"Music can really, really raise you" (Pete Rock)
Hip-Hop as a (Creative) Space for Education

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Abstract *This chapter pursues a practical approach to the question of how Hip-Hop culture can be implemented in educational contexts. The preparation of a Hip-Hop seminar at the University of Cologne for future music teachers led me directly to create a new song that deals with my own cultural identity built up around Hip-Hop. Hip-Hop culture's educational potential lies in its artistic practice. By providing insight into the creative process of sample-based beatmaking and songwriting as intertextual methods, I present Hip-Hop as a playful tool of knowledge acquisition and transformation. The concept of intertextuality employed in this chapter entails an approximation of Hip-Hop's musical practice and literary theory's hermeneutic methods.*

It's All Clear, at Last: Preparations for a Hip-Hop Seminar and the Genesis of a Rap Song

> A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 2003: 392)

> We were like scavengers, going through the garbage bin and finding whatever we could from our old dusty records. (Hank Shocklee quoted from Nielson 2013)

One thing shared by the angel of history described by Walter Benjamin and the first producers of sample-based hip hop beats is an interest in things that have been left behind. There is a difference, though. The angel of history is driven back, against his will, by the wind of progress and can no longer piece together the wreckage of the past. The first beat producers of Hip-Hop in the early 1980s, by contrast, defied aesthetic norms and the dictates of the culture industry in devoting themselves to a form of artistic construction that both deconstructs the past and reconstructs the future. They thus defied a linear notion of progress in which the supposedly original achievements of the past are to be surpassed through constant innovation, and in which an all-too-naive overvaluing of originality as a quality of art might in fact only push the past out of sight. Their artistic endeavors thus both pointed back to the past and forward into an artistic future with which the cultural mainstream is still grappling today. In the following, I would like to illuminate, at least in part, the creative, aesthetic potential for knowledge transfer this has generated by turning to my own artistic perspective.

During the summer semester of 2021, the Cologne Hip Hop Institute invited me to lead a seminar for music educators at the University of Cologne on the topic of *knowledge transfer as an aesthetic strategy in hop-hop.* My brief from the institute was to focus on knowledge transfer, but otherwise I was given free reign. The focus immediately made sense to me, from both sides. The importance of knowledge transfer for pedagogical work surely needs no explanation. Understanding the ways in which it is so crucial to the artistic practice of Hip-Hop, however, likely requires more context. As I was thinking about where I should start in historically and sociologically reconstructing the emergence of Hip-Hop, with the aim of showing when, how, and why processes of knowledge transmission are essential to the tradition, it so happened that I was also in the middle of familiarizing myself with the workings of a device that was new to me, though it had been around for a while. This was the sampler with the model number SP 1200 from E-mu Systems, manufactured in 1987. After a friend of mine and other musicians I knew had introduced me to the technical aspects of working with the device (How do I cut and edit a sample? How do I program a loop? How do I quantize sounds in a sequence?), and after I made my first attempts at using it, some of my favorite records, which had produced with this

device, told me new stories. With what I now knew about the sound of the 12-bit aesthetic and the mere ten seconds of sample time it offered, suddenly the Hip-Hop of the 80s and 90s appeared in a new light. After becoming more familiar with the limits and possibilities of the sampler that my great idols Pete Rock, Lord Finesse, and Large Professor (to name just a few) had used in the 80s and 90s to produce their now classic songs, I began to listen to their records in a different way. And I discovered, in the details of their beats, more and more inspiration for my own creative use of this specific device. Not only was I able to recognize samples that had been reused, but I could hear how the producers had worked with their material; I could hear what functions had been used to edit it. I was very young when I first got interested in music in ways that went beyond pure aesthetic enjoyment. Even as a teenager, I recognized in music a code that was calling to be deciphered, that challenged me to transform what I was hearing into actions of my own. This started when I heard scratches for the first time, at the age of eleven. The more I heard the strange sounds, the more I wanted to *know* how they were made; and the more I learned about them, the more I understood just how complex the sounds were that I was hearing on these Hip-Hop records. This complexity, in turn, increased my need to dive in to this complexity and make myself at home, by *learning* to scratch on my own. The same thing was true for me of rap. I only began to understand what flow really meant when I tried to find a beat for my own language. That's the way may aesthetic education progressed within Hip-Hop. Since there were no institutions where I could go, and since using turntables, samplers, and a microphone didn't require an ability to read sheet music, it was possible or even necessary for this learning to happen entirely within the offshoots of Hip-Hop culture in Germany that I had access to.

Hip-Hop not only allowed me to develop my skills within the art form, but also influenced the way my personality or identity took shape. Stories and their ways of telling them became a part of who I am; they opened up horizons that might otherwise have remained closed to me as a White, middle-class Central European man. I first encountered impulses from postcolonial and antiracist thought not in any history class, but from KRS-One and Ice T. I was first sensitized to social inequality and to a critique of capitalism through narratives from rap lyrics by groups like Public Enemy, Gang Starr, and Wu-Tang Clan. I also consumed so-called gangster rap not just as an acoustic version of action films meant for entertainment, because over time I increasingly recognized in it the symptoms of a hypercapitalist system and its neoliberal forms of society. Not that this gave me specific approaches to solving social issues, but it cer-

tainly did offer deeper insight into the kaleidoscopic reality of our globalized world, in which history—to return to Benjamin's angel—is too often written only from the point of view of the victors, and with no regard for the wreckage they leave behind.

As I was thinking about all of these experiences, a question clearly emerged for the academic context of my seminar: whether this cultural education and knowledge amounted for me to any kind of social added value, in a way similar to what I might have learned in a mainstream school. What I can say is that over the last ten years I've not only managed to make a living with Hip-Hop, but I also have the impression that it's made me someone who is more open-minded, tolerant, and curious. I would even say it has influenced my relationships with friends and family. I can look back on a circle of friends spanning countries and continents, traced entirely to my involvement in Hip-Hop.

At the same time, however, as has doubtless become clear from the first few pages of this essay, I am more or less immersed in the field, and this makes me a bit reticent to step away from the space of practice and enter an academic space of reflection, at least so long as I am speaking and writing about Hip-Hop. *What exactly* is it from the knowledge I think I've acquired through Hip-Hop that I want to impart in this new context, and *how, exactly*, do I want to do it? Do I need to get up-to-date on publications in Hip-Hop studies? Or get an overview of various pedagogical theories and how they might be applied to Hip-Hop?

When I took a break from my work with the SP 1200 to reflect on some of these questions, I noticed that one of the things lying around my studio was a record with traditional Jewish music. My plan had been to make a beat with some of the sounds on it. And as so often happens with me, this choice of source material was anything but a coincidence. My interest in traditional Jewish music resonated with something that has always been part of my identity, as the grandson of a Jewish grandfather. Both my grandfather and my father, who was born in 1927, faced racist persecution in Nazi Germany. Yet after the war, both of them abandoned any practical ties to the cultural heritage of their ancestors. The fact that my father was a survivor has shaped my relationship to the past and to the present in way that was crucial to forging my own identity, and that perhaps also shaped my own personal approach to Hip-Hop and the art form of beatmaking. For me, taking recourse to the past is a conscious act as part of coming to terms with the present. And this means that, for me, selecting a sample from a record with sounds of the shofar was a deeply significant gesture. I nevertheless quickly realized I wouldn't be able to make a

whole beat using just samples from this one record—which hardly ever works, anyway. So instead, I chose to underlay the sounds of this Middle Eastern instrument, which is mentioned even in the ancient texts of the Torah, with a chopped drum break from a funk record. I sampled another Fender Rhodes chord from another source, using the SP 1200 to scale it at different speeds and pitches to create a new melody. But now the shofar sounded like a small but subtle detail within the overall beat, which was itself an all-too-typical example of a 90s boom-bap aesthetic that some listeners may find a bit cliché. I interpreted what had happened here with the shofar as a small allegory about myself, recognizing the groove of a classic Hip-Hop beat as my real home, as a space where biographical nuances of interpreters can be easily included without the aesthetics of Hip-Hop leveling out these kinds of subtleties by assimilating them. The text of the song "Endlich eindeutig" (Finally unambiguous, 2022; see appendix for the orginal German version of the text),[1] which I then wrote for the beat, reflects not only this feeling of cultural belonging and the idea of a radically pluralistic humanism, but also the opening up of cultural and artistic practice to encompass references to the past. Future and past meet in the counterpoint of the loop—as a musical object welded together of several parts that simultaneously refers back to what has come and forward to what we face. I formulated this with a preposition—"before"—that became productively ambiguous in the chorus, as the past that once lay *before* us and *before* which we now stand:

> Finally unambiguous, I see it all before me
> I feel at home in the beat, as if I was born here
> Finally unambiguous, I see it all before me
> KRS ONE, Boogie Down Productions[2] was before me
> Finally unambiguous, I see it all before me
> I feel at home in the beat, as if I was born here
> Finally unambiguous, I see it all before me
> MC Shan & DJ Marly Marl[3] was before me
> Jazz unifies the behind and the mind[4]

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qU4JwLjCuqI; see also: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_rrZdgEapE.

2 Boogie Down Productions. 1987. "South Bronx," *Criminal Minded*, B-Boy Records.

3 MC Shan & Marley Marl. 1986. "The Bridge," Single, Bridge Records.

4 Funkadelic. 1970. *Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow*, Westbound Recordings.

I let the cool shit[5] flow till the container freezes
Maybe this sounds a bit backward
But the good old hip hop gives me peace
Everybody's sending messages into to insignificance
I grant you all that bullshit if it makes you happy
I need "the boom bip,"[6] a whizzing snare[7]
Enlightens me while the rest of the world darkens
I don't need long debates
Rap to me means creating something out of nothing
I don't care about the banal, viral, digital sphere
Paint verbal colors in my beat spiral
Baby, let us toast to the funk
Standing under a splattering rainbow
Don't talk about your life as a rapper within that bubble
I empty my bladder over your watered-down essence

Finally unambiguous
Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash[8] was before me
Pete Rock[9] and Large Pro[10] was before me

Hip Hop becomes a commodity in capitalism
But if you want, Hip Hop becomes the true humanism
No, I'm not gonna lead by missionary ambition
But it takes me higher just as the coke in your nose does
So ask someone else to get you some
I prefer turning on the drum machine in the early morning
Kids rather listen to some kind of gangsters
Maybe I'm replaced by changing times but I stick to it
Stick to the mic, stick to the beat, deep into the rhythm
Seen from outside I fall into escapism[11]
But Hip-Hop is more than a hobby
When my father passed away, Hip-Hop taught me respect

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5 Main Concept. 1994. *Coole Scheiße*, Move.
6 A Tribe Called Quest. 1990. "Push It Along," *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm*, Jive Records.
7 Stieber Twins. 1999. "Schlangen sind giftig," *Malaria*, MZEE.
8 Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five. 1982. "The Message," Single, Sugar Hill Records
9 Pete Rock & CL Smooth. 1992. "The Basement," *Mecca and the Soul Brother*, Elektra.
10 Main Source. 1992. "Fakin' the Funk," Single, Wild Pitch.
11 Pete Rock & CL Smooth. 1994. "Escape," *Return of the Mecca*, Elektra.

13 years old, first time freestyling on a rap concert
Only this discovery is worthy my human existence
I'm serious, all irony aside
Don't you ever take my mic away, I rather stay broke
"Take rap away from me and I die a miserable death like Van Gogh
I cut off my ear, you don't know what I'm going to do" (Stieber Twins)

Finally unambiguous
Ultramagnetic MC's,[12] Stetsasonic[13] was before me
De La Soul & A Tribe Called Quest was before me
A Tribe Called Quest[14], De La Soul
[more word cuts:]
Fuck all y'all[15]
MC Ice T[16]
All You[17]
Ladies and gentlemen[18]
It's at your own risk, Sucker![19]

There is irony here in the word "unambiguous." With the double sense of "before me," the term takes on multiple meanings. In one sense, "before" has a spatial meaning: there is something lying here, clearly recognizable, *before* my eyes. And in another sense, "before" also denotes a projection onto the past: there is something lying *before* me in the same temporal axis. The double use of this prepositional phrase "before me," in a spatial and temporal sense, playfully illuminates the permeability of the boundaries between the present and the past. Gradually I became aware that I was working on a song that more or less reflected what I would have liked to convey to my students: that Hip-Hop for me meant immersion in open-ended, playful processes of knowledge

12 Ultramagnetic MC's. 1988. "Ego Trippin,'" *Critical Beatdown*, Profile.
13 Stetsasonic. 1986. "Go Stetsa I," *On Fire*, Tommy Boy.
14 A Tribe Called Quest. 1990. "Bonita Applebum," *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm*, Jive Records.
15 Ice Cube. 1990. "Better Off Dead," *Amerikkka's Most Wanted*, Priority.
16 Ice T. 1987. "Sex," *Rhyme Pays*, Allied Presses.
17 Public Enemy. 1987. "Public Enemy No. 1," *Yo! Bum Rush The Show*. Def Jam Recordings.
18 Lord Finesse & DJ Mike Smooth. 1991. *Return of The Funky Man*, Traffic Entertainment Group.
19 King Tee. 1990. *At Your Own Risk*, Capitol Records.

transmission, which ultimately also made it possible to generate new knowledge while linking all kinds of knowledge, new and old. In the sample-based loop, the opposition of past and present is undermined by taking recourse to something in the past.

In the remainder of this essay, I would like to elaborate on the playful and open-ended orientation of Hip-Hop's artistic practice and then, in emphasizing the playful aspects of art, bring Hip-Hop and literature closer together. The convergence of Hip-Hop (which I use here mainly to mean rap) and literature is intended here as an example, and by no means excludes cross-pollination or connections between Hip-Hop other aesthetic phenomena.

Hip-Hop as a (Creative) Space for Knowledge Transfer

Pete Rock, who I quoted in the title of this article, is one of the greatest Hip-Hop producers of all time. Using samples and excerpts from earlier songs (mainly from the genres of jazz and soul), and often repurposing samplers and drum machines, he took sounds he found and created a sound of his own that anyone who knows anything about Hip-Hop will recognize. My own artistic career as a Hip-Hop DJ, producer, and emcee, now spanning some two decades, has mainly been about drawing lessons from my fascination with this aesthetic, as I described above. The process of learning this provoked is anything but complete.

The basic musical structure of Hip-Hop, the sample-based beat, was initially created using only two turntables and a mixer and has since been refined in many ways with the help of samplers, drum machines, and synthesizers. Combining existing compositions by interweaving technical procedures of reproduction and production produces a musical object made from pieces of other works that that is more than the sum of its parts. At the same time, the aesthetics of hip hop—at least in my view—challenge concepts such as originality, creative richness, or the work of art as a finished entity, i.e., as something complete and independent in itself, as well as the separation between processes of production and reception. I see beatmaking as a form of metacomposition. And this perspective offers many opportunities for knowledge transfer between Hip-Hop and other fields of knowledge.

In what follow, I would like to at least hint at possible connections to aesthetics and literary studies. Knowledge transfers like this open up all kinds

of potential to interweave pedagogical knowledge, and its everyday practices, with Hip-Hop.

But first, back to Pete Rock: from a purely economic perspective, the musical source material he used was also a kind of makeshift solution, as he explains in an interview:

> The reason why we sampled in the beginning was that we couldn't afford to have a guitar player come in and play on our record. We couldn't afford to have that horn section … or the string sections. We were like scavengers, going through the garbage bin and finding whatever we could from our old dusty records. (Pete Rock cited in Nielson 2013)

That said, this economic dimension, which in turn has historical and sociocultural implications, is by no means exhaustive for the analysis of sample-based hip hop. Rather, we must also recognize a foundation based in culture, and in the specific subjects addressed by Hip-Hop, for what is today often called the golden-age of the genre. We can see this in a statement from Hank Shocklee of the Bomb Squad, a production team best known for their work with the conscious rap pioneers Public Enemy:

> A lot of the records that were being sampled were socially conscious, socially relevant records, and that has a way of shaping the lyrics that you're going to write in conjunction with them. "When you take sampling out of the equation," Shocklee said, "much of the social consciousness disappears because, as he put it, 'artists' lyrical reference point only lies within themselves.'" (Nielson 2013, citing Hank Shocklee)

My point here is not to polemically advocate for sample-based work and against other production methods in Hip-Hop. The aesthetic integration of jazz and soul within Hip-Hop of the 1980s and 1990s, however, did not occur by chance, but rather as a function of social, historical, and economic conditions of production in a postcolonial society in which structural repression and violence against Black people has never gone away. Even if Hip-Hop's reference to the classics of Black music did not always express an appreciation of Black culture in the sense of taking a political stance, it had a canonizing effect on subsequent generations of artists and their audiences. It was not only the White middle class in the United States and Europe in 2023 that might have had no inkling about neo soul, lofi chillhop, or the various national versions of Hip-

Hop culture, had hip hop not existed. In the German discourse, for instance, the term "Deutschrap" has emerged as label that at least allows one to think this might be an entirely separate genre, whose ties to the African American legacy as a cultural component of Black culture and African diasporic experience were rationalized away by the cultural-industrial needs of a dominant White society. But if—to borrow an idea from Hank Shocklee—one's poetic or artistic point of reference lay solely within ourselves, and if this self corresponded to the identitarian notions of dominant White societies (which in Germany circulate under the catchword "Leitkultur"), then we would have a real problem with the semiotics of art and culture. Against this backdrop, Hip-Hop is an art form "that can really raise you" (Pete Rock). One of the educational contributions from Hip-Hop that can hardly be overestimated lies in how it continues cultural, aesthetic, historical, spiritual, and philosophical traditions, culturally enriching the world and helping prevent cultural impoverishment caused by monoculture.

But to what extent can Hip-Hop effectively contribute to knowledge generation and transfer in everyday pedagogical practice? Isn't there something we can learn, something based in cultural semiotics, not just *about* Hip-Hop but *through* Hip-Hop? Something, perhaps, that points far beyond this one subcultural space? In my view, hip hop harbors this potential like every form of art, since I understand art to be a medium of human (inter)subjectivity and thus also a realm of human insight. In contrast to modern science, which primarily has to fulfill certain logical criteria and follow methodologies that can be systematically articulated, artists face vast freedoms. The extent to which the seemingly clear boundaries of modern science prove to include loopholes for the irrational is a question for the philosophy of science that I need not delve into here. But that fact that it shows up here, and rightly so, already tells us something. Similarly, the sphere of art, which at first glance appears filled with boundless freedom, is also always subject to certain restrictions and regularities, to technical, aesthetic, and not least, institutional obstacles (not to mention economic ones), whose effects make our aesthetic judgment both possible and necessary. Just as enlightenment, science, and education, at least from a European perspective, are characterized by the opposition between freedom and coercion, liberation and subjugation, emancipation and colonization, art can also appear as one of the sites for the eternal struggle between human opposites. Art is no neutral ground where innocent ideas and practices come together, free of any hidden agenda, whether for aesthetic enjoyment or ethical perfection. Nor is it an ideological battleground. Art provides a space for en-

counters that can lead to insight or produce mistakes, that can yield gains or losses; it offers encounters that can influence the course of a greater whole or cause a radical break. Much like a scientific experiment can either disprove or confirm (but for how long?) previous theoretical assumptions, an artistic venture can take old concepts and develop them further, or discard them entirely. In art, I would argue, these processes of situating oneself *within* tradition, and differentiating oneself *from* it, inherently evince something playful. Relating to what has come before, whether in an affirmative or negative sense, also means engaging with rules and more or less conscious ways of enabling (or hindering) knowledge transfer. My artistic work within Hip-Hop retraces the workings of a regulatory apparatus, a regulatory machine, while also exploring how it might be changed through playful actions. The practice of Hip-Hop always also constitutes applied critical analysis of the world as it exists now, which is reflected, too, in the self-referentiality of battle lyrics that can contain statements and judgments about the world, about society, and about individual subject themselves and their own, immediate Hip-Hop scene—all in the same line.

Hip-Hop as Literature

The song "Those Who Say" by emcee Akbar (2001) could also be understood as a battle song, though here the self-aggrandizement largely finds its lyrical reference points in figures from biblical tradition and ancient mythology. The chorus goes:

> So I sat with the Gods and for years we did the science
> And when I stood up I realized that we were giants

In the following lines, the lyrical I affirms: "I'm not a gangster, I'm something closer to a monster." The active production and appropriation of knowledge ("for years we did the science") assist the lyrical voice in emancipating itself by transforming itself into a giant ("when I stood up I realized that we were giants")—the opposite of a gangster, the stylized figure found in so many rap lyrics that has provoked so much outrage and controversy in discourse about rap. Both the idealization of the gangster and his demonization are overshadowed here by the figure of the giant, whose enormous stature, as an external manifestation of superiority, derives entirely from his years of engagement with the wisdom of the gods.

In the second stanza, however, Akbar clearly turns to a current postcolonial world of global politics with the verses:

> I was a mild child until I got influenced by the "Wild Style"
> Then I became the unclaimed son of Hussein
> Society's blame, the whole world's afraid of me
> Killin my set but I'm still in effect like slavery

The predicate "still in effect" claimed in the last verse has specifically positive connotations in Hip-Hop, where it means "to be active or relevant." The phrase goes back quite a while—Rakim, for instance, used it in 1988 on his joint album with Eric B., *Follow the Leader*: "cause I'm in. E-F-F-E-C-T. A smooth operator operating correctly." The *tertium comparationis* of still being "in effect" connects the lyrical voice in Akbar's song to nothing other than "slavery," which the speaker says is also still "in effect." Akbar thus positions himself as a Black subject who is aware of forms of repression that have been recast for the present, such as the prison industrial complete, racial profiling, or other structural inequalities. Bragging, boasting, and social commentary coincide. At the same time, Akbar inscribes his knowledge of the postcolonial present into the concept of being "in effect." Relevance, coolness, and hipness go hand in hand with a political consciousness that embraces historical knowledge.

This brief excursion into the hermeneutics of battle rap is meant to underscore that Hip-Hop and rap are not solely pedagogical tools ("Dear children, today we will reinterpret Goethe's "Erlkönig" as a rap song!"), but rather that social criticism and knowledge transfer are often inherently embedded in the works themselves. Hip-Hop and rap do not merely serve the purposes of breathing new life and some coolness into traditional teaching materials; with serious consideration and practical appropriation, they can also enrich the complexity of everyday pedagogical practice.

Hence the focus here should not solely be on the operationalizability of pedagogical models within an art form; rather, the art form itself needs to be recognized as a space for the generation and criticism of knowledge of various kinds. In speaking of pedagogical (creative) spaces in the title to my essay, I am elevating two aspects in particular to determine the educational potential of Hip-Hop: playful action and open-endedness as two aesthetic cornerstones.

I understand playful action to be an activity that is rich in presuppositions, and whose execution is determined by prior knowledge and aesthetic regularities. Yet it need not fulfill any agenda defined in terms of the market or of eco-

nomic value, nor is it subject to any imperative stemming from efficiency or the goals of production, but it remains open-ended in its purposiveness. For me, an openness toward how a process comes to conclusion and the result it may produce is a basic prerequisite for playful and creative action. Even in a game with clear rules, the outcome can't be clear from the start unless you want the game to be boring. The same is true in literature, as well as in hermeneutics, as the art of its interpretation. If any work of art could be reduced to a specific meaning, a particular sign, or an explanatory text, the work itself would become entirely superfluous. These signs would be enough; the work would be unnecessary. But they are not enough, just as works of art, too, are not sufficient (in and for themselves, for instance) but point beyond themselves, to all kinds of other things, and contain references that include previous works of art; or at the very least they point toward a counterpart that relates to them, to reactions, to later works, or to entire libraries that could be written about them.

My procedural and medial understanding of art, which is rooted in this kind of open-endedness, certainly reflects my deeply personal interpretation of the *conditio humana*, which sees in human beings a capacity to be shaped or formed. This capacity is not always something positive; it can also mean—as in the case of my father, who was born into a Christian-Jewish marriage in 1927—that a government imposes a biopolitical regime upon its subjects rooted in mechanisms operating through disenfranchisement or even annihilation. It is only because human beings do not in fact have an identity from the very beginning that one can grow or be forced upon them. This infinity, or at least multiplicity, in the power to create something out of nothing is the open-endedness I am discussing here. Since I understand this to be an existential truth about human beings, I can accept art as a human form of expression only if this is one of its premises.

My understanding of art corresponds to this understanding of what it means to be human. In producing beats and writing lyrics, I work in ways that are both rule-governed and open-ended, in other words: that are playful. When I make a beat on my sampler, I usually start with the drums. I record a part of a song in which the drums play alone, and then I cut out the individual sounds of kick drums, snare drums, hi-hat, etc. to create a new groove. This rearranging of a drum break's individual parts can be compared to arranging the pieces on a game board. Similar to the set of chess pieces, the choice of pieces is limited; and, just like the chessboard with its exact number of squares, the rhythm (most often a 4/4 beat) prescribes a structure of possible

arrangements. The nature of both the sample and the sound, along with the technical properties of the machine being used, also set possibilities and limitations on what I can do. For this comparison, it's not important that a game like chess has precise rules, while the production of a sample-based beat has many more degrees of freedom. What matters to me here is the interplay between freedom and constraint: the choice of components and the rhythmic framework are set more or less arbitrarily. Although there is no mathematically determinable number of possible moves, the aesthetic conventions of my musical niche create enough regularities themselves to provide an aesthetic framework for my creativity. Working with possibilities and limitations is playful. Within the realm of possibility, I make decisions in which nothing is inherently coercive. I do what I can, but I am never forced to make a choice. And yet I do come across areas I stay out of—even if it's only because I imagine a rule that forbids it (for example: "don't sample drum sounds from another Hip-Hop artist unless it's clearly recognizable as a form of homage!").

The working method of sample-based Hip-Hop that I am outlining here is similar in many ways to the phenomenon that literary studies calls intertextuality. Considering the relationships between different texts—both intentional and unintentional—is not just a detective game played for its sake. It suggests, rather, that the fluid transition between two works of art can be constitutive of aesthetic processes per se. If we agree that an artwork is part of a dialogue, then the concept of work this presupposes will undoubtedly have to encompass the entire conversation, i.e., at least two position and corresponding enunciations of speech. Without the contributions from a rich cultural history that this dialogue provides, my artistic creativity would be an impoverished and self-absorbed pursuit, devoid of any playful energy because it lacks the necessary game pieces.

Hip-Hop is certainly not responsible for articulating this interactionist understanding of what constitutes a work of art, but it does take it to the extreme—and it does so within a pop-culture industry largely defined by superstars and celebrities that is increasingly turning into a bad caricature of fetish for hyperindividual originalism. No matter how busy a production company might be, it can never satisfy the market's demand for unique, exceptional artists. And this means that Hip-Hop's aesthetics draws from a retrospective view, creating its own cultural manna from a practice of combining what has already been produced. The overall object created in a sample-based track must not be equated with the institutional form of the "feature"—the marketing version of a duet, in which the collaboration of two

successful artists reveals itself, more or less directly, to be an attempt to combine or multiple their consumer base of listeners. Instead of selling me the illusion of unattainability and instilling in me a longing for otherworldly icons populating a realm of stars, to be pursued only through more consumption, Hip-Hop extended an invitation for me to participate in its process, much like literature does, as a form of art whose reception and production essentially requires the same resource: access to (written) language.

Literature as Hip-Hop

While studying Spanish literature, I came across a passage in Miguel de Cervantes's prologue to his *Novelas ejemplares*, his "exemplary novels," that reminded me of Hip-Hop. A master of storytelling, Cervantes opens his brief, exemplary stories by reflecting on his artistic intention:

> *Mi intento ha sido poner en la plaza de nuestra república una mesa de trucos, donde cada uno pueda llegar a entretenerse, sin daño de barras; digo sin daño del alma ni del cuerpo, porque los ejercicios honestos y agradables, antes aprovechan que dañan.* (Cervantes 2003: 52)
>
> My intention has been to bring out into the public square of our community a gaming table where each person can be entertained, with no harm to anyone; I mean, with no harm to soul or body, because honest, pleasant pastimes are profitable rather than harmful. (Cervantes 2016: 4)[20]

In this analogy, the work of art is an offering made within a public place—a place where the public is invited to participate and to be entertained. This "entertainment" can take shape in ways that are rich and multifaceted, fostering distraction as well as education; at its best, it is useful, pleasant, and not harmful. Its recipients are not merely passively exposed to this aesthetic activity "from above" but are included from the outset in the game's rules as players themselves. It seems to me that this expresses an understanding of art that goes beyond Horace's "delectare et prodesse" since the dictum of pleasure and utility takes on a collective and playful character, meaning it is both social and

20 Translation modified: "community" for "nation."

interactive. We need to discuss works of art that traverse the space of possibilities they delineate, in which aesthetics and pedagogy intersect in participation. This is what happens in Hip-Hop, where there is no single work of art—no sentence, no part of a musical composition, no letter in a graffiti piece, no dance move—that stands alone. It's easy for me to imagine cutting out individual thoughts from Cervantes's drum break—the one I just cited—and using them to make a new, though not entirely different, rhythm. On the resulting beat, I'll use the turntable to scratch lines from Akbar. For instance, I could quote the phrase "I was influenced by the Wild Style" (Akbar 2001) as an autobiographical remark, because the 1982 film it cites, which tells the story of a graffiti artist in New York and the resistance he experiences when he encounters the commercialization of Hip-Hop, made a huge contribution to my fascination with the subculture of the genre. If I were to describe this experience in a song, I could hardly avoid mentioning that when I heard the film's title music, it wasn't the first time. Since I grew up a bit later than 1982, I first encountered the "Subway Theme" as a sample on Nas's 1994 debut albumg *Illmatic*. Nas opened his classic, which made him one of the most celebrated emcees of all time, and whose lyrics have even shown up in seminars on literature at Harvard, with a beat that had already been heard eleven years earlier on the big screen and on the movie's soundtrack.

I understand my own artistic work as playful attempts to inscribe myself into this intertextual, postnational, and extrauniversalist cosmos called Hip-Hop.

Completely leaving aside the question of whether I have or might still become an authority in Hip-Hop, I can only agree with Pete Rock: *Hip-Hop really, really raised me.*

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Appendix

Retrogott: Endlich eindeutig (2022)[21]

_Endlich eindeutig, ich seh' es klar/
Vor mir, ich bin im Beat zuhause, als wäre ich/
Geboren hier, endlich eindeutig, ich seh' es klar/
Vor mir
_KRS One, Boogie Down Productions[22] waren/
Vor mir…
_MC Shan, DJ Marley Marl[23] waren/
Vor mir…

Der Jazz vereint Gesäß und Geist.[24] Ich lasse coole/
Scheiße[25] laufen, bis das Gefäß vereist. Vielleicht/
_Wirkt das auf dich hängengeblieben aber der/
Gute alte "Hip Hop" (MC Shan) spendet mir Frieden. Alles/
Sendet nach Belieben in die Beliebigkeit. Ich lass' euch/
All den miesen Scheiß, wenn ihr damit zufriedener seid. Ich/
Brauch' "The Boom Bip,"[26] eine Snare die zischt[27] gibt mir/
Mehr Licht, während der Rest der Erde erlischt. Er-/
Spart mir eure Floskeln und Festtagsdebatten, Rap/
Heißt für mich, aus nichts etwas zu machen. Ich /
Scheiß' auf die banale, virale, digitale/
Sphäre, male verbale Farbe in meine Beatspirale/
_Baby, lass' uns im Regenbogensplatterregen/
_Auf den Funk anstoßen, die Becher heben/
_Erzähl' mir nichts von deinem Rapperleben in deiner Blase/
Ich leer' meine Blase über deinem verwässerten Wesen/

21 The following notations help me in performing the flow of the song: A forward slash ("/") indicates the boundary between two 4/4 bars. The underscore marks a pause at the beginning of a bar.

22 Boogie Down Productions. 1987. "South Bronx," *Criminal Minded*, B-Boy Records.

23 MC Shan & Marley Marl. 1986. "The Bridge," Single, Bridge Records.

24 Funkadelic. 1970. *Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow*, Westbound Recordings.

25 Main Concept. 1994. *Coole Scheiße*, Move.

26 A Tribe Called Quest. 1990. "Push It Along," *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm*, Jive Records.

27 Stieber Twins. 1999. "Schlangen sind giftig," *Malaria*, MZEE.

_Endlich eindeutig…
_Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash,[28] Red Alert/
Vor mir…
Pete Rock[29] und Large Pro[30] waren/
Vor mir…

Hip Hop wird zur Ware im Kapitalismus. Doch wenn du/
Willst, ist Hip Hop der wahre Humanismus. Nein, /
_ Ich spüre keinen missionarischen Eifer, aber mich/
Bringt es hoch wie das Koks in der Nase dich high macht, also/
_Frag' wen anders, ob er was besorgen kann. Ich/
Mach' die Drummaschine am liebsten am frühen Morgen an/
_Die Kids hörn' sich lieber irgendwelche Gangster an/
Vielleicht verdrängen mich Veränderungen aber ich häng' daran/
Häng' nicht rum, sondern häng' am Mic, hänge fest im Rhythmus/
Von außen betrachtet, verfall' ich dem Eskapismus[31]/
Doch Hip Hop ist mehr als nur mein Steckenpferd. Als mein/
Vater starb, hat "Hip Hop" mich Respekt gelehrt/ Mit
13 Freestyle zum ersten Mal auf einem Rapkonzert/
_Mein Menschenleben ist allein diese Entdeckung wert/
_Ich mein' das ernst, Ironie bei Seite, nimm' mir nie das/
Mic weg, da bleib' ich lieber pleite/
"Nimm' mir Rap weg und ich verreck' wie Van Gogh" (Stieber Twins)

Endlich eindeutig…
Ultramagnetic MC's,[32] Stetsasonic[33] waren/
Vor mir…
A Tribe Called Quest[34], De La Soul
[Weitere Word-Cuts:]
"Fuck all y'all"[35]

28 Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five. 1982. "The Message," Single, Sugar Hill Records
29 Pete Rock & CL Smooth. 1992. "The Basement," *Mecca and the Soul Brother*, Elektra.
30 Main Source. 1992. "Fakin' the Funk," Single, Wild Pitch.
31 Pete Rock & CL Smooth. 1994. "Escape," *Return of the Mecca*, Elektra.
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35 Ice Cube. 1990. "Better Off Dead," *Amerikkka's Most Wanted*, Priority.

"MC Ice T"[36]
"All You"[37]
"Ladies and gentlemen"[38]
"It's at your own risk, Sucker!"[39]

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39 King Tee. 1990. *At Your Own Risk*, Capitol Records.