group of five emcees at any time in Hip-Hop's almost 50-year history—words are simple fish in Williams' soulquarium. In other words, Williams recognizes the immense power of the antegrammatical, for he would instead hum than rely on the strength of mere language, just as Hopkins, Cooper, Ellison, Reed, Naylor, Morrison, Shange, Spillers, Hartman, and countless other Black artists have relied on the power of the non-linguistic utterance to sublimate articulations Black life beyond the grammar of white American oppression. These writers figure the Black sublime as a foundationally fugitive expressive tool, eschewing the sense of white literate aesthetics for the freedom dream of the non-sensed elocution.

The Hip-Hop Sublime

As Williams' passage suggests, Hip-Hop continues this long tradition of the Black sublime. The Hip-Hop sublime extends the Black sublime, deploying the sonic to articulate pleasure, pain, and belonging outside of the confines of written or spoken language. Kevin Young describes this quality in Hip-Hop as its desire to be "misheard," arguing against Adam Bradley's depiction of rap as insisting "on being understood."[34]

> There's something in Hip-Hop that, despite its protests to the contrary, wants to be misheard, and even unheard. It is a music of the lower frequencies after all. The storying tradition is rife with coding and incompleteness as a set of strategies—Hip-Hop's slang alone, like the black vernacular more generally, seeks to draw distinctions and circles, some more inner than others.[35]

Young, returning us to the trope of the lower frequencies, lingers in the dislocation/dissed location of Hip-Hop's sound. This interpretative, indeterminate space harbors Hip-Hop's modes of aural meaning-making. A stable connection between the musical sign (i.e., notation) and signified are ruptured, displacing sound knowledge into the ears of hip-hop's community of listeners. It is this displacement into an open-ended interpretative process that I call the hip-hop sublime. In this sense, the "coding" and "incompleteness" that Young discusses are the communicative conditions of the Hip-Hop sublime, which distinguishes the sound knowledge of cultural insiders from that of cultural outsiders. In other words, the sublime activates a culturally-rooted meaning of sound instead of sound meaning being rooted in institutionalized sonic principles.[36]

Like the Black sublime, the Hip-Hop sublime carries with it a political purpose. Imani Perry theorizes this semantic strategy fully into the realm of political resistance, arguing that it operates

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[34] Bradley, *Book of Rhymes*, 5

[35] Kevin Young, *The Grey Album; On the Blackness of Blackness*, (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012), 313.

[36] Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2019), 9.

as a resistant mode of communication against white supremacy (what in this essay, I have been referring to as the ideology of literacy):

> One of the communication elements that resists white supremacy and co-optation has been the *self-conscious incomprehensibility of hip hop lyricism*. Rappers are *misunderstood, both intentionally and unintentionally*, not only as a side effect of the fact that we rely on figurative pidgins in the United States to cross borders in popular culture; but *incomprehensibility is also a protective strategy*.[37] (emphasis mine)

As I have argued above, such incomprehensibility is the dissed location of the Hip-Hop sublime. Building on Perry not only is incomprehensibility a protective strategy, but it also enables the communication of pleasure. Particularly in Hip-Hop culture, there is immense power in the party in which comprehension is secondary to the curation of pleasure. Significantly, Perry also exposes that this communication is not always intentional. Literary theory may rely on intentional messaging to construct meaning—whether authorial intention or the lexical determinism that colors close reading techniques—but Hip-Hop's theory of meaning-making does not rely on the author for those messages to be communicable. Because sound is communally defined in Hip-Hop's semantic range, sound's "messages" do not rely on intentionality or decoding processes. Meaning, instead, is made through the prominence of the listening community (or audience) in Hip-Hop's aesthetics. Thus, artists do not always utilize the sublime intentionally, which in no way detracts from its power or its long history in the Black expressive tradition in the United States.

The political potential of the sublime creates the possibility to tease out the contours of whiteness that appear invisible in the ideology of literacy, as Hip-Hop choreographer Rennie Harris implicitly gestures toward in his interview with Hip-Hop scholar Jeff Chang:

> Those things [contradictions] in Hip-Hop are unspoken and understood. And what happens is we get caught trying to explain it, and most of the time, we can't explain it. It's like learning a language that doesn't have a goddamned meaning—I mean 'How do you explain so-and-so in this language?' And so, in Hip-Hop, I think we all understand that, and so when we're challenged we're feeling inadequate in how we're gonna convey that. For me, I don't want to be in a place of feeling inadequate; I want to be very clear about what's unspoken.[38]

I argue that Harris' suggestion of Hip-Hop's willful indeterminacy contains a productive space in which the insistence of whiteness (and its aesthetic mechanism, literacy) upon determinacy, definition, and objectivity has no ground in which to take root. Like Esu Elegbara (the god of language and indeterminacy in Yoruba divination that captured Gates' critical attention in *The Signifying Monkey*), Hip-Hop consents not to be single,[39] relying on mobile, fugitive sonic aesthetic to make meaning. While "decoding" Hip-Hop may seem like a worthy endeavor for a form that so heavily relies on the written word to make meaning, Hip-Hop's indeterminacy confronts whiteness, forc-

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[37] Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 50.
[38] Jeff Chang, "The Pure Movement and the Crooked Line: An Interview with Rennie Harris," in *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop* ed. Jeff Chang, (New York: BasicCivitas, 2006), 64.
[39] I am nodding here toward the title of Fred Moten's most recent book series, *consent not to be a single being*. Moten cites the phrase from Martinican theorist Glissant to describe the radical fugitivity of "imaginative sociopoetic work of refusal$_2$" in Black studies. See Fred Moten, *Stolen Life*, (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2018), 194. I argue that Hip-Hop, likewise, refuses singularity or stability in its aesthetics, instead turning toward an aesthetics in motion that evades the capture of any analog of literacy.

ing it to encounter the grays at its edges. Literacy, then, is unable to capture Hip-Hop metaphorically. The sign dies in Hip-Hop's sonics, allowing the signified to be accessed only in the expressive potentials of sound. While Hip-Hop by no means is inadequate to explain such indeterminacy, it makes meaning by a lack of explanation. As Young put it, it desires to be unheard.

As such, the Hip-Hop sublime demands a different kind of interpretive process that centers the listening community over the sign. I suggest that meaning, especially in the Hip-Hop sublime, is carried through three principles of sound meaning: 1) sound's meaning is primarily perceived affectively and is subjective, 2) sound's meaning is only communally defined, and 3) sound's meaning cannot be perceived in its totality.[40] An ideology of literacy tries to decode Hip-Hop into an objective lexical system divorced from the culture created. Still, the Hip-Hop sublime forces the listener to engage with the cultural creators and the form's fugitivity to make sense of its meaning. To be theoretically rigorous, such engagement must, for example, deconstruct the white listener's own whiteness, for to begin to tune into the lower frequencies means that the listener must understand what these frequencies exist under, which is the crushing determinist semiotics of Western aesthetics. I am arguing that Hip-Hop's non-singularity in its aesthetics, especially in its utilization of the sublime, encourages its listeners to engage by self-examination, understanding their own cultural position and how that position impacts the excavation of its messages. Meaning, then, is not made through referent in Hip-Hop's sound. Meaning is made through community.

If you listen closely enough, Hip-Hop demands that we understand its "sound knowledge," which Deborah Kapchan defines as a nondiscursive form of affective transmission resulting from acts of listening.[41] Sound knowledge is created when the listener stops to listen to the lower frequencies, or the modes of knowledge often unheard in the logocentric West, which racializes aesthetics through an ideology of literacy. An overfocus on Hip-Hop's words or sounds *as they exist on a page* refuses to hear the rich semantic registers that resist lexical processes altogether. Hip-Hop's linguistic and non-linguistic modes of meaning-making are more rooted in the sound, texture, and performance of words than words on a page. Without attention to Kapchan's sound knowledge, one risks mishearing Hip-Hop.

The Hip-Hop sublime is multivarious in its practices throughout Hip-Hop history—ranging in sound knowledge production from communicating terror to pleasure to braggadocio to ancestor worship. Its function is best understood through its practice, so I will examine three cases of what I call the Hip-Hop sublime to elucidate how it produces sound knowledge. For example, the Hip-Hop sublime can signify small, unspoken messages in fleeting musical moments. Take Yasiin Bey (Mos Def) in "Fear Not of Man," the opening track of the 1999 album *Black on Both Sides*. He opens his verse with an "ooh ooh, wee!," which functions as an utterance of recognition and pleasure that could perhaps be exclaimed when one sees a friend across the street in Bey's home borough of Brooklyn (after all, he follows it with "That was for Brooklyn, we get it every time"). This use of the sublime roots such a sprawling album—ranging from discussions of the shortcomings of the Hip-Hop industry to anti-racism to anti-capitalism to an environmental critique of colonialism—in the immediate context of Brooklyn in the late 1990s, articulating Bey's thought excursions within the material contexts of his community. His utterance can signify as broadly as centering

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[40] I developed these principles out of Nina Eidsheim's three tenets of interpreting the voice: "1) voice is not singular, it is collective; voice is not innate, it is cultural; voice's source is not the singer, it is the listener" (*Race of Sound,* 9). These principles are broadened in my reinterpretation of them to capture the ways in which Hip-Hop artists deploy sound to make meaning.

[41] Deborah Kapchan, "The Splash of Icarus: Theorizing Sound Writing/Writing Sound Theory," in *Theorizing Sound Writing*, ed. Deborah Kapchan. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2017), 1.

Brooklyn in a global and diasporic context and signify as simply as garnering excitement in his listeners for his much-anticipated debut solo LP. While such a small moment in an otherwise expansive album may seem trivial, these brief moments—like James Brown's scream or Michael Jackson's breathy exclamations—situate the listener in a shared communal moment. Almost ceremonial, these utterances in the sublime simultaneously communicate affective belonging and pleasure, which serve to place the reader first in the context of Brooklyn before engaging in any other spatial recognition. While "ooh ooh wee" may appear like an ordinary, meaningless utterance to some listeners, I argue that by tapping into the sublime, Bey communicates sound knowledge that demonstrates his affective belonging in his Brooklyn community.

Bey also deploys the Hip-Hop sublime in his late-track ad-libs for "Double Trouble" in the Roots' *Things Fall Apart* (1999), a clinic in line-trading lyricism with the Roots' frontman Black Thought. As the track fades, Bey begins to rap "zen zen zen zen zen, zen zen zen zen zen, zen zen zen zen," which is a reference to the now-infamous ad-libbed verse of emcee Pow Wow in Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force's foundational early Hip-Hop track "Planet Rock" (1982). The utterance itself does not hold any literate referent whatsoever. It was created when Pow Wow forgot his lyrics for the verse and started to rap "zen zen zen" in a funky pattern so that he could hold his flow on the beat when he remembered the words. The error sounded good enough to keep it on the track and now is an iconic reference to Hip-Hop's earliest years. Bey, in this reference, is paying sonic homage to hip-hop's roots.

Bey continues this homage in the record's outro, following the construction of the "Stoop Rap" from the first Hip-Hop movie *Wild Style* (1983). He mirrors both the rhyme scheme of the original verse and the opening line: "Here's a little story that must be told / about two cool brothers that were put on hold." The Roots' record also gets its name from the repeated phrase "double trouble" at the end of "Stoop Rap." Finally, his homage references the Run DMC lyric "let the poppers pop and the breakers break" from "King of Rock" (1985). Thus, the reference to "Planet Rock" is not simply quoted material. It is a love letter to the Hip-Hop's innovators who created the culture Bey grew to love. His invocation of "zen zen zen" is more ancestor worship than musical reference, pulling together various 1980s Hip-Hop references in a sounded shrine. Deeply embedded in his "zens" is the Hip-Hop sublime's ability to pull forth emotion, context, and meaning with simply a sound. Thus Pow Wow's vocal mistake becomes something different altogether, without a lexical word being uttered at all.

Finally, I turn to one of Hip-Hop's greatest sonic innovators, Missy Elliott, to demonstrate the political potential of pleasure in the Hip-Hop sublime. Elliott was a 2019 Songwriters Hall of Fame inductee, but unlike other inductees, one of her most prominent songwriting techniques utilizes the Hip-Hop sublime over literate modes of meaning-making. Elliott's songwriting, whether in the use of onomatopoeia in "The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)" or the erotic sublime in "Hit 'Em wit da Hee," prominently relies on word sound to communicate meaning, sometimes eclipsing the written word altogether with groans, shouts, and other non-linguistic utterances. Niko Brim associates this power with the power of her music in terms of her power to rock a party: "someone like Missy Elliott, she's going to use these words because her intention may not be for you to think, it's for you to dance, it's for you to move."[42] Elliott is not trying to get you to think, but rather, she is trying to get you to dance. She uses the sound of her words to communicate the imperative to party even over the lexical definitions of the words themselves. As Atlanta emcee Big Piph puts it, "But Missy was like, I'm making noises that sound cool. Just straight up, and then I'm putting words to

[42] Niko Brim in conversation with the author. Dec. 9, 2019.

it."[43] Piph certainly is not implying that Elliott's use of the sublime suggests her inability to write densely lyrical verses; instead, he is commenting on the semantic order of her writing. While some Hip-Hop writers lean on lexical wordplay to make meaning, Missy's style relies on the *sound* of her words. The way she aurally bends her utterances sometimes matters more than the content of the utterances themselves. She makes meaning in her vocal technique.

Such dependence on the Hip-Hop sublime as a primary mode of meaning-making is prominent in her 1997 single "Hit 'Em wit da Hee." Missy Elliott expresses her erotic desire almost exclusively through the sublime. "Da Hee" is a bit of an undefined erotic reference. Still, it is readily clear to the listener beyond a lexical definition of "hee" that Elliott is referring to a sexual advance toward another person in the context of the song. Elliott's meaning is located in her community practices (knowing what "hee" means) and moving past literate wording to express her erotic desire. Elliott's emcee expertise lies in pushing words to or beyond their meaning instead of relying upon sound approximation and slang. While Elliott and the track's featured artist Lil' Kim certainly articulate a clear erotic message throughout the song's lyrics, the undefined "hee" serves as the ultimate erotic referent that evades literate definition. Elliott depends on the "hee" to define the nature of the sexual advance, but the only way to understand the "hee" is to immerse oneself in Elliott's sonic realm. The erotic, then, is signaled first with the sublime before any literate erotic message filters through the artists' verses.

Lil' Kim's verse further exposes the communal definition of the "hee" as it unfolds across the song. Kim raps, "I hit you with the huh, she hits you with the hee!" which complicates the referent of the "hee." Since we neither are privy to any clear definition of Missy's "hee" nor Kim's "huh," the audience is forced to let the phrase resonate affectively. The "hee" is an erotic referent related to, but separate from, the "huh," which personalizes the rappers' erotic desires. The inscription "hee" and "huh" seem almost absurd on the page, pushing the listener away from the page and toward the sonic ecology of the song to try to make sense of the utterance. New York emcee Mocha joins Kim and Missy on the remix, and these three womxn communally excavate the meaning of the "hee." Kim's verse contrasts the "hee" from the "huh," situating the erotic referent as dependent upon the emcee (i.e., Kim has the "huh," Missy has the "hee").

Mocha sets up a call and response with the song's chorus. She raps in the last line of her verse, "And while I'm spitting like this, check what I'm hitting them with," which bleeds directly into Missy's sung chorus, "hee, huh." While Kim separates the "huh" from Missy's "hee," Mocha claims Missy's "hee" and "huh" as her own. Meaning is thus created in communal collaboration. The erotic referent is known through the collaboration among these three emcees. The sublime, in this instance, receives its meaning in relation as the listener is enraptured by Kim and Missy's hit track. One only understands the hee, in other words, when they enter into a relational engagement with the artists themselves. Meaning is made in that communion of pleasure, not in any sign-signified semiotic system.

Conclusion

The purpose of excavating the Hip-Hop sublime in the works of Elliott, Yasiin Bey, and others is not simply to show that literacy is an inept metaphor for understanding parts of Hip-Hop. While metaphors of literacy break down in the sublime—what, after all, is the dictionary definition of the "hee"? —the sublime also serves as a space to communicate community knowledge underneath the political regime of the word. While the examples above may seem like subjective minor lyrical

[43] Big Piph in discussion with the author. Nov. 11, 2020.

flourishes, I am arguing that the Hip-Hop sublime is present throughout Hip-Hop history and is used as a significant method of meaning-making in Hip-Hop's expressive practices. The sublime's "meaning" can only be excavated through sound knowledge and attentiveness to the ways that sound signifies below literate semiotics. Artists like Missy Elliott, Yasiin Bey, and many others profoundly proclaim their emotive lives by using the sublime. Those messages, however, can't be read. They must resound past the page as we attempt to hear them on the lower frequencies.