Chapter 8: Hip-Hop Discourse and Artifact Analysis I (Illmatic tracks 1-2)


*Genesis* 1:45 (Track 1) and a Postmodern Origin-Story

Culture is always a commentary on larger environmental and social conditions. It is produced within a context as a response. As *Illmatic* begins the sound of a passing train can be heard along with the atmospheric sounds of the urban core. Being led by a child the listener is brought into the streets of Queensbridge, New York into the cultural epicenter of hip-hop. The intro is a birth for Nas (the commercial emcee depicted as a child on the cover), but a renaissance (rebirth) of both culture and society as almost every element including language is reused, hip-hop as recycling. Notorious B.I.G. recycles this theme of birth along with the child motif previously discussed in the intro track of his seminal album *Life After Death*. In it a young B.I.G. is born to the backdrop of Curtis Mayfield’s “Superfly” and quickly, along with hip-hop becomes socialized to the harsh conditions reality. This origin-story theme of both emcee and hip-hop culture in general is used repeatedly in hip-hop discourse.

The introduction begins the story. *Genesis* is the biblical inception and the beginning of *Illmatic*, which uses a sample from the definitive narrative of hip-hop culture, the movie *Wild Style*. The intro also features a sample of Nas himself as the movie is played over the emcee’s first commercial verse in the background, Main Source’s “Live at the BBQ.”

*Street's disciple my raps are trifle*

*I shoot slugs from my brain just like a rifle*

*Stampede the stage I leave the microphone split*
Play Mr. Tuffy while I'm on some Pretty Tone shit
Verbal assassin my architect pleases
When I was twelve, I went to hell for...

A seventeen-year-old Nas having already dropped out of school to seek education elsewhere lyrically defines his place within hip-hop discourse during the intro to *Illmatic.* The beat ends suddenly and the younger Nas’s lyrics are cut short right before he drops an already well-known line,

...snuffin Jesus, Nasty Nas is a rebel to America.

He turns his own previous text into a synecdoche a partial syllogism of his own logic letting the answer to the set up line three years earlier come in the form of *Illmatic.*

We are reminded throughout the album why Nas remains “a rebel to America.” Why his generation is not smiling, why his voice is labeled explicit, and why his discourse is not jazz or blues, but a mixture of the two both upbeat and downcast. We are reminded why hip-hop culture is an American counter cultural discourse positioned within and outside the mainstream. A culture with a distinct past and a deep influential history as we also hear the unmistakable sounds lifted from the movie *Wild Style.* This history represents a story of origin, what hanging-out in the Arcata plaza does to 1960’s California this story does to 1970’s New York, but it is also one that has been ripped from the seams and brought into a contemporary scene. A scene that is vastly different than the idealized one in the past. As the characters in the film recite a dialog one states to the other, “stop fucking around and be a man” before following with besides, “there ain’t nothing out here for you.” As the character in *Wild Style* states with a younger Nas rapping in the background “oh yes there is.” As the beat and vocals drop off a brief silence stirs as the listener waits for the answer, “this” (*Illmatic*). At which point, the beat immediately starts. The same beat from *Wild Style* amidst a completely different landscape Nas declares what exactly is out there. “This,” his culture, your culture, our culture, a cultural identity. Nas then notes in the intro that he is coming
comin straight out the fuckin dungeons of rap,

which reinterprets hip-hop’s glossy origins as a grimy rebirth. Like Derrida continuing the modernist project into the era of postmodernity by declaring the death of something and entailing the birth of something new, Nas carries rap into the new era sampling his own voice over the glory days of a hip-hop past that might never have existed. Thus we return to a fragmented reality of discourse diving headfirst into our own master narratives (in this case the dominant hip-hop narrative).

DJ Grand Wizard Theodore, *Subway Theme* 1983

Main Source, *Live at the Barbeque* 1991

*NY State of Mind* 4:54 (Track 2) and Global Conditions of Struggle

The first track aligns the uniquely spatial tone of the album with a more universal mind state. From this song Nas will be many characters with one complex state of mind,
likewise *Illmatic* will paint a universal picture of localized struggle. At times that struggle will be grounded in first hand accounts of socio-economic conditions of urban decay and other times it will be rooted in emotional appeals of fear, unity, and strength. “New York State of Mind” establishes the lost band member of hip-hop discourse, the emcee’s environment.

In this case it exists everywhere as a mind state, an American perspective. This, like America itself is an epistemological way of viewing the world. In that this ideology helps us understand the world we live in. As Baudrillard notes a story of origin is particular to the national narrative of a country. Many countries have been created out of conquest, some have drawn their boarders out of victory others defeat, and still others have had their borders drawn for them (we can think of domestic communities in a similar way). America has set-up a particularly interesting grand narrative attempting to erase history in favor for a postmodern inception, a murky origin that both recognizes and negates history (how does our national narrative exhibit these elements?) an inception that is much like the beginning of Nas’s *Illmatic*. The contemporary mind state offered by Nas’s first track remains fragmented in the face of a vicious and seductive American idealism, which New York becomes emblematic of.

This track is in contradistinction to the 1985 record “We are the World” in message, but similar in intent. Painting a picture of the world as America, as possessing New York values and Hollywood gloss, *Illmatic*’s message would be cautionary as well as celebratory and slightly more self-reflexive. It represents an idealism that is consumed and presented by an insider that knows nothing of the world outside except that the seeds of its ontology are also right there in Queensbridge. The super group that recorded the previous track USA for Africa might be flipped in 1994 to read Africa is USA or New York State of Mind.

According to Sohail Daulatzai “New York has in many ways been the beneficiary (if not the engine) of American imperial expansion, holding a unique place within the American imagination” (38). A New York State of mind is America’s state of mind, which in many ways has become the world’s state of mind. This perspective according to the discourse contained in *Illmatic* is both dominant and resisting of its own logic. Nas’s defining characteristic is this dichotomy and it is set up here in the first song as a cultural
expansionism reminiscent of America’s own. Daulatzai continues on the implications of an American global mind state

As the logic goes, because people from nations all over the globe come here to start anew, the United States represents the diversity of the world and is in fact a microcosm of it. With this diversity then, the United States represents the diversity of the world, so that the idea of “America” becomes a universal one. The implications of this have been profound because America has viewed this as a kind of mandate to justify American expansion and supremacy in world affairs. But it also springs from something more deeply rooted within the national psyche, because from its very beginning, America has seen itself as an expansionist power, with Manifest Destiny its mantra and violence its redeemer. What stood between the fulfillment of the divinely ordained belief of Manifest Destiny and the violence necessary to make it happen was the frontier—a powerful trope in American history that divided white “civilization” from native “savagery.” Out of this idea of the frontier sprang the very genesis of America—that through the establishment of “civilization,” a distinctly American identity would emerge that was about strength, rugged individuality, and so-called democratic spirit. (36-7)

After the domestic converting of land and people was complete at the dawn of the twentieth century America turned to spreading its idealism, its culture across the world to Cuba, Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam to name a few. The process of ‘savage’ conversion toward humanist conceptions is part of a narrative revolving around American exceptionalism based on supremacy resulting in a romantic neo-imperialist nightmare, an American Dream. Nas would later where a t-shirt in the video for “I Can” that stated, “I am the American dream” perhaps answering the left open title of his previous record “I am…” Daulatzai continues on the connection between domestic places and universal hip-hop discourse.

Because as America continues to make the world in its own image, with its footprint expanding and entrenching itself globally, its imprint is everywhere: entertainment as war, torture as porn, Bin Laden’s mix-tapes
hitting the streets worldwide. All over in this fantasia, throughout the shantytowns and outposts of empire, skull and bones fill mass graves as the killing fields have become theme parks, a brave new world built as a cross between Disneyland and the West Bank. (Daulatzai 38-9)

Later in the album Nas would declare that the “world is yours” and later in his career he would ponder if “I ruled the world,” a self-entitled call from a cultural discourse that shares the exceptionalism of the dominant discourse in which it is situated. In other words, this song is a narrative of American public influence, which is part of American Public Discourse. Queensbridge is a microcosm of a mind state toward the oppressed and a perspective of resistance and celebration in the postmodern era. For Nas the projects are a window unto the world fueled by visions of money and power presented as images on the screen that are reflected in the reality outside. The condition presented in this discourse enables us to see the connections between the forces that have devastated urban centers in the United States and those that are destroying lives throughout the Third World. A vicious geography of violence that connects Queens to Kabul, Abner Louima to Abu Ghraib, and Pelican Bay to Guantanamo Bay. This cartography of American power that links the tenements and townships of urban poverty in the United States with the empire’s slums abroad is a violent mix and political logic where urban communities in the United States and the Third World as a whole are viewed as a threat to both domestic and global stability, whether it be the fear of “crime” here of “terrorism” from there, “gang wars” here or “civil wars” there.

(Daulatzai 39-40)

In the 1970’s the rhetoric of crime began to dominate or mask urban issues due in part to white flight stemming from southern movement north.

New York specifically the Bronx, came to symbolize urban decay—the ashes out of which rose the phoenix of hip-hop. All over America, the movement of factories abroad exacerbated the conditions set in motion by Nixon’s politics of aggression, so that as tax bases and economic opportunities shrunk, both federal and state governments began to shift
their focus away from education and infrastructure toward the eradication of crime, as budgets for policing fattened and more punitive laws (such as the 1973 Rockefeller drug laws) were passed in order to calm national fears about crime in the city. (Daulatzai 48)

As Nas states, “I think of crime when I’m in a New York state of mind.” Daulatzai continues,

in order to fight crime, more laws must be passed in which more activities are considered ‘criminal,’ so that more potential ‘crime’ is created. In essence, by creating the category of crime and expanding what can fall under that category, politicians are in fact creating more potential ‘criminals’ and then spending vital resources to violently police and incarcerate whole communities. (52)

Much like how the term terrorism or ‘gangsta’ is deployed today. Nas on this track is a “smooth criminal” searching for a “legal luxury life style” through the economically emancipating forces of hip-hop. His rhetoric is an American contradiction personified by a city and a mind state “that never sleeps full of villains and creeps.” The crime is New York the mind state is America during a time of postmodern nihilism and postindustrial decay. This state of mind is everywhere, New York functions as an omnitopian construction of a place that is everywhere all at once. As west coast pioneer Dj Quik had already recited in 1992 from his west coast spatial counterpart everywhere is, “Jus Lyke Compton.”

Donald Byrd, *Flight Time* 1973
Joe Chambers, *Mind Rain* 1977