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# DOCUMENTS

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# Verbs Like an Automatic

Julian Myers

## flows and clots

*rugged and rough, killin' your set every day, microphone check one two here we go and Ima let you know who got the flow, spittin' my verbs like an automatic weapon.*

—Black Moon, "Who Got da Props," *Enta Da Stage*, 1993

"Bloodclot" is a curse word in Jamaican dance hall and reggae. It means a very stupid, worthless person. A blood clot is a coagulation. It stops flows. Flows shouldn't stop in hip-hop, becoming a scab is becoming a wack MC. Wack MC's can't flow. They can't put language together, they aren't original, they suck, their flow isn't together, one line doesn't produce the next. You can hear a wack MC as soon as they step in a cipher, you can hear the lack of confidence in their voice and the lack of flow between words and verses. A bloodclot is a dead flow. An MC must not scab over. They should flow.

Language in hip-hop is always a mode of metaphorically constructing and reconstructing your body, and, at times, about staging your own physical disintegration. These metaphors have the tendency to literalize themselves suddenly and retroactively. Not being able to communicate, to flow, is associated with the most violent, concrete, physical breakdowns. Fragmentary words begin to equal fragmentary bodies. In other words, words falling apart means bodies falling apart. Wack MC's don't leave the stage, they get knifed up, metaphorically, and literally gunned down. When you enta da stage, you'd better flow or you'll get wet up another way—because you'll be bleeding all over the place. If you can rap, your mouth flows forever. Bullet holes clot. You heal up, or you die, and either way you stop flowing. You're a blood clot, an idiot.

Those who can flow become guns. They become whole and solid, invulnerable, ready to explode. Formed in the lyrical murder of other rappers and the real gunshots on the inner city streets, their bodies are pastiches of damage. The flipside are those who bleed, who flow corporeally. In hip-hop you watch, from some position, yourself being shot. This repressed dynamic creates the subject in three places, as the gun, as the victim, and as a disembodied, invulnerable observer to your own disintegration.

## neurasthenia and hiphop's body

*my physical i express through song*

—Nas, "It Ain't Hard to Tell," *Illmatic*, 1994

<sup>1</sup> Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 38.

The violence, ambivalence, and incoherence symptomatic of the descriptions of the body in hiphop have a corollary in the nineteenth-century neurasthenic. In the late nineteenth century, neurasthenia was a blanket term for a complex of psychological symptoms bound up with fatigue by "excessive functioning until repair is momentarily impossible."<sup>1</sup> This excessive functioning was in turn bound up with the advent of industrial production and new urban spaces. In other words, neurasthenia is a syndrome caused by modernity itself (an unclear term, but one that implies new architecture and urbanism, new representations of collectivity, and an intensified impact of technology on the body). Modernity's city is a pathological space that places stress on the systems that constitute the human body. Repair is momentarily impossible, so the systems collapse. Neurasthenia is the condition of this collapse, characterized as perpetual physical fatigue without an obvious cause, complete ambivalence, and the loss of drive or will. This ambivalence is present in hiphop: think of gangsta rappers' periodic reminders that they don't give a fuck about nothing at all, Buckshot from *Black Moon*'s mumbled, lazy vocals, Guru from *Gangstarr*'s monotone, Nas's slurred raps, or even more revealing, the moment in the film *Menace II Society* when Kane's grandfather asks him "Do you care if you live or die?" and Kane replies "I don't know..."

The neurasthenic also experiences a crisis of memory and intelligibility, a disintegrating ability to articulate the causes and conditions of the stress. Like the neurasthenic, the crises the young black male faces every day on inner city streets causes a collapse of articulation (not the same as inarticulation) into language flows. In Nas's words, "my physical I express through song." A strange characteristic of some rappers is that while they kick crazy, intricate, often brilliant flows to DAT, in interviews they are inarticulate, slow, and look somewhat shell-shocked. This isn't because they don't know what's going on, but because there are situations when it's hard to talk about the things that matter to you most. People like Nas and Buckshot know what they have to say, but in analytic situations, where their words are not validated by a beat, they freeze up. When rappers are in the street, or in the studio, the words flow. The language of hiphop is a symptom of bodily crises, intense and violent, that are inexpressible any other way. Inner city life often proves deadly for young black males; much hiphop addresses these unpredictable and unbelievably violent moments of utter victimization—by the police, by gangs, by your neighbors, by any nigga with a motherfuckin' gun. These physical crises produce an extreme ambivalence and resignation to physical damage, and a hyper-spastic, hyper-expressive language which reflects in its cuts and fractures the fragmentation of the body that speaks it.

In hiphop the processes of crisis and collapse are deranged and disordered. There is no overload, no process of exhaustion, no environment where (post)modernity pushes systems farther than they can handle. If the moment of physical crisis arrives, it comes well after its effects have already been entrenched in the body. If anything, when the moment of violence arrives it does not create its symptoms but confirms and mythifies them. The subject of hiphop is never solid or whole, but always disintegrating, fracturing, and reforming. In *Menace II Society*, Kane and O-Dog are being lectured by Kane's grandfather against violence and about the dangers of the streets. Kane says "Grampa, I've never killed anyone." He hasn't. But his grandfather responds, "Oh, I sincerely doubt that!". His grandfather already constructs him as killer. Kane's body has always been fragmentary and incomprehensible. (His mother and father are both dead, and the first scene, constructed as a dreamlike primal scene, does not involve watching his parents screwing, but watching his father shoot another man. Psychoanalysis isn't much help.) Repair is momentarily impossible. The only way to reconstruct this body is with a gun, by shooting other men. Damage requires maintenance. Kane's grandfather knows that. Guns are a form of maintenance.

#### the not-yet-fully-born

*Guns have the capacity to do something of which the soldier is normally incapable: they can discharge and remain whole. ...the men cited here are impelled by a single drive: to speed from the gun barrel (which remains intact) and penetrate other bodies.*

—Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 2, trans. Erica Carter et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989)

The gun is an endless producer of flows; upon discharge, the bullet tears skin, blood. The rapper from Black Moon is named Buckshot, another group in Black Moon's "Bootcamp Click" is called Smif and Wessun. Like guns, they too produce flows, with their mouths, their diaphragms, spitting out verbs like an automatic weapon.

Modes of dealing with real or fantasized bodily damage extend across different histories as well as bodies. Like the fascist subjects described by Klaus Theweleit in *Male Fantasies*, the young black male does not have a mommy-daddy-baby system of ego formation. (If anyone does; since the disintegration of the bourgeois nuclear family it seems a forced account.) He has no "proper," hierarchic, psychoanalytic stages of ego-relations. Instead, the subject's ego is imposed from the outside (according to Theweleit the fascist's ego is formed by the nation), in the case of the young black male through stereotypes of masculinity, heterosexuality, and rigid inscriptions of race. Theweleit argues that the not-yet-fully-born's obsession

with certain objects, especially guns, is constitutive of the subject's body armor. For the hip-hop subject this dynamic is complicated. First, the gun constructs a concept of an impervious, painless body, but it also points to the body as being anything but whole. The gun serves as an engine of body construction, but it also attests to the permanent disincorporate state of the body. Second, gangsta rappers talked a lot about being "hard." Gangsta rap these days is looked upon by current hip-hop kids (including myself) as being hopelessly retro, boring, predictable, and not very interesting. The new hip-hop (Hieroglyphics, Bootcamp Click, Wu-tang Clan, Hobo Junction) isn't about being "hard," it's about who has the flow and who doesn't, who has mad flava, who can be illest, and the most crazy. The strategies for dealing with violence and damage are more about disincorporation and disembodiment than body armor. The newest hip-hop is more violent than ever, but it doesn't matter who's more "real" or "hard," just who has the flow and who doesn't.

Forms of repair are verbal, through creating flows, or violent, by shooting other bodies. It is important to recognize that these dynamics of language and body are always confused. Rappers who talk about guns on their records have guns in real life. Ol' Dirty Bastard from the Wu-Tang Clan was shot in the back last year. Nas is being tried on illegal firearm charges. Snoop is being tried on a murder charge. Tupac Shakur was shot in the groin, hand, and twice in the head. The lines between fiction and violent physical reality are never clear. Rapping about shooting is something other than a simple simulacrum of shooting. It is a strategy of radical bodily repair. Disembodiment as defense against disembodiment. Again, "my physical I express through song."

#### **women. not yet**

Women rap, women who are as smart and can talk as brilliantly as the men. The men don't talk about them very much though. When they do, it's usually tense and way over determined. The men say too little, in ways that are usually very defensive. Either, men overemphasize their masculinity, so much that their insecurity about it is pretty obvious. (Hip-hop kids internalize an already overblown masculinity and then get fanatic about it. It gets pretty over-the-top.) Or, they don't talk about it, maybe one song an album to assure everyone that no, they haven't become homos or anything terrifying like that. Snoop Doggy Dogg (the death whine of gangsta) spends half of his record gasping "I don't want that ho! I don't love that ho! Bitch, raise up off deez nuts! Get up off my dick!" Snoop doesn't even like sex, for him it's more of a performance of masculinity, something he has to make sure his friends know about and participate in. Sex for Snoop isn't even about women, it's about his niggaz. He wants it to be over quick, so he can get back out on the street. The newest rappers don't even mention it: Organized Konfusion, Smif and Wessun, Del, Black Moon, Nas, the Wu-Tang Clan, the Gravediggaz, they talk about being guns, being dead, killing people, and flows.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Del has one song about women, I think. In it, he kills them all, chops off their heads, etc., just like he does to the men in all the rest of the songs. He never mentions that they're women, he calls them "booboheads." So he may well not be talking about women at all.

**fucking or getting fucked**

*As I walk through the valley at night I'm thinking "I don't know that brother walking across the street in the black hoodie, so he may be a threat to me." He's thinking "I don't know that brother walking across the street in the blue hoodie, so he may be a threat to me." What's going through our minds as we reach down into our waistlines and pull out the tools the heaters the straps the biscuits the gats the jammies the rips with the clips, all placed there purposely by them? Here niggas, 16 shooter made specially for you. What goes through our minds at that moment when a brother's at the other end of our barrel about to catch a hot piece of steel and take his last breath? What goes through our minds? What's going through our minds as we walk through the valley?*

—Masta Ace, "A Walk Through the Valley," *Slaughterhouse*, 1994

Across the street in Bucktown, you see a brother. You don't know that brother. You wish you did. The Masta Ace quote isn't erotic; but it is, without a doubt, homo. The radical sameness (all that changes from human to human is the color of his hoodie) is predicated by the need to become the agent of the violence that the hip-hop kid is always subject to. In pulling the jammy on that brother across the street, you pull it on yourself. You aren't bleeding anymore, you are invisible, a gun. Violence communicates.

At the moment when Masta Ace speaks in the other man's voice, another voice, a mirror, repeats his words simultaneously. The violence and recognition of two people across the street who look the same, think the same and act the same is reversible. There is a radical breakdown of the gaze, a confusion of self and other. Every murder is lived as instantly reversible. Performing death is never about the affirmation of one's own body. It is an enactment of a corporeal liquidation of another body that is understood as radically similar, even the same as, your body.

*The gaze certainly involves an element of erotic objectification, but like a point-of-view shot in gay male pornography, it is reversible. The gendered hierarchy of seeing/being seen is not so coded in homoerotic representations, since sexual sameness liquidates the associative opposition between the active subject and the passive object.*

—Kobena Mercer, "Skinhead Sex Thing," in *How Do I Look?*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991).

The radical intimacy of absolute identification in sameness points to the fact that the hip-hop subject is not self-alienated at all, but self-identified or self-projecting, and clearly self-destructive as well. The most obvious characteristic of radical similarity is the brutal physical discorporation of getting shot, or the liquid, invisible dis-

corporation of becoming a flow of words. We are always already shot, just as we are always already shooting.

### skin

*I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?*

—Franz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. C.L. Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

Blackness, like whiteness, rests on its legibility; it is overdetermined from the outside. Appearance, the visual signifier of the body, shapes the identity and politics of that body. This rests on the presumption that skin is inescapable, a coherent, steady, and believable body surface. Race is imposed by the vision of the other: caught in a gaze, our form moves perceptibly towards ourselves as object. It is hardened on the surface, the skin. This imposition of identity from the outside is internalized as absolute violation, a violation that is only confirmed by everyday conditions of poverty and violence that are endemic to the inner cities and the 'hoods that most rappers are representin'.

Rappers don't construct a hard body. Like Fanon, they grow to see their own bodies as numbed, objectified, and they understand the logical conclusion of overdetermination from without to be complete annihilation. The only option is getting the hell out of their bodies, through drugs or through entering the flow. Desire is replaced by a directionless libido, one with an absolute lack of psychoanalytic content. Much of hip-hop's desire is detached and ambivalent, a mimicry of the American dream: money, drugs, and pussy. But despite all claims to the contrary, most rappers don't even sound like they really give a damn about any of it. They sound bored. This is the logic of overdetermination from the outside taken to its extreme. For the hip-hop kids today, what was a dead-end for Fanon has become an accepted truth.

### notes on Bucktown: urban space and language

Most hip-hop kids live in Bucktown. It isn't a bad place to live, in some senses. Everything is obvious and simple there. You don't want to die. You need money to eat. You want to get yours. You can't help but wish you'd have money. It's hard to be a communist in Bucktown. How can you dis the privileges you never had? In Bucktown, it will never occur to you not to want money.

In Bucktown, it's always obvious to you that you're going to die, probably sometime sooner than you want to, probably pretty violently. You have to be scared for

your body, otherwise you'll get bucked in the head, the face, the hand. Give or take a few studio gangstas, rappers live in Bucktown, they don't leave it. Hiphop records are filled with the names of friends who are gone. They're dead now. In Bucktown, you always know someone just like you who is dead now. In Bucktown, you hate your body, because you're scared it's gonna hurt, explode, corrode, spurt blood. Not scared, you KNOW it's gonna happen. The only way to live is to act as if you were the agent of the bodily violence that you wish wasn't going to happen to you. In other words, a lot of rappers want to become guns.

### 5:00 pm, Dec. 10

I'm walking downtown, listening to Das EFX. The beats are noisy, good, but not the same as I remember. It takes a few seconds before I realize that there is a fire right down the street, sirens all around, people yelling, cars. It's as if it's part of the track. Hiphop is always public: it has no private, insides are just drama and performance. The only time rappers go into their apartments (they never, ever live in houses, or farms) is to have sex. It's probably a big mistake to confuse sex these days with privacy. We might close the curtains or the doors, but it's a performance. It's going through the motions. Hiphop always happens in public, it's something you learn to do with ya niggaz around. When you get signed, if you do, you take your niggaz with you. They're your perpetual public. Das EFX should be played open air, on the street, traffic mixing in, sirens, during an emergency, a disaster. Like serial killers, their lyrical murders are always more about the relation of the murderer to his public sphere than a relation of murderer to victim. It's the performance that matters, not the victims and their dead body. Dead bodies are words, signs, ways of talking. Dead bodies don't flow, they can't talk right. So how could they possible matter? They don't.

### word/city

"Bucktown" has a few etymologies (all the words that hiphop creates do). I think it first appeared in a 70s blaxploitation flick called *Bucktown*. Bucktown was a bastardization of the name Buchanan, the fictional setting for a film about drugs and pimps and guns and the-black-man-getting-his-from-the-Man. I've never seen it, but what I've read suggests it was bleaker than most of its genre. Buchanan is in Noplace, USA, it's a generic town in a generic state, and Bucktown is its underside, its black 'hood. Even in its origin, Bucktown doesn't stand for a place, but a type of space, an uncontrolled, invisible space where hustlers live and life is hard. Government (i.e. the Man) has an idea that Bucktown exists, but they don't know it by name. They probably call it something pretty stupid, but then, they don't live there. Bucktown is a sign for a space which has been abandoned, left to fend for itself economically and socially, yet is subject to violently sadistic authority.

If you get shot in Bucktown, the cops will come but they won't do much—their job is enforcement, not protection. If you get shot in Buchanan, cops are at your service. Crimes are acts in the wrong spatial context. City governments regulate people by watching them, keeping people in the right place. Bucktown is the space of paranoia for them, what can't be seen can't be controlled. This is why the police are deployed like an army to Bucktown. Police don't live in Bucktown, they live some place a little nicer. All police are white. Even if they're African-American, they're ideologically white, straight, and male. Police are there to stop the infection of invisibility, blackness, and poverty from spreading. They have guns but they aren't guns. They're paranoid, and they exist to control and kill. No one in Bucktown likes cops. They are the control in the streets, but their control only extends to what they can see. 50 feet around a cop car is a space of roving, ridiculously random, brutal control. Aside from these moving splotches of tyranny, Bucktown is a pretty open place.

The word Bucktown returned when Smif and Wessun's first single blew up. Now Bucktown means "buck" as in "buck 'em down," meaning to shoot people down in the street. Niggaz die in other places, but usually they die in the street. Buck comes from "buckshot," used to hunt deer and as self defense against intruders. Bucktown implies a hunting ground and a trespassed space. Bucktown is all about guns.

*Bucktown, home of the original gun clappaz*

—Smif and Wessun, "Bucktown," *Dah Shinin'*, 1995

Bucktown is also about money, bucks, cuz cash rules everything around us. Dollar dollar bill, y'all.

#### **drive/buy**

The cops aren't the only dangerous ones on the streets. They patrol the streets as moving areas of control and as visual emblems of the panopticon. There are also moving spaces of violence, not patrols but terrorists—PLO style, cars as bombs, people as guns. Unlike the police, these people look just like you. Maybe their shirt is a different color, but then maybe it isn't. Any car that passes you could be the producer of one of these zones. You don't really discover that you've been in danger until it has eaten you up, until you or your friend, or your girl, has all types of blood flowing. The zone is always present, but you never know it until the guns go off. The guncracks reveal the space for what it was already, brutally violent.

From the space inside the car—it's essential to discuss things from both perspectives, terrorist or victim—you are the space of violence. The interfaces between you and your machines are intimate. You move through your car, you act through your gun. You are one agent. You are the violence that is invisible except for its

performance, and the instant of its performance is also the instance of its dissolution.

*I become violence, I'm from it, I even done it*  
—Nas, "One on One," *Street Fighter* soundtrack, 1994

Becoming violence is the absolute internalization and performance of damage to another person. You become violence because violence has no body, and you don't want a body because your body makes you vulnerable to pain. You want to become a gun, BANG, and disappear at the event of your surfacing. The text of hip-hop is in a state of flow. You create flows of words that, if you are a good MC, will never stop. The words are the surfacing of the body's crisis—its relation to the violence it performs or is victim to. The violence that is integral to hip-hop (only the most pathetic, commercial "rap" isn't infected by it) is a verbal expression of the severe damage the body is subject to in the spastically brutal space of Bucktown. Your words are what you want to become, like a gun, they are instant, temporal, liquid, and invulnerable—violently performative.

### writing Bucktown

I've learned a lot about space by tagging. It's an understanding of urban spaces of control that is instinctive to hip-hop. When you walk down a sidewalk with a paint pen, you learn who and what is a signal of danger. Headlights, from anywhere, are bad. They might be a cop, cops stay in cars most of the time. You learn to avoid areas that are too bright, because you're too easy to see. You stay away from houses because someone might be at the window at any time, even really late at night. People walk along the street, most of the time they couldn't care less what you're writing on some wall, but we live in a world of tattletales, and you never know who will call the cops. You have to act normal in certain spaces. When people are watching you, you pretend to be going somewhere, full of purpose.

When people aren't watching you, you look for walls, space to write. Spaces can change from safe to unsafe in a couple of seconds. Sometimes in the brightest, most obvious place, there are open seconds to bomb. A lot of the time, even in dark secluded spots, people appear from nowhere. Moments are disjunctive. You have to enter the flow, do what feels right as soon as you have a second. Freestyling is the same, you get moments where phrases, words explode from your mind, disjunctive, and bump against the last rhyme you made. The disjunctures and tensions are there all the time. Moments happen, quick, the rest of the time you're just treading water, skidding on the grid of streets, skidding on the rhyme. Hoping nothing stops your flow.