

I.M. MYSELF: A PROGRESSION INTO THE AESTHETICS OF HIP HOP FILMMAKING

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

**I.M. MYSELF: A PROGRESSION INTO THE AESTHETICS OF HIP HOP FILMMAKING**

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A two-part project, one half film and the other an analytical essay. A Maine in Progression is a candid documentary following Detroit music artist Illy Maine in his journey and discoveries throughout life and music. The film explores identity, challenges through troubled times and roots--all underlying an inspiring unyielding clinch to hope. Illy Maine believes that through sound we find identity. That our voice carries the entire history of who we are and who we present ourselves as. Along with the essay, this body of work was created in effort to show the methodology behind an "aesthetically Hip Hop" filmmaking approach into story telling. Built on the filters of humanity becoming creative through constraints and being true to who they are and what they choose to embody.

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## LAYING THE GROUNDWORK/SETTING UP THE MIX

During the Spring of 2019 in my second semester of graduate school, I would end up taking a course in Advanced Multimedia Writing (or to simplify it for my department and course work WRA 425). The class is taught by renowned filmmaker and scholar Alexandra Hidalgo, in which she would require us to make a documentary film of our own for the final project in the class. Just as important to creating the film itself, the entire process was followed in respect to what she's been teaching us all along—feminist filmmaking and how to give respect to the subject, crew and content in the entire production—not only creating a story for your own satisfaction but storytelling while keeping in mind its acceptance and intended message from the point of view of everyone involved. Of course, that's a short description of what all really took place in her teachings, but it inspired the thought of creating my own film about myself, creatively titled, *I.M. Myself: A Maine Progression*. Whose name was inspired by my artist name and debut album, Illy Maine - "*I.M. Myself*"—and to give it justice without my own bias... sounds complicated, right?

To talk about my life, as an artist and scholar, I had to call upon my roots and discover for myself how I really ended up where I would be today. In this back and forth tracing of my life's past and direction, a few things would stand out to me exceedingly. I couldn't talk about my life without touching on music, my family, my environment, and all the sounds that eventually made up who I would become... and it all revolved around Hip Hop and the church. We created the first version of my documentary in the class, and Alex and I would notice that my story had been similar to other musical artists finding/making their way into the world, down to the process of discovering who they were. From that point on, I knew there was

something important there I needed to study and do more research on. Was there a commonality in how artists go about their lives, and more importantly to my thesis... was there a particular way music artists, later specified down to Hip Hop artists, chose to represent themselves in film. In these stories the artists chose to speak about themselves, what was it that they found important to say, what clips were integral to embodying who they were/or wanted to be seen as and how would it move the audience watching it.

Over a year later, I would build upon my documentary and use these principles and ideas I'd pick up from studying other artist-specific Hip Hop documentaries to bring it more to life and capture that essence I felt from the other films. Presenting who I am, where I've come from, and illustrating in the most personable fashion I could... where I was intending to go. Theorizing in reflection of the piece, even through a retroactive lens compared to the other films, I can say it was truly representative of a Maine(s) Progression.

I wanted to create a film that explores identity, challenges through dark times and roots--all underlying an inspiring unyielding clinch to hope. It just so happened to be that film would be about my own life. And what I found in these moments of introspection, alone with my own thoughts, was that the sounds my body created mimicked my emotional being and made present the state of my being as well. Was I okay? Was I happy? Sad? Angry? In pain? It was all represented in whatever escaped the confines of my mind and managed to manifest itself into the audible world.

I believe that through sound we find identity. That our voice carries the entire history of who we are and who we present ourselves as. This is a documentary about releasing that inner

voice and sound. Being creative through your constraints, and fundamentally, in this cypher of life—it when the mic is in our hands... What do I need you to know?

The world may have an idea of you, but Hip Hop allows us to let the world know who we really are—whoever that might be—just as the breaks in music allows, it creates space for its receiver. Whether that be dancing, singing, breaths of meditation... that space is filled by what you choose to do with it. The aesthetic of Hip Hop is to welcome you, but whatever it is you choose to fill that space with, the only rule is—you must own it.

I choose to be myself.

From this work, I wanted to access this raw embodiment of who I was in everything that I did. So, in analyzing outside methods of Hip Hop's influence on the world that would affect me. To be as genuine as possible, I wanted my work to represent that. To relay my heartfelt approach through whatever medium provided... if I could use my voice, I could write a song. If we were in person I could use my body language... but just given text... suppose I could bring you in my world with a poem--and as in Hip Hop, allow the space for you to make your own conclusions after we break it down. For in truth, whatever I say, type, or do once released from myself is now the property of whomever received it. Filtered by their own life experiences that will determine how it is perceived. The following pages display a bit how these filters were brought together from my own life and train of thought, and also, in my film *A Maine Progression*.

With this analysis containing an aesthetically Hip Hop approach, might allow us in academia to bridge the gap between the personable and “sometimes” out of touch language sciences might have. As it is true for most art forms in respect to showing your work—Hip Hop

is inherently about community, I can consider myself the dopest MC around, but if no one ever hears me, if I am not understood—Hip Hop rejects you. That’s not to say that you must limit how you decide to create... but Hip Hop is about relaying that version of you, or intended message to the community that surrounds you. It’s about being you and letting the world know exactly how you feel. No ifs ands or buts... ‘cause past that language... at the end of the day it’s all about, can “we feel you.” It’s a methodology (containing voice, movement, and thinking) of establishing your place in its society, sure there can be a hierarchy of skill, but ultimately participation (listening, or stage-front) denotes two things... you’re either in or out.

To begin my analysis, I wanted to start with a poem inspired by the personal documentary *Travis Scott: Look Mom I Can Fly*. My goal for the film was to theorize hip-hop filmmaking and my goal for the essay is to give more context to my ideas from an artistic approach. In my review of the films instead of a traditional summary, it spoke to me more to speak on art, with art. Through that medium I was better able to grasp how the films connected with me on a more personal level, and because I was using my voice, what I would learn felt increasingly as if I was experiencing their lives myself. I could observe from all angles, the consumer/audience member, the editor, and somewhat of the artists themselves as I was able to proverbially step into their shoes. And from it I could see resonances of myself in his work. Just like the other films in my analysis, we may lead different lives—but at the root... it’s the art in all of us that brings us together.

**A Poem Inspired by *Travis Scott: Look Mom I Can Fly* (2019) 1h 24m Directed by White Trash**

**Tyler**

Off grip,

the first thing I noticed

the intensity of sound

the animation of the film.

The visuals lead us down a roller coaster track,

with 3D characters and amusement park themed objects—

and it's quite trippy.

Next, we see Travis Scott,

the subject of the documentary,

in grainy footage talking to a reporter.

I quickly notice

that they both are actually on a roller coaster—

then It takes off.

Answering questions

while in the middle of the ride.

We hear the air whirling through the obstacles

and the phone receiver being clogged by the rushing wind,

their faces drooping and flapping as they fly through the track.

And the whole time they are just talking,

as Travis drops a nugget of inspiration to finish up the intro.

Believe in yourself. Learn who you are. Create.

The whole feeling is raw. Candid.

It has a factor of daredevil-ness—

shock and awe, I just want to see it through

(all the subsequent reasons we watch risky situations).

Adding to that,

it's vulnerable by disregarding "how you/he looked"

to stretch the aesthetic,

or maybe it's the aesthetic

stretching the norms and bending their imposed limits.

I think this relates heavily to his audience base

(the wild, silliness, endorsed freedom of being yourself).

I think this is reflected visually: being yourself.

## THE PRELUDE

My debut into the performance world of Hip Hop had been a milestone for me in many ways. Off top, like most young adolescents in my area, I had dreams of being a rap superstar. This moment would be the first public reception to my writing—outside of people in earshot of my living room—and hopefully the grand shuffle into my life of stardom. I had all my cards aligned, tracks loaded, rhymes practiced, shoes fresh, and a few minutes till showtime. I was in a Hip Hop group at the time called *MoDet* (pronounced Moe-Deet) which was a collective of artists set on being considered Detroit's very own Wu Tang. There was a battle of beats, and we were there in support of our producer friend, who told us there would be a few slots open for performances during the show—so the homies and I cooked up some music for the occasion, and we were ready to go. The venue was decent sized, fit around 60 or so people—and rumor had it that one of the A&Rs (Artists and Repertoire label agents/scouts) from G-Unit had been in the audience. My mind began racing in an avalanche of thoughts, all competing for a higher presence and priority of my focus—I was getting nervous. So, I tried to concentrate on my breathing.

We were given 7 minutes to move the crowd, which could be described as the average length of a bathroom break or roughly 2-3 songs. I would happen to have 120 of those seconds split around 32 bars in two songs to make an imprint and express who I am (i.e., a superstar). I needed to shake these nerves and get in my flow.

The mic thumped—it was the MC telling everyone that the show was about to begin. I cracked my knuckles, dapped up fist with my brothers, then walked up the MC to check in. When I got close enough to speak, the host asked me what my name was for our introduction. I

said with the utmost confidence “Iliad,” smiling and everything, “based off of the Epic poems, from Homer. My brother goes by the Odyssey.” The host didn’t seem any clearer on the concept, but shrugged, said “cool” and urged us on stage. I grabbed the mic ready to hype the crowd... the announcer starts, “And now, coming to stage... Lord Mel, Doc Rhetoric, and... Idiot!”—I paused. Idiot? Was that supposed to be me? The next thing I would hear would stun me deeper than my name lost in translation—the beat dropped—and I had the first verse.

With no time to present who I was outside of the music, and at this point 15 and a half bars left to say anything at all. I vowed to make sure that my words would always paint a big enough picture in whatever time or space I was allotted. That if my voice was all I had, when it spoke, you’d remember who I was and what was said. I went in. And I’d like to say they loved us.

The second milestone in my Hip Hop journey would be in a music competition to “Change Detroit for Good”—which happens to be its actual name and intended mission. The challenge was to make a clean song that would inspire a change of narrative in Detroit, add positivity, and ultimately serve as an anthem for the city in its resurgence. It’s 2009 and Detroit is on the verge of bankruptcy, people are mad, reoccurring sounds of gunshots and sirens wail through the city as often as buses are late (the buses were always late). Wages are low, jobs and benefits are cutting back, people are tired and could use a bit of encouragement. I’m graduating high school, and “of course,” starting my rap career—so, being the face of the city with an anthem sounds like a musical dream! Long story short, MoDet through a lot of elbow grease and community support, won the competition. But it was during the meeting to accept the award, this would solidify itself to me as a milestone. We were sitting at a conference table in some fancy downtown office with people congratulating the group on the win. Suddenly a



woman enters the room and passes out certificates and a sort of gift bag—yet they number only 2. After passing them out to Lord Mel and Doc Rhetoric, she sat down looking satisfied. I asked her, were there only 2 certificates? She looked me directly in the eyes and asked— “Oh, are you a part of the group?” I paused. There are 3 of us here, 3 of us (primarily) in MoDet, and the song we submitted had 4 people on it (3 guys, and my lady friend Cierra singing). We even submitted pictures and again—I had the first verse...

I never would receive that certificate. We were even supposed to receive a key to the city but I guess that got lost in translation—given the only change provided was the amount they shorted us (a pun at the name of the competition) . Neither was our song made the anthem, studio time or promotion provided, or the fulfillment of the promised signing to Universal Motown upheld... But, that’s another story. What I would gain from these experiences is perspective and insight into the community I was embarking on. It was a community of aesthetics. We live in a visual world. I guess, what I looked like (and whatever perception ‘my mans’ had when he introduced me as “Idiot”) wasn’t “Hip Hop,” but my words were.

From then, I would concentrate my growth through the lens of my voice. It was the one thing I could control, beyond genetics and my “semi-apparent” appearance. I could be “accepted” and understood without the bias of my physicality. My aesthetic doesn’t author my experiences with Hip Hop, but you can bet Hip Hop altered my aesthetic. Given my experiences, I knew, quite often I would be abjectly opposite to most people’s assumptions of who I am. But music creates this space—open to everyone but felt individually, separate from the body of the author, but intertwined with our own. Sound captures moments of all kinds like emotions,

environments, and even someone's health, to name a few things. Words, just like the frequencies in the music, are felt within ourselves. And with music, where the focus is on specifically what you're hearing, to then perform "whatever" said action is—the words become easier to internalize. It had to be my voice, my total expression—my pain, my happiness, my excitement, to my exhaustion and determination.

A large portion of the work and incredible journey that eventually inspired my documentary, was channeling that "otherness" I saw in the southern based Hip Hop collective Organized Noize—how my physical appearance, and way of life may not always be welcomed in every circle, but my voice and the art birthed within me, could be. Unbeknownst to me at the time, I grew up influenced by much of the music they had a hand in creating, from TLC, Outkast, Gnarlz Barkley and so many more groups... and to learn that they too were searching for a place where their sound could call home truly resonated with me. Although they represented their environment, their sound itself was different from what was mainstream at the time and having influences from jazz, Stevie Wonder, disco, country, R&B and hardcore rap all mixed into one. They were bound to either be revolutionary or a bunch of folks simply making noise. Music was how they spoke to each other.

**A Poem Inspired by *The Art of Organized Noize* (2016) 1h 39m Directed by Quincy Jones III**

What is music but a collection of sounds,

That without context can be simply described as noise?

Through a sea of samples, record scratches, nature sounds, people yelling, and hand claps.

How do we decide what it is that we listen to?

Why do particular sounds stand out to us, versus others?

Some would say it's physiological, some would say it's mental,

Through nurture of the sounds we grew up to hear.

What we perceive as noise is bred from protecting our livelihoods.

A direct indicator of comfortability and built in gauge-meter to one's immediate survival.

Focusing the noise of life from a hodgepodge of sources, mixed in the same environment, might tell us something different from each person that hears it. But when we make those sounds together, what does that message really convey?

Birds sing to find a mate,

Lions roar in part to mark the range of their territory,

People sometimes scream out when they need help.

Our stomachs even gurgle to let us know,

"Hey! Pay attention to me."

I believe Organized Noise reflects these noisy patterns of the world... filling needs of the bodies that take heed.

Using their pain, addiction, joy, love, and extension of self in a call and response of the community that hears their cries.

Yet they make it beautiful. And retort, that anyone has the capability of their voice.

It's the art of the cry. Persuasion.

Finding value in your own voice.

Because with it, carries your entire life and experiences.

When we learn to distill/filter and express that sound. You'd be shocked at how the world will choose to listen.

How they'd not only hear us... but more than likely adopt and take notes of that distinct and beautiful tune we all really are.

Yet sometimes we have to move past sight, for us to hear it ourselves.

And persuade ourselves. That even, "we" are worth listening to.

## FINDING MY VOICE

I felt I shared a common language and could grow in my identity and be heard. I may like Maroon 5 and have a lime green Gameboy color with a fuzzy panda sticker on it, but you can get these bars though. Sadly, it was only through art or performance that I could gain respect—and honestly, I really meant “be heard”—but I figured that came with respect. Outwards from the community where something specifically Hip Hop related was happening, it was very hard for me to find common ground with folks. Yeah, I did well early in school, because I listened... What else do you do when you feel there’s no point in speaking? I was a salsa dancing, Yu-Gi-Oh! loving, playing in band, Mickey mouse looking comic book loving nerd... (I mean shit... I sat on my bookbag to play my instrument until I was 3 months into 9<sup>th</sup> grade because of my height), and I could definitely do well to eat more. This is circa 2005, so, there were a lot of physical perceptions about people. But when folks heard me “spit,” it was another world. They could understand me past whatever notions they had, and saw that I, too, breathe—Hip Hop—just like they do.

My voice, like all the artists in my analysis (Nas, Travis Scott, Organized Noize) developed within this community and shaped how I maneuvered and interacted with those around me. You can feel this in the sound and heritage in each of our voices, from lyrics to delivery. We are all products of our environment. A lot of it was done at a fine split between keeping a healthy social network and outright survivability. Far too many times had my personal security been infringed upon throughout my adolescent years to teenage life, from stolen items to physical violence. It became important to understand how to talk to people and what limitations you had to accept or otherwise. Over time, you develop methods to keep the

machine running—we know we have to pee, drink water, eat, poop, but you also want to wake up... sleep somewhere cozy and wake up again. When things begin to disrupt those patterns, either things change or people change. I'd like to say I remixed the situations and turned it into my advantage. They've given me the unique persona I embody today—my most controversial gift: me. As Kid Cudi and I'm sure a few of all of our ancestors have once or twice said, "They gone judge me anyway, so whatever" (Kid Cudi, *Up Up and Away*).

I felt free, more confident to fight through the mental shackles and insecurities society would impose on me. Being silent, I listened, and focused on my own words. Contrary enough, at this time many communities in Hip Hop weren't as open to new sounds—"founded" by pulled fragments of soundbites released on artist existences they happen to know, and whatever personal interpretation they had of Hip Hop's image. Many times, these views left no room for new voices because all the "ear" space was taken up with the same tracks, digging the same wax, as we'd watch songs become less and less original and sounding more like cover variations. Drake, one of Billboard's top grossing artists of the decade, in his mainstream debut in 2009-2010 was considered an anomaly. People thought he sang too much, that his voice and image were too sensitive, emotional and "pop-like" to be considered Hip Hop—now if you look at popular rap music, you'll find traces of his influence everywhere. Almost all the rappers are singing now, and particularly, very sensitive and emotional.

As I recall, and lose count, amongst the infinite layers all comprised with their own magnetic pulls influencing my identity. I found that these ideologies are all evolutions of my perspectives on form. Given Hip Hop aesthetics and embodiment, English scholar Caroline Levine teaches us that "forms" predicate how societies/communities function. They give rise to

“what is possible to think, say, and do in a given context” (Levine, 5). Particularly, I can fade between sampling and layering by combining two texts in cohesion to our intended purpose. We can infer the power of words and their collision with how the Author functionally morphs that pocket of air (literally and figuratively) filtered through years of applications and practice of the body—and whom we embody—collides with the notion of the body occupying space, but also the influence the Author has individually over the “aural landscape” they inhabit.

Thus, Hip Hop’s ability to “arc” our own personal narratives—that we are the Authors of our existence, whether marginalized or not—yet our voices and wit retain the key, and can—in its own way pry open a cell’s enclosing walls.” Levine was inferring to systems of form in prison but I’d parallel that form of temporal enclosure, to that of the mind when uprooting societal limitations/affordances; “constraints in different ways, bring their affordances with them as they cross contexts, and colliding to sometimes unpredictable effect.” (Levine, 8) Levine, in juxtaposition to Jeff Chang’s assertion on identity formation, theoretically tags a cyclic flow (in tandem) throughout generations of people in this country affected by the federal silencing of “revolutionary”—in act and heart—voices that birthed Hip Hop, and whom would then come after. “Questions of identity sometimes paradoxically become paralyzing.”—“identity is not a law, it’s not an answer, it’s a process” (Chang, *The Real Identity in Flux*). And with it, flip the EQ when we choose to superimpose ears to our stories. Learning to be “readers” of our own sonic encompassing stories—we could understand and provide so much more to the world. That “if we were to see social life instead as composed of “loosely and unevenly collected” arrangements, “a makeshift, pasted-together” order rather than a coherent system that can be traced—back to a single cause” (Levine, 17)

Levine suggests that since the modern world operates on a “powerful structuring of principles,” it would be a “grave mistake to overlook them.” Including aesthetic and social structures, we must understand that forms are everywhere and carry serious implications for understanding communities. Interestingly enough, many forms are nested inside one another, “arranging and containing us, but also competing—colliding—and rerouting one another.” Which places me right back in the loop fundamentals of Hip Hop. It challenges the default form historically constant in governing institutions—revolt, and abjection to the voices of Hip Hop will intrinsically be met with resistance. As long as the “old” rubrics exist, Hip Hop draws too much attention to the “manmade-ness” of conventional forms. Hip Hop forever seeks to bend those constraints—simply by staying true to form—infallible through time and space. The marginalized will speak up against the domineering control structure, when its people learn they breathe and fart in the same air as everyone else. You’re equal. And that means acceptance of your entire being and origins.

For example, Emery Petchauer in *Hip-Hop Culture in College Students’ Lives: Elements, Embodiment, and Higher Edutainment* makes claim that Hip Hop is a culture containing a myriad of creative, cultural and expressive elements that are all interconnected, and that “people who have no interest in more than one aspect of it are suspect” (Petchauer, 57). I’m sure all of us can argue we know of quite a few suspect people in relation to accepting the culture and pedagogies that spring from Hip Hop (even if it’s our families, or even ourselves)—but this denial (limitation) of intellectual fortitude and identity follows suit with Hip Hop by causing creative spaces to combat those blockages. Where naivety is even used to redirect the source of information to someone “default society” might find more palatable. What I mean is,



of course I understand citing scholars and researchers who have devoted insane amounts of time to have dialogues about certain subjects matter and are extremely important... but does my entire lived experience not give me the authority to speak on my own circumstance and identity, or that partly of my communities? An argument for another time. I'm simply trying to say that aesthetically Hip Hop discovers the best way to reach your intended audience, even when it comes to "dumbing down" your own delivery and even in language—to be sure it will be received better by its intended audience (in this sense think Jay Z or Lupe Fiasco). In my film, I use music as a tool to engage the audience physically, that by chance if they like the beat—they might like the words on top of it—or at least listen more intently.

That rearrangement of ideology will always hold true to Hip Hop's revolutionary discourse, and that is being radical. Rhetorically distributed across multiple literacies and forms—so that one day, the collision of identity and culture with the default notions of society... might rear its head to listen and put into place recipes, that value you—the voice—over the structure.

This is true in my film, in the sense that finding my voice meant looking at myself despite my tribulations and circumstances. It was accepting the preconceived notions people had of me and forcing myself to not believe them. That I knew who I was, where I was, and where I wanted to be. To drown out the noise telling me what I should sound like, grow to love my voice, and tune in more to those who could hear that beauty in my character. Depending on what sounds we let circulate us, may change the trajectory of where we end up. But sometimes you have to put the headphones down and rest your ears and soul. Cause once you pick it back up again, what you hear may be totally different, and you'll begin to appreciate even more how

everything plays out. I know at times it took others encouragement to help me hear what they did, doubting my own voice I became mute/deaf to my own uniqueness—trying to participate in a society I was no longer sure how to speak in, that adversity is deafening. But those added notes and readjustments on listening helped me change the scale I measured myself in from minor to creating some major keys to my success. This would ring true in my poem based on my analysis Nas' feature documentary *Time is Illmatic*. Speaking who you are, environment and all, and reverberating it.

**A Poem inspired by Nas' *Time is Illmatic* (2014) 1h 14m Directed by One9**

As a record spins and its grooves denotes where we are in time,

(Where a song ends and begins)

It changes us from linear thought,  
to time being captured into a circle.

On a quest to create the "perfect" album,  
Using words reflective to your surroundings  
Describes it not only as it once was...

But from then on what it might be.

This film is watching greatness from hindsight  
and in forward vision

A constant discovery, slow in process.

Slow to settle but cemented forever by the details

It reveals.

It's one thing to talk about yourself, and get hip to the soundtrack we provide

To our own lives...

But if we include the lives and perspectives of others,  
to these infinitely layered existences (and journeys we all share,)

An identity becomes revealed, through that collection of voices. Each adding their own sound  
and interpretation,

Bouncing off of each other, sometimes in unison and others as a response,  
or change in feeling.

They begin to build, and add to this album.

We find the soundtracks add meanings at a depth,  
beyond what we personally have become biased to hear.

It feels slow, it feels methodical, it feels like time on a loop.

It's personal, it's firsthand, it's as if you knew it all along.

No matter where we are in time

We find those sounds and identities are still present. A Loop of discovery.

The recurring sounds of identity, the tool of listening allows us to claim it.

In essence, vocalizing you're a legend, and refurbishing the purpose of intended roadblocks  
and hard walls the environment provides... as a tool instead of an obstacle... channels a deeper  
power in that sound of hope.

The outcome of the work is then found on,  
how we let it echo.

## HIP HOP AESTHETICS AND IDENTITY

This ultimately led to an explosion of creativity, with people pushing the limits bordering on what's acceptable or taste deficient. Hip Hop on a worldwide scale has influenced style and clothes, music and cars, anime, neighborhood and federal politics. Music would evolve because these sounds led society to a deeper discourse on identity. Sounds became more diverse, as people continued to explore more and more of who they are. A great example is within Hip Hop itself, from its sub genres and fandoms from Afro/Latin Trap, Lofi, "Homo-hop", Hardcore, to Conscious rap communities. Hip Hop encourages people to take pride in their cultures. It's a gestured language in words, body and motion—if you feel it, I feel it type, if I don't, make me—grammatically broken, slurred and yelling out verbs—you too (insert "voice" here) are welcome. It's everything up under the sun, from fun, dark, to revolutionary and radical. Fundamentally it may all be one, but it's the voice of the people, and they are speaking... see me... hear me... I too am an individual. Hip Hop grammar is a dialect, spoken and felt.

I could argue the controversial language of Hip Hop. But the name itself carries the weight and visualization of its importance. We already, if we're being honest, have preconceived notions of what Hip Hop is "supposed" to look like. How they talk, walk, dress, eat and live... it's unabashedly Black (and Latinx, in respect to origins) which signifies its denial in acceptance in our society. Sure, today things are slowly becoming more mixed and inviting to Black cultures... but we also know the veil of anti-blackness is ever more prevalent—scarily, invisible in the hearts of the people that perpetuate it.

For if the language of my environment itself is considered "infantile English" as George Krapp described in his 1925 article *"English of the Negro"* (pointed out by Black linguistics

scholar April Baker Bell)—perhaps your bias is already made in every level of our interactions. That otherness which is praised to have in other cultures is shamed when it comes to Blackness. This is a discussion had by many scholars, but I want to make an ode to April Baker Bell's *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy* and her amazing research. She states the "obvious" eloquently. She describes Black Language (which we will transpose as the foundation of Hip Hop) as her mother tongue. And developing the communities' "powerful, colorful, and unique" speech styles allowed her to "understand the world" around her, but also "how to participate in it"—down to even when needing to protect herself or others. Society's rejection of Black Language, and emphasis on code-switching inherently teaches that community that their way of life and interacting is subpar (and in many cases, invalid) when it counts institutionally. Which further drives a wedge between the two parties (for or against), both upset that the other won't matriculate in their systems of language—but one particularly abject/opposed, because why learn from a system that innately rejects who you are.

Thus, focusing on what people want/or accept to hear, versus what they don't. The rejection of your sound and identity... then transcribed to them as just noise. "Communicating in a language that was valid and necessary at home, in school, and in the hood. But pressure from schools/institutions to get learn the "language of the school" (Baker Bell, Ch.1, Entering the Language Wars). Thus, what I'm attempting to do with Hip Hop aesthetics and film, is what Dr. April Baker Bell and bell hooks describes as "a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance—a way of thinking about pedagogy in relation to the practice of freedom." And continuing that creativity despite limitations. So, the rejection of this work itself can be equated to a rejection

to my nurturing, my community, and thus who I am—which is of the Hip Hop generation whose language is Black.

I urge this cypher (dialogue/conversation) with the academy to suggest an aesthetically Hip Hop approach at exploring identity. Consisting of “voice” as an instrument of discovery, flows and patterns relating to the individual’s life, sampling by circumstance and intent on delivery, and how ruptures (as provided by the nature of Hip Hop) are expected—but solely judged on our evolutions to and from them. Just as we type on our word processing pages, breaks happen.

Hip Hop asks us, what do we do in that space. It’s a dropping of bias, and adds introspection for what the author intended to do. My writing, my voice, my identity isn’t structured to form but through how I feel. So, first things first, I need you to “feel” me.

I’m pushing at the edge of the screen.

From this constraint, I thought in my introduction to conceptualize a lived experience of mine rooted directly in Hip Hop. And that through it, you would be able to even for a moment conceive a vision and possible place, and sounds, surrounding my outlook. From then you’d have to separate from yourself, ever so slightly, to imagine what it must’ve been like in the middle of those situations—and then assuming my eyes, theoretically act what you would have done in my place. In this mental shoe switching, fader/turntable-ish approach in understanding—I feel it starts the building blocks of a language between author and reader, and with it—in theory our ideas would be conceptualized a bit more interpersonally (and see, in part the aesthetic as I did). Now let’s dig into the filters of our exploration.

To begin with the flow of my identity I want to continue with elaborating on the fluidity of my experience in the process of discovering my identity—and how these frameworks have been generationally spun, flipped, and translationally remixed in the records of my family's lives. So, I present two quotes; One in relation to a digital lit analysis on sound and its “modal-morphing” patterned break by form in writing; and Two, a quote in relation to aesthetics described by a break dancer in channeling their 5 fundamental elements in Hip Hop.

To be heard... you needed to be loud, accented, gestured towards breaking out of the aural wallpaper of society. Although, we know, as history shows us—in order for marginalized/thus “hidden” voices to be heard in spaces of constraint, was to trumpet oneself out of casual listening, if you ever wanted your community to be “reductive”—with respect to the listening practice work by Michel Chion—In the sense for your audience to go beyond awareness but intrigued by your expressions, and ultimately meaning.

Semantics aside. In life, I felt limited in a lot of ways—I'm near sighted so until I could afford more than one pair of glasses—sports weren't the safest route given the risk/reward scenario. I was a skinny black kid who looked like Mickey Mouse and loved “Yu-Gi-Oh”—what business did I have in Hip-Hop? Besides, through pen and paper and the constant rejection of my own physicality, I felt too nervous to speak. To voice my opinion—I lived in the jungle—and words gave life and took it away... so to speak, meant to stand by something—something that you were willing to die for. So I kept my voice—and thus my identity—to protect and learn to “noveltize” the value of each spin on this Earth. Honestly, I was still figuring things out, and figured I'd need a couple of more spins to really determine where I mixed in my home's urban collage of sounds, and how far I would ultimately go—staying true to the bounds of my identity.

It afforded me the space where I could be reflective on my expression, in my own time—a space separate from physical urban conventions, where I could focus on my voice/my identity. Similar to Wu-Tang Clan deriving reference from pop culture themes and martial arts—and are considered parental figures in the growth of Hip Hop—I refer to the world-renown anime series Dragon Ball Z and their application of a “futuristic” technology, the “Hyperbolic Time Chamber.” In it, an individual (generally in isolation) trains/develops their skills in a zone operating outside the normal forms of time. Technology would provide this “Hyperbolic” space for me—functionally through headphones and applications of YouTube and streaming.

The limits of restraining my voice, had provided me with an adept skill at listening. Increasing my focus on all the layers around me (school politics, world affairs, evening news, “grapevine” street channels, church). I reflected back on questioning myself, as to what stories I could tell, and who would want to listen? But at those moments it enabled me to see that due to repressing my voice—I learned to express my voice/art through semantic observation. What I would create, had increased meaning and relevance. The silence, resourcefully, enabled me to step off the “one, and, two”—and study my own revolution around the globe. In this space, in music/Hip Hop, I could recall memories of the past, the present, and explicate the narrative of my future—I no longer felt a victim—in control of the needle. My voice could be found in all of these times. *Time is Illmatic*, does an amazing job representing this concept, and in my film at all intersections throughout my process I wanted to prioritize one constant... that no matter at what point of time of my journey you watched me live—at the base of the growth and learning—I was always myself.



So, when I was ready to go out into the world, to exist—aesthetics on full collide, or not—I could be welcomed by a shared principle—a common language. Poetic as that may be, I want to sample from two illustrious quoted excerpts from Mansbach’s “On Lit Hop”—relevant to his fictitious book *Angry White Black Boy*, I feel that is pertinent to my lived world, and lesson throughout my life constantly flowing and patterning itself to be true:

“Conversations and actions are studded with a range of references and echoes, flips and homages. Conversant with race literature and real-life struggle, the characters are able to position themselves in relation to these traditions, both playfully and seriously. The events of their lives are bound together by the same internal logic, and with the same sense of tension, that binds a bunch of disparate sounds into a coherent musical composition.” ... “in shorthand because a shared culture has given them a common language. They act with the freewheeling, undisciplined vigor and all-embracing attitude of hip hop: natural historians, but only for eight bars at a time.” ... “Not the entire breadth and context; just the party rocking shit.” (Mansbach, 3)

It’s a common language.

## OUTRO

Hip Hop is personal. It brazenly empowers identity. Hip Hop is a lived experience. Hip Hop is drafted by the very environment shaped by a systematic altering of voices. Hip Hop is revolution. An art meant to blend individuality (creative genius through marginalization) with community. It isn't experienced through the confines of "muted" text alone—the only way to "experience" Hip Hop is to be a part of the culture... to discover who the Authors really are. Critic. In conclusion, I'll let Schloss help me out on this one—"Unmediated hip-hop, by definition, cannot be understood without becoming personally involved in it" (Schloss, 8). Every word sampled and layered through an endless stream of context and intervals of time, transforming and morphing from every lip to ear, in effort to uncover life's discography and all our places in the credits. I'd also like to give ode to Alexandra Hidalgo in *Cámara Retórica: A Feminist Filmmaking Methodology for Rhetoric and Composition*, for inspiring the idea of taking identity in filmmaking into account for me, and displaying some amazing practices on how to do justice to your story but more importantly your subject, even if it is yourself. From her principles I was able to develop my film with a complete ethos and understanding of what it means to look at yourself and not only see but feel who you are. Understanding the camera as a perspective in itself, and ultimately your relationship to it and (to broaden it) the world.

Hip Hop Aesthetics in filmmaking affords us the opportunity to be inclusive, not only in form, but in content and delivery as well. Placing value on context, and equally as important, the emphasis on how it is presented. We're a society bent on writing and communication, angry at a culture/community generationally un-allowed to make real use of the language. Black people in the USA were restricted from reading and writing for hundreds of years and

then “given” a disembodied school infrastructure. Of course, the community within those restraints would become creative and develop their own forms of communication. And history tells us, many of the messages were relayed through their voice—pitches, tones and cadences—indicating various meanings and intentions. With stories and songs used to pass on histories and for communal pedagogies. Our focus on author and voice through our filters, may enable us to shed light on a “former”-invisible heuristic—instead of merely understanding the writing, we may be able to encapsulate the soul of the author as well. Accents are intentional or highlighted solely due to how those sounds relate to the reader on a personal level. Exploring these filters of aesthetics allows us to conceptualize in a direct fashion, cultures experienced and inexperienced—from wherever we are.

So, step up to the mic. It’s all love, Hip Hop welcomes you. Just know, we’re listening too.

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