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### **Hip Hop as Martial Art: A Political Economy of Violence in Rap Music**

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### **Abstract and Keywords**

This chapter examines how hip hop exemplifies the instrumentalization of verbal arsenals, lyrical kung fu, and other rhetorical gestures to “words as weapons.” Indeed, this weaponization of knowledge may be thought of as the very premise of hip hop—of rap music as martial art. While this theorization will help explain hip hop’s enduring polycultural commitment to martial arts, the aim here is a more foundational one—to account for the ways that the trope of physical violence functions in hip hop discourses and performative practices. The chapter employs a political economy framework to argue that this translation from the discursive to the material is a counterhegemonic response to the conflation of the First and Second Amendments of the US Constitution: “the freedom of speech” and “the right to bear arms.” The chapter concludes by explaining why hip hop has proven an unlikely force for nonviolence in the Black Lives Matter moment.

Keywords: hip hop, martial arts, violence, nonviolence, political economy, metaphysics, US Constitution, polyculture, Black Lives Matter

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Thereupon Sun Tzu said: “The king is only fond of words, and cannot translate them into deeds.”

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

For a genuine poet, metaphor is not a rhetorical figure but a vicarious image that he actually beholds in place of a concept.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (quoted in Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*)

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Black radicalism is (like) black music.

—Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*

You cannot forget how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold.

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

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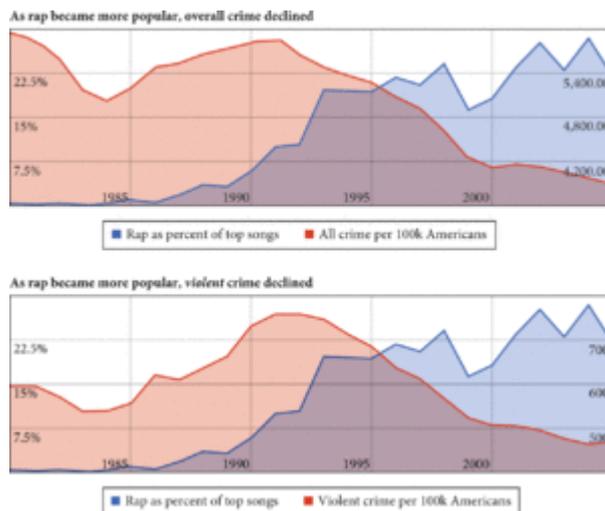
As a kid growing up in inner city Milwaukee in the early 1980s I remember hip hop and martial arts being practically inseparable. My neighborhood friends and I would practice our breakdancing routines alongside our roundhouse kicks, dressed in parachute pants and bandanas with Japanese (or were they Chinese?) characters and knock-off Payless Jordans. As long as we had the dubbed Newcleus and Michael Jackson tapes and enough D batteries to power the boom box, we were set for the whole day.<sup>1</sup> We would stay up late to watch old Bruce Lee films on TV or, if we were lucky, go to the movies to watch new hip hop-inflected martial arts films like Berry Gordy's *The Last Dragon* (1985) and martial arts inflected hip hop films like Harry Belafonte's *Beat Street* (1984).<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most telling microcosm of this cultural confluence and its resonance in the 1980s, the African American protagonist of Gordy's Motown kung fu flick went by the name of "Bruce Leroy."

To be sure, these two art forms shared a kinetic and embodied set of disciplining practices and distinctly *dope* fashions and material cultures. What I did not understand, at least consciously as a ten-year old, however, was that these art forms shared a holistic, even mystical, worldview and a highly visible code of honor with nonviolence at their core. This irony is foundational for the present chapter: that martial arts are ostensibly about mastering the dynamics of interpersonal combat, but that, as Sun Tzu put it in his fifth-century BCE treatise *The Art of War*, "supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting" (Sun Tzu 1910, 46).<sup>3</sup>

I did not study martial arts formally as a child, but I knew from my friends who did, that the first rule of karate was that it was to be used *for defense only*.<sup>4</sup> The martial arts films that were my main source of education in this realm constantly rehearsed this nonviolent ethos in their morality tales—that is, until the climactic scenes when the mild and downtrodden protagonists would, inevitably, have to open up a can of whoop-ass. Indeed, it is surely no coincidence that African American young men were drawn to these nonviolent warrior characters who perfectly embodied the potent ambivalences of civil rights and Black Power, at once personifying the moral authority of Martin Luther King Jr. and the last-resort militancy of Malcolm X.<sup>5</sup> Hollywood reinforced this powerful nonviolence in its US-based martial arts productions like *Karate Kid* (1984), while Michael Jackson transformed the aggression of gang warfare into harmonious choreography on "Beat It" (1983). Together, these media artifacts, the masculinities they performed, and the cultural practices they displayed also engrained the warrior code in the impressionable minds of our African-, German-, Hmong-, Irish-, Jewish-, Latin-, Native-, and Norwegian American gang. While our gang was short-lived—and not particularly notorious—I remember clearly the day I was told of its name. We were to be known as the Merrill Park *Golden Dragons*.<sup>6</sup> In reminiscing with old friends, interviewing hip hop artists and fans, and talking with my colleagues in hip hop studies over the last decade, it has become clear that my experience of this 1980s confluence of hip hop and martial arts was a common one among the "polycultural" milieu that Jeff Chang has named "the Hip-Hop Generation" (Chang 2005, 2).<sup>7</sup>

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Like martial arts, hip hop is an ostensibly violent art form. What is more, it is commonly marketed and read (or, rather, misread) as the hyperaggressive music of young black thugs. However, the first thing I want to stress is that this often aggressive and sometimes-violent music nonetheless remains *music*. Despite decades of sociological research, the data does not support a causal link between hip hop and violence as Becky Tatum, Erik Nielson, Eithne Quinn, Robin D. G. Kelley, and many others remind us (Tatum 1999; Nielson 2014; Quinn 2004; Kelley 1994). Indeed, both overall and *violent* crime rates in the United States began to fall in 1990, just as hip hop's gangsta era got underway (Figure 1).



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Figure 1 Crime rates in relation to popularity of rap.

As Philip Bump explains in the opening to his 2014 article in *The Wire*, “Mississippi Senate candidate Chris McDaniel once said that rising gun violence was a function of ‘hip-hop culture.’ Nope. If anything, hip-hop is saving America from crime” (Bump 2014).<sup>8</sup> McDaniel’s is precisely the type of unsubstantiated yet widely circulating “common sense”

stereotype that Tricia Rose undermines in her chapter “Hip Hop Causes Violence” (Rose 2008, 33–60). Indeed, for our purposes in the present chapter, we should note that Rose’s larger study examines hip hop through a fittingly martial frame, carrying the title *The Hip Hop Wars*.

At a more foundational level, it is important to remember that as hip hop began to coalesce as a graphic, kinetic, textual, and sonic culture in the mid-1970s, community leaders like Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa began using the art form to channel gang allegiances and criminal activities into productive and creative forms. Thus spawned Bambaataa’s Universal Zulu Nation and the “MC battles” of the late 1970s and early 1980s, wherein New York gangs like the Black Spades, Savage Skulls, Mongols, and Majestic Warlocks would go to war with microphones instead of guns—with words and music instead of weapons. As the hip hop scholar Davy D writes in “Zulu Nation: From Gang to Glory,” “the group for the most part was made up of former gang members. Many of them from the Notorious Black Spades which once reigned terror throughout the Bronx in the early to mid 70s .... It was in this backdrop that Bambaataa and other conscious brothers spent a lot of time teaching and preaching and working with Zulu members to bring about positive change” (Davey D 2000).

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As Chang writes in his encyclopedic hip hop history, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, “No one ever debated whether Bambaataa could stop the bullets. He made you *believe* he did” (Chang 2005, liii). Though the Zulus were *not* a violent gang, Bambaataa did conceive of them as a force to be reckoned with—an army: “when I did become a DJ, I already had an army with me so I already knew that my parties would be packed” (quoted in Chang 2005, 96). Indeed, Bam’s choice of the name “Zulu” came from the 1964 film of the same name and its proud and empowering anticolonial images of Zulu warriors. Notably, the genesis tales about the Zulus, their eschewal of gang violence, the early B-Boy and MC battles, their rechanneling of righteous anger, and the codification of hip hop’s nonviolent ideology writ large are rehearsed on countless tracks in the recorded archive of this music and are developed regularly in hip hop culture around the world to this day.<sup>9</sup>

Just one among countless examples of how this code has traveled the world—manifesting itself in stunningly fresh, syncretic ways around the globe—is captured in the name of the Tunisian-German MC, Bushido, whose name refers to the samurai code: the “way of the warrior.” Notably, another popular translation of the Japanese term is “the moral of the warrior.” Indeed, this moral code consists of seven virtues: justice, courage, mercy, respect, honesty, honor, and loyalty—an honor code that serves as a model for the virtues espoused by the Zulu nation, including its official credo: “Peace, Unity, Love, and Having Fun.” Another global example of this ideological confluence is Jun Tzu, the Belfast-born MC whose hip hop naming references Sun Tzu, credited with writing the widely influential Chinese military strategy text *The Art of War*. Jun Tzu’s choice of this name is a direct reference to the artist’s decision to break the cycle of violence that put his Ulster Unionist father in prison and put his energies into constructive critique of the ideological forces that rendered his Northern Irish birthplace a warzone.

One of the most poetic elaborations of what hip hop’s code of nonviolence looks like in practice is the track “Extrait d’Amertume” (Extract of Bitterness), wherein the Algerian-Parisian MC Sidi-O raps about distilling his anger into a bitter essence and letting that purged liquid flow onto the page as he writes his lyrics. Far from promoting violence, the indignant lyrics and their aggressive performance are, instead, a creative channel for him to prove that “la plume est plus forte que l’épee” [“the pen is mightier than the sword”]. Then there is, of course, the most high profile and sustained expression of hip hop’s affinity with East Asian martial arts, the Staten Island—or rather, “Shaolin,” crew—The Wu Tang Clan. The track “Liquid Swords” by Wu Tang’s GZA, will serve to epitomize some of my claims about hip hop’s enduring dialogue with martial arts and Eastern holistic philosophies. Further, it will help us move toward my more foundational argument that hip hop is, itself, a martial art premised on the political economy of “words as weapons.”

## ***Liquid S/words***

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GZA's 1995 album *Liquid Swords* (see Figure 2) begins with the halting and vulnerable voice of a young boy backed by a ponderous yet ominous B-movie synth line:

“When I was little my father was famous. He was the greatest samurai in the empire and he was the Shogun’s decapitator. He cut off the heads of a hundred and thirty-one lords. It was a bad time for the empire. The Shogun just stayed inside his castle and he never came out. People said his brain was infected by devils! . . . Then, one night the Shogun sent his ninja spies to our house. They were supposed to kill my father, but they didn’t. That was the night everything changed.”<sup>10</sup>

The opening sample from the 1980 martial arts film *Shogun Assassin* introduces us to the primary discursive terrain of GZA's cultural critique, examining the samurai code, political violence, and the mind/body split—a concept given new urgency with the samurai protagonist's preferred assassination technique of decapitation. As GZA explains later on the track, his role is a seemingly paradoxical one: “Child educator, plus head amputator.”



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Figure 2 Album cover for Wu-Tang's *Liquid Swords* and movie poster for 1980's *Shogun Assassin*.

Along with his producer, RZA, and crew of Wu Tang Clan guest artists, GZA employs martial arts themes and film samples throughout to focus the listener's attention on the album's central conceit: words as weapons. Taken together, the album and its title, *Liquid Swords*,

constitute a meditation on the *fluidity* between *the material* and *the ideal*—in a word, a meditation on *s/words*. GZA lays out this, the central premise of the concept album, from the very beginning of the title track's first verse, where words become weapons in MC "battles." He raps: "In mic fights I swing swords and cut clowns / Shit is too swift to bite you record and write it down." Indeed, just as the "mic fight" lyrics describe his abilities on the track, GZA's performed speech—his flow—bobs and weaves in pitch space and rhythm, demonstrating his sonic and enunciative prowess. He dodges and parries his opponent's efforts to control and copy him ("too swift to bite") and simultaneously critiques the limited materiality of sound recording and writing. The very next line underscores GZA's artistic-cum-pugilistic claims: "I flow like the blood on a murder scene." This is GZA's hip hop *s/wordplay*.

On the chorus of "Liquid Swords" GZA gestures to the lived actualization of words and texts while RZA doubles and highlights the musical speech act(s) by drawing out the final phonemes and rhymed couplets of the hook:

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When the MCs came  
To live out the name  
    And to perform (foorm)  
Some had to snort cocaine (caaine)  
To act insane (saaane)  
    Before Pete Rocked-it on  
Now on with the mental plane (plaaane)  
To spark the brain (braaaine)  
    With the building to be born  
Yo RZA flip the track with the what to cut:  
    Checka fit-a fit-a fit-a... (vocalized "cuts"/turntable scratches)

The first couplet echoes the critical wisdom of the Sun Tzu epigraph that precedes this essay: "The king is only fond of words, and cannot translate them into deeds" (Giles 1910, 6).<sup>11</sup> In the minds of GZA and RZA the "Master of Ceremonies" handle that the hip hop naming practice of "MC" implies, must demonstrate and "live out" said mastery. A true MC must talk the talk and walk the walk. Further, they must rely not on narcotics to "spark" creative praxis, but on their mind. In GZA's worldview—and that of his Wu Tang collaborators—words are not cheap.

Indeed, the phrase "building to be born" is drawn from Nation of Gods and Earths ("Five Percenter") ideology and its "supreme mathematics" wherein all letters and numbers have not just metaphorical but also metaphysical resonance and significance. As Felicia Miyakawa explains, "the Nation of Islam refers to Five Percenters as 'philosophers' or 'scientists,' evidence of the Five Percenter emphasis on metaphysics and esoterica. Using the spirit of the Supreme Alphabet, Five Percenters 'break down' the word" analyzing it as thing unto itself, with its own components and hidden meanings—not a mere signifier of a signified (Miyakawa 2005, 30).<sup>12</sup> As we will see, GZA's fluid movement between words and swords—between the ideal and the material—is exemplary of hip hop's performative ideologies wherein word and deed become materially and yes, mystically, interchangeable.<sup>13</sup> As Miyakawa and Jeff Chang point out, this particular Nation of Islam-derived episteme and elements of Afro-Caribbean Rastafarian spirituality played an important role in the early development of hip hop ideology and continue to inform this postcolonial polyculture and its music (Miyakawa 2005; Chang 2005). As Chang explains, early hip hop ideology brought together a diversity of views—the "truth wherever it is," from Five Percenter "supreme mathematics" to Rastafarian "overstanding" (Chang 2005, 106). As such, when, at the end of the chorus, GZA chops up—or "cuts"—the last line, performing a vocalized vinyl scratch and emulating his DJ's work, the performance of *s/wordplay* across textual-semantic and physical-performative domains comes into sharp focus as a central facet of hip hop practice and ideology.<sup>14</sup> He not only enunciates the word "cut" but also *performs* the cut in musical sound. As RZA explains in *The Wu-Tang Manual*, "Wu-Tang was the best sword style. And with us, our tongue is our sword" (RZA 2004, 63).<sup>15</sup>

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Later in the verse, GZA develops the fluidity of his *s/words* and their power to transform the ideal into the material, rhyming: “Energy is felt once the cards are dealt / With the impact of roundhouse kicks from black belts / That attack, the mic-phones like cyclones or typhoons / I represent from midnight to high noon.” Here he activates and materializes the energy of aphorisms such as “play the cards you’re dealt” giving them force and mass by articulating them to the poetic images of karate kicks, storms, and—coming full circle—the microphones of rap battles. Indeed, GZA’s roundhouse kicks, cyclones, and typhoons seem to model a vacillating cyclicity that elaborates each loop of the sample’s inevitable, back-and-forth, half-step motion. What is more, he temporalizes the mass and its force setting up alternating hours of judgment—face-offs at “midnight” and “high noon.”

Similarly, GZA then revisits his earlier critique of writing, underscoring the swift ephemerality yet massive impact of the MC’s art in the following two couplets. In his signature playful and mouthy flow, GZA—aka *the Genius*—raps, “I don’t waste ink, nigga, I think / I drop megaton bombs more faster than you can blink / ‘Cause rhyme thoughts travel at a tremendous speed / Clouds of smoke, of natural blends of weed.” The concept album’s second track, “Duel of the Iron Mic,” elaborates the efficiency of *s/wordplay* with GZA’s line “murderous rhymes, tight from genuine craft,” and rhymes from guest artists Masta Killa and Inspectah Deck about “dynamite thoughts,” “minds that’s laced with explosive doses,” and being “Criminal Minded”—an intertextual nod to the classic 1987 KRS-One track, with dub rasta stylistic influences and lines like “My English grammar comes down like a hammer” and “You need protection when I’m on the mic / Because my mouth is like a 9-millimeter windpipe.”<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, far from an idiosyncratic and weed-inflected outlier, GZA’s album is today considered a universally acclaimed hip hop classic steeped in hip hop knowledge and African American cultural consciousness. Indeed, my primary argument here is not that hip hop has found deep and abiding affinities with martial arts and East Asian philosophy. Ellie Hisama has made this case convincingly in her essay, “Afro-Asian Crosscurrents in Contemporary Hip Hop,” writing, “hip hop provides brilliant opportunities for musical crosscurrents and affinities between ethnic communities of color. American hip hop since 1990 offers compelling examples of interaction and exchange between African and Asian diasporic communities, and demonstrates the overwhelming political and aesthetic power of the polycultural” (Hisama 2002, 3).<sup>17</sup> In doing so, Hisama deploys the Robin D. G. Kelley term “polycultural” (also used by Chang) which “acknowledges the *simultaneous* existence of different cultural lineages in a single person, . . . recognizes the past and present solidarity between people of color,” and eschews multiculturalism’s “zoological,” “side-by-side” approach to culture (Kelley 1999, 81). Indeed, Tamara Roberts, Roger Buckley, Fred Ho, Deborah Wong, and countless others continue to elaborate the powerful potentialities of Afro-Asian affiliations and solidarities in scholarship and performance.<sup>18</sup>

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As such, my aim in focusing on *Liquid Swords* is to add to this discourse of solidarity and collaboration in order to move into new terrain. Yes, hip hop has had a long and productive relationship with martial arts, but I want to suggest that this mid-1990s artifact reflects a much longer cultural memory and an enduring political experience of the distance between the legalistic, de jure idea of American democratic equality and the violent asymmetries of its de facto realities. What is more, I want to show how this hip hop track and countless others like it provide evidence of an artistic practice that seeks to know and master that distance between what might be and what is. In martial arts hip hop finds not only inspirational content—from the sonic, lyrical, and performative to the spiritual and ethical—but also a model for its ontology of self. Hip hop is a martial art. Hip hop is an art of fighting, of battle, of war.

If we admit that the United States is far from a “perfect union,” according to its own stated, legislated, and performed ideals, we must endeavor to imagine what that distance between de facto reality and de jure perfection might be. If we admit that the de facto reality is a nation that continues to wage a centuries-old war on black people that has been sustained since before the nation’s inception—from dehumanization and enslavement to segregation and lynching to mass incarceration and state-sanctioned murder—it follows that this targeted body politic would find ways to understand the asymmetrical and contradictory terms of the nation and tune them to their advantage. Writing about the African American spirituals, Joseph Winters notes, “this incipient form of black musical expression countered a set of arrangements that rendered black bodies useful objects, arrangements predicated on the exclusion of blacks from the category ‘human’” and “enabled slaves to make sense of a senseless predicament” and “absurd” conditions (Winters 2013, 9–20).<sup>19</sup> Today, in hip hop, this performed understanding is wielded, quite literally, as a weapon against white supremacist society—both by African Americans and their allied comrades; both in the United States and abroad. As this war continues to be waged on minorities and on the poor by limiting their educational opportunities, devaluing knowledge sets they have mastered, and even by obliterating the very notion of truth itself when facts challenge the ruling class, it should not surprise us that this knowledge has become weaponized in hip hop performance.

## “Bullet(s) of Truth”: Instruments of Knowledge

Listen up everybody the bottom line  
I’m a black intellect, but unrefined  
With precision like a bullet, target bound

—Q-Tip, “Oh My God”

On the surface, *Liquid Swords* is an extended metaphor for “words as weapons”—words are swords, MC battles are sword fights, rhyming couplets are “roundhouse kicks,” “mic(ro)phones” are “cyclones,” rap battles are “high noon” shootouts, and “rhyme

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thoughts” are “megaton bombs.” But at a more foundational level we can see how GZA’s *s/wordplay* casts words, rhymes, and thoughts, not as instruments of destruction but as instruments of change. And in this regard these metaphors are indeed less metaphors than metaphysics—these words and ideas are as “real” as material objects. Taken together, GZA’s hip hop ideology is an alchemy that weaponizes poetry, beats, and other musical sounds into revolutionary devices. In making his case about the prophetic nature of music, Jacques Attali quotes Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, “For a genuine poet, metaphor is not a rhetorical figure but a vicarious image that he actually beholds in place of a concept.” Attali suggests that we need not look to poetics to understand music’s sonic heraldry. As we have seen, GZA not only tells us about his alchemic ideas but also brings these ideas to life in performed sound.

As I say, for GZA, the transactions between the word and the deed—between the ideal and the material—are more than metaphorical, they are a transformative metaphysics that weaponize or instrumentalize *knowledge*. While easily missed, in the well-known and much-loved line quoted at the beginning of this section, the famously “conscious” and nonviolent Native Tongues MC, Q-Tip, employs martial imagery to explain how his “intellect” travels. While “unrefined,” it moves with cultivated “precision.” It is “target bound” to his listener. Indeed, such metaphors and metaphysics are ubiquitous in hip hop. Likewise, for GZA, the protagonist of the opening film sample on *Liquid Swords* is not evidence of a destructive nihilism but of a constructive education—“that was the night everything *changed*.” In this episteme, GZA’s line “Child educator, plus head amputator” makes sense as a clear encapsulation of the sample’s suggestion that decapitation is an appropriate response to a brain “infected by devils.” As the recorded archive of hip hop shows us—or rather, lets us hear—MCs use everything from musical scalpels and cudgels to bullets and bombs to re-educate a polity that needs to be awakened from slumber. Hence, the wide usage of the term “consciousness” in hip hop—a discursive economy that today has more currency in hip hop than even contemporary Marxist thought, where political “consciousness” is also a counterhegemonic instrument.

Hip hop artists have long conceived of such verbal arsenals, lyrical kung fu, and other rhetorical gestures to words becoming *educational* weapons, from Afrika Bambaataa’s seminal call for street gangs to battle with mics instead of maces, to Rakim’s lyrical homicide on “Lyrics of Fury,” NWA’s gangsta entreaty to “Express Yourself,” the “trajectories” of Guru’s words on “Brainstorm,” Wu Tang’s *36 Chambers* ideology, and Blue Scholars’ entreaty to “Shoot the Cops” (with your camera phones). Notably, one of the finest expressions of hip hop’s disciplining and educational power as a martial art comes from a Japanese hip hop crew, King Giddra, on their critique of political violence on 真実の弾丸 (Saishu Heiki/Bullet of Truth). On the Giddra track, MC Zeebra localizes the “words as weapons” meme, tracking the educational trajectories of the MC’s martial art. He begins:

Facing us is an illusion, the noise of a completely corrupt society  
Giddra lights a fire in the war of ideas in a 20-faced disguise

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Forcing a new association of thoughts  
And approaching the illusion is *this song*

As Zebra's performed texts begin to sink in, the track's chorus completes the metaphor-cum-metaphysics:

The bullet of truth makes a direct hit  
Slowly directing your brain cells<sup>20</sup>

Despite hip hop's African American genesis, the track conveys an unmistakably strong sense of how global this metaphysics is today. Indeed, the transformative power of rap lyrics and hip hop beats—of hip hop knowledge as educational bullet and bomb—is even more widespread than the East Asian martial arts influence today. Following from this background, I suggest we might think of this weaponization of knowledge not only as a common theme of hip hop but also as a central premise of hip hop—of rap music *as* martial art.

On Dumbfoundead's 2009 track "Bullets of Truth," the LA rapper spits lightning-quick and breathless couplets exposing particularly American hypocrisies. With each performative bullet of truth—from structural xenophobia, the prison-industrial complex, government surveillance, and media complicity to religious manipulation, capitalist aggression, the man-made disaster of Hurricane Katrina, and the global arms trade—his anxiety and paranoia seem to grow. Gunshots ring out at the start of each line of the chorus, doubling his cry of "bang!" in the first line.

Bang! This message might self-destruct  
So if it blows up in my face will you help me up?  
(Bang! Bang!) They might come and assassinate me  
Then tell all of y'all that I was just exaggerating  
(Bang! Bang!) I hope that it finally hits ya  
And after it does know that they'll be comin to get ya  
(Bang! Bang!) We're shootin' out bullets of truth  
(Bang! Bang!) We're shootin' out bullets of truth

Sacrificing himself in performance, the rapper ends the track with the couplet "I don't care if this message blows up at the end / as long as you've heard it at the time that it was sent (Bang!)." The track ends with a final shot—and the implied promise that the message has been heard.

Most importantly for the aims of the present chapter, the Korean American MC's track begins with a sample from Malcolm X's April 1964 speech in Detroit, now widely known by its *idée fixe* "the ballot or the bullet." After the incessant hi-hat and arpeggiated piano beat begins, the Malcolm sample enters with the dating imperfections of a crackling vinyl LP: "This afternoon we want to talk about the ballot or the bullet. 'The ballot or the bullet' explains itself. But before we get into it, since this is the year of the ballot or the bullet I would like to clarify some things that refer to me personally." The recording is scratched by DFD's DJ Zo to emphasize and loop the *idée fixe* and other discursively important moments. Notably, the sample perfectly sets up the lyrical indictment that follows, replete

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with the stark words-or-weapons/peace-or-war choice, its ideal-cum-material metaphysics, and the paranoia that rightly haunted Brother Malcolm in the spring of 1964.

The violent metaphysics and ultimate self-sacrifice of Dumbfoundead's "Bullets of Truth" resonates with another, more recent, words as *educational* weapons track that brings us back to Wu Tang's s/wordplay. The title track of 2011's *Legendary Weapons* begins with the wide and pregnant vibrato of a single *shakuhachi* flute—instantly conjuring up the vicarious image of a samurai ready to strike. Ghost Face Killah enters with a full-throated assault backed by a flurry of hip hop drums:

I flip goods like a stock trader (get money!)  
We gon' rush the floor, we attack like Al-Qaeda  
Suicide missionary, black activist  
Nice with the tongue, I'm a verbal-type masochist

Like "Liquid Swords," the track instantly immerses us in Wu Tang Clan's metaphysics—hip hop's martial art.<sup>21</sup> In the first line goods are liquidated. In the second, Ghost tells us what we already know: that his aural assault will come full-force and unexpectedly. In the second and third, he articulates terrorist "missions" to the "missionary" work of social justice advocates. And just before we are even able to cringe at the equation of suicide bombers and black activists, the MC "from the Shaolin slum" reminds us that his terrorism, his activism, is centered in the realm of sound. His martial art is a verbal and musical one.

Similarly, in the introduction to Janelle Monáe's Afrofuturist video for "Q.U.E.E.N. feat. Erykah Badu" (2013), we are welcomed to a futuristic museum that summarizes hip hop's martial artistry. A disembodied (white) female voice introduces the scene: "It's hard to stop rebels that time travel. But we at the Time Council pride ourselves on doing just that." In the video, two black women walk into the museum. One is wearing a yin and yang t-shirt. The voice continues:

Welcome to the living museum, where legendary rebels throughout history have been frozen in suspended animation. Here in this particular exhibit you'll find members of Wondaland and their notorious leader Janelle Monáe along with her dangerous accomplice Badoula Oblongata. Together they launched project Q.U.E.E.N., a *musical weapons program* in the twenty-first century. Researchers are still deciphering the nature of this program and hunting the various freedom movements that Wondaland disguised as songs, emotion pictures, and works of art.<sup>22</sup>

Along with the yin/yang imagery, this "living museum" framing of the track casts hip hop as a martial art and centers Monáe's hip hop metaphysics. "Q.U.E.E.N." performs the conceptual artist's belief that music can be weaponized; that "songs, emotion pictures, and works of art" can be transformed into weapons programs, into freedom movements.

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Indeed, Monae gestures to the alchemy of race and its political economy on her rapped conclusion to the track.

Are we a lost generation of our people?  
Add us to equations but they'll never make us equal  
She who writes the movie owns the script and the sequel  
So why ain't the stealing of my rights made illegal?

As we will see, the political economy of race is central to understanding the political economy of violence in hip hop—and the racial structure of violence in the United States of America. These “equations” will be central to our continuing analysis.

### **“All that is solid melts into air”: Transformation and Exchange Value**

Given hip hop's genesis in the postindustrial austerity environment of the South Bronx and its early development in other American cities, I want to go a step further and argue that this performative translation from the discursive to the material, so central to hip hop knowledge and artistry, is premised on the centrality (and adjacency) of the First and Second Amendments to the US Constitution: “the freedom of speech” and “the right to bear arms.” As has become clear in recent years, the adjacency of these instruments of revolution, as codified in the 1789 document, has led to a superstructural conflation of the two. Yes, speech has always been a powerful weapon, but weapons are now speech—instruments of self-expression—according to a (notably white male) slice of the American citizenry. Indeed, it would seem that “the right of the people to keep and bear arms” has bled up into “the freedom of speech” line on the Bill of Rights—a line that also enshrines “the freedom of religion” and “peaceful assembly.”<sup>23</sup>

The full texts of the respective amendments read:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging *the freedom of speech*, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

and

A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people *to keep and bear Arms*, shall not be infringed.

Despite their seeming independence and increased interchangeability today, the full texts in their original context make clear that the ordering was intentional. The First Amendment (Article 3 in the Bill of Rights) ensures the freedom of (and from) religion and assures “the right of the people” to speak, especially against their own government, as

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made clear in the following clause about assembling and petitioning the government to “redress grievances.” In short, the First Amendment seeks to assure the functioning of a responsive government “of the people” by allowing those self-same people to worship, speak, report, petition, assemble—and to sing, dance, and dream as they wish. Assuming the smooth functioning of the First Amendment, the Second Amendment secures these people’s “free state” via “a well regulated Militia.”

As the reader has already sussed out, I am not a constitutional scholar, and I will not presume to get into the details of the well-developed “militia” arguments of gun control advocates here. As the Bill of Rights makes clear, however, the Second Amendment’s phrase “the security of a free state” refers directly to the state made possible by the freedoms enshrined in the previous lines. The First Amendment secures a system of freedom from internal threats—from government oppression and the (re)emergence of theocracy, oligarchy, autocracy, or mob rule. The Second Amendment secures those freedoms from outside forces, by securing the free state itself from outside forces via a “well-regulated militia.” The pragmatic and self-preservation intentions of this rule of law in revolution-era America are obvious. The threat from external imperial, colonial, and national interests was real. Further, there must have been an understanding that if the appropriate government channels for redress failed, the Second Amendment would provide a more convincing lever and fail-safe for the people—hopefully encouraging the healthy functioning of the preferred nonviolent government channels. What must have been less obvious to revolution-era lawmakers was the reality that such a law might eventually be mistaken for the one that preceded it, emboldening citizens to express themselves by killing fellow citizens at random. This, and the fact that it was not obvious to the framers that theirs was not a “free state.” This *de jure* freedom was not *de facto* by any definition to the 700,000 US citizens who were enslaved (18% of the US population in 1790), the 1.9 million women, and the 59,000 free nonwhite people.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, as recent political events in the United States have made abundantly clear, long-promised freedoms for some have been perceived as existential threats for others. This was true in the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 as Reconstruction fanned the flames of racial violence, it was true during and after the fight for the Civil Rights Act in 1964 as Jim Crow fell, kicking and screaming, burning and lynching, and it has been increasingly true since the election of the nation’s first black president as the edifice of white privilege succumbed to the greatest structural impropriety: Barack Hussein Obama and his African American family living in the White House. With each of these, and countless other decades-old structural promises finally being fulfilled, unreconstructed whites—South, North, East, and West—have grown frustrated at their loss of privilege, turning to the Second Amendment to express themselves and finding protective refuge in gun ownership. In this way, the Second Amendment and the unbearably slow crawl toward the true “free state” promised by the First Amendment have become historically intertwined. The move toward fulfillment of the First Amendment has utterly transformed the interpretation and intention of the Second.

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Following from Ta-Nehisi Coates's thesis that racial violence is central to American national identity and with the backdrop of state-sanctioned antiblack police violence, Ferguson, Charleston, #BlackLivesMatter, and the interminably saddening list of American mass shootings firmly in focus, I want to use this background to pivot into territory that suggests that hip hop has proven an unlikely force for nonviolence. Indeed, we have already seen the data. We know what happened to violent crime statistics as hip hop voiced inner-city frustrations and gained a nationwide audience in doing so. I will not pretend to equate the correlation with causation, but a closer look at such channeling of material violence into speech (instead of vice versa) should prove illuminating. Indeed, in looking at the transformation from the material to the discursive in hip hop's *s/wordplay*, we might find a key expression of hip hop's superstructural "war of position" that George Lipsitz identified in his *Dangerous Crossroads* over twenty years ago (Lipsitz 1994).<sup>25</sup>

In his incisive critique of the "American Dream," *Between the World and Me*, Coates implores his son, "You cannot forget how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold" (Coates 2015, 8). The theme of transformation has a long and distinguished history in African American arts and letters. From the African American spirituals—"the sorrow songs"—to Du Bois's transcendent poetics, from Sun Ra's sonic "myth-science" alchemy to Octavia Butler's Afrofuturist critiques, and throughout hip hop's foundational practices of *flipping the script*, transformation has been a touchstone.<sup>26</sup> As just two highly visible examples from recent hip hop, Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* and Beyoncé's *Lemonade* are both "about" transformation and renewal—in Beyoncé's case reflecting the old adage "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." As I suggest, like countless other hip hop albums, these most recent chart toppers reflect an enduring experience of the distance between the de jure idea of American democratic equality and the violent asymmetries of its de facto reality. Most importantly, this music offers ways to know and master that distance between what might be and what is.

Notably, the transformation that Coates wants to center is neither uplifting, otherworldly, nor gilded with heavenly promises. His transformation is transaction. He is concerned not with spiritual transfiguration and transcendence, but with earthly exchange value—quid pro quo. This is what Fred Moten is up to when he writes, "Black radicalism is (like) black music" in his *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Moten 2003, 7). Gesturing to Marx's "speaking commodity," its realization in black speech acts, and the music born out of chattel slavery in the "new world," Moten illustrates how the immanent critique of black speech transgresses the domains of art and politics (Moten 2003, 24). How black art is politics. How black radicalism is black music.

In a political era subject to the legal ramifications of the US Supreme Court's "Citizen's United" decision, wherein *money has become speech*,<sup>27</sup> dominated by the NRA and the arms industry despite the increasing regularity of mass shootings,<sup>28</sup> and beholden to the idea that a corporation can have "closely held religious beliefs" in the wake of the Court's Hobby Lobby decision,<sup>29</sup> it should not surprise us that our words for these entities—"corporations" and "arms"—have become reified and embodied. Money and weapons

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have become human agents with *bodies* and *limbs*. Our linguistic and legalistic frameworks have humanized the nonhuman, just as they have dehumanized black, brown, red, and, yes, yellow bodies.

As I suggest, it seems that hip hop has known what these transactions augur. In fashioning its polycultural ethos and ethics from African American religion and East Asian holistic thought, from the anticolonial spiritualities of black Muslim practice and Afro-Caribbean Christianity, *and* with an eye to the material, our contemporary “civil rights” discourse—of Black Lives Matter, of Ta-Nehisi Coates, of Beyoncé, of Kendrick Lamar—has turned its focus from ideas and their codification in de jure legal frameworks to bodies and their de facto realities. Bodies, it seems, are key to revolution. Bodies are its currency. In an era when guns and money have greater rights than people, our current mo(ve)ment marks a shift from the *ideal* of legal “civil rights” discourse to a focus on the *material* of “the pillaging of life, liberty, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs,” and the freedom to destroy nonwhite bodies with impunity (Coates 2015, 7). This change in strategy has thus turned from the *ideal* to the *material*—and hip hop is at the forefront of this shift, nimble with its mastery of the two domains and ready with a deep-seated martial ethos.

While this political economy of violence in hip hop will prove insufficient in accounting for misogyny, homophobia, and other prominent discourses of gendered violence in hip hop (Rose works systematically toward these ends in chapters 5, 7, and 8 of *The Hip Hop Wars*), I propose that Moten’s Derridian concept of “invagination” will prove useful for further investigations into this area. Indeed, invagination embodies, engenders, and enlivens the music-centered theory of Moten’s book, *In the Break*—that African American cultural possibility lives in the gaps, the interstices, the openings, and the possibilities between language and the speech act.<sup>30</sup> Certainly “the break” perfectly describes the distance between the de jure ideal of democratic equality and the de facto status quo of racial brutality at the center of this chapter’s argument, but it also counters Western modernity’s metaphysics (logocentrism) and the *phallogentric* drive toward stable meaning, universality, and (white, hetero, male) normativity.

Of course, “the break” is also the stripped down, drum and bass section of funk and disco records that early hip hop DJs started to loop ad infinitum, opening up a space for folks on the dance floor to do their thing—hence “breakbeat” music. Moten writes of such processes of invagination in black cultural production, thus: “they open the possibility of a critique of the valuation of meaning over content and the reduction of phonic matter and syntactic ‘degeneracy’ in the early modern search for a universal science of language. This disruption is of fundamental importance since it allows a rearrangement of the relationship between notions of human freedom and human essence” (Moten 2003, 7). Invagination sidelines meaning in favor of “phonic matter,” of phenomena, of aesthetics. In so doing it brings process out from beneath the thumb of product, privileging freedom and movement over certainty and stasis. Indeed, apropos of Moten’s

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point about freedom and essence, it is worth note that the art of DJ turntablism turned a semiotically static playback device into a creative instrument—an object into a subject.

As such, while hip hop, writ large, remains a troubling terrain rife with representations of violence (both discursive and mediatized) and while many of those representations do *real* violence, it will be important to examine how many of hip hop's cultural practices and knowledges take forms and positions directly counter to our manifestly sexist society, its pussy-grabbing president, the misogynistic regimes of the culture industries, and our phallogocentric/logocentric metaphysics.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, hip hop has another much-heralded site of competition and collaboration besides the rap battle—the hip hop cipher. In her *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, Cheryl Keyes describes the cipher as “a circle of three or more people” who come together to perform, challenge, and feed off of one another (Keyes 2002, 124). The cipher is the basic unit of hip hop community. As such, if we concede that hip hop is a martial art, and if we assent to the idea that hip hop metaphysics is deeply indebted to East Asian philosophy, as I propose, it is worth considering that this martial valence of the art and culture is balanced by a pacifist or spiritual complement. Indeed, in the context of the present chapter, we might think of the cipher as the yin to the rap battle's yang. As we have seen, the influence of East Asian holistic thought, as typified in traditional martial arts beliefs and practices, has helped hip hop practitioners conceive of this simultaneity not as binary and asymmetrical but as mutually constituted and interwoven—a fluidity we can hear in hip hop *s/wordplay*.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusions: “Mind 2 Motion”

I conclude with a brief look at the track “Mind 2 Motion” by the London MC, Roots Manuva. As the title implies, the track is about the transformation of thoughts into movement. As such, it models the artist's strategically essentialist name—and the “practice of diaspora” more broadly—and reminds us of one of the most salient powers of music (Edwards 2003).<sup>33</sup> Music moves people. Figuratively, if it is good, literally if it is *really* good. On the title of “Mind 2 Motion,” Roots transforms the “twoness” (“2”) between the mental and the physical into the singular, active, and directional transformation of “to.” Over the black British sounds of a swinging marimba and bass riddim pair mapped onto electro-retro video game bleeps and a heraldic pseudocolonial synth trumpet, the MC globalizes the black martial art with intonations, phrases, and other references to his Afro-Caribbean heritage, performing his *s/wordplay* with the lines: “I put them out with my turn of phrase / Tunable switchblade, rebel eye stay paid . . . Syntactical tacklers, volatile as the Gaza Strip.”

Despite his localization of the “bullet of truth” formulation in his line “With a brain gun, a skankin’ in the rain gun,” however, Roots seeks not to battle—nor even to educate the

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mind, per se. The MC's goal on this track is to "shake away the hurt" through movement, through dance, through *swing*. The chorus follows:

Mind 2 motion: swing your pants  
Mind 2 motion: swing your skirt  
Shake away the hurt . . .  
Go kick a hole in the rot nah, tellie  
Go kick a hole in the rot nah  
Mind 2 motion: swing it for me  
Mind 2 motion: swing it for me

The track implores his listeners to use the track as a medium through which to activate their humanity, to move their bodies in opposition and dance. Roots asks his listeners to get up off the couch, kick a hole in their televisions, kick a hole in all the "rot" that keeps them passive, and "swing it."

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While the term "martial art" remains a paradox for many, it seems a fitting place to begin in accounting for the ways that hip hop provides a discursive and performative field in which to vent frustrations, enact fantasies, build confidence, and formulate plots—without ending up in jail or shot (so to speak). As such, I conclude with the suggestion that hip hop, as an artistic *outlet*, might be one reason that, despite their commonplace marginalization, demonization, and criminalization, young black men have not gravitated toward the notably white male pastime of mass shooting.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, as the diverse and global reach of the artists I have mentioned here indicates, hip hop practice and ideology seems to work in culturally and politically productive ways around the world. In 2016 Q-Tip was named artistic director for the Kennedy Center's first-of-its-kind Hip-Hop Culture Initiative. Notably, his new hit track with A Tribe Called Quest is titled "We the People."<sup>35</sup> GZA, meanwhile, is working with the Columbia University professor Christopher Emdin on a science education initiative for inner-city youth.<sup>36</sup> He's also recording a new hip hop exploration of astrophysics, titled *Dark Matter*—it examines the relationship of *matter* and *energy*.

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### Notes:

<sup>(1)</sup> For those who do not believe that MJ was hip hop, go tell that shit to someone at 27th and Wisconsin Avenue in 1983.

<sup>(2)</sup> Michael Schultz, Director, *The Last Dragon* (TriStar, 1985); Stan Lathan, Director, *Beat Street* (Orion, 1984).

<sup>(3)</sup> Sun Tzu, "Section III: Attack by Stratagem—Point 2," in *The Art of War* (1910).

<sup>(4)</sup> Thanks to my colleague in music and martial arts studies, Colin McGuire, who confirmed and nuanced some of my superficial understanding of martial arts. As Colin suggested, my secondhand received knowledge about these forms and their ideologies is mediated in large part by a postwar pacification of the Japanese forms—especially as circulated, practiced, and mediatized in North American contexts. For an introduction to the emergent field of martial arts studies, see Sixt Wetzler, "Martial Arts Studies as Kulturwissenschaft: A Possible Theoretical Framework," *Martial Arts Studies* 1 (2015): 20–33. For its application in music, see the introduction to *The Fighting Art of Pencak Silat and Its Music: From Southeast Asian Village to Global Movement*, eds. Uwe Paetzold and Paul H. Mason (Boston: Brill, 2016).

<sup>(5)</sup> If the Netflix black superhero series *Luke Cage* is any indication, this speak-softly-and-carry-a-big-stick character remains an attractive one for the hip hop generation, and, as Miles White has shown us, the "Bad Man" character (who is nonetheless good, moral, and respected by his community) has been a powerful one long before the 1960s. Miles White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

<sup>(6)</sup> We trafficked mainly in oregano dime bags and yelled, "Fuck!" into neighborhood restaurants. We only had one rumble (in my experience) and in that instance our lone African American member talked both sides down before we had to use our *nunchaku* and throwing stars.

<sup>(7)</sup> Note that Chang's usage refers not to pluralism but polyculture—a difference that Paul Gilroy spells out in *The Black Atlantic: Race and Double Consciousness* (New York: Verso, 1993). Gilroy critiques such "polyphonic" models as "insufficiently alive to the lingering

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power of specifically racialised forms of power and subordination.” Further, in this reading “pluralistic” implies a diversity of essentialism and particular fixities (32).

(<sup>8</sup>) As we will see, correlation does not equate to causality. Yet the data do seriously undermine—if not lay to rest—such knee-jerk (racist) assumptions.

(<sup>9</sup>) See for example the Bronx retro-chic and mythologized narrative of the Netflix series *The Get Down* (Bazmark/Sony 2016). For more on hip hop ideology, its five elements (Dance, Graffiti, MC, DJ, and Knowledge of Self), and the Universal Zulu Nation, see [www.zulunation.com](http://www.zulunation.com). On an important related note, whether or not recent sexual assault allegations about the UZN founder Afrika Bambaataa are confirmed, hip hop scholars and fans will have to consider seriously the silences and blind spots around our investments in hip hop’s “founding fathers” and the unintended effects of such celebrating and valorization of the icons of the culture.

(<sup>10</sup>) GZA, *Liquid Swords* (Geffen 1995).

(<sup>11</sup>) Sun Tzu, “Introduction: Sun Wu and His Book,” in *The Art of War* (1910), 6. In an interview with WaxPoetics.com’s David Ma, GZA recalled, “The hook was actually a routine from around ‘84 that me RZA and Ol’ Dirty would do: [*sings*] ‘When the emcees came, to live out the name.’ Just like that.” <http://www.waxpoetics.com/blog/features/articles/the-making-of-liquid-swords-gza/> (last accessed June 20, 2017).

(<sup>12</sup>) As Miyakawa explains, “the Nation of Islam refers to Five Percenter as ‘philosophers’ or ‘scientists,’ emphasis of the Five Percenter emphasis on metaphysics and esoterica. Using the spirit of the Supreme Alphabet, Five Percenter ‘break down’ the word,” analyzing it as thing unto itself, with its own components and hidden meanings—not a mere signifier of a signified. Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop’s Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission* (2005, 30).

(<sup>13</sup>) For an in-depth examination of hip hop metaphysics, see J. Griffith Rollefson, “‘Straight Outta B.C.’: Differance, Defness, and Juice Aleem’s Precolonial Afrofuturist Critique,” in *Flip the Script: European Hip Hop and the Politics of Postcoloniality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 194–225.

(<sup>14</sup>) As one widely circulated genesis story has it, the names “GZA” and “RZA” were divined from the sounds of turntable scratches.

(<sup>15</sup>) The RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual* (2004, 63). This quotation is further elaborated and contextualized later.

(<sup>16</sup>) Boogie Down Productions, *Criminal Minded* (B-Boy Records 1987).

(<sup>17</sup>) Ellie M. Hisama, “Afro-Asian Crosscurrents in Contemporary Hip Hop” (2002, 3). See also, Hisama, “‘We’re All Asian Really’: Hip Hop’s Afro-Asian Crossings,” in *Critical*

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*Minded: New Approaches to Hip Hop Studies* (Brooklyn, NY: Institute for Studies in American Music, 2005).

(<sup>18</sup>) Deborah Wong writes, “As an Asian American scholar, I want to believe that Asian American incursions into African American forms are conscious attempts to link different ways of knowing and reconfiguring race. This activation of the body politic is no small thing. If we regard these performers’ efforts as pedagogical rather than appropriating, we can see anger, interrogation, coalition, action, revolution, in motion.” Wong, “The Asian American Body in Performance” in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, eds. Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 89. See also Tamara Roberts, *Resounding Afro Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Tamara Roberts and Roger Buckley, eds., *Yellow Power, Yellow Soul: The Radical Art of Fred Ho* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

(<sup>19</sup>) In his “Contemporary Sorrow Songs: Traces of Mourning, Lament, and Vulnerability in Hip Hop” (2013), Joseph Winters gestures to the political economy of the “absurdity” between the de jure and the de facto, writing,

With a nod to Adorno, we might say that mourning and sorrow directed toward neglected tensions, contradictions, and injustices in the social world can become a refusal of the *status quo*. Part of this refusal was directed toward the dehumanizing quality of white supremacy, chattel slavery, and so forth. In an attempt to trace the musical strands that precede and implicitly inspire hip-hop music, Anthony Pinn claims that the spirituals enabled slaves to make sense of a senseless predicament, to “humaniz[e] a dehumanizing environment.” In other words, this incipient form of black musical expression countered a set of arrangements that rendered black bodies useful objects, arrangements predicated on the exclusion of blacks from the category “human.” The spirituals provided a way of giving a voice to conditions and experiences that many have labeled absurd. They permitted black subjects to begin to locate these absurd episodes within a set of sense-conferring narratives.

(<sup>20</sup>) King Giddra, “Saishu Heiki/Bullet of Truth” (2005) (trans. Ian Condry). The 2005 track, of course, rings prophetic twelve years on, in our era of “fake news” and “reality tv reality.”

(<sup>21</sup>) For a closer look at this metaphysics, its genesis, its politics, and its relationship to martial arts films, see The RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual*. The RZA describes as pivotal seeing the martial arts film *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978) for the first time at a grindhouse cinema in Times Square:

I was just amazed by this movie—the action, the moves, the period, and the message it was giving—it was just sublime. On the surface, it was about a revolution against the Manchus. You had the government oppressing all the

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people.... Suddenly, these students realize the truth. They didn't know they were oppressed, they figured that's how it's always been. I could relate to that on a lot of levels. The second part of the movie was the training [San-Te] went through to become a master, to build himself up. That part took me by storm. I actually began doing push-ups and punching walls, going to Chinatown and getting books, the whole trip. The Thirty-Sixth Chamber was the one that opened my mind. The idea of self-discipline, of re-creating yourself. I was around fourteen years old. And it changed me, for real. (59)

Elaborating this metaphysics, and its martial artistry, RZA continues, "Wu-Tang was the best sword style. And with us, our tongue is our sword. So I was like, 'The book and the sword are the two things that control the world. We either gonna control them through knowledge and influence their minds, or we gonna bring the sword and take their heads off.' That's why we called our first joint 'Protect Ya Neck'" (63). Thanks to volume editor Jason Lee Oakes for this and countless other suggestions and directions.

(<sup>22</sup>) Janelle Monáe, "Q.U.E.E.N. feat. Erykah Badu" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEddixS-UoU>. See also Lia T. Bascomb's article on the track, "Freakifying History, Remixing Royalty."

(<sup>23</sup>) A transcription and digital reproduction of the original document is available at <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights>.

(<sup>24</sup>) "Slave, Free Black, and White Population" (Census Data) 1780-1830. <http://userpages.umbc.edu/~bouton/History407/SlaveStats.htm>.

(<sup>25</sup>) George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (1994, 36).

(<sup>26</sup>) For an examination of these transformations from Du Bois to Afrofuturist arts and letters, see J. Griffith Rollefson, "The Robot Voodoo Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Keith," *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (2008): 83-109. For an examination of hip hop's politically performative practices of flipping the script, see the introduction to Rollefson, *Flip the Script*, 1-18.

(<sup>27</sup>) Jeffrey Toobin, "Money Unlimited: How Chief Justice John Roberts Orchestrated the Citizens United Decision," *The New Yorker*, May 21, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/05/21/money-unlimited>.

(<sup>28</sup>) Michael Hiltzik, "The NRA Has Blocked Gun Violence Research for 20 Years. Let's End Its Stranglehold on Science," *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/business/hiltzik/la-fi-hiltzik-gun-research-funding-20160614-snap-story.html>.

(<sup>29</sup>) Ben Adams and Cynthia Barmore, "Questioning Sincerity: The Role of the Courts after Hobby Lobby," *Stanford Law Review*, November 2014, <https://>

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[www.stanfordlawreview.org/online/questioning-sincerity-the-role-of-the-courts-after-hobby-lobby/](http://www.stanfordlawreview.org/online/questioning-sincerity-the-role-of-the-courts-after-hobby-lobby/).

(<sup>30</sup>) Derrida describes invagination as “an internal pocket larger than the whole . . . as singular as it is limitless.” Jacques Derrida and Avital Ronell, “The Law of Genre,” *Critical Inquiry: On Narrative* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1980): 55.

(<sup>31</sup>) It is also worth noting the queer and bottom-up model of the Black Lives Matter mo(ve)ment as representative of such counterhegemonic forms and positions.

(<sup>32</sup>) Thanks to my fellow panelists at the 2017 Society for American Music Conference, Alexa Woloshyn and Emilie Hurst, and to Glenda Goodman, Loren Kajikawa, Sean Peterson, Lauron Kehrer, and panel chair Mark Katz for their comments that led to the proposal for further investigation and theoretical intervention outlined in this and the previous paragraph. Thanks again to Colin McGuire who, upon chatting about these issues after my return from SAM, said something to the effect of, “yeah, then the cipher and the rap battle are the yin and yang of hip hop.” . . . where credit is due.

(<sup>33</sup>) I’m here referring to Brent Hayes Edwards’s *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003).

(<sup>34</sup>) In his revealing expose on the underground message board community, 4chan, and its relationship to mass shootings, Donald Trump, and the “Alt-Right” (i.e., white supremacists), Dale Beran writes, “It was a culture that celebrated failure—that from the very beginning encouraged anyone who posted to ‘become an hero’ [sic] (their term for killing themselves, and sometimes others in the bargain).” As Beran explains, this white adolescent male culture of failure and frustration also originally coalesced around shared interests in Asian culture, albeit in largely exoticizing and unhealthy ways. “They were obsessed with Japanese culture and, naturally enough, there was already a term for people like them in Japan, *hikikomori*—meaning ‘pulling inward, or being confined’—teens and adults who withdrew from society into fantasy worlds constructed by anime, video games, and now the internet.” They were “a group of primarily young males who spent a lot of the time at the computer, so much so they had retreated into virtual worlds of games, T.V., and now the networks of the internet. This was where most or all of their interaction, social or otherwise took place. The real world, by contrast, above their mothers’ basements, was a place they did not succeed, perhaps a place they did not fundamentally understand.” Dale Beran, “4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump,” on Medium.com, <https://medium.com/@DaleBeran/4chan-the-skeleton-key-to-the-rise-of-trump-624e7cb798cb#.j51c2n1k6>.

(<sup>35</sup>) Zoe Camp, “Q-Tip Named the Kennedy Center’s First-Ever Artistic Director for Hip-Hop Culture: Center’s Inaugural Hip-Hop Culture Season to Feature DJ Spooky, Slam Poetry, B-Boying, More,” *Pitchfork.com*, March 8, 2016, <http://pitchfork.com/news/64009-q-tip-named-the-kennedy-centers-first-ever-artistic-director-for-hip-hop-culture/> (last

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accessed November 21, 2016). "We the People," on A Tribe Called Quest, *We Got it from Here . . . Thank You 4 Your Service* (Epic 2016).

(<sup>36</sup>) John Leland, "A Hip-Hop Experiment," *New York Times*, November 16, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/18/nyregion/columbia-professor-and-gza-aim-to-help-teach-science-through-hip-hop.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/18/nyregion/columbia-professor-and-gza-aim-to-help-teach-science-through-hip-hop.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) (last accessed November 21, 2016).

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