Article

Hip-Hop Ethos

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Abstract: This article excavates the ethos surrounding hip hop, starting from the proposition that hip hop represents a distinct yet pervasive expression of contemporary black subjectivity, which crystalized in 1970s New York City and has since proliferated into a potent *ethos of the subaltern* embraced within socially marginalized youth communities throughout the world. The article begins by outlining the black diasporic traditions of expressive performance that hip hop issues from, as discussed through the work of Zora Neale Hurston and Amiri Baraka. In the remainder of the article, a blueprint of hip hop's ethos is presented based on five fundamental tenets: (1) properties of flow, layering, and rupture; (2) a principle of productive consumption; (3) the production of excessive publicity or promotion—what hip-hop affiliates refer to as "hype"; (4) embracing individual and communal entrepreneurship; and (5) a committed politics of action and loyalty. While acknowledging hip hop's malleability and refusal to be neatly characterized, the article maintains that its characteristic spirit embodies these core doctrines.

Keywords: hip hop; black aesthetics; New York; flow; layering; rupture; productive consumption; hype; entrepreneurship; politics; counter-knowledge

1. Introduction

The contributions to this special issue aim to reinvigorate contemporary discussions surrounding ethos and its implications for the value and meaningfulness assigned to varieties of lived human experience. An aspect of this involves demonstrating the complexity of understandings and applications of ethos as a concept. We begin from the general definition of ethos as "the characteristic spirit, prevalent tone of sentiment of a people or community, the 'genius' of an institution or system" (quoted in Barnouw 1963, p. 24). Accordingly, we locate hip hop's ethos broadly within what Robert Con Davis and David S. Gross (Davis and Gross 1994) refer to as the *ethos of the subaltern*, suggesting that, perhaps more than most, it features maverick sensibilities of those who assert agency from positions of social marginalization and oppression. Consequently, our discussion may challenge traditional understandings of ethos as a molding force of culture or non-prescriptive determinant of collective behavior.

Caveats aside, this article excavates the densities of ethos surrounding hip hop as a distinct but pervasive expression of black subjectivity situated in the liminal space between the late modern and postmodern epochs. As such, it embellishes the polyphonic character of hip hop in all its complexities and contradictions. Hip hop is simultaneously entrepreneurial and communal; it is implicated in neoliberal modes of survival but offers itself as a social and psychological balm to the violence perpetuated through capitalist inequities; it publicizes unfailingly hierarchical identity politics—in some cases subverting and in others upholding existing relations of power—while being deeply concerned with the politics of identity; it speaks truth to power as it perpetually undermines and/or destabilizes our understandings of what is real. These and other intricacies surrounding hip hop's

curious position will be elaborated on in the pages below. More than anything, this ambiguity and pliability enable hip hop's mobility across geographic and particularly sociological boundaries, and afford a certain degree of resilience against efforts to demarcate it, devalue it, and/or contain it.

In what follows, we begin by outlining the black diasporic traditions of expressive performance that hip hop issues from. This includes both recounting its 1970s New York City origins and putting this well-recited socio-economic history in conversation with the work of earlier cultural commentators regarding fundamental characteristics of black American music and culture. Hip hop, in our view, is predicated on a centering of blackness that takes on distinct dimensions in the context of late-modern capitalism. From there, we propose a blueprint of hip hop's ethos based around five fundamental tenets. These span the range of characteristics of form, expressive priorities, active inclinations, and ethical commitments.

2. Hip Hop as Black Diasporic Tradition

Many scholars of hip hop, as well as a good deal of ardent devotees—sometimes referred to as "hip-hop purists"—define it around four expressive practices, namely: deejaying, break(danc)ing, graffiti writing, and emceeing (see for example, Rose 1994; Chang 2005; Ewoodzie 2017). For more casual observers, the preeminence of rap music, which is understood as either being synonymous with or connected to, but ideologically and/or aesthetically distinct from, hip-hop music, results in the greatest recognition being placed on emceeing and deejaying/beat-making.[1] This "four element" model occasionally gets supplemented by additional elements such as beat-boxing (i.e., human produced musical percussion), fashion, and knowledge (Gosa 2015). Rather than engaging in discussions regarding hip hop as the sum of four or more essential elements, we find it more productive to think about how hip hop gets projected through various expressive practices as well as how stylistic continuities exist across hip hop's spaces of social activity.

Whereas the racial politics surrounding hip hop have generated robust debates regarding the essentialness of blackness to its contemporary manifestations (see for example McLeod 1999; Taylor 2005; Harrison 2008; Jeffries 2011), in excavating the foundations of hip hop's ethos, we start from the position that the centrality of blackness is indisputable. Although the formation of hip hop has been assigned to a particular time (the early 1970s) and place (New York City, specifically the Bronx[2]), in tracing its various confluences and convergences—roots and routes as Paul Gilroy (1993) refers to them—hip hop's expressive priorities and sensibilities clearly mark the continuation of black aesthetic traditions. The pluralities of these traditions get molded through processes of recuperative rootedness in local specificities and expansive mobility across space and time. Hip hop, then, issues from dynamic black diasporic connections that are simultaneously untethered and binding.

Centering blackness in 1970s New York involves acknowledging a wealth of cultural ingredients that were prevalent at the time and place including, but not limited to, traditions of longstanding black New Yorkers, of people who had made their way north one or two generations earlier as part of the Great Migration from the Southern United States,[3] of recent black immigrants (primarily from the Caribbean) whose arrival was facilitated by the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, as well as by the tremendous proximity of and fluidity between New York's black and Latino working-class communities (Harrison 2009). Even with this remarkably generative mix, reminiscent of an earlier influx of diverse cultural traditions that inspired the Harlem Renaissance, Perry (2004, p. 10) compellingly shows how hip hop emanates from "black American political and cultural frameworks"

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[1]　Beat-making has a direct lineage to deejaying and, in fact, since the 1980s has supplanted it as the most recognized aspect of hip-hop music production. The work of the hip-hop beat-maker (or producer) essentially involves using sample-based and or percussion-based music production technologies—for example an E-mu SP-1200 sampler, Roland TR-808, or Native Instruments Maschine drum machine—to achieve the same musical ends that hip hop's pioneering deejays did through turntables and mixers alone (see Schloss [2004] 2014).

[2]　The Bronx is one of the five boroughs of New York City. The others are Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island.

[3]　A group that retained strong physical, emotional, and imagined (Anderson 1983) connections to their southern roots.

and, accordingly, prioritizes black *American* aesthetics. Indeed, Michael Eric Dyson claims that hip hop succeeded in "remythologiz[ing] New York's status as the spiritual center of black America" (quoted in McLaren 1997, p. 158).

To introduce key characteristics of these aesthetic priorities, we draw from two celebrated commentators on and compilers of black American performative traditions. In her 1934 essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression", Zora Neale Hurston proposed a taxonomy of black performance culled from her ethnographic studies in the American South. An astute participant-observer of African–American life, Hurston focused on black vernacular traditions in much the same way that hip hop, according to Dyson, foregrounds everyday experiences of the "so called [black] underclass, romanticizing the ghetto as the fecund root of cultural identity" and principal site of black creativity (quoted in McLaren 1997, p. 158). The enduring confluences between Hurston's (1934) identified black aesthetics and those celebrated within hip hop include:

- a "will to adorn", which inspires performative dramatization and extraordinary ornamentation surrounding the way black people walk, talk, dress, and act-out their everyday lives (p. 24);
- emphases on angularity and asymmetry—in both the visual and dispositional sense—thus encouraging avoidances of orthodoxy and predictability (p. 26);
- an understanding of originality that is grounded in re-interpretation and "the modification of ideas" (p. 28);
- and an appreciation of mimicry as "an art in itself" (p. 28).

In highlighting these, we do not mean to imply that they represent essential qualities possessed by all black racialized bodies or, for that matter, that cultural attributes pervasive throughout the U.S. South were transported directly and completely to New York by the black people who migrated there. Rather, following Moten (2003), we understand blackness as a dynamic cultural force emanating from the traditions and social positionings of communities of people who are racially designated black, but which exists distinct from the anatomies of individuals who comprise these communities.

Like Hurston, Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) critiqued, commented on and celebrated black performance from the perspective of an insider who identified as part of the creative communities and expressive traditions he wrote about.[4] In his seminal work on black music, *Blues People*, Baraka listed several "apparent survivals" of African music traditions within black American music (Baraka [1963] 1999, p. 25). Whereas Baraka's reference to survival might suggest that cultural materials can be transferred intact from one local to another,[5] as with Hurston's taxonomy, we again caution that such a reading is far too linear. Following Gilroy's important observations regarding the *Black Atlantic*, we wish to foreground the complex, even messy, swirl of confluences and continuities resulting in perceived tangibilities, which become the bases for recognizing common black subjectivity.

For Baraka, these African diasporic priorities can be foremost recognized in black musical communities' orientations toward rhythm. Here he highlights polyrhythmic emphases characterized by repetitive musical structures that combine multiple rhythm patterns (often assigned to different instruments) to produce contrasting harmonics, timbres and tones. The repetitively exhibited tensions between these different rhythmic strata serve as a basis for experiencing musical and aesthetic pleasure. A second priority, for Baraka, is the antiphonal (or call and response) singing technique common within black musical traditions. Through this blurring of distinction between performers and audiences, the context of a performance becomes paramount; this, in turn, works in harmony with repeated musical structures to promote improvisations that vary according to time, place, and who is present.[6]

4　We juxtapose this to the long ongoing tradition of outside (read white) researchers and cultural critics claiming a privileged voice in describing and discussing black life (see Kelley 1997).

5　For an elaboration on this critique see Mintz and Price (1976).

6　Here we should emphasize that improvisational competency only occurs through an acute understanding of the music tradition one is operating within.

Additionally, Baraka highlights how song lyrics tend to be connected to and/or derived from oral traditions, and how within these orature-based communities, music and other aspects of artistic expression are integrated into everyday life.

The formation of hip hop occurred in and around black performative spaces and was fueled by the dynamic, creative and generative cultural energies that circulated among black New York City youth during the early 1970s. Tricia Rose posits that hip hop came of age "in the twilight of America's short lived federal commitment to black civil rights" (Rose 1994, p. 22). As such, it issued from black youth's inability, and at times refusal, to assimilate towards whiteness. Its ethos, accordingly, takes shape in the hinterland surrounding America's economic and commercial core (i.e., New York), at a time when the marginal citizens of what had recently been hailed as Lyndon Johnson's Great Society were being forced into a series of economic, social and political arrangements that drastically amplified their marginalization.

The details surrounding hip hop's postindustrial New York City origins have been well documented (see, for example, Rose 1994; Chang 2005): rampant unemployment caused by the disappearance of manufacturing jobs within the transforming transnational economy as well as a push toward privatizing municipal services; urban blight exacerbated by a string of arsons, the blackout of 1977 and sanitation worker strikes; the building of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, which cut through the South Bronx—hip hop's famed birthplace—symbolizing a federal commitment to the suburban white communities of southern Connecticut, New Jersey, and Long Island over working-class black and brown communities in the city.[7] While such socio-economic factors create an important backdrop, the contradictory textures of hip hop's distinct late/postmodern ethos were consistently refracted through lenses of recognized blackness.

In his important work on the aesthetics of black radicalism, Moten (2003) locates blackness at the intersection of objectified spectacle and human agency, thus insisting that the "history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist" (1). Whereas racialized black bodies are sometimes invisible within white hegemonic spaces, blackness—which Moten claims involves the simultaneous "performance of the object" and "performance of humanity" (2)—is personified through hypervisibility, excessive surplus and a degree of spectacular ornamentation that seizes attention. Through audacious provocations of acting out as a response to objectifying white gazes (Yancy 2016), blackness gets activated as a fantastic and compelling performative force.

In the hyper-mediated context of late capitalist New York, hip hop, through its authorized exhibition of blackness, radiated beyond its originating black spaces to become a dominant global force. Hip hop's emergence as one of the most significant cultural forces of our times rests at the intersection of two conditions. The first is the United States' position as the most powerful exporter of global media—most notably around youth-oriented popular cultural products like music, film and the associated imagery that influences subcultural style (Hebdige 1979).[8] The second condition, symbiotically connected to the first, is the preeminence of the black American struggle as both an inspiration and template for other struggles for human rights and social justice. When reflecting on

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[7] Much of this history is discussed at length in the second chapter of Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994). In the mid-1970s, a virtually bankrupt New York City secured a federal loan, the terms for which included tremendous service cuts and the loss of a significant number of municipal jobs. During the preceding decade, the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway had devastated local communities through forced relocation and the shattering of vital support networks. Amidst this urban devastation, waves of suspected arsons (allegedly motivated by slumlords seeking to cash in on insurance claims and welfare recipients looking to get reimbursed for their moving costs (see Ewoodzie 2017, pp. 23–24)) plagued the borough. This image of Bronx urban decay was compounded by the rampant looting that occurred following the 1977 city-wide blackout and periodic garbage strikes resulting in huge piles of trash throughout the city (Rose 1994, pp. 27–34).

[8] Within sociology and cultural studies, *subcultural* is a contested term (see Bennett 1999). Understanding this, we reference it here in a general sense to signal recognizable, yet evolving and permeable, patterned behaviors—including activities, styles of dress, and language use—artefacts, and dispositions associated with particular musical genres, iconic films, patterned recreational activities, or generational cultural events. Indeed, the hip-hop ethos can generally be thought of as the spirit and source of the expression of various hip-hop subcultures.

the global spectacularity of blackness, it is important to consider the racist origins of the American entertainment industry—derived from a tradition of black-faced minstrelsy (Watkins 1999)—in relation to the struggles of the most despised peoples on the American racial landscape to achieve full citizenship, equal rights, social equality, and ultimately full humanity. Hip hop appears on the heels of the Civil Rights and Black Liberation (i.e., Black Power) movements.

3. The Blueprint of a Hip-Hop Ethos

We outline our blueprint of a hip-hop ethos around a series of principal tenets. In doing this, we are cautious about claiming a definitive understanding of the framework of emotional attitudes that structure how hip-hop affiliates approach the world. Ethos, according to Gregory Bateson, gets expressed through "tones of behavior" (quoted in Barnouw 1963, p. 100), which impact the way individuals and groups organize cultural categories, deploy cultural symbols, and conduct themselves. Ethos is not experienced as compulsory but is rather internalized and manifested through habitual practices. While it retains a certain degree of stability, like other facets of culture, it is fluid across time and space, and engaged with differently according to the individual and his or her social position. Here we reference the old anthropological adage that "no two people have exactly the same culture" or "no two speakers of the same language have exactly the same vocabulary". Ethos is marked by a density of overlapping and typically implicit observations, practices, priorities, and commitments. These divergences are often most notable surrounding collective social categories such as gender, age and class. Women and men, young and old, wealthy and poor tend to engage with and/or respond to ethos differently. Of course this is also contingent on the particular phenomenon an ethos emerges around. Hip hop, as a black cultural form situated at the nexus of late-modernism and post-modernism, embraces contradiction by both privileging and undermining notions of what is real. Nevertheless, the patterns of observable social practices that inform our notion of ethos are inseparable from the social relations that encompass them. Even with (or perhaps especially because of) hip hop's pungent association with blackness, affiliates of different racial backgrounds tend to inhabit hip hop's ethos differently (see Harrison 2009; Jeffries 2011). Accordingly, notions of ethos, to the extent that they are connected to questions surrounding appropriate behaviors, characteristics, identities, and fluencies, are deeply implicated in debates regarding authenticity (Swearingen 1994).

3.1. Tenet One: Flow, Layering, and Rupture

In her seminal work on hip hop, *Black Noise*, Rose (1994, p. 22) presented its "primary properties" as *flow*, *layering*, and *rupture*. This is a fitting starting point for two reasons. First, despite being one of the earliest academic treatments of hip hop—indeed *Black Noise* is often credited with announcing the arrival of Hip Hop Studies as a legitimate academic field—Rose's model continues to powerfully resonate with the ways hip hop is practiced and imagined. Second, in our effort to map a hip-hop ethos, recognizing the centrality of flow, layering, and rupture facilitates a level of categorical visualization that sets the foundation for the other tenets that follow. Whereas Rose's triad is presented as three distinct, foundational attributes of hip hop, through our subsequent discussions we hope to show how these stylistic continuities work in conjunction.

3.1.1. Flow

Within hip-hop contexts, *flow* is commonly associated with observable aesthetic qualities of performance—most notably surrounding emceeing. Indeed, within hip-hop music, the term has become synonymous with lyrical delivery or rapping style. Thus, a hip-hop lyricist might be referred to as having a "good flow" or flowing in a particular song. Adam Bradley (2017, p. 6) elaborates on the polyrhythmic investments of flowing by explaining that these "distinct lyrical cadence[s]"—relying on tempo, timing, and, at their best, "moments of calculated rhythmic surprise"—get assessed "in relation to the beat". Expanding outward from this popular connection to rapping, we might think of flow as foregrounding seamless continuities in which the beginnings and endings of discrete units

blend together to become unrecognizable. We can see this in the way practicing deejays mix songs together, in the way b-boys and b-girls (i.e., breakdancers) transition from one move to the next, or in the arcs and fluidity-of-lines found in graffiti pieces.

3.1.2. Layering

Layering involves situating multiple strata of expressive materials on-top-of or in close relation to one another. Deejays layer different songs together to form a seamless (flow) or, if the occasion calls for it, strategically punctuated (rupture) mix. Emcees' flows are evaluated on the basis of their polyrhythmic layering on top of the repetitive structure of hip-hop instrumentals. In introducing what he referred to as the *hip hop sublime*, Adam Krims underscored the importance of this layering project in generating sentiments of excitement and pleasure among hip-hop music listeners. Gesturing towards Rose's third property (i.e., rupture), Krims described how hip-hop producers "selectively and dramatically" bring "incompatible layers of sound . . . into conflict with each other", resulting in sensations of beauty, fear, hardness, and ultimately realness (Krims 2000, p. 54). Krims goes on to discuss how, in opposition to the unifying effect of flow, hip-hop music employs "dissonant harmonic combinations" and "clashing timbral qualities" (p. 73) to showcase its polyrhythmic aspirations and layering. This practice of layering different media and performative modes is pervasive across a range of hip-hop expressive practices.

Another dimension of hip-hop layering involves intertextuality, or the relationship hip-hop texts engender with previous (hip hop, black diasporic, or popular) cultural texts. Such intertextual layering produces surplus meaning across the contexts in which these earlier textual sediments resonate. This is, again, most obviously recognized in sample-based hip-hop music production, where utilizing previously recorded songs allows the hip-hop producer to exploit the meanings attributed to earlier recordings to generate new, contextually-specific significances.[9] These acts of creative imitation, reinterpretation, cross-referencing, and indirect signification are all encompassed in the vernacular performance of Signifyin(g), which Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Gates 1988, p. 53) describes as involving "the free play of language . . . displacement of meanings . . . [and] attention to the force of the signifier" to enact a different mode of meaning-making. Gates, quite famously, refers to this revisionary process as "repetition with a signal difference" (p. xxiv). Such intertextuality provides marginalized groups with occasions to communicate coded meaning, through language, performance, and/or what James Scott refers to as hidden transcripts—that is, "discourses that take place 'off stage' beyond direct observation by powerholders" (Scott 1990, p. 4). Although these intertextual priorities have led to controversies surrounding hip-hop music production and copyright use—and they have also, quite ridiculously we believe, been used as a basis for arguing that hip-hop musicians lack originality (see Schumacher 1995)—such responses testify to the cultural potency of intertextual meaning making.

3.1.3. Rupture

Hip-hop music's powerful polyrhythms are established through flirtations with and strategic embellishments of rupture. This appreciation of rupture occurs at the expense of (disrupting) flow; likewise, the achievement of flow is dependent on the potential for rupture. Through consistent modifications (or *breaks*) in musical percussion, rhythmic stability is continuously undermined and reestablished (Katz 2012, p. 24), creating an on-beat/off-beat effect that affiliates recognize as decidedly hip hop. Through their apparent randomness—the predictability of rupture compromises its disruptive effect—ruptures produce sensations of spontaneity. Thus, ruptures succeed in creating the exclamations, asymmetries, and rhythmic angularities that surprise, astonish, and capture the

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9   Intertextualism, which both Hurston and Baraka observe in earlier black expressive traditions (see above), also promotes the value of cultural literacy (Rose 1994, p. 89).

attention of listeners and onlookers. Indeed, noticeable rupture, signaled by a distinct but temporary break in a rhythmic flow, often strengthens the sense of rhythm rather than taking away from it.

3.2. Tenet Two: Productive Consumption

Hip hop emerged through processes of productive consumption and, accordingly, such inclinations remain central to how hip-hop practitioners comport themselves and approach the art of daily living. The most celebrated example of productive consumption in hip hop surrounds the origin story of DJ Kool Herc using turntables—a technology developed for music consumption—as an instrument of musical creation through manually manipulating two copies of the same record into a continuous musical loop or "Merry-Go-Round" (Chang 2005, pp. 78–79). This innovation in deejay practice later developed into the intertextual sample-based hip-hop music production discussed above. Yet, beyond this black diasporic orientation toward textual revision, hip hop's most celebrated origin story involves repurposing technologies of music consumption into technologies of music production. The New York City youth who created hip hop ignored the dictate to keep their hands off record players and instead started manually sampling the breakbeats of their favorite songs.[10]

Such productive consumption extends beyond music to include other efforts to enhance the use value of the limited material resources available to working class, racialized, urban youth. Emerging from a context of scarcity, hip hop promotes borrowing, sharing, and above all else creative renovation. It additionally encourages the creative appropriation of the abundant cultural symbols that saturate the youth-oriented markets of post-war society. During the period of hip hop's formation, these symbols—featured in music, fashion, television, and film—would have been most ubiquitous in the urban milieu, and perhaps nowhere more visibly than in New York City.[11] The countless symbolic resources early hip-hop practitioners adopted and adapted (i.e., rearticulated with signal difference) range from the general to the specific. For example, early b-boys adapted the kung fu stylings of Hong Kong action movies, which were regularly featured on afternoon television and in urban movie theaters, into signature dance moves (Schloss 2009); and graffiti writers featured icons and imagery from cartoons and commercials as regular aspects of their creative imagery.

Practices of productive consumption can be seen throughout post-war youth subcultures where young people creatively refashioned the abundance of consumer materials marketed towards them to generate new collective identities (Hebdige 1979). Yet, as the inheritors of longstanding black diasporic performative traditions that included evocative practices of reinterpreting, repurposing, and recreating though intertextual meaning-making, black youth were particularly poised to be in the vanguard of this new mode of consumer engagement. Indeed, many of the classic, well-documented, white post-War subcultures in Britain and the United States—such as the hipsters, beats, teddy boys, mods, and punks—were heavily inspired by connections to and/or fascinations with black culture. Since hip hop's emergence, its practitioners and affiliates have served and continue to serve as leading youth-culture taste-makers through their abilities to appropriate, innovate off of, and productively consume the cultural materials and symbols that capitalist society throws at them.

3.3. Tenet Three: The Production of Hype

Hip hop is spectacular, in part, because it generates excessive publicity or promotion—what people often refer to as "hype". Peter McLaren (McLaren 1997, p. 165) writes that "rap is a powerful offensive medium in the way that it raises havoc with white middle-class" values. In *Black Noise*, Rose opens her chapter on the sonic force of rap music by relaying a story of an academic colleague—presumably an ethnomusicology department head—who dismissed rap music as something that "they ride down

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10   A breakbeat, or the "get down section", is a segment of a song that typically consists of sparse, drum-centric, high-energy instrumentation. This practice of manually sampling breakbeats, in turn, leads to the development of several additional techniques including scratching, punch-phasing, back spinning, and scratch-phasing (Ewoodzie 2017).

11   Today, one might argue that the Internet has minimized the significance of geography on consumer culture.

the street at 2:00 A.M. . . . blasting from car speakers . . . wak[ing] up [his] wife and kids" ([Rose 1994](#), p. 62). She goes on to highlight a series of Black diasporic sonic priorities—something she describes as *working in the red*—that emphasize high volume and low frequencies towards the goal of achieving levels of sound distortion that blowout stereo speakers and make car audio-systems hum. In an interview with Rose, hip-hop producer Eric (Vietnam) Sadler discussed how *working in the red*—that is, recording and mixing with the sound levels perpetually in the (red) distortion zone—defied the logic of professionally trained sound engineers who consistently clamored "You can't do that . . . it's not right" (p. 74). Moten explains that blackness "has tended toward the experimental achievement and tradition of an advanced, transgressive publicity" ([Moten 2003](#), p. 255 n. 1). Reminiscent of the deejays credited with originating hip hop, producers—the people responsible for crafting the sonic force that announces hip-hop music's presence often well before the sound source (e.g., an automobile or outdoor speaker) appears—ingeniously extend the intended capacities of music technologies, breaking the rules, in order to create something that stands out.

Harrison's ([Harrison 2016](#)) work on hip-hop voicing similarly documents the production of hype within music recording studios, achieved through recording supplementary adlib vocal tracks. As a replication of the live performance role played by hip-hop, "hype men (or women)", adlibs typically involve one or more voices punctuating certain words or phrases in the main vocal track by repeating (i.e., layering) them. The repeated phrases usually occur on-beat, often involve end-rhymes in a lyrical couplet, and frequently include the chorus or 'hook.' An adlib track might also include non-lexical but communicative sounds (for instance, grunts, ah-huhs, and sighs) or a running commentary on the main vocals. Such vocal embellishments typically result in performative exclamations that gesture towards ensuing commotion. The outcome is an often unrecognized but compelling insinuation that "something ('shit' perhaps) is about to go down". Such textured vocal adornments signify hip hop as a collective practice situated in public space—even when the production process involves a single person alone in a studio recording multiple adlib tracks. Represented as communal, informal, celebratory vocal performances, adlibs enhance the polyrhythmic qualities of layered vocal flow, thus heightening a song's energy and creating the effect of capturing the spirit of the moment.

Working in the red and adlib vocal recordings represent two primary ways that hip-hop music creators strive to sonically achieve hype. Yet, this inclination towards hype extends to the way hip-hop music is listened to (turned all the way up) as well as to hip hop's visual representations in graffiti writing, fashion, and performance. In each of these arenas, there is a precedent for eye-catching colors, angles, and gestures that astonish by disrupting what has come to be expected. Indeed, the emergence of popular terms associated with hip hop, like "bling" (i.e., expensive and ostentatious clothing and/or accessories), "swagger" (i.e., a confident, possibly arrogant, and potentially even aggressive personal style), and "popping your collar" (self-recognition following a commendable accomplishment) indicate the extent to which attention to (self-)promotion and hype underlies its performance and everyday expression.

3.4. Tenet Four: Individual and Communal Entrepreneurship

The production of hype illustrates one way that hip hop promotes individual and communal entrepreneurship surrounding individuals and their communities. Entrepreneurship is often associated with business activities and the pursuit of money. It would be a mistake to ignore these inclinations in hip hop. Hip hop's partnership with consumerism can be traced to its formative years when pioneering deejays considered it a relatively safe way to "hustle" or make money ([Gosa 2015](#), p. 62). Hip-hop practitioners and allegiants have consistently undertaken efforts to self-promote through displays of extravagant or otherwise conspicuous consumption. As hip-hop music gained popularity, some of its most celebrated artists acted as "pitch men and women" for particular products; likewise, with the

prevalence of brand-name-dropping in their lyrics, hip-hop songs serve as virtual commercials.[12] By the start of the twenty-first century, many of the most successful hip-hop artists were also engaged in various business ventures. Yet, as a cultural formation that emerged from what Perry Hall (Hall 1997, p. 33) describes as one of "the least culturally assimilated sectors of the Black cultural landscape", and that has been *informed* by a tradition of radical blackness (see above), hip hop has an equal if not more substantive potential to facilitate and inspire actions oriented towards eradicating social inequalities and achieving social liberation (see Tenet Five below). Discourses of resistance and oppression are mutually constituted and therefore occupy the same discursive space. Thus, in recognizing the entrepreneurial spirit that underlies hip hop's attitude and approach to the world, we must recognize how, with its inclinations towards (self)promotion and strategic organizational entrepreneurship, it can propagate social uplift and further social inequalities, sometimes simultaneously.[13]

The spirit of competitiveness underlying hip hop is so ubiquitous that it could very well serve as its own tenet. This ongoing competitive quest for distinction, status, and prestige fuels multiple modes of hip-hop activity, but most notably its association with entrepreneurship. The concept of *battling* is fundamental to hip hop. B-boys/girls, deejays, emcees, and graffiti writers all either participate in battles (formal and informal) or hone their craft with the possibility of battling in mind. The prospect of participating in a direct competition (a battle), or even just having one's performance evaluated in relation to the performances of one's peers, motivates the development of hip-hop competencies. Common references to "sucker emcees" or "wack deejays" illustrate how hip-hop artists assert their identities in competitive relation to lesser practitioners, both real and imagined. Schloss highlights the strategic virtues of battling as learning how to handle potentially prickly situations, strategically revealing what one knows, and developing an "ability to control the way one is perceived" (Schloss 2009, p. 108). At its core, battling involves distinguishing oneself and foregrounding personal worth through generative, and at times, strategically spectacular deployments of available material and symbolic resources.

Through its competitive spirit, hip hop proposes itself as a meritocratic space where, ideally at least, an individual's performed competency matters and categories of collective social identity (i.e., race, gender, age, and the like) do not.[14] An important component of performed competency is the ability to self-author a unique personal identity. Rose considers hip hop "a source . . . of alternative identity formation and social status" for young people forced to contend with the truncated opportunities available in postindustrial urban environments. Similarly, Christopher Holmes Smith recognizes such identity construction as the "most fertile source of artistic creativity" (Smith 1997, p. 345) within hip hop. The practice of hip-hop naming, which often occurs through intertextual referencing (Gates 1988), works to draw attention to "significant aspects of [artists'] personalit[ies]" (Schloss 2009, p. 75) and suggests aesthetically salient "qualities they wish to project" (p. 70). One's name thus becomes a public platform for this type of identity work.

Hip hop embraces both self-promotion and collective community promotion. Its heightened attention to locality (Forman 2002) may very well have been fueled by the context of its New York City origins where distinctly identifiable boroughs existed in close proximity to one another and vied for competitive advantage (see note 2)—"is Brooklyn in the house?" This emphasis on territoriality gets expressed when hip-hop recording artists mention local references and "shout out" the names of people they are close with. Hip hop organizes around tight circles of affiliated allegiants (i.e., crews), who serve as sources of social support. Whereas successful hip-hop artists have sometimes

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12 In the majority of cases, these were not intended as commercial endorsements and no compensation was received. For example, the group Run-DMC did not release the song "My Adidas" as an Adidas commercial but rather because they wore Adidas sneakers.

13 The tension between the street and the executive suite (Negus 1999) is an illuminating dynamic through which to gauge hip hop's nearly fifty-year evolution.

14 Whereas this may be true for some arenas of hip-hop practice—for example see Joe Schloss's discussion of breaking (Schloss 2009)—Harrison's (2009) work on emceeing shows that race and gender are still consequential in some hip-hop fields.

been criticized for lacking fiscal responsibility and, most notably, spending exorbitant amounts of money supporting their large entourages—MC Hammer's 1996 bankruptcy being a classic example (Commons et al. 2014)—Brown (2012) effectively argues that such behavior might reflect an admirable, anti-capitalist ethos of expanded care for those in one's immediate circle. Thus, when Elliot (1997), in her song "The Rain", asks "who got the keys to *the* jeep?"(as opposed to "*my* jeep"), in the spirit of MC Hammer's entourage, she is gesturing towards automobiles as communally-owned rather than privately-owned property (Brown 2012, p. 268). Such attention to friendship and loyalty are illustrated through the hip-hop communities' widespread condemnations of breaking social ties (e.g., moving out of the "hood" and/or having one's "ghetto pass" revoked) after becoming successful. It is also exemplified in the practice of recording "posse cuts"—that is, songs featuring lesser known members of an artist's crew—which provides friends and associates with opportunities to record and potentially to break into the music industry.

In sum, while hip hop's entrepreneurship unquestionably orients toward embracing aspects of capitalism and individualism, it also retains a strong counter-hegemonic spirit, based on more socialist principles of remaining loyal to one's community and maintaining personal alliances with "those who have been down since day one".

3.5. Tenet Five: Committed Politics of Action and Loyalty

There is a well-circulated narrative within hip-hop circles maintaining that hip hop started out as a form of resistance and critique but then, sometime around the early 1990s, after engaging with the corporate music/entertainment industry,[15] shifted its central themes towards violence, sex and crass consumerism. There is little question that these topics, which in fact proliferate across all of American popular culture, have been prevalent since hip hop or rap ascended to the undisputed status of a pop(ular) music form. The larger question surrounds the extent to which hip hop was ever definitively political. Challenges to this political origin story have most often referenced the aforementioned entrepreneurial drive, with its accompanying pursuit of wealth and status, that has characterized hip hop since its earliest days. Still, as a recent branch of black American cultural expression, molded within some of the most marginalized communities in urban America, hip hop consistently cultivates a disposition of difference and opposition. At times, this quality encourages the expressive uniqueness that enables hip-hop entrepreneurs to materially and/or symbolically prosper in capitalist society. Yet, such an alternative character takes deeper roots in moral dispositions that challenge historical and ongoing inequities—most pointedly, within the U.S. context, those surrounding race and class.

As such, hip hop coheres to what Davis and Gross call an *ethos of the subaltern*, and describe as a "politically situated sense of cultural ethos ... [that] challenges dominant cultural and political orders with ideologically subversive schemes" (Davis and Gross 1994, p. 66). Rooted in moral ideology, this final tenet of hip hop's ethos—something that we label its *committed politics of action and loyalty*—manifests around three principled calls-to-action: generating and promoting counter-knowledge, repurposing property/space as a public good, and maintaining a loyalty to hip hop and its communities of origin and practice.

3.5.1. Counter-Knowledge

As an acknowledged branch of black diasporic expression—a characteristic that gets consistently reaffirmed through intertextual engagements and an insistence on loyalty (see below)—hip hop promotes alternative perspectives on local, national, and global events. Despite its contemporary presence in multiple sites of privilege, hip hop, in its most culturally anchored manifestations—those spaces where the gravity of hip hop's ethos have the most resonance—fosters counter-hegemonic

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[15] Harrison and Arthur (2011) underscore how this corporate engagement started as early as the first commercially recorded rap songs.

stances, nurtured through alternative impulses and indulgences. Accordingly, hip hop both cultivates and flourishes within counter-public spheres, most notably the black *counterpublics*—that is, sacred spaces of discursive engagement where (mostly) black community members reflect on and debate issues outside the surveillance of the dominant hegemony (Harris-Lacewell 2010). With reference to hip-hop practice specifically, Perry (2004, pp. 107–8) draws attention to the *cipher* as a "privileged outlaw space" of inclusion (and exclusion) where collective, heightened consciousness gets directed toward an "alternative ethos and subjectivity".

Outside these grounded sites of committed practice, hip hop offers accessible and stylistically compelling counter-narratives that provide political information, impact political attitudes, and foster personal growth through social and political consciousness (Bonnette 2015). Even hip hop's most nihilistic representations of black life, when considered through a rhetorical Signifyin(g) framework, put forth an "oppositional consciousness" that powerfully critiques conditions in contemporary society (De Genova 1995). As such, hip hop has been used as a tool for reinvigorating educational spheres where critical outlooks as well as alternative sources and methods of generating and spreading knowledge flourish.

Counter-knowledge, of course, is primarily based on information, but might also include ways of achieving goals. For example, hip hop's nonlinear modes of meaning-making, most specifically its indulgence of intertextuality, have been deployed effectively to undermine the authority of dominant texts. Ultimately engaging in these consciously black diasporic practices works to reaffirm political intimacies with other sites of diasporic struggle towards countering global white supremacy

3.5.2. Repurposing Property/Space

Our aforementioned reference to Missy Elliot's "The Rain" (Elliot 1997) as a gesture celebrating communal car ownership and an economy of sharing (see above), introduces hip hop's critique of privately-owned property. Sampling and graffiti reflect two other arenas of practice where conceptions of private ownership get forfeited in favor of the public good. Despite the considerable efforts and resources committed by corporate music entities to reigning in hip hop's sample-based production practices (Schumacher 1995), this most fundamental art of appropriating past music commodities to envision new musical futures anticipated the inevitability of public-assess culture (De Genova 1995). Likewise, there is probably no better example of Moten's (2003) transgressive publicity of blackness (see above) than graffiti writers' seizure of public space as canvases for self-promotion, which, through spreading art into spaces of everyday life, makes a proposed contribution to the public good. Originating out of spaces of scarcity, and with its spirit of entrepreneurship, hip-hop practitioners consistently try to repurpose what is available and, in doing so, regularly bring things into the realm of wider public spectacle and usage. At notable moments in its engagement with mainstream culture—consider, for example, b-boys/girls use of street corners, subway stations, and shopping malls in the early 1980s—hip hop's appropriation of space and property has erupted into controversy (Rose 1994). These frictions, in our view, further support the notion that such inclinations can be attributed to a distinct hip-hop ethos.

3.5.3. Loyalty to Hip Hop

Since its emergence as a pop(ular) cultural form, at least, hip hop has been embroiled in debates surrounding authenticity (McLeod 1999; Harrison 2008). To a large extent, these debates have coalesced around issues of race and class—for example, should white and/or wealthy hip-hop affiliates (the presumed binary opposition to hip hop's black working-class origins) be considered legitimate members of a hip-hop community or nation? Without denying the importance of these considerations—recall the above-made point that affiliates of different sociological identities likely engage with ethos in drastically different ways—we maintain that the moral (political) component of hip hop's ethos forms foremost around questions of loyalty. In other words, do individuals and communities have commitments to hip hop as a cultural form and constellation of expressive practices?

Or is their engagement with hip hop primarily a way to achieve other ends? An investment in hip hop includes recognizing the importance of its history, which intertextually means recognizing the other expressive traditions it engages with. It also means recognizing the centrality of blackness in its formation, evolution and future. Yet, loyalty also extends to include territorial commitments to one's community and crew.[16] As much as *realness* gets hailed as a marker of hip hop's preoccupation with authenticity, potential accusations of "being fake" and/or "selling out" speak to the central place of loyalty in its ethos. Finally, to the extent that affiliation with hip hop personifies a project of realizing and exhibiting both community- and self-worth, being loyal to oneself, sticking to one's (hip-hop) principles, and carrying oneself with integrity as a member of the hip-hop nation is paramount.

4. Conclusions

The qualities that distinguish hip hop's ethos are invariably complex. We suggest that hip hop's position as both a late-modern and post-modern cultural form leads to contradictions surrounding not only its relation to late-capitalism but also its propositions about what might and what might not be real; in this sense, again, loyalty matters more than authenticity. Yet, this malleability, refusal to be neatly characterized, and propensity to self-correct are among hip hop's most resilient attributes. Like many things cultural, the contours of ethos are often most visible when breached—accordingly, a failure to engage in intertextual meaning-making, a muffled avoidance of anything related to "hype", or an absence of loyalty to hip-hop traditions might serve as notable indicators that something is amiss with an alleged hip hop affiliate's ethical grounding. The primacy of blackness in hip hop's formation and evolution—and the importance of acknowledging this—nurtures alliances as well as shared political interests and commitments-to-action among its most ardent affiliates. Yet, at its basis, hip hop utilizes intertextually-positioned continuities and ruptures to generate sensation and spectacle—spotlighting individual and community self-worth—through the generative practices of turning consumption into new modes of cultural production and meaning-making.

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16 Naturally, such loyalty can only go so far. Depending on the specifics, the disloyalty of others can be sufficient grounds for "cutting them off".

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