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# African vibrations : the percussive approach in hip-hop music

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African Vibrations:

The Percussive Approach in Hip-Hop Music

Sherese Francis

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Signature:



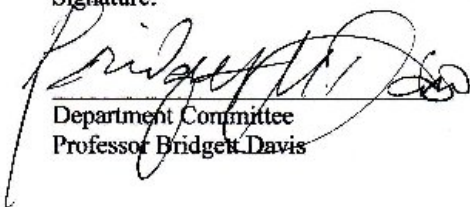
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## **Abstract**

The percussive approach is a method for analyzing the meaning behind sound and dance in hip-hop music. Percussion, especially the drum, and percussiveness have been and still are significant parts of music-making and social organization throughout the African diaspora. Based on cultural theorist and percussionist John Mowitt's percussive field, the percussive approach examines not only the musical side of percussion, but also the social, psychological and theological aspects of percussiveness. The percussive approach is divided into three sections: percussiveness in music and language, social percussiveness and percussiveness as a symbolic form of resistance. By drawing from the perspectives of the African diaspora and the spiritual system of shamanism, as well as from the texts of cultural theorists like John Mowitt, James W. Perkinson, Jon Spencer and Tricia Rose, this paper will explore the cultural significance behind the percussive practices in early hip-hop music.

## Introduction

*“Normally music to me was more than a sound; it was a substance, something that not only filled my ear but that I could touch as well, a rolling, almost visible substance like Technicolor fog puffed into a room, each sound having its own particular texture and effect on my nervous system.” – MC Moore from Al Young’s Snakes<sup>1</sup>*

*“The thing that frightened people about hip hop was that they heard people enjoying the rhythm for rhythm’s sake. Hip-hop lives in the world-not the world of music-that’s why it is so revolutionary.” - Max Roach<sup>2</sup>*

Although some critics branded hip-hop music as noise and as a fad – labels that were once used to describe several other African diasporic musical styles – hip-hop’s popularity has spread both nationally and globally since its development over 30 years ago. What is it about hip-hop music that has resonated with so many all over the world? Drummer Max Roach underscores in the quotation above, that the emphasis on rhythm is one of the main reasons that hip-hop is compelling to audiences yet dangerous to the status quo. Rhythm as the structural base of hip-hop music can be further expanded to a percussive approach in hip-hop<sup>3</sup>. The percussive approach does not only denote the percussion instruments – which are, according to cultural theorist Angela Nelson, instruments that are hit, shaken, rubbed, or scraped – but also the percussiveness of other instrument groups, percussive practices, and the social, spiritual and symbolic meanings of percussion. As cultural critic John Mowitt describes in his percussive field, the percussive approach can be divided into three main parts of the musicological, the

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<sup>1</sup> See page 155 of Michael Carroll’s essay on Al Young’s novel Snakes. Carroll writes about the inspiration of jazz on the semi-autobiographical musical memoir, and how the music is the sustaining element of the coming of age story of the lead character MC Moore. Carroll says, “For Young, though, music existed as neither a pastime nor means of support. He describes the musical impulse as a most powerful, verging on mystical, medium connecting individuals as well as generations. ‘ . . . What are we listening for but the human spirit sung or played or catching its breath in an invisible world where sound is to silence as day is to night’” (146). He also says that music reproduces the rhythms of the body (146).

<sup>2</sup> See page 17 of Tawanda Shannon’s research paper on bass and drums in hip-hop music.

<sup>3</sup> The inspiration for the name of the percussive approach comes from ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt’s description of the singing style African-American girl hand games on page 2 of her book.

sociological and the psychoanalytical (4).

Until recently, few studies have focused on music perception outside of the narrow paradigm of Western European classical tonal (pre-20<sup>th</sup> century) music. According to pianist and music journalist Vijay Iyer, mainstream music studies have often reflected only Western European cultural models of music and often these models are not adequate in critically analyzing other cultural music styles. Western music analysis reduces cognition and music to only “rational thought processes such as problem solving, deductive reasoning, and inference,” and Western linguistic and literate-based models (Iyer 387). To narrow the scope, those musical models are more reflective of upper class Western Enlightenment and modern Western Christian values because those two have dominated modern societies. Although the music in this paper developed in the West, their characteristics and concepts are not fully Western or European-based. The Enlightenment and Western Christian values do not completely represent or explain a wide range of musical styles, and certainly do not take into consideration African diasporic musics.

Fewer studies have given attention to percussion’s contribution to human musical perception or social politics. Ethnomusicologist Alexander Stewart criticizes other music scholars for their lack of in-depth “rhythmic analysis” in his article “‘Funky Drummer’: New Orleans, James Brown and the Rhythmic Transformation of American Popular Music” (294). Perkinson also notes the structural importance of percussion in his work (*Shamanism* 95-101). Although several scholars acknowledge the percussiveness of diasporic music, not many have explored the pervasiveness of the percussive sensibility throughout these cultures. Despite the significance of percussion in the history of music and in every culture, modern society, as drummer David Pleasant writes, has often relegated the instrument group to an inferior role in

relation to other musical groups (“The Drum is a Voice”). Hip-hop music defies the conventional methods of Western European harmonics and tonal music through its stress on percussiveness. Amiri Baraka himself said, “. . . To revere art, and have no understanding of the process that forces it into existence, is to finally not even to understand what art is” and this has been especially true for the analysis of Afro-diasporic music genres and cultures (197). Therefore, this thesis will provide a structural foundation of the percussive approach from which to analyze the musical and philosophical aspects of hip-hop, as well as other music styles.

The percussive approach analysis of hip-hop music will use the perspectives of diasporic cultures and the spiritual system of shamanism. Even though the cultures of the diaspora are varied, they do have common elements that run throughout them, such as a stress on bass instruments and drums in the music. Most of the cultures retained some West African percussive and rhythmic traditions, practices and philosophies that were “creolized” through Westernization. Thus, I take a broad conceptual approach, aside from hip-hop, other diasporic traditions. Additionally, to be able to discuss the percussive approach, it is essential that the approach be placed within a theological perspective, and for this paper, the theological base will be shamanism.

Shamanism is one of the oldest spiritual systems in the world, and it is often used as a term to describe many indigenous pagan religions or spiritual belief systems. Both Philip Royster and Raquel Cepeda have used the word “shaman” to describe rappers and other members of the hip-hop community (Cepeda 276, Royster 61). Jon Spencer, who cites Royster in his book *Researching Black Music*, writes that a “religiosity” and a theological base structures much of the Black cultural music styles, whether sacred or secular (30-38). Despite their differences, a similar spiritual base is present throughout the religions and cultures of the diaspora and the term



shamanism is a way to encompass them. In *Shamanism, Racism, and Hip-hop culture: Essays on White Supremacy and Black Subversion*, James W. Perkinson defines shamanism as an animistic (every material part of nature has a soul) belief system revolving around spirit possession and exorcism, ecstasy induction, ritualistic initiation, trance and healing practices through transformation (*Shamanism* 46-50, 77-78). Perkinson's description provides a frame from which to connect the diasporic religions and cultures because they in some fashion contain several if not all elements of shamanism. Moreover, in diasporic cultures, there is a conspicuous link between percussion or rhythm and spiritual practices, such as in Afro-Christianity<sup>4</sup>, Haitian Voodoo, Santeria, Candomble, and Rastafarianism, which is common in shaman ritual<sup>5</sup>. Perkinson, Spencer and Mowitt have specifically mentioned the importance of these spiritual practices and percussion and rhythm, especially in analyzing the social structure of these cultures (Spencer 2-9, Mowitt 83, Perkinson, *Shamanism* 126).

The percussive approach will be divided into three chapters based on Mowitt's percussive field divisions. First is the musical expression of percussiveness. Second is social percussiveness, which is the contact and interaction between different bodies and forces. Third is the marginalized groups' symbolic use of percussiveness in racialized and gendered society as a form of resistance. For the African diaspora, and specifically for in hip-hop culture, these three elements have been used in a shamanic manner as a tool for survival.

### **Percussive Expression**

Hip-hop's strong musical impact comes from its heavy reliance on percussiveness. Broadly speaking, one reason is that percussiveness or rhythm is embedded in our nervous system. Rhythmic sensibility is natural in our bodies because it enables movement in and out of them.

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<sup>4</sup> This is another name for the Black Church, which Spencer describes on page 56 of his book.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, shamans in many cultures often use hand drums.

The experiences of sympathetic resonance, entrainment and beat induction are a few examples of our bodies reacting to beats. Sympathetic resonance (or vibration) occurs when a vibrating body responds to the external vibrations or rhythms of a similar body, whereas entrainment is a body actively changing its frequency or oscillation to match another body (Webster's 386, 1191).

Resonance and entrainment is possible for us because of beat induction, which is the human musical ability to perceive a beat, or the striking of sound on the ear, and to move in synchrony with it, such as tapping the foot, bobbing the head, clapping, snapping fingers and dancing (Dixon 1, Patel 100). Even when a main rhythm is not explicitly heard, we still can perceive one (a metronome sense). Besides perceiving internal rhythms, our bodies also use internal rhythms for many bodily functions, such as walking, breathing, and sleeping.

Besides having rhythmic sensibility in our body, percussion is also metaphorically connected to the body. The drum is said to have a body, skin, a head and a voice, and its sound is often associated with the beating of the heart. Human bodies themselves can be percussive instruments, acting as resonant bodies employed either physically – as in clapping or stomping – or vocally – as in vocal percussion, scatting or onomatopoeic phrasing. Mowitt compares the drum and the human body, labeling them both as “beating bodies” and connects them through the main sensorimotor organ of the body, the skin (3-7). Not only does the skin aid in daily life functions and act as a form of protection from the outside world, but the semi-permeable barrier functions as a communicative tool like the drum. The drum speaks like we do and the beating of the drum is an extension of the beating inflicted on our bodies: “It is striking, of course, that the drum's speech, its resonant interiority, is constructed here as the effect of contact on the skin, as if the anaclitic relation between the envelope and the [Skin] Ego detailed by Anzieu was literally retraced in the catachresis, the abusive use, the beating, of the drum itself” (Mowitt 21). Both the

drum and the skin act as mediums between two worlds, the drum between the spiritual and the physical world, and the skin between the outer and inner world. Our perceptions of the body and the world are greatly tied to percussion.

Still, the perception and expression of percussiveness are culturally determined and learned, which is why it is important to take into account the influence of different diasporic cultural groups as well as the specific time period that influenced the percussive sound of hip-hop. The sound of hip-hop takes from specific rhythmic and percussive sensibilities and traditions of the diaspora, but is also influenced by the technological advancements of the '70s and '80s. Chapter one will look at the musical elements that make up the percussive approach within the African diaspora and their influence on hip-hop's percussiveness as well as the specificities of hip-hop's musical percussiveness.

### **Social Percussiveness**

Social percussiveness takes percussion into the realm of the social body through the other definition of percussiveness—a strong impact (Webster's Dictionary 860). Not only are rhythmic and percussive music and language meant to be impactful, but also social contact and rituals. Musician Jonathan Goldman notes that call-and-response in music and social communication ties in with the action of entrainment – one is calling for another to respond (“Sonic Entrainment”). Since our bodies act in a sort of “call-and-response” relationship with rhythm and beats, percussiveness can also be extended to social life – our interactions with other bodies and environments. Our lives are structured from sets of collisions or contacts with others as well as from ritualized actions. Social percussiveness also includes discourse on the multiplicity and fragmentation of identity—the social “I.” The individual is implanted in a society and is a product of it, not separate from it.

Within the diaspora, the social body and multiplicity of the subject is exhibited through the ritual or public dance. Percussive movement is a part of survival, including walking, movement of limbs, and “the dexterity of [the] blow” in the use of tools (Mowitt 70). According to Olly Wilson, music and motion in the diaspora are intrinsically linked, however, that could be applied to any culture to an extent. Dance is both a sympathetic or sensorimotor reaction to rhythmic sound, according to Iyer, and a percussive response to sound hitting the eardrum. He writes, “. . . a perceived rhythm is literally an imagined movement” and that “. . . the act of listening to rhythmic music involves the same mental processes that generate bodily motion” (392). We picture the movement or the source of the sound in movement. Basically, musical motion is audible human motion and one of the important functions of sound is to enact movement or action. Therefore, it is reasonable that the inner ear controls not only reception of sound, but is also involved in the vestibular system that controls physical balance, which is needed in kinesthetics (Rajamanickam 95). Due to the connection with the vestibular system, kinesthetics, which involves the “sensation of bodily position, presence, or movement,” is inter-related to hearing. Moreover, musical gestures that match bodily motion are known to have a greater impact on us (Iyer 393). The bass and drums are the most impactful because they are the most felt in the music, which explains its prominence in Black cultural music styles. Since percussive sound’s function is to enable movement, it is also related spiritual and social dynamics.

Thus, dance is an expression of the dynamics of social worlds as well as the dynamics between the physical and spiritual worlds. Ethnomusicologist Christopher Small argues that music is an active social process, using the term “musicking” to describe the physical act of making music. He writes, “. . .music is not primarily a thing or a collection of things, but an activity in which we engage” (Small 50). Small continues that it includes not only performance

and composition, but also dancing and listening (50). Therefore, dance is part of the musical and social experience. Dance is also a form of social communication similar to instruments serving as communicative tools. Instruments and bodily movement often can articulate what the human language may not be able to fully express. Given that dance is a physical version of sound, dance can also be a musical and speech surrogate.

Dances usually take place within a social group because we are social beings by nature; our minds are structured to be sympathetic with others. Mirror neurons within our brain help us to mimic and understand others, and are important to social cognition (Keyers and Gazzola 380). The definition of sympathy, a word used to describe a part of our nervous system, comes from the words “sympathia” (Latin) and “sympatheia” (Greek), meaning “common feeling and experiences”, and is “an affinity, association, or relationship between persons or things wherein whatever affects one similarly affects the other” (Merriam Webster 1191). The definition of sympathy is similar to the definitions of resonance and entrainment. The sympathetic nervous system is rightly named because it is responsible for receiving external stimuli and automatically responding to them, a type of “call-and-response” relationship with the environment. This system that is involved in the “fight-or-flight” response prepares the body for action, and regulates internal functions and movements of the body as well (an internal rhythmic regulator). The sympathetic nervous system works closely with the somatic nervous system, which controls voluntary bodily movements (Brodal 369). Our bodies are structured for us to be social and push us into action.

In the realm of spirituality, which involves the parasympathetic nervous system taking over the sympathetic nervous systems after it is excited, dance is involved in shamanic practices of trance state, ecstasy induction and spirit possession (McNeill 8). The trance, ecstatic state and

states of fantasy aid us in handling the shock or “the beatings” from the world and to move on from the shock. Spirit possession shows the relationship between visible and invisible worlds as well as the ever-changing dynamic of the self. In the diaspora, the three usually occur within a ritual or social event, and thus are social in nature, creating a *communitas* or communal spirit. The combination of movement and community translates into social and political movement as well. These social percussive elements also filtered into the early days of hip-hop. Chapter two will look at the physical, social, spiritual and political aspects of percussiveness that influenced hip-hop culture.

### **Percussion as a Symbolic Form of Resistance**

Percussion, as Mowitt says, is not “senseless beating” (3). Percussive and rhythmic signifying is a means of us trying to make sense of our environment and ourselves. The significance and use of percussiveness explains how subjects struggle in and out of the limits of their embodiment and situation. Embodiment is the subject’s perception of the world structured through the body and situatedness is the external environment’s impact on the subject (Iyer 389-391). Essentially, it is how we handle living in time and space. Mowitt argues that percussive instruments and practices act as allegorical or prosthetic tools, beating in place of the body, as well as a “beating back” against that struggle (16, 114). This connects to Tricia Rose argument that the function of hip-hop music was not only encompasses a continuation, or a sort of cultural genealogy, of Black cultural and stylistic priorities and values, but also a reaction (active response) to their situation (95). The purpose of the percussive response is evident in hip-hop music through its terminology, much of which is inherited from previous music genres, and the diasporic archetype of the rhythmic “trickster,” such as Henry Louis Gate’s “signifying monkey” (3-4). Diasporic musical percussive force has been a means of highlighting the fear of contact

with and penetration by the symbolic Black body in Western culture, including sonic penetration, visual penetration, spatial penetration and sexual penetration. The fear of penetration is analogous to the fear of being possessed (controlled or impacted on), which is a shamanic practice in several diasporic religions, such as Vodou. Due to its association with “Blackness,” religions like Voodoo have traditionally been demonized in Western society. During modernity, Black people, in addition to other marginalized groups, have had to confront the reality of being physically, socially and psychologically possessed.

Diasporic cultures have used percussive sonic possession and by extension bodily possession in the form of dance as a form of subversion. The last chapter will consider the physical, social and psychological beatings Black people receive and how they use percussiveness and rhythm as a form of “beating back”. Then the chapter will discuss how breaking in hip-hop is an extension of beating back. Last, to discuss marginalized groups and subversion, the percussive approach must include women and queer people’s perspectives, because rhythm and the trickster identity are also about dual or multiple natures. The last chapter will thus cover percussiveness as subversion through an exploration of the musical terminology of hip-hop, before leading into the conclusion about the percussive field and percussive politics.

Before the first chapter, I would like to address criticisms that some scholars have raised about the discussion of both European-influenced and African-influenced music. In the “Invention of African Rhythm,” Ethnomusicologist V. Kofi Agawu criticized the analysis and representations of “African music,” and argues specifically that it “others” African people. While I understand his criticisms, and believe they are legitimate, they are not the point of this paper. This is not an essentialist argument; African descendents are not naturally rhythmic. Also, characteristics of African diasporic music are not purely “African” or only to be found in

diaporic cultures. All music styles are hybrids (purity or authenticity does not really exist), and some of the cultural elements found in the African diaspora are universal to an extent, but manifested differently in each culture. Additionally, this paper is not saying that African or diasporic music is more rhythmic or percussive than other music styles or that it lacks harmonics. Diasporic music does have harmonics, but it is based primarily in percussiveness, which can be applied to other styles as well.

Modern Western culture has downplayed African influence due to a separatist racialized and gendered society and objectification of the people and their creations. Mowitt also challenges Agawu by saying that Agawu was treating music as an object instead of considering the social processes that form these genres (71-72). Nothing is wrong in portraying West African-derived music-making as percussive or “rhythmic,” it is how it is represented (as primitive, primal, regressive, evil and essentialist) that becomes an issue. In Mowitt’s discussion about how African-American percussive practices are related to voodoo practices, he states, “. . . moral indignation [has] made, and continues to make, it impossible for asserting such connections actually to understand their implications (73). The aim of this paper is to provide criteria and an interdisciplinary approach, or an “integrative inquiry” to African diasporic musical production (Spencer 1-2).



## **Chapter I: The Percussiveness of Hip-Hop Music and Language**

Hip-hop music's percussiveness can be traced back to West African percussion practices and sensibilities that were retained and passed down despite the constant imposition of Western culture. The percussive sensibilities were an amalgamation of different ethnic groups within the African diaspora. These ethnic groups fit into three main groups: U.S. Black Americans, Caribbean-Americans, and Latin Americans. Although the media tends to focus on U.S. Black American contributions to hip-hop history, and American history in general, the discussion of percussiveness would be lacking if the other groups were not included. Moreover, America should include North, Central and South America, not just the United States, which is the reason for the term U.S. Black Americans. But before the discussion of the diasporic influences on hip-hop begins, the foundational musical elements of percussiveness must be addressed.

Theomusicologist Jon Spencer writes that in many traditional African societies, “. . . the drum was a sacred instrument possessing supernatural power that enabled it to summon the gods into ritual communion with the people. In some societies drums were regarded as deities, deities whose voices were the percussive sounds that emanated” (11). Although Spencer does not mention shamanism, his description of the drums puts it in an animist and shamanic perspective because the drums, and percussion in general, are said to have spirits or supernatural powers. That philosophical and spiritual sensibility has influenced the percussive sensibilities of cultures throughout the African diaspora, including hip-hop culture. However, it should be noted that drums were not the only instruments in Africa and the diaspora. Besides other percussion instruments, like rattles, bells and xylophones, there were horns and string instruments, like the banjo-type akonting from Guinea-Bissau (Ortiz Walton 5-8). Still, percussiveness could still be

applied to these instruments as well, which will be examined in the next section.

In *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, Robert Farris Thompson notes the percussiveness of diasporic music, calling it a “percussive performance style (attack and vital aliveness in sound and motion)” (xiii). Thompson goes on to list specific characteristics of diasporic music, which could be examined via the percussive approach: “a propensity for multiple meters,” “overlapping call and response” or “‘interlock systems’ of performance,” “inner pulse control” or “metronome sense,” and “offbeat phrasing of melody” (xiii). Small, Rose and Gaunt affirm the same characteristics as well in their texts (Small 23-30, Rose 66-67, Gaunt 8, 28-34). However, other scholars identify characteristics that should be part of the musical side of the percussive approach. Gaunt names one trait as “oral-kinetic” learning (2, 11). Oral-kinetic learning entails percussive listening (sound hitting the eardrum) and speech, as well as percussive body movement for notating music (“in-body formulas”) (Gaunt 2). Gaunt also mentions percussive sense of time (circular or layered time). Cheryl Keyes and John Miller Chernoff describe the percussive layered sense of time as “outer and inner time,” where outer time is singular and measurable time and inner time is felt but immeasurable (Keyes 235). The last characteristic Gaunt offers is melo-rhythmic sensibility, “hearing melodies in rhythms and rhythms in melodies” or microtonal sensibilities (2, 30-32). Olly Wilson calls it percussive texturing or a “percussive approach to linear expression,” a heterogeneous sound value (Gaunt 31).

Another important characteristic is Mowitz’s concept of musical bricolage, or the practice of taking any available object and using it as a percussive instrument (78). Toni Morrison once explained Black art as the “ability to use found objects, [or] the appearance of using found objects, and it must look effortless;” her description applies to the concept of bricolage (Gaunt

13). Both Mowitt and Morrison connote improvisation, which is the ability to perform on the spot or “make do.” (Mowitt 78, 119). Improvisation does not come out of nowhere; the ability comes from having a base of knowledge or pre-existing material from which to play on or vary, a rhythmic back and forth or call-and-response between tradition and innovation. Improvisation is not, as Gaunt writes, “a new creation” but a dialogue with the past and an act of borrowing from an eclectic amount of sources (3). It also explains the practice of “versioning” of previous songs, which is common in diasporic music styles (Rose 86, 90). Percussive bricolage will be important not only in earlier U.S. Black cultural music styles, but also in hip-hop music.

Rose provides additional characteristics of flow, repetition (looping or layering), and rupturing (38-39, 65-72). While repetition is basically percussive timing, it along with flow gives also a sense of ritualized patterning, and rupturing is an incorporation of the gap, cut or break. Using John Miller Chernoff’s work on the Ewe drummers in West Africa, Mowitt cites the inclusion of the gap in the musical production. Chernoff describes the music “. . . as an arrangement of gaps where one may add a rhythm, rather than a dense pattern of sound,” which allows other performers to contribute (Mowitt 75). Master drummers make moves to fill the gaps of other rhythms and creates spaces that can be filled, like an oscillating pattern (Mowitt 76). Zora Neal Hurston describes Black music as dynamic due to the construction of rhythmic segments that as a whole are asymmetric because of the breaks (26). The gap is where the potential is or the freedom is to play with sound, which will be further discussed in chapter three on percussion as subversion. The last characteristic to add to the percussive approach is the emphasis on bass instruments, which provide louder sounds that leave a greater impact since they are more heavily felt by the body. The three main ethnic groups of the diaspora, U.S. Black Americans, Afro-Caribbeans and Latino-Americans, have expressed these elements that structure

the percussive approach in various ways.

### **Catch the Vibes: Percussiveness in U.S. Black Music**

“They took the drums away—but they could not stop the beat!”—David Pleasant<sup>6</sup>

Since hip-hop arose in the United States, discussing the development of percussiveness in U.S. Black cultural music is an appropriate place to start. The particular percussive approach to drumming and rhythm in the United States stems from the prohibition of the drums because they were viewed as a threat to slaveholders who wanted to keep enslaved Africans docile. Drums were communicative instruments, or “tonal semantic tools” to gather people together for a common cause (Pleasant “The Drum is a Voice”). Pleasant writes, “The drum is and always has been a voice, a voice that speaks in prayer, celebration, and *battle*” (emphasis mine, “The Drum is a Voice”). These functions of the drum came into use during the 1739 Stono Rebellion in South Carolina and scared slaveholders. Fears on the part of slaveholders that slaves would employ drums to instigate revolts led to a banning of the drums and a classification of them as weapons in all the states except for the city of New Orleans, but even there, they were restricted to Congo Square performances (Pleasant “Drum is a Voice”). Since then, there has been a cultural taming of the instrument, or a relegation of “the drum [and rhythm] to a proto-slave condition” beneath the harmony and melody in the United States because its power was deemed too dangerous (Pleasant “Drum is a Voice”).

For the drum rhythms to survive in the new world, the act of musical bricolage, or using whatever is at hand (“making do”), was necessary. As both Pleasant and Spencer says, the drums were taken away, but the rhythms were not (Spencer 23). U.S. African descendants managed to

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<sup>6</sup> See David Pleasant’s article “The Drum is a Voice.”

keep rhythmic sensibilities and practices alive through a variety of ways. Iyer, Pleasant, Mowitt and Spencer have all written about the importance of the ring shout in southern states, like Louisiana, South Carolina and Georgia during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the drums banned, the ring shout participants replaced them with clapping, stomping and shuffling of feet, fusing together further music and motion, as well as makeshift percussive tools to create rhythms (Iyer 405-406, Mowitt 77, Spencer 11-13, Pleasant “Drumfolk”). Shuffling dances in the ring shout may have later shaped swinging or shuffling rhythms in jazz, and that a more laidback or subtle syncopation was present in the unevenness or angular relationship between beats (Stewart 313). Mowitt cites Robert Palmer’s description of Louisiana shouters’ foot stomping to highlight the importance of the bass in Black cultural music styles. The stomp on the ground, as well as the floor of rural Black churches became makeshift drumheads to stomp on, was in a syncopated relationship with clapping (Mowitt 77). References in songs to the rock alluded not only to Jesus Christ, the rock of salvation<sup>7</sup>, and the floor of the church, but also the pagan or shamanic sacred ground of “Mother Earth,” (Mowitt 78). The ground or the earth was the “planet drum” and became a substitute for the original drums (Mowitt 82). This stomp-clap practice later influenced the syncopation between the bass drum and the snare drum in the trap drum kit.

Starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the trap set became important to popular music styles like jazz and continues its significance into later styles like the urban blues, r&b and rock ‘n’ roll. According to Mowitt, the early trap set consisted of a variety of percussive instruments, such as the bass drum, snare (side) drum, the Chinese cymbals, the tom-toms, tin cans, washboard, and sauce pan lids, continuing the tradition of percussive bricolage (79). Another percussive aspect of the trap kit is its name, which derives from the German terms for humans “stamping or

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<sup>7</sup> For example, the line, “the rock on which I stand, all other ground is sinking sand,” in the hymn “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less.”

tramping on Mother Earth” (Mowitt 80). The origin of the word trap reflects not only the percussive feet movements, but resonates with trap’s other meaning of being possessed, or imposed upon, and tricked, topics that will be discussed in the next two chapters. Much like the degrading of other diasporic traits, because of the bricolaged trait of the trap set, it was not considered an established instrument. Mowitt points this out with percussionist James Blades’ use of the term “atrocities” to describe the parts of the trap set (79). Like Blades, they tend to ignore completely the social factors behind its creation: slavery, banning of original drums and racial discrimination in areas like economics.

Percussive bricolage continues with other instrument groups as well. The West African-derived instrument, the banjo, was a string instrument with a drum-like body that was often played in a percussive style (Linn 1-2, 15). The rhythmic playing of American string instruments was probably influenced by the playing style on the banjo, called several names including “clawhammering,” “frailing,” and “rapping” (Linn 17). Rhythmic qualities of drumming were similarly applied to western instruments: riffs (short, repetitive rhythmic patterns) and staccato playing were used on the guitar, bass guitar, and double bass; the ragtime and stride styles developed on the piano. In “‘Put Your Hands Together:’ The Theological Meaning of Percussion and Percussiveness in Rap Music,” Angela Nelson writes of blues musician W.C. Handy’s grandfather. Handy spoke about his grandfather’s percussive technique involving a second person “drumming” on the fiddle strings with a set of knitting needles while Handy’s grandfather bowed the fiddle. Nelson adds that the “slide” guitar was another percussive technique because of the pressing of objects (rocks, knives, or bottle-necks) against the strings of a guitar. Blues musicians like Charley Patton and Robert Johnson were also known for playing their guitars like percussive instruments. In her article, Nelson describes these two blues musicians:

Blues scholar William Barlow points out that Patton "picked" propulsive bass runs, "hammered" percussive patterns on the treble strings, and "hit" the "sound box" or hollow guitar body with the palm of his hand like a bass drum (Barlow 36). Similar to his mentor, Patton, Johnson used his thumb to play on the lower guitar strings almost like he was playing a drum part (Barlow 47). Blues scholar Robert Palmer says Johnson made his instrument sound like a full band by furnishing a heavy beat with his feet (foot stomping), chording shuffle rhythms, and picking out high treble string leads with his slider (Barlow 47).

Hence, percussive and rhythmic qualities were maintained through their employment in the performance of other non-percussion instruments. The percussive bricolage legacy of U.S. Black folk and popular music continued into the musical practices of hip-hop musicians and producers. But, the Caribbean and Latino percussive influences also impacted the sound of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century musical styles in the United States, including hip-hop.

### **La Negra Tiene Tumbao<sup>8</sup>: The Caribbean and Latin Percussive Perspective**

*“They’re never allowed their drum here. By not allowing the drum, they lost their Africanism. . . But the Caribbean is different because the Black African captive is allowed his drum.” – Musician Eddie Palmieri*

*“The drum is part of the language, so I think because of the drum, Blacks in Cuba, in Puerto Rico, in Haiti, and Santo Domingo, were able to retain some of the language and some of the customs.” Journalist Aurora Flores<sup>9</sup>*

In the above quotation, Palmieri claims that in the United States, enslaved Africans lost their “Africanism” due to the bans on conspicuous forms of drumming practices; yet, he does not

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<sup>8</sup> This is the name of a popular Celia Cruz song. The translation is “the Black woman has swing” or “the Black woman walks with grace.”

<sup>9</sup> Both quotations are from the documentary, *The Palladium: Where Mambo was King*.

speak to how those elements were condensed and redirected into subtler forms. Spencer upholds that U.S. Black Americans kept their “Africanism” through the most substantial remnant of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, African rhythm, and that the drumbeats as well as certain cultural concepts were able to survive because of several percussive bricolage practices, such as the ones mentioned earlier (12). However, both Palmieri and Flores highlight the cultural percussive differences in places that were able for the most part to keep their drums, including most of the Caribbean, Latin America and New Orleans in the United States. Since most of the enslaved Africans were brought to the Caribbean and Latin America, and the Catholic Spanish and French were less strict about the drums than the Protestant British, most of the islands and South American countries were able to retain more percussion practices, languages and rituals (Pinn, Finley and Alexander xvii, xxvii).

But interactions between the three groups did not begin during the hip-hop era. Afro-Caribbeans, like Marcus Garvey and writer Claude McKay, were part of pan-African movements and art movements, like the Harlem Renaissance. Puerto Rican-born Arturo Schomburg was known for his research in diasporic history and cultures, and many Latin American musicians, such as Afro-Cuban jazz musician Machito, were collaborating with U.S. Black Americans for decades in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. All three groups influenced each other culturally and musically and had a few musical correlates. For example, banjo-styled instruments existed in the Caribbean as the *banza*, *banshaw* and *banjil* (Small 36). In Cuban and Puerto Rican music, the *tumbao* rhythm, which is played on the conga drums (tumbadores), the bass and piano, also places emphasis on the drums and bass (Roy 94, 246). Thus, there was already plenty of mixture that eventually gave birth to hip-hop, and hip-hop was a musical continuation of the expansion of the boundaries of “Blackness.”



Although Jamaican-born DJ Kool Herc is often mentioned as a pioneer in hip-hop history, other Caribbean influences were brought to early hip-hop's sound, most notably the "riddims" (a patois version of "rhythm") and sound systems (Stewart 308). These riddims came from island genres like, reggae, dancehall, calypso, and dub. Much like rhythms for each god in Vodou, a specific riddim can represent a certain person or theme. As many Black popular music styles in the United States had their origins in the ring shouts and the Black Church, the riddims were drawn from various faith systems, for example, the Rastafarian religion. In Rastafarian chanting rituals, burru drums, which consist of three drums (the bass drum, lead *akete* or repeater and the *funde*, rhythm drum), were employed to reproduce West African rhythms (White 135). Drummer Count Ossie popularized *burru* drumming and was influential in the sound of ska and reggae music during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Moskowitz 46). Additionally, ska and reggae were influenced by U.S. genres of r&b and rock 'n' roll (Moskowitz 18). From ska and reggae, dub developed and this style had one of the largest hands in shaping hip-hop music. Dub included the practice of copying records and stripping them down to the drum and bass to use as a foundation to create new songs. Some of the sound effects used in dub, such as echoing and reverberation, would also be important in hip-hop. The genre as well popularized DJing, sound systems, and toasting (or rapping) over the instrumentals (Moskowitz 94). Even though most of the enslaved Africans in the Caribbean were allowed to keep the drums, one island, Trinidad and Tobago, experienced a similar event to the Stono Rebellion, the Canboulay riots in the 1880s, which resulted in the prohibition of drums. However, just as Stono, Trinidadians used percussive bricolage to create steel pan drums, which gave rise to calypso, a genre that is sampled in hip-hop, too (Cowley 1-6).

Latin Americans, especially Cubans and Puerto Ricans, also brought various percussive

elements, including drums (congas, bongos, timbals, cowbells, claves, etc.) and the rhythms from music genres, like *son*, *mambo*, *rumba*, and *bomba*, all of which had West African influences (Stewart 308). Specific rhythms, like the *clave* (2-3 or 3-2 rhythm) and the *tambao* were brought over as Latin Americans migrated to the United States and incorporated into r&b and rock 'n' roll (Stewart 305-307). For example, the Bo Diddley beat can be perceived as a clave rhythm. Several of the Latin American music genres as well as the rhythms also were part of religious ritual, such as Santeria, Lucumi and Vodou. In the documentary *From Mambo to Hip-Hop*, interviewees spoke about the genre *mambo*, which was influenced by the Cuban *son*, *rumba* and Puerto Rican *bomba*, and which led to another fusion style, salsa, in New York City. In turn, salsa is viewed as a bridge genre to hip-hop music. Latin-American musicians like Tito Puente, Machito, and Candido Camero contributed much to the sound of jazz during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, helped form a new sub-genre of Latin jazz and popularized mambo and salsa in the United States. The different percussive sensibilities of U.S. Black Americans, Afro-Caribbeans and Latin Americans came together to give rise to hip-hop's sound.

Caribbean and Latin Americans influenced U.S. Black popular music in later genres during the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well, specifically rock 'n' roll, funk and disco. New Orleans is sometimes nicknamed the most northern Caribbean island because of Spanish and French rule and as a popular port connected to the Caribbean (Stewart 296). Moreover, as in most of the Caribbean and Latin America, New Orleans Black populations were able to keep their drums for the most part, and that allowed them to retain some of the rituals of the West African traditional religions, like in Vodou. It is no wonder that New Orleans had a significant influence on Black popular music, especially jazz. In "'Funky Drummer': New Orleans, James Brown and the Rhythmic Transformation of American Popular Music," Alexander Stewart argues that the percussive

traditions and the “rhythmic attitude” of drummers from New Orleans greatly influenced the groove genres of the funkier styles of r&b, rock ‘n’ roll and funk, especially the music of James Brown, who later influenced disco and hip-hop. Stewart writes that the New Orleans influences came from the mixed meter (open shuffle), the second line or processional (similar to Caribbean carnival) syncopated drum patterns and Caribbean and Latin percussive patterns (293). The open shuffle, a mixture between shuffle or swinging rhythms from jazz and the hard-driving, straighter (or even) rhythms from parade, Caribbean and boogie-woogie music, created a sense of “in-betweenness,” a factor that would influence funk, disco and hip-hop (Stewart 297-299). The mixture of rhythms is heard through hemiolas (duple and triple occurring at the same time) and other disorienting syncopations (Stewart 303). But the urbanization impacted the sound; migrations up north as well as the development of amplification allowed for a louder, more intense and more percussive style (Stewart 295). Funk and disco artists, especially musician James Brown, employed the different percussive practices of the diaspora into their music, and these artists were later sampled in many hip-hop songs.

### **“The Soul Sonic Force:” Percussion in Hip-Hop**

*“Africans were beating on drums. It’s that rhythm . . . we took it to another stage and kept going.”—DJ Quick*

*“. . . I feel as though hip-hop is the modern day beating of the drums” – That Boy Live<sup>10</sup>*

Funk and disco were largely important to hip-hop, especially the music of James Brown. The different rhythmic aspects of his music, including the rhythmic interplay between instruments, heterogeneous and microtonal sounds between percussion instruments, and the master drummer’s virtuosity, transferred to hip-hop (Brackett 309). On top of those features,

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<sup>10</sup> Both quotations from page 212 of Tshombe Walker’s “Hip-Hop and The Rap Music Industry.”

Stewart mentions that the thump-slapping, syncopated bass guitar innovation in Brown's and other funk bands, the Southwestern rhythmic and screeching style of the horns, the stress on the first beat through crashing of cymbals or silencing the fourth beat, the large bands (collective and "tribal" aspect of the music) and the drum break's shaping of the breakbeats, were also incorporated into hip-hop music (305, 309-311). Disco, which took its cues from funk, Latin and soul music, was also known for its use of drum breaks. The two genres were also stressed race consciousness and identity politics, such as in Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" and the dominance of Black and Latino gay men in disco, which were supported by their hard-hitting grooves. Brown himself believed that saying that his musical strength lay in rhythm (Stewart 309-310). Rhythm was Brown's basic organizing principle and that was musically and socially important to the rise of hip-hop.

Hip-hop music continues the cultural sonic sensibilities as well as the resistance to upper white class domination and dislocating actions. It was an expression of redirecting the social anger against consistent marginalization and erasure through percussive sounds. Rose brings up an example of residents complaining about cars with massive speakers blaring loudly for everyone to hear. She posits the question of why these drivers blast music so loudly in the first place, and suggests that it is a way to get attention from a public that often ignores their voices and the social problems that affect them. They want to disrupt the passive residents' "sonic territory" (Rose 63). As Sister Souljah says, ". . . when Chuck D tells you to 'bring the noise,' he 's telling you that it's hard. And when you hear the tribal beat and the drums, they are the same drums of the African past that draws the community to war. The drum beats are just faster, because the condition is accelerating so they've got to beat faster" (Rose 62). Souljah refers here to the faster and more forceful sound of hip-hop, a commentary on the social moment of the hip-

hop era as well as the louder united clamor from different cultures of the diaspora. Hip-hop has a more politicized kind of sound especially during the era of postmodern identity politics and its done through the transformation of diasporic percussive sensibility.

Throughout hip-hop music are conspicuous and continuous references to the significance of percussiveness and rhythm in general, and in the influence of James Brown in particular. For example, Brown's "Funky Drummer" has been one of the most sampled records in early hip-hop, including songs like Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," Run-DMC's "Beat to the Rhyme," UltraMagnetic MCs' "Give the Drummer Some," and Salt 'n' Pepa's "Let the Rhythm Run" (Thompson 22-23). Chuck D pays direct tribute to song in the opening line of "Fight the Power," "1989 the number, another summer (get down)/ Sound of the funky drummer." Other rap songs reference drums and rhythm in their lyrics as well; a few examples included rapper Harmony, who was associated with Afrika Bambaataa, in his song "Dance to the Drums," Def Jef's "Dropping Rhymes on Drums," and Kwame's "The Rhythm." Other songs include additional percussive instruments, such as LL Cool J's "Rock the Bells," in which he raps "the bells are circulating the blood in your veins," thereby implying the importance of rhythm as a sustainer of life. These records include sampled U.S., Caribbean and Latin drums or drum machine tracks, rhythmic horn, bass riffs and vocal samples interspersed throughout the record, and turntable scratches. The sounds all work together in a percussive, multi-layered, polyrhythmic system.

Afrika Bambaataa and his group Soul Sonic Force's song "Planet Rock" alludes to the significance of the floor or ground as the rock or base from the ring shout. The song "humanized electronic technology in hip-hop music for the body rockers on the dance floor," due to the pulsating, funky drum beats girding the electronic sounds (Gaunt 182). "Planet Rock" is equivalent to both the "Planet Drum" and the way percussion makes people move or "rock." The

song, which relies mostly on the digital 808 drums, emphasizes a sense of community within its lyrics. Together, Soul Sonic Force rap “Just start to chase your dreams/Up to your seats, make your body sway/socialize get down, let your soul lead the way.” Other lyrics suggest the importance and spiritual power of rhythm in life: “Our world is but a land of a master jam, get up and dance” and “The D.J. plays your favorite blasts/ Takes you back to the past, music's magic (poof).” The line, “On this Mother Earth, which is our rock,” clearly connects the song to the relevance of sacred ground. For the hip-hop community, the city streets of New York, instead of the rural land, became the new “holy ground,” the birthplace of hip-hop and the place where hip-hop rituals were practiced (Ralph C. Watkins 191).

Rap lyrics also mention the importance of the bass or baseline as well. Salt from Salt ‘n’ Pepa refers to it in the song “Let the Rhythm Run,” rapping, “a baseline is added for some soul.” The line connects to the spirituality of the bass in diasporic music. In Public Enemy’s songs “Bring the Noise” and “Night of the Living Baseheads,” Chuck D often stresses the word “bass” with a strong bass drum kick synchronizing with his call, reminiscent of the emphasis on the first beat in Brown’s records. Chuck D declares that the “noise” or the “universal” beat they are producing is a threat to the established order in “Bring the Noise.” In “Night of the Living Baseheads,” Chuck D makes a clear difference between “baseheads” (crack addicts) and “bass-heads” (those addicted to the bass of the music), which distinguishes between those possessed by drugs and those possessed by the beat. As Chuck D says, “Don’t confuse this with the sound/ I’m talking about base.”

However, although the cultural percussive sensibilities impacted hip-hop musical production, the instruments used were a product of the technological advancements of postmodern, postindustrial society. Once again, the practice of musical bricolage came into play.

In the aftermath of post-industrialism, hip-hop musicians applied the now-defunct machinery and technical skills they learned in factories as well as both the lack of funding for music education in schools and the lack of access to expensive instruments, to create new instruments out of the materials around them (Rose 27-34). By fusing the cultural percussive sensibilities of the African Diaspora with new electronic technology, the turntables, beatboxing, samplers and 808-drum machine became new percussive instruments.

Turntables, which at first were simply phonographs for playing records, became percussive instruments through the manual manipulation of sounds to create a percussive feel (Nelson). DJs Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash and Grand Wizzard Theodore were pioneers in the development of turntablism in the late 1970s. Herc, who was influenced by dub music jockeys, was known for mixing fragments of records, called breaks, together. Grandmaster Flash was known for his backspin and cut techniques, the former created echoing effects and the latter repeated words or phrases in a rhythmic matter. Finally, Theodore popularized the technique of scratching, or moving the record back and forth in a rhythmic matter to produce a scratch-like sound (Keyes 228-229). Essentially, these DJs turned the turntable from a passive tool for enjoyment to a kinetic instrument for percussive musical production. Beatboxing or the “human beatbox,” which Darren Robinson from The Fat Boys and Doug E. Fresh popularized, was also a percussive bricolage in which an “. . . artist employs precise breath control combined with lip-smacking, lip-popping, and tongue-clicking to imitate electronic [and urban] music sounds” (Nelson). Beatboxers copied the sounds they heard in their environment. The electronic percussive sounds came from samplers and drum machines as well.

Samplers and the drum machines, digital imitations of the traditional drum, extended the percussive abilities farther through reliance on digital pre-recorded sound, producing a digital

version of “honoring the ancestors.” Sampling was a digital extension of folk oral-kinetic and communal improvisation traditions in Black cultural music styles (Gaunt 14). With samplers, producers could take a variety of beats from anywhere, including music from diasporic cultural groups, which the DJs and listeners naturally gravitated towards since they grew up listening to these records. Early hip-hop records used beats from disco, funk, and Caribbean and Latin music records, echoing the communal and collaborative attitude in Black musical production. For example, the first mainstream hip-hop song, Sugarhill Gang’s 1979 record “Rapper’s Delight” sampled the disco band Chic’s “Good Times” from the same year. Samplers also allowed for a greater variety of sounds that could be incorporated into a recorded song, such as traffic noises, car alarms and other sounds of the city. They extended the cultural sensibilities of the inclusion of all types of sound from the environment, musical and non-musical, into the sound space. Additionally, the sampler and the drum machine extend the polyrhythmic and polyphonic characteristics of Black music as well as micro-tonal characteristics. In *Black Noise*, producers have stated that the sounds produced from the machines are different depending on the type, meaning that they can hear the minute differences between them (Rose 76-77). These instruments allowed hip-hop artists to still employ percussive techniques even if they could not play the drums themselves or could not get access to them. Percussive bricolage was practiced as well in the vocal sounds and language of hip-hop.

### **“Hit Me:” Percussive Language in Hip-Hop**

Another form of musical bricolage is percussiveness of language. Ethnomusicologist George L Starks, Jr. writes instruments act as speech surrogates, but speech patterns are based in the sound of the instruments and the environment as well (Starks 227). When it comes to cultures that heavily rely on percussiveness, one might conclude that their language would naturally be



percussive. For instance, West African languages, which influenced diasporic language styles, are tonal and rhythmic; they have a “built-in musical aesthetic,” especially when it comes to “understanding the acoustical phonetic signs of the drum” (Ortiz Walton 4-5, 12-13). Ortiz Walton said that despite the banning of the drums or the inability to keep all the drum practices alive, the textures, rhythms and linguistic influences were retained throughout the diaspora (5). This implies that a stress was placed on the language to act as a bricolage. These influences were incorporated in a number of ways. One is through the rhythmic preaching styles of Black church preachers, which in turn influenced the lyrical patterns of musicians from the blues to hip-hop. Spencer quotes from William C. Turner, Jr.’s foreword to *Sacred Symphony* in which he labels Black preaching *kratophany*, or manifestation of power, and *oppungancy*, the state of resistance, and that this is achieved through glossa, the act of speaking in tongues (49-50). Turner mentions that in U.S. Black folklore there is the idea of “moaning so the devil won’t know what you are talking about” and thus, the inarticulate speech is the voice of the Spirit of God (50). This “speaking in tongues” displayed itself through moans, groans, grunts, scattin, stuttering, onomatopoeic words, short repetitive phrases, and Brackett’s label of “double-voiced utterances” or rhythmic play with words.

The percussiveness of language is heard in many of musical genres of the diaspora. Moaning, groaning and grunting were often heard in the blues and transferred into rhythm and blues, soul, funk and hip-hop. James Brown and George Clinton of Parliament Funkadelic were known for moaning, grunting and screeching in their songs. Perkinson, in his essay, “Trancing Terror: African American Uses of Time to Trick the Evil Eye of Whiteness,” describes the moan as a kind of spiritual expression of a call or cry of the spirit waiting for a response and a sound that was outside of time and space (62). In a sense, the moan is a cry from the pressure or daily

beating of the hardships of life. Another vocal percussive bricolage is scattling. Popularized in jazz, scattling is singing or rapping of “nonsensical” syllables. Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong and Celia Cruz were all known for their scattling in songs. Robert Farris Thompson describes the syllabic, choppy style of singing or rapping, which is also found throughout Afro-Cuban music, as “mouth-drumming,” a form of oral notation and creolized language, implying that “nonsensical” is a misnomer (Sublette). Gaunt as well describes it as a “manipulation of vowels and consonants” that acts as coded language, similar to pig-Latin; it is meant not for lexical understanding, but for aesthetic and musical understanding (89,98). Several artists have scatted in their songs, including rock ‘n’ roll icon Little Richard in “Tutti Frutti” (“A-Wop-bop-a-loo-lop a-lop-bam-boo”), reggae icon Bob Marley in “Crazy Baldheads” and dancehall singer Barrington Levy in “Here I Come (Broader than Broadway).” According to breakdancer Jorge Pabon, the name hip-hop was also originally used by MCs as part of a scat style of rhyming (20). For example, in Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight,” the most popular line is “I say a hip hop the hippie the hippie to the hip hip hop, a you don’t stop the rock it to the bang bang boogie say up jumped the boogie to the rhythm of the boogie, the beat.” Other rappers, like Busta Rhymes, are known for their “mouth drumming” techniques in songs. Examples include “Woo Hah” (the title, “yah yah yah,” “yo yo yay”) and “Dangerous” (“my jigga-jigga making you bounce,” “uh-uh”).

Western percussive onomatopoeia also fills much diasporic music, including hip-hop lyrics. Not only do the onomatopoeia represent percussive sound, but also movement (Gaunt 103). For instance, several sexual euphemisms are percussive, such as smash, bang, hit it, tap that ass, sock it, beat it, boink, break off, bump, and dub (as in “rub-a-dub”). Another word crush, as in the Lil’ Kim song “Crush On You,” is also percussive since it is about wanting to leave an “impression” on a love interest. Rappers also mimic rhythmic patterns in their speech,

which in collaboration with the microphone, act like drums in an interlocking system with the other sounds in the records. The microphone itself is an electronic extension of both the voice and eardrum, which is why rappers mention it often in their lyrics. A microphone actually was used earlier as the name of a “telephone transmitter,” and “ear trumpet for the hard-of-hearing;” the latter is similar to an early phonograph and both meanings suggest communication purposes (Etymology Online). In songs, rappers will stutter, change tempo, and change rhythmic patterns such as on-beat and off-beating phrasing to create a rhythmic dynamism (Rose 39). Additionally, rappers squeeze and stretch out words, which is another example of the contraction and release (repetition and rupture) aspect of Black music and dance (Spencer 17).

Moreover, in Black cultural music, there is word repetition in songs are percussive, such as in James Brown’s repeat of “please” and “I” in “Please, Please, Please” and The Staple Singers’ repetition of “do it” in “Let’s Do It Again.” Both Angela Nelson and Zora Neale Hurston have indicated that the use of repetition throughout West-African-influenced languages is widespread. Hurston notes that the double descriptive and the double negatives are used often: kill-dead, down-low (or low-down), more better and ain’t never. In the standard English language, double negatives cancel each other out, but in West African-influenced languages, double negatives reinforce the negative. Additionally, short, repetitive, chanted phrases are often used, such as in Brown’s song “Superbad” these extend into hip-hop as well. According to Nelson, the use of repetition for emphasis or to establish a word gives weighted importance to what is said because of how it is said. Rap has continued that repetitive language not only through the words rapped, but also through the DJ’s cutting and backspin techniques that break up the record and put short phrases on a loop. As with Brown and The Staple Singers’ records, the melodic flow appears to be blocked or stopped until it can breakthrough to the next part. Referring back to Rose’s

characteristics of repetition and rupture, hip-hop DJs manipulate vocals through turntable techniques that break up words and put them in patterns. This in turn creates, as Nelson calls it, a sense of urgency in the language.

Additionally, percussive language is based on the microtonal elements of percussion. Just as variation and pitch can be subtly changed, cultural nuance is significant in interpreting meaning in West African-influenced languages. Walton writes, “in tonal language, the same word can have several meanings depending on the pitch of the word” (3). For example, he mentions that the word *fo* in Yoruban language can mean either wash or break with a change in accent (4). Accentuation is critical to learning these languages. How something is said is essential to understanding its meaning. In “James Brown's ‘Superbad’ and the Double-Voiced Utterance,” Brackett concurs that in Black English, the emphasis is on the sound of the word more than on the meaning because definitions are not static and can change depending on the context (309-310). Speech can be more of a game or a performance in which the significance comes from the social moment. Thus, the lyrics tend to have intertextuality, or double meanings, similar to the doubling or versioning in Caribbean music. Rose also agrees that double meanings can be found throughout rapper’s lyrics (39). Rappers tend to use the same word with several meanings, imitating the layering and repetition within the music. For example, Keyes writes about the use of the word “bad.” She states that determining the word’s meaning is based on the “speaker's vocal inflections, verbal stress, facial expression, and the context in which ‘bad’ is used” (232). LL Cool J’s song “I’m Bad” speaks to her statement. Here, he explains that he is “bad” because of his lyrical, physical and sexual prowess, which are positives not negatives.

Another example is the handling of the two controversial words, “nigga” and “bitch,” which might be explained through this microtonal approach. Within our present cultural context,

it is understandable that these words can be hurtful and often perceived as racist or sexist, but their usage in hip-hop songs is sometimes not so clearly defined. The changing of “nigger” to “nigga” reflects an attempt at the shamanic transformation of a negative into a positive. As with other transformative “incantations,” as Perkinson calls them, such as “Black is beautiful,” the changing of the word is an effort to redefine or break out of the limits of definition (*Shamanism* 65). In the sense of a homophone, the words sound similar, but have different meanings. Keyes agrees that depending on the context, words in hip-hop language can be either a compliment or an insult (232-233). Depending on its context, “nigga” within, and only within, the Black community is used as either a term of endearment or as an insult, making it somewhat neutral. Similarly, the use of “bitch” reflects the multiple meaning of the word. “Bitch” originally was a term for a female dog and later became a derogatory term. Several male rappers refer to themselves as “dogs,” which itself is a power-animal or figure absorption,<sup>11</sup> and thus, the logical next step would be that the female counterpart is the “bitch” (Perkinson *Shamanism* 149). It could also explain why several female rappers refer to themselves as “bitches” and not see it as overtly problematic. However, if the term is used negatively, it becomes an insult; the distinctions are discussed in Queen Latifah’s “U.N.I.T.Y.” The thought-process behind the use of these words, thus, may be culturally influenced. Although in the dominant culture, “nigger” still implies the inferiority of Black people and “bitch” still implies an inferiority of women, the way the words are used in different contexts show that the meanings are not fixed. Words gain several meanings over time. Oral language is more fluid than written standard language, and marginalized cultures use the former to subvert the latter.

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<sup>11</sup> This is another term for spirit possession. According to Perkinson, in many shamanic religions, animal figures were often used as spirits or gods.

## Chapter II: Social Percussiveness

*“We’re looking to become one with that beat, with that rhythm. To the point where your body is a musical instrument. Once it clicks, you can almost feel it.” – B-Boy Fable (Jorge Pabon)*

*“It enchants us and it keeps us coming back for more. And something about that music, it makes you want to get up and party and dance because it is a spiritual sense of freedom.” –La India<sup>12</sup>*

*“With a rhythmic instinction/ to be able to travel /beyond existing forces of life/ basically, that’s tribal/ and if you wanna get the rhythm/ then you have to join a tribe” – A Tribe Called Quest’s “Youthful Expressions”*

### The Beat Made Flesh: Ecstatic Movement

Social percussiveness is the impact of different bodies on each other as well as the social and physical manifestations of the musical practices. Percussiveness can also be defined as impact, and social rituals greatly impact human behavior and our interactions with each other. The different bodies can include other people, the environment, technology and in a religious sense, spirits (in a secular sense, ideas, thoughts, and music) because shamanism negotiates the intersection between physical (visible, material) and spiritual (invisible) worlds. Drummer Sule Greg Wilson says in his book, *The Drummer’s Path*, “artists affect people with much more than technique and training. They do it with who they are, with their emotions, with their life experiences, with their thoughts. One’s state of Spirit molds the music . . . and it affects the people it comes in contact with” (xv). This ability to impact people through art can create a sense of community, and rhythm and percussion are impactful parts of music. Rhythm is the basis of

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<sup>12</sup> The first two quotations are from the documentary *From Mambo to Hip-Hop*.

communication, communal experience, transcendence and “the force that helps to bring about harmony” (Cummings and Roy 63).

This structural base of rhythm has been seen throughout many Afro-diasporic religions. Perkinson cites religious scholar Charles Long, who aimed to systematize elements of African-American religious experience despite the formalized differences among them (“Trancing Terror” 62). In diasporic religions, like Voodoo, Santeria, Rastafarianism and Afro-Christianity, Perkinson describes this meta-religion as a kind of Afro-shamanism in his work. Spencer agrees that there is a connective base or “meta-style” of all of these spiritual systems and cultural practices, and he describes it as “African rhythm.” He believes that rhythm and spirit are one in the same, and “a recurrent dominant trait in all Black cultures” (29, 32-33). This connective base is also a form of meta-communication, tying in with the call-and response elements of Black musical styles (Gaunt 60). Thus, for diasporic cultures, rhythm is the ultimate meaning of life is that life (Spencer 33).

These religions are also considered forms of religious and ritual bricolage, resembling the musical bricolage of these cultures. Michael Ventura claims, “Voodoo is the African aesthetic shattered and desperately put back together, . . . recreated to serve its people under the shattering impact of slavery and poverty” (Mowitt 83). Basically, West African conceptual systems provided the base for the social and spiritual aspects of these religions, and the diaspora combined them with Western formalized religious symbols, gained from the collision with those cultures. Additionally, those religions influenced the secular music and rituals outside of the sacred places. In a way, it is a riffing or versioning of a theme, or an “iterative transformation”; it is not exact repetition, but a form of self-similar recursiveness (Eglash 127). Others have commented on this transformation, such as Amiri Baraka’s “changing same” and Stuart Hall’s

“re-working of traditions” (Gaunt 46, 129). No matter whether it is a sacred space or secular culture, that sense of rhythmic and percussive spirituality is present as a foundation.

Percussive instruments are often used in these religions’ rituals to induce ecstasy and ecstatic dance. Mowitt describes ecstasy as the “disorienting recognition of one’s dependence on a relationship, on a field of relationships, that identity manages poorly, if at all,” or the management of the “collective compromises of identity” through the “ecstatic loss of place” (85). Ecstatic induction in a communal ritual is a way of handling the often displacing sensation of the self in society. Philip Royster’s describes it as the experience of spiritual or cosmic oneness – the ability to transcend object, time and place (60-61). Ecstasy is a shamanic incorporation of the feelings of social dispossession as well as a temporarily loss of individual identity through absorption into a community. Mowitt also implies that ecstasy and ecstatic movement show that identity is a result of interacting social forces and multifaceted, not a whole entity in itself. Identity mimics the diversity of the community as well as the polyrhythmic and polyphonic aspects of the music.

Spencer suggests that this sense of oneness is a merging between the personal, social and musical, or the “I/we orientation,” in which the “I” is relational to the other (39). Gilroy also confirms social “I” in terms of “Black particularity;” he states that it is “constructed from several interlocking themes that culminate in an unexpected time signature. They supply the accents, rests, breaks, and tones that make the performance of racial identity possible” (202). “Blackness” is not natural, but a result of a set of social systems. Gilroy puts this in a framework of “anti-anti-essentialism,” which is a critique of postmodern theories. “Anti-anti-essentialism” is the in-between of essentialism, the belief that identity characteristics are natural, and anti-essentialism, the belief that identity is completely arbitrary or does not matter (x). Anti-anti-essentialism



basically is that although cultural customs and values are learned, they are still real and lived experiences with material consequences created from historical and social interactions. As Gaunt says, creating the self is a continuous “shifting process”, much like the feeling of ecstasy (41). It is the feeling of one’s identity, or a “passionate physicality” through ritual practices that makes these characteristics appear natural (Gaunt 60). The physical body, too, is not a whole entity, but a conglomeration of different parts with different functions working in unison as well as consisting of multiple gaps that enable growth just as the gaps in the music reinforce the patterns. Additionally, we are a combination of our parents and all the ancestors who came before them. Essentially, we are fragmented beings.

This is another reason dance is a vital part of diasporic social life: not only is it important in social life, the induction of ecstasy and spirit possession, but it is also the physical manifestation of fragmented and ever-changing social identity. It is the gesturing of embodied percussiveness and interlocking rhythms. Religious historian Gerardus van der Leeuw says, “the dance, by its very nature is ecstatic . . . the boundaries of the body and soul open, and whoever dances feels how boundary after boundary falls away” (Spencer 13). Royster compares MC Hammer’s dancing to the religion Santeria, which he calls a “danced religion;” he argues that dance is the “expression of the technology of the mystery of the world,” or in another sense, the technology of the spirits or forces (65). Gaunt also mentions that through dance, the body becomes a form of technology much like musical instruments become aesthetic technologies. The body is “the technology of Black musical communication and identity” as well as memory, since technology is the “practical application of knowledge” (58-59). Basically, the dance represents the technology of the body expressing the dynamic relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds. As with the multiplicity of identity and music, dance relies on interactions

between different parts of the body and with other people. Comparing it to Mowitt's description of the drummer, dance becomes the physical manifestation of the "pluralization" of or community within oneself (81). Robert Farris Thompson affirms this as well, calling the dance a mastery of self because it requires moving different parts of the body in sync with the different rhythms (Shufro). Chernoff also acknowledges that the music and dance relied on examining the whole and parts and outer and inner time simultaneously (Gaunt 29). The performer's body is partitioned with every limb doing something rhythmically distinct, but still working in unity.

These notions of dance, ecstasy and identity are incorporated throughout diasporic religions and their rituals. Dances often take place within a congregated space, such as in the ring shout in Southern United States, Congo Square in New Orleans, Haitian Voodoo rituals and Afro-Christian services. The ritual group dances emphasized the *communitas* or communal spirit (Nelson). Drumming and dancing in the rituals were important in order to position the participants in a manner that made the possession possible. For example, in Vodou ritual, the drummers play specific rhythms of each loa (spirit, god) to position the dancers and call the loa. Often ecstasy is achieved through the possession of the beat, or, in a religious sense, the possession of the gods (or spirits), or God (Holy Spirit) in Afro-Christian religions, during the dance. Mowitt defines possession in voodoo as the "experience of being ridden, where the accent fell not on 'loss of rational control' [surrender or submission], but on the ecstatic fulfillment realized when one's body was recognized as a capable of supporting a divine horseman [or loa]" (84). Molefi K. Asante agrees that possession is not being possessed by a god or spirit, but voluntarily possessing the god or spirit (206). Thus, the possession is about possessing the gods and the dance is not a passive receiving of the gods, but an active searching for them. However, since identity is relational, it could be understood as both sides possessing each other, or two

worlds interacting with each other. The dance is essentially the spiritual bodies and physical bodies becoming one, or the beat or rhythm being manifested in the physical material world. A co-dependent relationship is formed between them.

The close link between dance and music within community rituals was especially important for U.S. Black Americans. Olly Wilson said that the diasporic value of dance is not viewed as an associated act of the music, but an intrinsic part of the musical experience, suggesting that music is audible movement as well as the beat induction or spirit possession aspects in these cultures. Dance was also used by U.S. Black Americans to retain rhythms (10-11). Although dances were viewed as just as wild and uncontrollable as the drum, putting restrictions on dancing was much harder. Dances in ritual or social gatherings became another form of musical bricolage maintained through kinetic learning. As with instrumental and vocal percussions, dances were bodily notations of drum rhythms. One example of how rhythms were retained in dances was in tap dancing, which was a fusion of Irish clog dancing and African-American dance styles that developed during the minstrelsy and jazz eras of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hill 5-9). A descendant of juba-patting, hamboning and tap dancing, step dancing, a popular fraternity and sorority dance in the mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, consisted of foot-stomping, hand-clapping and body slapping gestures (Branch 316-326, Gaunt 21, 25, 76). For those who did not have access to written notational materials and access to traditional cultures and percussive practices, this type of notation and learning was important. Though specific rhythms and dances could not be remembered, the rhythms, dances and spirits were condensed and transported into creolized versions. Ortiz Walton makes it clear that despite the loss of specific drum rhythms for each god or spirit, those in the U.S. Black Church were able to retain polyrhythm and multiplicity through body movement under the guise of one God, or Holy Spirit,

and mass ecstasy (22-24).

Zora Neale Hurston discusses another community aspect of the dance, audience participation, which also mimics call-and-response in the music. She writes that two main characteristics of Black culture, including music and dance, are asymmetry and angularity<sup>13</sup>, which creates a dynamic feel in the music and dance. Those characteristics aid in compelling the audience to listen to the music and join in on the dance. Hurston continues that angularity of Black music and dance is dynamic through suggestion; it is not a whole expression but leaves a space for another to respond. This is relevant to the concept of possession because the audience is possessed or impressed by the dance:

No matter how violent it may appear to the beholder, every posture gives the impression that the dancer will do much more. For example, the performer flexes one knee sharply, assumes a ferocious face mask, thrusts the upper part of the body forward with clenched fists, elbows taut as in hard running or grasping a thrusting blade. That is all. But the spectator himself adds the picture of ferocious assault, hears the drums, and finds himself keeping time with the music and tensing himself for the struggle. It is compelling insinuation. That is the very reason the spectator is held so rapt. He is participating in the performance himself—carrying out the suggestions of the performer (26).

Hurston, who did study Vodou, speaks to both spirit possession, in her use of the word “rapt” (rapture or ecstasy), and percussiveness, through words like “impression,” “clenched fists,” and “drums.” The performance of the dance is not only the dancer but also the spectator’s reaction to the dance, which is what make the dances so exciting. The dances allow the audience to fill in the space the dancer created, and forces the audience to participate in the dance. This act of

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<sup>13</sup> On pages 406-407 of his article, Vijay Iyer, also noticed the “lopsidedness” of the music.

challenging is part of the competitive battling in many diasporic dance styles, which will later be significant in hip-hop dances. As Hurston adds, “the white dancer attempts to express fully; the Negro is restrained, but succeeds in gripping the beholder by forcing him to finish the action the performer suggests. Since no art ever can express all the variations conceivable . . . his [the Negro] dancing is realistic suggestion, and that is about all a great artist can do” (26-27). One example of battling is disco’s “voguing,” which was not a stylized dance as in Madonna’s video, but a dance in which Black and Latino gay men would use a parody of glamour poses to challenge each other to dance (Patton 84-85). The growth or creativity comes from the conflict in the music or dance, which is not aimed always towards a linear resolution as in Western European tonal music.

The spiritual and ecstatic aspect of Afro-diasporic dance in conjunction with percussion expands to the concept of fantasy. Western Enlightenment science mitigated the significance of fantasy, dream and unconsciousness in human experience to focus on rationality and the consciousness because the former states were not controllable. However, religions with shamanic characteristics of spirit possession and ecstasy incorporate fantasy and unconsciousness into their practices. The percussive significance of fantasy is about the rhythmic play between consciousness and unconsciousness, as well as the individual and the community. The unconsciousness allows for creative imagining of different worlds and relates to communal spirit. In “Dance and Social Fantasy,” Angela McRobbie writes about social fantasy in the dance hall or disco:

Like the cinema, the dancehall or disco offers a darkened space where the dancer can retain some degree of anonymity or absorption. This in turn creates a temporary blotting-out of the self, a suspension of real, daylight consciousness and an aura of dream-like

self-reflection. Where the cinema offers a one-way fantasy which is directed solely to the gaze of the spectator toward the screen, the fantasy of dancing is more social, more reciprocated. This is because it allows simultaneously a dramatic display of the self and body, with an equally dramatic negation of the self and the body. This latter works through the whole structure of the dance-floor. The crowded mass of bodies, the insistent, often trance-like disco rhythms and the possibility of being at once there and not there (Mowitt 86).

McRobbie here describes the ecstatic *communitas* or communal spirit that is induced from the dance. Once again, this is not a moment of losing control, but one of recognizing the linkage between the “desires for the self with those for somebody else” (Mowitt 86-87). A rhythmic relationship occurs between the individual dancer and the collective of dancers. Incorporating the possession of others and spiritual fantasy is a cover against the unsettling feelings of dispossession, and reasserts a feeling of control and a sense of hope. The communal and spiritual nature of the dance in diasporic music continues into hip-hop culture as well, fusing with new digital technology and the politics of the era.

### **Robotic and Ecstatic<sup>14</sup>: Dance, Spirituality and Political Movement in Hip-Hop**

The social percussive aspects of hip-hop can be seen in its early community emphasis, which was based in a hybrid and poly-cultural sensibility. Afrika Bambaataa says that hip-hop culture consists of several collaborative elements, including DJing, rapping (MCing), graffiti, beatboxing, breakdancing (b-boying) and knowledge (Chang x). In the early days of hip-hop, social gatherings took place in boarded-up, abandoned buildings in the Bronx. These became, to the performers, almost like makeshift churches or sacred places where DJs and rappers were the

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<sup>14</sup> The name of this section is based on Dr. Octagon's, also known as Kool Keith from Ultramagnetic MCs, “Earth People,” in which one of the lines is “robot voodoo power.”

priests or master drummers (*From Mambo to Hip-Hop*). Just as in Afro-diasporic religions, dance again became one of the main ritualistic activities. In fact, the word hip-hop, according to KRS-One's 2007 song "Hip-Hop Lives," means intelligent movement. The first part of the word, "hip," comes from jazz terminology, "hip" or "hep," meaning "to be in the know," and also possibly came from the West African Wolof word, *hipikat*, meaning "an intelligent person" (Campbell 36). Thus, there was a consciousness, or the body as a technology of knowledge, and a cultural reverence in the dances of hip-hop.

Similar to the ring shout or Congo Square, dances usually took place in a cipher, which, as Rose defined it, was a circle or ring formation, consisting of the audience doing a "syncopated body rock" while a few dancers danced in the middle (Chang 4, Rose 47). Within the cipher, dancers would enter, perform for a few seconds or minutes, and then exit to allow other dancers to enter. The dominant dance of early hip-hop was breakdancing. Aspects of breakdancing, such as acrobatic moves, pantomime, exaggerated movements, physical contortions, spins, and backflips draw influence from previous ecstatic Black dances. Dancer and cultural theorist Michael DeFrantz writes that breakdancing is similar to the fight-dance style of Afro-Brazilian capoeira, and is reminiscent of the dance battling of earlier dances. Early breakdancing competitions became replacements for gang gun battles; social frustrations were redirected into a healthier act (DeFrantz 12-14). Breakdancing was also a physical manifestation of the repetition and ruptures of hip-hop. Referencing Houston's angularity and Rose's repetition and rupture, popping and locking consisted of angular movements of snapping joints, but created an illusion of fluidity by having each movement be a motion that follows the previous motion from either the dancer or another dancer. The dance also stressed the break points or imitated the ruptures in the music. Breakers would also double each other's moves, similar to a repetition or shadowing

effect, which was kind of a communal movement (Rose 47).

Spirit possession rituals, as well, influenced breakdancing. For example, Rose describes a movement called the “freeze,” which involved dancers taking on or morphing into alternative identities. Dancers would pose as animals, pin-up models, or businessmen, or would challenge opposing dancers (Rose 47-48). Through these moves they could transform their bodies into different shapes or figures, reminiscent of spirit possession and shamanic transformation. Perkinson mentions that although these types of altered experiences, or “manic-mind” states, are hardwired into our nervous system, they manifest themselves differently depending on the culture (*Shamanism* 149). In traditional spirit possession, the dancers absorbed or possessed either religious gods or spirits and power-animals, but in hip-hop, the figure-heads or “gods” were drawn also from the digital and robotic technological culture. Hip-hop dancers mimicked machinery, characters from the *Terminator* movies and the robots from *The Transformers* (Rose 22, 34). Instead of animal dances, like the bird, the alligator or the monkey from the ‘60s, the dances in the hip-hop-era were more robotic. Also, the imitation of transformers is comparable to shamanic transformation, and the presence of shape-shifting and trickster gods in previous cultures.

The use of robots and electronics not only are reflective of the age of in which hip-hop formed, but conceptually continued the notion of spirituality and multiplicity of self. Christopher Small cites David Toop, who argues that the mythological tricksters and heroes of the past have been replaced by electronic age superheroes from video games, science fiction stories, comic books and Blaxploitation movies (392). These trickster identities allow for the marginalized to shift from structured identities as well as to reclaim identities that the dominant culture possesses. Both Perkinson and Gaunt argue that dances, like the robot and the pop-and-lock,



were collective responses in an effort to humanize new technology. Perkinson describes the robot as a “shamanic retrieval of the soul from the heart of the machine” or from the hegemonic forces that these new technologies still reinforced, such as science and technology belonging to only the White upper classes (“Shamanism” 83). Gaunt writes that the robot was a “funky mechanization of the dancing body,” combining the forceful beats of funk and soul music with “mechanical practices and technological innovations” of the day, suggesting a hybridism (82). Spencer also explains it as the drumbeats, or specific percussive styles, surviving the constrictiveness of “urbanization and industrialization,” and continuing the survival from the slave system that treated enslaved Black people as machines (15, 23). The absorption of these mythic figures into their culture was an effort to reclaim the power to define their own world and create their own physical narratives.

In “‘The Robot Voodoo Power:’ Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism,” J. Griffith Rollefson discusses how the robotic is an extension of voodoo practices and sensibilities. He argues that both call into question the meaning of “human,” “the subject” and the modern view of identity as a static form (86-89). Referring back to Gaunt and Royster’s claims about the body as technology, Rollefson implies that there is little difference between the construction of the robot, spirit possession in Voodoo, and the multiplicity of identity. He quotes cultural theorist Kodwo Eshun, who states that “the human is a population of processes . . . What used to be called alter-egos are now multi-egos, a crowd of synthetic subjects” (89). The embrace or absorption of the new technologies into music and dance allowed for further creation of new “hybridities” for escaping the universalism of Western racial discourse (Rollefson 88-89). Electronic and digital technology, as did previous mediums, further dismembered the subject. How are we different than robots? They run on fuel and electric power, and are composed of

parts like wires; we run on fuel (food and air) and electric (ecstatic or excited states) power (energy, forces, ideas, music or “spirit”), and as well are composed of wire-like parts, neurons and veins. Creating the self is a continuous process of transformation, much like putting on new robotic “appendages” or “prosthetics,” which continues also the West African practices of the performance mask or spirit possession in ritual.

Several rap songs have hinted at possession, such as MC Rob Base and DJ E-Z Rock’s “It Takes Two.” The record begins with an ominous voice saying, “Right about now, you’re about to be possessed by the sounds of MC Rob Base and DJ E-Z Rock” before the word “hit it.” GZA from Wu-Tang Clan’s raps in “Shadowboxing,” “hip-hop possesses me.” Kool Moe Dee’s “I’m Hittin’ Hard,” from his album *Knowledge is King*, has several percussive and spiritual references. Some lyrics are, “On the way you think you syn/Cronize, the wise tries/To overcome the dumb, the drum/Beats a pattern that turns into/A catalyst that’ll just/Grab your ear you had to hear/ A rhyme’s contents/Beyond nonsense,” “Shake and brake like the Holy Ghost connected/His body and soul/I control/His mind is mine cause my/Rhyme holds,” and “Through rhythmic hypnosis/Left in a state/Of cataclysmic neurosis.” Throughout the song, Kool Moe Dee positions himself and the beat as “gods” who possess the audience. His words are also suggestive of beat induction, spirit possession and ecstatic movement.

Other aspects of hip-hop continue the close relationship between music and motion in diasporic cultures. Turntable subculture carries on the processional or carnival-esque dance approach to playing instruments. Instruments were often not stationary objects but players were expected to move with them. For example, Olly Wilson mentions the importance of marching bands in U.S. Black culture in his essay “The Association of Movement and Music as a Manifestation of a Black Conceptual Approach to Music-Making” (18-20). Instrumentalists are

expected to be dancers (Gaunt 8). Mowitt, as well as interviewees from *From Mambo to Hip-Hop*, state that many drummers were also known as dancers, or at least recognized the relationship between dance and drumming. Drummers mentioned here include Big Sid Catlett, Buddy Rich, Max Roach, Earl Palmer, and Tito Puente. Max Roach describes how he had a call-and-response interaction with tap dancer Baby Laurence in performances (Mowitt 88). Another form of transcendence or *communitas* came from the back and forth between the dancer and drummer as well as the drummer's body and the drum. Thus, it was not surprising that that sensibility extended to turntable culture. The documentary *Scratch* notes that DJs or turntablists are expected to do body tricks while mixing and scratching on turntables. Although the turntable is a stationary machine, the DJs managed to work around it, employing physical and rhythmic knowledge that allows them to perform tricks that go back to the music and motion ties in diasporic music. It makes sense that this percussive practice translated over to that part of hip-hop as well.

In "The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip-hop Dance and Body Power," DeFrantz describes the spiritual, social and political power of Black social dance. He explains it as a "sacred holding, a trust of rhythmic legibility and cultural responsibility" (11). In other words, hip-hop dance was a continuation of the spiritual dance of diasporic cultures and was a cultural and social language used to gather people together. Going back to McRobbie's description of the dance floor in disco, DeFrantz also argues that although the dance was the beat made visible, the body simultaneously seems to disappear within the music. As said before, spirit possession is a co-dependent or oscillating relationship between the invisible and visible worlds. Although there is room for self-expression and "personal invention," the communal aspect and the intangible force of the rhythm is providing "healing and sustenance" for Black communities (DeFrantz 11-12).

DeFrantz also quotes scholar Philip Royster, who portrays MC Hammer as a “griot with shamanic skills whose singing and dancing show Black folk how they can not merely survive but thrive in a spirit of praise,” tying it to Perkinson’s description of shamanism in hip-hop (Royster 61). Most would probably not think of Hammer in such spiritual terms, but Royster highlights the blend between the secular and the sacred in Black cultures. Spirituality is embedded in music and dance, even when it is not so obvious. Additionally, Royster’s description implies that music and dance are used a force for social and political movement.

In his paper, DeFrantz analyzes the specific dance move called the “bounce,” which is a “recoil” move that allows one to firm oneself on the ground before the next move. He argues, “body power draws from the illusion of physical weightiness, of neediness, of the voracious consumption of space” (12). As a slang term, it gives a sense of moving around in space, like hip-hop. Essentially, the bounce turns into a political move, one that represents a fight against erasure or displacement. In some of hip-hop, emphasis is also on physical tension, hardness and aggression, which DeFrantz claims is unique to the politicized Blackness of the post-civil rights era (12). The identity politics in the postmodern era influenced the more overt politicizing of Black dance. However, the dances are also a protection against the constant feeling of displacement, for bodies that still struggle for full political and social control. They are a way of redirecting social anger and frustration into ecstatic movement and fantasies of fighting back. For instance, movement and dance defy the pervasive stereotype of Black people as lazy, idle and shiftless. One notable example is Professor Griff from Public Enemy, who is known for his martial-art high kicks on stage and in videos. DeFrantz writes in “African American Dance-Philosophy, Aesthetics and ‘Beauty,’” that Black performance and dance “allows us to imagine possibilities for social movement, social particularity, social flexibility, and social change” (96).

The party, or gathering of people into a social space, is more than enjoyment, but political, too. Dance is bodily, socially, politically, and spiritually transforming because it enables action.

Two Salt 'n' Pepa songs exemplify the connection between rhythm, dance, sexuality, spirit possession and politics. The first song, "The Beauty and the Beat," starts off with a sexual innuendo, "Ooh baby I like the sound when/the switch is on and you start pounding," before going into a group chant of "clap your hands now people clap hard . . . clap your hands now stomp your feet," which hints at the clap and stomp dances of the ring shout and the Black Church. They also mention the components of the drum kit, the snare, high-hat and bass drum, as something that the people want to hear. In another verse, Salt 'n' Pepa mention the call-and-response between the rhythm and the dancer: "When the turntable talks, your body will listen . . . Out of my speakers into your sneakers." Salt 'n' Pepa also connect sex to rhythm in lines like "the rhythm makes love to me as I dance," and "your chest and ribcage the bass is poking at." The group shows as well the relationship between the clap-stomp dance, the drum kit, and the turntables. Like Kool Moe Dee, Salt 'n' Pepa mention that the music possesses power and gives them the power to possess the listeners and dancers, especially the men, in the last verse.

In Salt 'n' Pepa's "Shake Your Thang," they associate politic movement with dancing. Spencer has argued that rhythms are so impressionable that they can energize people. Referencing Leonard Barrett, Spencer claims that the rhythm gives a sense of "self-confidence that fuels protest and insurrection" and other social actions (22-23). The "motor attitude," which could also be called swing or swagger, gained from the oscillating rhythms, allows people to cope with the future as well as to join with "a larger social context" (Spencer 25). It is the reason drums were important in the Stono rebellion and music was important in the Civil Rights Movement. In Salt 'n' Pepa's video, they are arrested for "lewd dancing," and the community

joins together to protest their arrest while the duo explain to the police why they are innocent through the song. Salt 'n' Pepa rap about others calling their dances “dirty,” then DJ Spinderella stops the fight about to ensue, and asking them not to break (or get angry). Instead, she tells them that “they don’t understand the way you. . . Shake your thang.” Salt 'n' Pepa reminds listeners of the misunderstandings in culture that often lead to political disharmony. Later in the song, they say, “We could get loose, but we can't get naked/ It's not a crime, it's legal, we answered/ Look again - see? We're just dancin'!” These lyrics speak to the issues of legal definitions that have often determined what was culturally appropriate according to the dominant culture, and that are often masked as morality problems. As Neil Leonard discusses in *Jazz and the White Americans: The Acceptance of a New Art Form*, the legal control of Black dances can go back to the restrictions on public jazz dancing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and further back to slave codes (26, 43-45). Salt 'n' Pepa declare, “Don't try and tell me how to party/ It's my dance and it's my body,” linking the body, the social, art and sexual politics. Dance and political movements have questioned and subverted the policing of space by the dominant cultures.

Activist and artist Sister Souljah’s speaks of the ecstatic and political nature of hip-hop music and dance. In her February 1990 speech at We Remember Malcolm X Day, she said, “. . . And when you hear the tribal beat and the drums, they are the same drums of the African past that draws the community to war . . . And when your feet are jumping, dancing . . . it’s the spirit attempting to escape the entrapment. When you feel that the children have gone mad, if you don’t feel it, and when you look at the dances you don’t see it, and when you listen to the music and you don’t hear a call, then you missed the jam” (Rose 62). Souljah raises a few important themes in her statement. She acknowledges the political movement aspect of hip-hop, the call-and-response characteristic that is important to the African diasporic music (the answering the of

the call) as well as the shamanic spirit transcendence of dance. The transcendence or *communitas* spirit and the call-and-response or dialogue helps in establishing the political movement.

Moreover, her statement highlights the social construction of mental illness. Although it can be a physical ailment, it is also a product of present society's views of rationality and oppression of subcultures. Often the practice of trance or manic dancing is either associated with "madness," or "cult" rituals, and this has been used to stereotype West African-derived spiritual systems and dance.

For example, in his review, "Rap Concert Fails to Sizzle in San Diego," John D' Agostino describes the audience as mindless cult-like followers, and that hip-hop is not a "critics' music, it is a disciple's music" (1). According to D' Agostino:

Devotees of the Afros, Queen Latifah, Kid 'N Play, Digital Underground, Big Daddy Kane, and headliners Public Enemy were jerked into spasmodic movement by what seemed little more than intermittent segments of a single rhythmic continuum. It was hypnotic in the way of sensory deprivation, a mind- and body-numbing marathon of monotony whose deafening, prerecorded drum-and-bass tracks and roving klieg lights frequently turned the audience of 6,500 into a single-minded, moveable beast. Funk meets Nuremberg Rally. (1)

D' Agostino writes afterwards that hip-hop music is "tedious," and artists only used sampling to "spice up" the sound as recognition of their "limitations." In this review, D' Agostino demonstrates a complex misunderstanding of the purposes of the percussive techniques. His connection of funk music, which influenced hip-hop, to a Nazi rally reflects a fear of the music and the people. As Rose writes, "he cannot explain why a series of bass or drum lines moves the crowd. . . ." (137). She adds that D' Agostino's contradictions of a numbing experience yet a

moveable mass of people, and a rhythmic continuum and monotony show his further confusion (138). He views the mass of people as dangerous. Yet, the music and dance are not mindless, but have deep meaning and can be empowering, if not for him, then for the hip-hop community.

Although Rose does not mention it, her criticism of D' Agostino is in the same vein as Perkinson's discussion of hip-hop and shamanism, specifically when she mentions that the music "conjure[s] [a] collective Black experience" and the "fear of Black energy" (Rose 138-139). This constant and at times deliberate misunderstanding leads to the next chapter on the symbolism of percussion as a form of resistance.



### Chapter III: Percussion as a Symbolic Form of Resistance

*“ . . . I would go to my drums. This was my relief, my outlet, my psychiatrist, my doctor, my medicine, my insulin. . . I embrace the drums and I never let it go.”-- Angel Rodriguez*

*“I believe that typically people that grow up in an oppressive type of society are always looking for medicine and for us cultural expression is the medicine.” B-boy Fable (Jorge Pabon)<sup>15</sup>*

*“I died and saw a deep hole, and a little man called to me saying, “Follow me. “. . . I don’t know how I left, but I do know how I went to heaven. I declare to you I saw myself in two bodies. Little me was standing looking down on the old, dead me lying on a cooling board.” – Ex-slave account from *God Struck Me Dead*<sup>16</sup>*

#### Chains: The Beating of the Black Body

The symbolic Black body has been the site of percussive beating, physically, psychologically and socially. Physically, the beating has come in the form of enslavement, militarization and police brutality. Psychologically and socially, it has come from the law and media. In a racialized and gendered society, those three fronts are used to maintain power dynamics and to possess or control marginalized groups in a social space. In his book, Mowitt discusses the beating against Black bodies, for example that of the Rodney King case. He argues that King’s body symbolically posed a visible threat and thus invited the beating because of the fear that his Black body would beat them first (114). The beating of Black bodies goes back to the era of slavery. For example, Sally E. Hadden describes in her book, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas*, that in the United States, violent policing of Black bodies traces back to slave patrols, which were, interestingly, called “the beat” (179). Slave

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<sup>15</sup> The first two quotations are from the documentary *From Mambo to Hip-Hop*.

<sup>16</sup> See page 70 of James W. Perkinson’s “Trancing Terror: African American Uses of Time to Trick the Evil Eye of Whiteness.” This part of the article detailed the conversion, out-of-body, and near-death experiences of ex-slaves from the anthology *God Struck Me Dead: Voices of Ex-Slaves*. The book also includes conversations on West African religious ritual, initiation, and ecstatic induction, and how those transferred to Protestant religions.

patrols later influenced police departments after the abolishment of slavery, and continued criminalization of people of color (Hadden 1-5). Additionally, community enforcement and policing existed in the South with public beatings and lynching (Mowitt 104). Eventually, prisons became another way to control Black bodies.

In blues singer Blind Lemon Jefferson's song "Lockstep Blues," he sings, "Mean old jailor has taken away my dancin' shoes/I can't strut my jazzin' stuff /when I got those lock-step blues." The lockstep was a strict military march that was transferred into prisons to keep prisoners in line. Although the Civil Rights Movement in the '50s and '60s was aimed at gaining equal rights and protection under the law, it still did not stop the racism embedded in police departments and the rise of prison culture. By the '70s and '80s, Rockefeller drug laws and the war on drugs increased police profiling of youths of color and, thus increased the number of inmates of color. Famous police brutality cases, such as the Rodney King case, continued the perception of Black people as a visible threat and the perceived need to beat them or break their backs to keep them in place.

Many rap songs in early gangsta rap have addressed the tension between Black communities and police, and flaws in the penal system, such as N.W.A.'s "Fuck tha Police," "Ice-T's "Cop Killer," and Public Enemy's "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos." In KRS-One's "Who Protects Us," he raps "But who protects us from you/Every time you say 'that's illegal'/ doesn't mean that that's true. . . If I hit you, I'll be killed/ But you hit me? I can sue." Here, KRS-One highlights the condoning of excessive police violence against people of color. These songs are essentially fantasy songs about talking back to police, an action that would be too dangerous for Black people, especially males, to do in a real life situation.

The law and the media are used for subtler psychological and social beatings. To an extent,

laws are created to protect the citizens of the nation. However, they also designate the power to define and control. Subconsciously, people of color are often not perceived as natural citizens, so laws are not always created with them in mind. Previously, I mentioned the Stono Rebellion, which resulted in the banning of the drums in slave communities in South Carolina. The ban on drums was juxtaposed with laws that controlled the agency and mobility of enslaved people, such as reading laws, fugitive slave acts and laws that denied any legal or citizen rights (Rose 144-145). These eventually were transformed after the abolishment of slavery into public and social space policies and laws, including Jim Crow laws, Black codes and vagrancy laws, which often affected poor Black blues musicians (Banfield 40). The use of laws to curtail Black communities also continues into the hip-hop era. Drug laws and copyright laws were the major laws produced to subvert hip-hop culture. As mentioned before, the war on drugs and Rockefeller drug laws have produced more inmates, especially those of color. In an interview, Chuck D and Hank Shocklee have noted that stricter copyright laws were created to undermine sampling in hip-hop because it was not profitable for companies (McLeod 2). Thus, although they are subtler, contemporary laws and practices resonate with the legacy of slavery and racism (Rose 145).

Media, institutional, and corporate control have had the largest impact on the compliance of the majority of the American population in the enforcement of these laws. Visual and written media representations have been two of the biggest possessive tools in persuading people to be complicit with racist behaviors, enact racist laws, and influence violent policing of people of color. Cultures establish themselves through myth, propaganda, symbols and media. Media is a financially and politically lucrative field because it can control the public's perceptions.

Perkinson argues that the main "mod[i] operandi" of Western domination are the disciplines and the technologies of the eye ("Trancing Terror" 66). Grotesque, demonizing and simplistic

portrayals of people of color are continuously used against them. Examples include the stereotype of Black men as thugs, which goes back to the image of the dangerous Black brute from the Reconstruction era, and Black women as hoes or prostitutes, a continuation of the Jezebel image. Rose writes that informal institutional policies still affect Black communities today, especially Black youths, and media interpretations of and policies directed towards hip-hop marginalizes it (125). Consumers buy into reductive negative depictions and destructive representations of Blackness instead of viewing Black people as complex humans, and these depictions are reproduced constantly due to their profitability. The mainstream has “. . . cultural and commercial terrain that embrace[s] Black musical products and simultaneously denies their complexity and coherence. . .” (Rose 65). Rose adds that mainstream and commercial musical spaces also adhere to a traditional paradigm of Western classical music as the legitimate standard, and quickly demonizes or exoticizes any music that does not fit into those standards through media, critics, lawmakers, businesses and institutions (65). They maintain the erasure or misinterpretation of marginalized cultures. Thus, as Perkinson states, “Where racialization is largely a discourse of the eye, resistance by Blacks has had recourse to tactics of the tongue and echoes of the ear, working rhythm into alternative economies of identity and community” (*Shamanism* 43).

### **Repercussions: The Beating Back of Black Music**

*When you hear seats rumble/you will hear your conscience grumble” – Parliament  
Funkadelic’s “Mothership Connection”*

To resist constant physical, psychological and social terror, Black music became a powerful tool. Rose, Perkinson, Keyes, and Spencer all acknowledge that Black musical practices identify with “tricksterism” or duplicity, and associate rhythm with the diasporic

trickster god, the god of communication and the crossroads (ex. Br'er Rabbit and the Vodou Eshu-Elegbara). The crossroads are not only frequently mentioned in blues songs, such as Robert Johnson's "Crossroad Blues," but also in rap songs by such artists as LL Cool J, The X-Clan and Bone Thugs 'n' Harmony. In chapter four of *Black Noise*, Rose discusses how marginalized cultures express their discontent in disguised forms or "hidden transcripts" of language, dance, and music that act as communal bases of knowledge and cultural glue that holds these cultures together (99-100). She adds that these alternative cultural codes – including inverting stigmas – question power dynamics and point out "ideological fissures and points of contradiction" (100, 102). Perkinson, too, describes trickerism as a resistance to Western universal or absolutism, and the dichotomous either/or categories that are used to vilify people of color ("Trancing Terror" 71). Spencer agrees, calling it a "synchronous duplicity – the meshing together of seeming opposites" (59). The African trickster form in Black cultural music is a way to blur the boundaries between spirituality and sexuality, good and evil, and sacred and profane, amongst other categories, and its purpose is to create wholeness of self because people are in reality a mess of extremes or contradictions (Spencer 62-64, 72-73). The trickster also relates to W.E.B. Du Bois' "double consciousness," which is seeing yourself through your own eyes and seeing yourself through the eyes of another, or an outsider within a society, both a gift and curse to diasporic cultures. The outsider does not fit in, but yet can see the world for what it is, not just what others think. This jibes with Perkinson's description of the shaman as well (*Shamanism* 48-49). The trickster and shaman are able to negotiate between the artificial barriers of dualities or opposing forces. They lie at the crossroads – the points of impact.

In order to discuss the percussive symbolism in hip-hop as a form of resistance, the musical terminology of groove-based music needs to be analyzed from a trickster or crossroads

viewpoint. Since rhythm is associated with the trickster, the musical language reveals the political, social and spiritual importance of Black music styles (Spencer 33). Words, such as groove, rhythm, funk, syncopation, swing, rock and backbeat are not only symbolically significant and work as sort of shamanic incantations, but also represent tricksterism or duplicity. Many hip-hop songs have used these words. For instance, the rap group Poor Righteous Teachers features them in the song “Rock Dis Funky Joint.”

Besides its musical definition, groove is defined in Webster’s Dictionary as a channel or depression that was dug out, a fixed routine implying repetition and rhythm, a strike zone in baseball where a pitch is most easily hit, and an exciting experience (513). Essentially, groove is linked to percussiveness because it is produced or defined through percussive or rhythmic movement. It also ties percussiveness to religious ritual and spiritual ecstasy in the sense that the repetitive and rhythmic patterns of the music can create an exciting experience. In Black music, finding the groove is the rapturous or heavenly moment gained from the paradoxical “getting down” or digging deep. As Nietzsche says, “the tree that grows to heaven must send its roots to hell” (Harris 7). It connects back to the bass as something spiritual as well as the phrase “I’m down,” which can express either sadness or shared feelings. This can also explain the meaning behind the blues, a genre that originated from a suffering and struggle, but also expresses transcendence and a celebration of life despite and because of these travails. It could also explain the close musical connections between gospel music and secular styles like the blues, soul and R&B; like in many traditional diasporic cultures, the sacred and the profane are not as easily separable.

The genre of funk music, which heavily emphasized the bass and drums, also implies a contradiction. The word funk itself is defined as a pungent stench, a state of depression (the word

is also groove or rut) or earthliness (“getting down”) (Webster’s 472). However, Nelson claims that funk is equivalent to soul and “implies a certain attitude or consciousness.” She argues that even though funk implies bodily odors produced from sexual activity and heavy perspiration, the hard bop jazz of the mid-50s changed it to something more meaningful. Funk hits you hard, whether it is the smell, the emotional state, or the music, and the music is meant to get the attention of those who are considered “clean.” For example, in Public Enemy’s “Night of the Living Baseheads,” Chuck D asks, “How low can you go,” a statement with a multiple meanings: how much more destruction will the drug dealers bring to the community, how much are we willing to do for your community and how deeply we can we get down with the music. Like the tree, funk music grows out of the dirt.

The contradicting elements, which can be tied to musical elements of call-and-response, polyrhythm and polyphony, are seen in the other concepts of rhythm and syncopation. Rhythm and syncopation incorporate the call-and-response relationships between gain-loss, living-ghost, and consciousness-unconsciousness. Mowitt mentions that the Greek word “rhythmos” means a river or flow, but the Roman word “rhythmus” means a blockage or dam (24). How the two societies culturally defined the word reflects their perceptions: Greek culture was known as more arts-oriented, while Roman culture was much more military-oriented. However, David Penalosa states that in sub-Saharan cultures, no word for rhythm exists because the word is a contradiction in of itself and rhythm is embedded through life (21). Rhythm is both flow and blockage. The dynamic of having two contradictive forces existing together is normal. The jazz term “swing” is connected with the flow part of rhythm because in order to hit something you have to swing first; jazz swing thus connects to hip-hop flow. Swing is also related to groove because groove-based music is music that also swings.

While syncopation is an oscillating term as well, it is more suggestive of the living-ghost and consciousness-unconsciousness relationship. The word syncopation comes from the terms *syncopare* (Latin) and *syncope* (Greek), meaning to shorten or contract, fainting or loss of consciousness and loss of sounds from words. The first meaning essentially is associated with the contract-release or repetition-rupture relationship in musical rhythm because a repetitive pattern pulls things continuously back into the “loop,” whereas a release or rupture breaks away from the pattern. Contraction and release are percussive or rhythmic since contraction is pulling and release is letting go; implying together a swinging motion. On the other hand, the second and third meanings hint more at the association between “the other,” loss, the ghost and unconsciousness. Connecting these two back to the first meaning, a contraction or pattern always loses something because it does not include everything and there is always another choice of a pattern. Thus, it is a back and forth between the gain and loss, consciousness and unconsciousness, and the visible and the invisible. Mowitt describes it as the “intervallic structure of loss and recovery, of renewal” (32). So, one aspect of syncopation is going back to pick up or handle the loss; in other words, incorporating the gap formed. This is why syncopation is an accent on the “weaker beat” or an accent that highlights any other offbeat, like a rest, that are not easily apparent because of a rigid rhythmic structure.

Mowitt gives the example of the paradox of choice or free will to explain the rhythmic gain-loss relationship. Using Chuck Berry’s line from “Rock ‘n’ Roll” – “Just let me hear some of that rock'n'roll music/Any old way you choose it/ It's got a backbeat, you can't lose it/Any old time you use it” – he argues that no matter what the choice, whatever is lost is not actually gone. The backbeat or rhythm cannot be lost either way it is swung. Mowitt’s discussion also has to do with identity politics; the subject becomes itself by losing or excluding the other, but that does



not mean the other does not exist anymore (31). The subject's relationship still depends on the other. Independence comes from dependence; however, modernity has stressed ignoring that dependence in favor of universality. This swinging back and forth between two extremes is still portrayed in songs like Black's Sheep's "The Choice Is Yours," in which the chorus is "you can get with this or you can get with that." Another line, "If my train falls off the track/Pick it up," is suggestive of Mowitt's loss and recovery.

Syncopation also relates to the ghost and haunting because loss can deal with death, destruction and displacement. In terms of recovery, it can simultaneously be about speculation, fantasy, the unconsciousness and the dream. In this racialized and gendered society, white male bodies are considered the universal, normative representation of humanity, whereas women and people of color are the "others." Since his body is the universal objective body, the social processes that have created the "white male body" are displaced for a normalized rigid identity. In order to create and maintain the position of power, the "other" has to be excluded. On the other hand, marginalized groups have no choice but to acknowledge the "other" in order to survive, whereas the centered "other" is not obliged to do so even though the relationship is always there. The latter is allowed to be a fully materialized living being, but the former is slowly erased and made invisible, mainly to represent the projections of those in power. Thus, the marginalized groups are the ghosts who haunt society through their sonic "beating back." Syncopated music emphasizes the so-called "weak beat," or the gap, and in the other context, it can represent darkness, the ghost, and a state of unconsciousness, all of which were resisted in modern Enlightenment-based culture. It also emphasizes the oscillating relationship with the so-called "strong beat," the music, light, living and consciousness, all of which are stressed in European Enlightenment and tonal music. Syncopation is about recognizing all of the

interlocking rhythmic relationships between these, or as Gaunt calls them, “the tension between multiple rhythms” (30).

The symbolic aspects of syncopation tie in with the work of sociologist Avery Gordon and psychoanalyst Sabina Spielrein. Jungian psychoanalyst Ean Begg once said that “repressed gods . . . take their captors captive” (Small 420). The term “gods” can also refer to “spirits” or “ghosts.” In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Gordon mentions how the abstracts of racism and capitalism, by which Western culture established power through separation, exclusion and erasure, has tried to suppress the “ghosts” that haunt society. It is a modern Western cultural refusal to acknowledge that life, humanity and subjectivity are complicated, and that social matrixes and power dynamics create social conditions (3-4). She notes that the past, or cultural memory, is always haunting the present, and that lack of engagement with these “apparitions” has created some of the problems of modern society (viii). Thus, this is the reason Michael Eric Dyson calls rappers, “verbal shamans exorcising the demon of cultural amnesia” (74). Gordon even alludes to the seducing nature of the trickster stating, “cajoling is the nature of the ghost” to force us to reconsider the relations between “there and not there, past and present, and force and shape” (6). Essentially, Black musicians, including rappers, sonically haunt those with cultural amnesia who do not know or refuse to recognize the past and marginalized groups’ experiences. People within marginalized groups have come to signify “ghosts,” especially after darkness or Blackness came to represent evil, death and the unconscious (Perkinson *Shamanism* 1, 13-15, 34-37). One could say that Blackness or darkness is evil due to a fear of the ghost, death, the unconscious and “the other.” Gordon’s view is similar to the psychoanalyst Carl Jung’s idea of the shadow; the lack of acknowledgment of which has resulted, he believes, in much of the neurosis and mental illnesses.

One example of a diasporic genre that incorporates the ghost is dub. Cultural writer John Corbett analyzes dub as deriving from the patois word “duppy” (or “duppie”), which means “ghost” (20). Dub musician Lee “Scratch” Perry called dub “the ghost in me coming out” and other Jamaican artists, like Burning Spear and Joe Gibbs, have associated dub with ghosts in their records (Corbett 20-21, 129). Another cultural writer, Erik Davis, describes the ghostliness of dub music: “Despite the crisp attack of its drums and the heaviness of its bass, it swoops through empty space, spectral and disembodied.” Since the music is also a copy of another record, it acts as a doppelganger or ghostly twin. His depiction of dub also builds on the paradoxical nature of Black music—both spiritual (or ghostly) and grounded. The ghostliness of dub has clearly influenced hip-hop musical production; the influence can be heard in such songs as in Method Man and Mary J. Blige’s “You’re All I Need.” This song uses ghostly backing vocals with the rhythmic, repeated sample, “Lie together, cry together/I swear to God I hope we gonna fuckin' die together” from The Notorious B.I.G.'s “Me & My Bitch.” Other rap songs have similar random sounds that come in and fade out throughout the record.

Ironically, Jung himself had a ghost as well, Sabina Spielrein, who was also a psychoanalyst, a patient of Jung, and whose voice was silenced as a contributor to the field of psychoanalysis. Throughout Gordon’s book, Spielrein is featured as a major character. In one of her papers, “Destruction As a Cause of Being,” Spielrein argues that our sex drive, or need for creation, is balanced out by a death drive, or a need for destruction in order to have transformation. She states that in order to create new life or have rebirth, something has to be destroyed. Essentially, the formation of the subject and creativity needs the opposing forces of the sex drive and death drive. Her works reflects back on the concept of trickster, Spencer’s synchronous duplicity, and Mowitt’s description of syncopation as renewal. It also ties into the

creation of diasporic cultural music styles.

As cultural critic bell hooks argues we cannot understand Black pleasure or Black cultural productions without understanding the complicating factor of Black pain (158). Every Black folk and popular music genre has developed from some sort of destruction (rupture) or displacement, another definition of syncopation. Spirituals and ring shouts developed from the experience of slavery, and the blues developed from the failure of reconstruction and the onset of the Jim Crow South. Jazz, rhythm and blues, and, later, rock ‘n’ roll resulted from the Great Migration from rural to city life and having to confront the “urban shock,” and doo-wop and soul developed after World War II and the start of the Civil Rights Movement (Mowitt 118-124). Disco, funk and hip-hop arose at the beginning of the postmodern (identity politics) and post-industrial age. Other Black popular music, like reggae, mambo and salsa, were a result of slavery, colonialism and migration from one country to another (ex. salsa forming in New York City). In “At the Crossroads: Rap Music and Its African Nexus,” Keyes claims that the two factors that also gave rise to hip-hop were the commercialization of disco and the urban destruction in the Bronx caused by urban “renewal” projects (224-225). The two displaced musical and social communities forced a cultural reversioning, or “the foregrounding (both consciously and unconsciously) of African-centered concepts in response to cultural takeovers, ruptures, and appropriations” (Keyes 224).

Spielrein and Keyes’ view fits in well with Perkinson’s argument about the social ruptures forcing marginalized cultures to recreate themselves and their myths of origin (*Shamanism* 44). For those who are marginalized by a dominant culture, the reorganization of their own cultures was a way to combat the erasure. He, like Keyes, argues that these crises forced certain mythic images or symbols within a culture to be more visible and relevant (*Shamanism* 48). Spencer

describes it as prodigal in nature – the child who leaves home experiences the harshness of the world and then comes home – symbolizing a resurrection from waste or broken pieces (xvi-xvii). With the threat of loss and erasure, a greater need to hold onto cultural traditions or transform them within a new context in order to hold onto them becomes apparent. The cultural myth or ghost becomes more visible. Black music and dance are transformative shamanistic practices, or as James Snead writes, the equilibrium between repetition and the cut, acts as coverage against destructiveness of life (147, 149-150). According to Perkinson, the diaspora is continuously going through a shamanic initiation. The constant forced rupturing, death, dismemberment, and re-configuring of our cultures pushes us to manage the hardships through constant rhythmic conjure (a call-and-response action or interpellation) and transformative practices (Perkinson, *Shamanism* 58-60). With an entire people suffering through similar traumatic experiences, the formation of communities with collective shamanic awareness occurs, which acts as psycho-social balm (Perkinson, *Shamanism* 63). Syncopated music was a tool to deal with the displacement and destruction because the practice itself is a form of displacement or deviation from the “norm.”

Rose also describes hip-hop as a technological transformation or creativity growing out of destruction. She states that hip-hop transformed technological waste into sources of pleasure and power expanding the “digital imagination all over the world (22). The “. . . abandoned parts, people, and social institutions were welded and then spliced together, not only as sources of survival but as sources of pleasure” (Rose 22). Rose refers to the “crossroad between lack and desire”, which correlates with Perkinson’s concept of tricky antiphony –infinite desire of a finite body (Rose 35, Perkinson, *Shamanism* 175). Their description of oscillation or crossroads is also connected to Spencer’s description of “daily human intradependence and spiritual

extradependence” as a source of strength because the rhythmic back and forth builds up momentum for transformation (21). The innovation or new knowledge came from not only building up on tradition, but also building up upon the “accidents” or the unexpected (Snead 150-151).

One example of how rap music has referenced the rhythmic oscillation or the crossroads is found in De La Soul’s song “I Am I Be.” Similar to Muhammad Ali’s short poem *Me/We*, it is a lyrical oscillation between the stable subject and the dynamic being. Rollefson examined the song, referencing Alexander Weheliye’s “I Am I Be: The Subject of Sonic Afro-Modernity.” Both writers claim that the song represented the fluid bond between the “static subjectivity (“I Am”) and dynamic instability of being in the world or multiplicity of self (“I Be”)” (89). The being is just as it is, a part of the *communitas*, but when meaning is attributed to the being, it becomes a subject or individual. One of the female voices of the song says “I am shorty/I be 4’11.” Shorty is a label that defines her as a subject, but her being 4’ 11” could easily have multiple meanings. The same is applied to rapper Posdnous, who starts the song by saying his name and then telling his story. His name is the static label of his identity, but his being is the different changes over the course of his life. His story is as being with the events that occurred in his life, which could have happened to anyone, but saying his name makes him the individual subject of the story. Posdnous’ story also represents the crossroads between the physical and the spiritual as he recounts the moments of earthly life but of also wanting something more.

In the next verse rapped by Plug Two (Dave), his approach is similar to Posdnous. He even mentions the ghost in the line, “from a ghost in the heckling crowd.” The ghost, or spirit, in the crowd, which is also a community, is essentially haunting the rapper, the individual subject. The ghost and the crowd could be a projection of the rapper as well. It is subversive in the sense that

the multiplicity of self is hidden under the singular label. So, the song represents the connections between the cyclical relationships of consciousness-unconsciousness, the living-the ghost, and the subject-the society.

The omni-directional, polyrhythmic and ghostly power of syncopated sound has allowed the “beating back” of Black music. In Mowitt’s discussion of rock ‘n’ roll, he writes about the form of syncopation called the backbeat, switching the two parts of the word around (114). Like the previous words swing, rhythm, and syncopation, rocking and rolling were also rhythmic, implying a back and forth motion. The anger at the beatings of Black bodies is redirected to beating against the eardrum. Syncopated music was a tool of subversion to strike back and draw attention to the ignored through the accentuation of the “weaker” beats or gaps. The syncopation becomes, in essence, the “backtalk of . . . of the unheard” (Mowitt 39). But what happens when one is constantly broken and keeps beating back at those who will not listen? Something breaks.

### **The Breaking Point: Breakbeats, Booming Sound and Breaking Boundaries**

*“I am broken. I am broken open. Breaking is freeing. Broken is freedom. I am not broken, I am free.” – Alike<sup>17</sup>*

*“Breaking shit down to molecules. . . “ – Busta Rhymes’ “Woo Hah”*

*“A drum beats loudest when it’s close to bursting” – A Nigerian proverb*

Although the language of hip-hop uses words from other music genres, its own words reflect beating back as well. Besides the name hip-hop being a scat word, the word rap is defined in Webster’s dictionary as a “sharp blow or knock” (965). David Pleasant writes that, in Georgia where he grew up, the syncopated beats played on marching drums were called “rhaps” (“The Drum Is a Voice”). Rap can also be describes as a quick and forceful utterance, which is the style

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<sup>17</sup> The poem recited by the main character Alike in Dee Rees’ recent film *Pariah*.

of rapping in hip-hop; rapping mimics the forceful, syncopated sounds of the music. Rap can be defined as a response to a call or action, too, since it also means “a sharp rebuke or criticism,” as well as a responsibility or the consequences of an action and the act of causing something to come into being. For example, in Arethra Franklin’s song, “Until You Come Back to Me,” she sings, “I guess I’ll rap on your door/Tap on your window pane/I wanna tell you baby changes I’ve been goin’ through/Missin’ you - listen you.” Rapping is a form of getting her love’s attention and the lyrics tie back to the ghost because she is haunting him until he comes back to her. Thus, when the music has such a hard-hitting, urgent sound, its purpose is to break. But why? In a spiritual sense, rap is also “to snatch away or upward,” as in rapture, a state of ecstasy, or breaking out of one’s boundaries. All of these meanings coalesce into one word rap. Its emphasis on a “sharp blow” relates to the significance of the break.

Throughout several Black music genres, the musical section of the break is a significant part of the record in which the main rhythm or time is interrupted. The word break itself has a variety of distinct yet related meanings in the English language that are important to this discussion. A break is defined as time off from a regular schedule or routine (an interruption), or a fracture, rupture, gap or separation. Additionally, it could be the introduction of something into a new space or an emergence (as in breaking something in, breaking new ground, or breaking the ice), an advancement (breakthrough), an illegal action (breaking into a house, broke the law), an end of an agreement or relationship (broke a promise), description of a damaged object, pain or punishment (break one’s back), or the temporary loss of mental stability (breakdown). Other meanings include an escape or exceeding of limits (“broke away”), a state of loss or poverty (“I’m broke”), or sadness (“broken man”), a sudden change, a chance or opportunity (“give me a break”), decoding or deciphering, balancing (break even), or an orgasm (“break you off”)



(Webster's 140). According to the documentary *The Freshest Kids*, in hip-hop terminology, breaking also means starting trouble, invading one's space or an insult ("my mom's breaking on me") and excessiveness, exaggeration, or abnormality as well as its use in the naming of breakbeats, breakdancers, b-boys and b-girls. Breaking is a symbolically significant word, whether it is for good or for bad. All of these meanings of break imply "breaking in" or "breaking out" of something, but also are indicative of the diasporic spiritual and cultural philosophies and musical concepts.

The incorporation of the break in hip-hop is a continuation of the "stitching in" of the gap in African Diasporic culture but also a specific response to the ruptures of post-industrialism, postmodernity and physical displacement from urban renewal projects in the Bronx. Perkinson describes the break as an "inculcating trance-connection to ancestry, opening the living community to a 'present possession' by the past" (*Shamanism* 103). Basically, he describes possession as an opening or a form of "breaking out" of the difficulties of the present moment and breaking into, as Royster called it, the cosmic oneness, which is outside time and space. The musical break and Perkinson's description ties in with a well-known drumming pattern in Haitian Vodou ritual called *kase*, which comes from the French word *casser*, meaning "to break." According to Lois Wilcken, the *kase* is known for "dramatically ruptur[ing] the flow of the drum ensemble's music" by contrasting or opposing the main pattern. It is drum break that is associated with spirit possession as well (Wilcken).

Due to its spiritual power, the break is also socially and politically powerful. Spencer acknowledges that one power of Black music is how it thrives in the in-between spaces (or crossroad places) of "repressively 'structured' societies," and that it breaks in from within, above, below and at the sides allowing the communal spirit to enter (20). Perkinson also

confirms the social importance of the breaks or cracks, stating how creating them is a way to “relativiz[e] evil by interrupting it, fracturing its lines of control” (*Shamanism* 103). The beating back of Black music styles has depended on the “‘cracks’ of the system of domination” (Perkinson, *Shamanism* 43). To put it another way, subversion relies on the loopholes that show that these systems are not bulletproof, and reveals contradictions and hypocrisies within dominant societies. For example, sampling subverted, or broke, the strict law of copyright through the loophole of breaking down a record to bits and pieces, which became difficult to copyright. Moreover, the break allows for multiple identities and sounds to exist, as in broken or dismembered pieces coming together in a collage-type work. The gap in West African music styles, spirit possession in Afro-diasporic religions, the break or stop-time in genres like jazz, blues, funk and disco, are all examples of the break as a way to allow other identities to come in and the intersection where multiple identities impact one another as well as moving in and out of each other’s spaces. The dynamisms and changes of the culture come from these points of impact.

Breaking is noteworthy in the rise of hip-hop for a number of reasons, such as those previously mentions, but also in its relation to the postmodern and post-industrial age. Breakbeats were influenced by the musical breaks in funk and disco, genres that were popular during the early postmodern era. According to Jorge “Popmaster Fable” Pabon, this was a part of the music that dancers liked the most because that is where the beats were the “most aggressive and hard-driving,” so DJs took the breaks and put them in loops (19). Second, breaking became part of the postmodern self-destructiveness in America. As the disco band Trammpps sang in “Disco Inferno,” “I couldn't get enough, so I had to self-destruct” or later as Kool G Rap says in “Kool is Back”, “designated to self-destruct,” the era of postmodernity and post-industrialism

has self-destruction haunting it. Certain notions of how American and modern society worked began to “break down.” In modernity, the individual identity, originality and authorship were the main ideals, but in postmodernity, identity became fractured. Moreover, morals and sanitized ideals from the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Modernism, the Victorian era, and the ‘50s Eisenhower era were called into question. Cultural theorists, such as Jacques Derrida (deconstructionism” and “post-structuralism”), questioned Enlightenment notions of rationalism and universality. Additionally, this point in time was after the peak of the movements of the ‘60s and early ‘70s – the Civil Rights movement, anti-Vietnam movement and Black Power movements. Post-industrialism resulted in the collapsing of America’s manufacturing base, and the economy was changing to more of a service and consumer-oriented base. The outcome was a loss of millions of factory jobs on which many poor and working class people relied. In New York City, urban renewal programs, under the infamous urban designer Robert Moses, would actually wreak havoc on lower income communities, especially in the Bronx. Moses work on constructing the Cross-Bronx Expressway forced many of these families to move out (Keyes 7). So, as these communities were broken in on, they decided in turn to break in on dominant society.

For the hip-hop community, “breaking” meant breaking through the high-class American denial of death or self-destruction that was happening in urban neighborhoods. The American upper class has traditionally quarantined others to protect themselves, either through lawful segregation like Jim Crow in the past or through the current economic segregation of ghettos (Perkinson, *Shamanism* 115). Segregation could also be considered a form of a break, but a break from the “other.” Through institutionalized segregation, the middle and upper class have avoided conditions of those who have witnessed early demises through poverty, violence, environmental

destruction, drugs, and cultural and social death, and have sanitized their own images through that exclusion. Perkinson acknowledges that death is part of “nature,” which modernity has wanted to control and that the present metropolitan (tourist-oriented, commodity and manufactured urban life) post-modernity tries to hide or delay (*Shamanism* 120). However, true separation from those realities in life is not possible. This could be a reason that upper class Americans are often shocked or unprepared for ruptures to their bubbled world (for example, the shock when a murder or crime happens in a gated or suburban community), while the constant shock or trauma of a racialized American system has forced people of color, especially poor people of color, to handle the “hard knocks.” The people who live in places of massive urban and environmental decay have become the “specters of death” or social ghosts that, as both Perkinson and Gordon says, still haunt the society (Perkinson, *Shamanism* 120). Since, their “dark bodies” represent bodies of death, these marginalized groups are easy markers to ignore discussions of destruction (cultural, social, bodily, etc.). These “ghosts” are still limited by the past modern racial constructions despite post-modern ideals. One of hip-hop music’s purposes was to sonically penetrate the territory of those who live sheltered lives. Breaking is the extreme of the backbeat or “beating back,” which is why hip-hop music is heavily syncopated; it reflects centuries of beating on the deaf ear of the upper class. It is “breaking open of a sealed space” where things can be transformed (Perkinson, *Shamanism* 135).

Kurtis Blow’s 1980 hit “The Breaks” is a play on the multiple meanings of the break. Starting off with “Clap your hands everybody/ if you got what it takes,” Blow presents a challenge or a call, common in Black culture, asking if listeners can handle the ruptures or the struggle and expecting a response. He then proceeds by listing the different uses of breaks (or brakes): the brakes in vehicles, breaks that allow people to become famous, “breaks to win and

breaks to lose,” heartbreak, money trouble (broke), mental breakdowns, and obviously the breakbeats that make people move. Blow also calls his audience to action by telling the audience to “Break it up, break it up, break it up! Break down!” as a form of resistance. Every time he says those words, there is a solo section (the breakdowns) that follows with the timbales player playing a fast, hard-hitting rhythm to further establish a hitting back.

Breaking is also reflected in the war-like elements of hip-hop music. The threat of war – especially nuclear war – destroying the world has loomed constantly through the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hip-hop incorporates the threat of world death by violence and war into the music, or as Perkinson says, removes the mask to reveal a cracked skull. Hip-hop “canaliz[es] the impulse to kill” or, as Spencer writes, it is as if “razor blades on throats can be heard in the undertones” (Perkinson, *Shamanism* 130). According to Perkinson, it is the shamanic absorption of death by performing the ugliness of death or re-appropriating death terms (*Shamanism* 133). Possibly stemming from funk musician George Clinton’s tendency of labeling the first beat in a measure “the funk bomb,” rappers have incorporated the usage of the “bomb” or explosions in the vernacular. In the documentary *Style Wars*, “bombing the system” is used to describe drawing graffiti on subway cars or to attack the system. The nicknames of the portable cassette player were the “boombox” and “ghetto blasters.” Often rappers will refer to themselves as “lyrical assassins,” and “mind terrorists” (for example in Public Enemy’s “Don’t Believe the Hype and “Mind Terrorists”). Two of the lyrics in Public Enemy’s “Welcome to the Terrordome,” “Droppin’ a bomb/ Brain game intellectual Vietnam,” exemplify the war and terror of the age. The album, from which this song comes from, *Fear of a Black Planet*, and the title song, speak to the fear of racial mixing and contact that has long been part of the history of the United States, by questioning the historical concept of “purity.” In another Public Enemy album, *It Takes a*

*Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, several song titles, like “Countdown to Armageddon,” “Prophets of Rage,” “Louder Than a Bomb,” predict the destruction of the American system through its own marginalized destruction.

LL Cool J’s song “Mama Says Knock You Out,” also exemplifies the connection between beating back and the bomb, destruction and fragmentation. The song itself was LL Cool J’s response to critics who says his career was waning. Beginning with the line, “don’t call it a comeback,” which in a subtle way could be an association with the backbeat, LL Cool J raps several lines on explosiveness, beating and breaking:

Listen to the bass go Boom

Explosion . . .

Wreckin’ shop

When I drop these lyrics that will make you call the cops . . .

Sliced and diced. . .

Watch me bash this beat like a skull . . .

And when I pull out my jammy [slang for punch]

Get ready cause it might go

Blaaw . . .

I’m blasting . . .

Rippin’, killin’

Diggin’ and drillin’ a hole . . .

Damage, destruction, terror, and mayhem . . .

I think I’m gonna bomb a town (get down!!).

Like Kurtis Blow, LL Cool J also mentions the breakdown, which is probably a mix between

breaking and “getting down.” Additionally, LL Cool J references previous genres and gives spiritual and social commentary. He raps that God gave him the “strength to rock hard,” again linking to the importance of the rock in Black music, and equating God with rhythm. In another line, he says “Old English filled my mind/ And I came up with a funky rhyme,” hinting at the sample of James Brown’s “Funky Drummer” in the song and commenting on how his rhythmic rapping spices up Standard English. A description of himself as the “maniac psycho” is reminiscent of Perkinson’s concept of the manic or ecstatic mind (*Shamanism* 149). Last, he mentions shadowboxing, which is an exercise that a boxer practices alone, as if with a shadow or ghost, as well as shuffling of the feet, associating itself with the beating back, the ghost and dance in Black musical culture. Although the song might easily be misinterpreted, it is not about physical violence, but instead about a figurative musical and sonic violence. LL Cool J wants to knock the critics out with his rhymes and lyrical power.

Hip-hop’s musical production also reflects the sensibility of breaking. Hip-hop producers often aim at breaking traditional norms and limits of studio production. Rose mentions that producers like Hank Shocklee from Public Enemy’s *The Bomb Squad* will go outside of the “normal” zone of studio sound meters and machines, which is called the red zone. The sound distortion crackles, creating snapping or popping noises, like in The Pharcyde’s song “Passin’ Me By.” Samplers are also detuned to emphasize lower frequencies (the bass), amplify volume and to make denser sounds. These reflect Black cultural priorities, which tend to “keep the drums to the front and boost the bass” as well as incorporate percussive heterogeneous sounds (Rose 75). The 808 drum can also be detuned to produce low frequency hums and provide what it called the “fat sonic boom” (Rose 75). As rapper Kurtis Blow has said, the point is to “break car speakers and house speakers and boom boxes,” and he even mentions that this is a sensibility of

African music (Rose 75). The new studio mixing also caused what is known as bass drum leakage from the 808 drum; here, the sound of the bass drum would impose itself into empty spaces on other tracks or take up more space than normal. As a result, the music tracks were not clearly separated and seemed to sound more chaotic (Rose 76). By pushing these priorities to the front in production, rap broke traditional recording priorities, which often placed the drums in the back so they would not stand out. Hip-hop producers employed shamanic breaking of constricting boundaries through the use of percussive digital technology.

Before the next section on percussiveness, and gender and sexuality, it is important to mention the trickery of sex. Since the trickster is the god of seduction, it is also the god of sex because sex involves breaking open a space. Mowitt also discusses sexuality as a breaking in or breaking out. He references Freud's work on sexuality called "A Child Is Being Beaten," and the psycho-socio-historical perception of sexuality as a violation or violence (a sin) in the Judeo-Christian-based Western modern culture. Mowitt additionally connects sexuality to sound in terms of "beating fantasies" (sadism and masochism) and corporal punishment (138-141).

Whether he knew it or not, Mowitt's reference of Freud and beating is linked to Spielrein, who had anxiety issues as a result of her sexual arousal from her father spanking her. Through her father's violation, she became sexually excited even by the sound of beating. Avery Gordon's discussion on Spielrein in *Ghostly Matters* includes Spielrein talking about how she often felt as if some kind of force was trying to take her away; she had fantasies of animals and other beings trying to do her harm and drag her into the darkness of death as if she was involved in spirit possession (36). Also, these different men, from her father to Jung (with whom she supposedly had an affair) haunted her and her work. It is no wonder that her essay reflects a trickster or crossroads theme. Spiritual and sexual excitement or ecstasy is produced from a



crossroad between pleasure and pain; there is a feeling of transcendence and being one with another, as well as a sense of danger because they entail vulnerability (Mowitt 144). Sexuality is “the other” breaking in or out of one’s space. It is one of the reasons why an orgasm in French translates to “a little death,” and why it is one of the main themes and another meaning of the musical terms mentioned earlier. The “mack” or “pimp” in hip-hop goes back to the seduction of the trickster (Perkinson *Shamanism* 152-156). No wonder prostitution is called “tricks.”

### **B-Girls: Gender, Sexuality and Percussion**

*“A Drum Is a Woman” – Duke Ellington*

Percussion as a tool of resistance cannot be completely discussed without addressing gender and queer studies, since they represent the sexual “other.” Since diasporic music and cultures incorporate social doubleness, in-betweenness, and multiplicity of identity, women as well as those who do not fit into the standard rigid gender roles must be included. Perkinson describes the shaman figure as “androgynous” (*Shamanism* 48). However, within racialized patriarchal societies, these groups do not receive as much attention for their musical and cultural contributions. Although women and queers have been influential in the area of percussion, spaces for feminine and queer identities are either marginalized or erased. This is a result of a denial of the feminine aspect as well as a denial of dual or multiple natures, which is what queerness represents.

Several of our current societies declare that drummers are expected to be heterosexual and male. Although ancient and some contemporary cultures have had women participate in drumming practices, they are largely excluded (Wilson 97-104, Redmond 1-10). Additionally, whereas within the diaspora women have played different types of percussion, such as the

tambourine, bells, gourd rattles, and were drummers like Big Mama Thornton, Sheila E. and Cindy Blackmon, women and percussion are not perceived as normal. Moreover, women, such as Ella Fitzgerald, popularized other percussive techniques, like scatting. Female percussive participation can also be seen in the Black Church, the ring shout, voodoo rituals among other musical performances. However, men are expected to be drummers or musical producers, while women are expected to be dancers or back-up singers. As the above Duke Ellington album title suggests, the drum is a symbol of the woman, probably because of its womb-like shape, but in our gendered culture, women are not allowed to possess their own bodies or possess male body through the beat. Perceiving women as only dancers reduces women to bodies for the objectification or “beating” by men, and ignores their contributions to music, including hip-hop.

In her book, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning Ropes From Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*, Kyra Gaunt claims that girl handclap games and double-dutch songs have influenced as well as share many of the rhythmic and percussive practices of male-dominated Black popular music, such as musical borrowing and mixing (92). These girls are not given credit for producing many of the hip-hop beats and melodies through their percussive bodies. Although female rappers have had some visibility, hand-clap performers and double-dutchers as well as female producers are not promoted as much as male producers. This goes back to the cultural expectations of men as the beat-makers and women as dancers. Since the body is a percussive instrument as well, female participation in beat-making needs to be considered. Dance and music are interconnected in Black musical performance; more attention should be given to musical experience and involvement of women in percussive music-making (25).

Gaunt adds that the stereotype of women as the “weaker sex” has influenced the perceptions of women participating in rapping, breakdancing and producing hip-hop music, even

though gender and sexuality are not essential factors in the ability to perform them (111-112). Double-dutch, as well as many dancehall and hip-hop dances that women perform, takes just as much physical strength as breakdancing. She argues that negative perceptions of Black women also create a more complicated situation because they are often portrayed as “masculine” or more “aggressive” than other women (112). Black women have thus had to negotiate the in-between space between perceptions of them as an inferior sex in a sexist culture, and not being feminine enough in a racist culture. Female rappers have had to either be hyper-sexualized or play into stereotypical feminine roles while simultaneously being aggressive, like Lil’ Kim, or perform more as androgynous figures, like MC Lyte and Missy Elliot. In some ways, female rappers have been able to portray gender dualities in their performances, especially as hip-hop became more “gangster” oriented, much more easily than male performers.

Many women have created and fought for spaces and voices in the mainstream male-dominated hip-hop music. Soul singer and record label owner Sylvia Robinson was known for jumpstarting the careers of The Sugarhill Gang and Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five (Chang 200). Roxanne Shante was known for her rap battle with UTFO rap group in her answer record “Roxanne’s Revenge.” Rappers like MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, and Salt ‘n’ Pepa became popular in the music industry while remaining true to themselves. Some rappers, like Missy Elliot, also became producers. Female rappers have used percussiveness, too, as a tool of resistance and to assert their own power against sexism and misogyny inside and outside of their own communities.

For example, Queen Latifah has several songs in which she declares her strength as a woman and a rapper. In “Nature of a Sister,” she raps about how she rises from “the bidi-bidi-bottom of the basement,” using the mouth-drumming technique, and hinting at the significance

of the bass. Latifah frequently mentions the bass as “pounding” or affecting her in other songs as well. She adds in “Nature of a Sista” that she has an “army busting through the enemy’s walls” and she “booms like a speaker,” suggesting her power. Additionally, throughout the song, she calls to listeners – “if you’re down, take a pound and put your fist up/ for the sound of the nature of a sista” – and other female rappers, like Salt ‘n’ Pepa. In another song, “Wrath of My Madness,” she speaks about how her “madness” is impacting the listeners. Through spiritual references, like God giving her the ability to rhyme and having the spirit, she is asking people to “dive into wrath of [her] madness,” her energy turning “people’s mind’s to gladness.” Latifah also demands men to respect her as royalty in the song. Her “Queen of Royal Badness” has several lines about percussiveness, including “hit you,” and “knock them out the box.” Moreover, she mentions that “the party is jam-packed” and throwing jams (punches). The musical term jam or jamming, originating in jazz (jam session), is percussive, meaning a group of people gathering together in an improvised manner to produce new music or dances. It is much like how jam is produced, smashing and mixing different ingredients to make sweet food, as well as fighting back, stopping something by force.

Female rappers also critique men outside of their community. Salt ‘n’ Pepa are known for their female empowerment lyrics, such as in “Beauty and the Beat,” where they mention that Spinderella is a female DJ at the end. Their video for “Twist and Shout” is a strong example of Black women subverting the white patriarchal system. The three women in the video perform as a rock band (Salt ‘n’ Pepa on guitars and Spinderella on drums), a group that has generally been perceived as a space dominated by heterosexual white males. Sampling the song “Twist and Shout,” the group reverses the gender roles (which they are known for doing) in the song and video by telling the men to dance. Another song, “Beauty and the Beat,” also highlights female

contribution to percussion, such as in the line, “Spinderella's not a fella/But a girl DJ!”

Queerness is more nuanced because it is not as instantly visual as the other embodiments, but more performative. In certain diasporic religions, queerness is more accepted through the goddesses, like the Vodou Oshun and Ezurlie Dantor, the trickster Vodou goddess Afrekete, and androgynous creator gods, like the Dahomean Mawu-Lisa (Monroe, Fetus, Louis 65, Provost 45-46). However, the dominant culture we live in stifles gender-dual or gender-multiple natures. Although hip-hop was greatly influenced by disco, a genre dominated by gay Black and Latino men, the queer presence has been ignored in hip-hop. As bisexual rapper Juba Kalamka says these “purity mythologies” combined with the need to fight off a “vampiric consumer culture,” leaves women and queer people out of the picture (Chang 200). Additionally, the erasure of these groups has led to a hypermasculine culture, especially after the rise of “gangsta” rap, or a need to be “hard” as a protection, but also a yearning for the power of the “hardness” of white masculinity.

Groups like A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul, and Arrested Development were often labeled as “soft” rap because they tend not to conform to the hyper-masculine or stereotypical portrayals of Black men. Moreover, their music tended to be more laid-back and not as aggressive percussively, taking most samples from jazz percussionists. The label of “softness” makes underlying references to homosexuality, or implies that these groups do not fit into stereotypical gender roles. Softness also is a fear of feminine energy and possession because of the perception that feminine energy equals powerlessness. However, in gangsta-pimp culture, popularized by rappers like Snoop Dogg and Ice-T, the stress on flamboyant clothing and hairdressing could be viewed as queer, which makes it ironic; but they evade it through the degrading of women and queer people. Heterosexual men are expected to be “hard” and cannot

be impacted, which is why they are shocked when they are “tricked” or seduced (ex. calling women sluts or gold-diggers), but women and queer people are perceived as more emotional, and therefore easily impacted. So, to be completely socially and spiritually healthy, we need to incorporate these identities as well into the study of music and percussiveness.

## One Nation Under a Groove<sup>18</sup>: Percussive Field and Percussive Politics

*“The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free.” – Audre Lorde<sup>19</sup>*

*“When we look at modern man, we have to face the fact that modern man suffers from a kind of poverty of the spirit, which stands in glaring contrast with a scientific and technological abundance. We’ve learned to fly the air as birds, we’ve learned to swim the seas as fish, yet we haven’t learned to walk the Earth as brothers and sisters.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>20</sup>*

Although this thesis is primarily about early hip-hop, the percussiveness approach can still be applied to the contemporary scene. After the early days of hip-hop in New York, and the spreading of the genre nationally and internationally, other subgenres formed with similar percussive and spiritual sensibilities. Examples include the hyphy and krump cultures on the West Coast and the crunk culture in the South that developed in the 1990s and 2000s. In the hyphy hip-hop movement, which takes its name from the shortened form of the word hyperactive, the music continues to emphasize bass-heavy, pounding beats (Rosen). The movement’s overtly energetic dance style, turfing, is a direct descendent of break-dancing, especially the pop and lock and miming actions, which originally developed on the West coast (Zamora, Pabon 18-19). The name turfing also implies a stress on claiming a space for oneself that is significant for people who are often displaced. Two of hyphy’s popular phrasings are “ghost ride the whip” and “go dumb” (or “get stupid”), the former connecting to the notion of the ghost in these cultures and the latter, possibly suggesting slipping into the unconscious or the manic state of ecstasy (also implied in the name hyphy). “Get stupid,” which already was a

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<sup>18</sup> The title is from the song by Parliament Funkadelic.

<sup>19</sup> See page 38 of poet Audre Lorde’s essay, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury.”

<sup>20</sup> From King’s speech, “A Proper Sense of Priorities,” which was delivered in Washington, D.C. on February 6, 1968.

common phrase in hip-hop<sup>21</sup>, and hyphy are also possible commentaries on the so-called “rational” modernity, the social constructions of mental illness or aptitude, and the history of racist scientific and educational systems. These phrases question normality and rationality, two concepts that were popularized during the Enlightenment age, a period that coincided with slavery and the colonial era. Krumping, which developed from the clown-dancing movement, is slightly different than hyphy in that it is more aggressive, fast-paced and less stylized, but still carries the same percussiveness, ecstatic movement and a sense of social spirituality (*Rize*). One scene in the 2005 film *Rize* on clowning and krumping culture shows the connection between percussion, spirit possession and dance in krumping; a female dancer passes out from the intensity of the dance and after she does, another dancer says, “she just struck” or reached her breakthrough. Throughout the documentary are similar references to diasporic spirituality.

The Southern hip-hop music genre, crunk also relies heavily on hard-hitting bass and drum beats as well as short, repetitive chants (Jones). The word crunk implies getting hyped or excited, and is also supposedly a past tense version of crank, as in Souljah Boy’s “Crank That.” Thinking in terms of a crank and its function as a device that moves in a circular motion in order to build momentum or set an object into motion, much like repetition in Black music, the use of word is appropriate. Moreover, if it is thought in terms of a crank-operated Jack in the Box playing for instance, “Pop Goes the Weasel,” one can see the connection to the past-tense crunk meaning a rupture or rapture. Both the pop and the doll jumping out the box are ruptures. Rapper David Banner describes crunk as, “being part of what religious people call the Holy Ghost . . . It’s just a spirit you have. People go to church to find the Holy Ghost. We go to the clubs to find the crunk. It’s like a ball of fire in your spirit” (Jones).

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<sup>21</sup> For example, in Digital Underground’s “Humpty Dance,” one of the lines is “I get stupid, I shoot an arrow like Cupid.” In another song, Rob Base and DJ EZ Rock’s “It Takes Two,” Rob Base raps, “Because I get stupid, I mean outrageous.”



Even in a secular space, the sense of “spirit” because of the bass and drum rhythms are present. The trajectory throughout culture is still there, and it is always meant both a celebration, and a challenging act of resistance. As rapper Killer Mike says: “The best thing about crunk music right now is that it still scares people . . . That's what good American music has always done. It's what Little Richard did. It's what Parliament-Funkadelic did. It's what early rap did” (Jones). Mike basically ties newer hip-hop genres to previous Black cultural music genres of while making clear that the purpose of the styles is to “beat back” against the establishment. This is evident in the Souljah Boy song, “Speakers Going Hammer.” He describes how the speakers are so loud that they are going “bammer” like a hammer and that his speakers are “out of space like E.T.,” a science fiction version of the transcendence. The song also subtly makes a remark about police; as Souljah Boy says they “watch him like TV.” The video for the song clearly represents Souljah breaking in on White upper class territory both physically and sonically. Rapper and singer T-pain expressed similar sentiments in his remix of the same song.

This percussive approach is apparent through production work by Timbaland, The Neptunes and Kanye West, in the lyrics of MC Hammer’s “U Can’t Touch This”<sup>22</sup> and Ciara’s “1, 2 Step,”<sup>23</sup> in Hammer’s name, and rapper Lil’ B’s nickname of the “Based God,” and in multiple Southern rap dance crazes. Despite the formal cultural differences of the African diaspora, the similar base undergirds them. This is why a standard criterion of the percussive approach should be applied in the analysis of diasporic music and philosophy because percussiveness plays a major role in their social construction. This is not to say that there are no legitimate criticisms of and negative aspects within diasporic cultures, but without looking at

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<sup>22</sup> Some of the lyrics include, “My-my-my-my music hits me so hard/ makes me say oh my Lord/ Thank you for blessing me with a mind to rhyme and two hyped feet,” and “And this is a beat uh you can't touch.”

<sup>23</sup> The first line is “This beat is/automatic/supersonic/hypnotic/funky fresh/work my body/so melodic/this beat here goes right through my chest.”

them from an insider and integrated viewpoint, their complex, rich musical contributions will always be largely misunderstood, and criticisms of them will not be in-depth or nuanced. I am thus calling for a holistic approach concentrating on the interpenetrations and intersections of the personal, the social, the psychological and the spiritual. This approach can be placed within Mowitt's percussive field. He says, "the percussive field is designed to pose questions both to music and its study . . . In questioning the study of music, the percussive field seeks to engage disciplinary reason and the social relations it organizes" (3). Spencer broadens the approach to include theological or spiritual aspects because, according to him, religion is not separate from culture but is a source and a way to understand a culture (35-40).

Although this paper focused on the African diaspora, the approach can be applied to any genre. Other cultures have used percussion, percussive practices and percussive symbolism, which is evident in the hybridity of the African diaspora's own cultures that takes influences from those other cultures. Additionally, studying the music and religion is a gateway to understanding various cultures' values and percussiveness is one frame to look at them. For example, Mowitt discusses the rigidity of modern European drum practices in military marches; he writes that the drum represented the voice of the commander and the strict formations that the drum had to follow. He argues that this was reflected in the cultural docility of the European body (91-93). It could also extend to the strict following of the conductor in the classical orchestra and possibly led to an over-emphasis on individuality in modern Western culture.

One of Spencer's main arguments is about the separatist culture of the West. In the Enlightenment Age, sacred was divided from the secular and cultural, and spirituality was distinct from sexuality. The separation of Christianity from pagan or ancient religions and the past from the present and future can also be added. Since Enlightenment, emphasis was placed

overtly on an objective, rational, scientific and linear approach to culture at the expense of myth, story, spirituality, and the manic-mind; this devalued people of color and women. The West may be scientifically and technologically strong, and determined to attain absolute knowledge, but its methods excluded a sense of spirituality and empathic ethics. The suppression of spirituality, mystery, community, multiple identity, sex, madness, abnormality, death and darkness has arguably led to some of the major problems of modern culture. The society formed was not natural, but a result of habitual or ritualistic patterns that can only be changed through a “breaking away” by force from those patterns to start new ones. The way it is (I Am) does not mean that is the way it has to be (I Be). Thus, the percussive approach is also, as Rollerfson and jazz musician Sun Ra both called, a “Myth-Science Approach” to culture, where we find the equilibrium and the connections between the dualities (3-5). It is a way to examine, understand and even question our cultures.

Reclaiming percussiveness is one way to explore the wholeness of our lives. As Pleasant says in “The Drum Is a Voice,” percussion’s spiritual depth is rarely explored to its full capacity; the “drums deserve no less of an opportunity to explore the full scope of sonic possibility; and through that exploration discover a breadth of spiritual modalities that free it from the constraints of expectation.” Percussion is not only about dancing, or adding color or support to the music, but its uses and practices reflect cultural and spiritual philosophies. The percussive approach brings together identity, the body, the social world, spirituality and political movement into one space of discussion; this makes sense because these things all reflect the dynamic interactions or tensions between multiple aspects of life as humans. So much of our language and perceptions are influenced by percussiveness. Our world is structured not just by things seen, but also by things unseen, or what one may call “spirit.” Sound, touch and motion connect us to worlds

outside of our own understanding and consciousness. Pleasant makes the call for a percussive approach clear:

Now a splendid opportunity exists to reconnect to that voice without shame, self-consciousness, or doubt. Today is the day to reclaim the drum. The popular phenomenon of rap has reintroduced the drum-to-voice, voice-to-drum dynamic. Possibilities are now open for the talking-drum sensibility to reemerge coupled with an African-American aesthetic history that is free of vagueness, one that makes clear connections from juba to master juba to the Charleston; shoud to shout to spirituals; pattin' to hand jive to steppin'; maroon to Seminole to stomp dancing; African to Gullah to Geechee to Black English/Ebonics to jazz. The potential for growth is beyond the artificial scope of name brand corporate history. It embraces the true face of American culture, along with the social, political, and economic conditions in which that history occurred ("The Drum Is a Voice").

The true spirit of hip-hop, as well as other cultures of the African diaspora, has been resiliency, the ability to bounce back against the terror of oppressive societies, and the ability to see something that may have seemed like nothing to others and transform it into something better. It is the rhythm that mobilizes us toward action and change, and an attempt at finding unity despite the differences, the cracks and the contradictions. As Pleasant said, we are the drumfolk. It is time to take back the drum.

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