

Remix and Life Hack in Hip Hop

Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Music

Michael B. MacDonald



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Remix and Life Hack in Hip Hop

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Remix and Life Hack in Hip Hop

Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Music

Michael B. MacDonald

MacEwan University, Canada



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To see Cipher5 in action please check out: my film *Megamorphosis: The Hip Hop Quest for Enlightenment* available to screen online at michaelbmacdonaldfilms.ca

INTRODUCTION

From Culture to the Production of Aesthetic Systems

Creativity is labour. It is the work that you do when you innovate with a set of resources. I will not say that it is a special form of labour, because I think it is very common. Creativity is a form of work that innovates and differentiates. Often it is said that creativity is making something from nothing. But this is an error. Creativity is the practice of innovating with a set of resources. It is true however, that sometimes the innovation produces a change in kind, a historic break from what was there before. Hip-hop Culture is precisely one of these examples. It did not emerge from a void, but from a set of technical and technological innovations using an existing set of aesthetic resources. This is not an attempt to undermine the incredible contribution to world culture that has been made by hip-hop music. But it does shift focus away from the creative capitalist heroes of the music industry, so that we might see more clearly the generations of youth who have used Hip-hop Culture to innovate upon themselves, to become something more, and to belong to something that was not there a moment ago. This is the core of *Remix and Life Hack*. Hip-hop Culture is NOT a music genre, it is MUCH more, and exploring how the sharing of aesthetic resources builds community, and how situated learning plays a necessary role in cultural sustainability draws out questions that may lead to a model of community located cultural education, and a starting point for a critical pedagogy of music.

Culture, it has been said, is the most difficult word in the English language to define.¹ The French philosopher Michel Foucault argued however, that *culture* could be understood as the administration of techniques and technologies of living. A culture is a set of practices, ways of doing things. He referred back to the Greek term *techne*, the root of technology and technique. He argued that culture is a word that signifies a set of techniques and technologies for constructing both the physical manifestations of a way of living but is also, and most importantly, the outward manifestation of an individual and group subjectivity. Wade Davis argued separately that losing a culture is like losing an old growth forest of the mind. So what is the impact of making a culture in a post or de-colonial context?

Colonization is the ideological and physical repression of *technologies* of expression (language, clothes, ritual) that disrupts *techniques* of subjectivity formation that erodes historical forms of sensibility. It is true to say that colonization wipes out culture, but this does little to explain how colonial practices interrupt the complex connections, the ecology of expressive practices and embedded knowledges that function as a factory for collective and individual subjectivity. This discussion is critical for educators who, by ignoring the often colonial location of arts pedagogy, risk the reification of culture that occurs when the location and practices

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of acculturation necessary for a social ecology are ignored for effective discipline and classroom management. Repeating the claim that culture is too difficult is an obfuscation that ensures that pedagogies that support local communities are not developed. And in extreme cases hides the damage done when there is a reification of aesthetic practices into “cultural objects” and counterfeit immersive touristic experiences. Saying ‘culture is hard’ is not an excuse to ignore the politics of cultural representation, the ongoing practice of colonization, and the political struggle youth cultures have been engaged in for generations. But where does this politics occur? I argue throughout that it is more than identity politics, although this is an important part. It is a politics of value(s) located in sensibility that requires a cultural studies of sensibility. A place to start? Take and remake aesthetics, and the aesthetic education it supports, from philosophers in the colonial European heritage. Replace it with a cultural studies of sensibility and a critical pedagogy of aesthetic systems.

WHY HIPHOP KULTURE?

Hiphop Kulture emerges from a history of African American innovation upon the production of urban subjectivity, a contribution of world changing importance that includes Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. DuBois, Back to Africa, the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Panthers, funk, soul, Motown and many more lesser known innovations.² Creative urban youth laboured with accessible sound reproduction technology and built new ways of communication across visual, aural/oral, gestural, and textual channels. Their labour took shape into what we now call hip-hop music. The story of Hiphop Kulture is more than the big hits and world-wide dissemination of generations of styles. While the world is familiar with Jay-Z and Kanye West, many hiphoppas labour to sustain Hiphop Kulture in their communities far from the big stages, world tours, and hit singles enjoyed by a shockingly few American hiphoppas. For those few mega stars, their creative labour is calculated in billions of dollars. But for most hiphoppas, their creative labour may never get expressed in economic terms, but in social capital, in the production of collective and individual subjectivity, in the bonds of love that build and hold communities together, and in the healing of broken hearts, broken homes, and broken neighborhoods in broken cities.

But it is now increasingly difficult to separate the production of subjectivity from the market place. Karl Marx’s notion of the social factory has moved center stage with the emergence of the creative industries. And with this move a counter move, a resistance to the commodification of everything is required.

SUBJECTIVITIES TRAPPED BY SYSTEMS OF GLOBAL CAPITAL

I am Michael. This simple sentence articulates three active forces, subject-subjectivity-identity, entwined in my aesthetics of self (Foucault). Michael is a white male heterosexual professor. Michael is constructed and is a construction. Musically,

I've never been comfortable with my whiteness. Not because I am musically white—not at all—I was not brought up in the classical music tradition. I was brought up in the gospel, soul, and blues traditions. My grandfather played traditional Cape Breton fiddle music and country blues and gospels on guitar. The whiteness that I understand, that I am comfortable with, is the whiteness that has not been included in Whiteness. It is a whiteness that I have difficulty articulating, and will therefore become the subject of another book. It is a whiteness that I only began to understand when I read Joe Kincheloe's work on blues epistemology, a subject I will circle back to a number of times in this book. There is no question however that I have been absorbed into the Whiteness of European colonization, the Whiteness of racial power, of a white-male-professor, the colonization of aesthetics. The power of Whiteness consumes subjectivities, encases and racializes sensibilities. I attempt to do two things in this book. The first is to turn against the history of Aesthetic philosophy, not by way of dismissal, but in an attempt to save the study of sensibility from European racialized, colonial philosophy. I believe there is much to be won by doing this. The second, is to locate a new study of aesthetics—as a philosophy of sensibility and community—in the local, thus undermining the attempted universality and life destroying critical objective distance built into European aesthetic philosophy. These philosophical and methodological acts become political for me because they inform my identity as Michael or Professor MacDonald. Michael the professor is being shaped by the social structures of the university, policed by the practice of European aesthetic philosophy, colonial philosophers and art critics. I, however am also shaping Michael, as a resistant philosopher, a researcher who builds healthy relationships, contributes to community, attempts to enact radical love against the power of Whiteness that is trying to consume me.

Before I went to graduate school I used to be Mike. When I was a kid in Cape Breton Nova Scotia I was sometimes Mick, sometimes Little Bar (my father's name is Barry). It was a strange process to introduce myself as Michael, I felt like an imposter. I was also aware that I was transitioning from artist/musician to graduate student and professor. A class transition was taking place that was also transforming my masculinity. My haircuts became more regular, I began wearing a shirt and tie without irony, buying the blazer with elbow patches, shaving everyday. I was making Michael within structures of power that were shaping Michael. Students played their role by treating me with "more respect" (more distance) the more I visually conformed to Whiteness. I began to accept that success—whatever that meant—was bound up in the successful shaping of Michael.

But it is not Michael who addresses you now, nor is it Michael that watches and reports. *I* am not Michael. Michael is a government sanctioned and supported identity, a label, a provable thing that governments and businesses enumerate, plan for, profit from. Michael is a label for a single locatable animal. And the animal that I am has lots of needs that I seek to satisfy. But I am not only this body I am also a consciousness, a subject, reaching out to you through print...even though I am no longer here. I was here. This is my proof. My tracing. Perhaps you will try

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to see me in a photo, try to feel the articulate consciousness that emerges entwined with the neural complexities and social-neural wiring that runs through the folded flesh hidden away in my skull. I am simultaneously Michael and not-Michael. I am a reflective consciousness that feels itself, tries to understand what it means “to be” in a sea of senses, that sometimes feels separate from the body that it requires, that sometimes, for a moment, feels like it is suffocated by its materiality. Writing externalizes the I, my subject, and gets a little closer to you, your subject. I slip from my materiality, my subject free and liquid, for a moment pooling somewhere between Michael and my laptop, until I take shape on the screen. This process and liquid not-yet is subjectivity, an important theme in this book. I want to contribute to the liberation of aesthetics in the hopes that we can develop a critical pedagogy of sensibility. An aesthetic education that delves into the fluxes of sense and desire, that has as its subject, not a history of art works, but a history of human becoming. I hope you are reaching out as well. Maybe someday you will tell me about being moved by my words. We will have a moment to share:

To write is to do other than announce oneself as an enclosed individual... To write, ... is to write to a stranger, to a friend... Friendship is always a political act, for it unites citizens into a polis, a (political) community... It is the difference between me and my friend that allows meaning. And it is meaning, the meaningfulness of the world, that is consciousness. (Kathy Acker cited in Braidotti, 2006, 144)

I don't know why I reach out. I am compelled to create, to make music, to make movies, to discover words, to make knowledge, to share connections. This energy is not the same as my subject nor identity. It is the *am* in I *AM* Michael. This is subjectivity, the verb form of subject, it is becoming. It is the production of subjectivity.

When I first started trying to get my head around my own subjectivity I imagined it to be a life energy that moved like an underground stream. Life energy was a flow and I was an individual expression of it, like an underground stream that emerges above ground through a crack in a rock. I liked the idea that I was an individual expression of creativity, a background energy of creativity that flows. This metaphor shows up quite a bit in thinking about creativity, as if creativity is a flow that is ‘out there’ that creative people can connect with. Creativity is often described as energy.

But I'm not a crack in a rock, and creativity is in fact not found ‘out there’ in any one place, from an external location to be tapped into. And there isn't inside either. There's no location of creativity; innovations emerge from the functioning of complex systems. Acts of differentiation, of not being Michael, not being Mike, not being flesh, not being who I was the moment before I wrote this. Metaphors were in my way. My subjectivity emerges from my life energy, but not in a metaphysical way. It emerges complexly from biological, mental, social, and environmental systems. Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela explain in “The Tree of

Knowledge” (1992) how, through autopoiesis and self-organization, consciousness emerges *from the materiality of the body*. Thoughts are both material and creative! We are stardust monsters! We now know (thanks to brain scans) that thoughts are electric constellations comprised of electric impulses traversing folds we call brain, fed by sensations of incoming data coupled with retained data (memory), or other connections, that shape perception. We are a constellation. Subjectivity emerges from this constellation we call consciousness, shaped by recursive operations that second-order cybernetics theorist Gregory Bateson explored in “Steps to an Ecology of Mind” (1972). Christopher Small, building on Bateson, argued that music contributes to the processes of social formation that he called musicking. Small argued that the noun form or the word *music* gets in the way of understanding what music really is; that music is not a noun but rather a verb and needs to be understood as musicking. The switch from music to musicking is not semantic but ontological. Musicking is an aesthetic system that produces. Aesthetic resources constitute the system.

Subjectivity seems to be shaped as we relate to our environment, in much the same way James J. Gibson (1979) called affordances:

The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill...refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment. (127)

One Sunday afternoon when I was very young I sat in the living room with my grandmother and parents listening to the radio. I was lost in the music and the warm sun that flooded the little room. My grandmother spoke to my parents saying, “Look at his foot, he is a musician”. When I was a young boy I sometimes played piano during family parties. At one of these an uncle stood next to me and watched me play. In the middle of a song he said, “You need to keep playing as you get older, girls will kiss you for this”.

In *The Republic* Plato warned that the state should be concerned about music education, and maybe he was correct. He argued that modes (scales) produce ways of feeling, that some modes produce contentment and others violence and war. Music stirs and motivates action. Music works on affect, on sensibility, as it works on our skin, our ears and our memories.

REMIX AND LIFE HACK

Remix and Life Hack explores the idea that people are affected by art, and further, that we remix aesthetic resources to self-produce. The idea of Life Hack is useful here because it implies, unlike education, that you use technology to make life easier; for instance, a life hack is using your car’s seat warmer to keep the pizza warm on the drive home. I’m using it a little differently. I’m suggesting that we life hack our subjectivities by using the aesthetic resources available in our society. I’m further arguing, as I will over and over again in the collection of essays in this book, that

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Hiphop Kulture needs to be understood in this way if we are going to understand its social and evolutionary significance.

I am one of many people that I have known for whom music is not just something one listens to but is a social technology for building, shaping, and changing oneself in concert with others. We use music and other aesthetic resources, like clothes, behaviors, and locations to resonate together. This understanding of music is difficult to locate in academic literature even though it is the foundational assumption of every New York glossy style magazine editorial board and every punk e-zine. If we are going to understand the role of art in our lives then we must take a different starting point, what I have called aesthetic systems theory.

This book is not about mainstream hip-hop. You might not know anything about Edmonton yet. We call it YEG after the airport call letters. These essays are a case study on the impact of Hiphop Kulture, as an example of the kinds of social changes that Hip Hop has made possible. Hiphop Kulture has emerged alongside changes in capitalism that must also be theorized. So while you may not know any of the artists in this book yet, and may not know anything about my city, I suspect that once you read these essays you will be able to apply our methods to your city. I hope this is a shout out to community-engaged researchers and activists concerned with autonomous culture and the impacts of capitalism. I am going to share with you our work here in Edmonton, not so that you know about Edmonton, but so that you can trace our methods and apply them. We have imagined a future where Hiphop Kulture (and all autonomous cultures) can imagine themselves as social constellations, networks, rhizomes, where neighborhoods and cities contribute nodes in a growing and developing global cultural system. It will be great if you can use this book to connect with us, visit us, and invite us to visit you. This is a shout out to the world of Hiphop Kulture, a global network that we know is out there but we don't yet know how to actively plug into.

My approach to the ethico-aesthetic politics of music culture begins with the realization that I have used music to build myself over and over again. And not just music, but the aesthetic resources associated with music culture. And I am not alone. I have been working with other people who have been doing the same. We get these aesthetic resources from media and inherit them from culture, and innovate some of them. It feels like I begin to see something swirling around and I connect with it, and use it to shift myself, learning something new about who I can be, what I might be. This is a long way from the rational subject who observes art at a distant and with a discerning, critical eye. This is a long way from bourgeois art galleries. We have no distance from art, dissolved by the industrial processes Walter Benjamin gave name to in his famous *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Sometime between the Jazz *hip cats* of the 1930s, the rise of urban life, the mass manufacturing of style, and the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance, the Beats, and succession of youth culture from rock and roll to hip-hop *aesthetics* and *life* became inseparable. But not only this: *aesthetics and ethics* and life. That self-aesthetic production has ethical and political registers and that these have provided a framework for political