Many hiphoppas labour to sustain Hip hop Kulture in their communities far from the big stages, world tours, and hit singles enjoyed by a shockingly few American hiphoppas. The creative labour of these few mega starts is calculated in billions of dollars. But for most hiphoppas, their creative labour may never get expressed in economic terms. Instead it is expressed in social capital, the production of collective and individual subjectivities, the bonds of love that build and hold communities together, and the healing of broken hearts, broken homes, and broken neighborhoods in broken cities. Hip hop Kulture 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.

"I ain't going to front, academics talking about hip hop scares me and often pisses me off. I'm protective about this culture like it's my own baby because it's meant so much to me and my close friends. In my less angry moments I do appreciate the fact that this culture still has so much to give to the rest of the world and that the next level is what we give back. Well, we need allies in this complex world to move things forward. As I've gotten to know Michael I consider him such an Ally and that his intent is firmly squared in empowering cats in the front lines. I also really dig the fact that he is committed to helping document the histories of those who laid the groundwork in the Edmonton scene. This is the respectful place to start. I look forward to bearing witness to Grass roots Hip hop reclaiming its voice and being at the forefront with academics supporting their community efforts." – Stephen "Buddha" Lesloor, Founder of the Canadian Floor Masters, Founder of Blueprintforlife.ca, Ashoka Fellow, Social Worker and an aging bboy!

"Dr. Michael B. MacDonald's research into Hip Hop's pedagogical ingenuity have not only led us to the grassroots of Hip hop's rich and vibrant global culture, but to the very Ethos of Hip Hop. With bold examination, this exciting research stands at the forefront of contemporary post colonial Hip hop literature." – Andre Hamilton aka Dre Pharoh, Executive Director Cipher5 Hip hop Academy, Temple of Hip Hop Canada

Cover image by Andre Hamilton
Remix and Life Hack in Hip Hop
YOUTH, MEDIA AND CULTURE SERIES

Volume 6

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Taking the notion of critical youth studies, this series features top scholars in critical media and youth studies. Coupling edgy topics with a critical theoretical lens, volumes explore the impact of media and culture on youth … and the impact of youth on media and culture.
Remix and Life Hack in Hip Hop

Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Music

Michael B. MacDonald

MacEwan University, Canada
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Some chapters were originally published and have been reprinted here with permission:


To see Cipher5 in action please check out: my film *Megamorphesis: 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. Hiphop Kulture 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 Hiphop Kulture 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. Hiphop Kulture 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. 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
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?

Hip hop 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. 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 Hip hop 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 Hip hop 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 marketplace. 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...
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 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
introduction

Knowledge” (1992) how, through auto-poiesis 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 complementarily 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
INTRODUCTION

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
struggle into the 21st century is played out everywhere. We live within a system of aesthetic resources that we can no longer see the outside of. As writers in second-order cybernetics have argued:

If reality is conceived as a cognitive construct, as an effect or correlate of observation, then descriptions of reality become descriptions of observation. When observation becomes an integral part of reality, it can no longer be understood as a kind of Archimedean Point—such as the one Descartes claimed to have found in his Meditations. There is no one place where all that is certainly real can be grounded. Observation loses its simplicity—an observer can no longer observe reality without taking into account its very observation as a generating element of reality. A constructivist view of reality directs the attention of observation of the observation of reality. It becomes second-order observation—and the theory of second-order observation is called second-order cybernetics. Second-order cybernetics is concerned with the reality-construction of observing systems. (Moeller, 2006, 71)

As I will explore in more detail, and from a number of critical directions throughout the text Kant looked at the art object in the 18th century, Walter Benjamin looked at the machines that mechanically reproduced art objects in the early 20th century, Howard Becker looked at the industrial processes that produced the artworld of the late 20th century, but now we can no longer objectify the system. I cannot see an outside. The machines of aesthetic reproduction swallow up life and our scholarship must chase this down the rabbit hole. I build myself with aesthetic resources that swirl around me, I build myself by observing others, when I am integrated within social groups, excluded from others, conscious of my body and trying to put all of this together. For an observer, the question is not whether or not my observations are real or true but whether or not there is consciousness of the impact of these forces at work. It is not enough for an observer to observe, but also to engage in a thoughtful, heartful observation, to ask what the implications will be if I choose to use these particular aesthetic resources as I build myself. It is no longer a discussion of observation and feeling but now also one of design. The observer is not distant of the system being observed but is a constituent of the system. As Joe Kincheloe (2005) has argued, it is necessary to move towards critical constructivism, to recognize that knowledge construction must also contend with forces of power. I would like to push this further, to see subjectivity as a construction.

TOWARDS A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF MUSIC

In critical youth media education practice, it is necessary to theorize along with students the forces of aesthetic governmentality (domination) and techniques of aesthetic subjectivation (formation of subjectivity) that form the ethico-aesthetic strata I call aesthetic systems. I take aesthetics to be the study of the field of communication resources used in expressive practices that contribute
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to the shaping of a field of *self and society*. These forces are emerging from the ongoing information revolution, emergent communication technologies, along with techniques of culture and the dominating techno-hegemonic force called hyperreality (Baudrillard). The domination of media culture and the minimum preparation of students for critical analysis of hyperreality has left the accompanying social transformations unchecked. Specifically, this analysis must focus on the capitalist mutations that expand production, exchange, and consumption of products to include the production of collective and individual subjectivities. Gary Genosko (2012), writing about Jean Baudrillard, said “welcome to the machine…ideology is embedded in the social relations [that] the forms of media dictate and induce. Media are thoroughly ideological” (76). Cognitive capitalism “produces and domesticates the living on a scale never before seen” (Boutang, 2011, 48) not eliminating material industrial production but reorganizing, remodeling, and incorporating the production of *subjectivity* under the rubrics of *financialisation*. We are products of the machinic assemblages of semicapitalism, said Felix Guattari and Franco Berardi and we “emphasize that entire circuits and overlapping and communicating assemblages integrate cognitive labour and the capitalistic exploitation of its content” (Genosko, 2012, 150) where “the mind, language and creativity [are the] primary tools for the production of value” (Berardi, 2009, 21). This emergence of *semiocapitalism* requires a new theorization of the production of subjectivity, subject and identity within aesthetic systems. As semiocapitalism incorporates life within the production of value, it transforms social relationships in two observable ways, by: (a) transforming schools in the image of neoliberalism (see Henry Giroux) and (b) transforming anthropological culture into market culture. It is this second aspect that I want to examine because it is here where contemporary political action may be located, in either a resistance to market culture, or alternatively, community economic development within market culture.

My research begins with the premise that theories of resistance have tended towards dismissing the cultural industries (Adorno), but that successful movements have emerged from liberated spaces, zones of autonomous cultural production within the creative marketplace. For instance, a critical historiography of resistant youth culture would illustrate that aesthetic governmentality within hyperreality has been challenged over and over again by youth aesthetic movements. Whether it is folk, rock, punk, or Hiphop these aesthetic movements are guerrilla incursions into urban youth sensibility. Youth are innovating upon technologies and techniques of the manipulation of sensibility for the construction of new forms of individual and collective subjectivity. When we say youth culture—this is what we are really saying, and this lesson must be used against the hegemony of European aesthetic philosophy that continues to exclude. The implications of this exclusion are not just issues of funding, grants, and government support of youth artists, but also exclusion of subject areas from schools. Globally students are still learning more about Shakespeare, Mozart and Beethoven then they are the poets, musicians, and playwrights that live and work in their communities. Why are we not working with
youth to critically develop a practical philosophy of sensibility? There are some examples of how schools support the development of local creativity, but these examples are few. But in just about any town you will find young people engaged in practical aesthetic philosophy, but you will rarely find their words in books.

This collection of essays is drawn from four years of community-engaged research in Hiphop Kulture in Edmonton, Alberta. Along the way, as a testament to community-engaged research, we have developed innovative methods of inquiry, methods of historiography, and methods of community media studies. *Remix and Life Hack* contributes to critical studies of media culture by adding a community-engaged research framework but also by informing this practice with Foucault’s later theoretical work on subjectification and the aesthetics of self, Deleuze and Guattari’s nomadic theories of subjectivity, Guattari’s theories of machinic enslavement, and all organized around Paulo Freire’s *culture circle*.

My interest in public aesthetics education arises from the transformation of globalizing network that are rocked by waves of social, cultural, economic and environmental crises. With only few exceptions, student learning is informed by what scholarly siloes deem to be important and not by the need to develop capacities to respond to a world in crisis. When we talk about the crises we are facing it is important not to abstract it, to mystify it and blame it on “the market”. As folk singer and labour activist Utah Phillips was fond of saying, “The earth is not dying, it is being killed, and those who are killing it have names and addresses.” We are working on developing a language to challenge rogue or *Zombie Capitalism* (Harman, 2010). For streams of cultural studies inspired by the Frankfurt School the study of the social, cultural, and psychological impacts of the emergence of capitalism are not new. Marx made many observations in the early days of industrial capitalism that are still relevant today. As we move through postindustrial capitalism into financial capitalism and the emerging semiocapitalism, or whatever it will be called, many systems of exclusion and inequality have only grown more intense, and certainly more global. These emergent systems are impacting sensibility.

And though we have known for some time that this system damages we seem unable to make any significant change. Before cultural studies emerged, philosophers were already troubling over the fact that voters and workers would actively make decisions that were against their own interests. How does this happen? The theory of ideology was proposed and explored in a variety of interesting ways. From Marxist scholarship to the work that poststructuralists undertook to bring, as Deleuze and Guattari did in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, to bring Marx and Freud together.

But if we look elsewhere we find praxis, where street based critical theory emerges from and is supported by action. Hiphop Kulture for instance, encouraged autonomy and a practice of thoughtful self-creation. In these essays I attempt to do three things at the same time: (a) replace European aesthetic philosophy with a new study of sensibility; (b) discuss Hiphop Kulture as an aesthetic system that opens new lines of inquiry into the relationship between subjectivity, sensibility,
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media and local urban spaces; and (c) locate public aesthetics education as a practice that supports local culture, defined as the sustainable reproduction of techniques of aesthetic production. These three points move towards complexification of music studies and music education philosophy towards a critical pedagogy of music.

NOTES

1 Discussion about culture in cultural studies.
2 In particular the cooperative economic innovations that have only recently been published.
3 http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674504806
SECTION I
AESTHETIC SYSTEMS THEORY FOR A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF POPULAR MUSIC
AESTHETIC SYSTEMS THEORY

Doing Hip Hop Research Together at Cipher5

INTRODUCTION

Aesthetic education is involved in the production of subjectivity. From Plato (2000), to Matthew Arnold (1932), to Theodor Adorno (1977, 1991), it has been understood that youth are moulded by cultural education. Plato encouraged art education that would influence the development of youth taste in ways that would support the state. Arnold worried about the loss of high culture with the rise of cultural industries, and Adorno worried popular culture produced by cultural industries threatened to transform people into empty-headed consumers. These thinkers were all concerned about the relationship between aesthetic education and the formation of a “proper” subjectivity.

From the earliest theorizations of aesthetics and aesthetic education, the production of a “proper” subjectivity was key. Frederick Schiller argues that by learning to understand beauty, the “handmaid of pure intellectual culture” (1954, 11), morality and consciousness develop. From the 1950s to the 1980s, Canadian music education was guided by this humanist philosophy of aesthetic education (Wasiak, 2013, 29). It has since been argued that aesthetics has an overly narrow focus on the “musical work” (McCarthy & Goble, 2002), does not include a multiplicity of musical practices (Regelski, 1996), cannot be inclusive (Bowman, 1993), and that “a truly musical experience is not aesthetic in its nature or value” (Elliot, 1995, 125). Feeling that aesthetic education was too philosophical, critics have offered an action-based (or “praxial”) music education philosophy that is “thriving in music education circles despite wishful thinking to the contrary by its detractors” (Regelski, 2011, 61). Heidi Westerlund however, while recognizing praxialism as a highly relevant approach, has suggested that “a reconstruction of the aesthetic may be possible without losing the important perspective of music as praxis” (2003, 46).

Unlike Westerlund, I do not think it is necessary or advisable to reach back to humanist aesthetics in music education. At the same time, I disagree with Regelski that “aesthetic speculations and abstractions are simply not needed to account for music’s obvious affective appeal and for its manifold paraxial functions” (2011, 72). There is more to music performance than the playing of notes, and it is a history of experiences with these features that led to the creation of aesthetics in the first place. The way forward is a re-theorization of aesthetic theory and this redefinition need not be radical. A suitable aesthetic theory only requires acknowledging something that
has been asserted since Plato: that the production of subjectivity and the production of art are intertwined in aesthetic education.

Praxialists argue that performing music is enough for music education, but it seems unlikely that only the performance of notes occurs during the performance of school music. It is necessary to point out here that praxialists forward their argument without recognizing the significance of the school music program as the context of music production. Praxialists treat the context of music performance unproblematically as if the music school is not already a cultural field into which music students are enculturated. While I agree with the praxialist critique of humanist aesthetics, I believe that there are still questions about aesthetic education that need to be answered. My concern is that ignoring or dismissing aesthetics risks obscuring educational processes, risks an anti-intellectualism in art production and obstructs theoretical pathways to our understanding of the function of symbolic systems in the formation of social groups and individuals.

In response to these concerns, I am developing a theory of aesthetic systems as an attempt to explain how music performance is an educational process that uses aesthetic resources to produce art objects and that through the making, sharing and using of artworks, group and individual subjectivities are produced. Aesthetic Systems Theory (AST) begins with the assumption that there are no uneducated musicians, but many unschooled ones. Through the study of music learning processes (both in and out of formal schools), researchers might access the dense systems of knowledge production that create aesthetics systems. The term “aesthetic systems” can be understood within a local traditional music community, a small and newly developing experimental group or a contemporary global musical movement like Hip Hop. “Aesthetic Systems” (AS), however, is not synonymous with genre, although genre may be an expression of AS within a capitalist system. AS is also not synonymous with culture. It is instead a theory of how aesthetic resources are used to produce a single system within complex systems we call culture. I propose AST as an approach to the cultural study of music. My formulation of AST emerges from cultural studies, critical pedagogy and the ethico-aesthetics of Felix Guattari.

AST attempts to explain how, through the use of aesthetic resources, group and individual subjectivities are produced. It is therefore necessary to explain what I mean by subjectivities. I follow Felix Guattari who proposed the production of subjectivity in contrast to the philosophical and humanities subject. The subject, according to Guattari (2008), is treated as if it were a consequence of human nature, itself a consequence of the biological body. Subjectivity, he argues, is not produced through language use the way structuralists asserted, but is instead “manufactured just as energy, electricity, and aluminum are” (2008, 47). Individual subjectivities are produced at the “intersection of determinations of various kinds, not only social but economic, technologic, the media and so on” (Guattari, 2008, 48). Instead of aesthetics being used to develop a given subject in the way Schiller imagined, to lead a subject from “baser” nature (sensuous) to “higher” moral and critical nature, Guattari’s notion of the production of subjectivities highlights process. He suggests
that there is no reason to assume a subject as tabula rasa when it is evident that we are all born into an already existing complex social network through which we are moulded. Like Adorno, who argued that people are produced by culture industries, Guattari acknowledges the influence of group subjectivity, but unlike Adorno, Guattari argues that, through creativity, individual subjectivities emerge and complexify group subjectivity.

AST is about explaining how group subjectivities are produced through the making, sharing and using of aesthetic resources, and that within these group subjectivities and through the use of aesthetic resources, individual subjectivities can form. In traditional societies, this means local practices produce collective subjectivities sometimes called ethnicities, and that individual practices within this larger system leads to individual subjectivities. Global urban capitalist systems transform making, sharing and using into producing, exchanging and consuming. The work of global capitalist entertainment can be understood as producing collective subjectivities through the marketplace of aesthetic products and the art world (Becker, 1982). Guattari argues that it is necessary to understand how the introduction of global capitalism, what he calls “Integrated World Capitalism” (IWC) (2008, 53), changes the production of collective subjectivities, and the ways that consumption necessarily follows. If the formation of subjectivities requires aesthetic resources, but these resources are always products of mass consumption, how is any group subjectivity not always bound up with IWC? Guattari suggests the formation of liberated group subjectivities requires a micro-political move against mass production of IWC. This occurs in the localization of the production of subjectivities that Guattari calls “molecular revolutions” (2008: 61). This approach has been incorporated into cultural studies as mediation (Grossberg, 2010, 191).

Mediation is the point at which aesthetics and language, geographic, educational, political, social, sexual, economic systems intersect in the production of group and individual subjectivities. Understanding mediation requires community-engaged research that is capable of identifying key moments of mediation, or what Guattari calls “singularities.” Singularities are sometimes mapped when members of a community join together in critical dialogue to share narratives of mediation. I have developed a research method for AST that draws upon Paulo Freire’s culture circle (2010). I have used the culture circle method to study Hip Hop as an aesthetic system, with special attention on the production of Hiphop Kulture (a collective subjectivity) and hiphoppas (individual subjectivities) in a community-engaged research project called Cipher5.

A cypher is a Hiphop circle most often associated with Emcees or b-boys/b-girls but there are DJ cyphers as well. For Emcees, the cypher is a space to deliver freestyles (improvised rhyme over a beat) or to drop writtens (deliver pre-written rhymes) around the circle. But cypher can also refer to stream-of-consciousness delivery in rhyme. This kind of freestyle flow, something I have previously called “epistemological flow” (MacDonald, 2012), is often taken as a sign of mastery of emceeing. Cipher, spelled with an i, refers to processes of encryption and decryption.
In this sense, a cipher is a space where it is possible to deconstruct the production of subjectivity in a knowledge circle. The “five” in Cipher5 refers to knowledge as the fifth element of Hip hop Kulture after emceeing, graffiti, b-boying/b-girling, and DJing. Cipher5 is a cypher that brings together hiphoppas, students and professional researchers to produce and share knowledge about Hip hop Kulture. Cipher5 meets every Tuesday night at 7:00 pm at a local community centre. Participants and facilitators organize chairs in a circle (a cipher) and use the sound system, projector and computer for sharing videos, songs and other online content related to Hip hop Kulture.

My research into the learning processes in Hip hop Kulture developed from what I perceived to be a lack of cultural studies in music education research. It was as if, on the one hand, music schools had no culture and, on the other, that music cultures in “the street” had no educational strategies. I was interested in showing that aesthetic systems like Hip Hop produce subjectivities, using learning processes to do so. I hypothesized that if learning practices can be shown to produce subjectivities, then it is possible to respond to praxialists who imply that music schools do not have aesthetic systems. They certainly don’t explain how these systems contribute to the production of student subjectivity. They do not acknowledge that aesthetic education produces subjectivity, and that school music might therefore be a place to produce experimental collective subjectivities that can be of benefit to the local community.

This chapter illustrates the way in which a community-engaged research practice can highlight the relationship between a music culture and the production of subjectivities. The starting assumption is that youth are already fully engaged in culture, and that in a democracy we do not need to follow the humanist aesthetics approach of instilling culture in our students from positions of power, but instead provide teachers and students with opportunities and capacities to make decisions about their participation in culture and the role it plays in the production of their group and individual subjectivities. Instead of making aesthetic decisions for youth, or obscuring the existence of aesthetics, we might instead develop an approach to art education that is a ‘critical’ study of aesthetic systems. I believe this will lead to the type of music education many profess to want, one devoted to the development of healthy group subjectivities engaged in critical consciousness or, in Paulo Freire’s word, conscientização (2000).

Conscientização “can be literally translated as the process used to raise somebody’s awareness” (Cruz, 2013: 171). It is, however, richer than this; it is

the process in which men [and women], not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality. (Freire, 1985: 93)

Conscientização is liberatory. Through critical education, subjects free themselves from an oppressor-oppressed dialectic that Hegel formulated as a master-slave narrative (Blunden, 2013, 11–28). They are able to do this, Freire theorizes, because
they are capable of identifying social forces Gramsci called hegemony (Mayo, 2013, 53–64) and overcoming a built-in fear of freedom (Lake & Dagostino, 2013, 101–126). Like Schiller, Freire takes the student to be a humanist subject that is born into oppression. Unlike Schiller, however, Freire was working with actual oppressed indigenous people in Brazil. I am building on Freire’s notion of conscientização, a critical consciousness that has to be built through community dialogue. But unlike Freire, I am arguing that conscientização is the critical production of group subjectivity.

I will leave whether or not our students are oppressed by universities or the cultural industries to another discussion. In this chapter, I will address the way Hip Hop aesthetic systems produce a Hip Hop subjectivity. To do this, I will propose a dialogic, community-engaged research method for aesthetic systems research that has been developed with members of the Edmonton hip-hop community.

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL CARTOGRAPHY OF AESTHETIC SYSTEMS

This article attempts to unfold many levels of aesthetic systems, and will continue by introducing a community-based dialogical research method for aesthetic systems modeled on the dialogical approach used in the famous Keil-Feld dialogues in Music Grooves (1994). Keil and Feld use transcribed dialogues as an attempt at producing a transparent and experimental knowledge production technique. This is a form of cartography, a kind of mapping. They built their method on Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s notions of dialogue, heteroglossia and multivocality, and on a secondary literature drawing from a broad list of disciplines (Keil & Feld, 1994, 13–14). Although I use this method, I have a different starting point: Paulo Freire’s dialogic education (2005, 87–124). Dialogue is “the encounter between [people], mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (86) and dialogue cannot occur between “those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them” (ibid.). It must be noted that Keil and Feld’s dialogue is between peers. Their exchange is famous because of the risks they took in moving outside of conventional academic method, providing new approaches but not necessarily accounting for the power differentials between the actors. I am taking a different approach. Following Freire, I am trying to create a cartographic technique within academic literature where those who are authorized to speak (Michael-as-professor), and those who are not (Andre-as-hiphoppa-community-member), can enter into dialogue with readers.

This is not without challenges. For one, I realize that my position as a white, male professor, regardless of my personal history, might hide power inequalities even from me, and this might lead to mistakes and assumptions on my part.

Power dynamics are difficult to spot. For instance, Keil and Feld do not justify the significance of their dialogue. They are both recognized scholars and experimenters, and as such their dialogic performance may stand uncontextualized as radical scholarship. And, in fact, this scholarly performance earned them a great deal of cultural capital. Andre and I are not Keil and Feld, so I have contextualized our
dialogue under the heading Context, which is followed by a conversation in the next section. Throughout the dialogue, Andre and I discuss our distinct perspectives and histories, and our motivations for the creation of Cipher5.

The inclusion of dialogue in this article layers information and methodology. This account offers a way of mapping flows between research partners that provides space for histories, subjectivities, methodologies and community. Cipher5 is both a research method and a community activity, and has both research and educational components. Andre and I are learning and sharing different things in different ways. I’m learning about Hip hop Kulture and research methods and Andre is learning about community organizing and university-community relations. We are learning about each other and ourselves. We are also learning how to navigate institutional structures, power relations, research dynamics and approaches to social knowledge formation. At the same time, we are clear about the educational mission we share: working to create an environment for the development of critical consciousness about Edmonton, one that makes visible the city’s social forces, racial divides, economic realities and socio-cultural challenges. Freire used dialogic teaching in culture circles for the production of critical consciousness. Andre and I have found that the longer people sit in the circle, the more critically aware we become about how inseparable we are from our aesthetics.

DIALOGIC RESEARCH: CONTEXT

A significant step in the development of aesthetic systems theory was my reading of Paulo Freire’s Education for Critical Consciousness (2010). Freire was working in literacy education with indigenous communities in Brazil when he came to recognize that he was stuck in an impossible situation. On the one hand, Brazil’s industrialization meant increased opportunities for many indigenous Brazilians. On the other hand, participation in industrialization required being literate in Portuguese. Literacy education, in this case, contributed to an ongoing history of colonialism. Instead of choosing between teaching literacy or not, he developed a model of politically informed literacy education called critical pedagogy. Freire’s principle was that you can teach something in a way that empowers learners. His hope was that critical pedagogy would allow learners to develop Portuguese literacy while seeing it as a cultural technology that is different from, but no better than, their own cultural technologies. When I was reading this, I saw similarities between the industrialization of Brazil and the globalization of cultural production. I asked myself whether I, as a music professor, could develop a pedagogical practice that acknowledges the global music industry while also respecting the locality of culture. I wanted a critical pedagogy of music to follow in Freire’s footsteps. I leaned heavily on Freire’s assertion that “the starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people” (2010, 95).
I created a university course about hip-hop culture, and with in-class support from Andre Hamilton, an Edmonton Hip Hop cultural specialist, we began to discuss how to do ethical research on local Hip Hop. We read Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012). Being in the classroom together revealed many shared interests, but we were also very different from one another. I grew up white in Cape Breton with Scottish Gaelic ancestry, while Andre grew up black in Edmonton with Jamaican ancestry. And yet there were similarities: we both grew up in Canada in small indie music markets that underwent exciting developments in the 1990s.

During the course, Andre introduced me to KRS-ONE’s *The Gospel of Hip Hop* (2009), which I read over the semester. On the last day of class, Andre suggested keeping our conversation going. Andre came up with the idea of Cipher5 as a knowledge circle that could use *The Gospel of Hip Hop* as a central text. Over the next two years, we meet weekly with a growing number of hiphoppas and music student researchers. Over this time, I began to develop AST as a way of explaining the relationship between the production of subjectivity and the production of Hip Hop. *The Gospel of Hip Hop* led to the creation of the Temple of Hip Hop (TOHH) in New York City, and the creation of chapters across the United States and a few elsewhere in the world. In Edmonton, Cipher5 led to a Hip Hop symposium in the spring of 2014 at which members of the TOHH were invited to give presentations. Following the symposium, Cipher5 was nominated to become the Temple of Hip Hop Canada, with Andre, my co-facilitator, named as its director. The following conversation between me and Andre took place soon after Cipher5 was acknowledged by TOHH NYC as TOHH Canada. We felt that we needed to explore the way Cipher5 had come into being, the way our work had become a focal point for our community energy and how, through a series of events, we were now part of a growing global Hip Hop network. Andre and I met at my Sound Cultures Lab at MacEwan University on February 10th and 13th 2012, and set up a recording device that was monitored by research assistants (RA) Diana Pearson and Roya Yazdanmehr, who later transcribed the conversation. I selected a section of the transcription for this paper. Sometimes Andre or I would begin to address the RAs to bring them up-to-date in the conversation, or to explain something that they didn’t know. I wanted the RAs present for precisely this reason: so that we could create a reflective process. The transcription follows, edited slightly to read as I had originally intended: a conversation between me and Andre. The RAs were not addressed directly but the self-histories were given for their benefit, and ultimately for the benefit of readers. It was interesting for me to discover new things about Andre’s history, and ultimately an alternative history of Cipher5, during this conversation. When I began the dialogue, I thought that my description covered both of us, but it turned out not to be so. Andre presented another version. Neither version is incorrect, and both are accurate. The dialogic exchange provided access to the multiplicities of mediation.
The Cipher has always been something of a natural formation in Hip Hop Culture. When I go back to the early-to-mid-80s when I was just basically a kid, 10, 11, 12 years old, [that’s when] hip-hop really began for me. Don’t get me wrong—Hip hop Kulture had been around for ten years before I discovered it. They said it started the year I was born.

I had some catching up to do, Edmonton being so displaced from New York, it took until ‘83 to come to fruition here. But breakdancing started after the Michael Jackson incident. Seeing that Michael Jackson had trained with a Los Angeles breakdancer and getting him up-to-speed on the hip new dancing that was started in America. What happened was on one of the Motown specials in 1983, when he debuted the *Thriller* album, he did a moonwalk across the stage and it just ROCKED the world! This one move … it delivered the *culture* to Edmonton.

All of a sudden, every mall was having big breakdance competitions, especially Londonderry [a mall in North Edmonton] for some reason. It was always at Londonderry or some Northside mall where they would have these huge competitions, I mean 2000 kids trying to get in. If you weren’t there three hours before the competition would start, you would never ever be able to see any performers. But naturally, ciphers would start forming around breakdancers. Even if people started spontaneously dancing, the cipher was always present. So it was a physical formation that seemed to be inherent with the culture, right from the start.

Cipher5 … you have to understand that when I started my journey into Hip hop Kulture, and studying it, I didn’t see any academic value. It was only after I met you, Michael, that I saw any academic value to what I was doing. But I had realized that I was a teacher. I had a certain kind of privilege, I had the support of my mother, and this is significant because I found myself in a situation where I knew I needed to be an MC. And in order to be an MC, I needed to teach myself a lot of stuff … quick. So I knew that I needed to become a musician, I needed to become an engineer, my own booking agent and manager, I had to conceptualize something fresh, new and relevant and I had to become a master of the English language. I had to do it pretty fast because I wanted it bad. So there were these areas that I needed to master, not just be proficient at—to be awesome at—in order to excel as an MC, as a “Hip Hop ictist.” There was no community of Hip Hop businessmen, Hip Hop producers, lyricists, DJs, there was no community. All I could do was look at what was coming out of New York in the mid-’80s and match it. I had to sit down for a couple months and really get my head around, “How am I going to pull this off?” So I had to teach myself English, okay? Good English. So I started by reading the dictionary and studying the rhyming dictionary that I found at a Cole’s bookshop—like a gift from God—one day! I’m like, “A rhyming dictionary!” I couldn’t believe it … I’m like, “Yeahhh,” you know? It was just my bible; I read it for all of grade 8 and half of grade 9.
I really became fascinated with people who were masters of the English language. So I found myself really drawn to law shows, and watching lawyers, studying lawyers in court, and how they just mesmerized judges and crowds. I found myself reciting and kind of performing music that was already coming out. So I was really good at listening to a verse and being able to just like, press pause, and memorize stuff really fast, which made me really good in school. All the memorization that was going on with all the hip-hop songs I was trying to learn made me really good at cramming for tests, and is actually probably the reason I got through school the way I did.

A cypher in my basement became a safe haven, a school, a research laboratory, sometimes it felt like a prison. It became a lot of things, and my mother let me just do my thing. My father was an internationally recognized reggae musician who was touring around with Peter Tosh and Bob Marley, so that was a mixed blessing because she understood the need to just let me go downstairs and do my music and to be left to just do my thing. But it was a mixed blessing because after a certain amount of time being a musician, she really pushed the whole “Plan B” thing, which didn’t help me much. It distracted me and made me doubt myself, you know? But there was a five-year period where I just stayed downstairs and taught myself how to master the English language, and how to produce music that was relevant, exciting and new. How to manage myself, how to compose, how to arrange, how to sell my music to local DJs, how to be able to call big corporate record companies and hustle phone calls until I was talking to A&R directors from all kinds of different labels. It taught me a lot of things, and how to manage myself, how to create this persona called Point Blank at the time.

This was completely solo. My younger brother was watching closely, but never claimed to be a Hip Hop artist. This was happening, just myself in the basement. What had happened was when I decided to announce that I was an MC, I announced it to a girl who happened to have a locker next to me in grade 10. I’m just like, “You know what? I’m an MC!” and she’s like, “really?” And I’m like, “Yeah. I’m an MC. Straight up!” I made this proclamation to her because she had a locker right next to me. Her name was Nicki Rodney. What had happened is, two weeks after I made that proclamation, I get this phone call from Nicki Rodney and she says, “You said you’re an MC, right?” And I was like, “Yeah,” and a man took the phone and he says “Listen, I’m Bailey and I’m bringing Ice T and the Rhyme Syndicate to Edmonton. Would you like to be their opening act and tour with them?” I was stunned. I mean, I actually whitened out … one of those defining moments in your life when you just see white. I accepted, but I had no real idea of what I was accepting ’cause I’d never really seen that many hip-hop shows anyways at that point. I didn’t know what was expected of me; I didn’t know what I was getting myself into. But I had three months to make it happen.

After I successfully rocked that show, something happened … my peers all over the city, you know, 3500 kids just like me, saw me doing it. And what that did for them is made them realize, “I can do it too!” which ignited a fire that just raged. So what ended up happening is, on a weekly basis—every weekend—I would have
five, ten, fifteen kids from God knows where, some of them would even come from other towns to ask if I would teach them. Or, “How can I do this? How do you do this? How do you do that? How did you do this-that-and-the-next?” And that was a responsibility I took extremely seriously, to educate my generation on how to do what I was doing so that I wasn’t alone, because it was a lonely life. It was just me doing it, and sure, I got off on it because I was the only one opening for every hip-hop act that ever came through Alberta for close to a decade.

So what ended up happening, I became a teacher. I was teaching my peers on all aspects of what I was doing. 182nd street [where I lived] was kind of a shady street, because we had six Edmonton housing project complexes all on this three-kilometer circular loop. With project living comes project thinking and lots of trouble. So I found myself grabbing kids who had creative potential, who were disciplined in school or in some other area of their lives. Maybe they were pursuing athletics or doing something besides sitting around, and I would pull them into my basement and give them opportunity. In addition, I had a lot of people approach me about … “apprenticeship”—I’m gonna call it that for the sake of this conversation—but I really had to intuitively filter out who needed to be there and who didn’t. I feel good about the choices I made, because the people I took on went on to do some pretty great things.

So Cipher5 was a natural part of Hip Hop Kulture, and it also came from a need to transcend our conditions on 182nd street, and it came from my own sense of responsibility to my peers and to the community. I’ve always felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to push us forward, and when I say us, I mean earth, and in my way, in a way I could. So I spent just as much time teaching as I did working on my own projects. So it was possible for me to take care of my own interests and still take care of my responsibility to my generation. So, this is where Cipher5 started.

Michael

There is something that I think needs to be clarified. You say Cipher5 started in your basement many years ago and that contradicts what I say about Cipher5 being started by us in our joint classroom experiment. And we’ve talked about this, that Cipher5 is both a practice and a thing. The group that we call Cipher5 is like the institutionalization—even though it’s in a coffee shop—of what you were doing in your basement. We get together in a circle, a cypher, we read parts of the book collectively, we listen to music, discuss lyrics, sometimes write our own. We discuss graffiti, we talk about what’s been released recently and talk to younger members about our experiences hearing something for the first time and doing something for the first time. We also learn from younger members what they think is hip and the kinds of techniques they are learning now, and how. Like how they are learning through YouTube and how they are exchanging beats with people all over the world.
Yeah, and this is a continuation. So, I was very pleased to see what Marlin [Politic Live] had been doing over the years because I kinda went off to do other things and Marlin really kinda carried the torch for a bit, y’know Marlin and Touch carried the 182 torch and kept that mentorship of others and this cycle of giving continued, so we’re always very, very proud of his accomplishments. Then I saw Marlin was involved in a couple of research projects with See Magazine and doing some academic work.

He approached me about a research project that a professor was doing and that there was actually a Hip Hop Kulture class that was gonna be happening at the U of A and this was, I was, was I in Vancouver at the time? I don’t know where I was, I just remember being extremely excited that this was taking place and fascinated with who this teacher was. So, finally Marlin put us in touch and we were just going back and forth mutually expressing our interests of meeting, but it was three or four months that went by until we could actually get in the same room.

Michael, you invited me to come and just chill out and watch your class, so I went and I just … I became fascinated, because here’s this guy teaching hip-hop at U of A and that was … that was monumental for me. It was monumental because I felt like our culture had finally made it somewhere other than a radio station or a MuchMusic control room; that we were being seen for something, for our ingenuity, the genius of it, the intelligence, rather than just as a moneymaker. It was this de-commodification to me, and don’t get me wrong, there’s intellectual exploitation that happens with all things, but in the moment it was different, it was a different kind of commodification, somethin’ I was okay with, y’know.

Towards the end of that semester when it all came together there was obviously a feeling of accomplishment and celebration but more importantly, a bond happened of camaraderie between both of us, a brotherhood you might want to call it. After one of the last classes, we had probably the most significant walk that I’ve had as an adult. From the U of A education building to HUB mall, and what happened on this walk was both of us, maybe saddened a bit by the end of this project, but knowing this was really just a beginning, determined that this needed to continue, that Hip Hop Kulture and education needed to move forward, and that we needed to figure out a way to come together on a regular basis and push this thing forward. But we’re dealing with undefined things, y’know. It’s like blind taste testing. You know you got somethin’, you just don’t know what it is, so you gotta taste it and figure it out.

Around this time, 2012, I had been flirting with an organization called the Temple of Hip Hop. A couple years earlier, on Facebook, I decided I would start a Temple of Hip Hop Canada page and then just walked away from it because life had taken me in other directions. Later, I was reading a book called The Gospel of Hip Hop, written by KRS-One, who is also a performer with Boogie Down Productions, and
he had basically taken the path of Hip Hop and turned it into a spiritual teaching, and it was from this starting point that we decided to start a book club. To come together each week to discover what was in these pages, what this book was saying. What was happening by doing that was we were creating a Hiphop academic community.

_Michael_

And what was important for me about that transition is we went from a classroom environment where I was the teacher, to the basement of that bookstore where you were the teacher. That was a big deal for me.

_Andre_

Well that was a big deal for me, because you taught me how to run that class by going to your class. If I didn’t go to your class I wouldn’t have been able to pull that circle off. I mean it when I say I learnt a tremendous amount in that semester, I did. It was about how to engage students in discussion about stuff I don’t know, and that’s what was important to see you as a professor Michael, is that you didn’t necessarily… like you knew what you were talking about, but there was so much you admitted that you don’t know. Like, “I don’t know where we’re going with this but we’re going to find out on the way,” and this kind of walking with confidence with a blindfold was amazing to me.

Because it reminded me of what I was doing in my own early times, and that was only, that was a short period of not knowing before I taught myself, and I was a confident MC and Hip Hop practitioner, but when I saw you there it was like, “Holy,” it was _that_ space. That space worked so much, so much possibility, it really reignited something for me and allowed me to go in that circle and try and facilitate with confidence because I mean, when you got a couple PhD’s sittin’ there grillin’ you about stuff and, y’know it’s intimidating, y’know that. But I became comfortable with the content and we just started to go places and explore, and I mean, I just started to learn from you and hopefully you learned something too during those early times of Cipher5.

What was important to us in Cipher5, number one, was getting some clear definition on what Hiphop Kulture was so that we could move forward and explore, getting some ideas together and really just going into depth in what KRS-ONE was talking about. It’s a fascinating book that inspires a lot of very intense discussion. But we got to a point of resolution with the book and this was probably the most important transition for Cipher5, in my opinion, because we came to a point where we had run this cycle, we had run through the book, we’ve had those big discussions and we needed to figure out where to go next and what was the next step for Cipher5. And I think we came to a conclusion that we had to be a working circle. We had to go back to the basement; I use my basement as a model for the next phase of Cipher5. We now get together, discuss issues in Hip Hop like whiteness and blackness, or
global industries and local talent, postcolonialism, and we listen to hip-hop, watch documentaries, and make Hip Hop. When I say make Hip Hop: write songs, listen to songs, write graffiti, have DJs in the room, invite b-boys and b-girls. Have all elements represented and together on a regular basis to create a normality of our culture.

CONCLUSIONS

The goal for AST is to explain the production of group subjectivities through the making, sharing and using of aesthetic resources, as well as explain the role social and environmental processes play in mediation (Grossberg, 2010, 191), or in the production of individual subjectivities. AST has the potential to contribute to popular music studies and cultural studies by contextualizing the existing documentation of subcultures, communities of practice, fan culture etc., as examples of the use of aesthetic resources in the formation of group subjectivities. These many examples do not in themselves explain the formation of collective subjectivities, nor the formation of individual subjectivity (mediation). Further, global changes in production processes raise questions about their impacts on the production of collective and individual subjectivities. Guattari argues that it is necessary to understand, for instance, how the introduction of global capitalism, what he calls “Integrated World Capitalism” (IWC) (2008, 53), transforms the production of collective subjectivities located in consumption practices. There are a number of implications and further research questions for a cultural studies of music, and for the music education theory and practice that flow from this perspective. AST can shed light on the role music media plays in teaching and learning musical aesthetics, and how music fans and musicians are produced collectively. This approach helps to contribute a theoretical explanation for creativity, not as the product of a genius, but as the functioning of mediation. In this sense, mediation/creativity is no different from living or becoming an individual. And in this sense it is possible to consider Freire’s conscientização as an informed mediation, and therefore education as the preparation for intelligent self-production, or self-design. I am currently exploring creativity/mediation/self-design as a critical pedagogy of music, where community creativity, liberation and critical thought can be understood as expressions of each other.

But there are also contradictions within Guattari’s work that AST will help address. Guattari suggests that the formation of liberated group subjectivities requires a micro-political movement against mass production of IWC. But then he also says that the formation of subjectivities occurs through aesthetic resources that are simultaneously products of IWC. So is the production of group subjectivities, outside of IWC, currently possible? Guattari holds out hope that the localization of the production of subjectivities, a process he calls “molecular revolutions” (2008: 61), is possible, however it is unclear how this can occur in any societies that do not exclusively rely on the local production of their aesthetic resources. Further, it is unclear whether Guattari’s concerns for the production of liberated subjectivities
emerge from his analysis or are ideological. For example, does the mass production of aesthetic resources and the subsequent global collective subjectivities that follow necessarily have harmful consequences? If so, then there is no way Hip Hop and hiphoppas could be examples of liberated group subjectivities. An evaluation process is needed in order to determine whether people who identify with mass-produced aesthetic resources can simultaneously generate and exhibit liberated group subjectivities. I have suggested a dialogical process borrowed from Paulo Freire that led to the production of the transcript included in this chapter.

Andre describes a complex environment from which he developed a notion of creativity and selfhood that includes the built environment of the city, the social environment of his community, the economic environment of his family and the technological environment. He also describes affective territories that are more difficult to discuss theoretically, but are easy to recognize when reading his story. It is easy to feel the excitement, frustration, hope and fear in his story. These affective, emotional and sensual territories contribute to the mediation process and need to be included and accounted for. The production of the individual hiphoppa subjectivity seems to be liberatory even though Hip Hop is a mass-produced collective subjectivity widely distributed by IWC. Through Andre’s story, it is possible to begin to identify the forces that contribute to the formation of “hiphoppa,” and the creativity he exerts to distinguish his formulation of hiphoppa within the global collective subjectivity of Hip Hop.

Unlike the Keil-Feld discussions where knowledge production was an end in itself, Cipher5 has a context and a consequence that emerged from Hip Hop Kulture. In The Gospel of Hip Hop, the production of Hip Hop collective subjectivities is articulated in the oft-repeated phrase: I am Hip Hop. As Andre attested in our discussion, the practice of Hip Hop elements produces both Hip Hop (the culture/kulture) and Hiphoppas (the people who practice it). There is no distinction between making Hip Hop and being Hip Hop. That Hip Hop is a distinct aesthetic system that produces hiphoppas is captured in the semiotic play between “culture” and “kulture.” KRS-ONE wrote that “true hiphoppas spell the full name of our culture with a k to signify our cultural uniqueness and our right to define ourselves … Even beyond the right to define ourselves, Hip Hop Kulture is … Hiphop reality” (2009: 108). His statement connects directly with Grossberg’s description of mediation as the self-production of reality (2010, 191) and Guattari’s (2008) discussion of the molecular revolution of creative group subjectivities. If music making, sharing and using produces cultural music works while simultaneously producing members of the culture, then it is fair to ask what kinds of subjectivities university music courses and culture are producing.

AST provides a starting point for an analysis of the production of subjectivity within formal music education. I have created the Aesthetic Systems Lab at MacEwan University to study the relationship between music production and the production of subjectivity, and its impact on music communities, cultures and music education. From the work that has led to the development of AST and the culture
circle method, I have come to see a need for cross-cultural methods of aesthetic analysis in the hopes of identifying bridges or pathways to new forms of university music education. For instance, a current project at the lab is a study of Hip Hop music theory and aesthetic judgment. The study pairs a group of university-trained composers together with a collection of Hip Hop producers to share and compare methods of compositional practice. We are investigating the processes of learning, how they occur, the role of technology and how one knows and learns what is “good” and “bad” within a given cultural system. The goal of the study is to theorize the relationship between collective aesthetic subjectivities, individual subjectivities and creativity. We hope that these outcomes will result in better insights into other ways of evaluating musical skills so that we might alter entrance requirements to better support and reflect the diverse musicians in our community. The hiphoppas I work with in Edmonton possess significant musical capacities, but the MacEwan music department does not have entrance requirements and curriculum developed in a way that recognizes such musicians. It is my hope, and the hope of students working in my lab, that a better understanding of different ways of conceptualizing the production of musical subjectivities may lead to expanding what the department recognizes as capable musicians. Moreover, it is my hope that as a faculty, we might come to understand our role in the production of new collective subjectivities as a method of contributing new and perhaps healthier ways of being together and being ourselves.

NOTES


2 I would like to thank the members of Cipher5 for their contribution to this article. There have been too many discussions with too many people to name everyone but special thanks goes to Chris Cousino (aka DJ Dice) and Don Welsh (ID) who have contributed a great deal of support for this research. Big thanks to Diana Pearson who read every version of this paper and provided substantial feedback along the way. Thanks to Andre Hamilton for all of the sharing and growing over the last few years. Finally, thanks to MacEwan University Research Office, especially Meghan Abbott, and the research support I have received from the MacEwan University Faculty of Fine Arts and Communications.

3 Spelling culture as kulture makes a distinction between the general category of contemporary culture as the field of mass cultural production (culture industry) and Hiphop Kulture as an autonomous ethico-aesthetic movement to regain the anthropological understanding of culture as the lifeways of a community.

4 Emcee is the MC or master of ceremonies most often associated with rapping. B-boy and b-Girls are break-boys/girls, sometimes called breakdancers. DJs, or disk jockeys, improvise with records.

5 Angela Impey noted the value of Participatory Action Research for ethnomusicology: “Through the application of participatory research methodologies, the process of documentation could begin to stimulate dialogue and exchange between Khula residents, and could provide a platform for people to address issues of identity, meaning and community building. The development of a narrative for eco- and cultural tourist consumption would therefore be linked with an initiative that sought to actively recover the communities’ histories, identities and traditional knowledge systems, and operate as a process upon which other kinds of community interventions could be explored.” (2002, 13; see also Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Fine & Torre, 2008; Noffke & Somekh, 2009).