

Introduction: Hip Hop Theater's Ethic of Inclusion

To declare one's own identity is to write the world into existence.

—Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*

The term *Hip Hop Theater* first appeared in the early 1990s when London-based dancer/poet/Emcee Jonzi D used it to describe a blended performance style.¹ Trained in both modern dance at London Contemporary Dance School as well as in Hip Hop dance as a youth growing up in East London, Jonzi D fused the full range of his art practices and did not compartmentalize them, as the traditional dance and theater worlds demanded he do at the time. In the United States, journalist and performer Holly Bass wrote an article for *American Theatre* magazine in 1999, “Blowing Up the Set: What Happens When the Pulse of Hip-Hop Shakes Up the Traditional Stage?” in which she detailed the presence of Hip Hop Theater at that year's National Black Theatre Festival in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The following year, playwright/actor Eisa Davis published an article for *The Source* magazine, “Hip Hop Theatre: The New Underground.” In it, she introduced the performance ensemble Universes and discussed other emerging Hip Hop Theater artists, including Rickerby Hinds, Danny Hoch, Will Power, Sarah Jones, Kamilah Forbes, and Psalmayene 24, most of the same artists featured in Bass's piece. These articles sounded a clarion call for a new form of theater in the United States that was youth driven and proposed a unique alchemy of Hip Hop aesthetics and sociopolitical content.

1. A note about spelling: Hip Hop is a global culture, and for many heads, including myself, it is also a nation, one that transcends the geography of birth and embodies its own utopic ideal. I therefore consider Hip Hop to be a proper noun. There are many possible spellings of Hip Hop. While other groups and organizations may choose to spell it with caps, no caps, a hyphen, no hyphen, or as one word, I take my cues from Universal Zulu Nation (the first Hip Hop organization), and from KRS-One's Temple of Hip Hop, both of which have unequivocally situated Hip Hop culture as activist and committed to peace (discussed at greater length in this introduction).

In the summer of 2000, two separate and notable Hip Hop Theater festivals took place, sharing some of the above performers. Jennifer Nelson, Producing Artistic Director of the African Continuum Theatre in Washington, DC, produced the Hip Hop Theater Fest, a continuation of work she began to support and nurture in 1997. Nelson's festival took place at the Kennedy Center and brought audience members that were unfamiliar with Hip Hop and Hip Hop Theater together with audiences that had previously never been to the Kennedy Center. This appeal to multiple constituencies would become a signature of much of the Hip Hop Theater produced by institutional theaters. Later that summer at PS 122 in New York's East Village, Hoch premiered the first New York City Hip Hop Theater Festival (HHTF). And in 2002, Rickerby Hinds (author of *Dreamscape* in this collection) produced the Cali IE (Inland Empire) Hip Hop Theater Festival (a.k.a. Cali Fest) in Riverside, California. Both HHTF and Cali Fest would become the most enduring presenters of the genre in the United States, growing into annual happenings. HHTF would eventually include year-round events in New York with additional festivals in DC, the Bay Area, and Chicago.

Both Hoch and Hinds founded their festivals as ongoing public platform for artists working at the intersection of theater and Hip Hop, most of whom did not have the support of well-funded, institutional U.S. theaters. Hoch describes the mission of HHTF as theater "by, about, and for the hip-hop generations," an intentional sampling of W. E. B. Du Bois's 1926 "Advice to the Krigwa Players Little Theatre" that a "Negro" theater was "About us . . . By us . . . For us . . . Near us . . ." (Du Bois 1926, 134). For several years, Hip Hop Theater pioneer, performer, and playwright Will Power stated that his vision of Hip Hop Theater incorporated one or more of the performance elements of Hip Hop culture in production—that is, DJing, Emceeing, Dance, Writing (aerosol art), and Human Beatboxing. More recently, he has begun to expand that definition to "theater artists exploring their relationship to hip-hop." This definition focuses, as Power says, on "content, form, or content and form" (Power 2008).

At its origin, Hip Hop Theater was born out of this struggle to own both content and form and, in that way, owes a direct debt to the activist and resistant culture of Hip Hop. One of the challenges in discussing Hip Hop is that it is often misunderstood as only a music genre. It is much more—Hip Hop is a global, multiethnic, grassroots youth culture committed to social justice and self-expression through specific modes of performance. Rap is an important part of Hip Hop culture as a form of counterhegemonic art, and there are many thoughtful, conscious artists using the mode of rap to communicate progressive social messages. The music and poetry of these

artists unite people by questioning some of the very circumstances that have led other, primarily commercially minded, artists to use rap to express themselves in ways that promote violence, sexism, and material culture (values found in most forms of pop music and in U.S. and global cultures, at large). One of Hip Hop's many contradictions is that some of these very same commercial artists have foundations and use the profits from this nonprogressive work to give back to their communities in significant ways. However, rap, in any form, serves as important cultural critique—both in terms of content and in viewing its ascent inside a larger context of global capitalism. It is an appreciation of Hip Hop as culture and critique that this book engages.

HOW IT CAME TO BE: THE BRONX, THE WEST AND SOUTH BRONX

The Bronx is often cited as the epicenter of the explosion of youth energy that has come to be known as Hip Hop.² But, as artist and activist Rha Goddess says, “Lightning can strike many places at the same time.” In the 1970s in many urban centers across the country, marginalized youth of color and their allies turned to rap, dance, DJing, aerosol art, and other forms of self-expression to protest the reduction of social services and the bleak post-Civil Rights landscape that met their generation.

From 1973 to 1977, reports Hip Hop historian Jeff Chang, 30,000 fires were set by slumlords in the South Bronx in order to collect insurance money. Here the notorious practices of “redlining” and “planned shrinkage” reduced firefighting services and garbage collection, shutting hospitals and schools, causing widespread unemployment and igniting gang violence.³ This landscape is captured by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's epic 1982 track “The Message” and is also visible in early Hip Hop films *Style Wars* (1982) and *Wild Style* (1983). Trapped in such an environment, youth in this area had to provide for themselves and be agents of their own freedoms and self-expression.

In response to cuts in municipal services and activities, DJs such as Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, Grand Wizard Theodore, and Afrika Bambaataa

2. The politics and aesthetics of this movement, especially the West and South Bronx narrative, have been well historicized and theorized by Hip Hop scholars. See, especially, the writings of Raquel Cepeda, Jeff Chang, William Jelani Cobb, Chuck D, Michael Eric Dyson, Juan Flores, Kyra Gaunt, Nelson George, Robin D. G. Kelley, Bakari Kitwana, Mark Anthony Neal, Raquel Z. Rivera, Tricia Rose, Joseph Schloss, and Cristina Véran.

3. “Redlining” is a practice of creating discriminatory cost structures in or denying services to certain urban areas, including, for example, insurance, loans/banking, real estate, health care, and other opportunities that further isolate already poor and/or marginalized groups—see Wallace 1988; Kelley 1997; George 1998.

held parties in parks, schools, and basketball courts. These community gatherings provided outlets of fun and entertainment that had, at their core, friendly competition, improvisation, and self-determination; as such, they also embodied practices that would become central to the culture. Each of these DJs contributed to the innovation of the form and the development of the movement as a performative, sociopolitical culture whose aesthetics helped members to “write themselves into existence” in a city that, by all accounts, did not much want to hear about, know about, or see them.

With the founding in 1973 of the Universal Zulu Nation, Bambaataa, a former Black Spade gang member, created a space where young men and women known as the Zulu Kings and Queens could “battle,” using their creative skills and imagination rather than lethal weapons. Since then, committed artist-activists have opened Zulu Nation chapters around the world, spreading Hip Hop’s message of peace and collaboration. The works presented in this book demonstrate how a theatrical movement has grown out of the politics and aesthetics of Hip Hop.

As described by Bambaataa, Hip Hop culture is about inclusion:

Hip Hop means the whole culture of the movement . . . when you talk about rap . . . Rap is part of the hip hop culture . . . The emceeing . . . The djaying is part of the hip hop culture. The dressing, the languages are all part of the hip hop culture. The break dancing, the b-boys, b-girls . . . how you act, walk, look, talk are all part of hip hop culture. . . and the music is colorless. Hip Hop music is made from Black, brown, yellow, red, white . . . whatever music that gives you that grunt . . . that funk, that groove, or that beat . . . It’s all part of hip hop. (qtd. in Davey D 1996)

Hip Hop also recognizes the ability—as well as the frequent necessity for its members—to hold seeming contradictions in the same space. Hip Hop heads know that multiple truths can coexist harmoniously and do not need to be “resolved.” Hip Hop playwright and theater producer Claudia Alick explains, “If you are Hip Hop, you have the ability to belong or exist in several different places at once and be many different things at the same time . . . and structure and content, they mirror each other” (qtd. in Banks 2008). To listen to a DJ set carefully or watch a b-boy’s or b-girl’s moves is to see all these elements at play—the body and technology in synch, in contrary motion, one nation, as it were, “under a groove.” Hip Hop is competitive and loving; spiritual and material; loud in-your-face and poetic and deep; contemporary, cutting-edge, up-to-the-minute, and connected to the ancestor-elder-predecessor artist-warriors from which we came.

Legendary Emcee and activist KRS-One, the founder of the Temple of

Hip Hop, adds, “Hiphoppas are judged by the *content of their character* and skill, not by the color of their skin, their choice of religion, or social status. Since the early days of our cultural existence, our moral pillars have been peace, love, unity, and happiness” (KRS-One 2003, 181). Known as “the Teacher” in Hip Hop circles, KRS-One has, in what he calls the “Refinitions,” added on to the four “original” elements of Hip Hop, plus the oft-called fifth element, Human Beatboxing. His additions include Street Knowledge, Street Fashion, Street Language, and Street Entrepreneurialism. Today Hip Hop Theater and Hip Hop Pedagogy are also often cited by members as further cornerstones to the culture.

KRS-One’s manifesto, sampling Martin Luther King, reflects Hip Hop’s connection to a history of antiracism and social justice work and how its aesthetics engage this history. This is the Hip Hop that signed a Declaration of Peace at the United Nations on May 16, 2001, organized by the Temple of Hip Hop (KRS-One 2003, 203). This Hip Hop also holds action and education summits around the globe, works with youth for empowerment and community development, stages protests against misogynistic lyrics, and holds dialogues about fatherhood and workshops to end domestic violence against women. Indeed, as Eden Jeffries, a Hip Hop activist and documentarian points out echoing the above point about seeming contradictions, “Hip Hop is unique for its ability to allow competition and inclusivity to coexist—and it’s this that fosters its progression and constant reinventing of itself” (Jeffries 2008). Hip Hop is a big poetry, dance, music, rhythm, loud, silent, protest, peacemaking, political, jack your body, swing, jazz, funk, rock, rap, beatboxing, DJing, grafting, meditational, Zen, Kemetic, Judeo-Muslim-Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Black, White, Caribbean, Latina, Latino, Asian, Indigenous, male, female, transgender cacophony that, wherever you see it, is about the present moment. Whether it is spinning on your back or head or rapping the vote, Hip Hop is immediate, necessary, always changing, and consistent in its struggle for recognition, respect, and inclusion.

SOMETHING FROM SOMETHING

Theorists and heads alike often say of Hip Hop that it is “something from nothing.” While this phrase may be accurate from the perspective of financial capital, what it does not take into account is the deep level of cultural capital and knowledge that forms the basis of Hip Hop. For example, Grandmaster Flash, who attended a technical high school, flipped his skills as an electrician and used them to invent styles of DJing that have transformed the way the world listens to music. Writers in the Bronx employed multiple literacies in memorizing train and patrol schedules and routes; displayed rigorous,

almost military devotion in practicing their skills (as do all Hip Hop artists); and relied on team-building and strategic-planning skills to reach a global audience. DJs invented whole systems of spinning and remixing vinyl, while tapping into the electricity of a municipality that provided little recreation and radically reduced social services.

Another one of Hip Hop's revolutionary practices is versioning and re-naming—taking ownership of a deprived situation through an act of self-determination, as well as the ongoing creation of Hip Hop vernacular. KRS-One's reframing of "the elements" as "Refinitions" acknowledges the multiple institutions of knowledge and cultural production that Hip Hop validates and out of which it self-defines. In so doing, he challenged the institutionalization of the elements (a very Hip Hop thing to do), especially as they were co-opted by commercial interests, and simultaneously created his own resistant speech-act by inventing a new term. Even *KRS-One* as an appellation was a recuperation of the name *Krishna* with which residents of the New York City men's shelter where he lived taunted him because of his interest in the *Bhagavad Gita* and Hare Krishna. He flipped this act of aggression and began tagging *KRS* and, later, the anagram *KRS-One*. These innovations should be considered as forms of cultural capital that need to be enumerated and validated so that Hip Hop is not obscured in the history books as a brief, accidental moment in U.S. or world history.

Hip Hop is, rather, "something from something." There was never "nothing" there. However, by removing material resources in places like the Bronx, those in power created conditions (through "redlining" and "planned shrinkage") such that young people would internalize this myth of nothingness, making them feel marginalized and criminalized in the context of a more affluent, usually European American, public sphere. Clearly Hip Hop has won a partial victory over the colonial circumstances out of which it grew by becoming mainstream on a global level—yet corporations continue to appropriate its performance forms for capital gain, while perpetuating such oppressive ideologies as misogyny, violence, and homophobia. Hip Hop was and is *something*—and to grapple with it seriously reveals the overlapping ethnic, cultural, and geographic influences in today's world, as well as the ways in which racism, classism, and sexism continue to serve as systemic tools of oppression by the media. Hip Hop culture struggles against the basic tenets of the marketplace as embodied by much of popular music and, specifically, the rap music industry with which many people associate the name Hip Hop. It is like a two-headed snake, one head trying to free itself from the other, which has been hypnotized by a larger force.

HIP HOP'S INTERCULTURALITY

Hip Hop has its origins in many cultures. In the early days, the Bronx pioneers of Hip Hop were from African American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Jamaican, and Bajan parentage, with European American allies (such as Rick Rubin, Henry Chalfant, Martha Cooper, Ruza “Kool Lady” Blue, and Malcolm McClaren) involved in helping to make some of the art forms commercially profitable.⁴ Yet despite this cultural and ethnic plurality—clearly visible in photos from back in the day and early Hip Hop films—Hip Hop is often marketed as solely an outgrowth of African American culture.

In terms of understanding the full cultural history of Hip Hop in the United States, it is useful to consider the questions: Why is it so important for the record industry to put forth Hip Hop as a “Black” form, especially while the founders and leaders of the culture assert otherwise? Why does the record industry market hypermasculine and/or hypersexualized images of African heritage male and female rappers to large, but separate, audience bases of inner-city youth of color and privileged European heritage suburban youth? The way that the record industry employs and exploits the majority of recording artists (with the exception of the small percentage that do succeed commercially) is economically identical to the post-emancipation industry of sharecropping, creating a system of indebtedness where the artist does not own his or her own work and must repay ever increasing debts against a promise of future work. This is one way in which the industry is able to insert content that may not represent the creative intent of the artist (KRS-One 2003; Hurt 2006).

Even within Hip Hop culture, participants, theorists, and artists often struggle to explain Hip Hop's origins and ethnic affiliations. These notions of “belonging” exist on the interstices of colonial and postcolonial history and how this history has impacted the groups that gave birth to Hip Hop. This is evident, for example, when considering the control that language exerts in the United States as to how African Americans, Caribbean Americans, and Latinas and Latinos of African heritage identify (or are given the option to self-identify) and the competition and division created between and among people who share geographical origins.

4. See Fricke and Ahearn 2002; Chang 2006; and Farris Thompson in Perkins 1996. Nelson George writes, “I’d argue that without white entrepreneurial involvement hip hop culture wouldn’t have survived its first half decade on vinyl. . . . Scores of white stepmothers and fathers adopted the baby as their own and many have shown more loyalty to the child than more celebrated black parental figures” (1998, 57). There were also a few European American and mixed heritage heads from early days—specifically in Writing and B-boying.

In *The New H.N.I.C.: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop*, Todd Boyd writes that Hip Hop is an “outgrowth” of “Black nationalist sentiment” (2003, 17). On the next page, Boyd explains, echoing Bambaataa’s statement above, “Hip hop transcends the boundaries of culture, race, and history, while being uniquely informed by all three” (18). These are not necessarily contradictory statements. The former statement pertains to the culture’s place in a lineage of revolutionary praxis, while the latter describes affiliation and cultural influence. Boyd’s statements reveal the complexity of the social fabric in the Bronx and how these groups influenced—and continue to influence—each other.

Similarly, Afrika Bambaataa states, in Nelson George’s legendary *Source* interview with him, Kool DJ Herc, and Grandmaster Flash, “Now one thing people must know, that when we say Black we mean all our Puerto Rican or Dominican brothers. Wherever the Hip Hop was and the Blacks was, the Latinos and Puerto Ricans was too” (qtd. in Forman and Neal 2004, 50; also discussed in George 1998, 57). The youth of the South and West Bronx developed the performance forms of Hip Hop with and against each other—such as the various historical waves of breaking and the contributions in style and form that different ethnic groups brought to the dance.⁵ The function of Hip Hop was similar for these groups living in close proximity and rocking it side by side. As Hip Hop pioneer Grandmaster Caz of the Cold Crush Brothers explains, “Hip Hop came from desperation. It came from people’s desperate need for an outlet” (in Chalfant 2006). The physical and geographical journey to the Bronx was, indeed, different for each group; but the expressive and spiritual responses to its oppressive environment reveal significant points of cultural connectedness.

As Hip Hop head and activist Tamara Davidson explains, “The reason why Hip Hop is so inclusive and plural is because African culture is prevalent in so many cultures. We all have ancestors in Africa, thus Hip Hop really speaks to so many cultures. So it’s not a contradiction to say that the core ethos comes from African aesthetics, because I think this fact leads to the plurality of Hip Hop” (Davidson 2008). Indeed, it is a seeming contradiction that Hip Hop heads live with—on the one hand, Hip Hop is a culture with its performative roots in African and other pan-indigenous practices and ways of knowing. However, the culture is not exclusively populated by

5. Juan Flores (2000) and Raquel Z. Rivera (2003) discuss the “African retentions” in Puerto Rican culture as a result of both the cultural and ethnic mixings that colonialism set into motion, and the proximity of Nuyoricans and African Americans living side by side in the Bronx. Their work is also seminal in documenting the contribution of Latinas and Latinos in the arts and development of early Hip Hop culture.

people of African heritage, even though deeply rooted in the creative and philosophical contributions of people of African heritage from different cultures and locations. And, today, Hip Hop is a dominant presence globally, especially among young people asserting their independence and desire for a return to community-based interactions and social justice.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

Until lions have their own historians, tales of hunting will glorify the hunter.

—Akan proverb

Hip Hop is an intricate interweaving of related aesthetics. Even in the development of the form, the elements evolved as overlapping circles of creativity: the Emcee grew out of the DJ's need to have more freedom behind the 1s and 2s; B-boys and B-girls began to break in relation to the DJ's technical and compositional innovations of extending the break-beat; Writing, already in existence, extended the public art and performance of outdoor parties to beyond the confines of a park or lot.

In addition, Hip Hop has a fervent connection to “the word.” Common vernacular expressions include “Word!” “Word is bond,” “Word up,” “Say word,” and a repeated sentence coda of “You know what I’m saying,” compressed into one syllable. These phrases remind the speaker and the listener of the power of “the word,” the importance of being understood and recognized, and the contractual relationship between listener and speaker. Indeed, the opening line of *Goddess City*, the first play in this anthology, is, “in the beginning there was . . . word” and the last line is “WORD.” In Hip Hop Theater, the spoken word is often foregrounded, blended with these other equally significant elements.

Paul Carter Harrison revolutionized African American dramatic theory by identifying the power of the word as the central and core connection to an intricate system of African and African-derived aesthetics. Harrison writes, “In the West African nation of Mali, the Dogon people’s version of the Word is Nommo, which is understood to be the creative force that gives form to all things” (Harrison in Harrison, Walker, and Edwards 2002, 316). Nommo is a concept that many Hip Hop Theater practitioners were raised on artistically—Marc Bamuthi Joseph and Anthony “Made” Hamilton both cite Nommo in *Total Chaos* (Chang 2006), and it infuses the interactive relationship between performer and listener.

This attention to Nommo and the word also indicates a spiritual connection for many Hip Hop Theater practitioners and an acknowledgment of the African retentions of Hip Hop. Harrison continues in his description,

“When Nommo force is properly activated, man demonstrates a capacity to manipulate the forces of nature. . . . While the community of the dead—the ancestors—may be activated for this purpose, the problems of life fall upon the living” (Harrison 1972, 3). Hip Hop has adopted certain African-derived ritual practices, such as call-and-response and pouring libations for the ancestors, learned from respected elders and mentors. This ethos reveals, as Harrison writes, “an understanding that ‘community is the social force’” (3), and marks Hip Hop as a return to community-based practice.

Spoken Word, as poetry and as theatrical text, is another important practice within Hip Hop that reveals a similar connection to cultural memory. Marc Bamuthi Joseph widely toured a tour de force dance/performance/poetry piece entitled *Word Becomes Flesh*, while Pulitzer Prize-winning, Hip Hop generation playwright Suzan-Lori Parks instructs, “Words are spells in our mouths” (1995, 11). KRS-One advises readers of his inspirational book *Ruminations*, “Learn how to speak, and then learn the power of speech.” Like Harrison, he discusses the “metaphysical meaning” and power of words and explains, “Your liberation and life success may be directly related to your knowledge of [the language a person uses]” (KRS-One 2003, 64–65). Hip Hop is dominated by the spiritual and revolutionary belief that we make our own world through the performativity of our words and thoughts.

This is, in fact, a refrain of the millennial generations—from the passionate embrace of Don Miguel Ruiz’s book *The Four Agreements* (1997), based on Toltec life philosophy (whose first agreement is “Be impeccable with your word”), to the runaway success of the film *The Secret*.⁶ These generations born under the sign of Hip Hop, in the context of a world system that seems less and less concerned with the welfare of people, have turned their attention to the belief that there is power left to us, in our ability to transform our circumstances through our thought and speech. In this worldview, the Word’s power is that it creates Being, which, in this case, might be considered the process of coming back into being from the margins—the lions writing their own history. The wordsmiths of Hip Hop reveal a history where the Word is crucial to the self-definition and perpetuation of the culture. In fact, each of the performance elements of Hip Hop, like the Word, alters the world and reality of the artist.

6. *The Secret* is an Australian-produced film and book, endorsed by Oprah Winfrey, in which a team of scientists, ministers, philosophers, and inspirational speakers instruct the viewer in the “law of attraction,” i.e., how an individual can influence his own destiny and attract to himself the life he desires (Byrne 2006).

THE RITUAL ELEMENT OF HIP HOP THEATER

The storyteller is crucial to the construction of such a culture. In parts of West Africa, such as Mali and Senegal, the storyteller is often called *Griot* (male) or *Griotte* (female) or *Djeli* in Mande.⁷ In the Mande language, *Djeliya* is the word that, like the English term *Orature*, refers to a performance style that includes storytelling, riddles, proverbs, call-and-response, song, dance, and gestures. The *Djeli* is the agent of this ritual activity, a living archive who carries the culture of a people. The *Djeli*, as described by poet and performer Wanita Woodgett, is, thus, “the glue of a community” whose roles include “teacher, historian, genealogist, musician, composer, spokesperson, adviser, praise-singer, diplomat, interpreter, ceremony-participant, and warrior.” The *Djeli* “serv[es] as a bridge between the generations” and “passes morals, values, practices, and history from one generation to the next” (Woodgett 2005, 1–2).

These roles are significant in considering the intersections of Hip Hop and theater, especially in thinking about the overlapping functions of the Emcee in Hip Hop and the actor in Hip Hop Theater. As contemporary *Djelis*, the Emcee and the actor are also the “glue” that can bind people together; or unbind, when manipulated by forces external to the community. The Word in Hip Hop and Hip Hop Theater is more than an instrument of storytelling—as described above, it is an agent of world-making. The Emcee and the actor are the physical representatives of this power.

Hip Hop Theater, like each of the elements of Hip Hop, is a space for members of Hip Hop culture to take control of their own stories, carving out a place at the table in the history of U.S. theater. As in Clifford Geertz’s notion that ritual is a story that people tell themselves about themselves (2000, 448), it is where we legitimize our voices, our audiences, and our unique cultural ways of telling stories important to these audiences. Thus, like any culture’s ritual theater, Hip Hop Theater is where members from within the culture come for reassurance, to find the values of the culture reiterated, to hear the history retold, and to locate ourselves inside of our own cultural frame. It is not just about information. Equally important is the cultural mind-set and logic. In terms of form, a Hip Hop head will, most likely, feel at home in a poetic, nonlinear, fragmented narrative with multiple ethnicities represented on the stage and multiple languages spoken. And the storytelling would almost certainly need to be interdisciplinary—indeed, any narrative

7. *Griot* is often assumed to be French-derived but may, in fact, come from the Portuguese *criar*, or be related to various African languages (Hale 1998, 358).

about Hip Hop that does not draw on the culture's multiple forms of creative expression would seem strangely un-Hip Hop.

In terms of function, for someone within the culture, Hip Hop Theater, like Hip Hop, is both a ritual of resistance and of self-determination. For those audience members from the outside, Hip Hop Theater gives a glimpse into these inner workings—the culture's stories, core values, and ways of thinking and knowing. This is how any culturally specific theater functions, such as Noh theater, performances of the Hindu epic *The Mahabharatha*, or Yiddish, Gaelic, and indigenous theater forms. These performances provide a cultural negotiation through expressive means for people both inside and outside of the work's cultural context. I propose, therefore, that Hip Hop Theater is the ritual theater of Hip Hop culture.

PREDECESSORS

Hip Hoppers who see themselves as part of an artistic and cultural movement know their histories. Hip Hop Theater did not just appear—it is the inevitable product of intersectional histories, in this case, artistic and cultural. As discussed above, Hip Hop inherited *Djeliya*/Orature as a method of sustenance and sustainability from its ancestral cultures. In addition, Hip Hop, spoken word, and Hip Hop Theater all owe a debt to the art and politics of a host of artistic foremothers and fathers who paved the way. For instance, quick, rhythmic speaking clearly did not begin with Hip Hop's version of rap—it can be found in many world cultures: *Djeliya*, Kabuki theater, R&B, and preexisting Western poetic and theatrical forms, such as opera recitative, Gilbert and Sullivan patter songs, and the lyrics of Tom Lehrer, as well as the practice of auctioneering (not without its own historical resonance).

The tradition of Jamaican toasting and dub music incorporated the patter of U.S. radio DJs from the 1950s and may have found its way back to the United States via Caribbean immigrants and their children, who themselves became the first DJs and Emcees of Hip Hop culture (Hebdige 1987). The intensity and lyricism of the sung-spoken, rhythmic storytelling of the *Djelis* of Mali and Senegal feel like a not-so-distant relation to rap and spoken word. These epic tales and praise songs resound with the same urgency and import that rap represents to its generations of listeners.

Soul legend James Brown is frequently identified as one of the first rappers. Other early influences oft-cited in Hip Hop scholarship include Linton Kwesi Johnson, H. Rap Brown, Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Eddie Jefferson, Jon Hendricks, preachers, bluesmen and blueswomen, such as Muddy Waters, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey, and poets of the late 1960s and early 1970s

(Baker 1991). The Last Poets (David Nelson, Gylan Kain, and Abiodun Oye-wole) helped ignite “rhythm and poetry” as a sociopolitical form of cultural performance, a precursor to some Hip Hop Theater. The group was born on the anniversary of Malcolm X’s birthday, May 19, 1968, in Marcus Garvey Park and dropped their first album *Last Poets* in 1970. They have frequently been referenced as the predecessors to rap groups such as Public Enemy.

Gil Scott-Heron—whose first album *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* also appeared in 1970—similarly mixed political poetry over music and a beat. The Last Poets and Scott-Heron added soul and funk to their soundtracks, and the meter of the poetry and its dramatic effect became deeply imbricated with the music (for example, the dialogue with the drumming at the end of Scott-Heron’s “Whitey on the Moon”). The Watts Prophets from Los Angeles formed in 1967 and, similarly, recorded protest poetry, sometimes with musical accompaniment—their third album was titled *Rappin’ Black in a White World* (1971). In addition, the Watts Prophets are cited as a major influence in rap and Hip Hop poetry (Powell 1991; Ankeny 2008; Sapp in Burnham 2005; Decker 1993). Other poets that have deeply influenced (and, in many cases, taught) Hip Hop and Hip Hop Theater generation performers include Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Pedro Pietri, Gwendolyn Brooks, Louis Reyes Rivera, Sekou Sundiata . . . and the list goes on.

In the 1970s, writers experimented with new forms that combined multiple elements of performance, resulting in a re-fusing of what had been separated by social realism. The Black Arts Movement produced a wealth of nonlinear poetic and political drama. The choreopoem, a term coined in relation to ntozake shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1974)—a collection of poems staged as an ensemble, total theater piece with an emphasis on physicality and embodiment—became its own genre. *Sister Son/ji* (1969) by Sonia Sanchez, a poetic one-act that preceded *for colored girls*, paved the way for this type of performance; and others carried it on, such as the group Thought Music (founded by Laurie Carlos, Robbie McCauley, and Jessica Hagedorn in the 1980s) in their piece *Teenytown* (1988) and other groundbreaking work. McCauley’s *Sally’s Rape* soon followed in 1989, and today it is not unusual for artists to reintegrate in their plays the multiple essential components of live theater—text, music, and movement—such as Talvin Wilks (*Tod the Boy Tod*, 1990), Carl Hancock Rux (*Geneva Cottrell, Waiting for the Dog to Die*, 1991, and *Who ’Dat Who Killed Better Days Jones*, 1993), Sharon Bridgforth (*Con/flama*, 2000), Daniel Alexander Jones (*Phoenix Fabrik*, 2002), and Universes (*Slanguage*, 2001 and *Eyewitness Blues*, 2005). What these pieces have in

common are poetic diction, often nonlinear sequencing, and a focus on the personal narratives of disenfranchised peoples.

There were also clear predecessors to Hip Hop Theater on Broadway. Melvin van Peebles's *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* (1971) was a spoken word, jazz, gospel, R&B, soul portrait of Harlem street life; Micki Grant's *Don't Bother Me I Can't Cope* (1972) used poetry and song to express the life struggles of young African Americans. Shange's *for colored girls* (1975) and Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* (which premiered in 1978 at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles before transferring to Broadway in 1979) influenced several generations of theater artists through both their form and content. Many Hip Hop Theater practitioners owe a historical stylistic debt to Douglas Turner Ward's Negro Ensemble Co. (founded in 1967) and Dr. Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theatre (1968). Dr. Teer saw her actors as "activators" and "liberators" who created community-driven, socially relevant art (Thomas in Harrison, Walker, and Edwards 2002, 361; Benston 2000). While she began her research in 1968, her building finally opened in Harlem in 1990, and the company still exists today, after her death in 2008, training new generations of performer/educator/activists under the name the Institute of Action Arts. At the New Federal Theatre, Woody King began in 1970 producing theater that focused on the "African American experience," supporting a wide variety of ethnic and cultural writing, including many of the pieces and genres discussed above (New Federal Theatre 2004).

These are just some of the New York companies. Theaters across the nation—such as Jennifer Nelson's work in DC, John O'Neal's Junebug Productions in New Orleans, and Rhodessa Jones and Idris Ackamoor's Cultural Odyssey in San Francisco—have long experimented with performance styles that draw on elements of ritual married with political content. Some of these groups are nationally known, while some have existed mainly in communities—church groups, community centers, schools, dance theater, or even young (and not so young) people creating a vehicle on their own to have their stories told and acknowledged—and have not been on the radar of institutional U.S. theater. As Marc Bamuthi Joseph writes in his inspiring essay "(Yet Another) Letter to a Young Poet," "Everyone is in your cipher" (in Chang 2006, 13). People have been ciphering for as long as they could form a circle—it is the collective consciousness of the community, a way in which we "see" and "know" each other. It is also a way people maintain the well-being of their community. It is how non-ego-driven art is made and where skills are practiced and emotional release is encouraged in a safe environment. Are all these theaters predecessors to, or current practitioners of, Hip Hop Theater? I would suggest that all forms of political and/or culturally

specific theater are, in some way, in dialogue with each other—for, in a country that encourages assimilation, to be culturally specific is an act of resistance. The history of these institutions does not exist hierarchically, but horizontally, in a discursive plane of the simultaneous resistance to dominant power and the celebration of survival. All the works listed above exist on a continuum of aesthetics and politics that are inextricable.

Early Hip Hop Theater pieces in the United States or pieces that were influential and groundbreaking to the genre include Dael Orlandersmith's one-woman, spoken-word dramas, *Beauty's Daughter* (1995), *Monster* (1996), and *The Gimmick* (1998); Danny Hoch's solo performances *Some People* (1994) and *Jails, Hospitals, and Hip Hop* (1998); Sarah Jones's *Surface Transit* (1998) and *Bridge and Tunnel* (2004, produced by Meryl Streep off-and on Broadway); Hip Hop Theatre Junction's *Rhyme Deferred* (1998); and Will Power's one-man, multicharacter, neighborhood-oriented shows, *The Gathering* (2001) and *Flow* (2003). Original members of the Rock Steady Crew, calling themselves The Rhythm Technicians, performed what is often billed as the first Hip Hop Theater musical. *So, What Happens Now?* (1991) played at PS 122 in New York City to high acclaim and was followed by *Jam on the Groove* (1995) at the Minetta Lane Theater. Playwright Robert Alexander's work in the middle and late 1990s is cited as a bridge between first- and second-generation Hip Hop-influenced plays. Alexander has mentored writers such as Claudia Alick and young writers in the Bay Area and is coeditor of an anthology of Hip Hop Theater, *Playz from the Boom Box Galaxy* (2009) with Kim Euell, a dramaturg and another important ally to Hip Hop Theater practitioners.⁸

There are Broadway shows that were either Hip Hop Theater or have a shared aesthetic and audience draw. *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* (1995) was a history of the African American experience told through tap dance that began off-Broadway at the Public Theater and then transferred to Broadway for a successful run of almost three years. It was choreographed by Hip Hop gen'er Savion Glover with poetry text by reg e gaines, a godfather to Hip Hop Theater and generous mentor to a generation of poets and artists. *Def Poetry Jam on Broadway* (2002) was clearly Hip Hop, but garnered much debate in "theater" circles as to whether it was theater. To me, this is a moot point, when considering the young audiences it attracted who had the opportunity to listen to their own stories being told in a Broadway theater through a familiar and empowering vernacular.

John Leguizamo's solo shows *Mambo Mouth* (1991), *Spic-O-Rama* (1992),

8. Alexander and Euell's book was released as this anthology was going to print.

and *Freak* (1998) attracted young audiences of color to Broadway shows in great numbers. And, in *Drowning Crow* (2004), Regina Taylor's intricate adaptation of *The Seagull*, the theatrical experiments of Constantine Trip (aka C-Trip, the character formerly known as Treplev in Anton Chekhov's original) were in an interdisciplinary rapped form that can only be described as Hip Hop Theater. In addition to its content, the play starred several actor-rappers, including Anthony Mackie, best known for his work in the film *8 Mile* (2002) and *Up Against the Wind* (2001), a theatrical ode to Tupac Shakur by Michael Develle Winn.

Other pioneers who have moved and innovated the form include Marc Bamuthi Joseph, Aya de Leon, Baba Israel, Hanifah Walidah, Dan Wolf, Tommy Shepherd, Psalmayene 24, Angela Kariotis, Nilaja Sun, Piper Anderson, and Vanessa Hidary; the companies Hip Hop Theatre Junction, Felonious, Progress Theatre, Universes; the numerous playwrights and performers in this anthology, as well as Eisa Davis, Christina Anderson, Claudia Alick, Zell Miller III, and many more. Performance poets such as Toni Blackman, Dennis Kim, Chinaka Hodge, Willie Perdomo, reg e gaines, Jessica Care Moore, Liza Jessie Peterson, and Pandora Scooter have helped theater artists think through the nature of this work and in building the genre.

Dance companies also experiment with form and content, integrating poetry and DJing, and choreographers have collaborated with more narrative theater artists. Such groups include Rennie Harris's Puremovement, Olive Dance Co., and Kwikstep and Rockafella's Full Circle Productions. DJs have worked hard to make this genre complete—Reborn, Center, Excess, Spooky, Mohammed Bilal, and Tendaji Lathan, among many others. International artists who have made an impact in the United States and with whom the Hip-Hop Theater Festival and other institutions have collaborated include Jonzi D, Benji Reid, and Kwesi Johnson (all from the UK, working with dance/movement and experimenting with form and storytelling techniques), Storm (France/Germany), Made in 'Da Shade (Netherlands), and Godessa (performance poetry from South Africa). This is an embarrassingly incomplete list that could go on for pages and I beg the indulgence of the many important artists whose names do not appear here. I only start it to give the reader a sense of how quickly Hip Hop Theater—as a movement, as a practice, as a genre, and as a marketing tool—has spread in the past ten years.

SO WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED HIP HOP THEATER?

Today, there are Hip Hop Theater courses being taught on college campuses across the country; Hip Hop Theater camps; Hip Hop Theater festivals,

whether commercially produced or university-sponsored; grants, panels, and conferences all dedicated to Hip Hop Theater. It is a salient moment to consider, “What is Hip Hop bringing to theater?” Here are some possible answers, as well as subsequent questions. After reading the plays in this book, I hope you, the reader, will add to this discussion.

Hip Hop brings to U.S. theater the voice of today. While clearly building on the past, Hip Hop Theater represents the creative energy as well as the political and social concerns of young people.

Hip Hop Theater is “avant-garde”—it creates new forms that work against the mainstream or dominant forms of theater and that utilize and advance technology in the process. Yet while Hip Hop Theater’s resistance is against mainstream theatrical forms, Hip Hop reflects popular culture, making Hip Hop Theater unique as both avant-garde and “popular.”

As such, Hip Hop Theater also embodies and introduces an important dialogue about theater and class. On the one hand, its appeal to young audiences outside the mainstream suggests how elitist traditional theater is; yet Hip Hop Theater also risks elitism on several levels. Many of the best-known practitioners are college-educated professional artists with theater backgrounds and so-called formal education and theater training. However, as described above, there is also Hip Hop Theater happening in neighborhoods and communities across the country—but does this work receive the designation “theater,” or is the term being used only in certain contexts, venues, and states of professional development? Much of Hip Hop Theater is still “popular,” a designation that depends on where a given show is performed, how produced and marketed, and how expensive the tickets are. Nevertheless, an increasing number of Hip Hop Theater productions cross over to commercial realms that may not feel inviting to some Hip Hop Theater audiences. Many practitioners, as well as producing organizations, are working to bridge this divide.

Although conceptually Hip Hop Theater is not that new (every generation has its own version of resistant theater), it is unique in the ways it blends particular elements of popular culture and theater; the incredible variety this synergy produces; and how this form reflects the diversity of Hip Hop and of the United States as a whole. Hip Hop Theater tells the stories of folks whose faces are not usually seen consistently or in great number on “mainstream,” institutional theater stages (or in mainstream theater audiences, with some notable exceptions).

Hip Hop Theater has progressed rapidly in its relatively short lifetime and there is no shortage of artists working in or around this form. Many theaters and producers have had an important hand in supporting the growth of this genre.⁹ *American Theatre* magazine, the publication of Theatre Communications Group, has also been a key proponent of the form—in 2004 senior editor Randy Gener ran a five-feature series focusing on Hip Hop Theater, its practitioners, and the politics of production within the U.S. theater landscape. This series put in-depth, firsthand accounts of Hip Hop Theater into the hands of artistic and managing directors of well-funded institutional theaters, as well as subscribers and other arts professionals in the United States and abroad. Yet Hip Hop Theater also faces key challenges as it becomes better known and mainstream theaters become more and more curious about its power to attract different demographic groups to their institutions. One crucial issue is the need for better criticism. Hip Hop Theater needs reviewers and critics who have the background to assess it based on its own aesthetic principles and logic, instead of a more traditionally Eurocentric lens or one that primarily values realism. Serious Hip Hop Theater criticism requires an appreciation of the cultural and aesthetic logic of the form and an ability to help translate these complexities for a wider audience.

Another challenge that Hip Hop Theater faces as it enters the mainstream is the danger of commodification, as echoed in KRS-One's statement: "Sometime around 1990, Hiphop the culture became Hiphop the product" (KRS-One 2003, 198). Hip Hop Theater faces the same dilemma that Hip Hop does, as its founding artists are getting older, having families, and trying to make a full-time living off their work in this form. How do we keep the "authenticity" of Hip Hop Theater *and* have a relationship with the market that, by nature, has a history of mass marketing and diluting cultural production? This challenge leads to the question, "Who defines Hip Hop Theater?" Is it a term that is more useful to presenters and producers than to artists? Does anyone "own" the designation? Who has the right to be the arbiter of what is Hip Hop Theater and what is not? What happens when people from outside of the culture create stories that have very little to do with Hip Hop—or, even worse, reveal their prejudices about Hip Hop and Hip Hoppers—and mass-market a commercial show with suspect val-

9. These include the Public Theater (New York), Harlem Stage, New Jersey Performing Arts Center, New York Theatre Workshop, the Marc Taper Forum (Los Angeles), Berkeley Rep, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, PS 122 (New York), Under the Radar, Centerstage (New York), Actors Theater of Louisville (Kentucky), Children's Theatre of Minneapolis, New WORLD Theater (Massachusetts), La Jolla Playhouse, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Theatre Royal Stratford East (United Kingdom), Contact Theatre (Manchester, UK), and quite a few others that have supported artists and projects, both on the commercial and the community side.

ues and artistry? Is it Hip Hop Theater if it is near and for the people, but not by? Is Hip Hop Theater destined to go the route of Hip Hop music, in terms of its commercialization and deracination of intent and core cultural values?

Some prominent practitioners such as Universes and Zakiyyah Alexander eschew the label *Hip Hop Theater*. My students often express ambivalence over the name, simultaneously asserting, “We love Hip Hop Theater” while resisting being “defined” by a brand. Is the label *Hip Hop Theater* necessary? Is the form, itself, only a fad, as was repeatedly said about Hip Hop music? What happens when Hip Hop Theater allies itself with commercial institutions—what will become of the genre when their interest fades (or if they begin to lose subscribers)?

The practitioners of Hip Hop Theater have been asking themselves these questions for a decade—and continue to do so. We don’t all necessarily agree. Nor do we need to. Unsurprisingly, we sometimes seem to disagree with ourselves in the same sentence and we change our minds over time. Nevertheless, we keep making the work, trying to reach new audiences, and bringing our communities into the theater. We work to renew the engagement between people and art, having art reflect the lives of society at large, across all lines of culture, class, and color.

What distinguishes Hip Hop Theater more and more is this engagement with community. Rarely does a Hip Hop Theater artist only perform at night. During the day she is giving workshops with youth and community members; he is doing his own pamphleting on the streets of inner-city neighborhoods or downtown to try to attract young people into the theater; they are facilitating community dialogues about the issues raised by the work, or the state of Hip Hop, or the negative reputation that Hip Hop has garnered—thanks to the music industry—as violent, misogynistic, and overly identified with greed or capitalism. Hip Hop Theater practitioners and artists are working intergenerationally to promote healing in communities. We are attempting to document a community’s history, challenges, needs, stories, and cultural resources. We are facilitating youth creating their own work, using their own voices, skills, and obsessions as source material—serving as conduits for us all to “write ourselves into existence.”

Hip Hop theater addresses ethnicity, class, culture, gender, sexuality, and generation—it is a theater of the issues that confront not just young people, but the whole world. This anthology includes plays such as *Goddess City* that, through poetry, dare to dream of a better world for people in general and women in particular. There are pieces such as *Dreamscape* and *Deep/Azure* that depict their protagonists’ relationship to power structures, most

notably the police; plays that depict the impact of Hip Hop on the lives of its adherents, such as *Welcome To Arroyo's*, *In Case You Forget*, and *Blurring Shine*; and works such as *You Wanna Piece of Me?* and *Low* that, through innovations in storytelling, employ verse, rhythm, and/or DJing to mix and re-mix the lives and narratives of young people and reveal the challenges of growing up in the age of Hip Hop. As with everything Hip Hop, these descriptions are not exclusive of each other—each piece belongs to several of these categories. More information about the plays, productions, and authors can be found on the website <http://www.press.umich.edu/special/hiphop/>. Also on the website is an additional work, *From Tel Aviv to Ramallah*, a full-length beatbox performance piece that looks at the role Hip Hop culture serves among young people in a conflict zone.

Those of us who work in Hip Hop Theater have seen the genre's effectiveness in uniting people and promoting understanding between and among cultural groups. It is the theater the world desperately needs at this particular moment in history as we contemplate the sustainability of the planet and the future of capitalism as a viable economic structure. Hip Hop Theater is the theater of now.