

‘The Jump Off’: Getting A Taste Of The Real Street Flavour? A Critical Analysis of an Underground Hip-Hop Club and its Logic of Mainstream Authenticity

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Introduction: Setting the Scene

A fairly long queue for a Monday night. ID in the pocket, over-18-only crowd. Hop down the stairs, enter the club. Small, dark, dirty, almost decadent. Walk over to the balcony, right next to the sound technicians, peep down for a piece of the action. The dance floor is a wrestling ring, the audience its walls. Dancers jamming on the blasting hip-hop beat, scantily dressed round-girls announcing their stage names. The spectacle is on: welcome to The Jump Off.

The Jump Off is a hip-hop club event happening at the Mean Fiddler, an 800-person capacity venue in the heart of one of London’s busiest nightlife locations, well-established within the circuit of British underground clubs. A once-a-month event since January, 2006, The Jump Off started on a fortnightly basis in August, 2003 and was known to many hip-hop heads across the country to be held ‘every other Monday’. The Jump Off is structured on the peculiar combination of a weekday club event and a competition-based showcase of hip-hop culture *elements*, marketed nationwide as the ‘UK’s biggest hip-hop night’. The prize-winning ‘battles’ render a commercially adapted representation of hip-hop’s fundamental four elements of Breakdancing, MCing/Rhyming, DJing/ Turntablism and Graffiti Art. The dance battles range from one-on-one or pairs breakdancing to crew street dancing to bootyshaking, the DJing has been substituted by a producers battle, while the element of Graffiti has been completely overlooked leaving space for a one-on-one basketball competition. All battles are judged by a pre-determined, ever-changing selection of three local personalities somehow related to hip-hop culture. The most noticeable competitions are regularly featured as Web TV on The Jump Off official site (www.jumpoff.tv) and occasionally screened on digital channels such as MTV Base, Rapture TV and Channel U.

Simultaneously defying and enforcing the continuous escapades in the mainstream horizon of media culture, hip-hop exemplifies a perfect fusion of an ‘aesthetic’ and ‘oppositional’ music-centred subculture. Such a dualistic categorisation, originally proposed by Denisoff and Peterson and embraced by Lull in his *Popular Music and Communication* (1992: 29) seems in fact to blur its borders when applied to hip-hop culture which deliberately celebrates its alternative aestheticism and social resistance at the same time. From this perspective, music is hip-hop’s ultimate tool of mediation, the ubiquitous medium to communicate and negotiate its signifiers: music shapes the articulations of hip-hop ‘elements’, provides the possibility of a conflicted semiotic resistance and positions the subculture in a way that appeals to both the underground and the mainstream.

Reflecting on the three-way relationship between culture, music and dance Lull maintains the latter is a ‘physical manifestation of culture, revealing an attitude towards the self, the body, the community, the other’ (1992: 30). Such a concept is reinforced by Hanna’s (1992) metaphoric description of dance practices as ‘moving

messages' of cultural identity, lyrically hinting at the power of the body in movement in respect to socio-cultural communication. The array of dance competitions within The Jump Off offer spectacular examples of the way music is embodied and becomes a creative site for its experience, consumption and socio-cultural signification. A shared taste in the mediated consumption of music, according to Thornton, is a basic criterion for subcultural affiliation within the context of club cultures, consequently identified as 'taste cultures' (1995: 3). In a competition-based club event such as The Jump Off, this affinity is extended to a shared taste in specific practices related to the embodiment of music that recalls Swales' definition of 'discourse communities' (in Newman, 2001: 389). Where a discourse community constructs and makes sense of its group identity through shared generic practices, the discourse community that inhabits a subcultural space shapes its 'underground' identity around the problematic notion of authenticity.

In the semiotic language of club cultures authenticity is the prerequisite to the acquisition of a subcultural status, which indeed finds its significance in a constant oscillation between the underground and the mainstream, between media rejection and celebration (Thornton, 1995; Redhead, Wynne and O'Connor, 1998; Rose, 1994). This socio-semiotic dynamic actively operates within hip-hop culture. The obsessive re-presentation of authenticity, stylised in notions like 'blackness', the 'street' and the 'real' ultimately surrenders to what Chambers (1990: 3) describes as the 'fetishizing rule of commodities', manipulating and *authenticating* cultural identity into a commercial production. Master of its counter-hegemonic power and slave to its craving for mainstream affirmation, hip-hop culture seems to be producing the same spectacle it attempts to subvert.

Conceptual identity in hip-hop, historically rooted in the representation of a performative self, moves away from a disembodied 'real' into a highly carnal, fictionalised subject. Hip-hop's insistence on the real as a semiotic entity re-produced through 'authenticated' identities challenges Baudrillard's (1983) denial of the possibility of the real, particularly a discursive, representational one. Using the artistic performance (whether counter-hegemonic or stereotyped) as a means of agency over the subject's identity, hip-hop promotes the real as a crafted identity, a spectacular representation. The performance of identity within hip-hop, like the vast majority of music-based subcultures, builds on a patriarchal construction of a body highly gendered and sexual (Negus, 1996; Frith and McRobbie, 2000). In particular, hip-hop culture seems to make use of a practice Walser defines as 'forging masculinity' (in Negus, 1996: 126), a strategy identified in the way hard rock musicians re-work their performative identities. Supporting this idea is the way in which male urban identities, notoriously rooted in a patriarchal ideology are forged, constructed on an extremely simplistic, stylised (almost in a cartoonish way) masculinity that is violent, over-sexed, misogynistic, and relies on the disempowerment and objectification of the woman.

It is necessary to stress that the construction and negotiation of gendered identities in hip-hop works (verbally and visually) as a dialogical discourse. It finds its significance in the continuous confrontation between male and female subjects and makes sense when related to (and to an extent produced by) the 'other' self. The semiotic construction of masculinity, consequently inscribed in the discourse of femininity, also reinforces the expression of an 'essentialised Blackness' elevated to the symbolic status of racial authenticity. This racialised identity, confronted with the infamous, racially syncretic participation in and commercial exploitation of hip-hop culture, follows an equally controversial, dialogical path to the one of gender (Rose, 1994; Neal, 1999). The cultural identity of hip-hop, authenticated in a black, masculine body, is then ready to be packaged, sold and delivered as the perfect post-modern commodity.

The Jump Off: the Production of a Subcultural Spectacle

It is through the relevance of performativity that the underground club event appropriates and divulges traditions of *resistance*. Potter purposefully notes that hip-hop culture seeks its cultural resistance through 'fundamentally anti-monumental' art forms or *elements*, relying on the perpetration of *spectacular* stereotypes, entertaining '*spectacular* relations, cultural exchanges along an uneven...racially-inflected social faultline' (1995: 9). The creation of an *underground* space used for artistic expression, so common within hip-hop, seems to challenge and resist the mainstream in a way that fits Scott's definition of the 'hidden transcript' (Scott, 1990; Neal, 1999). The club, just like the hidden transcript, is a social site inhabited by a selected community secluded from the context it tries to resist, where 'the frontier between the public and the hidden...is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate - not a solid wall' (Neal, 1999: 2). Nonetheless the cultural feature of semiotic resistance in hip-hop seems to generate a double discourse, one that creatively *resists* the conventional social context and at the same time purposely *resists* its resolution, surrendering to, interiorising and existing in its very own stereotypes. In fact the underground dimension of The Jump Off, paradoxically exalted as a marketing strategy, exemplifies a form

of resistance to the mainstream as well as a stereotype indispensable to activate processes of cultural authentication.

The notion of 'battle' with its insistence on a body engaged in continuous competitive action, traditionally speaks to a primary role in the performativity of hip-hop's aesthetic sensibilities. As Frith points out, 'black music expresses the body...with a directly physical beat...the sound and the beat are *felt* rather than interpreted via a set of conventions' (in Middleton, 1990: 259). Within such context the battle is the physical 'extension' of the music through an act of self-expression, in a discourse of self-staging that only makes sense when supported by the appreciation of the audience. The battle, spontaneously born in the underground, in the street, and visually translated in the circular formation of the *cipher*, strongly relies on the authenticity of the live performance and even more on the improvisation of the *freestyle*. The Jump Off appropriates the cultural concept of the battle to reproduce it in a structured way that inevitably distorts its original value. In fact the spontaneity of the formation, the lack of time and place restrictions, the overtly subversive celebration of the body that connect the original concept of 'battle' to a possible instance of a Temporary Autonomous Zone (Bey, 1991; Rietveld, 1998) are inevitably lost in the structured crescendo of the artistic competitions. The various battles take place at The Jump Off in a semi-rigid sequence that highlights the most visually entertaining ones as in a sort of primetime show; they are strictly timed according to the competition rules; they re-present stereotyped bodies rather than present innovative, controversial ones. The battles The Jump Off hosts are enhanced to sustain the narrative of the event, to maintain a sense of it being organic and to sustain the interest of a faithful audience all the way to the money-rewarded victory. The live performance of hip-hop's elements, of which the battle is a *spectacular* vehicle, is reconstructed in a fixed spectacle for the eyes of an underground crowd as well as an over-ground audience, a cultural simulacrum mediated by the magnifying lens of the camera.

The Authentication of Authenticity

The socio-semiotic path traced from hip-hop's 'culturescape' of aesthetic sensibilities and signifiers to its globally mediated image (and symbolic imagery), supported by a multiplicity of 'glocal' responses, is mapped out in the ostentation of authenticity. The obsession with cultural authenticity within hip-hop is displayed on a demonstrative level of urban awareness and displayed through what Neal defines as 'narrative commitments to the realities of black urban life' (1997: 117): from 'the street' to 'keep it real'. The resonance of the street has been culturally located in the landscape of a post-industrial America that witnessed the birth and development of hip-hop (Rose, 1994; Neal, 1997; Howley, 2002); it has subsequently expanded into a homogeneous, abstract affiliation with locality that works as a tool to constructively configure and support cultural identity. The mediated image of the street is ultimately inscribed in the glamorisation of notions of ghetto-centrism, translated in the exclusivity of the underground and blatantly associated with an undisputable status of artistic credibility, for only those skills nurtured in the underground come across as innovative, original, raw.

The rendition of hip-hop's mediated image, as re-mediated in the club event The Jump Off, is immediately centred on the prerogative authenticity of the street. Numerous semiotic references to the underground 'ambience' can be identified from the construction of the space to the technical organisation of the battles, dance-based ones in particular. The choice of a 'grimy' venue, dark and dusty, hidden by a long staircase leading to the underground belly of the city, padded in exposed wires, figuratively hints at a visceral space that hosts a hidden, subcultural congregation, a purposefully casual event, a vaguely dangerous sense of unpredictability. All the attention is drawn to the central stage, more of a wrestling ring than a dance floor with its surface covered in cardboard, in obvious street-dance fashion. The attitude necessary to win is rough, tough, provocative: 'beefing' and 'dissing' (common street slang expressions that stand, respectively, for 'violent confrontation' and 'offensive insults'). Translated into dance movements borrowed from the street, these competitive postures are openly encouraged during the battle. The audience avidly expects a showcase of raw, fresh talent, eager to support and praise the technique and the inventiveness, even more so if presented within the canons of their socio-cultural expectations. The voices of the three selected judges in The Jump Off's competitions inevitably succumb to the cries of the crowd: if you are skilled, you are 'real' and you get their attention; if you are 'street', you are authentic and you get their cheers.

Within such contexts the underground is recognised in a discursive desire to 'represent' *real* (life)styles, identities, abilities, without 'fronting' and 'selling out' to the commodifying demon of mainstream culture (which indeed is maintained as the privileged vehicle to commercial exploitation). The preoccupation with realism seems to develop a suspicious connection to a mere re-presentation of 'the real' which is in itself questionable, for 'the real' is manipulated into a stereotype synonymous with authenticity. As Nehring notes, 'it is certainly the case that

identity, whether individual or collective, must be 'achieved, negotiated, invented' through discourses not entirely authentic to oneself' (1997: 9), once again challenging the depth of hip-hop's notion of authenticity. Deploying strategies of exclusiveness sympathetic to notions of 'the street', guarantees (sub)cultural authenticity in the form of a re-production of the real, which in turn is re-presented and ontologically validated in the physical body.

The primacy of 'the street' as a semiotic strategy for the validation of authenticity, although originally strengthened by a cultural connotation of social resistance, fails to interrupt the ambiguous relationship between the underground and mainstream dimensions of hip-hop, caught as it is in the narrative of a fictionalised 'real'. This can be observed in the way The Jump Off exploits the construction of an iconoclastic, symbolic real whose underground roots function as a bridge to the mainstream: authenticity becomes a spectacular representation of the 'street' that is bred and recognised in the underground only to be sold and consumed in the mainstream. Similarly in the localised context of The Jump Off cultural authenticity is constructed and negotiated as a commodity whose exchange value lies in the adaptability to both the underground and the mainstream. Such a dynamic is exploited to the extent that the authentication of subcultural identity comes to reside in the viability of the stereotype of its authenticity, a paradoxically 'mainstream authenticity'.

The Performing Body: Sites of Empowerment and Constraint

The strategies of construction, authentication and negotiation of identity within hip-hop subculture diffusely rely on the semiotic reproduction and representation of discourses of race and gender. Identities are constantly re-worked along the prisms of a racial supremacy debated in the controversy between cultural exclusiveness and crossover appeal, and a patriarchal exploitation based on the primacy of heterosexual power relations. These discursive traits of identity, typically manifest in the physical body, resonate strongly when such body is engaged in performance. Extending De Certeau's observation that the body retaliates cultural domination in the 'style' of its movement (1984), it is correct to say that any form of subcultural resistance (or possibly, in the case of hip-hop culture, of conformation) is magnified in the semiotic expression of a performing body. This suggests that the artistic performance offers a site for the body, filtered by race and gender, to perform its cultural identity.

The competition-based structure of The Jump Off exemplifies the perception of the performance as a vehicle to showcase identity, hyped in the context of the battles. The producer of the event sustains in fact that, 'anyone can do hip-hop...you just need to go up there and show who you are through what you can do' ('Chris', personal communication, 22 October 2005); booty-shaker 'Monica' affirms that, 'the battles give people a chance to show what they're made of' (personal communication, 15 February 2006); b-boy¹ 'Michael' looks at The Jump Off as a 'platform' because, 'hip-hop is all about expressing yourself' (personal communication, 03 March 2005). Their words, although conveying the importance hip-hop culture places on the negotiation of identity, fail to address the issues posed by the 'representation' of identity in terms of race and gender, equally relevant within hip-hop.

In the case of hip-hop culture the most prominent trait of self-expression is Blackness, simplified through the performing body as a stereotype of racial authenticity. The dance competitions of the Jump Off host performers regardless of race; nonetheless the same cultural inclusiveness emphasises the racial exclusivity of the Black body. The stereotyped Black body is largely perceived as naturally fit (or exclusively equipped with the necessary asset for a well-performed booty-shaking), spontaneously rhythmic, dotted with an attitude always grounded in skillfulness. Gilroy contextualises this sense of empowerment expressed in the Black artistic body, similarly theorised in a 'biological existentialism' (1994: 127), in the supposed ductility of hip-hop's elements. Where the non-Black body is implicitly expected to subscribe to the same values, possess the same abilities and therefore be constricted in an alienating stereotype, the hybridity of hip-hop, Gilroy notes, is deployed as 'an especially potent sign and symbol of racial authenticity' (1994: 112). As The Jump Off promotes a performing body outlined in the colour of racial authenticity, it is necessary to consider Potter's notion that Blackness exemplifies authenticity, 'only as the commodification of a sort of synecdochal text...whose consumption marks not cultural understanding but rather a studied avoidance of understanding' (1995: 104).

Similarly, hip-hop culture is biased in relation to the dominating gender politics which exalt heterosexuality, embrace patriarchy and preach misogyny. The position of the woman is subordinate to the male counterpart and only contemplated in a dialogical relationship that implies dependency and resistance to the sexual objectification of the female body. At the same time, as Rose observes, the socio-semiotic gender dialogism 'accommodates the tension between sympathetic racial bonds among black men and women' (1994: 148), establishing an ulterior racial separation between black and white women's engagement with hip-hop. The discourse of gender is determined in the opposition, the resistance to the 'otherness' yet is simultaneously defined, and to a certain extent produced, by the same strategy. From this perspective, the discursive relationship established between male and

female identities is analogous to the reciprocity that links hip-hop subculture and the media in a contradictory discourse of resistance and exploitation.

Performative identities in hip-hop are organised along the axes of gender as well as racial authenticity. The rendition of the gendered body performing art is consequential to the interiorisation of hip-hop as a masculine culture that glorifies urban treacherousness and systematically promotes a reductive, distorted, sexually-oriented imagery of womanhood. The secondary role assigned to female performers is obviously exemplified within The Jump Off in a substantial limitation in the number of women participants and in their markedly different artistic approaches. In the one-on-one or pairs breakdancing battles it is common practice to witness the audience, the judges and even the male opponent sympathise with the occasional b-girl² as she is expected to actively contribute to the artistic content of the battle but inevitably lose to the supposedly more talented male counterpart. The crew battle proves to be an even more male-oriented competition. The rare female element in an all-male crew is undoubtedly perceived as technically weak but regarded as an added 'flavour', an attitude-provoking ingredient. The most diffused trend of the all-women crew represents a different challenge altogether: girls are expected to stand their ground with technique *and* add that stereotypically feminine, cheeky, sexy touch. The spotlights inevitably follow the fit, capacious thug-dancers, relegating the outnumbered women to the dark corner where sexuality equates skill and the cheers of the prevalently male audience are the loudest. Whereas the men's artistic capability is recognised and encouraged in terms of originality and dexterity, in the case of women ability and skill are overlooked in favour of generous displays of skin. With such distinction being supported by the wider cultural context and almost universally accepted, women's awareness of their sociocultural expectations could be seen as a necessary step to the definition of their cultural niche. This is evident in the case of The Jump Off's bootyshaking battle: it is the only slot of the show when women are the undisputed protagonists. The only man allowed on stage is a passive spectator, the stereotype of 'The Man', and as such is needed as a dialogic counterpart. Other male involvement is limited to the cheers and boos of the audience or to the poll, posted on the online forum, about the possibility of a male bootyshaking contest. The latter resulted in a draw, reduced to a provocative joke and generally dismissed as unfeasible. 'Lady Sweetness', a regular participant in the forum, clearly expresses her doubts about finding 'brothers' willing to, 'step on the stage and bootyshake' as she believes, 'they would be known as queer for life' (Lady Sweetness, www.jumpoff.tv, 2005). Once again the body of the performer is thought of as essentially Black (a 'brother') and heterosexual (otherwise 'queer'). Her view, shared by most of the forum contributors, is firmly rooted in the stereotyped roles assigned to male-female subjects, precluding any possibility of inter-changeability or appropriation.

Exasperating the patriarchal constriction of the gendered body, women proceed to counter their artistic disempowerment and re-affirm the value of their subjectivity. The feminine body approaches the performance as a semiotic strategy to counter disempowerment through a hyperbolic, male-challenging over-empowerment. Nonetheless, Best affirms that similar, 'subject positions are often enabled by the very structures of domination which they are criticizing and against which they struggle' (1998: 23). The female's response to counter and challenge the male's identity affirmation lies therefore in an over-celebration of the feminine body, a discourse that Rose finds nonetheless contradictory as it 'affirm(s) black female beauty and yet often preserve(s) the logic of female sexual objectification' (1994: 147). The females' appropriation of a 'masculine' style of the body in movement, which involves continuous sexual innuendos and the adoption of a violent attitude, does in fact reinforce the stereotype of the subordinate position assumed by women in a dialogical discourse of gender. Therefore the sexually-related over-empowerment ultimately risks being restricted to a stereotype of disempowerment perpetrated through the female performing body, one that may eventually undermine the cultural substance of women's identity.

Conclusion: Putting On the Spectacle of Identity

The definition of identity within hip-hop cultural practices highlights the relevance of the contingency and the practicality of those discursive practices that actively re-construct the fragmented, polytonal modern self (Newman, 2001; Hall, 2000). The notion of identity in hip-hop easily fits Giddens's conceptualisation of a 'project of the self' (1991) that comprises the constant reworking of stereotyped socio-cultural expectations related to notions of ghetto-centrism, patriarchy and racial supremacy. Hip-hop's very own 'project of the self' then naturally blends with a 'projection' of the self exalted and communicated in the artistic performance as exemplified in the case study of The Jump Off: the show, as 'B-boy' summarised in a forum post, 'it's about style, charisma, technical ability and wowing the crowd' (B-boy, www.jumpoff.tv, 2005). Such a combination can be further explored within Probyn's definition of the *combinatoire*, as 'a discursive arrangement that holds together in tension

the different lines of race and sexuality that form and re-form our senses of self' (1993: 1-2). Identity becomes a performance that is assembled in the spectacle of dance, around the semantic *presence* of the body which in turn mediates a wide spectrum of socio-semiotic signifiers to position itself in the specific subcultural context. The 'style' of the performing body is in fact capable of expressing identity, according to Hanna, in the shape of an array of 'messages in motion' (1992). The symbolic use of such devices is in fact recurrent in all the dance competitions of the club event: the sets of provocative steps that visually challenge the opponent are a concretisation of the tactics necessary to fight in a battle; the gestures and postures of the body are often adopted as a stylisation of weapons; sensual and sexually explicit movements work as the actualisation of the dominant heterosexual and patriarchal power relations (Hanna 1992: 176-180). In this way the project of the self is encoded (and decoded by the audience) in the semiotic meanings of the movement, while the projection of the self is articulated in the emphatic representation of a racialised and gendered body.

The subcultural experience of hip-hop offered by The Jump Off relies entirely on the perpetuation of a myth of authenticity: being authentic means being real, and the real is only found, proven and performed in the street. The notion of identity is therefore grounded in a semiotic construction of authenticity where the real and the street primarily belong to a Black, Male body. This body, an essentialised cultural Body, validates its identity in the arena of live performativity, against other variants of racial and gendered identity that are dismissed as less adequate. The element of dance mediates hip-hop's battle of identity, which is fought between its cultural signifiers and its constructed image. Identity is therefore given, 'represented', as a combined project and projection of the self, and negotiated in the semiotic immediacy of the Spectacle. The use hip-hop makes of the Spectacle as a ubiquitous strategy of counter-hegemonic communication has been conceptualised in the socio-semiotic density of the visual content of all its elements (Rose, 1994; Potter, 1995). Cultural identities are outlined in the 'spectacularised image' of hip-hop which, as Potter's definition suggests, is re-presented rather than communicated and therefore negotiated as a stereotype. The representation of identity as a 'spectacular image' is in fact constructed in both processes of production and consumption of the spectacle, and negotiated for its commodity value. This suggests that where the style of the performing body is re-invented, rendered and negotiated through stereotypes of race and gender, identity in itself becomes the ultimate commodity, the cultural tool for the simultaneous exploitation of the underground and the mainstream. The spectacular performance of identity, authenticated in the underground space of the club event and arranged in the stereotype of its representation, is ready to transcend its subcultural confines in order to serve the commercial purposes of TV broadcasting. The presence of the cameras in the subcultural context of The Jump Off does not cause a predictable effect of alienation, indeed it extends the performance in the logic of mainstream authenticity, celebrating the ultimate spectacle of identity.

Endnotes

¹ The term b-boy is a street abbreviation of 'break-boy', which commonly defines a male break-dancer. The word 'break' refers in fact to the dynamic beat-only portion of hip-hop songs, favoured by dancers as the ideal rhythmic segment to develop and showcase dance moves.

² Similarly, the term b-girl identifies a female break-dancer in hip hop terminology.

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