

**NEW YORK SUBWAY STYLE WRITING:  
AESTHETICS, INFRASTRUCTURE AND TECHNOLOGY**

**A DISSERTATION**

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**BY**

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# ABSTRACT

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CORNELL UNIVERSITY 2022**

This dissertation pursues the argument that New York Style Writers (often misnamed as “graffiti” based artists) transformed a transportation infrastructure system into a communication technology. The introduction focuses on a series of popular culture anchors from Basquiat to the films *Wildstyle* and *Style Wars*, guiding the reader through the basic shapes and concerns of the practice as it developed in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then, in chapter 1 I begin by historicizing their practice within the longer history of metropolitan development in New York City, specifically the automobile focused development priorities which occurred at the cost of the subway’s growth. Alongside those funding priorities, I examine the broader systems of racism and social defunding which occurred throughout the city, especially in hip hop’s birthplace. In Chapter 2, I inquire about the aesthetics of sociability behind the development of the subway as a communication network, relying on the modernist approaches of Carlos “Mare 139” Rodriguez. In Chapters 3 and 4, I inquire further about the aesthetic methods which allowed the subway to be transformed into a communication system, specifically considering compression and identity strategies on behalf of Rammellzee’s preoccupation with mathematics and technology. Chapter 5 takes a deeper look at the municipal mechanisms and informatics which led to widespread devolution, especially in racially marginalized areas of the city, and traces these problems into the longer term future of the city (into the 21<sup>st</sup> century). Chapter 6 continues the investigation into themes of technology among Style-

Writers, specifically considering the work of Kase II and the ways that his “computer style” negotiated stylistic concerns arising in the digital age. Keeping in mind Mare’s commentary that the subway resembles the architecture of the internet, I turn to the work of Skeme and his favored production area, the 3 train yard in Harlem, considering his claims for intuitive algorithms. The conclusion extends the questions of technology and computation by asking what theories of artificial intelligence may learn from the insights of the Style Writers.

# BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Abram Coetsee's research focused on New York Subway Style Writing circa 1980, from the perspective of infrastructure, technology and aesthetics.

# DEDICATION

Dedicated to my mom, my dad, and all the artists  
whose art remains underestimated by their audiences.

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# PREFACE

When this project began, I understood it as a theoretical one, an investigation into the ideologies of museums and museum like forms where Style-Writing's history lived. As I continued, I learned that Style-Writing's appearance on the New York subway itself showed a dynamic relationship with the questions of community networks, networks severed by programmatic state abandonment and widespread impoverishment. The wide-eyed question of "the archive" became a more focused question, asking about the New York subway system as an archive specifically, and then the question of the archive became transformed into a question of the community networks that generated the artwork in the first place. The work of Mare 139 bridges many disciplines, and it was his statement, that the Writers' use of the subway echoes the functionality of the "internet," that led me to refine that focus on networks as a focus on the technologies used appearing near to their communities, and more broadly during, the time of the subway Style-Writers:

The website stuff started in the early 90's with my brother [Kel] and we were the first ones really pushing the agenda of minorities online, when I first got into the whole idea of the internet being the new platform for the graffiti writer I said this is the new layup because you can post your work up and not just hundreds but millions of people could see your work and they could respond to it and the subway system if you look at a map it looks very much like the architecture of the internet.<sup>i</sup>

From an understanding of the New York subway as comparable to the "architecture" of the internet, the question of the subway as an archive grew more dynamic. How did Writers in fact use the subway as an internet-like network? What were the components and mechanics of their aesthetics? In turn, how were their artworks designed, deployed and stored in this network? How did artists address questions of storage, transmission, and exhibition of their Writing in the archival systems?

Inspired by Jane Jacobs' seminal *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, I also considered the idea of urban users and the kinds of designs which suit their spatial needs and possibilities for social engagement:

Twenty-foot sidewalks, which usually preclude rope jumping but can feasibly permit roller skating and the use of other wheeled toys, can still be found, although the street widenings erode them year by year (often in the belief that shunned malls and "promenades" are a constructive substitute). The livelier and more popular a sidewalk, and the greater the number and variety of its users, the greater the total width needed for it to serve its purposes pleasantly.

But even when proper space is lacking, convenience of location and the interest of the streets are both so important to children—and good surveillance so important to their parents—that children will and do adapt to skimpy sidewalk space. This does not mean we do right in taking unscrupulous advantage of their adaptability. In fact, we wrong both them and cities.<sup>ii</sup>

In some respects one might say that my focus on the metropolitan infrastructure is a way of studying how the Style-Writers intervened in the urban user design processes which guided the development of the New York Subway System. Here one can see how Writers created a network of informational resistance against systems of racial and social neglect, exclusion and exploitation. For example, in chapter 7, I examine the Harlem Lenox yard, also known as the 3 train yard, and the history of the local artist Jay "Skeme" Ali in relation to local Style-Writer crews such as TMT (The Magnificent Team) and the 3 Yard boys. With the idea of an internet-like architecture in the transmissions of the Writers, I contextualize the 3 yard in relation to the so-called "user" history of urban planning practice and critique in mid and late 20th century New York City. The vast majority of New York's current physical form exists as the embodiment of mid-century urban development programs' strategies of aesthetics and design.

In the long ellipses of neighborhoods divided by highways, for instance, a bird's eye view recognizes shapes of the built environment drawn from the systematic, "meat ax" methods (see ch. 5) of figures like Robert Moses. As the century continued, the "master planner" approach began to lose favor with many communities, and a localized "user" focused discourse emerged in the work of visionaries like Jane Jacobs. Where Moses deployed linear solutions at the macro-level, Jacobs turned

to examining the cellular structure of local blocks. We might compare both to the network structure created by Style-Writers, who made use of both long-range interborough linkages and local neighborhood connections. Critics such as Andrea Mubi Brighenti theorize how Writers provide a network where users of the city could so-to-say restructure the syntagma of their metropolitan “conversations” (to use Brighenti’s word). Continuing these analyses, I examine how artists such as Mare 139, Rammellzee, Kase II, Skeme and Phase II generated such structures by deploying large (and small) scale art texts on the network components formerly only designed for transmitting the body politic.

This line of inquiry brings me to the core of my argument, which is to examine how the subway’s component structures (normally deployed as a component industrialized infrastructure system) became substrates for the transmission of identities otherwise ignored, displaced, marginalized, racially stigmatized or carceralized. With these questions in mind, I sought to examine the ways in which Writers created letter structures which could be easily scaled and executed under clandestine conditions. I learned that not only did several artists take highly critical approaches to these questions, but specifically discussed these questions in mathematical, technological and computational terms connected to Mare’s comparison: painting “information,” (Rammellzee), the creation of “computer style” (Kase II), the intersection of music and algorithms in the idea of “algorhythms” (Skeme, Mare 139, and many others), self-identification as an “equation” (again, Rammellzee), the discussion of “visual mathematics” (Riff 170), and beyond. Moreover, the Style-Writers’ engagement with these questions could, of course, not be separated from the long racist and colonial legacies which led to the more recent histories of impoverishment.

In the chapters that follow I present these coordinated lines of inquiry: the internet-like architecture of the subway Style-Writer’s networked archives, the Writer’s critical perspectives on the computations of that built environment, and I hope most of all, their Writing Styles. The handful of

Writers I seek to engage with throughout this study represent an inquiry into a startlingly small range of the total number of Style-Writers active on the subways at that time, and I look forward to future scholars correcting this study's shortcomings. This small range of focus proved meaningful in that it allowed me to avoid uncomfortable generalizations over a vast range of individual artists, as well as allowing me to focus on a small series of interconnected techniques. Of course, artists engaged with the questions of their time, and it was not difficult to find a sophisticated range of Writerly engagements with technology, computation, futurism and similar related themes. With this in mind, I hope that this dissertation speaks mostly to its own limits, while stepping forward in the confidence offered by several years of research, even if that confidence at its best serves to open a way for us researchers to see just how far these logics have advanced without imagining that we have established authoritative interpretations of what is not ours, and we do not yet understand, and so repeat many of the problems at work in the mid-century strategies of urban development inherited by the Style-Writers' generation(s).

# INTRODUCTION: QUEENS, KINGS, AND ANGELS OF NEW YORK, NEW YORK – ST. BASQUIAT’S LEFT HOOK

*Fig. 1. Cover image of Jean Michel Basquiat: The Notebooks. From Basquiat, Jean-Michel. Jean-Michel Basquiat, The Notebooks. Edited by Larry. Warsh and Demosthenes Davvetas, Art + Knowledge, 1993.*

Figure 1: “FAMOUS NEGRO ATHLETES” *ibid.*

Figure 2: “STOPPED IN TRANSIT SEVEN TIMES” *ibid.*

*Figure 3: “IS IT MY IMAGINATION” *ibid.**

*Figure 4: “AMATEUR BOUT” *ibid.**

Paging through the facsimile collection of Basquiat's *Notebooks*, we find a New York where, by the time 1970s gave way to the 1980s, the utopic fantasy of many mid-century American dreams had long been brought down to earth. In red ink, one page of the artists' journal simply reads,

STOPPED IN TRANSIT SEVEN TIMES<sup>iii</sup>

Here, we might be reminded that, as much as the luminous visions of urban development in New York expressed the noble possibility of the human ideal, these psychodramas from above just as much expressed an underlying sense of a globalized civilization's failure to move beyond the challenges of the earlier stages of modernity's failed debut, the twentieth century. The Nazis were defeated in Europe, but in the pacific theater the U.S. had tragically displayed our ability to annihilate the residents of multiple Japanese cities at the push of a button, in a horrifying expression of anti-Asian prejudices (a regionalist devaluing of human life later rearticulated in the terrors of napalm). After the war, communists, capitalists, and a few others would redraw the planet in a series of proxy wars, destabilizing millions around the planet to keep the "chill" of the Cold War. Although the fascist's blood theories of World War II seemed to have ended, apartheid only officially began in 1948 South Africa, and in the U.S. lawbooks "Jim Crow" would persist until the earthquakes of the civil rights era. The long-awaited dawn of a post-war civilization often seemed to give way to the entrenched growth of racism's legacy, as public spaces became carceral opportunities for the persistence of a latent white supremacist consciousness which continued in the so well decorated home of liberty, the "land of the free" (see for instance, Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*).<sup>iv</sup>

Basquiat's attention to the spatial problems of physical movement in the transit infrastructure alert us to the continued horrors and theatrics of criminalization once relegated to the Runyonesque New York of a bygone era. No art form exists in a void, and to effectively study the

history of New York Style-Writing we must also understand the city's history of arts and the making of its culture. Long before Mare 139 or Skeme began Writing in Harlem, the neighborhood had, of course, existed within a dynamic metropolitan culture. The appearance of Style-Writing offered a focus on the aesthetics of letters specifically, and appeared nearby many other forms of public art, visual, textual and otherwise. For instance, many conversations might quickly associate "SAMO©" with the idea of "graffiti art" *as such*, yet this project of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Al Diaz represented only one endeavor among many. Diaz makes a pointed distinction:

As far as I am concerned, SAMO© is not and never was "street art." It was graffiti in the Greco/Roman tradition—commentary as opposed to one's name. The art element is merely the fact that the art world was quite often the target. During our peak, there was a group of guys our age who were hanging actual oil paintings around Soho. They called themselves AVANT. Very shortly after we parted ways, Richard Hambleton's "body outlines" began to appear throughout downtown. And thus street art was born or reborn or made visible or whatever.<sup>v</sup>

Elsewhere the two collaborated on Basquiat's 1983 album *Beat Bop*, which also featured the rapper K-Rob, and the multi-disciplinary Rammellzee (one of the subway Style-Writing artists who features most prominently in this dissertation).

On the subways, Al Diaz also was recognized by the name BOMB-1. However, to take nothing away from Basquiat, the popular focus on "SAMO©" in fact misses the significance of Diaz and Basquiat's partnered project. By contrast to Diaz' "Bomb-1" and the Style-Writing community more generally, Diaz and Basquiat's "SAMO©" often focused on elaborating extended aphorisms, while maintaining a lettering method which prioritizes one very simplified style across a variety of textual instances. In a photo from Diaz' website (fig. 7) we see his Bomb 1 tag. Here, the reader may note the uniquely styled letters such as the peak of the "B", and the additional annotation "3YB" in the upper right corner, referring to the 3 Yard Boys, a Writing crew of Harlem. In such details we find the connections between the subway writers and broader figures in the aesthetic ecologies of New York City's residents. While Basquiat's career is often seen as a progressive trajectory of

growth beyond the art often known as “graffiti”, we see one of the many ways that the monolithic narrative of the SAMO© project might be shifted, so that we see its immediate connection to and differentiation from Writing like “Bomb-1.” In that shift we may also turn to Style-Writer’s art hubs such as the 3 Yard at Lenox in Harlem, an area discussed in more detail later in the dissertation (see, specifically, the discussion of Skeme in chapter 7).

Figure 5: “BOOSH-WAH” Quiet Lunch. Al Diaz / SAMO© ‘Selected Multi Media Works’ at Same Old Gallery. Quiet Lunch. 15 October 2018. <https://www.quietlunch.com/al-diaz-samo-selected-multi-media-works-same-old-gallery/>

Figure 6: “Al Díaz and Jean-Michel Basquiat/SAMO Reclining on Automobile Seat (1978)” Almiron, Faith J. *The Street Wisdom of Al Díaz, a First-Generation Graffiti Artist*. Hyperallergic. 2 May 2021. <https://hyperallergic.com/642220/street-wisdom-of-al-diaz-a-first-generation-graffiti-artist/>

Figure 7 – “Bomb 1” Tag, Diaz, Al. *Bomb-1*. Al-diaz.com <https://al-diaz.com/category/graffiti/bomb-1/>

On the question of Basquiat’s use of textual aesthetics, Larry Warsh’s introduction to *Jean Michel Basquiat: The Notebooks* cites an opinion that “Rene Ricard wrote in an unpublished essay:

In these notebooks one can chart the process of refinement as Basquiat purges himself of syntax and the received structure of language, almost the entire apparatus of style, to arrive at the final and irreducible few blocks of substance that comprise his mature work.<sup>vi</sup>

Ricard’s claim for a linguistic “purge,” and the ultimate reconfiguration of “irreducible blocks of substance” into a “mature” period echo Warsh’s own claim for Basquiat’s “Brilliance,”

his essence, was on those pages. The notebooks reflect his sophisticated sense of design, but also the importance of the word. Half-words, blocked and crossed-out words, and revised phrases all contribute to the play between the conscious and unconscious mind of the artists.<sup>vii</sup>

Specifically, Warsh turns to Basquiat’s use of text in his “Famous Negro Athletes ©” series:

The notebooks reveal Jean-Michel’s preparations for his attack on the art world that was to follow. They are like Napoleonic battle plans. A phrase like “FAMOUS NEGRO ATHLETES ©,” which would appear throughout his art, is shown to have originated here.<sup>viii</sup>

In the essay *Famous and Dandy like B. ‘n’ Andy: Race, Pop and Basquiat* we find José Esteban Muñoz’ analysis, which situates Basquiat among, on the one hand, the artists in his orbit (such as Andy Warhol), and on the other, the queer artist’s work of surviving and “much more:”

I always marvel at the ways in which nonwhite children survive a white supremacist U.S. culture that preys on them. I am equally in awe of the ways in which queer children navigate a homophobic public sphere that would rather they did not exist. The survival of children who are both queerly and racially identified is nothing short of staggering. The obstacles and assaults that pressure and fracture such young lives are as brutally physical as a police billy club or the fists of a homophobic thug and as insidiously disembodied as homophobic rhetoric in a rap song or the racist underpinnings of Hollywood cinema. I understand the

strategies and rituals that allow survival in such hostile cultural waters, and I in turn feel a certain compulsion to try to articulate and explicate these practices of survival. These practices are the armaments such children and the adults they become use to withstand the disabling forces of a culture and state apparatus bent on denying, eliding, and, in too many cases, snuffing out such emergent identity practices. Sometimes these weapons are so sharply and powerfully developed that these same queer children and children of color grow up to do more than just survive. And sometimes such shields collapse without a moment's notice. When I think about Andy Warhol, I think about a sickly queer boy who managed to do much more than simply survive. Jean-Michel Basquiat, painter and graffitiero, a superstar who rose quickly within the ranks of the New York art scene and fell tragically to a drug overdose in 1988 is for me another minority subject who managed to master various forms of cultural resistance that young African Americans need to negotiate racist U.S. society and its equally racist counterpart in miniature, the eighties art world.

These practices of survival are, of course, not anything like intrinsic attributes that a subject is born with. More nearly, these practices are learned. They are not figured out alone, they are informed by the examples of others. These identifications with others are often mediated by a complicated network of incomplete, mediated, or crossed identifications. They are also forged by the pressures of everyday life, forces that shape a subject and call for different tactical responses. It is crucial that such children are able to look past "self" and encounter others who have managed to prosper in such spaces. Sometimes a subject needs something to identify with, sometimes a subject needs heroes to mimic and in which to invest all sorts of energies. Basquiat's heroes included certain famous black athletes and performers, four-color heroes of comic books, and a certain very white New York artist. These identifications are discussed in a recent recollection of the artist by *Yo MTV Raps!* host Fab Five Freddy<sup>ix</sup>

As we will see, Fred “Fab Five Freddy” Braithwithe and Jean-Michel Basquiat shared more than aesthetic collaborations, they also shared willingness to take on the labor of navigating the whiteness of the New York art world. As Braithwithe dramatized the stories of the Lee and Lady Pink navigating the racist art markets in the film *Wildstyle*, he echoed Phase 2’s sense of operational and organizational strategy. So too did Basquiat labor to earn his position on the throne “of the New York art world where Warhol reigned”:

For Basquiat, Warhol embodied the pinnacle of artistic and professional success. One does not need to know this biographical information to understand the ways in which Basquiat's body of work grew out of Pop Art. But biographical fragments are helpful when we try to understand the ways in which this genius child from Brooklyn was able to meet his hero and gain access and success in the exclusive halls of that New York art world where Warhol reigned.<sup>x</sup>

Echoing Muñoz’ critique, Fab Five Freddy’s famous “soup can” style subway works suggest insights into the ways that artforms were and are commodified for the “pastiest” stomachs:

Pop Art's racial iconography is racist. A thesis/ defense of these images is an argument that understands these representations as calling attention to and, through this calling out, signaling out the racist dimensions of typical North American iconography. I find this apologetic reading politically dubious insofar as it fails to contextualize these images within the larger racial problematics of Pop Art.

[...]

With this posited, I will swerve back to the story this paper wants to tell, the story of how a black child of Haitian and Puerto Rican parents from Brooklyn becomes famous like Andy Warhol. The line I want to trace is one that begins with identifying with one's heroes, actually becoming like one's role model, and then moving on. This line is not easy to follow inasmuch as it is neither linear nor in any way straight. It is, in fact, a very *queer* trajectory. There are some identifications that the culture not only reinforces but depends on. An example of this would be the way in which some young black males identify with famous black athletes and entertainment media stars. Such a normativized chain of associations transmits valuable cultural messages while at the same time, depending on the identifying subject, it reinforces traditional ideas of "masculinity." Other identifications are harder to trace: how does this young African American identify with a muscular red, blue, and gold and yes, white, "superman," not to mention the pastiest of art world megastars?<sup>xi</sup>

Figure 8: “Soup Can Train” *Fab Five Freddy*, (photograph by Martha Cooper). See “Fab five Freddy soup cans.” Speerstra. <https://www.speerstra.net/en/collections/fab-five-freddy-soup-cansmartha-cooper>

Figure 9 “Andy Warhol Soup Cans” Sotheby’s. <https://sothebys-com.brightspotcdn.com/dims4/default/fe3383b/2147483647/strip/true/crop/640x360+0+0/resize/684x385!/quality/90/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fsothebys-brightspot-migration.s3.amazonaws.com%2Ffb%2F93%2F49%2F34dac2ecd2fffd81a2ff7778c1644273d14e9bd73fa1cc9ca556f0854d%2Fprints-recirc-2-659118160-9qlbc-10-wall-df.jpg>

In Muñoz’ essay, the ideas of “misrecognition” and “revisionary identification” are comparable to a “diva’s strategies:” “A diva’s strategies of self-creation and self-defense, through the crisscrossed circuitry of cross-identification, do the work of enacting self for the gay male opera queen.”<sup>xii</sup> We might recall the Style-Writer herself who adopted that name, Diva. While the dynamism of Style-Writing might echo the flamboyance often attributed to the figure of the queer “diva,” I suggest patience in any attempt to directly tie the paradigms of “a diva’s strategies of self-creation and self-defense” to those of Style-Writing. Although the conceptual structures may seem to harmonically counterpoint each other along the axes of aesthetics, identity-transformation, anti-establishmentarianism and the like, Queer theory and Style-Writing deserve more than the opportunism of simplistic scholarly alignments.

Queer theory, from my perspective, might be carefully considered here, providing insights and tools other than an attempt to project the idea of queerness upon a subject, and so attempt to scrutinize the artists and their artworks until they confess, to the satisfactions of their interrogators,

some truth of queerness as most recently theorized. Rather, of course, queer theory offers many voices which share in the search for the ability to be free from those externally authorized “infringements” so often called “recognitions.” Might we find a sense of the uniquely American style of New York Subway Writing, as Margo Thompson’s “American Graffiti” calls our attention to, it may be in these freedoms. Here the freedom we hope for may be hoped for in continuity with the freedom defended by scholars who write in the defense of indigenous freedom in the Americas and around the world, such as Elizabeth Povinelli and Glenn Coulthard, who show us that these publicly enforced recognitions are so often in fact operationalized as the manipulations of external control over one’s own autonomies, be those knowable as sexual or otherwise. Here we may note the continuities among many New Yorkers who in their own ways were subjected to a series of intersectional, yet highly differentiated, issues ranging from rampant carceral marginalization to the challenges of revising one’s identity in a city of nuanced exclusions.

In these ways, we should consider Style-Writing, alongside Basquiat, as part of a wider series of uniquely evolved transformations of the spatial experience of New York City. The 1969 Stonewall riots appeared, for instance, as one of the key moments of transforming 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. urban space into a radical anchor usable by those seeking alternatives to heteronormative cultures. These anchors proved to be exceptionally defensible in response to those discriminatory ideologies which had themselves had long operationalized the political machinery as ways to express and ensure their own dominance. We might hear the echo of other cultural forms, from Basquiat to Style-Writing, which share in these projects of territorial reclamations in a repressive urban environment.

As such, our understanding of the longer histories of complex and widespread cultural flows within which both the New York LGBTQ+ community and Style-Writing existed should be influenced by a critically minded application of the ideas of intersectionality. Angela Davis, in her essay “Imagining the Future” (1990), looks back to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963, and beyond,

in a long line of moments when the formerly latent world of a “dream” travels to a lived “future” beyond “flights of fancy”:

Imagine that all colleges and universities in the country could be mobilized in order to educate all of our young people for the future—for free.

Imagine that in jobs and in the universities, there would be strong affirmative-action measures so that Black, Asian, Latino, Pacific Island and Native American youth might finally overcome the stifling legacy of racism. Imagine that young women had the same opportunities as young men.

Imagine, indeed, a world without sexism. Imagine a world without homophobia.

Imagine that we lived in a world without racism.

[...]

Imagine that we lived in a world where physically and mentally disabled youth would not be subjected to devastating routine discrimination.

Imagine that we lived in a world without capital punishment. Today, approximately twelve hundred people languish in death-row cells in the prisons across this land; some of them were mere children when they were sentenced to die. Almost half of them are people of color.

But, my young friends—my young sisters and brothers—we must do more than engage in such flights of imagination. All of us, the young and the old alike, women as well as men, must stand up, speak out, and fight for a better world.

[...]

And we must say—as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said twenty years ago, “I have a dream.” Your generation was not yet born when Dr. King led the earthshaking march on Washington in 1963, but you hold in *your* hands the power to lead this country in a direction that will reflect what you are able to imagine now in your hearts and minds.

Finally, my young friends, remember that you must not only imagine and dream about your future goals—and, indeed, the future of the world, but you must also stand up, unite, and fight for peace, jobs, equality, and freedom!<sup>xiii</sup>

Unfortunately, anti-queer and anti-feminist practices persisted throughout the New York art scenes of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and well into the early 21<sup>st</sup>; as an example of the period, Style-Writing culture often exhibited and exhibits cisgendered heteronormativity. These patterns remain prevalent today in the arts, and the presence of women and/or queer people within the practice of Style-Writing in the 1970s and 1980s was, and continues to be, by anyone’s measure limited at best. Moreover, many non-masculine people faced the problems echoed in the critiques found throughout hip-hop studies (Tricia Rose, among so many others, has written eloquently on this issue).

At the same time, Style-Writing as well as other “on the street” based arts served as highly dynamic tools and social formations for many femme and non-masculine people in New York. The expected characteristics of gender-driven prejudice in the U.S. are certainly present, but by no means universal or intrinsic to the practice of Style-Writing. This point is evidenced by the increasing availability of academic resources on the question of gender in and around the practice, such as

Jessica Nydia Pabón-Colón's *Graffiti Grrlz*. She, for instance, brings our attention to details in the longer history of research on the subject, such as Ivor Miller's *Aerosol Kingdom*, which cites the Writer Fuzz as saying "Women writers were always put on the back burner; they weren't even on the stove. They were right out there in the trenches with some of the top dogs, and they were just forgotten about. Most were black and Spanish."<sup>xiv</sup> The undeniable, yet underrepresented, presence of female Style-Writers calls on us to consider the complexity of such artists' strategies for navigating the fraught conditions of late 20<sup>th</sup> century urban conditions. On this question of the socio-environmental influences on gendered strategies of self-figuration and artistry, we may also consider Pabón-Colón's claim for "grrlz [who] performed the masculinity that was both a behavioral by-product of sociopolitical conditions and a requirement of getting up."<sup>xv</sup> Here we see the complex, and often hidden, layers of identification and dis-identification at stake in each Writer's process.

On this question, we may look again to José Esteban Muñoz' essay *Famous and Dandy like B. 'n' Andy: Race, Pop, and Basquiat*, which critically extends the inquiry into these practices of making and unmaking identity, pointing to the "world of difference" between Warhol's and Basquiat's individual practices of disidentification:

To be sure, fame is of tremendous import for both of this essay's subjects, but a comparison of one of Basquiat's famous black athlete images with Warhol's portraits illustrates the world of difference between these two disidentificatory impulses and the aesthetic effects they produce. Warhol's portraits of Liza, Marilyn, Liz Taylor, Elvis, and so on are not so much portraits of celebrities as they are of fame itself. Although it can be argued that Basquiat's paintings also treat fame as a subject, his formulations enact the disturbing encounter between fame and racist ideology that saturates North American media culture. The famous Negro athlete series reflects the problem of being a famous black image that is immediately codified as a trademark by a white entertainment industry. The deployment of the word "Negro" is a disidentification with the racist cultural history that surrounds the history of both sports in the United States and the contested lives of African Americans in general. The simplicity of the following image exposes these dynamics of being famous and ethnically identified in U.S. culture (see figure 6): we see a trinity of three images, a hastily scrawled black head, a crown symbol that accompanied most of the paintings in this series and a baseball. The controversy that ensued in 1992 when the owner of one major league baseball team, Marge Sholtz, referred to one of her players as "a million dollar n[\*]gger" makes a point that Basquiat was making in this series: the rich and famous black athlete is not immune to the assaults of various racisms. Within such racist imaginings, the famous black athlete is simply equated with the ball and other tools of the trade. Basquiat interrupts this trajectory by inserting the crown symbol between the man and the object. The crown was an image that Basquiat has frequently used to symbolize the rich history of Africans and

African Americans. The crown, or the title of "King," is, as Stewart explains, a title used to designate the supremacy of graffiti artists who were best able to proliferate and disseminate their tags.

Fab Five Freddy explained Basquiat's famous Negro artist series in the following way: "And like a famous Negro athlete, Jean-Michel slid into home. He stole all three bases, actually, and then slid into home. Home being Mary Boone's gallery." I want to engage this metaphor further and speculate that home base was also embodied in Basquiat's relationship with Warhol.<sup>xvi</sup>

In Muñoz' analysis, we find an alignment which might surprise those who see queer masculinity as somehow at odds with the heroics and struggles of athletes. Muñoz asks us to reflect on Basquiat's expression of queerness as an alignment with, not the unnamed sexual possibilities of male bodies subjected to the investigations of a queer gaze, but queerness as aligned to intersectional challenges faced by those who express their intentions so articulately through the possibilities they create for and through their own bodies: "The famous Negro athlete series reflects the problem of being a famous black image that is immediately codified as a trademark by a white entertainment industry."

## SUGAR RAY ROBINSON

Figure 10: Basquiat, Jean Michel. *Untitled (Sugar Ray Robinson)* 1982. Jan. 2002. EBSCOhost, [discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=b1206100-8e06-3d68-b135-0d8c927f402c](https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=b1206100-8e06-3d68-b135-0d8c927f402c).

Figure 11 Detail of fig. 12.

Figure 12 “Sugar Ray Robinson walks back” Neil Neifer. 10 August 1965.

<https://neilleifer.com/portfolio/sugar-ray-robinson/>

Photographer’s caption: “Sugar Ray Robinson walks back to his corner during a light middleweight fight versus Stan Harrington at the International Center Arena.

Honolulu, Hawaii 8/10/1965

(Image # 1010)”

In the case of Basquiat’s portrait of Robinson, we find the honorific crown above a disembodied face, one drawn in simple lines suggesting both royal stoicisms and the long sufferings of someone brutalized over the course of hundreds of fights. Basquiat’s vision of Robinson appears in sharp contrast to simplified celebrations of an international prizefighting superstar’s celebrity status. Famed for his massive entourage, Robinson trained internationally and spent extended periods in Paris as well as Harlem. In 1950, TIME magazine recalled one of Robinson’s most memorable gestures:

At Jersey City, N.J., Sugar Ray Robinson outdanced Challenger Charley Fusari in a defense of his world welterweight championship. The real winner: the Damon Runyon Memorial Cancer Fund, which got \$44,785. Robinson’s purse: \$1. Fusari’s purse: \$23,433.<sup>xvii</sup>

Damon Runyon represented not only some general subject of charity, but one of the great voices in journalism, urban storytelling and sports entertainment. This moment points us to the longer history of New York aesthetics, a history within which Basquiat’s metropolitan iconography of a crowned Robinson is but one expression of a multitude of voices which have sought to engage with the legends of a “Runyonesque” metropolis. Moreover, the dynamism of the Brooklyn born Basquiat’s artistic *oeuvre* more generally may itself be understood as an engagement of cultural fluency with the narratives which passed “exuberant, energetic, and urgent” through his metropolitan mind, much like Damon Runyon’s; indeed, the stylization of Runyon phrasing like “waiting for heads and shoulders to appear at their feet and grow into bodies” echoes many of the mysterious, multi-

directional syntagma of SAMO©'s hauntings and subway Style-Writing more generally. This analysis reflects the configuration noted by Daniel Schwarz, whose book *Broadway Boogie Woogie* links Runyon's sensibility, Mondrian's geometry, and the subway itself:

Runyon's style, like that of Piet Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie Woogie" (1942-43), is exuberant, energetic, and urgent. Like the city life to which they are responding, Runyon's and Mondrian's styles teem with life, move in several directions at once, and overflow with intensity. For both, the subway with its noise, anonymous crowds, swaying cars, abrupt stops—is not only the circulation system of the cities but also its unconscious. When New York's subway system opened on October 28, 1904, it was celebrated as a major public event. According to the next day's *New York Times*, "All the afternoon the crowds hung around the curious-looking little stations, waiting for heads and shoulders to appear at their feet and grow into bodies." Often Runyon's involved sentences barreling along—moving first one way and then another—but finally coming into the station like a subway are miniatures of his plots. The structure of his stories—and perhaps even of individual sentences—reflects a fascination with emerging from a clandestine world where the narrator is an intrepid explorer of the city's underground mysteries. One might say that the structure of his stories and sentences gives spatial dimension to his fascination with the underworld.

Runyon not only listens with his magnificent ears to the slang of these New York streets but embroiders and transforms it until it becomes his own special inimitable discourse. Sentences seem to wander away, as if they had a drink or two, or as if they were fatigued at four in the morning, but eventually they get their bearings. They have the circumlocutions of a culture which loves to talk for its own sake.<sup>xviii</sup>

Here find the echoing legacies of New York's cultural and aesthetic history within which Basquiat's series of paintings appear: rather than a glamorous world of heroes surrounded by fraternal allies, we find a painter whose textual and visual storytelling echoes Runyon's "fascination with emerging from a clandestine world where the narrator is an intrepid explorer of the city's underground mysteries." With Muñoz' analysis of recognition and mis-recognition in mind, we might consider how Basquiat could extend the meaning of "clandestine" in calling on his art to present the otherwise hidden truths of an athlete's identity, as truths which cannot be fully told in the terms of sheer spectacular entertainment. Rather, Basquiat may call us to the "clandestine" processes of his icons' challenges of "disidentification": the emergent, reverberating expressions which resist "purely celebratory" interpretations of their identity in the "distorted images of athletes and the occasional performer that the white media deemed permissible":

Basquiat understood the force of death and dying in the culture and tradition around him; his art was concerned with working through the charged relation between black male identity and death. He, like Van der Zee, understood that the situation of the black diaspora called on a living subject to take their dying with them.

They were baggage that was not to be lost or forgotten because ancestors, be they symbolic or genetically linked, were a deep source of enabling energy that death need not obstruct.

Disidentification, as I have suggested above, shares structures of feeling with Freudian melancholia, but the cultural formations I am discussing are not, in the Freudian sense, the "work of mourning." Laplanche and Pontalis describe the work of mourning as an "intrapsychic process, occurring after the loss of a loved object, whereby the subject gradually manages to detach itself from this object." The works of mourning here offer no such escape from the lost object. Rather, the lost object returns with a vengeance. It is floated as an ideal, a call to collectivize, an identity-affirming example. Basquiat saw the need to call up the dead, to mingle the power of the past with the decay of the present. bell hooks has recently commented on Basquiat's paintings of famous Negro athletes (see figure 9): "It is much too simplistic a reading to see works like *Jack Johnson* or *Untitled* (Sugar Ray Robinson), 1982, and the like, as solely celebrating black culture. Appearing always in these paintings as half-formed or somehow mutilated, the black male body becomes, iconographically, a sign of lack and absence." hooks is correct to shut down any reading that suggests these twisted shapes are anything like purely celebratory. But I do take issue with her reading of "lack" in the work. The lines that Basquiat employs are *always* crude and half-formed, and while they do signify a radical lack of completeness, they also hearken back to a moment when a child takes a pencil to paper and, in a visual grammar that is as crude as it is beautiful, records the image of a beloved object, of a person or thing that serves as a node of identification, an object that possesses transcendent possibilities. The power of this black painting has to do with the masterful way lack and desire are negotiated. The painting itself stands in for another lost object, childhood. The famous Negro athletes series works as a disidentification with the stars of an era when black representations were only the distorted images of athletes and the occasional performer that the white media deemed permissible. [sic]"<sup>xix</sup>

As Schwarz suggests for both Runyon and Mondrian, and, I would argue, Basquiat, the subway "is not only the circulation system of the cities but also its unconscious" and here we might find a clear alignment between the tremulous, psychodramatic style of Basquiat's figural work and the voluble, exclamatory methods of the subway Style-Writers (such as Bomb1), methods with which Basquiat's textual style had engaged so heavily during their series of shared works. Moreover, on this point, we might look with Basquiat to the subway as a literary community expressing the "circumlocutions of a culture which loves to talk for its own sake"—circumlocutions echoed in the exuberant yet diagrammatic matrices of words and icons appearing in works such as Basquiat's text focused piece "27" (see fig. 13). This voluble work again deploys the crown motif, so iconic in New York Style-Writing, atop a mapping of the components of a broader series of conversations about and between many subjects across history. Here Basquiat uses arrows to coordinate vectors and nodes between clusters of information spanning from the enumeration of champion boxers,

#### CAMPEONES.BOXEOS

1. JOE LOUIS

2. JERSEY JOE WALCOTT
3. SUGAR RAY ROBINSON<sup>xx</sup>

Then toward “ASIA”, “RADIUM” “LEONARDO DA VINCI”, and from  
 “HOLLYWOOD.CALIF” to the royal lineage of the crown motif, repeated, now atop “EGYPTO.”

Figure 13 “27” Basquiat, Jean Michel. “27” Jan. 2002. <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2012/contemporary-art-evening-auction-112020/lot.27.html>

Figure 14: Detail of Figure 13.

## JERSEY JOE WALCOTT

One of the figures mentioned in “27” also appears in Basquiat’s “famous Negro athletes” portrait series, where the image of Jersey Joe Walcott, presents an interesting question: which threads of Walcott’s history does Basquiat call on, and how does he weave them together? In this painting the crown symbol rests not on the head of the athlete with the apparent advantage, but on the head of the one suffering the blow. In a series of highly touted face-offs, Walcott confronted Rocky Marciano. On September 23, 1952 in Philadelphia, Jersey Joe had lost to Marciano in the 13<sup>th</sup> round. With a technique later remembered as one of the “Punches That Changed Boxing Forever,”<sup>xxi</sup> Marciano would defeat the great Walcott. So revered was Walcott’s legacy that just months later (May 15, 1953) a highly anticipated rematch was scheduled, which ended with the same result, that time proved more definitively. The two represented not only one of the great confrontations of talent in the sports’ iconic history, but also represented a specific experiment in the possibilities and sacrifices of the shared territories of the two as practitioners of a methodical commitment, “the sweet science,” which transcends the brute logic of those who only see “low-brow” or “violence-

driven” entertainment. Here, like chess, the “rules” of the game become transformed into the aestheticized frameworks of logical counterpoints within which the great champions articulated and expressed themselves. Basquiat’s contribution to views on the “sweet science” shows how figures, such as Walcott, each sacrificed themselves to the particular and ultimately social risks, of their medium’s conditions and the methods of their craft, devotions taken in service of re-narrating the possibilities yet identified in the human body.

The 188 lb. Marciano represented the apogee of, not only the “white” in a “black and white” confrontation, but an experiment in the possibilities of supposed smallness. Marciano’s record at heavyweight captured attention because it included a flawless record of defeats of opponents well above his apparently identified weight class. These ergonomic dilemmas, of measuring the idealized possibilities and limits of the human body were dilemmas which echoed and counterpointed Walcott’s own legendary status: first securing the World Heavyweight Title at the extraordinarily late age of 37 in a saga of fights with Ezzard Charles. Walcott held this record until well after Basquiat’s painting, when in the auspicious year of 1994 George Foreman re-captured the title at 45 years old). Defending the title until the time of their first confrontation, Walcott, at 38 years old and 195 lbs. confronted Marciano, then 28 years old and 185 lbs. As is the case with many championship affairs, the vast majority of the popular allure reflects the practitioner’s willingness to make unusual and life-long sacrifices in pursuit of the articulation of their craft—not unlike the many artists and scholars we will encounter throughout this dissertation.

In this regard, I would argue Basquiat’s *Walcott* is also notable for the inclusion of an arrow, one much like those used in Style-Writing elsewhere, and one seeming to signal the vector of force communicated from the one athlete’s hand and transmitted through the other athlete’s chin. The abstract linear configurations of the two fighters call us to attend to the possibility of various athletes taking on comparable moments within their own performance (or at least the desire for those

moments). While we need not close the range of interpretations available to this artwork, we should at least attend to relatively clear reference points in history when considering a portrait of Walcott showing a crowned fighter struck by a blow. Here Basquiat calls attention to the possibilities of multiple athlete's lives within the ring, articulating their shared exchanges in mutually coordinated positions: visible in figures 14 and 16, we see Walcott and Marciano in nearly mirrored positions, showing the two's unique stylistic interpretations of the same questions of the pugilists' logic game. Perhaps Basquiat's urgent abstractions call us to the sensibility of those who would remember the blow which felled Walcott as a "history changing punch"—given Walcott's stature, it only seems reasonable that a strategy, like Marciano's, would have to engage something beyond the immediate blow, in order to outdo Walcott's more venerable mastery of the "sweet science."

Figure 14 "Walcott's left Hook strikes Marciano September 9 1952" Legends of Boxing in Color. 7 October 2021

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BEcV6uB76A>

Figure 15 Basquiat, Jean-Michel. "Jersey Joe Walcott" What's the Meaning of Basquiat's Crown Motif. Incredibleart.com

<https://www.incredibleart.com/basquiat-crown-meaning/>

Figure 16 "Marciano's left Hook strikes Walcott." Herb Scharfman, Original Caption Reads: "Jersey" Joe Walcott and Rocky Marciano sparring in ring, 1952, gelatin silver print, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Kenneth B. Pearl, 1997.118.108 <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/jersey-joe-walcott-and-rocky-marciano-sparring-ring-76895>

## ST. JOE LOUIS

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Figure 17: Jean Michel-Basquiat “St. Joe Louis” (1982) . [https://www.kingandmcmcgaw.com/prints/jean-michel-basquiat/st-joe-louis-surrounded-by-snakes-1982-435626#435626::border:50\\_frame:880608\\_glass:770007\\_media:3\\_mount:108644\\_mount-width:50\\_size:618,610](https://www.kingandmcmcgaw.com/prints/jean-michel-basquiat/st-joe-louis-surrounded-by-snakes-1982-435626#435626::border:50_frame:880608_glass:770007_media:3_mount:108644_mount-width:50_size:618,610)

Figure 18 Jean-Michel Basquiat “Untitled (Fallen Angel)” [https://www.kingandmcmcgaw.com/prints/jean-michel-basquiat/untitled-fallen-angel-1981-435606#435606::border:50\\_frame:880229\\_glass:770007\\_media:3\\_mount:108644\\_mount-width:50\\_size:620,543](https://www.kingandmcmcgaw.com/prints/jean-michel-basquiat/untitled-fallen-angel-1981-435606#435606::border:50_frame:880229_glass:770007_media:3_mount:108644_mount-width:50_size:620,543)

Figure 18b: “Schmeling celebrates win over Louis” from Mulvaney, Kieran. When Joe Louis Boxed Nazi Favorite Max Schmeling. 2 June 2021. <https://www.history.com/news/joe-louis-max-schmeling-match>

Figure 19: “Schmeling and Hitler” *ibid.* Source caption reads: “Adolf Hitler pictured with German boxer Max Schmeling and his wife Anny Ondra at the Reich Chancellory in Berlin after Schmeling's victory against Joe Louis in New York, 1936. Heinrich Hoffmann/ullstein bild/Getty Images).”

Figure 20: “Joe Louis drops Schmeling” (June 22, 1938 at Yankee Stadium). from Tom Gray, “FROM THE RING ARCHIVES: A UNIQUE LOOK AT LOUIS-SCHMELING II” The Ring Archive. <https://www.ringtv.com/406661-the-ring-archives-a-unique-look-at-louis-schmeling-ii/>

Figure 21 “Louis reads of his victory” From Mulvaney, Kieran. When Joe Louis Boxed Nazi Favorite Max Schmeling. 2 June 2021. <https://www.history.com/news/joe-louis-max-schmeling-match> . Original caption: Joe Louis smiles as he reads the NY Daily News the day after his fight against Schmeling on June 22, 1938. NY Daily News Archive/Getty Images

Basquiat’s attention to the finer details of the “sweet science” echo his sensitivity to what José Esteban Muñoz described as the artist’s question of “survival” as well as something “much more.” Moreover, we see the closeness of the aesthetic depths of the “radiant child” (as Basquiat was so often called) and the artists’ questions of, not only violence, but “self-defense” as a “spiritual” question both including and transcending the question of bodily violence as such. Consider, for instance, Basquiat’s portrait of Joe Lewis (figure 17). In 1936, Joe Louis would face one of the Nazi’s figurehead athletes, Max Schmeling, in the first of one of the great sagas in 20<sup>th</sup> century athletics. Both confrontations took place just north of Basquiat’s home in Brooklyn. At one of the U.S.A.’s renowned patriotic symbols, Yankee stadium in the Bronx, Schmeling would defeat Louis, who was counted out in round twelve. The event had been broadcast around the world, with Louis representing a powerful cultural icon standing steadfast against the growth of white-supremacy and fascist culture in the U.S. and Europe. Hitler personally congratulated Schmeling

after their contest and the Nazi propaganda machine flaunted Schmeling as a hero in their spectacles. The Juneteenth date of the defeat of the formerly undefeated (24-0) Louis only underlined the event's sense of tragedy.

Basquiat's portrait calls up Joe Louis' position as a venerable cultural figurehead, a position especially brought to focus in the New York neighborhood of Harlem. There, the radio networks told of Louis' loss to the Nazi champion resounded as a public tragedy, as remembered in Langston Hughes' essay *Prelude to Spain*, from his *I wonder as I wander: An Autobiographical Journey*:

WHEN I got on the boat to go to Europe, in the spring of 1937 to cover the Spanish Civil War, I could hardly speak above a whisper. The night before I left Cleveland, Joe Louis had become heavyweight champion of the world, so I had ridden around for hours in a car full of folks shouting and yelling after the news of Braddock's defeat came over the radio. I do not believe Negro America has ever before or since had a national hero like Joe Louis. As he went up the ladder toward the championship, and after he became champion, winning fight after fight, Louis became a kind of symbol of all that Negroes had always dreamed of in American life. Then, as the Nazi threat in Europe became more and more pronounced, he became for the Negro people through the world a champion of racial decency and achievement, the one who could and was giving the lie to the Hitler blood theory of white supremacy— which our own American Red Cross was later to adopt to the hurt and horror of black Americans.

Each time Joe Louis won a fight in those depression years, even before he became champion, thousands of colored Americans on relief or W. P. A., and poor, would throng out into the streets all across the land to march and cheer and yell and cry because of Joe's one-man triumphs. No one else in the United States has ever had such an effect on Negro emotions— or on mine. I marched and cheered and yelled and cried, too. A few years before, when Joe Louis had lost his first fight to Schmeling in Harlem, I had been a part of the hush and the sadness that fell over darker New York. After the fight, which I attended, I walked down Seventh Avenue and saw grown men weeping like children, and women sitting on the curbs with their heads in their hands. All across the country that night when the news came that Joe was knocked out, people cried.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Louis would go on to defeat Schmeling in a second contest, rapidly dispatching his opponent in the early stages of the fight, and so securing the ardor of the struggle for anti-white supremacy around the globe. The iconic role of Joe Louis extended far beyond Harlem, inspiring, for instance, Nelson Mandela in South Africa:

Indeed in Louis's prime, his actions in the ring reverberated around the world, as Louis Barrow Jr details in his book *Joe Louis: 50 Years an American Hero*. "You know, Nelson Mandela, when he came over to the United States after he was freed from Robben Island told me that he, along with thousands of black people in South Africa, had stayed awake to listen to my father's fights on the radio," he wrote. "It provided them with hope."<sup>xxiv</sup>

Figure 22: “Nelson Mandela boxing” Sports Illustrated staff. Nelson Mandela and Sports. 5 December 2013. <https://www.si.com/more-sports/2013/12/05/nelson-mandela-and-sports#gid=ci0255c77e00002781&pid=circa-1950>. Original Caption reads: “Keystone/Hulton Archive/Getty Images Mandela, who had boxed as an amateur heavyweight, poses after joining the African National Congress (ANC).”

Fig. 23 “Nelson and Ali” Ibid.

Here we see the way that Basquiat’s painting envisions a heroic Louis as one whose legacy might motivate the image of a holy figure. In the portrait of Louis, Basquiat’s crown differs in detail: this time we find a floating crown of thorns, which now firmly echoes both the use of the halo and crown throughout Basquiat’s aesthetic milieu in New York City.

In other paintings (figures 28 and 29) we find Basquiat making the sharp connection: the crown of the “king” rests above the word “brand” (and both above the anatomically told truth of the heart). In figure 18, Basquiat’s “Untitled (Fallen Angel)”, we find the same visual style of the halo, now effervescent in its display of cherubic power as cataclysm. Then, in figure 25, Basquiat’s “Boxer Rebellion” we find the artist’s extension of the connection between the hypotheses of boxing’s “scientific” method on the one hand, and the historical practice of global revolutions for self-determination on the other, as we see the “Chinese boxer rebellion” label appearing repeatedly in various phrasings. At the same time, the painting’s structure invites us back to the question of the contradictions and self-erasures that occur in the internal tensions of his icons: “Sugar Ray Robison versus Sugar Ray Robinson Sugar Ray” reads the top of Basquiat’s left-hand column, with the first set of words crossed out. In the center middle we find religious poetry from the Judeo-Christian creation story about the archetypal moment of new formations, and so we hear a divinity who says “It was good, it was good” in blessing the appearance of “light” on a formerly “formless” earth is a

divinity echoed in the dynamic moment of Basquiat's boxers, where we find again an echo of the geometry of the strike which we saw in his other painting of Walcott (see the detail in figures 26 and 27).

Figure 24: “*Warhol Basquiat Boxing Poster 1985 (Warhol Basquiat collaborations at Tony Shafrazi)*, 1985”  
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/jean-michel-basquiat-warhol-basquiat-boxing-poster-1985-warhol-basquiat-collaborations-at-tony-shafrazi>

Figure 25 Jean-Michel Basquiat “Boxer Rebellion” <https://www.guyhepner.com/product/boxer-rebellion-by-jean-michel-basquiat/>

Figure 26: detail of figure 25.

Figure 27. Detail of figure 15.

Figure 28. Jean-Michel Basquiat “King Brand” <https://www.jean-michel-basquiat.org/king-brand/>

*i*

Figure 29: detail of fig. 28.

Basquiat's explorations of crowns, haloes, and arrows as motifs in his textual paintings, and beyond, provide us with a broad sense of the possibilities of these symbols among the street-based artistry of New York City. His stylization and positioning of the two symbols in effect brings the audience through a complex consideration of the manifold possibilities and histories of the world of these symbols as ones being used contemporaneously in the urban spaces around him. We might say that these configurations in Basquiat's paintings drive the audience past his own "brand" as a royally-marked art figure, and toward those innumerable instances of these symbols as used in the metropolitan environment around him.

One of the most obvious points of Basquiat's method, and yet one of the most difficult points to grasp, is the mysterious subtext of some kind of royal community shared by, for instance, the athlete and the Style-Writer. We might recall that Basquiat's choice in figures emphasizes a specific array of athletes: not only the "heavyweight champion" of one of the multiple global or national boxing leagues, but, a group of boxers specifically designated by the office of a "lineal" heavyweight champion. The lineal champion provides a different logic of performative contests than the other league-based titles, as the status simply is a matter of public knowledge handed off from victor to victor. Basquiat's series effectively produced an archive of this historic pantheon, activating the athlete's struggles and artistry as reference points for his struggles for ascendancy to the throne of art history, beside contemporaneous royalty like Andy Warhol (see figure 24).

Figure 33 “STOP THE TRAIN OF THOUGHT SAMO©” Eisner. Haunted by History. The Tenement Museum. History 30 October 2020. <https://www.tenement.org/blog/haunted-by-history-part-iii-memory-phantoms/>

Figure 34: “SLEEPING ON SIX TRAINS” Basquiat 1993.

Figure 35: Detail of Figure 19.

Figure 36: Basquiat, Jean-Michel "Untitled (Skull)" [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untitled\\_%28Skull%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untitled_%28Skull%29)

## “STYLE-WRITING” and “GRAFFITI”: HISTORICAL PARAMETERS AND CONCEPTUAL SIGNIFICANCE

The term “graffiti” carries many valences, and may either be used to refer to a specific artistic tradition, to unauthorized, illegal, and/or unwanted inscriptions generally, such as the word’s etymological origins in the sense of a scrawl on a wall. Thus, rather than to propose a general categorization about the protocols for scholarship, I simply attempt to maintain consistency in my word choices local to this document: here, throughout the study I use capitalized terms (i.e. Style-Writer) to refer to practitioners of a specific aesthetic tradition. This choice is not without precedent; see for instance Greg Tate’s essay *Rammellzee: The Ikonoklast Samurai*: “Once upon a time in the Bronx, before hip-hop had a name, or came to be defined by the Five Elements of mc’ing, breakdancing, B-boying, turntabling, and the painting known as graffiti, it had Writers.”<sup>xv</sup> In this case I focus on their practice in the New York subways in the 1970’s and 1980’s, which shared early roots with the Philadelphia wall Writers of the 1960’s. This lineage would go on to hybridize with the methods of artists around the Americas (such as the “Cholo” style in California, which began even earlier in the century). By contrast, when I feel that it is necessary, I use the lowercase term (graffiti) to refer to the general idea of an “unauthorized” inscription. When quoting others, I attempt to maintain their usage as much as possible given the limitations of the dissertation structure.

Central to this dissertation is the debate around “graffiti” as a form of aesthetic writing. This debate immediately calls a scholar’s attention to the academic-archival presuppositions which position Style-Writing as a preeminently visual form, most often as a less evolved form of muralism. The current order is clear: when “graffiti” appears in a humanities canon, it appears within visual art histories, perhaps as it should.

Despite the practitioners' insistence on their social status as, and their historical movement's title of, "Writers," we might note that few anthologies of literary writing include these texts. In an attempt to recalibrate, my inquiry here focuses on a limited range of highlights from the history provided by the practitioners, focusing on key dimensions entrenched in the late 1970's and early 1980's. In that historical moment, the genre's self-identification coalesced as a globally recognizable phenomenon just as it faced the end of its defining substrate; as the 1980's passed, the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority's anti-graffiti campaign would succeed in recapturing the train lines. Each instance of Writing signaled the discontents of a crumbling municipal order, an order built on the fissures of a mid-century's social vicissitudes of urban planning and order which had long prefigured the ultimate whitewashing of the subways. Subway based Writing appeared in the social and spatial gap abandoned by an automobile-minded "revolution" in urban infrastructure largely heralded by Robert Moses. In the 21st century, Style-Writing survives from its fecund epoch during the heyday of masterpieces on subway trains, now undeniable as a form of global public space.

They said "the Bronx is burning" just as Hip Hop was more generally "Born in the Bronx," Style-Writing irrefutably demonstrated the presence of not only what, but who, remained beyond the abandonment of whole districts to ashes and capital speculation (landlord sponsored arsons infamously were designed to capitalize on insurance policies). Such spatial dismissals were only echoed by the vast destruction of mid-century urban environments that preceded the construction of highways serving the upper white classes. This Writing then might be mis-known as "graffiti" insofar as its historical appearance contravened the ethos of public governance exemplified by figures like Daniel P. Moynihan, whose infamous federal memo of "benign neglect" rendered many communities of color outside the purview of government responsibility.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Simply put, each name inscribed by a Writer demonstrates the presence of a community network and archival index that was first subjected to erasure in deed by municipal power-brokers

like Robert Moses, and later in word by congressmen like Moynihan. Tricia Rose's now classic *Black Noise* presents the case for this historical importance most succinctly: "Graffiti artists spraypainted murals and (name) "tags" on trains, trucks, and playgrounds, claiming territories and inscribing their otherwise contained identities on public property."<sup>xxvii</sup> My inquiry thus touches on the archival ideologies and practices in repression of, and even more those put to work by, the genre of Style-Writing practiced on the New York subway in the 1970's and 1980's, and appeared as a substantive international practice of written aesthetics by the early 21st century. While I often call on these more traditional theoretical resources from the discipline of literary studies, I aim for a framework that results from the assertions made by Style-Writers. Often this means attempting to just begin trusting the intellectual possibilities that their claims open ahead of us. Despite the fact that their expertise far exceeds most of the academy's current resources, many of these thinkers have been excluded from the scholarly discourse because of their status as people of color, people displaced from higher education, or people demoted from the "high" art circles. This is perhaps most especially true in a subfield where the Style-Writer's voices should be readily heard, that of murals and public art.

At the forefront of the genre's resistance to such problems we find the oeuvre of the early leader Phase II, who favors the term "style-writing" to that of "graffiti." Shifting the parameters of gravity for an account of graffiti from visual studies to include the attempts of literary criticism may also allow for a crucial political shift: the critical method adjusts to the testimony of the practitioner's self-declared identification as "Writers." While the traditions of literary studies have, of course, developed without a consistent attention to Style-Writing as a literary form, the same can be said of many forms of writing and authorship which at one point or another were not considered well fit to the idea of "literature" (for a multiplicity of reasons). By letting Phase 2's insights guide interconnected theorizations from the academy, I propose that we might elaborate why written

inscription is one of many necessary lenses for analyzing the category of Style-Writing, rather than the misnomer “graffiti.”

An overarching contention of this study is that viewing Style-Writing as an interrogation of these archives in fact calls for a resistance to those dominant academic accounts which position Style-Writing as a “naturally” ephemeral phenomenon, and a more careful attention to the contest over such a “nature” among Writers. After shifting the understanding of Style-Writing away from an art naturalized as ephemeral, we in turn recognize an art which in fact deploys a whole repertoire of complex practices insisting against ideas of simplistic erasure. I have yet to encounter a Writer who does not understand the basis of their art’s risk of ephemerality in the face of generalized decay and erasure by authorities. However, the simple idea, that the art is therefore ephemeral as such due to its risk, misinterprets the way Writers seem to prioritize and manage risks. Many Writers still take pilgrimages to legendary sites of the craft, and should a rare artwork be recovered from some two decades before, many Writers celebrate the moment as a rare event of Style-Writing surviving against the odds. This attitude seems far from the idea that Style-Writing as an aesthetic form prioritizes ephemerality in a way that could be qualified as intrinsic to the artist’s commitments. Moreover, the level of risk Writers are willing to take on in service of their craft need not be understood as a commitment to ephemerality as a positive value, indeed the confrontation with ephemerality only underlines the level of intensity that the Writer must keep in balance. Seemingly, between ephemeral connections and the legacies of community heroisms, each stroke of the Writer’s craft both divides and balances the two senses.

The choice of the subway as a primary substrate leads us to a most immediate vision of the delicate balance between the risk of disappearance and the possibility of remembrance. First, the medium proved a formal contrast with the easily understandable sense of hesitation availed by many owners of property in public space. Rather than focus on the public walls of urban buildings or

personal property, the subway as a substrate provided a dynamic contrast, by making the archival choice (of substrate type) itself a choice which could be conscientiously made as a feature of the art practice. In its detachment from a sense of personal possession, except, perhaps in the Style of the Writer. The subway might be understood as offering Writers an archive-like functionality, insofar as it became a kind of public record for the Writers to share about the day-to-day evolution of the complexities of their craft during these fecund years. Not only did the subway serve as a transmission network, but, of course, it served as a public ledger where Writers engaged and stored sets of configurations of the alphabet. This public set of information points to the way that questions of the archive could help us inquire about Style-Writing. With this in mind, we might ask: as the cultural archive for the word “graffiti” now results from a complex saturation of auxiliary economies generating social, financial, and spatial capital, which specific institutional histories and sites have Style-Writing’s tradition moved in and out of? How are artistic, disciplinary, economic and political boundaries constructed, populated, hidden and contested?

A wider social condition is at stake in this investigation. The politics of legibility and mass industrial-institutional complexes increasingly subsume and normalize the value of “underground” cultures. Yet, these conditions often are pragmatically necessary for these artists’ careers. For instance, the films *Wildstyle* and *Style Wars* each make subtle inquiries into the question of the Style-Writer turned gallery artist. In *Style Wars*’ cousin, the photobook *Subway Art*, Mare presents a subtle sense of an emergent “world” appearing after an initial loss: “We may have lost the trains, but we’ve gained the whole world.”<sup>xxviii</sup> The risks of these contests at the boundaries of such archival networks seem equally present in success and in failure. How do inscriptive negotiations of the archive of public life and public space make, fulfill, or become repressed by the increasingly fascistic conditions of late-capitalist democracy? Or, perhaps more insidiously, how do these inscriptions become subsumed by the liberal conditions of recognition and pacific consensus? What voices and forms of

inscription can negotiate the fraught conditions of contemporary public space where competing complexes of legibility and erasure are often co-extensive?

Proposing questions of normalization returns us to questions of the literary arts. Can our traditions of written aesthetics account for Style-Writing as a form of literature that prizes the aggregates of disseminated displays over imaginative structures of textual meaning? What literary tools value the spatiality of the inscribed name alongside its legibility? How many scholars analyze written forms that prioritize the space of dissemination itself, alongside the success of more general referential apparatuses? Style-Writing fundamentally proposes that a transgressive and confrontational position within a hegemonic order can reach the status of being a primary medium of its art. Then can that art, taking such positional relation as a medium rather than an end, resist being “dialectically” subsumed by hegemonizing forces?

As a study of Style-Writing, this inquiry is necessarily positioned at the fluctuating thresholds between these hegemonic and radical archives of writing. So ultimately, I confront the limitations of the academy’s political calculus (which, paradoxically, often leads to dismissing legally written-on walls as inauthentic, politically neutralized, or perhaps worse yet amounting to the same, claiming such spaces as moments of liberal triumphalism). Yet, writers of the art have enthusiastically engaged with an extremely broad spectrum of spaces since the origins of the tradition in the 1970s and 1980s, often including exactly such legalized sites of practice. Thus, the Style-Writing tradition pushes the academy to expand the boundaries of both “politics” and of “writing.” Style-Writing calls on us to take seriously how our knowledge production will not only refer to, but be led by, voices mis-positioned as “outside”—and there attempt to articulate traces left during that travel.

## THE STATE OF THE ACADEMIC RESEARCH FIELD IN THE EARLY 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Despite a terrific quantity of scholarship, the state of the scholarly field is problematic at best. My primary contention is that the literature on “graffiti” treats the practice with too much generality to make many precise and/or robustly contextualized claims. In doing so, it also neglects fine grained regional histories, such as the foundational role of New York styles in providing aesthetic programs of inscription. Few academic articles, let alone books, are written on the vast majority of this tradition’s own most recognized Writers (see for example the monumentally influential Sandra “Lady Pink” Fabara). At the same time, articles do proliferate on artists positioned firmly within 21st popular culture, focusing on their works without attention to the aesthetics of inscription which constitute the overwhelming majority of the tradition. More rigorous surveys only recently appeared in the form of edited collections.<sup>xxxix</sup> Of the strongest books that take the tradition seriously, Austin 2001 and Schacter 2014, the latter is limited by geography, and both by disciplinary orientation.<sup>xxx</sup> Aside from rare examples such as Chaz Bojórquez’ brief foreword to *Cholo Writing*, “Stroke of Identity,”<sup>xxxxi</sup> the scholarly literature largely lacks coherence around semiotic or linguistic analyses, let alone sensitivity to that dimension’s aesthetics. Similarly, an increasing scholastic tendency to rightly refer to the art as *writing* is not yet accompanied by a rigorous engagement with the archaeological shift of stakes from visual art history to literary art history that that change implies.<sup>xxxii</sup>

The general archive giving order to the academic literature on this subject is thus a major issue. The scholarship is largely from disciplinary positions outside the treatment of inscription: to name a few, criminology,<sup>xxxiii</sup> legal studies,<sup>xxxiv</sup> anthropology and ethnography,<sup>xxxv</sup> youth studies,<sup>xxxvi</sup> sociology,<sup>xxxvii</sup> urbanism,<sup>xxxviii</sup> geography,<sup>xxxix</sup> preservation studies (preserving *against* graffiti),<sup>xl</sup> scientific

approaches to aesthetics,<sup>xli</sup> and education.<sup>xlii</sup> Moreover, many accounts make clear the need to fight for an increased recognition of Style-Writing within the academic archive.<sup>xliii</sup> As I mentioned before, the most extensive collection of the literature on Style-Writing ultimately (dis)places it as a subset of muralism.<sup>xliv</sup> Exceptions appear in work such as “Graffiti and Murals,” The third chapter of Guisela Lattore’s *Walls of Empowerment* (2008), where the work of Marcos Sánchez-Tranquilino<sup>xlv</sup> features strongly, as does the commentary and artwork of Willie Herrón.

Despite critical tendencies to absorb his relation to Writing in the teleology of muralism, Herrón incisively claims the independent validity of the artform.<sup>xlvi</sup> While a few taxonomies of Style-Writing’s many iterations exist,<sup>xlvii</sup> the archiving of Style-Writing lacks a rigorous critical account that can clarify the stakes of these methods. Surprisingly, strong critical inquiries appear regarding digital archives for “graffiti” and rejections of museal inclusion of “graffiti”,<sup>xlviii</sup> and, less surprisingly, articles of ambiguous politics define the right of a property owner to preserve “graffiti” on their premises.<sup>xlix</sup> Discussions of cultural heritage appear in relation to generally liberal politics of documentation on the one hand,<sup>1</sup> and on the other in relation to the discourse of 21st century progressivist urban ideals of a “creative commons.”<sup>ii</sup> An anti-“graffiti” position appears explicitly in preservation studies,<sup>iii</sup> and more subtly in reformist, “solutions”-oriented commentaries which divide the tradition into two archives, one worth preserving, and one subject to erasure.<sup>liii</sup>

With the limited nature of academic sources, the best critical accounts of Style-Writing have migrated elsewhere, along with most of the rigorous and sensitive methods of archivization. Typography guides,<sup>liv</sup> periodicals, internet forums and web-based archives have provided important sources for intellectual development of questions surrounding Style-Writing, such that the academic field should do its best to rely on these materials<sup>lv</sup> and their authors.<sup>lvi</sup>

**WILDSTYLE(S), SUBWAY ART, AND STYLE WARS – AFTERLIVES OF STYLE  
WRITING AND ARCHIVAL NETWORKS: WHAT WE CAN AND CANNOT KNOW  
ABOUT STYLE WRITING (AND CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THAT DATA-  
HISTORY)**

First released in the early 1980s, the films *Wildstyle* and *Style Wars*, and the photo book *Subway Art* provide us opportunities to survey a history often at risk of disappearance—in a few words, the afterlives of the subway Writing movement. The shape and structure of these opportunities will prove highly instructive for new learners such as myself, as we will come to see each of those archives only represents a limited collection of another set of archives—the subway lines themselves, and so on—and so require us to pursue an even more highly focused study into that archival innovation as it appeared in the transportation networks of New York. This focus is reflected in the following chapters, which seek to patiently focus on a limited range of artists’ specific uses of that networked infrastructure as the primary repository and distribution system of their artwork. Here I seek to frame the broader narratives of Style-Writing as it evolved and sought to engage a range of media in the globalized culture of the late twentieth century.

Moreover, I hope these productions also introduce the reader to a subtle invitation at the foundation of the Writer’s logic(s) themselves: as each show us different examinations of the ways that documentary and archival practices could both transform derogatory presuppositions, and simultaneously ensconce monolithic cultural narratives. These documentary apparatuses moreover investigate, and themselves confront, the ways that Style-Writers, and hip-hop practitioners more generally, could find ways to maneuver complex forms of narration and fictionalization (especially as their work moved across mainstream networks of popular media archives). These forms would not only be rendered by external agents, but by a global field of practice itself increasingly conscientious

of its culture's encounters with success, and the way that success might, for better or worse, reshape the culture's practices.

Here, we may explore the often-fecund confrontation between the histories of inscription, documentation and fictionalization, examining the independently produced film *Wildstyle* in relation to the historical identity of the Style-Writers who would not only play lead characters, but create non-diegetically-constrained, historically in-situ artworks which the film yet depended on to drive its fictional narrative. Here we may consider the documentary *Style Wars* and its sibling photo book *Subway Art*, analyzing the versions of history established by these documentary apparatuses in the context of the broader corpus of one of the artists of focus, Richie "Seen" Miranda.

These questions touch on a range of anthropological and ethnographic issues surrounding documentary practices which underwrite the archival formation of a film and media network in *Wildstyle*, *Style Wars* and *Subway Art*. The case of Ahearn's *Wildstyle* presents a unique interrogation of both fictional and documentary processes through his directorial insistence, and reliance, on the autonomy and improvisation of the cast of artists playing artists. Gregory Snyder's *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Graffiti Underground* and Jeff Ferrell's *Crimes of Style* would come to address the importance of such topics, drawing on a wide range of critical documentary and critical ethnographic scholarship as they continue the study of the practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in two of the key books in the academic literature on Style-Writing.<sup>lvii</sup> Snyder's Appendix, *The New Ethnography* for instance, suggests that "ethnographic writing is fiction, in the sense of something made.

Ethnographers are potentially constructing culture as they report it."<sup>lviii</sup> By extension, I suggest that we understand that the documentary processes in the following examples take this challenge of their practice as a site of inquiry as well, creating experiments in the processes of fictionalization in their engagement with extra-diegetic features of the *in-situ* spaces they performed in. Moreover, the artists' improvisations, as we will see, set the tone for transformations in the supposed boundaries of fiction

as a valorized authorial site, by which non-fiction as a documentary category might be affirmed (and in that boundary, the long histories of the colonial gaze are often reinscribed).

The fact of academic practice is that it performs the idea of non-fiction and documentary practice, and this fact is surely true of this dissertation. As a warning to myself and other scholars, I suggest we work to maintain the discretion of Style-Writers whenever possible. The idea of documentary apparatuses, and non-fiction as an applied system of social control may be fearfully and suggestively imagined in the oppositional creation of the “National Graffiti Information Network” which might be seen to serve as a critical counterpoint for Ferrell’s own study of extra-state aesthetics:

By 1988, campaigners from a number of U.S. cities had formed the National Graffiti Information Network. Following an August 1990, meeting in Los Angeles—attended by representatives from twenty-eight cities, and twenty-three local, state, and federal agencies—the Network began to seek members for its Advisory Board. It received a variety of enthusiastic acceptances. The president of a grocery chain noted that “you touched a hot button with me with regards to efforts that would be made to stop the desecration of public and private property by those who seem to be bent on serving their satisfaction.” An assistant city manager likewise proclaimed that “I find graffiti of any kind horribly offensive. I would therefore be pleased to be involved in any effort whose purpose is to permanently eradicate the unsightly vandalism.”<sup>lx</sup>

The production of these vast state-based networks of surveillance and documentation point us to a dramatic case of the ways that documentary processes can be used opportunistically. These exploitative initiatives are often ultimately unnecessary to the major needs of a metropolis, and create an extractive cycle leading to self-destructive systems where the city-governing networks treat the (often marginalized) city-dwelling networks as entrepreneurial opportunities. As Ferrell writes:

the careful organization and coordination of economic and political power, all point to a single conclusion: the Denver anti-graffiti campaign—and indeed the status of graffiti as a local problem—results less from the nature of graffiti than from the enterprise of those who stand to benefit from its obliteration. Clearly, the Denver graffiti clampdown has been orchestrated by those “in the upper levels of the social structure” that Becker (1963: 147, 149; see 147-163) labels “moral entrepreneurs”—entrepreneurs who, in the process of constructing an anti-graffiti campaign, have at the same time constructed graffiti writing as crime.<sup>lx</sup>

The question of such orchestration leads to the question of administration as performance.

Continuing this question, Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire* calls us to more precise claims about the ways that artists-as-characters maneuver structures of fiction to generate and sustain the

archive of Writing on film as a specifically hemispheric performance. She points to the way that “like trauma, performance protest intrudes, unexpected and unwelcome on the social body. Its efficacy depends on its ability to provoke recognition and reaction in the here and now rather than rely on past recollection. It insists on physical presence: one can participate only by *being there*.”<sup>lxix</sup> Here she might be understood to suggest that the imposition of an archival identity upon an expressive agent could be resisted by its ability to intrude on the metaphors of the “social body.” (189). Establishing a broader context for the “body” of trains and the spatial structure of the city, upon and through which the subway Style-Writers’ intruded, processes of metaphorization and fictionalization that the subway provided for New Yorkers at the time, we might look to Michael W. Brooks’ *Subway City: Riding the Train, Reading New York*.<sup>lxxii</sup> He writes that in 1900, the

watchword, ‘To Harlem in Fifteen Minutes,’ ran from lip to lip and swelled into a splendid chorus. The subway was the city’s preeminent symbol of unity and hope.

Like any symbol, however, it contained uncertainties and tensions. Urban theorists proclaimed that the subway resolved a contradiction in urban form—it reconciled the economic need for concentration and the human need for dispersal. But while New Yorkers agreed that the subway would make possible the future city, they did not agree on the kind of city they expected to create. While some used the subway to support a dignified vision of the City Beautiful, others employed it to make the Skyscraper City of triumphant commerce.

Similar tensions appear in newspaper accounts during construction.<sup>lxxiii</sup>

In turn the films’ critical dramatization of outlaws-turned-professionals finds a historical critique in Richard Lachmann’s now classic 1988 *Graffiti as Career and Ideology*.<sup>lxxiv</sup> Here he ties the appearance of “Writer’s corners” on the cornered walls of popular street intersections in Style-Writing communities, to the questions of the advent of gallery-driven fame and the risks it posed to authentic “local fame”:

Writers’ corners reinforced and deepened muralists’ earlier conceptions of fame, while the loss of such ties to peers, in combination with the experience or knowledge of the different rewards available to gallery artists, made muralists question the worth of local fame. Taggers’ encounters with other similarly situated taggers called into question the belief that the general public echoed the fame they had won from mentors and from their own disciples.<sup>lxxv</sup>

Chapter 2 provides an examination of, seemingly, more classical models of documentary: Chalfant’s film *Style Wars* and Chalfant and Cooper’s photobook *Subway Art*. In scholarship contemporary to the time, such as the highly influential 1980 warnings of sociologist Nathan Glazer

(who also served as an advisor for the film), we hear the voice of a city in emergency, treating the governance of Style-Writing, as the governance of one more uncontrollable social vector in the fallout of mid-century programs of abandonment:

the arrests dropped radically after 1975, but not because graffiti artists could not be caught—rather because the effort seemed futile. The police began to concentrate on the more determined graffitists and to uncover more serious crimes with which to charge them.<sup>lxvi</sup>

Such sentiments echo the central role of Mayor Ed Koch in the film, whose career can be contextualized by works such as Mollenkopf's *A Phoenix in the Ashes: The Rise and Fall of the Koch Coalition*. Koch's social condescension, entrepreneurial sense of morality (see above), and his massive spending packages targeting the Style-Writers often reinforced social risk and decay in areas already impoverished of services and undermined its local infrastructural ties to municipal administration:

Koch failed to clear other black appointments with the Harlem establishment; he did not recruit appointees from their ranks, drawing them instead from foundations, law firms, and similar sources. He closed Sydenham Hospital in Harlem as an economy measure and later attempted to close Harlem's Metropolitan Hospital as well. He reorganized and retrenched the poverty program, producing a considerable outcry from black and Puerto Rican elected officials.<sup>lxvii</sup>

Here, the critical thinking of Hito Steyerl in turn provides analytical tools in two directions. On the one hand, *In Defense of the Poor Image* offers a way to begin valuing the continual flux, unstable iteration and intentionally desanctifying processes of Writers as they placed tags and pieces over other Writers. While Writers might “erase” each other's work by going over each other's letters, this contrasts with the sense of white-washing on behalf of the city. Moreover, the Writers' desire to compete with each other's work rarely exemplifies the practice of erasure. Rather, Writers often see the competition between each other's works as a priority: any so-called “erasure” generally is met with non-positive feelings on behalf of the author. Hito Steyerl's critique offers a conceptual bridge for us to then consider the informal distribution mechanisms of the highly photocopied *Subway Art*. An examination of these varying re-archivizations of the subway's optics should also consider the vast scope of artists which this dissertation aims to address, either directly or implicitly.

Let us, for instance turn to Joe Austin's popularly cited *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art became an Urban Crisis in New York City*. While this dissertation pursues a line of inquiry which subscribes to a series of artists who oftentimes associate themselves with the broader range of hip-hop disciplines (as do the associations presented in the films *Wildstyle*, *Style-Wars*, and the book *Subway Art*), it should be noted this series represents a purposefully small sample of the range of aesthetic productions at work in and on the subways at the time. Austin reminds us that while

In the course of telling their stories, both *Wild Style* and *Style Wars!* Provided some how-to information on writing and were filled with shots of work on the trains and walls of New York City.

These connections in the mass media may have led to an increase in the number of writers in New York City, and had global effects as well. Many of the new recruits living outside the East Coast first became aware of writing as its associations with rap and "breaking" were being established. Writing maintains an important link to and position within the overall hip-hop cultural formation. Still, some writers, even those who are also rap performers themselves, are still a bit weary of the connection.<sup>lxviii</sup>

The term "Wildstyle" carries many valences (I capitalize it with reference to the genre, and italicize it with reference to the film). I rely initially on Jack Stewart's definition, with variations throughout the individual Writer's re-use of the term. Kase II describes it, for instance, as a coordinate style. Throughout the dissertation I attempt to follow widespread estimations of the artists' field, which credit Michael "Tracy 168" Tracy as the pioneer of the genre.

## **NARRATING GRAFFITI'S HISTORICAL IDENTITY IN THE FILM WILDSTYLE: LEE, LADY PINK AND CHARLIE AHEARN**

The first seconds of Nas' 1994 *Illmatic* (often hailed as one of the most influential rap albums of its generation) opened with the track "Genesis," sampling the first moment the audience sees Lee converse as Zoro in *Wildstyle*.<sup>lxix</sup> Sneaking back into his apartment, his brother Hector appears in full U.S. military uniform, and they speak the lines that would introduce *Illmatic*:

Hector: You're sitting around doing this shit? You should be earning a medal for this. Stop fucking around and be a man. There ain't nothing out here for you.

Lee: Oh yes there is, this!

Jungle: Yo, Nas, yo, what the fuck is this bullshit on the radio, son?

Nas: Chill, chill! That's the shit, God, chill<sup>lx</sup>

As an anecdote, Nas' use of Wildstyle's audio exemplifies the way that those early archivizations of Style-Writing and Hip hop examined in chapters 1-4 would later come to inform the longer inheritances and experiments of the tradition. By the time of *Illmatic*'s 1994 debut, one era had given way to another: *IGTimes* was in its final years of publication. The archival apparatuses of *Style Wars*, *Wildstyle*, *Subway Art* and the *IGTimes*, among a host of other influences, had confirmed the preeminence of New York Subway tradition (and the apparatus of those trains) in the global imagination of Style-Writers and their audiences. Such apparatuses, originally secondary to the subway, now also provided frameworks and methodologies allowing for the possibility of discourses created by and about these Writers.

By 1983 the subway's role as a viable archival vehicle for the networks of Style-Writing was in decline. It is within this retrospective sense that I turn to the documentary apparatuses which both preserved and distributed archives of the now fading era for a global audience. *Wildstyle* resulted from a partnership between an experimental filmmaker, Charlie Ahearn, and an established figure in both the hip hop movement and the avant-garde New York gallery scene of the time: Fred "Fab Five Freddy" Brathwaite. This artifact offers an opportunity to explore the relationship between the historical inscription, documentation and fictionalization by foregrounding nondiegetic moments of Style-Writing's inscription and identity within the film's fiction. The foundational line of inquiry in this introduction is to examine how Style-Writing's historical aesthetics allowed possibilities for artists to confront and navigate contexts of mediation.

Moreover, I aim to show how that aesthetic came to render the narrativizing influence at the core of any archival apparatus as a dimension subject to the force of the tags and pieces which would ostensibly be subverted by the fictionality of the film. Not only would the narrative rely on the world class, live-action artistic techniques of the Writers to sustain the drive of the plotline, so

that the fictional universe depended on the non-fiction of their artistic executions, but their stylized signatures provide the foundation for the film's claim to historical accuracy.

This sort of inquiry could be used as an approach to a wide range of moments in the film. I first look to the ways that Ahearn and Brathwaite insisted on improvisational autonomy within the performances of the storyline. Then I will examine the intrusions (as might be suggested by Taylor's *Archive and the Repertoire* above) of non-diegetic history from the broader field of Style-Writers who were not otherwise featured in the film. Finally, we will turn to Wildstyle's reflexive engagement with the broader structural relationship between Style-Writing and the commodification of urban culture in media attention, muralism and the art industry.

## THE OFF-SCRIPT ARCHIVE: DIRECTING AUTONOMY

As Ahearn and Brathwaite point out, during their partnership in guiding the film's story:

"We had no idea that things were gonna go down like that. It's crazy."

"Once you get in the middle of it, things were happening while we were shooting the movie that were influencing the actual world that it was depicting."

"That's right, and a lot of what was actually happening, ended up inspiring what ended up on screen in the movie."

"Exactly so you can't separate any of it."<sup>lxxi</sup>

Ahearn's insistence on the autonomy of the "players" (as they are listed in the credits), finds a ready analogue in the cinematographic framing of the protagonists. Ahearn's directing thus simultaneously confronts both its own force in authorizing the narrative that the Style-Writers would inhabit, and the autonomous identities that their performances invoked.

Let us consider a moment in the film's bonus materials, where the cinematic composition confronted challenges in, and experimented with methods for, allowing the autonomy of Style-Writing's culture to present itself on its own terms. When Ahearn interviewed his film's star Style-Writer, the legendary Puerto Rican Lee "Lee" Quinones in 2012, the artist would point to "the

beauty of the film being” that Ahearn “let everyone be themselves,” guiding the shape of the narrative as the film developed:

Watching you actually be very loose about everything, not being very like ‘it has to go this way’ it wasn’t your view, it was our view at the end of the day. Because at the end of the film, when you think about it, none of us are acting, we’re just being ourselves and that’s the beauty of that film, that as it was going, I was like, the fact that and it took me a long time to realize this because I had my own ideas about how the film should end, and how it should go through a narrative, because I had a lot of things that I didn’t tell a lot of people, still have not told people to this day of what I did, how I did, when I did things, and why I did things, I realized that the beauty and the artistry that you brought to the film was that you let everyone be themselves, you sort of follow a sort of narrative, a subliminal narrative but you basically left everybody be themselves, and I think that’s the beauty of the film, and I realized you know wow we’re not going by the script, we’re flipping the script, and that’s cool but then it took me 20 years to realize it was really a beautiful thing in motion, that you really let it be itself.<sup>lxvii</sup>

In which ways was this autonomy exercised, at the level of the Writing? Even before the opening credits, *Wildstyle* offered a view of Sandra “Lady Pink” Fabara inscribing the lead couple’s names, “Rose” and “Ray”, with her paramour, Lee “Lee” Quinones. Here we might note the subtle contrast between the left-pointing stylization at the top of the R when she tags “Rose,” and the right pointing stylization of the R when appearing when she tags “Ray.”<sup>lxviii</sup> Such details invite us into the mechanics of Style-Writing’s aesthetics, the strategic decisions faced by Writer’s management of stroke sequences, and the unique questions of inscription that arise from its aesthetics. In the pivot from left to right we see the subtle possibilities of Style-Writing’s emphasis on the compressed scope of its aesthetic attention. Moreover, in that compressed scope, we see the component logic of the Writer’s process of constructing the moment of inscription and the possibility of creating units of communication made distinct, and made conjoin-able with other units, by the variation in inscriptional details at the level of the name.

Figure 20: “Rose” with left pointing style. *Wildstyle* 2013.

Figure 21: “Ray” with right pointing style. *Wildstyle* 2013.

Figure 22. *Rose and Ray*. *Wildstyle* 2013.

These artists were already well known in their milieu, and the styles of that milieu had grown in popularity so that these artists were now sought after in high-end galleries around the world. Both Pink and Lee’s notoriety would lead to large-scale subway works running on the system’s networks for extended periods (sometimes months) without disruption by other Writers who were actively engaged in the contests of going over each other’s works. Here knowing audiences would be confronted with another subtle question: this time regarding the array of identities to which the distinctions between “Ray” and “Rose” might refer. Was the camera directing its gaze upon Lee and Lady Pink, or Zoro and Rose? As Lady Pink points out, “I really was Lee’s girlfriend, this wasn’t just made up for the film.”<sup>lxxiv</sup>

The question of the camera’s gaze not only allowed for experiments in directing, but in the case of the initial “Ray” and “Rose” tags, the act of Writing itself. *Wildstyle* would come to depend on the historical prowess of cast members like Fabara and Lee to deliver its imagined narrative forces. When the 2016 Netflix series *The Get Down* later sought out one of *Wildstyle*’s actor-artists, John “Crash” Matos, to teach its cast how to Write “graffiti,” he hesitated “Teach them how to spray paint in a weekend? It doesn’t work that way,” he said, “It takes years to make a straight line.”<sup>lxxv</sup> Only skillful Writers could deliver clean, straight lines, as Lee did with Ahearn:

*Figure 23: Lee (Ray) sprays a precise line. Wildstyle 2013.*

Lee's and Pink's performances more generally facilitate Ahearn's ability to explore the director's challenges. When Lee first encounters the muralists, including that same John "Crash" Matos: we hear Pink art-directing the other Writers in the Artists' Union, who live-paint as the filming takes place:

Pink: "Crash you should like, after you do that, you should give these over here, these stuck things, a fill in again cause like that brick's all fucked up. Don't get drips now"

Crash: "Drips?"

Pink: "Yes, drips"<sup>lxxvi</sup>

By the 52-minute mark, the film offers vivid moments framing the two Writers peering through a window at passing trains, now struggling to navigate the pressures of both commodification and broader social engagement:

Figure 24: Rose and Ray embrace. Wildstyle 2013.

Figure 25: Rose and Ray at the Window. Wildstyle 2013.

Earlier in the film at 14:30, as if to share in the director's own confrontations between the intertwining of possibility and risk, gaze and action, success and dilution, Raymond "Zoro" asks "Z-Roc" (played by the historical artist Andrew "Zephyr" Witten): "How can you call people who hang out in windows and watch trains 'Writers' man? You gotta write, you gotta do the action."

Similarly, the space created for the range of dancers and emcee's historical skill in turn allowed the film to deliver its force of narration. The question of the relationship between a monolithic, heroic vision, and the broader socio-cultural context can be interrogated as well through the "genius" figure of Lee as it can through the director, Charlie Ahearn. In fact, the key narrative tension of Rose and Zoro's intimacy itself reaches narrative climax with a confrontation over the forms of aesthetic leadership that would be exerted among other performers. Zoro presents his plans for the artwork, projecting his office of artist as the transcendent genius at the vision's center, but Rose proceeds to critique this concept. Her inquiry rests on the basis of the needs of the space as one to be re-created, not by the ego of the artist, but by their community's broader sensibilities:

Zoro (Lee): "What I'm trying to draw is the artist in the middle, and he's like, painting all by himself in his own world"

[...]

Rose (Pink): "I'm also gonna tell you I don't like your mural; I don't like your idea. [...] Zoro this Zoro that, we don't wanna hear about it. Concentrate on what the whole thing is about. It's a jam, rappers are gonna be coming down, they're gonna be the stars of this thing not you."<sup>lxxvii</sup>

The "jam" would take place in the final scene. Ahearn's cameras cut between showing an intimate close-up of Zoro in blissful release, and views from the bandshell's peak, of the crowd clapping

along to the DJ's beat, (seemingly from Zoro's eyes). Reflecting on the film's vision of rebalancing the relationship between heroic auteur and milieu, whether that be Lee and Zoro, the director and the cast members, or the city and "the biggest jam that ever happened in outdoor New York at this moment," which was thrown without the government's permission.<sup>lxviii</sup>

Figure 26: Ray overlooks the bandshell. Wildstyle 2013.

Figure 27: The community of performers at the bandshell.

## WRITING GRAFFITI IN/ON WILDSTYLE: AN ARCHIVE OF EXTRADIEGETIC CHARACTERS

“I remember when Butch and Kase was really bombing with nice whole cars”  
- Zoro (Lee) to Zephyr (Z-Roc)<sup>lxxxix</sup>

The bandshell scene invites us beyond the ideas of a singular genius steering the aesthetics of their era, and toward the questions of artists, artworks and historical references that appear in the film, yet remain outside the narrated archive of its diegetic field. Artists like Kase and Butch will appear as historical examples in the later chapters of this dissertation, yet in the film they are somehow, within the fiction, remembered by imaginary characters. For instance, the film’s title “Wildstyle,” derives from that genre of style pioneered by Michael “Tracy 168” Tracy; at 28:42 a large Tracy 168 tag appears on the wall beside the lead character Zoro. From 13:50 to 14:50, a montage of passing subway trains includes works by the historically Harlem based Skeme, whose aesthetics are addressed later in this dissertation. Here Lee’s “Zoro” reminisces about moments in the culture’s history, such as Writers of Lee’s own milieu, Caine 1 of the Woodside neighborhood, who died on the twenty-fourth of March, 1982, and for whom the film presents a tribute piece in a “blackbook” at 8:16. These “blackbooks” function as somewhat sacred sketchbooks for not only developing one’s own signature styles, but receiving those of other artists with whom one might share the book. Thus, the image of that tribute piece to Caine, in the blackbook (and remembered again in film) returns us the immediate historical community of Writers. Lady Pink remembers meeting him in 1981:

PC KID brought him to my house in 1981, they were commissioned to do a mural at Bryant High School, which was across the street from my mother’s house. They’d heard I was a good artist and wanted me to be involved; CAINE went ahead and did a Grim Reaper and I did a sexy girl. The principal called it inappropriate art, got real upset and called the cops on us, they came looking for me at my house. Later on when I got thrown out of Art & Design High School I was sent to my zone school, which was Bryant, you should’ve seen the look on the principal’s face!<sup>lxxx</sup>

In such cases of the historical community extending into the fictional film, the film engages with the expertise of its specialized audience, establishing concurrent and competing planes of referentiality.

Figure 28: Lee discusses art. Wildstyle 2013.

Figure 29: Lee overlooks New York. Wildstyle 2013.

Figure 30: Skeme train visible in Wildstyle film. Wildstyle 2013.

Later, the appearance of Skeme's piece both calls on the character "Zoro" and the historical Lee: establishing for itself a third temporality, independent of both the film's fictional world and the historical context of New York City. Moreover, the piece's iteration in the film sustains a temporality autonomous from either historical or filmic chronology.<sup>lxxxii</sup> Skeme's piece delivers its own stylistic autonomy as an event impactful enough to pierce the visual field of both city and film screen. In his artwork's capacity to break through the apparent limitations of metropolitan perceptions (and beyond), Skeme's aesthetics suggestively echo the claims of aesthetic force offered by Rammellzee (see the following chapters) who would play one of the film's muralists and rappers. Here the liberatory potential of the subway artwork is seen as a potential working across multiple dimensions of perception. Skeme's aesthetics here also echo the broader autonomy of temporality we will soon see is sensed by Carlos "Mare 139" Rodriguez's in his Style-Writing's radical engagement with Modernism.

Summarily, the film "Wildstyle" not only thematizes and presents the cultural zeitgeist of Style-Writing, but undertakes a robust experiment in the range of confrontations that the artform had historically brought to bear on the stability of representation in late 20th century New York City. Here we can specifically inquire about the ways that the film extends subway Writing's original capacity to exert a penetrating force upon the boundaries of New York's often inaccessible, yet apparently public, networks and spaces. These often-inaccessible dimensions of the city will soon be seen in the following chapters of the dissertation in, especially, the programs of government sponsored projects of mid-century displacement of marginalized communities. As Skeme's piece or Tracy's tag manifest the execution of historically sprayed aesthetics, now the signatory technique not only moves through layers of narration to ground the Writer's identity and suggest a trans-diegetic

ontology; this aesthetics simultaneously establishes a more capacious historical field enclosing and interjecting into the fictional world of *Wildstyle*.

## SHOOTING THE SCENE: MEDIA ATTENTION, MURALISM AND THE ART INDUSTRY IN *WILDSTYLE*

The montage featuring Skeme's train occurs during an exchange between Zoro (Lee) and Z-Roc (Zephyr) regarding the entry, and risk, of Style-Writing into the economic and cultural fields of popular engagement:

Z-Roc: "Yo man wait up, I just want to talk to you man, I just want to talk to you about the Union"

Zoro: "What about the union, I don't want to talk about these guys"

Z-Roc: "These guys are making a lot of money man, I think you should be down with this, the guy who paid them is only around at night until this place opens up, this big black dude, think his name is Phade" [played by Brathwaite]

Zoro: "Oh shit, Phade, I know that guy"

Z-Roc: "Yo this is only the beginning of what the union guys are gonna do for money, when this article comes out"

Zoro: "What article"

Z-Roc: "Yo this lady reporter, her name is Virginia, she's coming to interview them tomorrow--"

Zoro: "If she's doing something on the union she's obviously going to do their pictures and they don't even have whole cars going, they don't even know what whole cars is"

Z-Roc: "The lady said some museum might be interested in their work, they're doing graffiti on canvas"

Zoro: "So now they're doing graffiti on canvas. Graffiti aint canvases. Graffiti is on the trains and on the wall and they aint got nothing to talk about"

Z-Roc: "Ah I like that, completely brand new"

Zoro: "Being a graffiti writer is taking the chances and shit, takin the risk, taking like all the arguments from the transit, from the police from your own mom, you know your friends and shit, you know you from your friends an shit, you know 'ah, your vandalizing all these trains'"<sup>lxxxii</sup>

Note how the film maintains and extends questions of self-reference and engages with those questions in relation to the increasing popularization and industrialization of Style-Writing within and beyond its own cultural field.

Looking ahead to the conclusion of this dissertation, I will later discuss how Phase 2 himself began to confront precisely such questions; here we see how *Wildstyle* experiments with similar tasks, precisely in its characterization and performance of the character “Phade.” Off-screen networks of art circles weighed heavily on the film’s possibilities of production, even at the level of casting: Phase 2’s work as a cultural organizer was so renowned that he would become the basis for the dynamic character discussed by Zoro and Z-Roc. “Phade” was, of course, played by the film’s mastermind, Fred “Fab Five Freddy” Brathwaite, after Phase 2 declined the role. Lee himself only came to play the lead character “Zoro” after extensive convincing by his off-screen counterpart, Lady Pink (“Rose”).

Even then, Lee arrived on set wearing extensive makeup to disguise his identity from the police who might later see the film. The film’s fundamental narrative tension turns on the protagonist’s movement across the intervals from anonymity to public identity in the media, the legal mural world, and the highbrow art industry. The film itself opens with a chase scene, as Zoro escapes identification by other Writers after producing a large character piece, and soon we see Z-Roc whisper to himself in the yard’s shadow “Oh shit, so that’s Zoro.”<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Tensions at the level of identification within the Style-Writing as such give way to the film’s interrogation of broader tensions regarding the risks and possibilities of success via recognition by popular media and New York’s position within the global art world.

As the key point of connection between the Style-Writers and the circles of art connoisseurs, Phade not only provides a perspective on the value that Writers could capture by risking entry into the art market in the film, but as a persona of Fab Five Freddy, Phade immediately invokes Brathwaite’s own experiments in that realm. Phade tells Zoro, “about time we get some publicity” (20:00), then, at a cocktail party he promotes his work to the curator of the Whitney (played by Glenn O’Brien) (48:00). Elsewhere, Charlie Ahearn’s photo of Fab Five Freddy’s famous re-

engagement of the Warhol scene in the 1980 “Campbell Soup Train” appears in the extras of the DVD release.

Figure 31: Fab 5 Freddy’s famous Campbell Soup Train. Wildstyle 2013.

In a 2012 interview with Ahearn, Lee would point to Brathwithe's leadership, "Fred was very instrumental for doing that, for putting together the dots, and giving enough light to the subject that paved the way for me to say, you know what, this doesn't end here, this hasn't even been the beginning, this is something that's gonna go on and go on."<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

The film's global distribution networks and legacies should be understood in multiple contexts. On the one hand, we might consider the burgeoning global (especially, but not entirely European) uptake of Style-Writing in its above ground galleries and underground counterculture scenes. On the other, we may reflect on how that global distribution network itself functioned as an evolution of Style-Writing's core values of rapid iteration and dissemination (see the later discussion of speed in the chapter on Kase II). David "Busy Bee" Parker recalls the 1983 promotional tour:

1983 was one of my favorite years, I had a blast, we toured all over the world. But my experience over in Tokyo, I went to Japan, I am one of the first MC's of the world to go to Japan, to let the world know about the culture of hip-hop<sup>lxxxv</sup>

In a 2006 interview, Lady Pink's description of the cult following in Europe echoes Lee's notoriety in the film's opening chase scene:

In some small cities or towns in Europe and other places I know that they play that movie *Wildstyle* at midnight like the Rocky Horror Picture show, and they go and they see it every single weekend Saturday night at midnight, and these kids they know the dialogue. They know all the dancing. They copy the breakdancing exactly, then they see me walking down the street, and I get teenagers following me, they're whispering my name and they're calling out to me. This is in little towns I've never been in, I have no business people knowing me there, but they see this movie. It's a cult movie. Everyone knows it, everyone knows the dialogue, and they recognize me in the street, up to this day, it's incredible.<sup>lxxxvi</sup>

Here we see the anticipatory echoes of these information networks, where the Styles were so effectively written as to seemingly transcend the flows of space and time (see also, for instance, the discussion of Mare's transhistorical aesthetics in chapters 2 and 3). By July 6, 2020, the film's iconography would again be redeployed, this time by artists in Eindhoven, rendering a massive, plaza-sized work by using the idiomatic style of the *Wildstyle* title piece to produce a Black Lives Matter mural. Soon after the release of works like *Wildstyle*, *Subway Art* and *Style Wars*, among other

forms of transmission, European transit lines themselves increasingly became highly saturated networks of Style-Writing. In 2020 the *Wildstyle* logo would become the vehicle for a monumental Black Lives Matter piece in Eindhoven (see below).

Here we might follow Rose's questioning of Zoro before the film's closing performance: "Why can't you go into the yard with me?" Zoro would reply, "I've gotta do something really important": finish the stage's grand mural (1:01:00). As the 1980's continued, Style-Writing fully matured its position in popular culture: as such, its ability to go "into the yard," and maintain its identity became threatened by the risks associated with the new archives and networks which accompanied its success. An anecdote from the film echoes this sentiment. While the storied *Wildstyle* quickly catalyzed a new global community of Writers, during filming Ahearn would sometimes call on hired doubles to play Zoro in key scenes. These extra actors appeared due to Lee's commitment to the sacred nature of his practice remained so intense that he refused to be filmed in a train yard.<sup>lxxxvii</sup>

Figure 32: Wildstyle poster. “Wildstyle Poster” Moviepostershop. <https://www.moviepostershop.com/wild-style-movie-poster-1984/AE6439>. Accessed 23 July 2022.

Figure 33: Black Lives Matter plaza mural. “Giant Black Lives Matter Graffiti | Eindhoven against racism” EMOVES. 8 July 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FAOj\\_xCOM4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FAOj_xCOM4) Accessed 24 July 2022.

## SEEN AND UNSEEN STYLE WARS AND SUBWAY ART: CONFRONTING ARCHIVAL SUCCESS IN THE PRACTICE OF RICHIE “SEEN” MIRANDA, HENRY CHALFANT AND MARTHA COOPER

We could not pretend to fluently discuss the globalization of Style-Writing without also turning to a pivotal pair of documentary works, 1983 film *Style Wars* and 1984 photobook *Subway Art*, analyzing the work of documentarians Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper with reference to one of their key protagonists, Richie “Seen” Miranda (a white Writer who shared the name “Seen” with another famous black Writer “Seen”). The global impact of Style-Writing can be in some part traced to the seminal documentary film when considered beside its archive-sharing sibling work, the photobook alleged by some to be the “Bible of Graffiti.”<sup>lxxxviii</sup> These collections of artwork, and the networks of artists they represent (while limited to certain subway lines) offer us the opportunity to analyze the consolidations and expansions of the genre’s stylistic inventory and social representation by comparing it to other collections of the time. Taki 183 famously ascended to the position of a

foundational Writer, even as his tag gained fame beyond its own spaces of inscription, by being profiled in a famous 1971 *New York Times* article, and so the media established an origin mythos that has remained surprisingly intact alongside figures widely understood to be slightly earlier pioneers, such as Philadelphia's Cornbread.

The presence and absence of certain subway lines in the film and book moreover offer us the opportunity to critically adjust our perspectives before pursuing an analysis of the artists and artworks more directly in the following chapters. While we may sense the presence of a much wider series of patterns among Style-Writers, the ideas I seek to reflect on in this dissertation are very limited. The limitations are not simply the delicacies of intellectual distinctions and parameters, but these limitations in scope arise from the nature of these documents as, of course, only afterlives of the historical moment they point to.

In other words, this dissertation's inquiry is limited to a few subway lines visible in a small variety of online and offline databases and archives, and this study does not claim to speak to the vast networks of artists which lie beyond the edges of already-venerable collections such as *Style Wars* or *Subway Art*. Rather, I hope to establish just how minimal this dissertation's understanding of the Style-Writers remains, by pointing more often to the smallness of our concepts than to claims for theoretically generalizable, or broadly applicable, philosophies about the artists.

## **DRAMATIZING *STYLE WARS*: SEEN AND THE ARCHIVIZATION OF ANTAGONISM**

In this spirit, we should consider the stylistic networks and archives established by the sibling artifacts of film and photo book, seeing the career of Richie "Seen" Miranda as a heritage by which to pivot toward and elaborate on broader questions regarding the need for, and inherent limitations of, any archival practice applied to such an embattled art form. Seen's appearance in *Style Wars* as a

documentary figure dramatizes the struggles confronted by the Style-Writer. There shown as a rebellious and charming protagonist, Seen is shown to maneuver the competitive disruption of Writers going over each other within a broader context of erasure. From this analytical vantage point, we may examine the appearance of Seen's works in *Subway Art* relation to his broader career. Specifically, we may frame the book's focus on one division of the trains, the Interborough Rapid Transit (IRT) sub-network, in relation to Seen's famed work on the 6 line.

Born to an Italian family in the Bronx, and in his early twenties at the time of the film's release, Richard "Seen" Miranda appeared as charming public outlaw, now found raising the next generation of Style-Writers. Seen provided an accessible image of a street savvy, gregarious artist who was shown while on probation, strolling through train yards and mentoring younger artists on legally authorized wall projects. Seen's key scene at one of those walls would appear in the film immediately after an interview where Mayor Ed Koch discussed the threat to "our lifestyle." The mayor would casually muse on the punitive options possibly available:

They're all in the same area of destroying our lifestyle and making it difficult to enjoy life. And I think it has to be responded to. So I've told you the response that I think a repeater, three-time repeater, should get would be five days in jail. Now, obviously, a murderer, if you believe in the death penalty as I do, you want to have the option of executing a murderer. You wouldn't do that to a graffiti writer.

The editing of Sam Pollard establishes the contrast between the heavy-handed erasure of the municipal government's anti-graffiti campaign and Seen's happy-go-lucky charm. The isolated punditry of Koch's condescension gives way to the Americana of Dion's 1961 blues-rock hit "The Wanderer" (the background music was chosen by Seen himself). A montage of Seen's trains flashes across the screen before we reach an extended vision of him leading the wall production. Later in the film, that wall would offer a sequence of images, with Writings going over each other, and finally the work of the film's infamous "bomber" Cap, shown over, among others, Seen's piece.

Figure 33a: Mayor Koch. Chalfant and Silver. 2003.

Figure 34. Seen's production. Chalfant and Silver. 2003.

Figure 35: Seen as mentor. Chalfant and Silver 2003.

Figure 36. Cap. Chalfant and Silver. 2003.

Figure 37 Seen's finished production. Chalfant and Silver. 2003.

Figure 38 Cap over other pieces. Chalfant and Silver. 2003.

Here we see how the capacities of film as a medium within a broader aesthetic infrastructure enabled a unique perspective on Style-Writing. Subtly balancing Seen's work between the far poles of Koch and Cap allowed Henry Chalfant and Tony Silver to dramatize the competing versions of ephemerality which affected the Style-Writing movement. As the director's commentary suggests, Chalfant and Silver developed a narrative structure by heightening Cap's presence as an infamous counterpoint to the refined dilutions of the high-art world. Structuring the story this way led to the chagrin of the other Writers, as the film increased the visibility of Cap destroying other Writers' works.

Here we do well to analyze the archival interconnections between, on the one hand: 1) the film's ostensible documentary prerogatives in the face of a rapidly disappearing art form, and on the

other: 2) the alleged “ephemeral” nature inherent in the practice’s vulnerability to the external elements and mutual practitioners. Providing insights into many such unresolved antitheses within the movement’s broader history, Cap himself claimed a distinction within the broader practice of Style-Writers: “I am not a Graffiti Artist. I am a Graffiti Bomber. There’s two kinds of Graffiti that are trying to coexist with each other. But it aint gonna work like that.” (45:00). Cap would provide a ready figure for a persistently radicalizing drive in Style-Writing, offering a distinct yet proximally militant ethic when compared to Rammellzee’s liberatory resistance.

Most importantly though, by insisting on the contrast between Seen and Cap, *Style Wars* demonstrates that the ephemerality arising from Cap’s practice could deliver an assertion against the reified legalization of the art form, and the governed reification of public life more generally. When later asked, “Was there a particular reason for the war between you and a few of the other writers at the time of Style Wars?” Cap would reply “People thought they could make rules for an outlaw world and I believed if there were any rules. The bronx rules. [sic]”<sup>lxxxix</sup> *Style Wars* shows us how the city officials’ erasure of the Writer’s work functioned in precisely the opposite manner, legislating for the governed lifestyle that was symbolically and literally predicated on the process of whitewashing the subway trains. Little distance ultimately existed between the mid-century government’s abstractions of control over the archive of the city’s visual field decades before, to be reviewed in chapter 5, and the new 1980’s form of sterilization that handily provided recognition to the Writers’ militarized contest over public space. This distance was perhaps most visible in the system’s new series of vehicles, now completely re-painted in white, seemingly ready for the Writers’ transmissions:

Figure 39: Newly white-washed subway trains. Chalfant and Silver. 2003.

Figure 40: Fences around the train yards. Chalfant and Silver. 2003.

Figure 41: White train passing over barbed wire. Chalfant and Silver. 2003.

## SEEN IN SUBWAY ART: THE VISIBILITY OF THE 6 LINE

The inherent limitations and complexities of urban life led residents like Martha Cooper, Henry Chalfant, Fab Five Freddy or Charlie Ahearn to challenging experiments with the questions of documentary practice. In the case of *Subway Art* for instance, rather than attempt an “exhaustive survey” some pursued something they found “extraordinary” from their “own point of view”, as Henry Chalfant points out in the 25th anniversary edition,

*Subway Art* was a good representation of the art that was being done on the trains at that time, but we had a bias favoring the artists who painted the IRT's, and ignored the many great pieces that were undoubtedly being painted on the BMT's [Brooklyn Manhattan Transit Company division trains] and IND's [Independent Subway division trains]. This was because both Marty [Martha Cooper] and I happened to live on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and we naturally gravitated uptown for picture taking. Here the IRT's ran on elevated tracks, but the INDs ran only in tunnels. The BMTs didn't run there at all. I never found a really good spot in Brooklyn or Queens to shoot. The general direction of the lines in those boroughs is east-west rather than north-south, so the light conditions weren't as good as they were in the Bronx and Upper Manhattan, and it would have taken us much longer to commute to the locations, reducing our opportunities for catching trains. After the publication of *Subway Art*, many writers from Brooklyn and Queens who worked on the IND and BMT lines complained about being left out of history. In the same way, the many pioneering artists who were painting trains before we came along were left out. Marty and I would like to acknowledge all those great artists whom we missed due merely to circumstances of timing and location. We're sorry! We never thought of the book as an exhaustive survey of the entire history of the graffiti movement: rather it was an extraordinary record of a movement that we had observed from our own point of view.<sup>xc</sup>

With a perspective of the competition between the city and the broader networks and types of Writers in mind, we are in a position to consider the significance of the exposure that the 6 line would have provided for Seen's oeuvre. Consider his emphasis on legibility for all who were “getting on that train that morning,” the personas of the general New York public, as constituted by the subway:

I liked the idea that I could write my name in the Bronx and in an hour's time it would be in Brooklyn. It was like a moving billboard. This is later on, when I realized getting up was about the more you got up the more famous you got. I wouldn't care about the other Writers. If you look at most of my pieces they were almost all readable. I coulda did crazy Wildstyle that you couldn't read but that's like another writer to another writer, trying to burn another writer. I cared about the people getting on that train that morning waiting for the train to go to work and standing there, and again, I was a product of the early 60s, my mother used to sit me in front of the TV set, watch cartoons all day with paper and pencil [...] I wanted you and you to remember my name. I would put the cartoon of the day in front of my name.”<sup>xcii</sup>

Let us magnify the focus on the 6 line's passage within the expanse of the subway network, turning to Seen's work on the 6 line in relation to the broader network of Style-Writers. First we should note the 6 line's interaction with the many Writers who frequented the 149 St. station. This station figures as perhaps the preeminently famous "Writer's Bench" location, where the artists gathered to watch names go by, develop skills, build friendships and trade styles. Following Seen's work on the 6 line to this effervescent node in the broader art history asks us to just as soon find the limitations of alternative narratives and documentary records that would arise were we to center the archive of that station more broadly.

Additionally, a proper contextualization of the competing networks and their archives, within which an artist like Seen worked, requires a comparison between the archive established by *Subway Art* and other records such as the massive documentation availed in the @149<sup>ST</sup> website and its sibling project, the book *Graffiti New York*.<sup>xvii</sup> These sources simultaneously show us how little the academy can claim to know about the Style-Writers, and also invite us to compare the archive of one subway network to another, for instance the IRT to works from the IND and BMT lines. By reflecting on works that appeared on the IND and BMT lines, for instance, we may consider the limitations, and so the opportunities for precision, in our understanding of artists whose pieces were also catalogued on the IRT via Cooper and Chalfant (such as Revolt), high profile artists who Wrote on all three (such as Doc), and the (unfortunately) more rarely archived Writers who appeared most often on the IND and BMT (such as Sar). Sar aligns with many other Writers in pointing out that "nobody seems to have flicks [photos] of that old shit from 1977-1979 on the J's [a BMT line]."<sup>xviii</sup> Tod Lange's "Born to Run" focuses exclusively on works from the IND and BMT trains. There he points out that

There have been many publications that focused primarily on the IRT (Interborough Rapid Transit) rolling stock. Over the years, I have heard of a famous book being referred to as *The Graffiti Bible*. If that term is heard by earlier writers, one might receive an earful, and a history lesson, for sure!

Regrettably, in documenting this golden age, graffiti on the BMT (Brooklyn Manhattan Transit) and IND (Independent subway system) has been poorly represented. That is because there has always been a paucity of better-quality photographic images of those two lines. To argue that these neglected corridors are on the endangered-species list would be an understatement<sup>xciv</sup>

The “paucity” of documentation for the artworks on these alternative lines parallels broader cultural losses due to the socio-economic conditions of public space at the time.

By the late 1970s, the full impoverishing effects of hierarchically driven mid-century urban planning would be visible (as discussed in the following chapters). One classic example is Robert Moses’ Cross-Bronx expressway which had, by ink on a map, and then by jackhammer on the street, reinscribed the transportation logic of the 1929 New York Regional Plan Association’s master plan across “113 streets, avenues, and boulevards.”<sup>xcv</sup> In this plan, “The business interests behind the master plan wanted to transform Manhattan into a center of wealth, connected directly to the suburbs through an encircling network of highways carved through the heart of neighborhoods in the outer boroughs.”<sup>xcvi</sup> As Lee points out in the foreword, this logic of hierarchical space played out similarly in the IND subway lines:

The newer INDs (alphabet lines, B-division) were judged for their title of entitlement as they choo-choo’d from the rural gated beach communities of the Rockaways or the tree-groomed streets of Forest Hills to the chandelier halls of Washington Heights. As for the markings that graced their sides, those lines were primarily littered with throw-up kings (scant markings applied by determined practitioners) with the occasional window panel masterpieces that in turn created a brighter color festival on its dull, stainless walls.<sup>xcvii</sup>

The use of spending so much attention on the comparisons between secondary media networks is that critiques of the often unintentionally narrativizing forces are critiques that allow us to prioritize the reflexive historiography already done by Writers. For instance, we should especially weigh the significance that the members of this culture place on the work of Chalfant and Cooper, even as we recognize that work to be only the tip of the iceberg. Rather than suggest competitive scholarship, the well-established @149th<sup>ST</sup> digital archive makes no hesitation to thank both Chalfant and Cooper for their work in preserving the Writers culture. Indubitably major figures like Tracy 168, who did not feature prominently in either *Style Wars* or *Subway Art* still should be understood to

underscore the documentary significance of these artefacts; Tracy, for instance, appeared in the extras of *Style Wars*.

## PHASE 2, NOT GRAFFITI BUT STYLE WRITING: DEFINING A GLOBALIZED DISCOURSE, ARCHIVAL POSITIONING, AND THE IGTIMES

The insights of the subway masters may remain hard to come by, given the lack of widespread archival practices until very recent times. It is in this context that I argue we should appreciate and learn from the work of figures like Phase II. Known for his powerful articulations, Phase 2 emphasizes the high value of particular flows in a “network” provided through the unique advantages of subway lines (here, for instance, the 2, 4 and 5 train). The Writers established interborough social connectivity spanning “Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx, which was where a lot of history was being made”:

According to PHASE 2, ‘It was like one big gigantic network. We’d see names from Brooklyn and be impressed and inspired with them. You looked forward to meeting people like DINO, NOD, LA-ZAR or DEVLISH DOUG and EVIL ERIC, partly because of their styles’ [...] lines that ran the length of Manhattan on the east and west sides of the island being the most prestigious. PHASE 2 remembers: “At one point it was all about the 2s, 4s, 5s [subway lines]. They traveled through Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, which was where a lot of history was being made.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Phase II remembers the early years of Writers trading, discovering, deciphering and seeking to “figure out” how to re-implement innovations in letter logic:

Only a few cats really had major ideas -- clouds, stretching letters, points, softies, puzzle shit. Me and RIFF 170 were really the two people who had the most ideas. Then LEE, in the early eighties. But a cat might see one little thing fly thing in somebody’s style, take it, and run with it. You might write ASER, and you see a guy who writes PRAE, and you like his A and E. and then you gotta figure out how to make your other letters match his A and E.<sup>xcix</sup>

These matching processes speak to the complexity of this social network’s information infrastructure, and echo the broader way that we may also consider Phase 2’s leadership of the *IGTimes* magazine as an internationalized auxiliary space for the practice and networking of Style Writing. Regarding Phase 2, Skeme would say:

when you're talking about style, Phase 2 of course is a name that's going to rise to the top of that list and although he may not have created all the styles, but what he did create was the desire for style, he started a format and from that format the desire and quest for style<sup>c</sup>

Phase 2, was born Michael Lawrence Marrow in the Bronx on August 2, 1955 and passed away on December 12, 2019. Also going by the name Lonny Wood, he would be instrumental in reinforcing the term “Writing” when the culture was understood only as “graffiti,” as analyzed in section 2.1. Not only would his career establish and legitimate that archival position for the practice, but the inventory of aesthetics available to the practitioners would dramatically grow due to his leadership. Moreover, the global participation in the genre itself would multiply with engagement of the IGTimes. We have only begun to consider the archive of New York’s Subway Style Writing once the Writing began to migrate globally, and so may claim to know still very little about how the genre not only evolved as the 1980’s turned to the 1990’s, but how seminal masters like Phase 2 fought for identity of the craft to resist dilution.

## **PHASE 2: STYLE-WRITING IDENTITY**

As an introduction to the practice of Style-Writing, we may also examine how Phase 2 defined the archive that established the role of the Writer by linking his claims for identity to the growth of the historical tools catalyzed by his innovations. Consider the importance of his discursive positioning of the tradition itself—which would underline an expansion in genre, shifting the practice’s center from visual to literary arts—confronting the sayability of the culture in asserting the terms “Style Writing” over “graffiti.” Here I argue for links between the evolving techniques of inscription and formation of identity as a Writer. The advent of new stylistic methods allowed for both the intensification of the semiotic structures that defined letters, and, in turn, the heightening of each Writer’s claim to self-identity. As Skeme points out, Phase 2’s contribution was not only in

the invention of styles, but also in inculcating a drive for innovation that offered individualization: the “quest” or “desire for style.”

As per the title of his 1996 book. “Style: Writing from the Underground,”<sup>ci</sup> Phase 2 points not only to Style-Writing’s extra-state nature, but insists that it is not “graffiti” at all, but rather “Writing.” More radical than it first appears, his claim suggests guiding implications for this study. In some ways, Phase II makes comparatively little effort to reject the claim that these writings are legally unsanctioned, thus implying that violating the process of legal recognition is not a logically sufficient motivation to use the concept of “graffiti.” Then, the fields within, and upon which, this Writing is inscribed suggest legitimation under auspices we might be unaware of: authorizations which do not correspond to the spectrum of political orders we may invoke in naming that writing “graffiti.”

Thus, as per one of Phase 2’s most specific names for the tradition: “Style Writing,” the category of “graffiti” for this writing is transcended by the category of “style.” Phase 2’s claim seems to posit a transcendence by “Style:” a transcendence of that political governance which sets inscriptions as subject to archival or anti-archival effects: the claims of “Style” that (may) appear beyond the horizon of a political analytic determining the rightful appearance of “Writing.” His claim implies the possibility of other sources of legitimation for inscription as aesthetic writing, lying in sources beyond the (academic) archive’s capacity to determine the range of our usable terms. Indeed, shifting from visuality to the discipline of “Writing” is simply to agree to attempt a reading of Phase II’s sense of this culture on his own terms.

Phase 2’s logic suggests that if Style Writing is not graffiti, then its aesthetics are not “dialectically” conjoined to the state, even in negation. Thus, we might see that the Writer can fairly purport to establish space and self-identification free from the state’s systemically precarious metropolitan apparatuses. Yet, in an attempt to write a dissertation one fact remains unavoidable, it

seems: the next pages reproduce many of the university's scholasticisms. Some of these reproductions are minor curiosities of debates many of us wish we could leave behind, yet many are also scholarly valorizations that cannot be seen as somehow nobly free from the reality that any university as we know it is always a relatively small player in the broader social apparatuses of parties like the state (apparatuses which can be, perhaps surprisingly, both repressive and empowering). Most obvious perhaps is the fact that my luck access to the revolutionary curatorial work of our university's Hip Hop Collection (which has for years not only survived, but flourished) is not luck at all, but access appearing by virtue (and so by an open question of contrast) of an original land grant university, a process which is only a detail in the history of a nation with a highly racialized colonial background. For the sake of polemical conversation, I have pointed to legibilities echoed in surprising moments of, for instance, post-structuralist theory contemporary to many of the Style-Writers' time. Rather than attempt to rely on those theories for legitimation of the artists I discuss, I hope to note the unexpected moments when Style-Writers' artworks shift our understanding of expected theoretical sensibilities. When discussing theories of the signature, for example, I later point out that even those theorists now remembered to be often the most prejudiced against authorial presence, once supported the existential poetics of the signature. Beyond such historical novelties, though, Phase II often resists simplistic senses of valorized recognition which would heroize him and his work in exchange for political security. His own publications offer wider-ranging and more sophisticated aesthetic conceptualizations than can be treated here, such as tying "anonymity" and "recognition" to ideas like "impact expressionism":

Honestly my first intention was to get my name known and remain anonymous. If you're doing what you're supposed to be doing in this, wrecking with style or pieces, the recognition comes with the territory, it's not something you have to strive for. This is 'impact expressionism' so, having the impact is a duty.<sup>ci</sup>

## PHASE 2 AND THE GLOBALIZATION OF “STYLE WRITING”: THE IGTIMES (1983-1994)

Next, I turn to an early print formation that established a globalized network for the genre. Here I aim to build on the analysis of Phase 2’s career by examining the transnational networks enabled by the 1984-1994 zine *IGTimes* (once known as the International Graffiti Times, often persistently misnamed as such). As a background to this dissertation, I recommend the reader to use the Times’ archive held by Cornell’s Hip Hop Collection. We should remember to situate this publication’s contribution to transnational networks at the start of an era where the New York City government’s anti-graffiti campaigns had all but eliminated the presence of Writing on Subway cars. Style-Writing moves: here I track the shifts that occurred as these writers migrated their inscriptions from unsanctioned public spaces to archival spaces in auxiliary media. Focusing on archival methods *applied to Style-Writing*, centering the iteration and inscription of the tradition and extending the framework of archive, signature and space. I examine the *IGTimes* through two versions of spatiality. 1) Social spatiality: the circulation of the writing, and its derivative arts, through different versions of consecration, competing fields of cultural production, and asymmetric distributions of economic power. 2) Material spatiality: the circulation of the writing through different neighborhoods, geographies, exhibitions and pages where those signatures are repeated.<sup>ciii</sup>

The aesthetics of identity implied by Phase 2 connect with a global network in the *IGTimes*, which forms the second portion of the chapter’s analysis. Produced in partnership with David Schmidlapp, who I situate within the field of early archivists circulating in a counter-public museal scene, the *IGTimes*--and its photocopies--had decisive effects on the tradition’s development in distant geographies.<sup>civ</sup> I examine the forms of repetition, systemization of signification, and geographic movements that the zine undertook, and the concomitant comparison of origins, fields

and contests over archival spaces.<sup>cv</sup> Here the spatiality of the archive became divorced from any stabilized topology beyond the substrates of the images of inscriptions themselves, catalyzing the inscription's iteration: styles repeated across continents, from wall to photo and to wall elsewhere.<sup>cvi</sup>

As Ferrell points out in his introduction to *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*, the *IGTimes* appeared in a unique moment of the spread of Style-Writing, with the success of *Style Wars* and *Wildstyle* which,

spread the imagery and style of hip hop graffiti outside New York City [...] by the mid-1980s, then, hip hop graffiti writing had spread not only through the boroughs of New York City, but to cities throughout the United States—among them Denver. Henry Chalfant—whose photographs had early on helped introduce hip hop graffiti into the New York City art world, and whose 1984 book with Martha Cooper, *Subway Art*, itself became a manual of style for aspiring writers outside New York—could by 1984-86 (Chalfant and Prigoff, 1987) document sophisticated hip hop pieces in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco Oakland, and other U.S. cities. These new enclaves of hip hop graffiti in turn began to form links through a national network of publications. As of the late 1980s and early 1990s, these included *IGT (International Graffiti Times, later International Get Hip Times, New York City)*, *Ghetto Art* (also known as *Can Control Magazine*, North Hollywood, California), *Graffiti Rock* (Philadelphia), *Vapors Magazine* (Santa Barbara), and Pjay Seen Productions (Bronx). Increasingly, this new graffiti was defining not just the look of hip hop, but the visual style of U.S. urban culture<sup>cvii</sup>

The force of these aesthetic propositions can be seen beyond the magazine; German Writers, such as Kaser, of Berlin, or Baske, the founder of the Kulturzentrum in Karlsruhe, persistently inscribe the statement “Style Writing is more than Graffiti.”<sup>cviii</sup> Thus, I examine a series of global inheritors of the aesthetic strategies established by Phase II's leadership among New York subway Writers. By the end of the 1980's, metropolitan transit lines around the world had been used to establish extra- and de-colonial content networks. So far, we have treated an introduction to the broader range of specific moments in which Phase II's contributions enabled those projects and global networks, whether through specific aesthetic innovations, or through internationalizing spaces for global Writers' expressions (such as the dissemination of anti-apartheid material in the IG times). It is with this in mind that I conclude with an analysis of the relationship between these revolutionary projects and the insistent claim to the role of “Writer.” How may this evaluation change if the frequencies, durations and positions of a piece of writing's appearance is a measure of its aesthetic success—as per the “King” in Skeme's title “The 3 Yard King.”



## CHAPTER 1 - CARLOS “MARE 139” RODRIGUEZ: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO READING SUBWAY STYLE-WRITING

The first and second chapters of the dissertation provide an extended, and primarily descriptive, introduction to a way of reading Style-Writing through Carlos “Mare 139” Rodriguez’ thinking as a Writer and art critic, and I present these aesthetics as part of a broader range of responses to the conditions of 20th century infrastructure, technology and social accessibility. Here, I show how Mare and his friends used the subway network as a communication technology in Spanish Harlem and beyond, where decades of infrastructure projects had led to integrated social systems for the privileged, while undermining access for the already marginalized. The initial extended analysis of the chapter develops an exposition of some of the artistic processes at work in Mare’s use of the subway as an urban communication transmission system.

I focus on that Writer’s own aesthetic philosophy, which turns to, among other things, Modernism’s abstract methods in the early 20th century, engaging with futurists, constructivists, cubists, and, specifically, Russian agitprop artists who had also used train networks as dissemination devices in constructing aesthetic communities. I position Mare’s thinking on these earlier 20th century practices in relation to other critical appraisals of trans-historical and trans-geographical aesthetic forces, such as Pamela Scheinman and John Lennon on Wildstyle, and Daniel Schwarz and Charles Altieri on Modernism. Concentrating there on Mare’s formulations “Relevance by Proximity” and “Drawing in Space,” I then examine how these concepts point to specific aesthetic mechanisms capable of delivering social functionality in the practice of Style-Writing. I conclude the central portion of the chapter by demonstrating how Mare’s philosophy works in concert with other approaches to Writers and their texts which seek to understand the authorial and social forms of signatures in urban

space, such as Tricia Rose and Andrea Brighenti. Finally, I re-anchor Mare's critique of the social function of Style-Writing within its practice in New York City. Here I turn to scholarship like Marisol Negron's account of the film *Our Latin Thing* and Laura Lomas' analysis of José Martí to locate the art as one example among many Nuyorican communication inventions and cultural technologies, which together served to reconstruct and transform diasporic communities in the wake of otherwise destabilized infrastructures. For more on "cultural technologies" I refer the reader to Coleman (discussed below).

In this context, we should recall that Algarín and Piñero's introduction to *Nuyorican Poetry* offers a sense of the poet as one who "has to invent a new language, a new tradition of communication" and we might note the role that Nuyorican diasporic traditions play here. For all of the new uses of devices, media and technologies (with digital culture only representing one aspect among many) which Nuyorican artists created and partook in, we would do well to situate these innovations within the longer traditions of Nuyorican inventions and their diasporic and metropolitan surrounds. Consider, for example, the way that the Style-Writers' newly activated social networks only appeared as one of their generation's productions in the context of a much longer network of public, semi-public and underground archives of aesthetics and sociability. For instance, recall that the Young Lords leader Felipe Luciano was also a poet with aesthetic and political ties to Amiri Baraka: "Even though the revolutionary nationalist Young Lords were theoretically hostile to Baraka's cultural nationalist CFUN, the relationship that Baraka and Luciano forged in the Black Arts movement in New York helped CFUN and the Young Lords in Newark transcend this potential conflict."<sup>cix</sup>

## THE WRITERS' NEW USES FOR NEW YORK'S OLD SUBWAYS: THE PATHWAYS OF LATE-TWENTIETH CENTURY NEW YORK, AS CREATED BY EARLY- AND MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY INFRASTRUCTURE

In 1965, just across the river from Randall's Island and the Triborough Bridge, Carlos "Mare 139" Rodriguez's youth began in Spanish Harlem and before long, he and his friends began using the subways to transmit their texts, known as Style-Writing, throughout the metropolis, a practice now more often known under the mistaken general term "Graffiti." To accurately read the artworks sent on those trains, we first need to understand the infrastructure of the greater metropolis. The city's integrations, funding priorities, coordinated and un-coordinated interactive nodes (and more) which together constituted the public transport system of the subway railroads and train-cars became the apparatus that Mare and his fellow artists used as a communication device. The positions assumed by the concrete and steel of the subway extensions in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, and consequently the points of integration within the broader social networks of the city, represented the result of much larger, and much older, infrastructural decisions about the social needs of New Yorkers.

For instance, in the \$60+ million dollars of funding marshaled for the infrastructure of the monumental Triborough Bridge, we see the manifestation of decades of metropolitan consensus-building attempts. 1916 saw early plans drafted, but attempts remained stalled for decades. After opening in 1936, the multiplex of bridges, viaducts, toll booths, landscape and administrative architectures together reconfigured Randall's Island to begin serving as the primary sorting device for large-scale networks of neighborhood and metropolitan regions.

*Fig. 1. Screenshot from MTA Video Showing the Construction of Triborough (inset caption theirs). From Metropolitan Transport Authority, State of New York. "Robert F. Kennedy/Triborough 75 Years." 11 July 2011. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjI2I\\_pm2IqY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjI2I_pm2IqY)*

There, the city managed automobile flows from three separate boroughs—Manhattan, Queens and the Bronx—and so the great frontier “America” beyond (see fig. 1). As recently as 2009, Alan Feuer of the New York Times would still hold that, for all its efficiencies, the complexity of Triborough bridge delivered a cognitive load that might well surpass the mental models of a typical driver:

Even people who have driven over it countless times would be hard pressed to draw a diagram of the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge formerly and perhaps still better known as the Triborough. The bridge is actually three in one: an eight-lane, 1,380-foot suspension span over the East River; a six-lane, 310-foot lift span over the Harlem River; and a six-lane, 350-foot truss span over the Bronx Kill, according to a Metropolitan Transportation Authority fact sheet. There are also 14 miles of approach roads and a giant traffic junction that provides access to Randall’s Island and tries to sort out the various strands of interborough travel.<sup>cx</sup>

In its capacity to “sort out” the social “strands” of interborough vectors, this integrated system of built environments together named

Triborough was not a bridge so much as a traffic machine, the largest ever built. The amount of human energy expended in its construction gives some idea of its immensity: more than five thousand men would be working at the site, and these men would only be putting into place the materials furnished by the labor of many times five thousand men; before the Triborough Bridge was completed, its construction would have generated more than 31,000,000-man hours of work in 134 cities in twenty states.<sup>cxii</sup>

To drive these armies’ “work in 134 cities in twenty states”, the bridge’s visionaries would need to navigate a line through many years of contests over displacement, prioritization and sponsorship.

The bridge had at last captured approval, appearing alongside another one of New York’s monolithic industrial hubs, Rikers Island, itself physically enlarged by hundreds of acres in the process of manifesting the city’s vision for its now-famous carceral machine:

Commissioners of Correction and of Plant and Structures were congratulating themselves yesterday that the recently adjourned Legislature, while it slaughtered so many important municipal bills, adopted two which will facilitate respectively construction of the Tri-Borough Bridge and of the new \$10,000,000 Riker’s Island penitentiary. [...] In order to avoid demolition of some of the larger buildings of the Manhattan State Hospital on Ward’s Island it has been found necessary to swing the line of the bridge about 800 feet to the westward of its original line on Ward’s Island.<sup>cxiii</sup>

On Friday, October 25, 1929, Mayor Jimmy Walker finally broke ground with a silver-plated shovel, at a city ceremony with thousands in attendance. If anything may show us the precarity ingrained in even these most epic success stories of New York’s infrastructure, we need look no further than this

monumental project. Just the day before, on Black Thursday, traders had sold-off their shares en-masse. On Black Tuesday, October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed, deflating and fragmenting the pipelines of national, state and metropolitan funding formerly aligned in support of the traffic hub's construction. The project remained stalled again until 1933, when Robert Moses succeeded in capturing the role of chairman of the Triborough authority under a new mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia. After securing additional funding, including another \$37 million from Roosevelt's PWA funds, the project coalesced within the fray of city, state and federal governance, confirming the interdependence of the metropolis' neighborhoods and opening for traffic in 1936.<sup>cxiii</sup>

The project thus also functioned as a financial funnel connecting much needed stimulus from the federal government to multiple economic sectors across the eastern seaboard of a depressed United States in the early 20th century. By delivering much needed funding to constituents, politicians used such public opportunities to motivate political support. One 1933 New York Times article declared that "A program of State unemployment relief calling for jobs for 15,000 men a month in repairing and widening highways was revealed today by Colonel Frederick Stuart Greene, Commissioner of Public Works, and Captain Arthur W. Brandt, State Highway Commissioner."<sup>cxiv</sup> A 21st century analysis by the Zicklin School of Business at the City University of New York's Baruch College, notes that "all of the cement plants from Maine to Georgia were re-opened just to meet the needs of the complex."<sup>cxv</sup> With this example of mid-century urbanism we see industrial materials, notably cement itself, figure as crucially pliable mediums within which visionary infrastructures might now be rendered.

The flexibility of such substrates not only allowed for the rapid deployment of complex, large-scale engineering designs, but for the abstraction and conceptualization necessary to imagine those designs within the pressing needs of the city. Innovations in cement, for instance, offered a variety of accelerations internal to the chemistry and physics of the media's functionality, as early

and mid-century demand grew for rapid implementations of the new possibilities of engineering. *Popular Science's* October 1941 issue heralds the new speeds of, as it were, infrastructural concretization, stating that “the automobile age, however, was impatient of the month it takes the natural product to harden, and turned to synthetic or “Portland” cements which did the job in a week.<sup>cxvi</sup> The potential of such a “synthetic” substrate and its more rapid deliveries had captured the imagination of figures like Highway Commissioner Arthur Brandt, who authorized the shift to the new industrial technology.<sup>cxvii</sup>

Technologies of speed and scale allowed government leaders to favor future-forward visions of a metropolis composed of highly plasticized and interconnected spatial vectors, such as Triborough’s newly built islands of interchanges between previously bottlenecked regions—not to mention the abstraction of designs which called for the new formation of entire island geographies. Soon, another project, the new 3,770 foot long Bronx-Whitestone Bridge, also called on the new “Rosendale” cement blend in laying its pier-work and cofferdam seals. In the spring of 1938 the Daily News heralded that project as one more manifestation among many from the city’s oracular visionary of civil-engineering: “Park Commissioner Robert Moses—the city’s No. 1 bridge and road builder—yesterday foresaw the World’s Fair traffic problem solved in essentials by 1939 with a new system of long-range improvements.” After praising his acumen, the article offers a list of three completed highway projects, several more in progress, and the identification of six traffic “[b]ottlenecks to be smashed.”<sup>cxviii</sup>

At their best, these new infrastructure media and methods knit together the social intake, processing, interchange and redistribution systems needed to maintain the “arterial” flows of the metropolitan *corpus*, doing so in a far easier to use way, and with far greater efficiency. One 1940 pamphlet promotes the bridge as “Linking the Boroughs of MANHATTAN, BRONX and

QUEENS” through “Time Saving Arteries Connecting All Parts of the City with Long Island, New York State, New Jersey and New England and forming with the new Belt Parkway a modern method of transit around the congested Metropolitan area.”<sup>cxix</sup> If we accept the metaphor favored by urban planners of the time,<sup>cxix</sup> the coincidences at work in that cardiovascular understanding of the transportation network in turn suggest two overlapping senses of the city, both of which prove useful for our investigation: 1) the geographical structure, living creatures, and *in media res* materials of the city understood as an ecosystemic body and 2) the inscribed assembly of filings, data, allocations, statistical mechanisms, and broader informatic engines of representation-construction and representation-transformation. Together, these senses underly New York’s social and infrastructural investments, and consequently its longest-lasting legacies.

As a hub of metropolitan ecosystems, Triborough’s vast and recombinant network of automobiles and their transportation flows represented the application of complex analyses of the pieces of information in the city’s own files and databases. A step earlier in the city’s data supply chain, before it was available in those archives, that information appeared as the city’s own representation of urban dwellers; there, pieces of information resulted from the city’s own stories and understandings of its citizen’s transportation preferences (the details of processes will be dealt with in more depth later). In the processing of the traffic flows, these New Yorkers were (re)conceived as a series of privatized agents, whose individualized intentions could be realized through the atomic operation of their personal vehicle. As a device which created and activated information of traffic management, the scale and technical prowess of the Triborough Bridge placed it in the great achievements in the city’s history of inter-bureaucratic integrations.

Its first weekday service saw an average of 1,000 vehicles per hour converging into its lanes.<sup>cxix</sup> Passing from and to the Bronx, Manhattan, and Queens, each input could be tracked and tolled at booths, before allowing its drivers to autonomously select their repositioning for an output

point. Then, in the Triborough Bridge Authority offices' internal filing network, each transaction would be calculated into measures of traffic planning and construction funding. The "GREAT LINK IS ACCLAIMED" read the headline of the New York Times' July 12, 1936 article.<sup>cxvii</sup> That "Y-Shaped sky highway" served as a mechanism that brought together not only boroughs, but broader visions of the capacities which integrate geographic and social systems.<sup>cxviii</sup> The paper recorded Mayor LaGuardia's declaration: "We dedicate ourselves to the building of a greater bridge which will permanently join the land of liberty and equality to a system of economic security."<sup>cxix</sup>

In the pursuit of opening the regions' vast natural pleasures to the enjoyment of a new mid-century middle-class, Moses' new projects had long wrestled with Long Island's land barons, and the result of such brokerage enabled great swathes of suburbanites to connect with the city. At the same time, the new infrastructure projects favored access for travelers from New Jersey, Staten Island, and Long Island's Nassau and Suffolk counties. Urban drivers were now enabled to explore the farther reaches of those areas, and enjoy the splendid beaches of Jersey's shores and Atlantic City to the south-east, the Connecticut sound arching northwards, or the Hamptons two hours' drive to the east, or more.

These visions of urban flourishing might prove more true, if imagined personas of New York could in reality afford the luxury of such an accessibility-generating device as the automobile. Those who could not afford it faced a decline of robustly conceived, executed and sustained public programs. Rather than being seen as two components of the many complementary and specialized functions present in a high-functioning ecosystem, the subways lost funding in favor of the highways.<sup>cxv</sup> With Moses' commitment to the utopics of an automobile-centric future, low-cost options for transportation declined. The new financial allocations, plans and design priorities thus further constricted and destabilized living patterns and core livelihoods for many New Yorkers.

While government infrastructure funding directly stimulated some components of the economic system, other already at-risk aspects of the broader infrastructural ecosystems suffered increased pressures. As is the case of many vicious cycles appearing in the wake of New York's positivist modernizations, the social costs were carried by the poor in areas like Spanish Harlem and many other neighborhoods where Black, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or Dominican People lived, to name only a few of the most affected groups which feature prominently in this study.

In the case of the South Bronx, the appearance of new infrastructure networks in fact often increased disconnections between the local area and the greater metropolitan organs—stakes highlighted by the pivotal federal desegregation rulings of the decade leading up to the time of the birth of Carlos “Mare 139” Rodriguez. Rather than enabling consistent integration into the goods and shared prosperity of a socio-geographic whole, the highway projects displaced thousands of people during construction alone. Nearly a century since its creation, the miles of concrete partitions for another infamous infrastructure project, the Bronx-Queens Expressway, an auxiliary of Interstate Highway 278, continue to stifle foot traffic. In so doing, it risks further ghettoizing its already underserved community. As of this writing, city and national leaders pursue funding for “rectifying inequities of past highway projects” under the Biden administration’s 2021 infrastructure bill, with Bronx-born Congressman Ritchie Torres tweeting: “The Cross Bronx Expressway, built by Robert Moses, is both literally and metaphorically a structure of racism.”<sup>cxvii</sup> As Ivor Miller writes, the urban planning of the time “transformed the city for the benefit of the privileged. By building highways through thriving neighborhoods, Moses’s projects left drab concrete walls along the expressways upon which Writers imposed their colorful images.”<sup>cxviii</sup> There, we find one of the many ways that Style-Writers reconstructed social networks in the midst of infrastructural devolution. As suggested by Butch 2, one of Mare’s friends from The Fantastic Partners crew,

I'm from way uptown, Dondi might be from downtown, but through Writing we seem like we're from the same neighborhood more or less... Trains make it seem like we're all from the same block.<sup>cxxviii</sup>

## “GUESS WHAT? SOMEBODY DID IT BEFORE ME”: PROXIMITY AND EVOLUTION IN MARE’S RECURSIVE THEORIES OF 20TH CENTURY WILDSTYLES

In 1983, PBS debuted the Sundance Film Festival award-winning documentary *Style Wars*, showing the growth of dynamic social relationships among teens transmitting subway texts between neighborhoods, such as Mare’s surrounds in Harlem and the South Bronx.<sup>cxxix</sup> In one scene filmed at the 149th St. Station in the Bronx, we see an artist’s favorite position for viewing and sharing works: “The Writer’s Bench.”<sup>cxxx</sup> As myriad train lines converged, the subway cars and the Writers’ creations appeared to those at the station’s bench as a series compiled from multiple sources of the subway’s networks and neighborhoods. The platform at 149th Street was one of those hubs prized for the range of social flows and self-stylized personas appearing on the passing train-cars, framed by pillars and passengers.

The narrator begins:

At the Grand Concourse 149th Street Station in the Bronx, graffiti writers gather at what they call the writers’ bench. They’re saying that the kids run the subways, that the system is out of control, the 15 and 16 year old kids are running the system, and that graffiti is a symbol of that.

Dez: Nah I ain’t running the system, I’m bombing the system.

Interjection from crowd: Hell yeah!

Dez: They’re trying to make it look like the graffiti writers break windows and everything, it ain’t even like that.

Skeme: You know who be doing that man? N[\*]ggas who be high when they go home from school are the ones who break the windows.

Zephyr: It’s in the graffiti artist’s favor to be as cool calm and collected about putting his art on the train as you can, you know, he wants to get in and get out without even being noticed except for the work that’s going to come out to the public that Monday”

There we see a teenage Marc, at the time a prodigious Style-Writer among more seasoned masters like Kase 2. The latter was only a few years older; his own renowned "Computer Rock" style was seen as an aesthetic interlocution with the "mechanical" styles refined by even more prototypical figures such as Riff 170. Kase 2 would create works in tribute to that name, paying "homage to the aerosol lettering style":<sup>cxxxi</sup>

*Fig. 2. Riff and Case. Inset captions are original to the image as found. Image shows two photos stitched together to show a complex, windows-down piece reading "riff". Captions read "Part of a Riff-Raff car done by KASE" and "CASE 2 pays homage to the aerosol lettering style of early style master RIFF 170". "Riff 170." Subway Outlaws. Accessed 18 July 2022. [http://subwayoutlaws.com/new\\_page\\_2.htm](http://subwayoutlaws.com/new_page_2.htm)*

These genealogies extend to regional levels: the “*Platform* style,” originated by Philadelphia Writer Top Cat 126, moved with him to New York. There, the method soon “was popularized by writers like Jive 3, Riff 170 and Death TC5. It’s said to be the first style together with Phase 2’s Soft Letters to achieve an all-city popularity.”<sup>cxxxii</sup> In the recursive cycling of train cars across the interconnections of subway lines uniquely visible from the bench at Grand Concourse, Writers wrote, transmitted, read, and re-wrote these texts, progressively evolving and refining the inscription methods.

As one flagship example of New York’s human-information processing apparatus, Triborough worked in tandem with dozens of hubs designed for similar functions across multiple tiers of New York’s urban infrastructure. Grand Concourse, 149th Street Station played a similar role, serving as a key interchange point between multiple areas of the city. The community documentary website, *At149st.com*, points out that, in connecting distant Writers who had composed their texts in train yards separated as far as, for instance, the Bronx and Brooklyn, Grand Concourse served as

an ideal location for a writer’s bench for several reasons. It was a station where the 2 and 5 lines converged. The 2 and 5 lines featured some of the most artistic works in the city. The fact that many lay-ups and train yards for the 2s and 5s were located in both the Bronx and Brooklyn made creativity on these lines extremely competitive.<sup>cxxxiii</sup>

The architecture of the station itself allowed for Writers to assume a series of high-engagement positions for developing their craft in conjunction with the new aesthetic methods presented to them on the passing trains, as “an overpass connecting the uptown and downtown platforms was an ideal vantage point from which to view the passing trains.”<sup>cxxxiv</sup> The Writer’s bench served as an integration point for exchanging and strategizing stylistic resources and methods:

Writers from all over the city congregated at a bench located at the back of the uptown platform. They came to meet, make plans, sign black books and settle disputes. The main activity was watching art on the passing trains (known as benching). The writers would admire and criticize the latest paintings.<sup>cxxxv</sup>

Recall how, in the pivotal *Style Wars* film, we witnessed the eclipse of a unique artistic community: in the years after its release, the city escalated an eradication program.<sup>cxxxvi</sup> By 1989 the city would declare its victory in recapturing the subway lines.<sup>cxxxvii</sup>

Mare continued his career as a prolific critic, sculptor and digital designer, re-exploring many of his subway texts and styles in those secondary media genres. By 2006 Mare's leadership in designing the *Style Wars* website went on to win the highest award for excellence on the Internet from the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences: the Webby. In 2016 his achievements led to his assuming the role of curator at the newly founded Museum of Graffiti in Miami. His critical and artistic career provides this study's initial point of entry for inquiring about that singular, unique focus of the Writers' text-based aesthetics: the stylized inscription of the letter.

Remembering his youth, Carlos "Mare 139" Rodriguez positions his method within the broader art's stylistic evolution, as he contextualizes his careful focus on letter choices within the early years of the movement:

Mare was short for nightmare 139. 139 was 139<sup>th</sup> street where I grew up. I liked tagging up nightmare, but it was too long. Two name names was a thing of the 70's: Super Strut, junior Bic, little Kindle, little Corrado. And I thought nightmare was a good name but I chose it also because of the style, the style writing, it had good style letters. And so you know, well ok I'll shorten it to MARE<sup>cxxxviii</sup>

Mare positions his decision to heighten attention to letter shapes as a deliberate choice in the progressive history of Writers' processes of identity construction and stylistic encodings. Specifically, the opportunity for "style" leads to the decision to "shorten" the number of letters strung together: the possibility of "style writing" a name with "good style letters" dictates the scope of the specific program of stylized characters inscribed via aerosol applied to a steel subway vehicle.

In this example, we also see that Mare understood his choice of style methodologies as a form of interaction with a set of artistic methods which, across time and space, constituted his experiential community: "[T]wo name names was a thing of the 70's," and despite having "liked tagging up nightmare" he claims it was too long, instead choosing "Mare" and so extending the

evolutionary processes of style-writing as the basis of a trans-historical and trans-geographic community. Here we encounter an initial framework for 1) the ways that earlier Writers generated resources which their inheritors then innovated upon, and 2) the ways that the community of practitioners used the subway network as a way of transmitting new methods to each other.

Mare locates an even broader historical geography for that late 20<sup>th</sup> century New York City community. In a slide from his 2018 lecture to a St. Petersburg audience, he shows three images: 1) work from “some of the best trains painted at that time in 1978” by “the style masters” 2) Blade’s innovative “whole car” style in 1980, and 3) his own work with Zephyr (who played Z-Roc in Wildstyle), see fig. 3.

Fig. 3. "Guess what" Screenshot A from Mare 139 Mare 139. Лекция на V1 BATTLE 2018 (inset caption as original). Rodriguez, Carlos "Mare." "Mare 139. Лекция на V1 BATTLE 2018. Lecture by pioneer Graffiti artist Mare 139." 2018  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfRWX8HTyx8&list=PLlkTGKu98Noul0vHSp7tsPK5srCpe2T85&index=50&t=485s>

With this progressive evolution of his own New York history in mind, Mare asks the audience:

Here's the crazy question, why would anybody do this and has anyone ever done this before?  
Guess what? The Russians did. The Russians painted trains in the early 1900s around 1915. Agitprop.<sup>cxxxix</sup>

Mare points out that many of Style Writing's key features appear in these agitprop artwork's use of train networks as a substrate for inscription as well as a media distribution tool—ideas which anchor the overall infrastructural framework of analysis, as employed in this dissertation.

Speaking to his audience of Russian B-Boys (hip-hop dancers), Mare situates these techniques within a broader shared history of “young people” facing “risk” and “revolution,” as he seeks to

connect what I saw through hip-hop culture, through Russian culture. Young people who were just as inventive and just as much as in risk during the war. So these are scenes from the revolution, but I'm gonna push forward and I'll show you the trains. Those are painted trains and they often painted top-to-bottom, characters and letters as well [...] it's an important part of your history that this happened. That's a whole-car, top-to-bottom[.]<sup>cxl</sup>

Specifically, he sees these agitprop trains as texts fluent in, and readable through, the railway structures which define major components of the Style-Writing skill-set: “They often painted top-to-bottom, characters and letters as well.” A “whole-car” work refers to a specific, and somewhat rare, stylistic sub-grouping of Writing which makes use of the entire aperture of a train car's geometric structure, when viewing the side of the vehicle from the platform (see figures 4 and 5). Thus, “top-to-bottom” refers to the typology which makes whole vertical use of the train's frame, and “characters” refer to images of personas.

Fig. 5. "Painted Russian Train 2" Screenshot C from Mare 139 Mare 139. Лекция на V1 BATTLE 2018 (inset caption as original). Rodriguez, Carlos "Mare." "Mare 139. Лекция на V1 BATTLE 2018. Lecture by pioneer Graffiti artist Mare 139." 2018  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfRWX8HTyx8&list=PLJkTGKu98NouI0vHSp7tsPK5srCpe2T85&index=50&t=485s>

Fig. 4. "Painted Russian Train 1" Screenshot B from Mare 139 Mare 139. Лекция на V1 BATTLE 2018 (inset caption as original). Rodriguez, Carlos "Mare." "Mare 139. Лекция на V1 BATTLE 2018. Lecture by pioneer Graffiti artist Mare 139." 2018  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfRWX8HTyx8&list=PLJkTGKu98NouI0vHSp7tsPK5srCpe2T85&index=50&t=485s>

[x=50&t=485s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfRWX8HTyx8&list=PLJkTGKu98NouI0vHSp7tsPK5srCpe2T85&index=50&t=485s)

Fig 6. “Kadinsky and B-Boy Abstracts” Screenshot of Mare’s Presentation, showing Kadinsky’s Abstract Drawings of Dancer Gret Palucca (top middle) Mare’s B-Boy Abstract Drawings (bottom middle), and on the right, Mare’s 2006 B-Boy Abstract Illustration Screenshot D from Mare 139 Mare 139. *Лекция на V1 BATTLE 2018* (inset caption as original). Rodriguez, Carlos “Mare.” “Mare 139. *Лекция на V1 BATTLE 2018*. Lecture by pioneer Graffiti artist Mare 139.” 2018

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfRWX8HTyx8&list=PLJkTGKu98Noul0vHSp7tsPK5srCpe2T85&index=50&t=485s>

Fig 7. “Mare presents Tatlin’s ‘Corner Relief’ ” Screenshot E from Mare 139 Mare 139. *Лекция на V1 BATTLE 2018* (inset caption as original). Rodriguez, Carlos “Mare.” “Mare 139. *Лекция на V1 BATTLE 2018*. Lecture by pioneer Graffiti artist Mare 139.” 2018

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfRWX8HTyx8&list=PLJkTGKu98Noul0vHSp7tsPK5srCpe2T85&index=50&t=485s>

Moreover, he coordinates several pillars of hip-hop’s broader structure with Russian artforms (such as the alignment of rap with Mayakovsky). Then, he aligns his visualizations of B-Boy dance forms with Wassily Kandinsky’s images of the German performer Gret Palucca (see fig. 6). In 2005 Mare had started B-Boy abstract drawings in search of an “elegant and sophisticated, smart way to show what the dancers were doing.” In emphasizing a “very simple and sharp geometry” he again found that “Guess what? Somebody did it before me” (17:26).<sup>cxlii</sup>

Pointing to many influences across French and Italian Modernisms before turning to the case of the constructivist Vladimir Tatlin’s art, Mare places the Russian artist’s “Corner Relief” on the screen saying, “in his day this was wildstyle” and proceeds to show another sculpture of his own, inspired by Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*. Mare’s analysis of these aesthetics often relies on a concept he formulates as “relevance by proximity,” through which he posits links between the abstract geometries of those letter styles and the methods of modernists such as Cubists, Futurists, and Russian Constructivists. Echoing his sense of community across historical geographies as the lecture continues, Mare locates Wildstyle as a method which can engage abstractly, echoing back into

time, across geographies prior to, and outside of, the original boundaries of the New York Metropolitan area. Firmly connecting their shared understanding of “raw material and emotion through material,” Mare points to a shared “energy” which his work seeks to advance across these ostensibly divergent histories and regions:

But why Russians? Why the constructivists? Because they understood raw material and emotion through material. So, you could see all the energy in the center of these pieces. But if you think about wild style and you think about b-boying, it's that same energy, but pulling it forward.<sup>cxliii</sup>

Since the inception of the technique, then, we might see Wildstyle’s parallel development with other artists whose “raw material and emotion through material”—yet these parallels would converge in Mare’s sense of Wildstyle’s “same energy but pulling it forward” in an interchange with a new space and time. It is in this unique capacity for the readiness of interchange with varied regional urban geometries (and, uniquely, the “material” of trains) that Wildstyle often produced hybrid forms with other networks of stylistic histories that passed across geographic boundaries, and so functioned in partnership with other artists around the hemisphere and globe (as we will see especially in the case of Phase II). In its ability to borrow and exchange with techniques from other places and times, Wildstyle could also enable its Writers to reconfigure new “hybrid” aesthetic effects particular to the unique conditions of its implementation in various locales. Sometimes, juxtaposed in allusions such as Mare’s retroactive and recursive reading and reuse of Russian train transmissions, we see the cross-pollinatory effects of parallel communication histories.

**“RELEVANCE BY PROXIMITY”: CONTEXTUALIZING MARE’S CLAIM’S FOR THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF STYLE-WRITING - BROADER DEBATES ABOUT STYLE-WRITING’S TRANS-HISTORICAL AND TRANS-GEOGRAPHIC CULTURAL GENEALOGIES**

Pamela Scheinman's 2016 essay "A Wall in Mexico City's Historic Center: Calle Regina" would also emphasize the hybridizing, inter-hemispheric<sup>cxliv</sup> flexibility of the genre: noting that in Mexico City "[t]erritorial style evolved at the city's periphery, incorporating influences from New York 'wildstyle' and Chicano symbolism from California via Guadalajara" (Scheinman 226-227). In the same Routledge volume, John Lennon's essay, "Writing with a Global Accent: Cairo and the Roots/Routes of Conflict Graffiti" warns that the analysis of such globalized practices must prioritize

graffiti in a particular area and context (its roots) before teasing out the ways that the form itself speaks to, and is interpreted by, a global audience (its routes). For example, how we interpret the routes and roots of the fat bubble, "Wildstyle" graffiti found in back alleys of Tripoli after the death of Gadhafi should be the result of a concentrated examination of the intersections between the recent globalization of graffiti subcultures with the specific material culture born from particular situational local politics." (Lennon 61)

See below for an example of Libyan artwork. Lennon's approach highlights the ways that the "situational local politics," which offer contextual "roots" of style writing's appearance around

*Fig 8. "Free Libya" Mulholland, Rory. "Libyan street protest art-in pictures" The Gaurdian. 4 June 2011 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2011/jun/05/libya-gaddafi-street-art>*

the world, offer value before and beyond an analysis which highlights “routes” of the form’s aesthetic globalization. Next, we will see that Mare’s critical propositions for the social transmission of the stylistic forms, such as “relevance by proximity,” elaborates that sense of autonomy and localized force essential to Style-Writing, while enriching the relationship between particular “roots” of context, and global “routes” of form and interpretation.

The phrase “Relevance by Proximity” appears as one of Mare’s key formulations for conceptualizing the relationship between his work and that of broader art histor(ies) and Modernism(s). From the vantage point of a 2015 duo show “Crossing Paths – The Intersection of Memories” with Abadie Hafez at the David Bloch Gallery in Marrakesh, one editorial places that term in a stylistic period beginning around the year Mare turned 15: “From 1980 onward his articulation of the art and culture began to take form when he was exposed to Picasso and the modernists prompting his interest in ‘relevance by proximity.’”<sup>cxlv</sup> In the notes of a formerly available 2018 Instagram post, the artist underlines these ties, claiming he “often speak[s] about [his] work in terms of ‘Relevance by Proximity’ to Modernism.”

Fig. 9. "Relevance by Proximity" Mare's caption reads: "#Repost . . . I often speak about my work in terms of 'Relevance by Proximity' to Modernism. My work with [@realkenswift](#) is an inspiration and a great example of what influences my [#bboyabstracts](#). The Sculpture Prince Ken Swift (2000) was inspired by Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913)

*The drawings have an approximation to Wassily Kandinsky, "Dance Curves: On the Dances of Palucca" (1926) which I discovered by chance years after I began the series."*

*from "Rodríguez, Carlos "Mare." [\[@carlosmare\]](#). Instagram post: Relevance by Proximity. Instagram. 25 January 2018 (Post no longer available).*

“Relevance by Proximity”: neither a hierarchical self-authorization nor a “Critical Tradition,” but a phrase that enigmatically proposes a subtle and complex relationship with broader artistic and academic understandings of Modernism. “Proximity” and “Relevance,” words which, given the range of communities and examples we have encountered so far, implicate a wide range of spatial connotations both geographic and aesthetic, physical and conceptual.

If the B-Boy abstracts Mare composed in partnership with the dancer Ken Swift both demonstrate relationships to works that directly “inspired” Mare, but also bear an “approximation” to works of Kandinsky which he “discovered by chance years after [he] began the series,” then linear sequences of time do not define “proximity.” Moreover, both objects predate Mare’s work by nearly a century, and both fall under his claims for “relevance by proximity.” However, under Mare’s analysis, the temporality of “approximation” does not result from a linear chronological sequence, where Boccioni’s 1913 “Unique forms of Continuity in Space” gives way to Kandinsky’s 1926 “Dance Curves: On the Dances of Palucca” which in turn gives way to Mare’s 2000 “Prince Ken Swift.” Rather, all three stand in equal priority of relevance to each other. Thus, Mare’s claims here suggest that relevance among artistic works is not limited to the analytic priority of historically and geographically defined socio-cultural movements.

Instead, for Mare, the temporality of the artworks’ stylistic features may provide an independent aesthetic history. Thus, we cannot simplistically situate Mare in relation to the influence of variously globalized art histories, such as Modernist abstraction. Rather, Mare re-theorizes and re-implements strategies from the independent qualities of his aesthetic environment’s spatial and temporal relationships. Mare’s sense of shared relevance in, and due to, mutual independence, is defined by the specific forms of abstract balances, tensions, lines, weights and masses exemplified by artworks in relation to the industrial framework of railway cars. When situating these engagements

with other artists, Mare's framework specifically locates his own participation in these variable aesthetic communities, forces and strategies as pro-active choices.

Far from forms of deference to an oppressive intellectual system, Mare sees these choices of engaging with inter-continental Modernism as actions which enable the assertion of identity, invite shared understandings of social and political stakes, and also address gaps in the practice of cultural history. Mare's claims for these trans-historical and trans-geographical artistic relationships are particularly focused on addressing historiographical risks of "latency in the historical record":

Graffitiurism: "After watching the video you make the comment about Modern Masters, this is a statement that resonates with me. When we look back 400 years from now, do you feel that people might finally be able to understand some of the concepts you're talking and painting about? We look forward to watching you bring these new bboys to life in sculpture and in paintings. Any final words you would like to say and answer this last question?"

MARE139: "It is said that history is the version of events people have decided to agree upon so I think if we can continue to advance and promote these ideas and add value to it we can offset the latency of historical record. Its present, its now and all around us. [sic]"<sup>cxlvi</sup>

Here, Carlos Rodriguez' thinking on the relationship between Style-Writing and Modernism offers a distinct contribution to the conceptual fray of a long-standing debate about the relationship between visual and written forms, and the broader geographic communities of its aesthetics. Several scholars have reflected on Cubism and Futurism's relationship to the writerly arts, especially insofar as the interrelationship between painting and text addresses questions of practice across temporal and historical boundaries.

In Daniel Schwarz' 1997 book *Reconfiguring Modernism: Explorations in the Relationship between Modern Art and Modern Literature*, the chapter "Searching for Modernism's Genetic Code: Picasso, Joyce, and Stevens as a Cultural Configuration" also points to a larger framework through which Modernism may be positioned in "humanistic terms" and by which critical analysis may move "beyond ideology and abstractions." He writes:

By imaginatively responding to similarities among Picasso, Stevens, and Joyce and tracing patterns within their lives and works, we may create a cultural context that locates the genealogy of Modernism, even while that context transcends geographical boundaries as well as simplified stories of influence or hegemony.<sup>cxlvii</sup>

Mare's claims augment such accounts of the dynamic "genealogy of Modernism" where the "cultural context" of these practices "transcends" both the idea that these aesthetic relations are limited to "geographical boundaries," as well as the idea that relationships of "influence" within that genealogy can be understood in a simplistic way.<sup>cxlviii</sup> Mare's critical theory calls on us to recognize how Style-Writing's aesthetics give us access to a version of history that is not limited to or by linear chronology (or hegemony, for that matter). Moreover, this understanding of history sees it as a recursively generative territory of temporality, one produced by the relations that the arts generate, and in doing so begins to invite the use of spatial epistemologies to understand said temporality. Thus, we need to inquire further about the aesthetic processes occurring in these artworks themselves.

Mare's idea of "Relevance by Proximity" suggests that proximity is not just chronological nearness of "period." However, it is still a specifically temporal category as it does provide for an aesthetic history that can describe and account for changes in relationships between works with massive and irregular temporal distances. Here, relations between artworks result from the aesthetic forces at work in the objects.

## **STYLE-WRITING AND THE SOCIABILITY OF ABSTRACTION**

By 2012 Mare would regularly feature in group exhibitions like "Disambiguation" at the Carmichael Gallery in a glitzy neighborhood of Los Angeles' Culver City. Presenting many other works that bring "the movement and style of train writing" to engage with earlier modernisms, the promotional materials home in on Rodriguez' transformational use of formal techniques from "Modernist and Futurist masters" alongside those of "b-boy veterans:"

New Yorker Carlos Mare captures the moving human form in both two and three-dimensional form. By applying his study of Modernist and Futurist masters Marcel Duchamp, Wilfredo Lam and Kazimir Malevich to

his observations of the gestures and attitude of b-boy veterans such as Ken Swift, Mare refines a practice that translates the patterns, rhythms and beats of dance and modernism into sculpture and drawing.<sup>cxlix</sup>

By moving further into the specific details of aesthetic practices and forms that Mare engages with in Russian constructivism, we can deepen our understanding of the social function he claims for Style-Writing.<sup>cl</sup> Alongside Mare's work stood pieces by the Italian artist Rae Martini (himself "equally inspired by Futurism and its obsession with the machine"), Sixeart (whose art offers a "mixture of psychedelic abstraction and comic book-inspired figuration [...] The dreamlike quality of [Sixeart's] work shows an affinity with Surrealist artists such as Joan Miró, another native of Barcelona"), and Remi/Rough:

Attention to the formal elements of fine art, in particular that of Minimalism, is central to that of Remi-Rough. His color palette is selected through deceptively simple arrangements of lines and angles that bring a variety of hues into unexpected encounters with each other. By working on canvas and sculpture, he transports the movement and style of train writing into the gallery space.<sup>cli</sup>

In Mare's emphasis on the internal and formal operations of the artworks' "arrangements of lines and angles," as well as in his insistence on trans-historical proximity and approximation, Mare's analysis of futurism, constructivism and cubism parallels those of modernist critics such as Charles Altieri.

In *Why Modernist Claims for Autonomy Matter?*, Altieri notes the way that Malevich's geometries and pigmentations create a "sense of endless mutual modification" within the sensual and sensory aspects of the artwork's self-sustaining dynamism of confluent forces, as appearing within the shapes, colors and relative positioning of the composition. In this understanding of the possibilities of abstraction as an artistic approach, it is "the mutual dependency" of the relationship between masses, color, angles and rhythms that progressively "imposes itself on the viewer's activity." In that production of the audience's activated sense of mutual dependency, "there is no unity without intense local detours that in turn make unity inseparable from intricately balanced tension, with no overarching gathering force" as in a "natural scene." Following Mare's expansive sense of the interrelationships between modernist abstraction and Style-Writing, we can see the way that critical

perspectives on Malevich offer insights shared by the artistic sensibilities of subway Writers. Consider how, even before a work is read, the visuality of a Wildstyle piece may dissect the letter form's structural elements, and reassert them so that the work has "no overarching gathering force" aside from the inscription of the signatory name, the synthesis of which is itself only rendered by the "mutual dependency" of "intense local detours" in the composite logic of letter components and stroke sequences. In turn, the intricate, intensional, multiplicity of dynamic stylistic registers--color, line, mass--"imposes itself on the viewer's activity."

Daniel Schwarz also echoes this account of aesthetic force, with a focus on its literary operations:

Whatever our immersion in the aesthetic, we respond to words differently than we do to musical notes or colors. We understand them at once in terms of immediate experience. Our responses to "cancer" and "heart attack" and "brutality" and "Holocaust" within a novel or poem are conditioned by our experience of those words outside it. <sup>clii</sup>

By analogy to its parallel difference from "musical notes" or "colors," an "immersion in the aesthetic" of words speaks directly, in a way unique to its form as language: the "immediate experience" of how we have been "conditioned by our experience of those words outside" their appearance in a "novel or poem." There he asks whether aesthetics might be understood as a dynamic category of "the beautiful":

Isn't it time to reclaim the aesthetic, not as the transcendent category but as one of several categories? What is the place of the aesthetic in cultural criticism? Indeed, what *is* the aesthetic? It is the category of the beautiful as opposed to the moral, the useful, and the utilitarian. It involves our emotional response as opposed to our rational responses; it validates the sensuous response to art, and it acknowledges that there is something inherent in our reading that goes beyond the political and the ideological. Yet our aesthetic pleasure depends on how the form discovers the moral and the political, and how the parts relate to the whole; it depends on the pleasures of seeing and reading and even thinking retrospectively about why a work or text or film pleases us. It may be a community experience when it includes our pleasure in sharing artistic experiences with our friends, students, teachers and colleagues. <sup>cliii</sup>

Here, rather than subordinating the "sensuous" to either the "utilitarian" or the "political," we may instead consider how those operations which provide aesthetics' dynamic immediacy there offer a way to activate the function by which "form discovers the moral and political"<sup>cliv</sup>

Sharing a sense of possibility with these modernist claims of artistry's force, Mare identifies a sense of “offense” in the “aggressive” quality of a Style-Writer’s hand style (i.e. the signature shape of the hand-written tag). As the relationship between artist and audience comes to rely on the aesthetic force of such abstractly presented letter-masses, the artist and viewer must find means of social “identification” that do not reside in thematized representations, mimesis, nor a fictionalized world that the audience must imagine. In an abstract recursion of formal positions, the audience also sees as artist, sharing in “a sense that they are at once free from nature and bound more tightly to an underlying event of seeing.”<sup>clv</sup>

Tangibly anchoring that moment of aesthetic sensuousness, the artwork’s form now grounds the sociability of multiple author and audience positions of agency, concretizing the possibility of seeing-as, and sensing-with, the artwork’s presented forces. In other words, rather than represent ideas about the world, the artwork demonstrates a method of entrance into a lived experience: an experience of the work’s style as occurring in the social world shared by audience and artist. In the escalating intensity of sensuous engagement, the artwork begins itself to impact experiences beyond its edges, and so increasingly constitutes that shared world in, and by force of, the art. As Style Writers’ artworks display an intentional form of complexity, multiple structural planes compose an internal logic for the work’s non-objective, non-representational tensions. This process in turn produces opportunities for audience and author to identify with each other’s subjective experience, by virtue of the sociability of committing both perspectives to the embodied forces of dynamic balances and counterpoints, which in turn sustain the rhythms and tensions of the shapes, colors, lines and masses in a work.

Calling on the method of abstraction to extend its service of the social function between artist and audience, Mare understands the function of abstraction as a collective feature of hip-hop:

the hip hop disciplines are high abstract art and so in that kind of way, whether its you know this the DJ mixing and scratching, you know beats that are on rhythm and breaking up that rhythm or the bboy going into

different styles of dance, or the writer taking the alphabet and abstracting that, and the lyricists who would take metaphors abstract metaphors and string them together in some kind of rhythm pattern, and so the bboy lines, the lines themselves are you know, born from that, but also really the kind of echo from early modernism<sup>clvi</sup>

By practicing in their “high abstract art,” here the Writer engages trans-historically with the broad aesthetic community of artists who “echo” from the “hip hop disciplines” to “early modernism.” In that inter-genre, abstract community, “it’s kind of in a tradition where the artists of the time and the dancers and the poets and the musicians of their time they all meet in both spirit practice and template.”<sup>clvii</sup> With this exposition of his proposals for the sociability of abstraction in mind, we may clarify Mare’s claims for “relevance by proximity.” In this conceptualization, B-Boys, Style-Writers and early 20th century modernists occupy rather parallel positions in a dimension of sociability defined most specifically by aesthetic relations (here we may consider broader relationships between hip hop and cubism in the analysis of scholarship such as Jim Perkinson’s analysis “Hip-Hop Percussion and Cubist Vision”).<sup>clviii</sup> Moreover, Mare’s framework implies that the shared positioning within the aesthetic dimension is a positioning which occurs specifically because of the possibilities of abstraction provided by “the hip hop disciplines” and extending those of “early Modernism.”

## CHAPTER 2 – MARE 139 “WRITERS DRAW IN SPACE”: FROM SEMIOTICS TO URBANISM IN THE CASE OF STYLE WRITING AMONG NUYORICAN COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

### FROM SEMIOTICS TO URBANISM

Tricia Rose's 1994 *Black Noise* offered one of the early academic treatments of Style-Writing within hip-hop and critical race studies, and remains one of the most robust. As with many other critics, her textual treatment of Writing calls Wildstyle “indecipherable”, but this time with a different valence.<sup>clix</sup> Here Rose locates Wildstyle's origin within a whole range of formal innovations which “expanded graffiti's palette. Bubble letters, angular machine letters, and the indecipherable wild style were used on larger spaces and with more colors and patterns.”<sup>clix</sup> In contrast to the critics who de-emphasize textual demonstrations of authorship and prioritize visuality, Rose emphasizes the broader history of this evolutionary period in Style-Writing, where, “by the mid-1970s, graffiti took on new focus and complexity” as new methods appeared, “most of which were designed to increase visibility, individual identity and status.”<sup>clxi</sup> Perhaps most importantly, Rose's method shifts the frame of reference in ways that align with the aesthetic sociability of Mare's “relevance by proximity”—a shift perhaps most vivid in the crucial medium of networked subway trains. From the perspective of Rose, the multiplication of structural elements in Wildstyle can be understood as a particularly complex subset of a larger project of communication among those Writers who disseminated their texts through a city via the media of the subway trains.

Rose's section, “Graffiti” totals less than a dozen pages in a much longer book focusing more broadly on hip hop and critical race studies in America, and does not claim to analyze the

literary aspect of the artworks as a central academic priority. Rose turns her focus on the subway network to its use in establishing relations between the reading Writers:

Train facades are central to graffiti style for a number of reasons. First, graffiti murals depend on size, color, and constant movement for their visual impact. Although handball courts and other fiat and stationary surfaces are suitable, they cannot replace the dynamic reception of subway facades. Unlike handball courts and building surfaces, trains pass through diverse neighborhoods, allowing communication between various black and Hispanic communities throughout the five boroughs and the larger New York population and disseminating graffiti writers' public performance.<sup>ckxiii</sup>

She deftly provides a logical sequence that stakes “visual impact” together with “communication” and the “dynamic” process of disseminating Writers’ public performances. Her analytic gaze is predicated on empathizing with the Writers’ commitment to communication and personal identity, and so she also contrasts their work with that of the city government, which sought to erase the Writings that they had “reconstructed as symbols of civic disorder.”<sup>ckxiii</sup> Rose’s project enriches our understanding of Style-Writing: she allows us to both enlarge Mare’s claims for an aesthetic sociability, i.e. its “relevance by proximity” with modernism(s), and to begin transitioning to the literary aspects of these artworks, now seen as an authorial practice of writing. From this perspective, the “indecipherable” Wildstyle in fact heightens the Writer-ly aspect of the artist to one of the most intense poles imaginable.

For a theoretical account of the Writer’s function as an author, we may, perhaps surprisingly, turn to those literary critics who most deeply would have hesitated to ascribe the idea of authorial presence to a given text or artwork. In the 1960’s and 1970’s the Euro-American literary theories known as post-structuralism and/or deconstruction gained popularity, led by figures such as Jacques Derrida who would begin a long career shaking his young fist at the sky of aporias in essays like *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* (originally presented in 1966 at Johns Hopkins University). Another essay (originally presented in 1971 at one Montreal conference "Communication" organized by the *Congrès international des Sociétés de philosophie de Langue Française*) titled *Signature/Event/Context* would go so far as to take the risk of claiming that “perhaps” the

moment of the signature offered, to the idea of authorship, an anchor in robust existential force. Closing his essay with an iteration of his own signature, he writes: “writing, if there is any, perhaps communicates, but certainly does not exist. Or barely, hereby, in the form of the most improbable signature.”<sup>ckiv</sup> Even within this understanding of literature which seeks to critique the authorial “presence” in a text, it is the paraph itself—a European term referring to the flourishes of a written signature—that seems to offer a kind of robustness which remains resilient to this form of deconstructive analysis, which goes on to target nearly every other dimension of the text specifically, and the ideologies of aesthetic production more generally. I hope to show how, even from one of the most polemical, theoretical, and influential perspectives in the heights of academia, the supposed epitome of Style-Writing’s imagistic commitments can be demonstrated to execute specifically written practices of aesthetics.

In other words, as the Style-Writers suggest in their own choice of name, researchers need a *literary* approach to understand this practice on its own terms. Here I want to 1) emphasize the literary function that the paraph plays in a piece of Style-Writing, 2) account for that function as one rooted in the context of Mare’s claims for sociability via abstraction and relevance by proximity, and 3) take these reflections as opportunities to begin considering Style-Writing as a literary form. In this instance of literary theory, the inscriptive moment of the paraph is closely tied to the process of semiotic spacing. Semiotic spacing in turn can be tied to the creation of metropolitan archives, within which Style-Writing constitutes a politicized interval of information. In this sense, the information networks of the city may be differentiated, between those who do and do not invest in the legibility of Style-Writing.

If we treat Style-Writing as a set of writings, then the city becomes absorbed into what Andrea Mubi Brighenti calls a “syntagmatic, rather than paradigmatic, view”.<sup>ckv</sup> In Brighenti’s analysis,

What is peculiar of the writer's gaze is that it operates a relative deterritorialization of conventional territorial boundaries, thus shifting the thresholds of visibility of the public domain. Most everyday uses of urban space regard walls as separators between a "within" and a "beyond." The wall is commonly perceived from an essentially "orthogonal" perspective. As recalled above, walls have always been used this way: Walls are governmental tools that set limits and impasses, and complementarily allowed paths and trajectories. Writers invent a way of using walls that is no longer orthogonal. Their approach to the wall is "longitudinal" rather than "orthogonal. The wall not so much separates a "within" from a "beyond," as it joins a "here" to a "there." It is a syntagmatic rather than paradigmatic view. For a writer, the present, actual wall is an affordance and an invitation, but in itself remains only a part of a larger, virtual wall--it is just a sentence in a continuing conversation. And it is the act of joining your sentences into an ongoing conversation, which implies the presence of several voices, that leads you to question the qualities and the properties of this shared, common domain, the public. [sic]<sup>clxvi</sup>

If we focus on the New York tradition, we can quickly see how the divisions in the public that Brighenti locates in the "within" and "beyond" of the wall, divisions which territorialize urban space, are also divisions tied to the difference between the possibility of Style-Writing as "writing" and Style-Writing as "image." If the walls do not function as "separators between a 'within' and a 'beyond,'" but as a "syntagmatic" opportunity, then the city's various "orthogonal" structures of "separation" such as the "walls" of buildings and the "complementarily allowed paths and trajectories" of the linear grid of streets, and we might imagine, public transportation structures, becomes, in Brighenti's analysis, an actively networked archive, inviting the sharing of statements in a "conversation[,] " inscribing the identities of "the public." Thus Style-Writing does not simply compete for space to declare identity, but revises the form and syntagmatic connectivity of the way that urban social space is established in the first place. As Christiansen suggests of Rammellzee's aesthetics (discussed in more detail in the next chapter): Style-Writers "created a new spatial grammar; a sort of alternative text of reality designed to etch out a new space for different social and political reference points."<sup>clxvii</sup>

There we see an extended conceptual connection between claims for Style-Writing's abstraction, sociability and readability. Insofar as Style-Writing de-stabilizes and re-stabilizes forms of legibility, it requires its readers to focus first on the will embodied in the signature's detailed

flourishes (i.e. the “paraph”) and so it also disrupts the capacity to attach identity to, and by, anything except the autonomy of the author. As such, reader and Writer can both identify with each other insofar as they mutually invest in the complex multiplicity of sequenced structures that together constitute the (Style-)written word. Many visually-prioritized critical pre-commitments can thus be seen to mistakenly provide for an interval between Euro-centric versions of margin and center, an interval conditioned by the temporality which asserts that recognizability is determined by the threshold of those systems above others. On the other hand, Rose seeks to preserve the complexity of temporality at stake in the process. Generating recognizability within one’s own community can, of course, be the same method through which one resists recognition by another community.

Let us consider those who look at these reading positions together: those who seek to read Style-Writing, and those who seek to simply encounter it as a phenomenon intruding into the visual field (and no further). Considered in this regard, Style-Writing’s intricate aesthetics of sociability itself comes to be seen as the method of regulating the shifts between these two stances. Thinking through Mare’s claims for abstraction, both are formations based on social and cultural historiography, rather than the history constituted in the dynamic forces that the works contain: the signature of the Style-Writer. Again, Mare offers a provocative formulation, “Writers draw in Space.”<sup>clxviii</sup>

## **CREATE ALTERNATIVE BEHAVIORAL HABITS: PUERTO RICAN**

### **INFRASTRUCTURES AND URBAN MEDIA NETWORKS IN NEW YORK CITY**

For the poor New York Puerto Rican there are three survival possibilities. The first is to labor money and exist in eternal debt. The second is to refuse to trade hours for dollars and to live by your will and “hustle.” The

third possibility is to create alternative behavioral habits. It is here that the responsibilities of the poet start, for there are no “alternatives” without a vocabulary in which to express them. The poet is responsible for inventing the newness. The newness needs words, words never heard before or used before. The poet has to invent a new language, a new tradition of communication.<sup>clxix</sup>

In a feature with the Istanbul museum, Pera Müzesi, Mare recalls the moment in his youth when Style-Writing dawned on him. Crossing a moment of discovery, he recalls the advent of his own knowledge of the community of Writers. In an experience with the work of one of the earlier masters (see above ch. 1-2), Lee Quiñones, the deployment of the “full train top to bottom” format offered cartoon details which piqued a young Mare’s interest. As his inquiry began, he “started realizing, there were other people I knew who were doing this” where he “was living between the South Bronx and Spanish Harlem:”

I was about 10 years old when I saw a train by Lee Quiñones. A full train painted top to bottom. It had cartoons and letters and colorful [*sic*] so as a young kid who loved cartoons: who, why, what, where, how? Then I started realizing it was all over the community. I was living between the South Bronx and Spanish Harlem on the west side of New York. And at that time, there was so much writing that I wasn’t aware of, and then when I was aware of it, I started realizing, there were other people I knew who were doing this. And so, I decided to try, and I tried in school, and a friend introduced me to a marker. Like a real graffiti marker, and from there I started paying more attention to the writing, learning more about the writing, and the culture, and so from then on I never looked back. I kept getting invested into this culture realizing it wasn’t just a signature, but it was also design. It was also the complicated lettering forms, things that move and cartoons that come off the train. And it was a way to get known in a place where you were not necessarily known or thought about because it was the south Bronx and the city was very poor. So from that point, that entryway, that was the entry into a whole culture that was not just in one place, but in many places in New York City. <sup>clxx</sup> [*breaks to montage*]

Given the cultural heritage of Spanish Harlem, and this dynamic moment of artistic influence between two Puerto Rican artists, Mare’s claims regarding the social function of Style-Writing’s aesthetics should also be understood within the wider range of Puerto Rican social technologies and cultural infrastructures in, and around, New York at the time. One especially notable aspect of this encounter is that two members endogenous to the Nuyorican community connected with each other directly through semi-anonymized identities; identities which preceded their introduction to each other through other social means. Previously, by this account, Mare did not know Lee, but an aestheticization of the subway’s technology allowed them to construct, transmit and interact with each other through self-styled personas to each other.

Moreover, both came of age among a field of Puerto Rican cultural innovators who created new communication infrastructures in the face of large-scale social disconnection. Many Nuyorican and related networks appeared as a series of responses to multiple dimensions of social and spatial displacement. For instance, Mare notes elsewhere that within this multiplicity of networks, the Number 1 train offered a specifically complex geographical interchange of communicators:

the number 1 line had a lot of Latinos, Dominican, white, and black writers, because it went from downtown to uptown in the Bronx, through Harlem, Manhattan, so there was no line that was segregated in that way. I never knew a line that was just white writers<sup>clxxi</sup>

In this ability to engage multiple Burroughs, and racial localities, beyond the immediate reach of the text's author, the subway offered literal vehicles for the social inscriptions.

Mare continues the interview, re-emphasizing the way that those substrates' constraints drive the stylistic impetus for textual parameters:

My name when I started, cause I started writing in the late mid 70s, and happened in that era, [W]riters had two name names like Stay High 149, Superkool 223, and so that was a thing to have two name names. And I chose nightmare cause it seemed cool and dangerous but I dropped the night because I wanted to be a style writer and so style writer meant that you were doing not just a tag but you were designing letters with form and arrows, that was really the best, the apex of what the culture was. I focused on that. That's why I kept the name short. [breaks to montage]<sup>clxxii</sup>

Here he reiterates the evolutionary focus on “designing” the length of transmitted information: keeping “the name short” in distinction from the “mid 70's” Writers like Stay High 149 and Supercool 223. Moreover, he roots that design choice as one of many occurring in the heightened pursuit of a cultural “apex”: signature “letter” mechanics such as “form and arrows”. Again, we see that his theory of an aesthetic which envisions social connection through the “relevance by proximity” of abstract artworks, is also one which provides a specific vision for the challenges of social engagement in his time and place. Moreover, we see the increasing presence of cultural tension with the growth of a downward cycle of the later 80's commodification, commercialization, and capitalization of Style Writing:

During the early 80s when all of us were being discovered, everyone was painting on canvas, it was flat 2d. It was not necessarily style writing that was being transformed from the train to the canvas, it was something else.

It changed. The artist changed. Doing more work that was popular, commercial, or had a very different aesthetic. And my response to that was well no I'm not gonna take part in that I'm still gonna paint trains, and then I got to the point where as a style writer felt like I got as good as I could get, and so I said ok well how do I respond to this that's happening? What's next?<sup>clxxxiii</sup>

In her treatment of another type of Puerto Rican cultural performance in New York, the music documentary film *Our Latin Thing*, the musicologist Marisol Negron also critiques the capital-market driven objectification of the “spectacularization of popular expressions that emerges among racialized (and, in the case of Puerto Ricans, colonial) subjects.” She reinforces the understanding that, at the time, the “performative excess of New York’s DiaspoRican communities” sustained an autonomizing force which “transcended the music’s representation”:

*Our Latin Thing* helped Fania Records exploit the cultural significance of salsa by branding the label as a grassroots organization that formed part of the dense community networks within New York’s predominantly Puerto Rican communities. However, by situating *Our Latin Thing* within the material world where its meanings are constituted, I [Marisol Negron] also show how the performative excess of the New York’s DiaspoRican communities transcended the music’s representation, even as the film became part of the ways in which salsa resemanticized the physical and audible presence of Puerto Ricans in the city’s public sphere. [sic]<sup>clxxxiv</sup>

For readers of Mare’s claims for the aesthetic material of Style-Writing’s self-autonomizing signatures, Negron’s claims for the agency of that “performative excess” may strike an echo. Andrea Brighenti’s earlier claims for Style-Writing’s syntagmating operations, could be said to in turn offer a longitudinal compliment to Negron’s claims that Nuyorican cultural productions “resemanticized the presence of Puerto Ricans in the city’s public sphere.” In that “material world where its meanings are constituted[.]” the Puerto Rican community might be seen in complex terms, as they “both participated in and benefitted from the music’s commodification and commercialization, while resisting the reduction of their own identities to commodities for global consumption.”<sup>clxxxv</sup>

## WHAT’S NEXT? DRAWING IN SPACE

In response to the pressures of commercialization, Mare experimented with the spatial imposition of Style Writing’s principles even further. Phase 2 had already achieved notoriety as the

first to produce large scale sculptures employing Style-Writing's aesthetics in the 1970s, and in 1984, Mare would continue experimenting in the new form, focusing further into his sense of Style Writing's proliferative agency (only 1 year after his appearance in the landmark documentary *Style Wars*). Doubly underlining his commitment to aesthetics of "going out into space" in Style-Writing, he describes going into the new genre as "another space to connect all those things we were alluding to, that letters would fold into space, that there would be depth":

And so my response to my peers was to maybe do something maybe done before. And so in 1985 I started doing the letter sculptures. It was only one done in 1980—actually, my first sculpture was in 1984. And Phase 2 did a large scale, beautiful; he was the first to do a large scale sculpture which was very important. Up to that point nobody was thinking about sculpture. So I decided to take graffiti, or "style writing" that's what we knew it as, into another space to connect all those things we were alluding to that letters would fold into space, that there would be depth, and so I started doing the letters. And also my relationship with Henry Chalfant for many years was very important, because he too was a sculptor, and he too knew about art history. He introduced me to art history very early. So I was connecting my work to art history. So when I started doing the letter sculptures, I said well that's too easy. Let's connect that to art history, to the constructivists, to the cubists, to the futurists. Those ideas of contemporary art, those things that were in proximity to the aesthetics of writing and so that's where I found my love for the sculptors of other periods. You can see it in the work. For instance, this work, when I was making it, I was thinking about an artist David Smith, one of my favorite American sculptors, and just picking up raw materials and drawing in space. And writers draw in space [6:09] because we do like this [mimics a "handstyle" of a tag in motion], and we have a muscle memory, so the lines are like this [mimics handstyle]. And so for me that transition was really easy and natural, but I knew I couldn't stay in the traditional format of graffiti, that it had to evolve, and I kept pushing the envelope through sculpture. [breaks to montage]<sup>clxxvi</sup>

As the imaginative operations occur, both the audience and author gain sensuous interactions with the ways that vectors of "letters would fold into space." In effect, that formal process would, at the boundary of sense and imagination, narrate the text's proposition: that in engaging with these "letters" we begin to enfold ourselves with the aesthetic intentions of an author's inscription. Thus, the apparently formal and/or visual functions of Style-Writing can be seen to deliver textual aesthetics of expressive communication.

Here, the Writer's Style delivers semiotic value. Insofar as their spray can controls the style of signature, the Writer gains control of the intervals of "fold[ing]" and unfolding of referential connections between the identity they assert for themselves and the identity legible to those outside that reading and Writing community. The Writer's individuated style thus functions as a way of

encoding transmissions between a community of authors, and the wide range of possible positions of reading that the metropolis of New York offered in determining, for instance, the persona of a generalized pedestrian as the basis of its choices in street design. By extension, the Writer's signature method, notably its shifting encryptions from image to text, acted as a cypher in the hands of the New York metropolitan government. That government's determination of which personas should constitute that idealized "general public" should already create the built environment Mare was born into, even while the identifying style of a Style-Writer provided enigmatic information to other Style-Writers. Elsewhere, Mare once offered a provocation in the succinct statement, "I'm not an aerosol artist anymore, I don't paint with spray cans; I am a wild-style writer."<sup>clxxvii</sup> Following Mare's claim that the sculptures offered a way to extend the possibilities of Wildstyle as a written aesthetic practice, leads us to recognize how the information of Writing's Styles can be transformed across one stylus to another.

From there, we may additionally consider the ways that Mare's emphasis on being a "wild-style writer" might lead us beyond the limits of aerosol as the basis of Style-Writing's aesthetic values. Then, we might consider how this process of information transformation is even more true in the case of Wildstyle—which immediately heightens the transformation of the referential resources of letters into abstractions themselves directly legible as a given Writer's identifying technique. In his re-deployment of abstraction in the museum environment, Mare later re-affirmed the idea of "drawing in space": that core sense of Writing's outward movement. This sense is one continually anchoring in, and "pushing the envelope from," the "muscle memory" of Style-Writing's letter shapes. Those structures themselves are rooted in the memorized information of the hand style of a tag's stroke sequences.<sup>clxxviii</sup>

Already in 1972, the local history of Spanish Harlem had shown that the outward action of style, a Writing by "drawing in space," might offer a cultural-semiotic anchor for that immensely

popular film *Our Latin Thing*, which presented the Fania All Stars in performance at the Cheetah Club, near Broadway and 53rd the Thursday night of August 26, 1971. Negron writes that within the Puerto Rican community, media and economic infrastructures had long developed which facilitated the launch of films like *Our Latin Thing*, even while the film's own "virtual tour of the neighborhood" emphasizes a widespread social decline marked by systems of "residential displacement." In the 1972 film's opening shot, Negron notes that the title typography specifically appears as an instance of the Style-Writer's genre, also citing Stoever-Ackermann's idea of the "sonic color-line":

Our Latin Thing begins with a shot of children playing on a rooftop and an aerial view of the Lower East Side below. As the scene develops, children spill onto the street, Spanish-speaking voices fill the air, and a young boy walks slowly through an alley, pausing to read the credits for the film spray-painted like graffiti on the wall as Ray Barretto's "Cocinando" ("Cooking"; 1962) plays in the background. At the end of the alley the boy begins to run through trash-filled lots and city streets with rundown buildings that Greenspun's New York Times review referred to as the "blocks where the city sanitation sweepers seem never to have visited" (13). Indeed, the virtual tour of the neighborhood emphasizes the deteriorating economic conditions at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, a period marked by residential displacement, the continuing decline of the manufacturing industry that disproportionately impacted Puerto Rican communities, and the disinvestment of landlords and the city in African American and Puerto Rican communities.

The numbers of Puerto Ricans arriving in New York after World War II increased, and their linguistic and musical practices became markers of their sonic dissonance from hegemonic constructions of Americanness. What Stoever-Ackerman has conceptualized as the "sonic color-line" equated the city's growing Puerto Rican presence during the 1950s to an invasion that the New York Times likened to a swarm of bees whose "loud" and "voluble Spanish" filled the air, along with "Caribbean rhythms and guitar twangs," "wild shouts [of] children in the streets," "boisterous" and "characteristic Latin dissension" that displaced the white residents (as qtd. in "Splicing" 68–69).<sup>clxxix</sup>

Among the range of Puerto Ricans engaging with these questions, especially near his neighborhood of Spanish Harlem, Mare exemplifies the way a subway Style-Writer could play a central role in the

*Fig. 1. Screenshot from Our Latin Thing opening credits shot, showing a child walking by the film's title tagged on an alley wall. From Barretto, Ray, Johnny Pacheco, Bobby Valentin, Alonso C. Curet, and Ismael Miranda. Our Latin Thing: Nuestra Cosa. Woodland Hills, CA:Codigo Music, LLC, under exclusive license to Venevision International Music, 2012.*

*Fig. 2. Cover image of Our Latin thing (DVD release) From Barretto, Ray, Johnny Pacheco, Bobby Valentin, Alonso C. Curet, and Ismael Miranda. Our Latin Thing: Nuestra Cosa. Woodland Hills, CA:Codigo Music, LLC, under exclusive license to Venevision International Music, 2012.*

broader transformations of the relationship between social networks and the multiple geographies of state-sanctioned chaos in programs of eviction, bulldozing, forced relocation, and policing (see also the discussion of Wallace below). As one of the many social “precedents to the street jams of hip hop culture” Ivor Miller cites the use of “portable record players” enabling the spatial mobility of social aesthetics in “fiesta and carnival” as remembered by Nuyorican Victor Hernández Cruz (quoted by Miller 2012): “The youth had inherited the Caribbean spirit of fiesta and carnival and used any excuse to party. [...] With our portable record players, we formed a bembé anywhere—in the school yard, up on the roof.”<sup>clxxx</sup> Here we might understand the unique role played by the technology of portable record players in activating urban space within auditory community networks of Spanish Harlem.

## THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION IN POSTWAR THEATRES OF INFRASTRUCTURE

Long before this, suggests Laura Lomas’ *Translating Empire: José Martí, Migrant Latino Subjects, and American Modernities*, the works of Latina/o artists already began offering cultural strategies to navigate U.S. “imperial modernity.” Citing for instance, the force and insight of the “extravagant metaphor” (of a “coffee cup” which seeks to gather the power of a “volcano”) Lomas quotes Martí when pointing out that the

astonishing events that occurred in U.S. cities in May 1886 in the wake of the Haymarket affair pushes available forms of representation to their limit. “To put the events of these days into a newspaper chronicle is like trying to gather lava from a volcano into a coffee cup”<sup>clxxxii</sup>

In that stylization at the “limit” of “representation” we find long rooted examples of the way that Latino/a modernist literary history

addresses and represents reading communities on the borders of the bourgeois industrial civilization that imperial modernity sought to extend throughout the hemisphere. The poet on the periphery creates extravagant metaphors to confound the logic by which liberty has begun to mean its opposite, especially for a large sector of workers and migrants of color.<sup>clxxxiii</sup>

Here we see that the methodologies of artistic production and implementation confronted spatial challenges at work in diaspora and displacement. Alongside, we also see a framework for understanding the relationship between these aesthetic strategies and the decades upon decades of local, and hemispheric, hegemonic (largely governmental) programs which changed the public space of New York City in tandem with that of, for instance, Puerto Rico. In the case of New York City, the resultant forced-relocations in mid-century industrial urbanism ultimately led to the persistence of the segregating effects of ghettoization well throughout Mare's youth, when Style-Writing had already begun to serve as an infrastructural strategy.

Fig. 3. "NYTimes 13 August 1967" from 13 August 1967. The New York Times.  
<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1967/08/13/106222675.html?pageNumber=1>

Until the 1950s, many would know Spanish Harlem as Italian Harlem. Social tensions escalated after officers killed Victor Rodriguez and Maximo Solero in 1963, Francisco Rodriguez Jr. in 1964, and Renaldo Rodriguez in 1967, with riots breaking out across eastern Harlem that July. Johanna Fernandez' *The Young Lords and Late Sixties Urban Radicalism*<sup>clxxxiii</sup> points out that

The mood in the streets suggested that people wanted meaningful control of their neighborhoods and their institutions, a sentiment captured earlier in the decade by the idea of Black Power. One group drew a line in chalk just above 110th Street and over it wrote: "Puerto Rican border. Do not cross, flatfoot."<sup>clxxxiv</sup>

The representation of power declared in the chalk line of the newly drawn Puerto Rican border contrasted dramatically with another image that occurred within a few summer weeks: a highly promoted and highly curated athletic exhibition, produced in partnership with the auspices of a city vividly seeking to re-assert its sense of governance. The August 13th Sunday LATE CITY EDITION of the New York Times offered an image of a boxing ring set up in 112th Street, off of Third Avenue, just north of the newly drawn border at 110<sup>th</sup>. Ahead of a third championship match against Ismael Laguna, the Hall of Fame pugilist Carlos Ortiz appeared in an outdoor exhibition, sparring with Jerry Draci.<sup>clxxxv</sup> The coverage noted the "bareheaded, barefisted Mayor" Lindsay presiding as referee over the "world lightweight champion" Ortiz: in that image we find a re-performance of the municipal government's theatrics of political machismo, and a re-articulation of both local and national condescension toward migrants from the colonized islands. Mayor Lindsay's 1967 "summer task force" gathered sponsors for a series of intervention programs which, according to Johanna Fernandez' research,

fit with the liberal notion that at core the problems experienced by urban communities of color were tied to lack of opportunity and exposure to aspects of a white middle-class lifestyle. Missing from Mayor Lindsay's assessment of and prescription for the problems confronted by communities of color was an understanding of northern poverty and racism that identified its structural and economic dimensions: increased segregation in housing, consciously segregated public schools, an ailing public health care system, a disfigured landscape, structural unemployment, and poverty wages in the sectors that were employing people of color (as nurses' aides, orderlies, porters, cooks, elevator operators, and laundresses) in the hospitals, restaurant and hotel trades, and New York's declining postwar manufacturing industry.<sup>clxxxvi</sup>

The New York Time's page layout echoes these insights into the disparities of the time. The headline "EAST HARLEM SEES A SWINGING MAYOR" aligns to another title: "Migration of Poor to City Likely for Decade More", and on the left side of the juxtaposed columns, we read that "Mayor Lindsay has pointed out that New York's soaring expenses for public assistance are 'largely the result of the influx of relatively unskilled persons to New York City from Puerto Rico and the American South.'"<sup>clxxxvii</sup> Some twenty years later, when MTA's Paul Pettit addressed the rise of "graffiti" he would tie post-colonial migration to the appearance of the Writer's culture: "My personal opinion is that it started with the influx of the Spanish people. When the majority of the Spanish people came from the Islands, it seems like they brought this with them."<sup>clxxxviii</sup>

In 1967, the Wednesday after the publication of that Sunday paper, the Times' more journalistic variety of prejudice would reinforce narratives of the chaos delivered by new arrivals in New York, claiming that "Latins have been known to take their sports with what amounts to a blind and hysterical ardor."<sup>clxxxix</sup> That article, titled "An International Incident[.]" highlighted the drama of two prior championship bouts located in each fighter's respective homeland, Puerto Rico and Panama, where Ortiz and his opponent Ismael Laguna traded the role of "hometown boy" as well as the belt. Both regions had long served as para-colonial, extra-state proxy positions for the U.S., which acquired Puerto Rico in 1898 after the Spanish-American war, and secured control of the Panama Canal in 1903 after recognizing Panama's independence from Colombia.

In the image of an "international incident" between Puerto Rico and Panama occurring in a ring presided over by a White American referee, the municipal politicians were suggestively presented as the final authorities over the islands' disputes. Then printed beside the Wednesday racisms of the Sports of the Times section, we see a sports-gambler's column claiming "6-5" odds and favoring the trim physique of a 30 year old Ortiz, measuring him at five foot, seven inches, 135 lbs. Alongside, the Times notes John Lindsay's physique presiding as a tall referee, with the "6-foot,

3-inch, 180-pound Mayor bouncing off the ropes” and we may again consider the ready allegories of the imagined superiorities and self-authorizations of post-war U.S. governance supervising the uncertain futures of its own imperial theaters in Central and South America. So read the opening sentence of the mid-week betting column, which began with a view of the odds’ broader environmental factors: “In an aura of apprehension that the spectators may provide more violence than the contestants... .”<sup>exc</sup>

Ortiz was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico in 1936, and in 1960 so was the legendary Style-Writer, Lee Quiñones who, we saw earlier, went on to catalyze Mare’s early work. Raised on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Lee now looks back on the political undercurrents which situated the Writers’ movement: “If I was still painting on the trains, I’d be painting politically. ... I would be the Malcolm X of the [number] 5 trains, and I think that’s why the MTA wanted to get rid of it.”<sup>exci</sup>

The politics of 1960s New York arrived on the heels of the preceding decades’ slum clearance policies. Robert Caro notes that the “deterioration accelerated” in areas such as that between Riverside Drive and the West End, around Ninety-Fourth and Ninety-Fifth street. He describes how one early 1950’s witness watched as the blocks “brimmed over with indications that families on the Manhattantown site were simply fleeing from their homes into the nearest available shelter, no matter how inadequate.” Such patterns reappeared around the city, including tenants “from other Title I sites being dumped by the hundreds into vacant tenements in a section of Brooklyn called ‘Brownsville.’”<sup>excii</sup>

The pattern of slum growth repeated across the NYC metropolitan area, including eastern stretches such as the Rockaway Peninsula where “sprawling colonies of summer bungalows in Avene” were each occupied by:

several shivering Negro and Puerto Rican families in each. He had heard disturbing rumors about tenants from other Title I sites being dumped by the hundreds into vacant tenements in a section of Brooklyn called “Brownsville.” What was Moses doing on *all* his Title I sites?

By 1953, many New York liberals concerned with housing were asking that question, and some—such as Hortense Gabel and Stanley Isaacs—began going to sites to see the answer for themselves. They returned horrified. “Stanley came back sick, just sick,” an associate recalls. “He said, They’re hounding those people out like cattle.”<sup>exciii</sup>

This longer historical context provides crucial details for understanding the social strategies Mare locates in the aesthetics of Style-Writing. However, we must not only understand the context in terms of the powerful influences of imperialism and metropolitan racism. Moreover, we must grasp the radical force of the aesthetic and geographic distribution networks created and leveraged by the diasporic populations of his Nuyorican and Latin@ surrounds in El Barrio. Specifically, we may turn to another iteration of the words “Our Latin Thing” tagged on a city wall, this time in a video clip from Henry Chalfant’s documentary *All City*.<sup>exciv</sup>

Fig. 4 “Que Pasa? Graffiti Art: Our Latin Thing.” Four screenshots from *All City*” from Chalfant, Henry. *All City*. The Museum of Contemporary Art. 1983 (film). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7jMzfxJ0to>

In that repetition, the crucial dimension of self-inscribed reference sustains the circulation of the Writer's signature style and a community's declaration of "Our Latin Thing."

For some Writers, as we shall soon see, the trains, when viewed as a collection, could be read as an electrified book in the form of interactive volume. Writers often speak of their pieces as having a (preferably long) existence of their own, taking on a public life and a series of metropolitan interactions (which the Writer themselves may not even be aware of). In this sense, we can easily re-imagine the flows of inscribed identities passing through the city, now as identities bearing a narrative function which resembles the character as a literary device. As we will see in the next chapters with Kase 2 and Rammellzee, we may also reflect on the many Writers who describe themselves as poets. However, when Henry Chalfant's *All City* shows Mare flipping through a photo album of master train works, it may be interesting to note that his discussion partner Spank (TC5) chooses not to highlight the classic dimensions of poetics or narratology, but instead the specifically informational capacity of the Writerly artworks, read as "knowledge". He declares:

Takin' it back. Takin it back. To the coalmines! To the coalmines! It's all right there. This is knowledge, knowledge, this is the book of knowledge. let it be known, let it be known, this is the book of knowledge!

## CHAPTER 3 – RAMMELLZEE: WINGS, OR THE DREAMS OF WINGS

Mare's career offered us a way to reconceptualize the archive of Style-Writing: mobilizing the resources of the more visually driven studies usually applied to so called "graffiti" and extending those scholarly resources to understand the fundamentally written nature of the practice in the spacing of the signature's stylized letters. There I sought to reflect on the ways that Mare's claims for the sociability of Style-Writing are tied to that process of spacing, and, in turn, how urban space could be part of, as scholars have indicated, that Writerly conversation. As Mare and his community of artists used the space of the subway as a circulation network for their artwork, they extended the scope of spatially engaged cultural technologies and innovations which intervened in the post- and de-colonial stakes of Spanish Harlem. Specifically, subway Style-Writing could be seen to function as one of many cultural technologies (such as radio, portable record players and print) which enabled residents of New York to overcome the pressures of impoverishment, as well as, often while, seeking ways to establish the social networks of their immigrant communities, such as Mare's Puerto-Rican heritage.

Now, we will attempt to take a step further in our inquiry. If we consider the subway as a cultural technology for the circulation of Writings within, and beyond, the limits of a postcolonial metropolis, then how might we understand the ways that Style-Writers saw the themes and futurist logic of that technology as part of the poetry of their time? We can begin to pursue the question in

the career of Rammellzee. Here, Rammellzee's reconceptualization and recrafting of letter structures asserts the Writerly control of the terms of recognition.

While the concept of recognition here should be understood as a question of legibility and interpretation in the general and more simple senses, it should also be understood in broader terms of political criticism. Consider for instance, the analysis offered by Glenn Coulthard in *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* which focuses on Indigenous Canadian people. Here, Coulthard presents extensive insights in regard to late twentieth century conditions of post-colonial studies more generally, specifically a critical perspective on liberal politics of recognition. His introduction, *Subjects of Empire* outlines the challenges of the hard-won successes over, and persisting challenges in the long history of, colonialism:

Indigenous anticolonial nationalism that emerged during this period forced colonial power to modify itself from a structure that was once primarily reinforced by policies, techniques, and ideologies explicitly oriented around the genocidal exclusion/assimilation double to one that is now reproduced through a seemingly more conciliatory set of discourses and institutional practices that emphasize our *recognition* and *accommodation*. Regardless of this modification, however, the relationship between Indigenous people and the state has remained *colonial* to its foundation.<sup>cxv</sup>

Here critical theory need not necessarily seek to tell a "deeper" truth of the Writer's aesthetics, but rather Rammellzee's aesthetic discourse can show us a deepened understanding of how the politics in question can be historically practiced: a goal served by a critique of the politics of recognition. That school of thought appeared as a dominant philosophy of liberalism in the later 20th century, rooted in works such as that of Charles Taylor, and subsequently picked up by figures like the Frankfurt-school trained Axel Honneth (other critiques appeared by Elizabeth Povinelli, Nancy Fraser, and in a less direct way, Jacques Ranciere).

Critiques of the politics of recognition might be understood to value the range of broader stakeholders, rather than simply the pre-authorized systems, of reconciliation, systems which call that subject's inwardness into enforced fluency with or for external forms. Keeping in mind the highly different subject of her research (indigenous life in the colonial Australian state), Elizabeth

Povinelli's *The Cunning of Recognition* provides useful formulations for global critiques of liberalism, in our case re-illuminating the stakes of the Writer's name as understood against the government name. Povinelli offers one of the most trenchant critiques of the politics of recognition, as a politics which demands impossible desires: "to be this impossible object and to transport its ancient prenatal meanings and practices to the present in *whatever* language and moral framework prevails *at the time of enunciation*."<sup>cxvii</sup> With these critiques in mind, how may we learn from Coulthard and Povinelli's studies as applied to the case of the repressive legacy of colonial structures in the history of the U.S.?

When brought into "proximity" with the thinking of Rammellzee, we might learn from this kind of critical language and so reflect more deeply on the seeming paradoxes of recognition in his aesthetics of "Gothic Futurism." When doing so, we should also critically consider his thinking in relation to Afrofuturism; Chuck Galli's study "Hip-Hop Futurism: Remixing Afrofuturism and the Hermeneutics of Identity" provides excellent insights in this regard. Rammellzee's paradoxes begin: Galli points out that Rammellzee in fact distances himself from Afrofuturism per se. Other scholars of Rammellzee's work, such as Mette Christiansen, in "Sounds of Alter-destiny and Ikonoklast Panzerist Fabulations," often rely on Mark Dery's *Black to the Future*:

For Dery, more specifically, Afrofuturistic work is characterized as a kind of "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century techno-culture."

These forms of resistance are often not located in the mainstream, one does not just casually encounter them. To find such counter-hegemonic narratives, Dery informs us, we need to look in "unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points." Enter: Sun Ra and Rammellzee <sup>cxviii</sup>

As a cultural (and often Afrofuturist) technology (see the discussion of Coleman's research in this regard below), Style-Writing's artistic practice establishes a counter-archive of naming against the force of governmental naming, typified in the absence of information on Rammellzee's own legal name in any known record.<sup>cxix</sup> Reinforcing his militant thrust beyond such dreams of the state's

information networks, we may look to works such as Halsey and Young's 2006 article in *Theoretical Criminology* "Our desires are ungovernable': Writing graffiti in urban space," which critically repositions the concepts of criminology, by taking a focus on the "affective dimensions of the activity in the hope that the words of writers become a visible and productive presence in urban (and academic) space" (since then, a great deal of academic ink has been spilled).<sup>cc</sup> Their analysis of the "prosthetic" nature of Style-Writing seems apt for considering Rammellzee's aesthetics, which often focused on developing projects from hand-style letters to full-body exoskeletons and back again

In the act of writing—that is, by using the aerosol can and the felt tip marker as key prosthetics for connecting 'self' and 'world' (but also as a means of collapsing such distinctions)—graffiti writers connect themselves to all the possible reactions the city can muster with respect to a particular image or set of images produced over time.<sup>cci</sup>

This embodiedness of Rammellzee's aesthetic also provides a way to reposition the idea of Style-Writing, now understood in opposition to the vision of vandalism *per se*. Rather, argue Halsey and Young, there is a particular spatial variance in "ocular orientation," and even more so, a "haptically" understood change in orientation, which offers "a mode of envisioning which begins on the basis that the surfaces which make up the city are always already marked by signs of deterioration and decay" and in so doing provides a strategic intervention "in the countless locales where each surface intersects with and is an extension of the numerous signifying practices of which graffiti is but one example."<sup>ccii</sup> Style Writing could be said to catalyze the shift from a passive optic understanding of the city, to an active haptic understanding: so that a "surface is never just 'looked upon' so much as it is felt or lived" (ibid). This change in orientation and experience, then, provides a contrasting strategy for identifying the objects refused from the programs of futuristically envisioned maintenance and improvement which characterized the "directive era" of the mid-century as we will see discussed by Fainstein and Fainstein below. Moreover, suggest Young and Halsey, the "orthodox" ideas of the attributes of "purity" and "cleanliness" are troubled by the idea of the wall

understood as “locales of, and for, a ceaseless writing. Such a writing never ends and is never completed.”<sup>cciii</sup> These ideas of an aesthetics which activates an infinite series of writings echoes, we shall later see, Rammellzee’s own claims: “I do sentence structures that do not end with periods, points or errors, they continue on from beginning and end with the same word at the end of the sentence structure to repeat itself.”<sup>cciv</sup>

We might also note that the Writer’s perspective can be thus understood as not only, per Rammellzee, an “equation”, but one which activates the formerly “static manner of viewing the world” so that one engages with the “fluid, or even volatile, nature of the relationship between words (such as train carriage, kerb)[sic] and their meanings (such as public transport/potential panel, edge of sidewalk/place to perform new tricks)”.<sup>ccv</sup> This fluidity establishes a new method of using the city “from a standpoint distinct to other users of public space”—but they are not edgeworkers. Far from being ‘on the margins’, their images occupy a central place in urban and suburban life.”<sup>ccvi</sup> It is in this sense that I argue we should understand Peñalver Eduardo M, and Sonia K Katyal’s *Property Outlaws: How Squatters, Pirates, and Protesters Improve the Law of Ownership*. (Yale University Press, 2010). Rather than focus on those practices’ readiness for the apparatuses of criminalization, they suggest that, “protracted and pervasive property law-breaking produces important data about the location of possible injustice or inefficiency within the property status quo, generating what we will call ‘informational value.’”<sup>ccvii</sup> In turn we might keep this sense in mind later when we look to Keller Easterling, who discusses the connections between information and urban design in her *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*:

Space doesn’t have to be digitally enhanced to carry information. The repeatable formulas or recipes for space-making described in the book are something akin to software—an operating system for shaping the city. And that operating system can be hacked with forms that act like a switch or a multiplier—forms that establish an interplay between spatial variables.”<sup>ccviii</sup>

Such reframings of criminalization and the extra-state leads us to longer histories of power and poverty in New York City, as discussed in John Hull Mollenkopf's edited collection *Power, Culture and Place: Essays on New York City*, especially Fainstein and Fainstein's "Governing Regimes and the Political Economy of Development in New York City, 1946-1984".<sup>ccix</sup> Consider, for instance, Fainstein and Fainstein's description of "The Directive Period (1946-1966)" and the "combination of actions, later termed a 'public private partnership' " which allowed leaders like Robert Moses to outsource the final management, and so offload a reasonable (and profitable) amount of administrative risk, executive accountability, and operational execution. Applied in the development of both the U.N. and Stuyvesant Town, the management methodology functioned by a repeatable logic where first "under the leadership of Robert Moses, the city condemned eighteen blocks of tenements housing 12,000 people, then resold the buildings and land to the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, which was given complete control of site planning and tenant selection."<sup>ccx</sup> In another case, he and the city "worked with the Rockefeller family and developer William Zeckendorf to attract the UN to the old East Side slaughterhouse district"<sup>ccxi</sup> financed by "the Rockefellers and the city" in a combination of actions which, later termed as the model of

...public-private partnership, laid the groundwork for the development of east midtown as a center of commercial and upper in-come residential development.

For a decade after the inception of the federal urban renewal program (Title I of the 1949 Housing Act), Moses coordinated the actors and put together the financial packages enabling redevelopment of cleared land [...and ] establish[ing] the Committee on Slum Clearance Projects (CSC) as the city's official urban renewal agency with himself as the head. He made sure that the CSC did not become an autonomous professional bureaucracy by headquartering it in the offices of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (TBTA), which he controlled.

Through this administrative mechanism, Moses implemented the "New York method" he had developed with Stuyvesant Town. He privatized urban renewal by giving developers immediate title to occupied parcels of land and then allowing them to erect new structures. He guaranteed them a 10 percent return on the preclearance assessed value of the property. This system allowed Moses to line up sites and prospective developers quickly, thereby getting earlier commitments of federal money. As it showed in Title I results, New York became the U.S. Urban Renewal Administration's favorite funding recipient.

The CSC's urban renewal projects reflected the "New York method's" emphasis on market and political rationality. Three-quarters of the projects were located in Manhattan (see Table 7.3), because it was here that powerful institutions and private investors wanted to reshape an already built-up territory to realize its potential for other uses. Expansion-minded universities sponsored Title I projects: New York University (NYU) in Washington Square, NYU Medical School in Kips Bay, Fordham University in Lincoln Square, and Pratt Institute in one of three Brooklyn projects. In Morningside Heights, a David Rockefeller-backed organization joined Columbia University in financing middle income housing to buffer the Heights campus

from Harlem. Other sponsors included TBTA itself, which built the Coliseum in Columbus Circle, and Lincoln Center, Inc., another Rockefeller enterprise, which anchored the adjacent Lincoln Square Project. The labor-sponsored United Housing Foundation built any middle income units at Penn State South and other sites. Private developers, often with Tammany connections, were involved with Park West, Washington Square, Kips Bay, and Lincoln Square. When a number of these ventures failed financially (after long years during which the developers profited from tenement ownership), William Zeckendorf took over the projects.

During the period when he directed the city's slum clearance program, Robert Moses also controlled the Housing Authority. He refused to build public housing in sparsely developed peripheral areas, feeling that new low-income housing should be contained in the old working-class neighborhoods.<sup>ccxii</sup>

It is with an understanding of this reframing of hegemonic understanding of the limits of state authority and policing that we should understand Rammellzee's claims to be a "militant" and an "equation":

I'm a militant. I ain't got nothing to do with art. Art is an equation just like Rammellzee is an equation.<sup>ccxiii</sup>

## SUBWAY STYLE WRITING TECHNOLOGIES AND THE BOOK OF KNOWLEDGE

Takin' it back. Takin it back. To the coalmines! To the coalmines! It's all right there. This is knowledge, knowledge, this is the book of knowledge. Let it be known, let it be known, this is the book of knowledge!<sup>ccxiv</sup>

In this declaration, what kind of knowing did Spank (TC5) refer to at the end of Henry Chalfant's *All City*?<sup>ccxv</sup> When he flips through the photo album of subway Style-Writing and emphasizes, among other things, the term "book," does the word simply point to the "book" as the album of train images he pages through? Or, as suggested by some other Style-Writers whom we will now engage with, may his use of the term "book" also point to the system of subway cars themselves as devices for reading?

In asking this question, we may find an opportunity for patience: considering how our critical perspectives might shift, so that we need not simply begin with searching for competing theorizations of artworks. In other words, without dishonoring the original work on the subway, rather than isolate the iterations of the artworks with a perspective limited only to origin and copy, how might we avoid separating the "book of knowledge" as series of moments on the train, from the "book of knowledge" as a series of moments in the photo of train. We may begin to consider

the dynamic information of the Style-Writer's aesthetics which can flexibly inform from moment to moment of iteration, even if we cannot yet grasp the currents which might sustain our passage from the subway, to the photo album, to our viewing of the album on some paper or digital media at present.

When describing this "book of knowledge", does Spank seek a traditional academic differentiation between forms of knowledge? For instance, organizing his inquiry according to Western classical perspectives such as scientific, sensual and/or spiritual knowing? Do long academic histories of such analytical categories adequately correspond to the inquiries underpinning Spank's emphasis on showing his audience this "book of knowledge"? Touching on the deeper flows of Spank's aesthetic philosophies would take more resources than this dissertation can provide, but his declaration can still alert us to broader discourses among his peers.

Many Style-Writers emphasized the capacity of the artworks to function as vehicles which transmit information, and in this emphasis, they often engaged questions of technology and communication contemporary to their cultural moment. The next sections of the dissertation task themselves with focusing on Rammellzee as one of the many Style-Writers who prioritized styles confronting technological questions (in, for instance, Coleman's Afrofuturist sense of the word "technology" below). In the following chapters, I argue that the innovations surrounding the aesthetic programs of Style-Writing as "equations," "visual mathematics," "computer style," "mechanics," "algorhythms" and "science," were not simply manifestos of an artistic movement, futurist invocations or esoteric mythologies bordering on spiritual practices—although they were all those things at one time or another. Rather, I will argue, the discourses referred to specific ways of creating structures for computations and equations for the archival processes of Style-Writing, and this Writing was thus designed to address, and often leverage, gaps in the statistically driven models

that guided the presences and absences at work in the layout of the city, and its subways, and so their vehicles.

In turn, a focus on informatics and technology represents only one of the artistic community's overlapping and highly developed themes, themes here appearing among the sub-genres of those thousands of Style-Writers who each prioritized stylistic endeavors of their own choosing. If we accept the last chapter's argument, which locates Style-Writing among other cultural technologies for communication in New York, then this chapter poses the question, which informational processes did the Style-Writers' archives specifically deploy within those communicative apparatuses? By which strategies might Style-Writers in fact, as theorized by scholars like Brighenti, activate the city's spatial structures and operationalized these as communication networks? In other words, what is it about Style-Writing's aesthetic form that allowed it to uniquely transform the infrastructure of the subway network into a type of information technology?

Were Style-Writers' technological claims reflections of the systematic construction of specific technical components, or were these artists' technology-driven styles to be understood as pre-eminently symbolic themes—imageries of technology or, by contrast, devices of technology? As the sayings go, maybe we need not simply think in such binary terms?

## AND YOU HAVE A PAGE, EACH TRAIN CAR: THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE LETTER'S CHASSIS AND THE POETRY OF MILITANT EQUATIONS

Fig. 42: Rammellzee the Militant, as pictured in Cascone, Sarah "Sotheby's and a Former Banksy Dealer Team Up to Test the Market for Street-Artist Rammellzee in London" 10 August 2018. <https://news.artnet.com/market/rammellzee-sothebys-steve-lazarides-1331210>. Cascone captions the photo "Rammellzee, Hip-hop 'til you drop performance at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, (1989). Photo by Brian Williams, courtesy of Red Bull Arts New York."

Fig. 3: Rammellzee the Garbage God, as pictured in Hsu, Hua. "The Spectacular Personal Mythology of Rammellzee" 28 May 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/05/28/the-spectacular-personal-mythology-of-rammellzee>. Hsu's caption reads "Rammellzee created and wore full-body suits of armor that he called 'Garbage Gods.' Photograph by Mari Horiuchi / courtesy Red Bull Arts New York and the Rammellzee Estate."

As for Rammellzee, what may we call the space that his aesthetics traverses? In 1995

Rammellzee would tell Ed Gill:

The trains are a big book. They are flying through a wind tunnel. Wind is—there's pressure going backward against any train that's going forward, so you design the wings, or the dream of the wings, or the dream of the arrows, becoming more aerodynamic. And when an arrow—a directional symbol, a symbol of direction—turns into a missile, you're no longer directing your emotions and the style changes into a tank from wild style, or burner. If you know wild style, then there's burner style, which has two or three arrows on it; then there's griller style, which has three or four arrows on each letter; and then there's wizard style, that has four or five, six more arrows. And then they start to lock down. And they start to turn on you. They're no longer direction symbols, just a simple triangle with a rectangle behind it. They start to become more architecturally designed, because they have to meet the requirements of the letter's chassis, as the train goes through the tunnel. Now you have a wind tunnel, in front of a whole bunch of little kids who didn't know what a wind tunnel was. And then we started designing letters like it was in a wind tunnel. So now you're shipping words as tanks, or spaceships or dragsters, through a wind tunnel.

Ed Gill: Right.

Rammellzee: And you have a page, each train car. We call it a page because the number at the top of the train car could be a page number, like any page in a book. Or it can be a year, which means if it says 1875, you went back in time. If it said 1347 you went further back in time, and if it says 2015, to the future. So I came up with a statement called 'Gothic Futurism.' Gothic—before Gutenberg's printed press, right? The ornamented manuscripts, illuminated manuscripts. And then Futurism, after Gutenberg's printed press, where you have ornamentation with people, places, and things from the monks. And then you have the monks of the subways, and the architects of how to build chassis designs. Which were Al, Bl, Cl, D1, El, Fl, Gl, and then we stop.<sup>cxxvi</sup>

At one core of Rammellzee's aesthetics we may find a space that considers the passage between “wings, or the dreams of the wings.” In literary terms, we might ask of Rammellzee's “or”: shifting and inhabiting the link between 1) the stylized letters on the trains and designs of diegetic narratives such as “dreams of arrows” or 2) the moment “when an arrow—a directional symbol turns into a missile.” Now, let us consider why he rejects the phrase “directing your emotions”: we may recognize that the terms would offer an insufficiently expressivist formulation for Rammellzee's project.

When the letters' “style changes into a tank from wild style[,]” we find a moment where Rammellzee insists (like Mare) on an aesthetics beyond, yet including, diegetic narrative worlds: “[T]hey [the letters] start to become more architecturally designed, because they have to meet the

requirements of the letter's chassis, as the train goes through the tunnel." According to Rammellzee, we might read the letters' stylizations not only as "symbols" but as designed for

a wind tunnel, in front of a whole bunch of little kids who didn't know what a wind tunnel was. And then we started designing letters like it was in a wind tunnel. So now you're shipping words as tanks, or spaceships or dragsters, through a wind tunnel.<sup>ccxvii</sup>

In this activating moment, Rammellzee claims that the Style Writers are "shipping words as tanks, or spaceships" beyond only a symbolic form. In these ways, the aesthetics of Rammellzee theorize a most vivid exposition of the caustic force that extended from the imaginary semiotics of letters, through aerosolization, and chemical compositions in and upon steel train cars—and moreover, we shall now see, into the field of information science. This aesthetics catalyzes the motion from the brute and logistical materialism of trains, to the imaginative field of the book, and back to the train, now quite accurately understood as the "letter's chassis" in a "wind tunnel."

Earlier, we saw how Rammellzee described his poetics: "I do sentence structures that do not end with periods, points or errors, they continue on from beginning and end with the same word at the end of the sentence structure to repeat itself."<sup>ccxviii</sup> It is not difficult to make sense of such a statement when the train is understood as a book, so that the miles of the continually flowing subway lines sustain a unique sense of poetics where "the same word" of the Writer iterates and remains across the cyclic motion of the subway car.

Fig. 4: Rammellzee close ups, stills from Rammellzee and Rabotnik "RAMMELLZEE'S movie "Gothic Futurism" Kees Klein, THE NEW RABOTNIK. 13 March 2018.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXqxVpl5g9w&list=PLKs89edidu7XNYkFQIJghikg\\_8FCvHMEAc&index=4&t=221s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXqxVpl5g9w&list=PLKs89edidu7XNYkFQIJghikg_8FCvHMEAc&index=4&t=221s)

Seven years before the publication of the statement of “wings, or the dream of wings,” to Ed Gill, Rammellzee explained that one purpose of this aesthetics is specifically informatic in the aforementioned 1988 interview with the Dutch group Rabotnik TV—“I paint to leave information”—just before inverting the statement’s logic, and so inverting the position of a reader who seeks to be informed:

Rabotnik (Narrator): “Hey Ramm tell me, why do you paint?”

Rammellzee: “Well I paint to leave information. To leave information very inaccurately. That’s why I like designing architectural structures like tanks, because painting is something society wants, and not what I want. But if I want to put out my information commercially so I can become more fine art, I must in some way, compromise. [...]”<sup>ccxix</sup>

Here he specifically sees the project of Style-Writing as one of, simultaneously, non-accuracy and “information[,]” situating his own autonomy over that informational function as part of a project placed at risk by the commercialization of “fine art.” Reflecting on Marisol Negrón’s argument regarding the “performative excess of New York’s DiaspoRican communities” discussed above, we may situate Rammellzee’s own claims of autonomy through aesthetics alongside his sense of the control of information. Now this archival control may also be seen as a facility of Style-Writing’s aesthetics to resist institutional capture.

Christiansen (citing Tate) points out that

To be taken into the fold by the art world elite and submitting oneself to the dictates of curators and other artworld aficionados was for Rammellzee like having part of one’s identity muted in the name of profit. In Tate: “Because that is what they [art galleries] will do to you. They sell your art, they sell your music and exploit it . . .” But although he was well aware of the price of commercial success, he tried to push back against its domesticating forces not by staying out of the limelight or shying away from the financial support that came with his induction into the ranks of gallery artists – he actually seems to have been very comfortable as the center of attention, albeit mostly when clad in one of his amazing, hand-built exoskeletons, which he allegedly would wear in public more often than not – but by harnessing it and using it as a platform to produce and promote increasingly dense and complex works of art that communicated his ideas about cultural demise and alternative realities. In fact, according to Tate, Rammellzee saw his work as artwork only secondarily; its real purpose, he maintained, was to illustrate his dual philosophy of “Gothic Futurism” and “Ikonoklast Panzerism,” which through intricate grammar and equations constituted by unique letter combinations is a stunning projection of a fantastical world where, as we will see, what we thought made sense is rendered nearly unrecognizable.<sup>ccxx</sup>

It is with this sense of “harnessing” the institutionalized art world and “using it as a platform” that we should understand Rammellzee’s other claims: shifting from “ornamentation to armamentation” and identifying as a “militant” rather than with the limitations of “art,” when interviewed by Rabotnik, as mentioned above. Resisting the reflexive weight of ivory towers with quick touches of irony and assertiveness, Rammellzee rejects associating himself with theories that are “a little bit too arty,” because he is a “militant” who has “nothing to do with art”:

Rammellzee: “Why don’t you film a duck, man? [video cuts] My favorite film? Battlestar Galactica. Television Program.”

Rabotnik: “Why?”

Rammellzee: “Because it designs tanks like I do.”

Rabotnik: “Tell me about your tanks Ramm.”

Rammellzee: Ikonoklast Panzerism is the integers all in [“locked force” inaudible] armored from ornamentation to armamentation, exercises the letters [“through” inaudible] raw integers”

Rabotnik: “Does that sound a little bit too arty, or am I wrong?”

Rammellzee: “You’re wrong.”

Rabotnik: “Why?”

Rammellzee: “Because I’m a militant. I ain’t got nothing to do with art. Art is an equation just like Rammellzee is an equation.”<sup>ccxxi</sup>

In this cycling of identifications, we should note the suggestively implied logic. Rammellzee proposes the idea of information and computation directly, calling his name, and in the third-person, himself, an “equation” among other equations, including “art.” If we accept Rammellzee’s identification as an equation, then we should read the “I” of “I paint to leave information” as an equation which delivers information—often, “inaccurately.”<sup>ccxxii</sup>

Yet elsewhere in the same interview, the Style-Writer would also reply with equal confidence when Rabotnik persisted in an even more precise inquiry into Ramm’s artistic genre—not only was the equation to be understood informationally, but poetically:

Rammellzee: “Rammellzee is an equation.” [film cuts]

Rabotnik: “Hey Ramm, you’re a poet?”

Rammellzee: “I’m a poet.”

Rabotnik: “Tell me.”

Rammellzee: “I just did. [laughs] Word. I am. I am a poet. Word.”

Rabotnik: “Hey can I ask you again, you’re a poet?”

Rammellzee: “I am a poet.”

Rabotnik: “Tell me something about it.”

Rammellzee: "Tell you something about it. Procedures and definitions, like as-is, is-as, icon or panzerism. [...] one word, ionic statements. And I do sentence structures that do not end with periods, points or errors, they continue on from beginning and end with the same word at the end of the sentence structure to repeat itself."  
Rabotnik: "Hey Ramm, tell me, why do you paint?"  
Rammellzee: "Well I paint to leave information. To leave information very inaccurately."<sup>ccxxiii</sup>

Against the historical backdrop of immediate risks of municipal bankruptcy and the long processes of catastrophic urban restructuring, his transformations of the alphabetical archive offered a means to envision, and aesthetically militarize, a liberatory subversion of both "fine art" and the built municipal environment, broadly understood. The means lay in Rammellzee's radical expansion and substantiation of the boundary between warfare and dreaming, which aligned the literary space of the spray-painted letter with the infrastructural space of the subway line's territorial boundaries.

With this interval in mind, we may more deeply understand the significance of this poet's claim for a personal identity resulting from the name he calls an "equation." This poet sees his Style-Written texts as weapons made of letters which offered an "integer structure quality" beyond the "phonetic value" which "does not apply to any letter's structure because the sound is made by the bone structure of the human species, which has nothing to do with the integer structure quality." Asserting his name as an equation of weaponized integers then reinscribes his separation from state control of discourse: "No government owns land in this mathematical formation (N x AM x E) = □."<sup>ccxxiv</sup> Asserting new terms for the basis of social legibility, Rammellzee's claim for the autonomy of this "land" of the self also offers an opportunity to investigate the context of the spatial resistance he claims for his community.

We might ask: was that free, uncaptured "land in this mathematical formation" to be understood as diegetic escapes of fantasia, or lived-in experiences of territories of New York City?<sup>ccxxv</sup> Just what about this equation's name offered a mathematics that might provide a "formation" traversing the diegetic and the urban? We will now see that the plasticity located between the "wings, or the dreams of wings" of the spray-painted letter allowed Writers a way to

deploy a few ounces of pigment which, when properly positioned, might go “All City”—perhaps even spanning the 700+ miles of subway lines. In this transformative positioning, they restructured their relationship with space across the post-war urban grid: As he would say to Greg Tate, “Our generation’s poverty and despondency made us turn a letter into a missile.”<sup>ccxxvi</sup>

## MISSILE CONTENT EXTREMELY CONDENSE

*Fig. 5: “Quantum Mechanics” diagram, from: Rammellzee “IONIC TREATISE GOTHIC FUTURISM ASSASSIN KNOWLEDGES OF THE REMANIPULATED SQUARE POINTS” 2003 (1979). <http://drzulu.com/the-rammellzee-ionic-treatise-gothic-futurism/>*

How did Rammellzee’s emphasis on technology, weaponization, and mathematics play out in terms of that “integer structure quality” from one letter to another? In which ways might written letters and texts be understood as integers and equations here? In an often-referenced diagram from his “Gothic Futurism” we read the cryptic title, “quantum mechanics” with diagrams of the evolving stylizations of the letter E, from “BOMBERISM,” to “WILD STYLISM” to “IKONOKLAST PANZERISM.” Here Rammellzee’s annotation, to the diagram in his treatise, includes the parenthetical: “(Missile Content Extremely Condense X-Rays, gamma rays, ultraviolet light visible light. infrared.)”. Relying on Jack Stewart’s influential *Graffiti Kings* we may understand the artist’s term “bomb” in the context of Style-Writing as a verb meaning “to cover a train in graffiti.”<sup>ccxxvii</sup> The nuances of Stewart’s claim for coverage should be noted. Stewart himself began as an artist and later served as vice-president and provost of the lauded Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 1975. There, notes his wife Regina Stewart, it was “suggested” that he write a dissertation. *Mass Transit Art Subway Graffiti: An Aesthetic Study of Graffiti on the Subway System of New York City* (U.M.I. Ann Arbor, MI, 1989) represents one of the earliest extended engagements between the authorized archives of American collegiate education and the practice of New York’s Style-Writing, and in 2009, was republished as the book *Graffiti Kings: New York City Mass Transit Art of the 1970s*.

The opening sentences specifically emphasize two questions unique to the moment of the practice’s inception and early regional spread from Philadelphia to New York City: the question of “scal[ing]” in relation to text and the question of historically “dat[ing]” an artwork in relation to “stylistic grounds alone.” Stewart writes,

Worldwide, from ancient to modern times, the form and content of graffiti remained remarkably unchanged until the mid-1960s, when much larger scale graffiti began appearing in Philadelphia.<sup>ccxxviii</sup> Before then graffiti was for the most part, impossible to date on stylistic grounds alone.

The scale of early graffiti was related to that of the average written letter. The graffiti that appeared in Philadelphia in the mid-1960s was different. It was not ideological or political. In an academic journal, two geography professors researching graffiti observed that there were two types of writers—“territorial markers” and “loners.”<sup>ccxxix</sup>

“Territorial markers” of the time wrote to define youth gang territories, and the “size of the names grew to match the magnitude of the warnings” (ibid). Stewart cites Cornbread as among those “loners” who had rejected gang involvement, and “began to adopt larger-than-life scale for their signatures” in extending their practice even further as a project of

improving on the existing graffiti: hitting more ambitious locations, writing larger-scale letters, using better materials, and, ultimately creating better designs. These new concepts that began in Philadelphia were the harbingers of the unique designs that appeared on the walls and then the trains of the New York City subway system<sup>ccxxx</sup>

Here, one refinement, of the “concepts” of “better designs” that could be executed in “larger-scale letters[,]” was matched to another refinement: emphasizing the selection of a structural medium which could adequately share that information at scale. Once again, we may note the shift to mobile infrastructure:

Early Philadelphia graffitiists realized that public transportation vehicles would have a much larger audience than any fixed location. They spread their linear graffiti—simple line-based letters, as to the more elaborate and stylized works that would soon appear in New York—along the public transportation routes, with buses and subways the favorite target.

By the late 1960s, the buses and subway trains in Philadelphia were saturated with graffiti, while in New York the trend was just beginning. But subway trains and stations offered maximum exposure, and the Philadelphia Subway System was dwarfed by New York City’s. In New York, the idea would achieve its full promise.<sup>ccxxxi</sup>

At the scale of “maximum exposure” offered by the public transportation infrastructure, Stewart also identifies the question of scalability of “linear” as well as more complex styles.

It is within this aesthetic context of “new concepts” regionally shared as “harbingers” of inter- and intra-metropolitan scalability, that we should consider Stewart’s analyses in conjunction with Rammellzee’s theories of “missile content: extremely condense.” Both see urban space as informational space. For instance, alongside Rammellzee and so many other Style-Writers, Stewart similarly distinguishes between a “hit” defined as “to write a graffiti name, usually on a small scale” and a “kill” in the artistic sense: “to completely cover a surface with graffiti.” This question of scale in coverage points to a more general subtlety among Style-Writers, as the Style-Writer Cap would famously say in the film *Style-Wars* (as discussed in chapter 1): “I’m not a graffiti artist. I am a

graffiti bomber.” In that documentary, Skeme would also describe his counter-hegemonic artworks as explosive devices: “No I ain’t running the system, I’m bombing the system.” Here the significance of a Writer’s practice is not only weighed in single masterworks, but in duration and scope of execution. To “go all-city”—according to the highly-respected @149st website—refers to the highly-respected achievement where “a writer or crew bombs all major subway lines or the streets of all five boroughs.”<sup>ccxxxii</sup>

The concept of “Bomberism” thus in part pivots on an idea of information which provides a Style-Writer with the ability to deliver rapidly scaled coverage over space, and the speeds necessary for large-scale execution can be understood in relation to the relative simplicity and near-symmetry of the curves of the “epsilon.” To achieve coverage on a train or a city required highly iterable information, and so archives of designs which a bomber could de-“condense” from the original design in high volume. Execution at this scale required more skill when a Style-Writer sought to not only achieve repetition but also achieve the complexity of the popular Wildstyle form, which Stewart defines as “A letter style that features highly fractured forms that seem to bounce off one another at oblique angles.” The aesthetic potential of the information embryonically condensed into the “bomberism” style could be understood to be more fully de-compressed in the highly-armamented “Gothic Futurism.”

Rammellzee’s note on the “extremely condense” content of Style-Writing also points us to another scalable axis of information compression: as each version of the letter (from its “epsilon” style to its “sigma” style) allows for a different scope of complexity of letter stylization applicable to the writing of any name, to be “compressed” into the configuration of one instance of the letter. In this context, we may also understand his previous claims, such as, “I paint to leave information,” even more robustly: his diagram analyzes his Writing’s “missile content” as a series of types and informatic uses of the spectrum of light as “extremely condense” structures. In the process of

decompression, the equation could be said to maintain the information (of a letter) to deliver many variable iterative products. The information itself could be said to function, in the sense of this poet, like a “bomb” exploding in its decompressions from one letter style to twenty-six iterations, from one letter style to more complex styles.

In this way, we might also understand the Harlem Style-Writer, Chain 3’s Instagram post of a design constructed to allow him to scale letters from notebook to train car: “Chain 3d! Notebook...The notebook provided the blue line that was great to measure the bottom of your window down ...”.<sup>ccxxxiii</sup> There, the venerated Style-Writer, Part 1, suggests we might also understand this development of the information of letter styles as a “prototype.” This line of thinking shows us that, often, Style-Writers’ specifically strategized their letter designs so that the “prototype” could easily scale and so lead to potentially thousands of implementations traveling through, in Rammellzee’s terms, the recursive “sentences” of subway networks that endlessly “continue on from beginning and end.”

*Fig. 6: Screenshots of Chain 3d! Notebook (Instagram post), including original caption and Part 1's comment "prototype." 2003 (1979). From "Chain 3" [ @allen.ramsey.906 ]. Instagram post: Chain 3! Notebook. 5 September 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTcqYrZHxG-/?hl=en>*

Rammellzee's aesthetics of information-armamentation opens the opportunity to analyze the ways that artists weaponized and shared information through the Style-Writing networks on the subway as a form of resistance to governing regimes of identity. Specifically, his treatise(s) on letter structures address the ways that Style-Writing might create an independently functional site of information compression.<sup>ccxxxiv</sup> Soon, we shall see, the informational structure of the letter in fact functioned not only as the "dream" of an "extremely condense" missive, but as a computable transmission—yet, the design of that computational structure remained resistant to cultural regimes of information at the time.

Christiansen sees the density of Rammellzee's information as part of its politicized resistance:

By probing the historical significance of letters, integers, and equations from a perspective that is a dizzying conjunction of fictional, historical, and futurist, Rammellzee, as if from behind his impressive, mythological troupe of characters (is he puppet or puppeteer?), launched a symbolic war to bring about a desired reality. "I am one of the Gothic Futurists in the Alpha's Bet; the equation known as the Rammellzee. I am some 16 billion years old . . . the particular person acting out right now has a theorem that if he can boomerang through time, he can make sure that a sledgehammer causes a cosmic flush."<sup>ccxxxv</sup>

## CHAPTER 4 - RAMMELLZEE AS-IS, IS-AS, ICON OR PANZERISM: FROM ORNAMENTATION TO ARMAMENTATION

To understand these ideas of writing weaponized letters as integers and equations, we should first turn to Rammellzee's treatises on the weaponization of the alphabetical archive: "Gothic Futurism" and "Ikonoklast Panzerism." Changes in urban planning, specifically regarding transportation infrastructure, situate Rammellzee's claims for the possibility of aesthetic resistance to the "creative destruction" of already marginalized communities. Not only is he Rammellzee, Ramm, Zee, the Equation, or EG (Evolution Griller); his government name remains unknown.<sup>ccxxxvi</sup> Christiansen describes the dynamism of the cycling of his identities:

Every bit as anti-authoritarian as Sun Ra, Rammellzee officially abandoned his given name, which has remained a closely guarded secret since his 1979 adoption by legal decree of the appellation Rammellzee; not a name, he insisted, but a militaristic equation (written like this: RAMM: ΣLL:ZΣΣ). Post-1979, he would consistently refer to himself as "The Equation." Far from a normal mathematical concept, The Equation that was Rammellzee was not one to be easily solved or otherwise summarized using the standard tools of mathematics or logic; instead he was a cipher, a generative myth-maker whose esoteric epistemology and total art present some mindboggling enigmas that insist on being opaque, it seems, as a tactical form of resistance.<sup>ccxxxvii</sup>

The "opaque" nature of this resistance appears in reference to both his sense of self-identifications and his sense of letter styles. Subway texts were understood as weaponized vehicles in his aesthetic theory of "Ikonoklast Panzerism," synthesized in the manifesto "Ionic Treatise Gothic Futurism" (1979), often with "Ionic" replaced by "Iconic" in its title. The document(s) now broadly exists in fragmented transcriptions on the internet, which seems appropriate given that his theories of iconology would often be deployed in what he called "ionic" statements (see also Hito Steyerl's *In Praise of the Poor Image* in this regard)<sup>ccxxxviii</sup>. The most readily available version (from 2003) now exists on the Internet Archive's Wayback machine, which preserves the document as Rammellzee presented it on his own website, which is itself no longer online.<sup>ccxxxix</sup> Alongside a small library of

annotations for his labyrinthine cosmology and historiography, a critical account of source documents could easily fill a book length work.

Throughout the Treatise, Rammellzee provides a mythic constellation, integrating inferences from quantum physics, five hundred years (or more) of political historiographies regarding the nature of the western alphabet, futurist humanisms, anti-cancer strategies, apocalyptic prophecies and, most overwhelmingly, the militant potentials of providing “armamentation” to “word-strategy”:

One universal gamble is the understructuring of a transversal register. The letter by equation and answer to equation. The other universal gamble is the reformation-equations to make the understructure make itself the overstructure in an equation-evolution ornamentation by monks who overstructured their idols and did not know that they had remanipulated a disappearing point on a quantum transversal register. The next point of appearance to the register's structure was known as armamentation in the universal gamble of word-strategy reformation by the reformators and themselves the receptacles. Once again this is Ikonoklast Wars<sup>cxli</sup>

For Rammellzee, monks had contravened the will of medieval leaders by radically engaging with the spiritual and astronomical implications of letter forms, which disrupted political controls of discourse and beyond. Inheriting the discontents of the manipulated alphabet, Rammellzee and other Writers could continue the monastic intervention to stave off the manipulations of authentic culture.

As a Writer, emcee, fashion designer and sculptor born in Far Rockaway, Queens, Rammellzee first circulated the manifesto(es) in the late 1970's. Together, these documents “imagined a world in which Roman letters would arm and liberate themselves, at his command, from the power structures of European language.” In his arcane historiography, Rammellzee looks to illuminated manuscripts where monks contradicted the discourse of kings, taking these moments as opportunities to locate origins of Style-Writing: “From the fourth century to the nineteenth century a development of style re-manipulated by monks known as Gothic type, or Old English type, presently used by The New York Times and Long Island Press. This is the proto product of wild styling.”<sup>cxli</sup>

Already in the 1940s, New York was a city where European anthropologists would be, according to George Hutchinson. “enthralled by a city that could change in time, class, and culture from block to block.”<sup>ccxlii</sup> By the time of Rammellzee’s youth, the new efflorescence of Style-Writers aesthetic technologies only continued to reinforce New York as evermore a metropolis the French scholar Claude Levi-Strauss once adored as “a city where anything seemed possible. Like the urban fabric, the social fabric was riddled with holes. All you had to do was pick one and slip through if, like Alice, you wanted to get to the other side of the looking glass and find worlds so enchanting that they seemed unreal.”<sup>ccxliii</sup> Rammellzee’s book of the subway offers one zenith of “worlds so enchanting they seemed unreal” –once the reader was transported to “the other side of the looking glass” and into Rammellzee’s “Gothic Futurism.”

## **ID WARS AND THE GARBAGE GODS**

Rammellzee’s “Garbage Gods” should also be understood with respect to the wider connections between infrastructure, enfranchisement and identity. The Garbage Gods present a series of inhabitable personas assembled from the refuse of the city, and moreover, the ability to develop an identity apart from the state, indeed precisely in and through the excesses which fall beyond its functional regimes. The problems of sanitation had presented a long history of problems in New York. The subway itself appeared, for instance, in part as the result of public health concerns in the face of the unmanageability of horses when used as a city-wide transportation technology, the excessive grime of above-ground train systems, as well as in response to the need to reduce the danger of the early years of raised electrical infrastructure tangles. It is within the ultimately unmanaged flow of late 20<sup>th</sup> century excesses that Rammellzee’s reconfigurations of the archive function as informatic devices, from his exoskeleton costumes to his Written texts themselves; in Christiansen’s words:

In addition to his philosophy, with its equations and alternative linguistic history, Rammellzee's mixed-media assemblages, where layers of found objects are submerged in resin and paint, speak an equally secretive language. Perhaps we can think of the hidden objects in these pieces as a form of archival composition of a material reality whose meaning can be revealed once excavated by a future world ready to receive the concealed message.<sup>ccxliiv</sup>

By the time of Rammellzee's "Garbage Gods" the Bronx was, notoriously, "burning" and left to decay under the haunted federal attitudes of "benign neglect," as Moynihan put it in his infamous memo to Nixon. Among a milieu of Style-Writers already dedicated to secrecy, Rammellzee might remain one of the most enigmatic. Moving along the line of inquiry we gained from a re-understanding of the visuality of Style-Writing through Mare's exposition of abstraction, Rammellzee offers us the opportunity to focus directly on a complex meditation about the role of letter forms, from the distinctive understanding of a Style-Writer. Not only did he devote himself to theorizing inscriptions at an immense scale, but he also reconstructed his lived experience around the identity he inscribed, often walking the streets of New York in character and in costume, as a multitude of figures. At the core of his philosophy stands the conviction that, under thorough analysis, the shape of the Written letter itself can enable resistance to hegemony more broadly, by the force of symbolic warfare. The degree to which this "Ikonoklast" aesthetics of the letter enacts the militancy he espouses stands as the primary subject of this chapter.

An understanding of his cryptic aesthetic discourse must be developed before the details of his "word-strategy" can be usefully elaborated. At nearly every turn, Rammellzee's claims overdetermine their syntactic vehicles. The scholarly literature remains limited and uneven, but treatments such as Chuck Galli's *Hip-Hop Futurism: Remixing Afrofuturism and the Hermeneutics of Identity* point out that despite the obscure style, in person and in publication, Rammellzee maintained a "tendency to speak in very definite, specific terms about the future in regards to Ikonoklast Panzerism and the fate of humanity."<sup>ccxlv</sup> In this *hyper*-definition, his statements overdetermine their syntactic vehicles.

His discourse exploits grammatical variability, often beginning sentences as questions only to end in assertions which tease answers, but remain asymptotic in relation to propositional resolutions: “How can a government be structured straight using a symbolic code subconsciously remanipulated and its symbols do not belong to the verbal formation.”<sup>ccxlv</sup> Here Rammellzee’s aesthetic discourse offers a marked contrast to the analytical methods and languages ostensibly valued by western philosophy. He sustains both an overwhelming investment in propositionally systematic (if also paradoxical) claims internal to his work, and a perpetual divestment of his assertions from solvency in the theoretics of external accounts.

In so doing, Ramm endlessly returns his audiences and auditors to confront his text’s provision of the immediacy which remains regardless of attendant critical apparatuses. Thus, in this engagement with the possibilities of intellectual forms, Rammellzee’s rhetorical strategy renders nearly all conceptual positions precarious except the vivid militancy of his inscriptions. External conceptualizations of his system finally can only be anchored in his text’s claim to the reality of a militancy existing often wholly in the informatics of aesthetics, even as these concepts can thus only recognize its force, while stopping short of claiming to understand its more hidden workings of identity.<sup>ccxlvii</sup> Any additional attempt to penetrate his identity then could be seen to only repeat the attempts of capture via the gaze of the state. Moreover, Rammellzee’s labored explication of his work in the *Ionic Treatise* could never well be reduced to a defensive assertion of illegibility as an aesthetic practice. Recalling Galli’s point regarding Ramellzee’s “tendency to speak in very definite, specific terms about the future in regards to Ikonoklast Panzerism and the fate of humanity”,<sup>ccxlviii</sup> we may also note that the abundance of statements which might elide recognition in academic totalities are just as often statements formed specifically by an equally disarming lack of ambiguity.

Enigmatic does not mean illegible. Such simplifications of the artists' thinking would obscure the dynamism of Rammellzee's narrative of his equation's clandestine continuity with monastic habits of style:

In the 14th century, the monks ornamented and illustrated the manuscripts of letters. In the 21st and 22nd century the letters of the alphabet through competition are now armed for letter racing and galactic battles. This was made possible by a secret equation known as THE RAMM-ELL-ZEE<sup>ccxlix</sup>

Specifically, Rammellzee sees the shift from "ornamentation" to "armamentation" in the aesthetic evolution:

In medieval times, monks ornamented letters to hide their meaning from the people. Now, the letter is armed against further manipulation<sup>cd</sup>

For all the reticences of his esoterism, Rammellzee's practice remains startlingly consistent.<sup>cccli</sup>

The extreme variety of personas he would present aligns precisely with his resistance to government control of recognition, changing his legal name in 1986 to assert the name he had been Writing instead.<sup>ccclii</sup> Decades later, as scholars still have not captured his "government name,"<sup>cccliii</sup> the enigmatic force of his paraps would align, and we should say drive, the enigma of his identity.

Moreover, at the level of genre, when Galli posed the question:

Novelist Alondra Nelson writes that "Afro-Futurism arises out of an engagement of dispersed people with technology", and Patrick Neate notes that hip-hop is unique in its exclusive reliance on technology for production. How has technology informed Gothic Futurism and/or Ikonoklast Panzerism?<sup>cccliv</sup>

Rammellzee would again reply with uncanny simplicity teetering on the edge of overdetermined inscrutability:

There is no such thing as Afro Futurism. Because of Sun Ra, George Clinton, Bootsy Collins and the 5% nation are our view on thoughts of Futurism. A time table has become Mapamatical. Weapons technology and the Alpha Bet system, the A was dropped from Beta, concludes the Barbarian that I am....these secrets are of the "Hidden". Black as a culture has nothing to do with it. The Romans stole it from the Greeks. And we still instill it. Language dies. The Human species also does. You will run out of genes shortly....I suggest space travel for you. Then you may extend your life expectancy.....<sup>ccclv</sup>

At the very least, Rammellzee's thinking shows us how to move away from evaluating Style-Writing in the telos of public discourse, whether that be through agonistic, consensual or established genres.

Rammellzee's more abrasive statements, such as claiming, "There is no such thing as Afro

Futurism” should not be understood to be a simplistic rejection (or denigration) of that broader cultural movement, but a complex way of performing an interrogation of how popularly legible ideas which might be imposed on the history of creators who sustain the movement (such as “Sun Ra, George Clinton, Bootsy Collins and the 5% nation”). As Bennet et. al’s article “Funky Images on the Other Side of Time” argues, “there is no one way to define an Afrofuturist aesthetic because Afrofuturism is not at static entity [sic]. Like the art printed on the following pages, Afrofuturism is fluid, it evolves and expands with the purpose of pointing to new possibilities and perceptions that have yet to be voiced.”<sup>cclvi</sup> This sense of fluidity sparks many debates about how that indeterminacy takes place, such as in examples of “Undefined Afrofuturism: Greg Tate and Alondra Nelson”, a section of John Jennings and Clinton R. Fluker’s essay “Forms of Future/Past”: “The main difference between the two theories of Afrofuturism offered by Tate and Nelson is that while Nelson attempts to provide a platform that may lead to a definition of Afrofuturism, Tate does not.”<sup>cclvii</sup> Later, Jennings and Fluker point to Beth Coleman’s essay “Race as Technology” where Coleman critically explores the etymology of “technology”, turning to the idea of “*techne* (from the Greek), or more commonly ‘technique,’ as we know from everyday usage, is a reproducible skill.”<sup>cclviii</sup> They summarize Coleman’s sense to see “*techne* or technique a testament to the person who uses the tools, not the tools themselves.” Coleman’s insight, according the Jennings and Fluker, is to

liken race to a tool, a form of technology to be used, Coleman argues that race itself must be defined: “For race to be considered a technology, it must first be denatured—that is, estranged from its history as a biological ‘fact’ (a fact that has no scientific value perhaps, but constitutes, nonetheless, a received fact)” (178). For example, one historical ‘fact’ regarding race might be the long legacy of stereotypes associated with black people because of institutional racism. Coleman argues that by reconsidering race as a technology these unsavory facts about race can be undone: “this proposition moves race away from the biological and genetic systems that have historically dominated its definition toward questions of technological agency” (177).

In similar fashion offered by Coleman, Afrofuturism can be likened to a lens that renders reality via a *panotechnological* perspective. It views *everything* as a type of technology. Moreover, like Coleman, if race can be viewed as a technology, the most significant question is, who wields it? Historically, in the United States, race has been used to divide communities and subjugate individuals by institutional systems of racism. Despite this legacy of race, Afrofuturism seeks to embrace the *artifice* and fully exploit the fact that, often, the things that we *think* define us are merely constructions that function as prosthetics that produce various effects relating to their user’s needs. Afrofuturism posits that throughout history, many black people have noticed the affordances of different types of technology while under countless forms of control. The most important affordances of these *liberation technologies* have always been freedom, equity, and agency. Whether it has been literacy, civil

rights, social justice, or simply access to an internet connection, black people see the systems that they have been denied access to and have used calculated means to circumvent the obstacles that prevent that access.

The use of a pantechological perspective enables individuals to see potential weaknesses hidden within systems of oppression. Though access to technology can render society's playing field level, it also has the power to destroy and subjugate as history has demonstrated. To combat against technology's more negative aspects, a perspective informed by Afrofuturism recognizes that if everything is technologically framed, then *everything* can be hacked into and rewritten. In this way, Afrofuturism actively *customizes* the products it encounters and makes them fit the needs of its users. This ideology is one that establishes Afrofuturism as such a radical mode of cultural production and criticism."<sup>cclix</sup>

In this sense they also refer to John Akomfrah, whose films can be seen to, for instance, treat the Blues as a "Black technology" which "spawns all other technologies relating to musical production by black people in the United States (i.e. jazz, Rock & Roll)."<sup>cclx</sup>

Here the democratic archive's determination of the possibility of enunciation establishes social control of the present temporality. Demonstrating that the state itself exists as a series of fragments, with another world, more persistent, appearing throughout the gaps, Rammellzee's armamentations relinquish the need for outright violence because the opponent was already, visibly, displaced from its claim to (self-)authority. We should be careful to note that for Rammellzee, this semiotic field cannot be well understood as "ahistorical," or some subset of a greater category.

Where the pursuit of systematic concepts seems to evaporate, the artworks, when directly engaged (or the dream of such engagement), would provide the most stable resolution of the concomitant cryptic discourses, offering hints on ways to make good on the claim that a Wildstyle work can function as a "symbol destroyer." Inscriptions about a work founder on the inscription *of a* work. Recalling the enigmatic ground of the paraph, we can begin to integrate critical understandings of the politics of recognition as discussed above in regards to Glenn Coulthard and Elizabeth Povinelli with the aesthetic processes central to Style Writing: the enigmatic force of this inscription contravenes systematic explanation of the inscription.

In the late 1970's New York spent some \$20,000,000 on anti-graffiti measures. Style-Writers' chemicals were outgunned by "solvents sufficiently strong to remove most writing also stripped off a car's 'official' base coat, since writers stole a more durable, better quality paint for their work than

the MTA purchased for theirs.”<sup>cclxi</sup> The fact that the caustic solution did not succeed in erasure of their Writings, but rather disfigured both the art and the train, was a fact that proved to many of Writers that the state’s practice and goal was preeminently to target the legibility of the letters, to disarrange the arrangement of pigments—not to return the subways to a prior state of metallic sheen.

As the political machine could be threatened by the same processes that Writers used to “burn” each other, Rammellzee’s thinking shows that the state is one more intervention competing for presence into public space. Moreover, although it would be hard to say that Style-Writers had in fact taken control of the metropolitan infrastructure, the state was willing to spend millions, quite literally, *burning* its own trains to wrestle back the authority their overzealous policies had implicitly conceded as captured by the hand(styles) of the Style-Writers. In the attempt to recuperate its public image the state put that marginalized public more generally at risk:

A report by a transit engineer on the matter revealed that no studies as to this solvent’s safe handling had been made, an illegal safety violation that was extended as a commercial advantage to many other “new” solvents during the next decade. More than two hundred workers reported illnesses or injuries related to chemical solvents used at the car wash during its years of operation, including the death of one worker at the age of forty-seven from long-term exposure.<sup>cclxii</sup>

Rammellzee’s warnings against the “cancers” of “diseased culture” begin to make biopolitical sense. Moreover, the MTA showed itself as contingent as—perhaps more contingent than—the Style Writings themselves. As the Treatise suggests: “Graffiti-era is from the beginning to the end of recorded history!”<sup>cclxiii</sup> As Mare would say, “We may have lost the trains, but we’ve gained the world.”<sup>cclxiv</sup>

While Rammellzee exemplifies a form of combativeness other than violence as such, we would be mistaken to reduce this militancy to simplistic ideas of psychological warfare. The Writers’ practice emphasized immediacy, technicity and consummate historicity: racking (stealing) spraycans, selecting subway lines, breaking into train yards and organizing pigments into massive inscriptions that moved across 700+ miles of New York subway. All of these geographically material features

remain far too direct displays of power to be encountered as primarily virtual, and too anonymously reticent to understand the generalized popular consciousness of a public sphere as the most precise target of their confrontation. Thus, Rammellzee's theory of Ikonoklast Panzerism expands the threshold between psychic confrontation and territorial capture, such that it is wide enough to begin encompassing both.

Interpreting Rammellzee's aesthetics continually drives us back to the flourishing history of the letters which were imagined, inscribed and deployed as a collective militancy. Such claims become far more intuitive when we consider the incandescent history of Writers simultaneously forming a city-wide community of name production which shared in mastering new improvisations, and a city-wide network of extra-state practice, deterritorializing the state's claim to spatial control.

As Tate writes:

"I came down from Queens to the Bronx," he reminisces, "because that's where the culture was coming from. All the guys who also rode the A train--Phase Two, Peanut Two, Jester--all these guys influenced me in this manner of Writing. [...] Dondi saw something developing--he couldn't see how the idea of an arrow turning into a missile could have come from someone from Far Rockaway. [He thought] it should have [come from] somebody [dead up] in the culture, from the hierarchy. I was far away. I shouldn't have those thoughts in my mind. If I'd been in Brooklyn," he adds, "I wouldn't have come up with my style of Ikonoklast Panzerism. I would have been too close to too many masters."<sup>cclxv</sup>

At the level of his discourse, the shifts between easily readable propositions and impenetrable language only reinforces the broader historical field of force where his Writing takes place. Consider the oscillations of the following quote which peak in the final word:

TAG militarily the unreadable are a stabbing harpoon and pulsator technique which is like a satellite. This technique can unravel, extend, discharge, surround, attack. TAG is not a signature but a sign-overture. Due to the formula in construction of motion in motion construction, path of launch and extension of the connecting SIRPIEREULE.<sup>cclxvi</sup>

Even the opacity of his apparent neologisms forcefully reorients readers to his artworks, as the aesthetic objects offer the only opportunity for reference. Attempting to archive one particularly enigmatic word, "SIRPIEREULE" leads the reader most rapidly to mixed media works such as "And when the bell tolls sirpiereule strikes" but then to one of his letter-handstyles at Moma:

Fig. 1. *And when the Bell Tolls Sirpiereule Strikes*. Inset caption by exhibitor (not original to artwork). From Rammellzee: *And when the Bell Tolls Sirpiereule Strikes*. MutualArt. <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/And-When-the-Bell-Tolls-Sirpiereule-Stri/EB3DFC398C502B3F>

Fig. 2. *Letter Handstyle of Sigma* with detail noting “Sirpiereule” from Rammellzee. *Alphabet*. Marker and pencil on paper. Gift of the Gilbert B. and Lila Silverman Instruction Drawing Collection, Detroit. MoMa. [https://www.moma.org/collection/works/293095?sov\\_referrer=theme&theme\\_id=5173](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/293095?sov_referrer=theme&theme_id=5173)

Perhaps Rammellzee’s exploitation of the play inherent in language is then most clearly an interrogation, a disarming, or even an armamentation, of the network and its data-producers. As he says elsewhere, “Well I paint to leave information. To leave information very inaccurately. That’s why I like designing architectural structures like tanks, because painting is something society wants, and not what I want.”<sup>cclxvii</sup> The public may attempt to capture his identity, but the information appearing within that archive would function explosively: whole theories, shelves of literary studies could be written systematizing Rammellzee’s theories, only to find that crucial information was in fact precisely positioned “inaccurately.”

Again we may consider the way Rammellzee operated beyond brute conceptions of violent warfare, and recognize the depth of this ethic which returns to the volatility of humor forcefully executed. Per Greg Tate:

you can take his playful philosophies as seriously as you want. He cracks himself up constantly. Ask him how he came to believe the Pope is the enemy of the letter and he’ll guffaw, “I don’t know!” and mean it. He’ll admit to being as mystified as anyone by the stuff that spontaneously exits his mouth.<sup>cclxviii</sup>

For all our analytical tools, how can we differentiate between these armamentations as functional apparatuses as opposed to the fictionality of narrative apparatuses when Rammellzee walked the streets and confronted New York’s traffic. In other words, how can we deem to recognize the

moment our archives give way to the letter's aesthetic. Sometimes, the imperial complexity of his oeuvre may make us doubt the truth of his confessions when they appear in simplicity. But, after all of his existential commitment to cosmic skirmishes with the otherwise pedestrian logic of New York City's subway, are we willing to risk believing him when he explains: "I'm a method actor"?<sup>cclxix</sup>

Moreover, recall Coulthard's critique of the politics of recognition. We might consider that additional attempts to recapture his "origins" would actively violate what is perhaps the most vividly identifiable system of his aesthetic practice: the ability to, militantly, inscriptively, define his own identity. In 1983 Rammellzee would be interviewed by Edit DeAk in a special issue of *Artforum*—a publication Greg Tate calls "for many, our first encounter with Ramm's militant and contentious body of thought."<sup>cclxx</sup> Here, Rammellzee would tie the control of naming to the control of housing construction, contextualizing that linkage with a critique of appeals to the government as the arbiter of either:

Identity problems? I don't have on Identity. I'm a human, I'm everybody on this planet. Edit DeAk is a government name, it should not have been given to you, and it does not govern you. Name is a necessity to a housing construction, the Identity. The government busts out N for necessity, A for housing construction. The necessity for housing construction is that it separates this name from that name."<sup>cclxxi</sup>

## CHAPTER 5 – INTERLUDE: BREAKING ALGO-RHYTHMS IN

### NEW YORK CITY

#### MEAT AX MATHEMATICS: THE INFORMATION BROKER AND THE RUINS OF NEW YORK

Identity problems? I don't have on Identity. I'm a human, I'm everybody on this planet. EDIT DEAK is a government name, it should not have been given to you, and it does not govern you. Name is a necessity to a housing construction, the Identity. The government busts out N for necessity, A for housing construction. The necessity for housing construction is that it separates this name from that name."<sup>cclxxii</sup>

How might we contextualize the Style-Writers' engagement with the mathematical and technological questions of Rammellzee? In the case of Rammellzee's statement to DeAk above, for instance, how might we historically consider the inter-relations between variables of an identity, a human, a government name, the necessity for housing construction, and other cryptic terms? What about formulations from the Ionic Treatise like: "No government owns land in this mathematical formation  $(N \times AM \times E) = \square$ ."<sup>cclxxiii</sup>

Rather than attempt to solve the equation, limiting its aesthetics to one identity, I hope to provide some interpretive context which I hope will prove useful to the academic conversation. Consider the way that the municipal government's "housing construction" projects would depend on large scale demographic data about the residents of New York City: real, as imagined by the government, or otherwise. Rammellzee's statement about the name's contested relationship with the hegemonies of land control, as well his statement about present or absent identity relates more directly to the question of housing than we might at first suspect, given the indirect style of his allusions. One way or another, the multitudinous communities of the city would need to be identified, estimated and represented in countable forms so that the scope of a public project would

match the number of residents. However, according to Caro, much of the math behind the municipal machinery (and its housing projects) did not entirely rely on so-to-say, real numbers:

What statistics were available—often in obscure files, in other city agencies, of whose existence the unit would never have known were it not for Orton’s encyclopedic knowledge of every corner of city government—were patently too low; Moses kept them low by refusing to count the actual number of people being evicted (instead he multiplied each “dwelling unit” by an “average” family size so small as to bear no discernible relation to reality), and by simply ignoring the existence of “doubled-up” families and boarders (of whom there are always a significant number in low-income areas) as well as of people living in rooming houses or hotels.<sup>cclxxxiv</sup>

Here, the abstraction of a person through the logic of an “average” family demonstrates the ways that the data could be manipulated for the sake of visionary building projects. Such abstracting transformations erased the position of many within the logical systems underpinning the reintegration and rehousing efforts ostensibly offered by the broader program of Title I. In other words, core informational variables—such as “dwelling unit” or “average”—of the mathematics were designed and implemented in a series of strategic ways, strategies advantageous to some and disadvantageous to others.

Rammellzee himself lived in the long aftereffects of mid-century renewal programs.<sup>cclxxxv</sup> With an understanding of the data, archival, and informatic problems underlying the logic which operated the system of housing construction, we might re-read his statement like “Name is a necessity to a housing construction,” or the assertion of a name where “No government owns land in this mathematical formation.” These statements critically re-frame the context of housing construction projects which depended on the control (and often manipulation) of the appearance and disappearance of names and places in the data of the public archive. These data strategies, in turn, rendered erasures within the broader system of spatial allocation:

Orton’s unit could not repair these deficiencies. With the buildings in which these uncounted tenants had lived demolished and the tenants moved away, there was no longer any way of obtaining a record of their existence. Yet the unit did come up with a rough compilation: during the seven years since the end of World War II, there had been evicted from their homes in New York City for public works—mainly Robert Moses’ public works—some 170,000 persons.<sup>cclxxxvi</sup>

Here we see the ways that the network of archival records could be manipulated to not only evict residents from physical spaces, but moreover exclude them from informational spaces.

The greater effect of the erasure of the numerical position of individuals, and the larger groupings of these individuals, within the social management afforded by these statistics led to a disappearance of a recognizable and legible mathematical position within the metropolitan information processing machinery—or, the appearance of a mathematical non-position—especially in regards to housing, and so, positionings and re-positionings upon the grid of New York. Elsewhere, the information structures underlying the engine of public housing were strategically designed, so that

the total number of public housing units scheduled for construction during the next year or two was a mere fraction of the number of tenants Moses was telling the world that he was going to move into those units. Analyzing Moses' soothing statistics, Orton was able to see—all too well—how the Coordinator had arrived at them “With every project—Title I or some expressway or whatever—he would say ‘Don't worry about the people living there. If they don't want to go anywhere else, we've always got room for them in public housing.’ But what he was doing was using the same public housing vacancies for many projects. The same vacancies that were alleged to be available for one project had already been allocated for a previous project—or perhaps ten previous projects.”<sup>cclxxvii</sup>

Here, the hidden malleability of the information structures enabled the planners to treat the city, grid and resident, as, by proxy, increasingly malleable objects of aestheticized abstraction. For his part, Moses himself (in)famously said:

You can draw any kind of picture you like on a clean slate and indulge your every whim in the wilderness in laying out a New Delhi, Canberra or Brasilia, but when you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax.<sup>cclxxviii</sup>

By the time of Style-Writing's growth in the 1970s, the results of this mathematical cleaving machine were especially pronounced in the South Bronx, cut off from the rest of the city by the Cross Bronx Expressway. The presences and absences of the mathematical picture, as drawn by the meat ax, proved to be infamously stark. Nonwhites were being evicted at over 300% of the rate that they

would have been evicted had the title I programs distributed the displacement program equally among racial groups. As Caro points out,

Although the 1950 census had found that only 12% of the city's population was nonwhite, at least 37 percent of the evictees (Moses' own figures) and probably far more were nonwhite.<sup>cclxxxix</sup>

## NIGHTMARES IN A PERFECT ORDERED CIVILIZED METROPOLIS: ESCAPING ADMINISTRATIVE ABSTRACTIONS AND IMAGINING QUANTUM PERSONHOOD

“We simply repeat that cities are created by and for traffic. A city without traffic is a ghost town” said Robert Moses, as quoted by Annie Cohen-Solal in her book on the New York socialite and art dealer, Leo Bersani, *Leo and his Circle*. Cohen-Solal notes that “The voice that then seemed progressive sounds horrifying today.”<sup>cclxxx</sup> The goal of this study is not to once more lean a scholarly gavel on the scales of history, where we might again weigh one administrator against another. Rather I hope to inquire about the broader cultures of urban management, data, technology, design and many other interdisciplinarily conceived fields which create the unique aesthetic and political conditions of the apparatuses of the city, as finally used by Style-Writers. Urban space, re-designed with mid-century dreams of scale, bore multitudes.

1811 shows us the roots of the New York City block, which deployed “a uniform rectilinear grid for organizing all future development on the island” according to the historian David Henkin’s *City Reading*.<sup>cclxxxi</sup> Whether this choice recast New York in egalitarian and democratic terms, or simply sanitized space as an industrial market commodity, Henkin notes that the “neutral treatment of land” lies at the core of such debates among critics of urban history.<sup>cclxxxii</sup> The grid system “homogenized” land such that “its unique features liquidated into a uniform currency. Points on a map become interchangeable units of space distinct from one another only in terms of size and

relative location” (36). It was via the ether of this dream—the almost nameless fluidity of a self-identically divided space, now operationalized in the early mappings of New York—that the foundational vectors and axiomatic geometries of human experience were established for the futures of the city.

It was also by this alchemical malleability of the terms of space that in the next century, the Moses administration spread “playgrounds over the congested areas of the city...as a sower might sow magic seed bidden to flower in the slums” (said the Times, as quoted by Caro); this magic resulted in an annually updated abstract map. There the city and its playgrounds could be transformed into the symmetrically numbered series, “playground 204...playground 240” along with an aestheticized data vision (as are all visions of data) of outline maps of the city, “blank except for dots representing playgrounds”:

[T]o dramatize the size of the achievement, Moses gave each playground a number, and the press counted along with him: playground number 189 opens, the headlines said, playground number 194 dedicated . . . playground 204 . . . playground 240 . . . And he had his mapmakers prepare pairs of outline maps of the city, blank except for dots representing playgrounds. The map on the left would be labeled simply "1933," the year before he had become Park Commissioner, the one on the right simply "1937" (or "1938" or "1939"). And the contrast between the two maps was certainly spectacular, the one on the left almost empty, the one on the right covered thickly with dots. And public and press drew from the maps the conclusion that Moses wanted drawn from them: that his playground-building program was an unqualified improvement, an absolutely unalloyed benefit, to all the people of New York City.

A close inspection of the maps would have revealed some rather puzzling characteristics about the pattern formed by the dots.

Their distribution, for example, was not at all even. The areas of the maps on which the dots were clustered most thickly corresponded in the main to those areas inhabited by families that were well-to-do or at least "comfortable." The areas of the maps on which the dots were sprinkled most thinly corresponded in part to undeveloped outlying areas of the city that did not really need playgrounds, but they corresponded also to some of the city's most congested areas, to the tenement neighborhoods and slums inhabited by families that were poor—to areas that needed playgrounds desperately. Most of Robert Moses' neighborhood playgrounds had, in other words, been built in the neighborhoods that needed playgrounds least. Few of the playgrounds had been built in the neighborhoods that needed playgrounds most.

The areas of the maps on which the dots were sprinkled most thinly of all corresponded to those areas of the city inhabited by its 400,000 Negroes.

Robert Moses built 255 playgrounds in New York City during the 1930's. He built one playground in Harlem.<sup>celxxxiii</sup>

The problems of hierarchized and unequally distributed recreational space for the youth became heightened in these racially exclusive development practices. The subway trains offered the awareness that “there were large parks in other sections of the city which the children could reach,”

traversing the gaps in integrations between transportation networks which restricted access to metropolitan livelihoods. In this period of the early 20th century, as it did in the later century of the Style-Writers, the absence of “parks for them to play in” often led to explorations in the streets and “burnt-out” housing.

The problems of access-reducing designs occurred not just in the continued practices of de-facto generalized segregation (often, via incarceration), but also in the way that space and scale were treated as conceptualizable figures. The iterative advantage of abstract scale had its limits: according to some historians, many spaces could in fact be too small to be deemed usable by the administration. This issue was shown by the fate of the vest-pocket park program:

Moses had begun his park commissionership by enthusiastically gobbling up vacant city-owned lots in the slums with the intention of turning them into tiny parks. But this enthusiasm soon waned.

The effort involved in creating such "vest-pocket" parks was immense. The land acquisition alone involved the approval of countless agencies and officials and, therefore, endless red tape. Designing something that would make a tiny lot attractive or useful was difficult. Because you couldn't afford to keep a full-time supervisor on duty in every vest-pocket park, those small parks located in slums quickly became filled with rubbish and winos.

The rewards involved in creating vest-pocket parks were, moreover, not at all commensurate with the effort required. If the reward was a sense of achievement, what—to the creator of Jones Beach—was the achievement in creating a tiny bit of green space or a few benches or a seesaw or two? Moses had always thought on the grand scale—that was his genius: the ability to grasp the needs of a whole city or state and devise a means of satisfying them—and this quality of mind made it difficult for him to take much interest in something small. There was something inherently good in size itself, he seemed to feel. If the reward was public applause, the size of the reward for building a vest-pocket park was small indeed; editorial writers didn't get nearly as excited about a tiny park as they did about a Randall's Island or Orchard Beach; it was the great projects that awed them: size seemed to signify significance to them, too. Whatever the reasons, "RM," an aide would say, "just wasn't interested in anything small. He used to say, 'That's a little job. Give it to so-and-so.' And that attitude filtered down, so that the fellows weren't interested in small things either." Coupled with his feelings about the people for whom the effort would have to be made—the lower classes who didn't "respect" or "appreciate" what was done for them, in particular the Negroes who were "dirty" and wouldn't keep his beautiful creations clean—his lack of interest in "anything small" made him uninterested in small parks in slums. <sup>261xxxiv</sup>

These park design processes themselves, according to Caro, were enforceable abstractions. These abstractions could be understood as algorithmically structured in the “ready to go” plans conceived of as sequential layers expediting the process of decision making, such as the “standard

design” for indoor playhouses, that only one variable step within the “standard Park Department playground design”:

There was to be no Barbizon brick and Ohio sandstone in New York City parks; concrete—plain, unadorned concrete—and brick—plain, red brick, the cheapest made —were what the WPA had in mind; Moses was able to relieve the blankness of the concrete Orchard Beach bathhouse only by finding a mysterious source of terra cotta tiles, which, while cheap, at least added some necessary color, a chaste blue, to the unrelieved grayness. While Moses was willing to fight—endlessly and ingeniously—to make his big projects as perfect as possible, it was obviously unfeasible to battle over the details of every playground when one was building hundreds, especially since arguing about every design would have cost him his great advantage over other city departments with the WPA: the fact that when new funds became available, his plans were "ready to go."

A standard Park Department playground design was evolved and architects were given little leeway to deviate from it. If there was to be an indoor playhouse in the playground, there was a standard design for that, too, and if the architect wanted to make variations in it they had better be small ones.<sup>cclxxxv</sup>

Caro goes on to point out that the apparently unusably small spaces which did not fit the formally declared features of the standard scale state-issue playground are spaces which could surely have been served by localized engagements. By 1961 such small-scale spaces left aside from the politics of state recognition would be hailed by Jane Jacobs:

Successful street neighborhoods, in short, are not discrete units. They are physical, social and economic continuities--small scale to be sure, but small scale in the sense that the lengths of fibers making up a rope are small.<sup>cclxxxvi 1</sup>

As we will see later, Style-Writers exhibited a surprisingly similar conception of space, now as an aesthetic principle strategically applicable to the specific assemblage of 20th century built environments. The processes and philosophies driving the configuration of those built environments resulted from vast inter-borough recreational, economic and highway transportation systems. These interconnected systems were conceptual patterns arising from an even vaster system of metropolitan management and engineering—patterns seen as principles to be shared among the international community of urban thinkers and planners.

In Elizabeth Barlow Roger’s review piece “Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York” in the March 2008 (67:1) “Exhibitions” section of the *Journal of the*

*Society of Architectural Historians*, “parks, housing, bridges, roads” and other structures figure as “elements of transformation” driven by these principled models, and these transformations often appeared alongside the neglect of other core components such as the “mass transit system, world-class museums, and soaring commercial skyscrapers.”<sup>cclxxxvii</sup> The discourses of the “model city” offered a verdant inventory of metaphors for configuring the planners’ practices. On the one hand we find the more categorical concepts as deployed by William Love’s Niagara experiment of the 1890s, or the nation-wide Model Cities program of the late 1960s and early 1970s. On the other hand, we find tangibly imagistic visions of a draughtsman, such as the miniature *Panorama of the City of New York* made for the 1964-65 World’s Fair, and on the other.

At the Queens Museum of Art, we find a 1964-65 World’s Fair “model, measuring some 10,000 square feet and depicting all of the city’s 895,000 structures”<sup>cclxxxviii</sup> where one can, according to Barlow, “marvel at the complex whole of a dynamic metropolis and recognize” the abstraction of an idealized city, configured into a grid now seen from, and remade by, the administration looking down on it from above:

For all the far-reaching grandeur of Moses’s ambitions and achievements as a master builder, he did not pursue a comprehensive planner’s vision but was rather a pragmatic enabler of public works. He was simply and powerfully what he boasted to be: a man who got things done. Without his focus and uncanny ability to follow the money and his preparedness with an arsenal of well-developed plans, the transformation of New York, for better and for worse, into the modern city we know today would not have occurred. Yet, all the elements of that transformation—parks, housing, bridges, roads—for all their impressive scope, scale, and reach, are only pieces within a richly complex city whose glory also derives in no small measure from things that Robert Moses’s vision did not encompass or that he willfully ignored, such as its mass transit system, world-class museums, and soaring commercial skyscrapers. Comprehensive planning is, in any case, a quixotic ideal, for the best-laid plans are always subject to global economic forces, political change, and unpredictable shifts in societal values.

Still, the intentions of every age are inscribed on the urban palimpsest. One of the best places to contemplate the Moses legacy is from the ramp overlooking the newly refurbished and beautifully relit *Panorama of the City of New York* housed at the Queens Museum of Art. Made by Moses for the 1964–65 World’s Fair, the model, measuring some 10,000 square feet and depicting all of the city’s 895,000 structures, is a permanent attraction of the museum. Here you can marvel at the complex whole of a dynamic metropolis and recognize all the places where Moses left his stamp.<sup>cclxxxix</sup>

In Barlow's sense, the "urban palimpsest" offers us an archive to read the "intentions" of its "age"—but what do we read in those inscriptions? Whose fluencies, which stakeholders, and what kind of knowledge do we find in the long-lasting imprints where the planner left their "stamp"?

These systems of scale themselves expressed and executed conceptual frameworks, frameworks seen as among the paradigmatic methodologies by both domestic and foreign urban planners of the time. Robert Caro writes of the ways that international planners saw the principles of a "democratic city" in the "system of express highways and parkways," while regional planners commissioned Moses to review:

plans for arterial highways for the Pittsburgh Regional planning Association. He dispatched a team of aides to spend two months in Pittsburgh, reviewed their findings himself, and on the basis of their reports, submitted a plan laying out a comprehensive arterial highway program for the city. He had to refuse the others, but his mark was left on them, too, for their engineers came to New York and spent weeks—in some cases, months—watching Moses' men in action and, when they returned to their own cities, applied the principles Moses had taught them in building their own parks and roads.

Nor was the cheering limited to America. Teams of park experts came to New York from countries all over Europe, even from Scandinavia, traditional leader in park design, and went home vastly impressed. As for roads, a survey of public works in America made for the British government by a team of British urban planners said:

The most important development in American city planning has in recent years been the building of express highways on a large scale. New York City has led the way in the development of an outstanding system of express highways and parkways. These are so good that it would seem almost essential that England should study them...It is probably the outstanding example of democratic city planning in the world.<sup>ccxc</sup>

It is within this seemingly patriotic sense of urban conceptualization that we should understand just how overwhelmingly lauded the mind of Moses was during the peak of his career,

So fast did the awards flow in, in fact, that he found that if he traveled to each out-of-town event at which he was to receive one he would have little time for work; he therefore made a practice of not attending, and of reading his acceptance speech over the telephone on his desk, which was hooked up at the dais at the event to an amplifying device that enabled the audience to hear it.<sup>ccxc</sup>

In those aforementioned regional and international networks of media and urban policy authorities, as well as in this "amplifying" of information from the perennially re-vetted administrator to the degree-granting audience, we see a chain of informatic technologies together expressing the cultural value placed on recognition of the concepts of an administrative "genius," to borrow Caro's word.

From the time of mid-century building transformations to the time of the Style-Writers, many neighborhoods, such as the Bronx, suffered the consequences of under-performing governmental services alongside entrenched racial prejudices. The great building visions of the mid-century slowed as the 1950s turned to the 1960s, which saw the rise of competing urban theorists, like Jane Jacobs. From the mid-1950s, to the time when Style-Writing coalesced in the mid-1970s, areas like the Bronx and Harlem underwent chronic decay in the face of impoverishment, conditions of impoverishment that resulted from the longer histories of prejudice and hegemony in the Americas.<sup>ccxcii</sup>

In 1981, the federal government (under the Reagan administration) defunded public assistance programs, leading to cost-saving on the part of the operating agencies, yet increasing risk for its most vulnerable citizens, such as those living in the South Bronx. In 1983, the year of the debut of both the landmark Style-Writing films *Style-Wars* and *Wild Style's* (just a few years after the release of 1981's *Escape from New York* and *Fort Apache: The Bronx*) the Italian filmmaker, Enzo G. Castellari's, cult-favorite film *Escape from the Bronx* appeared alongside *The New Barbarians*, just after his 1982 futuristic exploitation film "1990: The Bronx Warriors." Here Castellari offers a near-future portrait of a master planner again (now in the year 2000) activating the information contained in his model. While Castellari's films are limited by many of the issues of the 1980s "exploitation" film industry of the time, we might yet note one of the subtleties the film offers, a subtlety which remains undramatized by the World's Fair Model at the Queens Museum.

In Castellari's vision of the master planners presiding over the model city, two directions of social archives, and the information technologies which connect and constitute those archives, are cleverly juxtaposed in the transition of scenes. Castellari brings our attention to consider the networks of communication which catalyze networks of power and exclusion, as he juxtaposes a

scene showing the praiseworthy “Model City” with a sudden cut to another scene, now showing the residents of the Bronx displaced by metropolitan security forces.

In one direction, we see the administration’s information about these directives of progress being transmitted over the television, as received by an audience composed of the apparent image of success, per the phrase of the master planner’s proxy, a red-handkerchiefed man presenting the promise of “a perfect ordered civilized metropolis.” In another direction, we see the directives as radioed to the security forces on the ground of the “uncivilized” theatre of Bronx, ravaged and burned in the pathway of that civilizing. Framed by the steel towers, the genius Mr. Clark stands in the orbit of news crews, police, and auxillary officers who speak of “a perfect ordered civilized metropolis” built in the ashes of the demolished and burnt-out Bronx, where the futuristic DAS (“Disinfestation Annihilation Forces”) herd the residents into police custody:

ccxciii

ccxciv

These imaginative narratives, set in the year 2000, dramatized the future of a present all too real.

## HOPE VI: SOCIAL NETWORKS AND VECTORS OF DECAY

The all-time great Style-Writer, Donald “Dondi” White, would pass away from AIDS in 1998. In 1988, the doctor and scholar of epidemiology Rodrick Wallace would write from the Albert Einstein College medical center in the Bronx, emphasizing the idea of a “nonlinear ecosystem coupling between AIDS, contagious urban decay, and population shift.”<sup>ccxcv</sup> Here he investigates the intersection of “community ecology,” “quantitative approaches to geography,” and the continuing policies of “planned shrinkage” municipal service cuts which triggered the ‘South Bronx’ burnout” and the broader recursive coordinations of contagion: aligning the “vector” of HIV with that of “a new outbreak of contagious urban decay” repeating the “shredding of the social networks” in the Borough.<sup>ccxcvi</sup> Wallace writes:

It is found that the "South Bronx" process of fulminating, contagious urban decay which devastated the region in the 1970s, and its associated forced population migrations, spread intravenous drug abuse, the principal HIV vector in the Bronx, from a geographically contained center in the South-Central Bronx to a virtually borough-wide phenomenon. This has significantly complicated attempts to contain HIV infection, both by shredding the social networks which are the natural vehicles for education, and by vastly enlarging the area requiring intensive targeting. Since the "planned shrinkage" municipal service cuts which triggered the "South Bronx" burnout persist, and since levels of housing overcrowding now approach those of the early 1970s in the Bronx, it is expected that a new outbreak of contagious urban decay will occur, likely again dispersing population and seriously compromising any in-place HIV control strategies. If overt AIDS itself becomes a contributor to urban deterioration in overcrowded neighborhoods susceptible to "South Bronx" process, we could then see a nonlinear ecosystem coupling between AIDS, contagious urban decay, and population shift. Elementary mathematical models are provided.<sup>ccxcvii</sup>

Echoing Castellari’s use of the neighborhood as both a symbol and space, the Bronx’ real history of urban development had now, recursively, been abstracted into a “nightmare”-like metaphor in the public fluency of a legible “symbol” of the “The Bronx” explained Wallace:

The Bronx is a symbol of a systematic catastrophe in American cities which, by the early 1980s, had degenerated from the "urban crisis" of the 1960s to an accelerating complex of massive low income housing loss, resulting "homelessness," disruption of essential community networks, rising drug abuse and violence, and rapid deterioration of general public health. Into this interacting maelstrom of community destruction and poverty has come the great plague of the second half of this century, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, AIDS, the overt sequelae of infection with human immunodeficiency virus, HIV, a contagious retrovirus with a long, variable, and asymptomatic infectious period which makes public health control a nightmare.<sup>ccxcviii</sup>

The legacies of these space-based exclusions and hierarchies continued well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. See for instance, Fullilove and Wallace's essay "Serial Forced Displacement":

HOPE VI was enacted by the federal government in 1992. Directed at "distressed" housing communities, the program offered money to cities to redo existing public housing as mixed-income housing. Although it was advertised as solving a problem of hyperconcentration of the poor, many HOPE VI projects simply moved the poor to new areas of concentrated poverty. Sometimes, those areas were outside city limits, in nearby suburbs.<sup>cccix</sup>

Another 21<sup>st</sup> century essay agrees, in the 2019 volume *Interrogating the Neoliberal Lifecycle: The Limits of Success*: Patrick Alexander's "Boys from the Bronx Men from Manhattan: Aspiration and Imagining a (Neoliberal) Future After High School in New York City." Citing research in 2014-2015, Alexander suggests that the Bronx still was understood by some in the terms created by programmatic abandonment: as a place to be escaped, and this understanding informed the longer history of metropolitan area's self-reflexive senses of identity. The sense of division is illuminating: to take a trip from Bronx High School

to the 92nd Street YMCA, where some students went to see plays as part of their Advanced Placement (AP) English classes, would be considered being 'downtown' even though this was several miles from the central areas of Manhattan. While the Empire State Building was just visible from Bronx High on a clear day, students saw 'the city' as a place remote both spatially but also, and more importantly, in terms of imagined future lifestyles. Many of the young people that I spoke with during the ethnography described ideal futures where they were successful in 'The City', having already made the remove from The Bronx to college. It was interesting to note, however, that many also imagined a future return to the neighbourhood in order to give back. Several young men described their dream future job as 'philanthropist'<sup>ccc</sup>

"Escape from The Bronx," then, was an essential part of "making it."<sup>ccci</sup>

In which ways did the "dreams" of "missile content" of these Style-Writers confront the warped informatics of the metropolis' administrative history, and so the shapes within which the Writers lived? In other words, is there a way to consider the operative logic deployed in the poetry of Rammellzee's "quantum mechanics" in relation to that hierarchizing, operative logic of the city's spatial conditions, as inherited by the Style-Writers' transformational practices? While stopping short of a scientific equivalence, in his metaphoric use of the term "Quantum Personhood," Patrick

Alexander echoes Rammellzee's interest in futurist logic, and has suggested a useful figure for the interconnections of space, history and futurity in the identity of Bronx students. Alexander's idea of "Quantum Personhood" suggests a conceptual framework of intertwined futurities and histories, akin to the inter-temporal sensibilities of Rammellzee:

Quantum personhood seeks to capture the complexity of how personhood is constructed in dynamic ways in the everyday lives of young people at school, alongside an enduring sense of stable personhood as traditionally perceived in Western society. As with quantum physics, the intention here is to complicate existing ideas about personhood by focusing on complexity, uncertainty and paradox, particularly in the temporal figuring of personhood. Quantum personhood accounts for the ways in which the many potential versions of persons impact on how they construct a coherent sense of self both in the present, and in representations of the person projected backwards into the past and forward into the future.<sup>ccii</sup>

Echoing Mare's sense of a trans-historical and trans-continental relationship in aesthetics, Barlow's sense of a palimpsest of urban intentionalities, as well Brighenti's idea of the wall's efflorescence of longitudinal conversations, Alexander draws on the idea of urban superposition, where "complex links between temporal and spatial location of self in the past and their reverberations into the future. In the language of quantum mechanics, there is a *superposition* of multiple past, present and future selves."<sup>cciii</sup> In Alexander's study, we encounter several young people in the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, living in a present-day future arising from the mid-century's devastation of the neighborhood.

Citing research with one student at "Bronx High", "Charles," the essay points out that the "extent to which one spatially located future can impact on another is made very clear in Charles' reckoning of how he may be prone to the dangers of local street politics no matter how far away his ambitions for a different future take him":

[Charles:] Technically I'm gonna be here [the neighbourhood] for another four years -it's like, I'm away for a certain period of time, but then there's breaks so people come back, and you know when people come back and they want to go to a party and anything can still happen at that point. You can meet up with someone you had problems with years ago. I seen somebody who had been away for six years...one had been in Australia...and one had been in Detroit...they bumped into each other, and one didn't go back home.

The extent to which one spatially located future can impact on another is made very clear in Charles' reckoning of how he may be prone to the dangers of local street politics no matter how far away his ambitions for a different future take him. This has a strong resonance with Archer et.al's (2001) articulation of competing masculine values—in this case between violence and physical toughness on one hand, and the 'calm' qualities required to succeed in education. Further, his comments suggest that these values are spatially situated. As Charles suggests, 'I am always gonna remember where I came from', and with this statement he recognises the complex links between temporal and spatial locations of self in the past and their reverberations into the future. In the language of quantum mechanics, there is a *superposition* of multiple past, present and future selves in this narrative, and the net result is a quantum reckoning of personhood that is the sum of all of these parts, and also something altogether new and valid in its own right by virtue of this process of coming together.

Here too we might recognize, as part of the layers of palimpsests, walled conversations, or Alexander's quantum mechanics, the recursive continuities reverberating upward and downward from the national political machine's abandonment policies of "benign neglect," to the "meat ax" of local politicians administering that neglect, and the perpetuation of "street politics" which arise in the wake of that administration's widespread dis-enfranchisement of the Bronx. By course of many projects deemed successful under accepted metrics of the time, relationships between city and national governance from the mid-century had also, done much to shape the late 20<sup>th</sup>, and early 21<sup>st</sup>, century conditions of urban space. Often, the practices of urban renewal utterly restructured the space of the city, inflicting "creative destruction" at a scale often still outsizing the hard-won reparative efforts of community organizers like Jane Jacobs that came in the later portion of the 20th century.

This extreme scale of change during the mid-century of master planning functioned in part by virtue of the enabling forces of national-level legislatures. A Supreme Court decision in 1954 had granted incredible leeway to the government's execution of eminent domain. As legal scholar Amy Lavine writes:

*Berman v. Parker's* extraordinary form of legislative deference allowed urban renewal projects to go forward across the country with an astonishing lack of attention to the welfare of the people that the program was supposed to benefit.<sup>ccciv</sup>

Not only did this decision's heavy-handed, top-down manipulation of space enable extreme state willfulness in reconceiving infrastructure, but the interventions were often of a uniquely aesthetic nature. Lavine points out that

While it paved the way for the "sacking of [our] cities[,] it also established important precedent for a wide range of now commonplace police power regulations, including sign and billboard laws,' scenic landscape protections, landmark and historical preservation laws, and aesthetic zoning of all sorts." Its direction that "when the legislature has spoken, the public interest has been declared in terms well-nigh conclusive" has been repeated in dozens of cases and included in many constitutional law textbooks.<sup>cccv</sup>

Urban renewal practices thus, at least in part, resulted from a legal authorization (alongside the necessary funding) for the governing offices to function in a highly subjective order. The nearly expressivist function of this authorization in its direction, "when the legislature has spoken, the public interest has been declared", was perhaps only paralleled by the assertive freedom of agency exhibited by the Style-Writers themselves. Moreover, we again see the broader context which enabled the abstract intentionality of the smaller local city leaders, like Robert Moses, whose visionary policies defined the presence and absence of parks and so amenities such as handball courts, defunding the subway in favor of broadly unaffordable automobile infrastructure, and destroying rare, foundational ecological systems.<sup>cccv</sup>

Perhaps the administration's sense of abstraction is most clearly expressed in their raw manipulation of not only the city streets or infrastructure in the limited senses of these words, but at the level of how space could be conceived. As Caro points out that in pursuit of its visionary city schema, the Moses administration would move whole buildings and created whole islands and rivers.<sup>cccvi</sup> These choices, of course only affirmed the cutting edge of a longer history of similar practices. See for instance the creation of one U Thant Island, which first only rose from the surface of the water to serve as, not public space, but something behind that shared experience: the infrastructure of an invented auxiliary island, one often used to service the construction of a transportation tunnel and far later becoming a very small wildlife refuge.<sup>cccviii</sup> Here the intention and

imagination of the planners came to logically precede the capacities which space can offer. So well enabled was the development machinery of the political apparatus that space no longer figured as a structure upon which a builder manifests their intention, but the dimensional possibilities and locations of space appear as a result of the administration's subjective intention.

In other words, the logic of underwriting materializations and dematerializations of space is a logic that depends on the more fundamental claim that the "master builders," along with their attendant networks of official operations which activate at the appearance of right signatures, together dictate when and where space does, or does not, exist. In these methods and discourse, they thus gain narrative power over space as a conceptual unit in the metropolitan apparatus. We may hear a counterpointed, somewhat haunted, echo of Mare's aesthetic proposition that "Writers draw in space."

Consider the disappearance of Charlotte Street, as both a place and an idea, in a time when fundamental structures providing public connection for those living in the South Bronx had undergone destruction. Not only did the street physically disappear under mounds of concrete pieces as waves of garbage crept back across the apparent limits of sidewalks, and into that abstracted tar-sanctuary of the automobile, but the informational possibilities and access of that street disappeared as the city trimmed the vectors of the neighborhood. Not only had the government abandoned physical programs of public resource distribution (as in the case of the defunded subway lines), but in some situations, the New York municipality abandoned the idea of including the public spaces in their data's archival structures. In one Bronx neighborhood, claims the New York Times, one "Charlotte street" underwent such neglect that "Part of the street was taken off the city map in 1974 and did not reappear until a decade later":

Mr. Carter's visit did not revive the area by itself, but people in the South Bronx say it created a much-needed spark and drew the world's attention to a borough that was not only burning, as Howard Cosell famously informed viewers during a World Series game that October, but seemed to be dying, too.

“What I recall more than anything else was the uncertainty,” said José E. Serrano, the Bronx congressman whose district includes Charlotte Street and who was a state assemblyman in 1977. “Of not knowing when the building was going to burn, when the landlord was going to cut back services, when you find yourself in a building that the landlord totally walks away from. The housing stock was going to waste and abandon.”

Charlotte Street had been a working-class Jewish enclave in the years before World War II. By the 1970s, it was the victim of arson fires, rampant crime, a lack of city services and abandonment and neglect by landlords. It had almost become invisible: Part of the street was taken off the city map in 1974 and did not reappear until a decade later, according to the Bronx borough president’s office.<sup>cccix</sup>

Hiring arsonists became a tactic of some fleeing landlords, representing one of many waves of flight and abandonment in the neighborhood, from the constricting force of the Cross-Bronx Expressway to the federal government’s austerity programs which contracted urban funding across the nation. Progress did not come quickly; still in 1980, when Ronald Reagan paid a visit to Charlotte Street after addressing the National Urban League Conference, declaring that he had not “seen anything that looked like this since London after the Blitz.”<sup>cccx</sup>

It is within the dystopic scene of the South Bronx that Mare’s claims for the Style-Writers’ unique relationship to space must be understood. During a workshop reflecting on further integrations between Style-writing and modernisms such as futurism, cubism, and constructivism, Mare looks to the work of Rammellzee:

Another important artist from the old school who looked at modern painting that you could say he’s also inspired by the Futurists and the Cubo-Futurists and the Russian constructivists, is Rammellzee. Rammellzee felt like the one thing the graffiti writer had to defend himself was his letters, his hand styles. And if you think about handstyle—we were doing the hand style exercise today—it’s aggressive, you know. It’s always [pushing his hand forward], offense. It’s always, you know, going out into space.

Rammellzee felt like we need to put missiles, and weaponize our letters and our words to protect ourselves. And this is where it gets interesting, because he used language as a weapon back on the oppressor, as he would say. But also, he did something really important. He gave it all a name and he called it Ikonoklast Panzerism and Gothic Futurism. Panzerism and Gothic futurism.<sup>cccxi</sup>

## **IT WAS LIKE THE MOON NOW; GOING OUT INTO SPACE**

The quality of “going out into space” which he points to in Style-Writing should be understood from multiple angles. First, we may understand the outward engagement of a Writer intervening in the city and subway infrastructure. In turn, the letter’s geometric flows render vectors

of signature shapings and spacings dynamic enough to stand out against the industrial metallic shell of a subway car, and so “impose” themselves on the reader’s visual field.

Moreover, in reflecting on Rammellzee’s drive to “weaponize our letters and our words to protect ourselves” Mare points to the process occurring across a liminal moment of reading: when we no longer simply see the mass of pigments, but read the letter’s components and representative images. In this case, the letter’s imposing movement is itself narrated in the images of “missiles” ready to launch, painted into the structure of the letter, itself augmented with the details of a tank. In that “going out into space,” Mare’s analysis of Style-Writing’s engagement with Modernism extends the impact of critics more firmly focused on early 20th century European modernism; such scholarship looks to an aesthetics which seems to dawn upon the sensorial field of its audience. In Mare’s words, the artwork is “going out into space” from itself. Echoes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s tragedies appeared in the minds of New Yorkers. Said one observer of a Manhattan project, located to the west of Spanish Harlem, across from central park,

Manhattantown looked like a cross section of bombed-out Berlin right after World War II. Some of the tenements were still standing [...] surrounding them were acres strewn with brick and mortar and rubble where wreckers and bulldozers had been at work.”<sup>cccxii</sup>

By the late 1970’s, reporters would describe the South Bronx as so desolate as to be otherworldly: “It was like the moon now. Nothing but minerals. Buildings had collapsed. Their wood had been consumed and their stones had crashed down. Some walls still stood, but there was nothing inside.”<sup>cccxiii</sup> The quotation was borrowed from Kurt Vonnegut’s description of Dresden after the bombings of World War II. Such images became increasingly common in the long wake of abandonment, demolition and relocation processes.

Recall the way that, when opening his presentation “Art for the Next Century” to the Russian audience of b-boys and b-girls, Mare echoes the aforementioned dystopic sentiments while noting Style-Writing and hip hop’s simultaneous efflorescence:

This may look like a warzone, but it's the South Bronx, this is where hip-hop was born and out of nothing we invented something. Something we didn't even know had the kind of impact it is having today, and I show you this because we're gonna come back to this, to the story of Russia during the war.<sup>cccxiv</sup>

Mare remembers: "...And in the buildings—the ruins of buildings, the shells of buildings—people still lived."<sup>cccxv</sup> Let us return to Mare's point about "Russia in the war."

The Agit-Prop artists he mentions there influenced many artists in New York in different ways.<sup>cccxvi</sup> As a point of distinction—not hierarchization—in comparison to subway Style-Writing, we might consider the work of John Fekner in his 1980 series, the *Charlotte Street Stencils* which read *Broken Promises, Falsas Promesas, Decay, Broken Treaties, Last Hope* and *Save Our School*:

The *Charlotte Street Stencils* were painted during the last week of July and the first week of August 1980. John Fekner stencils *Broken Promises, Falsas Promesas, Decay, Broken Treaties, Last Hope* and *Save Our School* on the walls and buildings of Charlotte Street in the South Bronx. The message of Fekner's stencils focus on pointing out the deteriorating conditions and issues that have plagued the community since the 1960s. Fekner's purpose is to call attention to inadequate housing, poor services and the deplorable social problems afflicting the neighborhood residents for the past two decades.

Fekner's agitprop stencils reflect the issues and opinions of the diverse grassroots coalitions participating in the People's Convention (August 8-10th), an alternative gathering to the Democratic Convention being held at Madison Square Garden in New York City (August 11-14th). Dissatisfied with both the Democratic and Republican business policies and urban renewal development, the organizers and activists of the People's Convention sought to build a dialogue of unity by addressing the unemployment of the local community, as well as broader social issues of freedom and equality, alternative energy/anti-nuclear, lesbian/gay rights and farm labor.<sup>cccxvii</sup>

Despite the deteriorated conditions, Fekner's website points out that:

Not all of the buildings were abandoned on Charlotte Street. Fekner and Leicht paint *Last Hope* on the roofline of 1500 Boston Road where families were living. Years later, through the combined efforts of Alice Myers, Helen Steiner and Mary Jones, the building was finally purchased by the residents, renovated and renamed New Hope Plaza in 1983.

ccc xviii

Stencils provide a very different approach than the use of the free-handed stylus devices more traditionally used by Style-Writers. In the case of stencils, the mathematics of pigmentation have a reduced relationship to chaos,<sup>cccix</sup> allowing for lowered risks in the management of precision. The use of a stencil generally provides a far easier mode of use than stylus-based vector constructions, especially in the case of aerosolized pigments: random droplets are controlled by the

creation of a liminal threshold of the letter's inscription through a secondary implement beyond the pigment itself. However, in the case of both Fekner's letter, and in the case of a Style-Writer's letter, the vectors of pigment application could be understood as functions of the sense of time unique to New York as a metropolis. Both forms of writing required styles iterable in the moments hidden, from the capture of colonialism in the long sense, and the public life of carceral time and prejudicial policing in some of the more immediate senses. The conditions of prejudice that drove these temporalities of public space differed greatly for various artists, and so the questions of spaces all the more became questions of speeds.

In the next chapter, as we approach the conclusion of the dissertation, we will again see how Mare elaborates on the aesthetics of b-boy dance shared by the aesthetics of his b-boy abstracts. We might also consider the ways that his choice in titles for such styles reflects an interrogation of mathematical choices in urban space, specifically a questioning of ready-to-go, model algorithms in urban space:

Breaking/Algorhythms is a mixed media exhibition that is both a testimony and an inquisition into space where art, entertainment, and technology converge. Mare's earlier work in drawing, painting, and sculpture will be featured, marking watershed moments of his 32-year exploration and innovation within this space. In his perpetual pursuit of the cutting edge, Mare's centerpiece is the result of a groundbreaking collaboration with contemporary luminaries in the fields of animation, dance and motion capture.

In his dynamic installation, Mare explores the intersection of new tech and performance through the direction and capturing of Bboy Ynot of the legendary Rock Steady Crew via the Rokoko Smartsuit, the first independent motion capture body interface of its kind. Tobias Gremmler, data visualization programmer and animator transforms the information into an emotive and captivating visual display.<sup>ccccx</sup>

## CH. 6 – CASE II COMPUTER STYLE: WE DON'T LEAVE TIME, TIME LEAVES US

Some people think that graffiti is just that “ghetto garbage.” But graffiti ain’t no ghetto garbage. It’s better because it’s more than art, like poetry—it’s all in one. It’s self-poetry, faithful art, it’s a person’s feeling for art, all combined into one. Then it’s combined with cosmic comics, everything from the universe, it’s just like a natural habitat thing from the jungle, but you can build it into an art” Case 2 1988 quoted in Miller pg. 24

*Figure 43 Kase II El Kay train. <https://writers-connection.noblogs.org/post/2011/08/16/kase-2-r-i-p/>*

– Kase 2 (RIP 1958 - 2011)

### READING THE STYLES OF KASE 2 THROUGH THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK OF MARE 139

Now how does Kase II, Mare’s crewmate, offer us insights in regards to these aesthetics of time, as devised by Style-Writers? In the case of artists like Case 2, the subway car, when treated as a site for Writing, is brought to parallel and heighten the wall’s function for Writing (recall Brighenti’s claim for longitudinal conversations and Rose’s claim for the technical advantages of the subway as media). As a result, in the conditions of the aesthetic territory, as well as in the question of the ease of vector aerosol application speeds above, the wall is brought to be understood as structurally apposite to the subway car (the wall is simply a more static substrate). Thus Style-Writing may render space as a question of speed.<sup>ccxxxi</sup> In other words, Style-Writing renders its collection of substrates as both a temporal territory and a spatial one. Then the aesthetic temporality of Mare’s “relevance by

proximity” becomes an even more impactful analytical tool; the more a writer’s work appears in the city, the more the city is recast in the temporality of the writing.

Some reports indicate Kase 2 was born in Harlem, some say in the South Bronx, yet he produced work that spanned all five boroughs of New York City. He regularly produced work on multiple trains paused in the Bronx at the Gunhill Road lay-up, as his protege, Phade, remembers: “there were collaborations that only pictures can bring back the memories of those nights at Gunhill Road lay-up and bussin' 6 whole cars.”<sup>ccccxxii</sup> The popular 6 line train ran end to end in the metropolis. In which ways might we critically conceive of the idea of infrastructure in a creative context such as this?

## SYSTEM BUILDERS

The goal of this historical analysis is to demonstrate innovations at the level of what scholars of infrastructure call, for instance, “system builders.” I have attempted to set the stage showing the broader socio-technical context within which subway writers embedded their practice. Moreover, I seek to show how these artists worked as both “system-builders” and producers of “gateways” which “permit the linking of heterogeneous systems into networks and internetworks” (Jackson, Edwards, Bowker, and Knobel 2007). Specifically, I aim to show how the artists’ Writing offered what Jackson et. al. would call a “gateway” joining two ostensibly separately functioning industrial infrastructures of aerosols and railways. With the advent of subway Writing at scale, the two formerly “heterogeneous” systems became integrated in a third system of what Mare might invite us to consider as aesthetic sociability, by the choice of these “system-builders” to not only activate latent functionalities, but also invent these mechanisms, within socio-technical infrastructures of both aerosols and railways. My point here is that the literature created by New York subway Writers

offered something in addition to the expressive and imaginative possibilities for readers and authors that we would traditionally value in such artistic heritages. Here, literature delivers the concrete and technical forces capable of generating a material, industrial-scale urban infrastructure.<sup>ccccxxiii</sup> To understand the efficacy of this literature's performance within an infrastructural system, delivered by this literature's aesthetics, I look to Lily Nguyen's use of the term "infrastructural action," specifically leaning on her understanding of "hacking" as a

Strategy for breaking *into* global techno-culture rather than breaking *out of* socio-technical limitations. By contextualizing hacking within the larger dilemmas of distance within global integration, this notion of infrastructural action serves as a critique of the techno-political ethos of transgression typical of hacking discourses in the global north.<sup>ccccxxv</sup>

Here we see the significance of the unique relationship between authorship and audience in the work of subway Writing, and enter the debate touching on public and private legibility. Specifically, Nguyen's insight offers a way to consider the questions of public and private legibility at stake in Wildstyle subway writing (as Tricia Rose pointed out in chapter 1 above). Viewed in this way, the historical evidence suggests these artists practiced a form of infrastructural action that may be read as both a "breaking *into* global techno-culture" and a "breaking *out of* socio-technical limitations" in Nguyen's terms.

Focusing the discussion for our context, Keller Easterling has specifically elaborated the intersection of urban design and software in her *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, calling for the research and practice of hacking: "Exposing evidence of the infrastructural operating system is as important as acquiring some special skills to hack into it."<sup>ccccxxvi</sup> For Easterling, urban structures can be hacked once they are understood as "software."<sup>ccccxxvii</sup> My analysis here relies on her insight that spatial structures can function as software which may transmit networked content, independent of being "digitally enhanced"

Space doesn't have to be digitally enhanced to carry information. The repeatable formulas or recipes for space-making described in the book are something akin to software—an operating system for shaping the city. And that operating system can be hacked with forms that act like a switch or a multiplier—forms that establish an interplay between spatial variables."<sup>ccccxxviii</sup>

In which ways might we open a dialogue between Keller's idea of urban software which could program and hack infrastructure space, and Kase II's understanding of computer style Writing on the infrastructure of the subway? Before attempting to simplistically associate metaphors of urbanism and computer technology, let us begin with the continued question of the relationship between Style-Writers' choices in self-described metaphors and the underlying mechanisms of their aesthetic logic. Before we hypothesize about the subway as a system where a Writer like Kase II could hack the style of "computer" Writing, let us connect the ideas of computation and the ideas of mathematics (suggested in the previous chapter by Rammellzee).

## READING KASE II THROUGH MARE 139

Echoing Mare and Rammellzee's sense of inter-historical aesthetic sensibilities, Margo Natalie Crawford's 2017 *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* points to Amiri Baraka's *Nation Time* (where "In this state of suspension, black consciousness-raising and black experimentation are inseparable; being and becoming cannot be separated") as a predecessor for a "new grammar for understanding the circularity of black aesthetic traditions" in the 2002 book *Splay Anthem* by poet Nathaniel Mackey:

In his introduction to Larry Neal's poetry volume *Black Boogaloo* (1969), Amiri Baraka proclaims that the BAM is "post-literary" as he makes blackness itself stretch out like the words "It's nation time eye ime" in his signature BAM poem "It's Nation Time." Black post-blackness is this state of suspension we see and hear when Baraka stretches out the word "time" into "time eye ime." In this state of suspension, black consciousness-raising and black experimentation are inseparable; being and becoming cannot be separated.

In *Splay Anthem* (2002), Nathaniel Mackey provides a new grammar for understanding the circularity of black aesthetic traditions. His theory of seriality captures the circular tension of black post-blackness: "A desperate accent or inflection runs through seriality's recourse to repetition, an apprehension of limits we find ourselves up against again and again, limits we'd get beyond if we could. [. . .] Recursiveness can mark a sense of deprivation fostered by failed advance, a sense of alarm and insufficiency pacing a dark, even desperate measure, but this dark accent or inflection issues from a large appetite or even a utopic appetite." This tension between pacing back and forth with a sense of stasis (a "failed advance") and pacing back and forth as one feels propelled by a "large appetite" is the difference between moving linearly and moving in a "tidalectic" manner. This idea of "tidalectics" emerges in a 1995 dialogue between Mackey and Kamau Brathwaite. As Brathwaite explains his theory of "tidalectics," he captures the nonlinear, back-and-forth, black radical tradition of

continuity *and* rupture that propels my theory of black post-blackness. Mackey explains, “It’s not a linear movement, except in the sense of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. That is an overall idea. But since I started that, it has been superseded with the idea of tidalectics, which is dialectics with my difference. In other words, instead of the notion of one-two-three, Hegelian, I am now interested in the movement of the water backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic, I suppose, motion, rather than linear.” Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, famously critiqued his comrade Jean-Paul Sartre’s use of the Marxist dialectic when he asserted that there is a next step after black consciousness-raising (that *négritude* is a “minor term” in a larger dialectic). Fanon (like Brathwaite with his theory of tidalectics) insists that the most radical black aesthetic movements are always anticipating the next step “beyond blackness” and actually shaping whatever blackness is around the impulse to imagine the unimaginable. When the BAM mobilized the word “black” in the most radical manner, it was a way of naming the unknown dimensions of freedom and self-determination. In the most radical BAM usages, the word “black” always gestures to a profound overturning of the identity category “Negro” and a desire to reenchant black humanity as much more than an identity category. “Black” signaled excess, the power of the *untought* (that which José Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia*, describes as the “not yet here”).

This book opens up a space in which the *not yet here* of the 1960s and early 1970s Black Arts Movement converges with the *not yet here* of early twenty-first-century African American literature and visual art.

Ivor Miller points out that Writers like Kase 2 and Noc 167 “do not identify with their birth name” and quotes Kase’s self-description of his method of inventing his name: “I made the names from the way they sounded, not the way they look. Case to me is a case in court.”<sup>ccccxix</sup> We can here see the way that artists experimented with their general ideas about computation through more specific conceptual inquiries into the conditions of data and race faced in their personal lives. Kase 2 chose his name specifically, as a reference to his interest in the ongoing count of the court system. The extended scales and continuums of racist carceral history intertwined with the “collapse of manufacturing jobs” say Fullilove and Wallace:

Mass criminalization is related to the collapse of manufacturing jobs in the following manner. With the collapse of industry as a source of employment, alternative employment emerged, including a major industry of drug dealing. Drug dealing was linked to an increase in addiction, violence, and the spread of infectious disease. The explosion of violence that accompanied the crack-cocaine epidemic triggered an avalanche of harsh policies that put many Americans behind bars. The criminalization of African American men has been particularly pervasive and deleterious.

Gentrification, the replacement of lower income residents with more wealthy ones, has gathered speed in cities across the United States. Gentrification is often viewed as a “natural” process, rather like the tides, but the study of serial displacement makes it clear that this process is itself eased by pro-gentry policies and built on the destruction of the prior inhabitants’ communities by the series of policies noted above.<sup>ccccxx</sup>

The concept of a multiplicity of court cases calls on the history of mass criminalization, which appeared in the form of mass-population processing systems like the island prison Rikers,

which also functioned as forms of population in a systemic process mostly marginalizing people of color: in their article “Serial Forced Displacement in American Cities, 196-2010” Fullilove and Wallace explain that “Mass criminalization followed and added another form of displacement and social rupture to the growing list” (386). Oftentimes the difference between evaluating an extra-state space of the liberty of freedom from the state and a space which must be re-captured from being an illegal space is a difference drawn in racial lines.

## **SELF-POETRY, FAITHFUL ART**

Let us consider how the Writings of KASE 2 can be read through the critical frameworks of abstraction offered by Mare 139. As two members of the The Fantastic Partners (TFP) crew, the historical relationship between “Jeff Kase 2” Brown, and Carlos “Mare 139” Rodriguez prompts this dissertation with the opportunity to demonstrate how Rodriguez’s approach as a critic allows us to attempt one way of historicizing the Writerly aesthetics practiced by Kase 2.

In the case of the following piece, and several others, Kase 2 shows subtle experiments with that visual dimensionality of curves, corners, and beyond:

*Figure 44 Kase 2 Yellow and Orange Piece. <https://hyperallergic-newspeak.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2011/08/train.jpg>*

Note the way that vertical line-pattern edging the orange-pink and yellow toned fill seems to indicate a third dimension of depth to the letter structure. Now, consider the moments where that pattern varies from its role as a feature consistently indicating that topological change, as flashed across a subway tunnel or paused at a platform (in the style of a “New York” minute)—such as the unusual 45 degree angled lines at the bottom of the “K.”

Here we begin to see beyond the “edge” of “the retina” and its dependencies on single vantage points of dimensionality (specifically the Writerly strategies used to the differentiate between curves and corners). Echoing Cubist inheritances of Cezanne, in this abstracted, multi-perspectival approach, the dimensionality of the letter structures begins to subtly show single letters from multiple angles, applying many of the insights Mare extends in his updated extensions of modernist abstraction. Now consider the way that our understanding of the dimensionality (and, so, the semiotics?) of the letter changes when we attempt to consider the “anti-aliased” curves in the appearance of that line-pattern in the upper right-hand corner of the work.

At the top extension of the “E”, we see the same indication of the contingent 3D dimension, of depth attached to surface, but without the ostensible surface. Now, as readers, our understanding of the text as a dimensional object of inscription changes: the pattern signaling that “realistic” sense of a third dimension now becomes an independent position in the imaginative logic we are required to invest in the reading to sustain engagement with the work as one which has textual legibility. Even if we are unable to “succeed” in interpreting it, we are held in the interval of attempting to. We may also begin to note that this pattern itself shows a local repetition: a pattern of a pattern, the independent appearances now may also be seen to appear in a specific series.

How might we as scholars seek to apply Mare’s insights as a way of understanding not only the processes of Style-Writing in general, but a specific local aesthetic partnership? Let us attempt a close reading of some works by Kase 2, a close associate of Mare, as part of The Fantastic Partners (TFP) Crew. Kase 2’s passing in 2011 presented a major loss for the Style-Writing community, and many Writers offered public eulogies. Mare’s appeared on his blog and was reposted by multiple major international internet platforms.<sup>ccccxxxi</sup> Here he recalled how

It is artists like Kase 2 who have enabled a whole generation of artists not unlike myself to break from traditional style into a more modern complex lettering theory based on computer technology, this was pre mass computerization. His classic ‘computer rock’ style can be seen

in the works of many of today's top writers from coast 2 coast and across continents. [...] He was truly the originator of today's 3D wildstyle.<sup>ccccxxii</sup>

The questions of relevance by proximity only take on further potential when we underline that Mare 139 and Kase 2 painted multiple whole subway cars running during the same period during the classic subway train era of Style-Writing. The rapid flow of advances from generation to generation can be seen in the way the subway was used to compile and accelerate style-innovations, leading from straight letter tags to Kase II's Computer Style. Reading Kase 2's work via Mare 139's critical apparatus then begins to allow us to partially suggest inter-interpretive possibilities about the kind of aesthetic sociability that Mare proposed is possible for Style-Writing.

Let us examine a series of stylistic patterns in the orbit of Kase II's yet incompletely understood "computer rock" idiom. It is important to note that this style is not simply "whatever this artist makes," but a specific subset of his work. Look for example to the following late-career 2004 work.<sup>ccccxxiii</sup> Here it is not only the tails of letters that function as paraphs, but we can see how he adjusts the elements of letters which are at the discretion of the author's subjectivity. Consider, for instance, the variation specifically within the sense of the letter's stroke sequence construction, when understood through the perspective of alternating vectors between a traditional A, with a bridge established as a separate stroke, and the cross-over of the vectors of the letter in Kase II's version. Each piece might be seen to represent, in terms borrowed from Ferrell's earlier point about the creation of "the Network" in chapter 1, an entry in the metropolitan archive's as a case of "criminal information." At the same time, the governing network's archival positioning of Kase II's series artwork may be contrasted with Kase II's own appropriation of the power of terms of information, in his radical reassociation of the idea of the case number to begin with.

*Figure 45 Kase 2 at 5 Pointz* <http://blen167.blogspot.com/2011/08/rest-in-peace-kase-2-case-2-king-of.html>

This work at the famous 5 Pointz collective in New York City, bears obvious resemblance to a subway era piece:

*Figure 46 Kase II Blue and white. <http://blen167.blogspot.com/2011/08/rest-in-peace-kase-2-case-2-king-of.html>*

In both cases, the serifs, arms and spines of letter are thickened, but here and there offset by the counterbalance of thinned masses, such as the bars of the K and A. These thinned masses carefully echo the tails added to the K and A. Each of these echoes and reshaping, is, in the terms of Mare, an interrelated geometry.

As we can see, these unities extend across individual works, so Kase II shows us a way to establish a broader sense of authorial identity by continuities across his pieces' experimentations with anti-aliasing and dithering. This consideration of Kase II's Computer Style also might consider his reference to going beyond Wildstyle (see the discussion by Eshun): Wildstyle, as Kase II points out was the "coordinate" style. Thus, we might understand Kase II's artwork to not only arrive at questions similar to the question of anti-aliasing, faced by computational and algorithmic grids of all kinds (electrified or not) as seen in the case of Eglash et. al's discussion of Navajo weaving. In other words, in which ways does his style transcend the coordinate grid system of wildstyle? One way to reflect on this question is to meditate on Kase II's often quoted statement that the computer style is an opportunity for him to section off the Writing according to his preference (see above).

Here, we might begin by noting that in his choices in rendering shadows and/or highlights, topological consistencies are revised as opportunities for the author's expressive recapturing of space through style. Consider the fact that the execution of, for instance, "pixel" placement in a

computer image is governed by an algorithm which, to ensure the reader does not detect a recognizable pattern, delivers semi-random coordinates as positions and sometimes, semi-random accumulations of pixels, that we might begin to consider Kase II's brilliance. Kase, as so many other masters do, enters into this question of stylization and the randomness of imaging, specifically, as Kase suggests, he specifically does through the Writing of Computer Style art.<sup>ccccxxiv</sup>

In another work, Kase 2 can be seen to maintain that delicate counterpoint between the thinned bars of the A and the second spine of the K. Here the tail and spine of the S gains a slightly exaggerated curve, which remains in productive tension with the ascender of the K. That ascender modulates into the thick curve of that letter's rear ear, which in turn grounds the smaller and more flared ear, providing an abstract rhythm of regularity to the far more dramatic ear that rides from the A to the S. That top rhythm of ears then cycles back to the heavy stroke of the K and S, framing the work from the bottom of the subway car to the moments where the horizontal line produced by the smaller frame of the window is invaded by the top flourishes.

*Figure 47 Kase II Red and Blue <http://blen167.blogspot.com/2011/08/rest-in-peace-kase-2-case-2-king-of.html>*

Elsewhere, Kase experiments with making the thickness of the letters' curves their own dominant idiom:

*Figure 48 Kase II Green <http://blen167.blogspot.com/2011/08/rest-in-peace-kase-2-case-2-king-of.html>*

Here we see another way that Mare's claims for abstraction come into play. Look to the tail at the rear edge of the stress of the C and compare it to the preceding K's, where the tail began to itself produce a second spine. Here it would be wrong to say that we see the same tail we saw in the

previous examples, but instead we should say we see a similar idea of a tail, that Kase II's Style offers informational continuity (like so any other Writers). We are not called to see the repetition of imagistic elements, but the will which can idiomatically experiment with those elements. In this work, the end of the top arm of the E offers a jagged terminal, and that irruption, in turn engenders the invitation to consider a secondary abstract structural unity between the increasingly fragmented chips of the tail and spine of the C and S. In the case of the C these chips become opportunities for a swash connecting the C to the A. This work can heighten the smaller, floating details because the body of letters' curves are heavy enough to ground the play of such experimentation.

Finally, in his rightly lauded work on the Kase 2 El Kay whole car production, which has been treated as a kind of magnum opus by the documentary field attached to Style-Writing,<sup>ccccxxv</sup> the artist brings together the two abstract structures: 1) the tail-become-second-spine technique of the first three works, alongside 2) the thickened, grounding curves of the letter bodies in the fourth work. Note how these two abstract structures allow Kase 2 to reinvest the complexity of the works toward an instantly recognizable writing style:

*Figure 49 Detail of Figure 43*

Here the tail at the left edge of the first K is dramatically thickened, such that it in fact begins to take on the same work that the curved spine of the S does here and in other works. Now the structure of central thickness (such as the body-spine of the S and A) and the structure of secondary elements (the ears, tails and swashes), become coincident, and thus overdetermined. Even the jagged chips offer a parallel width, so that finally the paraps of the word reinforce the inscription's visibility. As a result, Kase 2 is able to marry what was availed in constructivist abstractions to a telos of

inscribed identification: the formation of the masses increases the legibility of the authorial identity, if we can read it.

## INTERNET ARCHITECTURE AND THE SUBWAY SYSTEM

In turn, Susan Stewart's *Crimes of Writing* discusses the way that the Writer's "individualized style" might be mobilized as an "imposition upon mass forms and tools", which allow them to "place their arts within the interruptions of social life, marking off a physical space for a time and inscribing it within an individuality both unique and ephemeral":

improvised spray-can tops, improvised inks, and transformations of marker tips all demonstrate the imposition of individualized style upon mass forms and tools. Writers do not conceive of their role as one within a larger narrative or historical structure other than this specific tradition of graffiti writing; rather, they place their arts within the interruptions of social life, marking off a physical space for a time and inscribing it within an individuality both unique and ephemeral. In this way, graffiti resembles the "cut" frame of cinema, refusing metonymy, refusing—here negating—an "outside" in favor of an "inside out," a focus on the separation.<sup>ccccxxvi</sup>

Conversely, how might we re-read Mare's Writing through Kase II's insights, while we have seen Rodriguez' critical framework to re-engage the abstraction of early 20<sup>th</sup> C. Modernisms like that of Picasso, Malevich, and Tatlin. Now we will see, moreover, that he also puts forward a critical understanding of the information architecture of the internet, by taking a Style-Writer's critical perspective on the global network in comparison to the New York Subway. Individual character strings and letter formations themselves become structures for aesthetic interchange and community building, as evidenced by Mare 139's account of his brothers' participation in a "call and response" of the letter W between individual Writers and larger group based networks:

"During this period, he and the CIA crew executed a call-and-response with the writing crews they admired — TFP, TDS, TMT and Mafia — by upping their game. For example, when TDS painted whole cars with names that started with the letter W, Word (Chain3), Worm (Part1), Warm (Kool131), CIA painted Welch (Kel139), Wink (Duro), Wurm (Dondi)"<sup>ccccxxvii</sup>

The aesthetics of Style-Writing's informational network, of course, did not depend on that of the internet—however, the questions addressed in these two network forms may offer insightful interchanges, to borrow Mare's words regarding his experience as a digital artist and designer:

The website stuff started in the early 90's with my brother [Kel] and we were the first ones really pushing the agenda of minorities online, when I first got into the whole idea of the internet being the new platform for the graffiti writer I said this is the new layup because you can post your work up and not just hundreds but millions of people could see your work and they could respond to it and the subway system if you look at a map it looks very much like the architecture of the internet.<sup>ccccxxviii</sup>

The foundations of the internet were dawning in the same era that subway Writers saw, and met, the need for their own advances in community networking, media transmission and information technology. Mare's comment comparing the subway to the internet in his interview should not be taken as an uncertain imaginative speculation or a trivial, rhapsodic simile (and of course not as the only way to consider the two multitudinous cultures). Rather, he presents his engagement with the internet as a specific technical project forwarding the values of his heritage online.

Any doubts about his expertise in "the architecture of the internet" should defer to his reception of a prestigious 2006 Webby as a producer with the design firm Code & Theory for the *Style Wars* website offered project design and development partnering with Henry Chalfant and Tony Silver in association with Public Art Films as clients. The project appeared in 2004 with Apple Computers presenting the website launch at its flagship Soho store on Prince Street.<sup>ccccxxix</sup> In the 2006 Webby press release the Webby's located the *Style Wars* project among "new and up-and-coming sites like The Huffington Post (Political Blog), Style Wars (Best Visual Design) and FabChannel.com (Music)."<sup>ccccxl</sup> The same year, Myspace founders Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe would receive the "Webby Breakout of the Year Award." The site also garnered a 2006 "Best in Class – Fashion and Style" award from the Interactive Media Foundation." Style Wars has also garnered the COMMARTS/Communication Arts Award, Horizon Interactive Award, as well as SXSW/South by Southwest Interactive for its unique design, narrative and interactivity.

Following Mare's suggestion, we may consider the technical innovations of Writers to gain insights into the "architecture of the internet," and vice versa. In the most simple sense, the architectural structure of the internet defines on the one hand the systems of user flows of

engagement through the transmissions of content and information through the nodes (or vertices) and edges (or links) of network(s), and so, on the other hand, also defines the materials and environments of the components and content that make up those flows of transmissions by which users execute their interactions. How might a re-reading of Mare enable us as scholars to attempt to learn from and apply his concepts and analyses to further our reading of a work or works of Style-Writing? In turn, what questions about the limits of our present understanding of Style-Writing, may such a reading open for us? How might scholars depend on the demonstrated expertise of Writers themselves, to read and learn about groups of an author's or borough's artworks? In other words, how might we read these works with the analytical diligence traditionally offered by the academy in its application of the close reading of literary texts, genres and canonical writers.

Beginning with a detail of Mare's thinking—a comparison between the subway network and the architecture of the internet—how might we understand the details of that comparison within broader discourses about computerization and mathematics popular at the time? Given the use of Mare's thinking as a social tool through which we see one interpretation of the broader stylistic operations of his friend Kase 2, how might we consider a social function of Kase's stylistic program “computer rock“? By understanding his claims for the “step-wise” constructive process of style and his comments on the function of time, we may see the way that Kase' Style-Writings passed back through the architecture of the subway into the social field that Mare 139 proposed. In other words, this chapter concludes by proposing an attempt read the two artists together. With reference to Mare, we might read the enigmas of Kase' text as the signature moments of a socially functional code passing through a social information network: sending Style-Writing through the subway functioned as the “interchanging,” per Mare's thinking, of transmitting a computer's algorithmic programs through an “internet” of Styles?



## CH. 7 – SKEME 3 YARD KING

Earlier chapters showed the ways that the practice commonly called “graffiti” can be understood as a specifically written technology, when examined through Mare’s claims for sociability, specifically in regards to Wildstyle and stylistic abstraction in past futurisms as well as Nuyorican culture. Through Mare’s claims for sociability, Kase 2’s work was later seen as one case of the insistence of artistic agency and communication within these community forms, there reflecting on one subset of Kase 2’s methods, focusing on the claim that his “computer style” could be understood in “a step-formulated way.” (Subway Art 1984 quoted in Arte 2015). Then we reviewed the presence of a wider technological and futurist driven discourse among Writers, focusing on the writings of Rammellzee. We concluded with a reflection from Mare’s own experience as a producer within the computer industry, where he compared the subway network to the architecture of the internet.

Thinkers like Mare, Kase II, and Rammellzee, among others (we could not forget Kase II’s mentor Riff who discusses “visual mathematics”), claim that Style-Writing as a practice can be understood through the use of computational metaphors and comparisons. We have seen these conceptual systems are both highly imaginative, and highly technical. Deepening these inquiries by reflecting on how the thinking and practice of writers like Skeme expand these themes in relation to the creation of social networks and territory in Harlem, this chapter offers readers the opportunity to consider the political and technical possibilities that NYC Writers saw in these aesthetic commitments of a Mare or a Rammellzee were also realized by Skeme in Harlem. My analysis of Mare and Rammellzee’s work sought to elicit conceptual methods and frameworks which can be used to inquire about Style Writing. Similarly, my analysis of Skeme’s own work will seek to

contextualize these discourses in historical terms of technical practices. While the scope of this dissertation necessitates a limited approach, my intention is not to suggest that the 3 Yard constitutes an archetypal example of how data computation and urban infrastructure are related. We may just as easily have continued our inquiry directly from the consideration of Mare's Spanish Harlem, located mere blocks away from the 3 Yard, or we may have done the same with Rammellzee's area of Queens. Moreover, Kase 2's incredible contribution to the discourse around computer aesthetics in Style Writing would more than justify considering his career as the case study of choice for any scholar interested in the subject—I look forward to the time when that more robust future project supplants my own.

I highlight Skeme's career and locale for a few reasons. First, Skeme's extensive efforts at self-documentation throughout his career offer us an opportunity for accuracy, especially given the limited resources available. Second, Skeme's own scholarly efforts on the subject (including multiple guest lectures in my courses at Cornell University) has demonstrated his professionalism and thoughtfulness in dealing with matters where integrity, wisdom and discretion on behalf of others is paramount. Third, Skeme's long oeuvre allows us a way to not only see how the conceptual concerns of chapters prior can be seen at work in a particular historical moment, but it also allows us a way to connect that historical aesthetics to a longer engagement with the history of racial justice in the U.S. state. Again, I caution the reader to notice that much of the same could be said of many other Writers. Now, I will turn to a study of the way that Writers in the 3 yard deployed the aesthetics of Style Writing to transform a transportation infrastructure into a social network. What may we call the approach by which they accomplished this? How did a network built for the physical relocation of human bodies become a social interface for communication transmission? Which devices, circumstances and methods were used to catalyze this transformation?

His career engages with threads of liberation from post-colonial and critical race studies which were touched on previously. Here we see another context for chapter 1's treatment of Carlos Mare 139 Rodriguez and Nuyorican concerns for freedom in the Americas more generally.<sup>cccxi</sup> Additionally, we see how Skeme's status as 3 Yard King relates to global pursuits of sovereignty in regions undergoing decolonization, and the networked practice's recursive anti-colonial effects within the regions which originally directed the colonial practices. If we take the Young Lords as a point of reference, we see that the area's own extra-state responses to impoverishment also targeted infrastructural technologies: in addition to being themselves targeted by the FBI's COINTELPRO program, the group repossessed a mobile x-ray unit (we might later pursue, moreover, the fascinating inter- and dis-connections between Writers and other groups such as the Black Panthers).

If we in turn revisit reporters' claims that the South Bronx "was like the moon now. Nothing but minerals, buildings had collapsed," we may find a broader range of encounters with the poetic intersection of lunar visions and infrastructural decline. Here we may also look to the 9th track of Gil Scott-Heron's debut *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, featuring a 1970's classic critique of the infrastructural patterns of racially divided hubris and neglect: "Whitey on the Moon." The strategies of cultural and technological integration and transformation developed by Style-Writers offers an incisive perspective on the broader historical issues of infrastructure and futurism. "Whitey on the Moon" offers a particularly strong infrastructural critique of the imbalanced priorities which overspent on the space exploration program while underspending on the human factors of the 1960s U.S. urban crisis, and so set the stage for that crisis' growth throughout 1970s and early 1980s New York. That national strategy mistakenly disconnected futures of human planetary exploration from futures of human planetary needs.

This chapter will show how Skeme's stylistic techniques intervened in the infrastructural conception of the New York Subway, one of many examples of the way that Writers' application of mathematical and computational strategies, as we saw in chapter 2, allowed them to "hack" the system, so that they could install a social network where their interactions and experiences had previously been repressed. In doing so, their informatic strategies produced new journeys of futurity.<sup>cccxlii</sup>

Turning to the work of Skeme, I re-consider how the Subway itself may function as an archive: with the application of pigment, the Writers activated the subway trains as a social and aesthetic substrate. Here I return to scholars such as Andrea Mubi Brighenti who has offered sophisticated integrations of spatial theory and Writing, applying his conceptualization of a city rendered "syntagmatic" by the Writer's "sentence in a continuing conversation" of the longitudinal "virtual wall," where orthogonally linear structures of state governance no longer "set limits and impasses" or define the possibilities of "paths and trajectories."<sup>cccxlili</sup> We might extend that consideration by learning from Skeme's work on the 3 line, as a key example by which to introduce necessary nuances when examining the subway as a historical system (rather than walls per se). Contextualizing Skeme's work in Harlem, we might turn to critical histories such as Margo Natalie Crawford's *Black Post-Blackness: the Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* and James Edward Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*<sup>cccxliv</sup> (Crawford's discussion of anticipation will appear later in the chapter).

Smethurst provides an entry point to consider the shifting conditions of public institutions alongside disruptions of allegedly "high" and "low" art which together suggest contexts for the rise of Style-Writings' aesthetics in Harlem's 3 Yard. Style-Writing was not the only urban art in the U.S. to use the wall as a medium playing a core function in the author's poetics. For instance, the 1967 *Wall of Respect* in Chicago was created as a large-scale community mural, overlapping with the period

of the early Writers but predating the heights of the subway movement by some years. Pointing to the mural's engagement with the longer history of black aesthetics and public space, Smethurst cites Kimberly Benston, who

notes there was an interplay between Black Arts performance and collective audiences within the larger social context of mass African American struggle, as the "long hot summers" of urban uprising became a recurrent phenomenon. This interplay lent a peculiar intensity and immediacy to the movement's paradoxically twinned formal and ideological vanguardism and community building—much like the way economic depression and militant labor struggles helped to make Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* and Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* electrifying theater in the mid-1930s. To a large extent, these performances as well as the collective creation and viewing of murals were the calling cards of the Black Arts movement to the broader black community. In fact, the production of murals and other forms of public art took on a performative aspect. This was famously true of Chicago's Wall of Respect, where musicians performed and poets recited as the mural was painted by members of the OBAC Visual Arts Workshop. The completion of the Wall of Respect was particularly gripping theater, taking place before a mass audience that included armed (and hostile) policemen watching from surrounding rooftops. Even a more formal presentation in a theater or community arts center housed in a black neighborhood was a public event that left a considerable impression on the street—if only on a marquee or on a pasted-up flyer advertising the production of a new play by Ed Bullins or Ron Milner or a concert by Pharoah Sanders or Milford Graves.<sup>cccxlv</sup>

Here we see the way that the wall and public space had a longer history as part of the networks of circulation which served such "an urgent need for black people":

It is this sense of an urgent need for black people to produce and circulate printed texts by African American authors to the broader black community across the United States (and beyond) that made the establishment of journals, newspapers, and presses such a high priority of Black Power and Black Arts institution building and made those textual or text-producing institutions among the most successful and most long-lived of initiatives by those movements.

The precarity of these networks could be felt at a local level. Smethurst points to an uptown – downtown social (leftist) institutional network spanning "the Lower East Side, Greenwich Village, and, to a lesser extent, Harlem" which had suffered heavy blows in urban decay over the century.<sup>cccxlvi</sup> Smethurst characterizes Harlem as a neighborhood which was seen by some, somewhat like the Bronx, as somewhere to be departed from: by the time of activity of Beat and Bohemian poetry of the Lower East Side in the 1960s, "The focal point of this cross-genre activity was not uptown in Harlem but downtown, increasingly in the new bohemian center of the Lower East Side." Specifically, he points to the issues of social network creation so important to Harlem's role in anchoring an African American consciousness: "It also says something about the persistence of a

sort of African American consciousness downtown and how this consciousness created a network even among artists like Baraka and Sanchez who knew each other and each other's work (or at least knew of each other and each other's work, even if they had never met)." Smethurst in fact notes Harlem's lack of well-developed social network infrastructures for a "well developed countercultural coffeehouse and poetry reading scene associated with the New American Poetry" (92). Fullilove and Wallace (2011) note the way that these social infrastructures are damaged by the specifically "serial" nature of the city's "displacement" programs:

Beverly Watkins carried out a study of Harlem, a community known to have suffered from a series of harmful policies. She found that the community did indeed show evidence of increasing dysfunction after each negative event. As predicted by Leighton, families fragmented, social organization declined, and disease increased. Violent behavior emerged as a new behavioral language adopted for communication in the context of the "noisy" channel of social disintegration.

Serial displacement directed at a minority neighborhood wreaks havoc on the surrounding areas. Wallace showed how planned shrinkage policies of fire service withdrawal shotgunned AIDS over the Bronx section of New York, expanding the focus of infection from what would have been a small nexus of intravenous drug users concentrated in the old "South Bronx" to a borough-scale phenomenon that reflected the intersection of social networks fragmented by forced displacement that would have otherwise remained distinct.<sup>cccxlvii</sup>

## THE RISE OF THE THREE YARD: SUBWAY WRITERS AND THE REPAIR OF SPATIAL ENFRANCHISEMENT

*Figure 50 Skeme and friends, 3 Yard. P. 132 in Chalfant, Henry, and Sacha Jenkins. Training Days: the Subway Artists Then and Now. Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2014.*

One member of the 3 Yard Boys, Disco, began his career “on the INDs in ’72 or so”, remembering he adjusted his stylus to the needs of the particular medium: “silver paint cause the train suck that sh\*t up. I had to rack pound cans of silver to get a good piece or tag up.”<sup>cccxlvi</sup> When we consider the work of this member of the 3 Yard Boys, we also see how the subway, as a tool, was itself redeployed as one option among infrastructural systems that the Writers would place in a hierarchy of increasing network efficacy: “See the other boroughs had the train running through them. Queens had the buses. So the sh\*t was to king the hood then the buses then move to the trains [sic].”<sup>cccxlvi</sup> Looking at the network of the 3YB, we also see interactions between groups across geography: Disco would create works with In, Kit, and Nic outside of Harlem, at 149<sup>th</sup> street:<sup>ccccl</sup> the geographic mapping of these information networks shows us how the Writers’ stylistic sociability created, and repaired, social ties across areas previously abandoned and impoverished. Kit’s own reflections on the subway network structure point to another layer of connectivity and network saturation, this time pointing out how the ‘packets’ of stylistic information would be redistributed according to an additional resource leveling and maintenance process undertaken by the MTA:

Mark 198 Kit 17 [artwork] done on the layups in the mid 1970’s this car ran on the 2 and 5 line back then the 2,4,5 trains would switch often as well as the 1 and 3 trains you could do a piece in the 3 yard and have your piece running on the 2 line the next day good times mg boys<sup>ccccli</sup>

Here we see that the routing destination of artwork produced using the 3 yard would not be restricted to the train lines which were primarily associated with that location. The famous Jester would be remembered decades later by Mare, at the Museum of Graffiti, as Writer who produced key letter styles which influenced the city more broadly. The inter-city connections and influences abound. For instance, although more emphasis may be placed on the influential IZ the WIZ' role as president of The Master Blasters (TMB) or a member of Rolling Thunder Writers (RTW), IZ also "painted for The Three Yard Boys and other crews too numerous to mention."<sup>ccclii</sup>

Continuing the claims for spatial sociability of Mare 139 and territorial authority of Rammellzee, let us look at the work of Skeme and his laying claim to the position of "3 Yard King." His practice serves as an opportunity to historicize these aesthetic inquiries in direct relation to a specific subway line and its primary site for Writing production, the 3 yard at 148th St, Lenox Terminal. The Lenox Yard served as the site of the 1968 construction of the Harlem-148th Street station. Turning to the subway's various nodes within a city where racial lines were entrenched by, among other things, mid-century urban development, we may rely on a lens of inquiry resulting from Skeme's own commentary regarding the racial makeup of the Writing groups:

I hate to use the term "segregation" because it has negative connotations, but it's not true that yards were integrated. Some yards were neutral, some yards were black yards, and others were white yards. I've never seen a white person in the 3 yard. [...] It was more geographical than anything. If you had a yard in your own backyard, why would you travel miles to come to the 3 yard? The 1 tunnel was a multicultural tunnel, if you will.<sup>cccliii</sup>

From decaying housing and escalating rental prices, to the exodus of many Harlemites with the means to migrate, the conditions of Harlem in the 1970's did not promise to support the 3 yard's radical growth as a cultural center.

Consider the dissemination of style from the 3 Yard to other locales. As Skeme points out, the following work,<sup>cccliv</sup>

Figure 51 Skeme and T Bag. <https://graffiti-database.com/image/5071/Skeme%2520-%2520T%25E2%2580%25A2Bag/Skeme%2520-%2520T%25E2%2580%25A2Bag>

“[was] one of my first exposures to what is called the “diamond-point style,” a simple, funky letter style that was made up and perfected by Chain 3 [a.k.a. T-Bag] on the handball court in the back of the 3 yard. When I saw Chain 3’s piece, I just stood there for an hour staring at it and studying it.”<sup>ccclv</sup>

Skeme’s work appears within the broader network of contemporary and prior generations of Writers, including prolific members of that site’s eponymous crew, the 3 Yard Boys, such as Harlem’s Stan “Stan 153” Pratt, and writers based in other boroughs such as IZ the WIZ, Cliff 159 and Clyde. We should contextualize this inquiry by considering important stations on the 3 line that also function as intersections between multiple lines, noting the interplay between content Written across various boroughs. As Craig Castleman points out, “writers’ corners were established at the Brooklyn Bridge subway station in Manhattan (intersection of the 4,5, and 6 lines of the IRT), and at Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn (the 2,3,4, and 5 lines of the IRT and the D, QB, and M as well).”<sup>ccclvi</sup> Such “corners,” or “benches” offered Writers locally centralized venues for the shared exhibition and critique of works from all over the subway network; the diamond-point style above provides a key example of the 3 yard’s role as an important node.

Figure 52 Piper 1. As seen in Chris Freedom Pape’s Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CalzjhTsMPpK/?hl=en>

In this sense, Chris “Freedom” Pape describes the way that “platform style letters” were transported from Philadelphia to Harlem by Top Cat 126 and Blood 126. Here we see the “Broadway Legend” Piper 1, “an original member of the Three Yard Boys,” putting that style to use in New York City. In this way we see that Harlem itself was a dynamic regional node for the reception and creation and transformation of subway styles from cities outside of New York.

The Three Yard Boys, such as Piper 1 here specifically, promoted key moments in the development of Style Writing's history. In this way, the three yard itself became both a physical centerpiece of Style Writing's development—as a key integration of physical mechanisms allowing the creation and distribution of information, and cultural experiences. Moreover, the Three Yard at Lenox can be understood as a site contextualized by the broader historical development of Harlem and Black Arts. Writers from the crews which worked at the site and used it to develop shared subgenres can be seen to practice within the broader history of Black Arts, as well as, of course, the Harlem Renaissance.

### **ALL YOU SEE IS CRIME IN THE CITY?**

I would like to contextualize the aesthetics of scale that underwrite Skeme's *Crime in the City* train, which poses a dynamic question to its metropolitan audiences: in encountering the artwork on this train, does a city dweller see only the result of a "crime" or something more? As he points out, those words were bookended by the inscription "all you see is": here we find a kind of epigraphical narration of its own historical performance, a meditation on the maximalist commitments of many Writers of the time. Including major 3 yard predecessors such as Cliff 159 of the crew "3 Yard Boys" (3YB) crew. In the short 1976 documentary *New York Graffiti Experience*, Cliff would differentiate between Writing that pursued the achievement of "the best piece that you can do, using the most colors" and those who pursued the achievement of "putting your name up on the train on as many cars as possible."<sup>ccclvii</sup> One moment of aesthetic mastery did not accomplish what duration and extension could.

It is in this context that Cliff would say, "You have to be recognized, that's the highest thing."<sup>ccclviii</sup> Treating recognition and proliferation *as aesthetics* countered the built environment's brute logic of magnitude. Cliff explains:

I just liked seeing my name [...] I'd leave my name wherever I went [...] just to say I was there. When I started to get in on trains, the first few months I just want to have as many cars as possible so people could know who I am. I want it to be recognized as an art form.<sup>ccclix</sup>

Writers like Skeme produced magnificent works such as “CRIME IN THE CITY,”

*Figure 53 Skeme "All you see is Crime in the City" Still from Chalfant and Silver, Style Wars*

A piece made famous in Chalfant and Silver's documentary *Style Wars* where Skeme describes the production of

two whole cars. It was me, Dez, and Mean Three right? And on the first car in small letters it said 'All you see is..' and then you know Big, big, you know some block silver letters That said '..crime in the city' right?" It was a whole car [...] then on the next car a cop character"<sup>ccclix</sup>

*Figure 54 Skeme "All you see is Crime in the City" II. Stills from Chalfant and Silver, Style Wars*

A piece still referenced by the video backdrops of a new generation, via queer feminist Boricua emcee Princess Nokia:

*Figure 55 Princess Nokia performing at Greenpoint Terminal, NYC, May 2018, photo by the author*

And a piece (re-)iterated in the production of postal-sticker art, now appearing most often in collector's archives:

*Figure 56 Skeme, Pyramid Skeme, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFuF3WpFby/>*

What do we make of the movement of that text, seen first in 1983? Here I want to historicize the possibilities that we gained insight via Rammellzee's thinking in the previous section. Skeme's accomplishment here demonstrates the way that this extra-state network could go beyond just the goal of evading capture when penetrating the state archive. Moreover, it extended, and continues to extend, across a long temporality of New York's broader hip hop culture, and more broadly speaking, deepened the complexities of a phenomenon that Margo Natalie Crawford has analyzed as the "aesthetics of anticipation" within the earlier Black Arts Movement (BAM)

Showing his face in *Style Wars* alongside his illegal artworks, Skeme controlled the terms of his public identity. Such an action was a radical choice within the archival structures of Style Writing at the time. Contemporaneous to that film, Craig Castleman's early scholarly work, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York* (1982) notes that Writers placed an incredible emphasis on evading capture. The infamous anti-graffiti squad officer Conrad Lesnewski seemed slightly baffled by that preoccupation with remaining outside the state's capacity for identification:

They'll do anything to get away. They'll climb down between the cars, or down the pillars. Sometimes they'll lift up the seats on the trains and hide under the seats. They have something about being caught. They take incredible chances.<sup>ccclxi</sup>

With these stakes in mind, we can begin to see the significance of Skeme controlling the terms of his public identity in the documentary *Style Wars*. As we shall see, each artist that showed themselves here effectively and proudly demonstrated their identity as a public contravention of the state. In the identity's passage between the inscribed material signification, the state named identity of the

inscribing agent, and publicly recognized status of personhood, the inscription divided the state's control of the inscribing agent. As I suggested with Rammellzee, even inside the state they remained outside the boundaries of the state's control, recapturing the ability to define the process of public personhood.

Now, perhaps the multi-decade (re)iteration of Skeme's *Crime in the City* train makes sense as an active aesthetic value for the archival questions of Style Writing. Not only a nostalgic afterlife of a bygone era, such reinscriptions and reappearances underwrite the archival aesthetics of duration and repetition at scale. Writers like Cliff of the 3 Yard Boys contextualizes the aesthetics of scale that underwrite Skeme's *Crime in the City* train. As he points out, those words were bookended by the inscription "all you see is": here we find a kind of epigraphical narration of its own historical performance, a meditation on the maximalist commitments of many Writers at the time.

## **ANTICIPATIONS IN THE BREAKS OF INFRASTRUCTURES**

As Caro points out, the small spaces of so-called vest-pocket parks were opportunities apparently non-fit for the grand scope of administrators who only pursued projects large enough to, apparently, merit their attention. By 1961 such small scale spaces left aside from the politics of state recognition were hailed by Jane Jacobs: "in the sense that the lengths of fibers making up a rope are small."<sup>ccclxii</sup> In a striking echo of logic, Skeme points out that the subway car offered a robust opportunity for the deconstruction, reconstruction and remixing of spatial experience. The train itself functioned as one interpretation of socio-spatial logic, an interpretation we may contrast with that of the automobile, and Writers seized the opportunity to confront, overtake and elevate the means of articulating that interpretation. The underused spaces now became spaces for a highly detailed social praxis. Writers worked in contrast to the ordering logic that Jacobs also would critique,

An all too familiar kind of mind is obviously at work here: a mind seeing only disorder where a most intricate and unique order exists; the same kind of mind that sees only disorder in the life of the city streets, and itches to erase it, standardize it, suburbanize it.<sup>ccclxiii</sup>

The intricacies and small-scale fibers of the city's infrastructure were precisely the spaces that Skeme notes as the archival logic of the subway car which had been transformed by the Writers. Writers could categorically differentiate and operate the intimate details of a subway car to facilitate the structural appearance of their work. So called "Buff Spots" were risky: the hair grease from hundreds of rider's heads would slowly wear away an inscription. "Fame spots," located under the slotted paper advertisements, were valuable for the long-term:

I saw some photos of the trains that were thrown in the ocean. And some of those trains showed the fame spots, and so your joint survived all of that time through the fame spot because it was covered by advertisements.<sup>ccclxiv</sup>

As the @149st\_Graffiti Instagram account points out in a September 9, 2021 post:

Writers all had their favorite spots, fronts headlines, panels. WASP favored the vertical strip at the end of cars. In the mid to late 70s he had the spot on lock. 4s, 2s, 5s and and more. WASP RIP #salsa #subway graffiti #insides #tags #graffiti #salsacrew #mrschick #graffitinye #graffitinewyork [sic]

*Figure 57 Wasp Vertical. Screenshot from @149st\_graffiti <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTm8A-3ppPT/>*

Leveraging such micro-logical, liminal spaces far beyond their supposed use echoes a longer tradition in the aesthetic strategies of the Black Arts Movement. As Margo Natalie Crawford points out:

Comparative studies of the Harlem Renaissance and the BAM gain more depth when we acknowledge the power of anticipation. The musical definition of anticipation, in the epigraph of this chapter, embodies the spirit of the anticipatory flows between the movements. If anticipation is indeed "the early sounding of one or more tones of a succeeding chord to form a temporary dissonance," we need to learn to hear unexpected sounds in the space of improvisation that Fred Moten so aptly calls "in the break." We need to understand the full force of the role of anticipation in the improvisation and experimentation that continue to define black aesthetics.<sup>ccclxv</sup>

"In the break" of the infrastructure designed for his neighborhood's neglect, Skeme would find spaces that could survive the city's naive disposal of subway trains that carried works of master artists. This is not to mention the improvisation of using the subway car itself as a canvas for

aesthetic transmissions. In the infrastructure of New York, subway cars functioned as infrastructural relics from a system that Moses' automobile (and so upper class) focused development had patently ignored. While some scholars align subways and expressways, viewed together as a monolithic engine of municipal infrastructure driving a largely white-centric economy centralized in Manhattan, the transportation history of New York is more complex.<sup>ccclxvi</sup> Subways provided for economically disenfranchised demographics in ways that had been neglected by the focus on automobiles during the early and mid-century.

By the 1940's Moses would propose doubling the subway fare, which freed millions from the city's debt limit toward other public works, while creating a "financial burden that would fall heaviest on those of the city's people least able to bear it." The subway fare increase occurred in addition to raising taxes "that would fall heaviest on the city's poorest inhabitants," all while leaving taxes that would affect the wealthy "unraised and unmentioned."<sup>ccclxvii</sup> Such foundations of New York City's public space thus were built on the backs of the poor while "the new projects that could be financed as a result of this income would be *his* projects."<sup>ccclxviii</sup> Such trends only grew in the early 1950's under the Impellitteri administration (1950-1953), when the city "built eighty-eight miles of new highways, but not one mile of new subways" (795). During this administration--

with the exception of Staten Island--the city's last vast open spaces disappeared. New York filled up, assumed a new shape. The shape Moses dictated.

And Moses' forty months of absolute power enabled him to shape the city for far longer than forty months.<sup>ccclxix</sup>

Omitting the subway from his infrastructure of New York's spatial future, Moses had consolidated power under his infamous, and extraordinarily monied, bureaucratic fiefdom, the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (TBTA). In 1952 he would reject the idea of the TBTA taking over, and taking responsibility for, the New York Transit Authority. In 1953 the Transit Authority was instead created as an independent division. By 1965, following Moses' "strong pro-

auto and anti-transit biases,”<sup>ccclxx</sup> the TBTA would resist redirecting portions of their notoriously abundant surpluses to finance the Transit Authority. However, by 1968, Moses’ power waned, and with behind the scenes politicking, including that of Governor Rockefeller and Mayor John Lindsay, the TBTA was instead taken over by the newly created Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA).

In the creation of infrastructural gaps in that long history of neglect, however, Crawford claims much more than improvisation in the potency of an aesthetics of anticipation. In Crawford’s understanding, “Black anticipatory aesthetics is the art of not knowing what blackness will be; it is the art situated within the sustained dissonance of the earlier chords being heard, simultaneously, with the sounds that are just beginning to emerge” (38). Later she writes:

Anticipation is the force of giving birth to expression that has not been named and fully realized, but is nonetheless a part of you the entire time it is being formed. When I was growing up, my mother would warn, “I knew you before you were born.” Black aesthetics often has that texture of something that is most known and felt when it seems so elusive (such a “flash of the spirit”) that it seems to not be born yet. The word “renaissance” may mislead us with the notion of the rebirth of black aesthetics and culture; the Harlem Renaissance and the BAM are best understood as the *pregnant* state of anticipation. The more militant, anti-assimilation texts of the Harlem Renaissance knew “Black Arts” before it was born.<sup>ccclxxi</sup>

As the early 20th century Harlem Renaissance anticipated the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s’ and 1970s’, we might also look to Crawford’s interview with Gerald Williams, who suggests ways of thinking about how the Style Writing of the next decades may be anticipated by the “lettering” of his milieu. Here we see how, even in those early decades of Writing, the ubiquity of that first generation of “graffiti that was ever-present”:

Lettering, or incorporating written messages in the work, was adapted from Barbara Jones, who had used it in some of her pre-AfriCOBRA prints. It was fairly unique in ‘pure’ painting by African Americans, although several Europeans used it. The graffiti that was ever-present also had a lot to do with it. Of course, not all members used messaging, and some took it to astronomical heights.<sup>ccclxxii</sup>

While a cultural institution like BAM represents a clear context for the Writers' milieu, it only provides one aspect of understanding their practice. BAM offers the opportunity to situate the Writers work in relation to the work occurring in the 10-25 years prior to the appearance of artworks on the subway. Crawford refines this focus by specifically offering ways to consider connections between Style-Writing in the early 1980's and the broader presence of abstraction and lettering in the previous decades by artists such as Nelson Stevens, Ted Joans, and Larry Neal. BAM thus also links their work to the longer history of Harlem as a cultural center, and so provides a point of comparison between the 3 yard and other cultural centers such as the Apollo Theatre (where Mare's *Breaking Algo-Rhythms* was performed).

To situate the 3 Yard in Harlem's cultural history requires a careful distinction in our inquiry. While there are broad echoes (such as the use of lettering) between a movement like BAM and that of the Style Writers, it is challenging to find a simple pattern of direct allusions from the subway artists to the artists of a somewhat prior generation. Crawford's claims for lettering continue in a more detailed analysis of the Chicago based AfriCOBRA's descriptions of "mimesis at midpoint." For instance, as Ivor Miller points out, many Writers would reject the idea that they inherited their aesthetics from the *Wall of Respect*. Our understanding of the aesthetic ecology of these artists and artworks requires something beyond the idea of authorizing genealogies.

Within such a national context, here we see how Skeme's work and prior movements like BAM and AfriCOBRA shared a longer historical period whose structural boundaries had been established much earlier. Moreover, practices which manifested the transformation of conditions asserted by the state were practices continuing the impact of forces at work in a longer history of black nationalism. As Crawford points out

the black cultural revolution (black cultural nationalism) was an experimentation with new self-images and ways of walking through the *actual new world* that was anticipated. The Black Arts cultural workers were not waiting for the world to change; they were anticipating

change, believing that change could happen, and creating art that would, in the words of Ed Bullins, create a “sense of reality confronted” and “consciousness assaulted.”<sup>ccclxxiii</sup>

Style Writing’s preoccupation with aesthetics designed to confront reality at scale thus makes extraordinary sense: what did the scaled distribution of these works deliver if not “a sense of reality confronted”? While the experienced reality of the state’s public archive defined one version of the world persisting across the 20th century, the Writer’s demonstration of that same archive’s fragmentary nature provided “new self-images and ways of walking through the *actual new world* that was anticipated.” As for scale, we may consider the longer duration of Skeme’s career. If his work in the later 1970s and early 1980s confronted the mid-century U.S. state, his 21st century work continues to evoke an anticipatory aesthetic in what Crawford, if I understand her correctly, might call a “tidalectic” temporality.

The stylistic exchanges at the 3 yard provided social bonds that extended for decades. In 2013 Skeme would be joined by Chain 3 (whose diamond point style Skeme had studied in the 3 Yard decades before) and Khufu, together producing the 40th Anniversary Tribute Zulu train as members of the crew TMT (The Magnificent Team). Here the documentary process invokes a multi-century aesthetic(s) of anticipation and archivization, aligning the block letters of Cy Enfield’s 1964 title screen with the contemporary history of letter Writing appearing a few minutes later in the TMT video. Moreover, Skeme’s piece suggests the lineage of the Zulus at war with the precarious statehood of colonial forces in 1879.<sup>ccclxxiv</sup> All of this is not even to begin to mention the work as an invocation of the global hip hop foundation, the Universal Zulu Nation.

Returning to the question of “mimesis at midpoint,” I look to Crawford’s quote of AfriCobra’s description:

Mimesis at midpoint, design that marks the spot where the real and the unreal, the objective and the nonobjective, the plus and the minus meet. A point exactly between absolute abstractions and absolute naturalisms.<sup>ccclxxv</sup>

Here we might see the aesthetics of the TMT tribute train as the midpoint where the archives of two infrastructures meet again: the long history of anti-colonial struggles for spatial authority, and the persistently abstract stylistics of letters formed to radical spatiality.

*Figure 58 Zulu Screenshot from film Endfield, Cy, et al., directors. Zoulou: Zulu. Paramount Pictures, 1964.*

*Figure 59 Zulu screenshot II from film Endfield, Cy, et al., directors. Zoulou: Zulu. Paramount Pictures, 1964.*

*Figure 60 Skeme Zulu piece (no longer available online)*

## INTUITION AND ALGORITHM

Skeme points to the Writers' ability to rapidly intervene in the infrastructure of the public archive by thinking in a manner he likens to an intuitive algorithm, while yet rejecting a simple understanding of the term "algorithm" as applied to Style-Writing:

There was some degree of planning but not much required because there's not that many variables, right? The variables are time of day, number of trains in the yard, how far the trains were parked from the fence, how deep they went, activity in the yard, what day of the week it was. And so believe it or not man as you became an experienced writer, it was like an algorithm already in your head. You already knew, yo ok, it's Sunday, we need to go around 5:00 o'clock, I'm just using a silly example, but it wasn't like we sat down with a map and you know like Mr. Green, and Mr. White, and Mr. Pink, and Mr. Red. It was like yo man, you're gonna do this, you just knew. After you go so many times, yes, you go. It was in regards, a military type operation because you had to be stealthy, you had to be quiet, you had to be professional, you had to be on time, you had to clean up after yourself, you know, things that I was taught, again this goes back to the protocols were more important than the letters, the protocols allowed me to advance and stay in the game long enough for my letters to get right.<sup>cclxxvi</sup>

Skeme points to the unique sense of mathematics and computation that we should keep in mind as we seek to learn from the Style-Writers. As suggested by the research of Ron Eglash, we need not undermine the value of a given set of mathematical processes simply because the processes do not use the same, so to say, “integer” structures as mathematical practices do which we are used to in the Western academy. Moreover, as my committee chair Professor George Hutchinson pointed out to me in his extraordinarily thoughtful comments, “modern math and algebra are not ‘Eurocentric.’ They have partly Arab and Indian origins and are used all over the world.” Along these lines, Eglash and others show us how much more complex our mathematical approaches can be when we engage with these global mathematical cultures that Hutchinson also points us to. In other words, Skeme points us to the way that the “variables” of the “algorithm” are primarily cognitive constructs “in your head” rather than preoccupations with enumerated integer practices. It is important to note that Skeme’s use of the term “variable” is highly similar to its use in what Professor Hutchinson pointed out to me to be “standard mathematics.” The goal of this dissertation is to show an ecumenical sense of the range of mathematical insights that we can find modeled in Style-Writing’s discourses. For instance, Skeme’s use of the term “algorithm” seems symbolic, in fact he outright claims that it should not be understood too rigidly, in precisely such senses, we may consider the following two insights: 1) ultimately, all our mathematical languages are simply symbolic systems and so subject to the slippages of metaphor and 2) mathematical insights need not be rendered in overly systematically structured propositions for the mathematical tools to be significantly useful in providing explanatory power within the world. Skeme’s insight points us to the ways that all computational and mathematical creations are not only contingent human constructions, but, moreover, functionally operate as intuitive mechanisms. Recall again how Mare offers useful formulations: “Writers draw in Space” emphasizes the use of “muscle memory where we draw in space” (it is worth noting that elsewhere, echoing the radical complexity of Mare’s aesthetic thinking,

Skeme personally rejects any simplistic association with modernist abstraction). It is in this sense of the intuitive and social nature of the vocabularies used to operationalize mathematics that I argue we should understand Skeme's engagement with these themes. While he points to the fluidity of the terms above, Skeme's ability to innovate in the subtleties of these terms is not only reflective of a sense of humor, but as we saw with Mare's use of the term algo-rhythms, a specific way to address the critical history underlying those mathematical discourses as practiced in the urban history.

For instance, the case of a piece which one member of the Writer's community referred to as "one of the most recognized piece of all time" exemplifies the interconnections. Skeme describes it as both a "mechanical burner" and an "Alphabetical Algebraic Equation." In the screenshot below, we see another Writer's contemporary replica of not only the piece, but the moment of documentation by the photographer Henry Chalfant:

37 years ago, at the age of 16,... I painted this piece on a 40 ft high elevated platform way uptown in the boogie down Bronx. Finishing just before the crack of dawn, I had the presence of mind to call Henry Chalfant at home and alert him to the creation of what i swore was the best burner ever to grace NYC MTA steel;...without hesitation, Henry C. jumped out of bed, and slid down his fireman's pole to catch the latest alphabetical algebraic equation!! While i waited in the cover that was dawn" skeme. Throw back thursdays. *Instagram*. 2 november 2017. [https://www.instagram.com/p/ba\\_wcjxal82/?igshid=fjqtlu7tv5f](https://www.instagram.com/p/ba_wcjxal82/?igshid=fjqtlu7tv5f).

*Figure 61 | Skeme 3<sup>rd</sup> rail and tribute piece. No longer available online.*

Elsewhere Skeme notes, with extreme detail, the material history of this "alphabetical" type of "equation":

"the piece: krylon - copper fill-in, adobe, burnt orange, and aqua turquoise designs, leather brown outline, bone white highlights, dove grey plasma cloud with lime green bubbles and fire engine red outline ... me - cut off lee jeans, red suede clydes, white tubes, red and green bvds, white martin paint painters hat, fresh cut from jerry's den barber shop." (instagram july 29, 2017) [edit/check this text w/ instagram post]

When Skeme describes his use of Krylon copper in his piece we are viewing a moment of infrastructural surprise: spray can meets subway train. Here we see Skeme at the point where two moments of infrastructure unexpectedly collide, his notes here and elsewhere specifically designate a

series of commodities and infrastructural elements. Consider the immediacy with which Skeme describes not only the intuitions of the Style-Writers, but the rapid and coordinated movements of the Writers with broader infrastructures of city media networks beyond the limits of the subway system itself, as in the case of Chalfant. Here we see that documentary apparatuses and the Writers often worked in symbiosis.

As in the case of the “mechanical” piece above, Skeme would produce works and coordinate with influential documentarians when a new piece would enter circulation (“I had the presence of mind to call Henry Chalfant at home and alert him to the creation”). Doc would do the same for seminal leaders in the Writing community, like Dondi White, his mentor: “he would sit up on the roof, and I would call him [...] he would sit up on the roof and wait for them to go by, and then he’d call me that evening and be like ‘very good, I like what you guys are doing.’” Dondi and Chalfant in turn would relocate to viewing positions, engaging the content by respectively providing both reviews of skill and photography leading to archival imprints. Here we see how Dondi and Chalfant in turn would relocate to metropolitan viewing positions defined by the spatiality of the artwork. Moreover, we see how dynamic forms of socially networked content engagement result from the way the artworks moved through infrastructural positions: Dondi provides reviews and sharings of stylistic methods among younger artists, and Chalfant provides photography leading to documentary imprints for the broader aesthetic community.

Elsewhere, Kel 1st, notes how Dondi White’s style offered a means of localized distinction from crews like TFP:

Dondi had a style that was different than that of the TDS (The Death Squad) or TFP (The Fantastic Partners) and TMT (The Magnificent Team). A great deal of attention was given to the clean lines of his letters. The connections from one letter to another or to an arrow were unobstructed from adornment typical of some of the Bronx styles exhibited from TDS or TFP. He gave importance to the word and accented them with arrows or shapes that pushed the envelope of graffiti for new schools to follow.<sup>ccclxxvii</sup>

Kel emphasizes the abstracted interborough community effected by the expansive presence of his artworks: “oh my god I lived in Brooklyn! Everybody thought I was from Brooklyn! They’re like,

‘Oh you’re Kel from Brooklyn’ I’m like ‘nah, I’m from the Bronx, know what I’m sayin’ [shrugs] But I went to almost every yard in Brooklyn, Yard on Van Sicklen, the J Yard which is the East New York yard, I practically lived in that yard.”<sup>ccclxxviii</sup> Not only did the circulation of the subway network result in a public [directory] of styles, but Writers like Kel designed media for others across the city to use in their own practices (extending the tradition of a master artist ‘giving an outline’ to an apprentice):

“The way you got paint would depend on your status; you know what I’m saying. I got to a point where I didn’t have to rack [steal] paint. I didn’t have to go out and put myself in danger of stealing paint nothing like that, because I developed myself to such a point where I became influential in designing names and styles for other writers. And in turn for them getting those services or privileges from me, they’d have to give me paint.”<sup>ccclxxix</sup>

Now the spatiality available to the viewing position multiplied. At a minimum, subway platforms as a whole became key points of content engagement. Maximally, the spray can as stylus strategically activated any position in the city capable of seeing a train.

Others understand these stylistic methods not only in terms of engaging the city generally, but as a form of social interaction and confrontation. Consider Doc TC5’s statement during an artist talk with the Museum of Graffiti:

I was battling seven artists and I didn’t think that mathematically the style would cancel them all out so what I did was I pointed all the arrows inward on my piece and destroyed myself and everyone else at the same time. So I’m never going to do that again because you know I follow the rules of physics and engineering and all that other stuff so I can’t preach it and not live it. So that is why that is the one time you [inaudible] saw me do that, because you know that was the science behind that.

After his time as a youth, Doc would pass city exams and opt to work on the train lines for the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA). He and countless others understood the subway lines themselves as forms of content transmission by virtue of the social interactions made available by the contests of mathematical and scientific logic.



## CONCLUSION: QUESTIONS

In the spirit of knowing more about exactly how little we academics know about the subject of Style-Writing, I would like to end this dissertation by shifting my attention back to that littleness, attuned to the notes of questions rather than those of answers. Over the course of this dissertation, we have considered the work of Style-Writers in conjunction with urban infrastructure and technology, specifically considering ways that they engage with questions of computation both at the level of the content of their imaginings, and in the form of their logical structures. Of course, these two categories are not mutually exclusive.

However, it is one thing to say that Rammellzee identified as an equation, and quite another to say that he designed cultural products capable of somehow operating the logical mechanisms of equations. In chapters 3 and 4 (and throughout the dissertation) I attempted to point to the way that Style-Writing calls for a unique understanding of aesthetics, one which undermines our ability to draw firm lines between the apparently hypothetical worlds of diegetic content and apparently factual worlds of documentary content. Their literature rarely can be understood as simply fictional or nonfictional: Rammellzee provides an excellent study in this regard, pointing us to the effervescent boundaries between the world of his mythic figures and the personas using the subway.

In chapter 6, we saw the way that Kase II's work can be considered through the perspectives of mathematicians and computer scientists, specifically looking to a curriculum collection "Math is a Verb." The title of that collection points us again to the question of supposedly mutually exclusive categories of knowledge: numbers and words.<sup>ccclxxx</sup> In that collection, we saw Barta, Eglash, Barkely and Lyles connect the question of Style-Writing letter-shapes to the "task of "curve-fitting"; here they noted that the challenge of fitting "real-world data to a mathematical model is an enormous area within professional applied mathematics and typically involves statistical measures to quantify

‘goodness of fit.’<sup>”ccclxxxi</sup> Next, we saw how Babbit, Lyles and Eglash also inquired about curve-fitting in terms of the question of anti-aliasing and computational graphics. There, I asked if we might reflect on Kase II’s “Computer Style” as a vision for further exploration of these questions. As Babbit, Lyles and Eglash point out, the ways that Navajo weavers use algorithms require integer systems different from that of the Cartesian grid. In many commonplace mathematics we are accustomed to the symmetry of units afforded by the processes of creating a rectilinear grid. In the case of the Navajo weavers, the researchers found that they “could not simply map each individual weave to integer intersections on a Cartesian grid,” however, this problem was addressed when they could “simply map the weave into non-integer spaces between the grid intersections.” Similarly, I argue, Kase II created Computer Style lettering as a step beyond the “coordinate” system (which he associates with Wildstyle). Here he emphasized that his use of “a step-formulated way” allowed, uniquely, for a system of partition construction resulting from his own autonomy: “It’s just sectioned off the way I want. Like if I take a knife and cut it, and slice, you know, I’ll slice it to my own section.”

Then in chapter 7, I argued that our sense of these “step-formulated” and “algorithmic” styles should be understood in context of Skeme’s claims for Style-Writing teams that functioned together according to an “algorithm already in your head.” Thus, these mathematical and computational practices could be understood in an echo of Mare’s claim that Style-Writers rely on “muscle memory where we draw in space.” We could consider these senses of the Writers’ practice as ones which often articulate mathematics and computations beyond the methods we are used to. Specifically, the ethereal and cognitive practice of mathematics and computation is seen to be a highly embodied and social phenomenon (we might ask, is mathematics a “fictional,” or a “non-fictional,” style of writing numbers?). Thus, we may more deeply read Skeme’s claim for an “Alphabetical Algebraic Equation” sent from the Bronx through the city (see ch. 7). Not only might

the “mechanical burner” artwork provide operable forms of mathematical mechanics, but the artist produced the piece so that it would function among a network of his peers who also considered their practice in such technologically and mathematically minded terms. How might we characterize those functions? Surveying the many Styles of New York Subway Writers, we would never produce a complete characterization, but we may focus on a few artists who shared ideas of Style-Writing and technology here. These artists themselves, we shall see, employed such ideas as one of many—for instance, Skeme brings us to a consideration of the intersection of, among other things, funk and technology.

The technological use of the subway network echoes questions from throughout the dissertation, specifically an inquiry into Keller Easterling’s idea of the “software” of urban space: “Space doesn’t have to be digitally enhanced to carry information. The repeatable formulas or recipes for space-making described in the book are something akin to software—an operating system for shaping the city. And that operating system can be hacked with forms that act like a switch or a multiplier—forms that establish an interplay between spatial variables.” How might we consider the Style-Writer’s use of subway networks in these terms? Inspired by Mare’s comparison of the subway network to the internet, and Kase II’s claim to Write a “computer style” language, how might we understand, for instance, that the subway functioned somewhat like a distributed network of computers, offering in the integration of the circuits of coded signals on the trains, the technological capacity for processing the information of the Style-Writers.

I intentionally leave this idea broad and open-ended, seeking to align with the enigmatic scope of technological horizons seen by the Style-Writers discussed above. In 2022, at the time of writing this dissertation, the network characteristics that we note above, for instance, might be ones which alert to questions of, for instance, contemporary distributed forms of cloud computing. We may also sense echoes of the continuities between analog and digital computers as seen in the early

space race: when computer mainframes (such as Fortran) dawned in the mid-century U.S., of course, the digital machinery was most vividly imbricated in the analog machinery of, for instance, punch cards or desk calculators used by the mainframe's supervisory scientists.

As made famous in the film *Hidden Figures*, for instance, we see the example of the early “human computers” such as Katherine P. Johnson, Mary Jackson and Dorothy Vaughan, who represent the system's human catalysts, internally capable of evaluating the success of the machine. While some shake their fists at the seemingly increasing subsumption of human experiences into the digital realm, we may just as well say that the “digital realm” is only being subsumed further into the human's world. In other words, the story of figures like Katherine P. Johnson, Mary Jackson and Dorothy Vaughan, makes us ask a question of that dilemma in cybernetics: how would we know in which direction the subsuming flows? This point, of course, is only to connect and reiterate insights more in the long history of feminist and afro-futurist research in cybernetics. As Halsey and Young noted above (see chapters 1 and 3) the Style-Writer's practice activates a “prosthetic” and “haptic” (in addition to “ocular”) relationship to their medium (here to the subway train). This process effectively creates a relationship not only between urban space and the Writer, but more specifically, between the Writer and the metropolitan informatic systems which dictate, for instance, systems of housing and transportation (see chapter 5). Even more specifically, the Writer not only relates to the spatial structures of relatively non-malleable and highly concrete processing mechanics (such as Triborough Bridge) and, by contrast, the relatively malleable and highly fluid processing mechanisms of the electrified subway network. Itself, in fact, a conglomeration of distinct networks such as the IRT and BMT, with many shared nodes, such as the 149<sup>th</sup> street concourse station, or the Lenox station 3 train yard in Harlem.

In turn, the electrification of the subway circuits provides a catalyst for considering the open-ended possibilities: how might an “internet architecture” made up of Writers who might create

and experiment with “algorithms” in a “computer style”? The question becomes more interesting when we recall that, as discussed throughout the dissertation, the timing of the circuits (as well as the dimensions of the medium) recursively determined not simply the physical shapes of letters, but the logical sequences used to execute the letters. We will see that these features provide many of the conditions hoped for by information scientists (such as Alan Turing) who sought to define the idea and theoretical possibility of an intelligent machine more clearly. While many components we would expect to be “digitally enhanced” remain decisively “analog,” we might note that in the absence of a personal computers’ micro-processor, the recursive routing systems of the subway functioned much like the experimental ideas of a macro-processing network.

## INPUT AND OUTPUT INFORMATION: ASKING QUESTIONS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FROM THE INSIGHTS OF THE STYLE-WRITERS

I would like to conclude this dissertation by continuing the focus on the possibilities of questions, by turning the emphasis to disciplinary problems. Steven Jackson, of Cornell's Information Science department, suggested "Good fields need good problems. Good fields are actually defined by their problems, not by their methods, not by their theories." From the perspective of literary studies how might we continue our disciplinary growth by asking ourselves, which questions have we neglected? Which questions have we assumed lie outside our range of reflections or academic prerogative?

Many scholars have applied methods and technologies from computer science to literary aesthetics and humanist studies more broadly; take for example the article *How we do things with words: Analyzing text as social and cultural data* (Dong Nguyen, Maria Liakata, Simon DeDeo, Jacob Eisenstein, David Mimno, Rebekah Tromble, and Jane Winters, 2019). They point out that the humanities and computational methods might engage with each other in the recursive process of, citing Piper, "further discovery in two directions":

For some in the humanities, validation takes the form of close reading, not designed to confirm whether the model output is correct, but to present what Piper [2015, pp. 67-68] refers to as a form of "further discovery in two directions". Model outputs tell us something about the texts, while a close reading of the texts alongside those outputs tells us something about the models that can be used for more effective model building. Applying this circular, iterative process to 450 18th-century novels written in three languages, Piper was able to uncover a new form of "conversional novel" that was not previously captured in "literary history's received critical categories" [Piper, 2015, p. 92].

Along similar lines, we can subject both the machine-generated output and the human annotations to another round of content validation. That is, take a stratified random sample, selecting observations from the full range of scores, and ask: Do these make sense in light of the systematized concept? If not, what seems to be missing? Or is something extraneous being captured? This is primarily a qualitative process that requires returning to theory and interrogating the systematized concept, indicators, and scores together. This type of validation is rarely done in NLP, but it is especially important when it is difficult to assess what drives a given machine learning model. If there is a mismatch between the scores and systematized concept at this stage, the

codebook may need to be adjusted, human coders retrained, more training data prepared, algorithms adjusted, or in some instances, even a new analytical method adopted.<sup>ccclxxxii</sup>

Here, the computational and humanities models exist in a recursive symbiosis, providing mutual insights which proceed in “two directions” of circulation so that the information produced from each model can engage with the information produced by the other. The stability of this cycle of engagement is highly precarious, as the authors point out that in the case of data processing,

Unfortunately, these steps tend to be underreported, but documenting the pre-processing choices made is essential and is analogous to recording the decisions taken during the production of a scholarly edition or protocols in biomedical research. Data may also vary enormously in quality, depending on how it has been generated. Many historians, for example, work with text produced from an analogue original using Optical Character Recognition (OCR). Often, there will be limited information available regarding the accuracy of the OCR, and the degree of accuracy may even vary within a single corpus (e.g. where digitized text has been produced over a period of years, and the software has gradually improved). The first step, then, is to try to correct for common OCR errors. These will vary depending on the type of text, the date at which the ‘original’ was produced, and the nature of the font and typesetting.

One step that almost everyone takes is to tokenize the original character sequence into the words and word-like units. Tokenization is a more subtle and more powerful process than people expect. It is often done using regular expressions or scripts that have been circulating within the NLP community. Tokenization heuristics, however, can be badly confused by emoticons, creative orthography (e.g., U\$A, sh!t), and missing whitespace. Multi-word terms are also challenging. Treating them as a single unit can dramatically alter the patterns in text. Many words that are individually ambiguous have clear, unmistakable meanings as terms, like “black hole” or “European Union”. However, deciding what constitutes a multi-word term is a difficult problem. In writing systems like Chinese, tokenization is a research problem in its own right.

Beyond tokenization, common steps include lowercasing, removing punctuation, stemming (removing suffixes), lemmatization (converting inflections to a base lemma), and normalization, which has never been clearly defined, but often includes grouping abbreviations like “U.S.A.” and “USA”, ordinals like “1st” and “first”, and variant spellings like “nooooo”. The main goal of these steps is to improve the ratio of tokens (individual occurrences) to types (the distinct things in a corpus). Each step requires making additional assumptions about which distinctions are relevant: is “apple” different from “Apple”? Is “burnt” different from “burned”? Is “cool” different from “cooooo”? Sometimes these steps can actively hide useful patterns, like social meaning [Eisenstein, 2013]. Some of us therefore try to do as little modification as possible.<sup>ccclxxxiii</sup>

We might imagine the challenges of any attempt to do justice to Style-Writing in any of these computational methods.<sup>ccclxxxiv</sup> The questions of the curve-fitting algorithms used in optical character recognition provide fecund engagements with, for instance, the questions of anti-aliasing offered by a reflection on Kase II’s computer style. From there, we may also share in a question asked by Nguyen et. al., about the circular relationship between the precarious question of data processing, and that of machine learning:

When human-coded data are used to validate machine learning algorithms, the reliability of the human-coded data is even more important. Disagreement between annotators can signal weaknesses of the annotation scheme, or highlight the inherent ambiguity in what we are trying to measure. Disagreement itself can be meaningful and can be integrated in subsequent analyses [Aroyo and Welty, 2013, Demeester et al., 2016].<sup>cclxxxv</sup>

In this spirit, I would like to conclude by asking about ways that literary studies may engage with those of information science.

## THE IMITATION GAME

A long-time subject in information science, artificial intelligence, presents interesting questions, for the literary researcher specifically: such as the popularly named Turing test, perhaps more accurately referred to as *The Imitation Game* (the first section of Turing's 1950 article *Computing Machinery and Intelligence* in *Mind: A Quarterly Review*):

### 1. *The Imitation Game*

I PROPOSE to consider the question, 'Can machines think?' This should begin with definitions of the meaning of the terms 'machine' and 'think'. The definitions might be framed so as to reflect so far as possible the normal use of the words, but this attitude is dangerous. If the meaning of the words 'machine' and 'think' are to be found by examining how they are commonly used it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the meaning and the answer to the question, 'Can machines think?' is to be sought in a statistical survey such as a Gallup poll. But this is absurd. Instead of attempting such a definition I shall replace the question by another, which is closely related to it and is expressed in relatively unambiguous words.

The new form of the problem can be described in terms of a game which we call the 'imitation game'. It is played with three people, a man (A), a woman (B), and an interrogator (C) who may be of either sex. The interrogator stays in a room apart from the other two. The object of the game for the interrogator is to determine which of the other two is the man and which is the woman. He knows them by labels X and Y, and at the end of the game he says either 'X is A and Y is B' or 'X is B and Y is A'. The interrogator is allowed to put questions to A and B thus:

C: Will X please tell me the length of his or her hair?

Now suppose X is actually A, then A must answer. It is A's object in the game to try and cause C to make the wrong identification. His answer might therefore be

'My hair is shingled, and the longest strands are about nine inches long.'

In order that tones of voice may not help the interrogator the answers should be written, or better still, typewritten. The ideal arrangement is to have a teleprinter communicating between the two rooms. Alternatively the question and answers can be repeated by an intermediary. The object of the game for the third player (B) is to help the interrogator. The best strategy for her is probably to give truthful answers. She can add such things as 'I am the woman, don't listen to him!' to her answers, but it will avail nothing as the man can make similar remarks.

We now ask the question, 'What will happen when a machine takes the part of A in this game?' Will the interrogator decide wrongly as often when the game is played like this as he does when the game is played between a man and a woman? These questions replace our original, 'Can machines think?'<sup>ccclxxxvi</sup>

We may see that Turing's question of artificial intelligence calls on many of the analytical tools of literary studies and, of course, the humanities in general: the idea of a persuasively scripted fictional device has at least as long a scholarly history as that of *deus ex machina*, an early Greek critique of mechanistic fiction. Turing meditates on the question: "Can machines think?":

We may now consider again the point raised at the end of §3. It was suggested tentatively that the question, 'Can machines think?' should be replaced by 'Are there imaginable digital computers which would do well in the imitation game?' If we wish we can make this superficially more general and ask 'Are there discrete state machines which would do well?' But in view of the universality property we see that either of these questions is equivalent to this, 'Let us fix our attention on one particular digital computer *C*. Is it true that by modifying this computer to have an adequate storage, suitably increasing its speed of action, and providing it with an appropriate programme, *C* can be made to play satisfactorily the part of *A* in the imitation game, the part of *B* being taken by a man?'<sup>ccclxxxvii</sup>

Insofar as various agents (human or computer) must "be made to play satisfactorily" the part of a believable (and gendered) human, the Turing test depends as much on the persuasive fiction of the human as it does on the architecture of the computations which are hypothesized in service of those figures. In that regard, the Turing test may be understood as a test of aesthetics as much as a test of computation. Indeed, the limits of the fictions and nonfictions of "the human" determines the idea of computation in this scenario. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Turing's game would be remembered by Stephen Guastello's *Human Factors Engineering* (2014) textbook, which paraphrases the question as one of "gibberish":

The Turing test (Turing, 1963) specified a hypothetical procedure by which one could discern whether a system was truly intelligent or just artificially intelligent. Two curtains would be set up in a large room. Behind one curtain would be a computer. Behind the other would be a human. Both entities would receive a question through a mail slot in the curtain. Both would type their responses to the person who asked the question. If the question were sophisticated enough so that neither the human nor artificial source could answer, the human would reply that he or she did not know the answer, whereas the artificial source would respond in gibberish.

Thus, an intelligent system required, at the very least, a modicum of self-awareness. Eventually, an element of self-awareness was introduced by the error diagnosis in the compiler program. Programming finesse eventually integrated the error reports into the bodies of shell programs and latter-day programs. Computer systems eventually acquired diagnostic programs (essentially expert systems) to help repairers make repairs, and help programs for the users. Did these advances bring self-awareness to the system? Not by a long shot, but they were useful steps forward from the vantage point of both theory and usability.<sup>ccclxxxviii</sup>

Let us proceed with a line of questions which extends that thought experiment, by continuing inquiries from the kinds of perspectives opened by subway Style-Writers. If the calculation of Mare's dancers, the equation of Rammellzee's identity, the computer style of Kase II's Writing, or the algorithms of Skeme, could in some way be "read" by some computerized robot, then the mathematical, technological and computational strategies of such Style-Writers might offer us insights into the kinds of question we can apply in this scenario to the questions of artificial intelligence. If a robot could read Style-Writing, what would that mean? Could it produce Style-Writing? How might this process of reading relate to the broader computational discourses which Writers offered?

In more pointed terms: if a Style-Writer and an OCR computer each "read" a series of Style-Writers' works and then were tasked with rendering the letters of their own name behind Turing's curtain, how would we distinguish the one from the other when we see the resulting production but the authors remain hidden? Would the "gibberish" of the computer—poorly fictionalized replies to an interrogator which make no sense given the context—provide a method of distinction from the artistic Writing? Moreover, how might we distinguish the erroneous mechanical responses, in Guastello's words, the "gibberish"), from the Stylized mechanics of the Writer? Would the errors be in those letters which appeared too straight and too clean, demonstrating a precision beyond the capability of the apparent human? As an alternative, some might ask: would the errors perhaps not be in those letters which appeared too chaotic and underdetermined, so that the apparent human would find it lacking? How might we distinguish the nonsense of "gibberish" responses from styles we simply cannot read? Indeed, this question is part of Turing's logical subtext with the presentation of the precarious questions of performative characterization, for instance, gendered legibility and hair-length.

## FLUENCY AND FUNK

Not only must the robot above execute the correct series of commands, it must also produce legible information variably designed for the circumstances of the user—as Guastello’s interpretation of Turing points out, the computer would fail by producing “gibberish.” In other words, of course, the fluency required of a truly artificial intelligence depends not only on the dynamic linguistic logic of the machine’s perfectly configured circuitry, but the re-expression of that logic in the form of information interpretable by the user. In many ways the ultimate achievement of user-facing legibility determines the configuration of the computer’s operating logic (this remains perhaps even more true if the user is a computer). Indeed a degree of supposed “gibberish” and errors appropriate to a computer behind the curtain would be, Turing himself points out, according to some lines of thinking, the only details which could signal a uniquely human fluency beyond that of a machine. In turn, the robot’s moments of autonomy are in fact also understandable as operative moments in the digitized logical parameters of the chosen media (in this case, ostensibly, the integrated circuitry of the microprocessor).

How might we re-read the supposed errors of information design as potential sites of fluency? Turing reflects on that decision:

Most of the programmes which we can put into the machine will result in its doing something that we cannot make sense of at all, or which we regard as completely random behaviour. Intelligent behaviour presumably consists in a departure from the completely disciplined behaviour involved in computation, but a rather slight one, which does not give rise to random behaviour, or to pointless repetitive loops.<sup>ccclxxxix</sup>

Not only do these questions of the status of “intelligence” loosely echo the kinds of evaluations some may apply to Style-Writing, but they invite us into the consideration of a specific question

addressed by Jay “Skeme” Ali. In, for instance, his description of Chain 3’s “diamond style” he notes the appearance of a “funky letter style”:

[was] one of my first exposures to what is called the “diamond-point style,” a simple, funky letter style that was made up and perfected by Chain 3 [a.k.a. T-Bag] on the handball court in the back of the 3 yard. When I saw Chain 3’s piece, I just stood there for an hour staring at it and studying it.<sup>cccc</sup>

First, we may note that the style could be shared (perhaps imperfectly, but still successfully and meaningfully) in sociable exchange: this means that “funky” did not simply mean illegible chaos.

Wildstyle, in Jack Stewart’s terms, presents a uniquely intense case for this point in our analysis: “A letter style that features highly fractured forms that seem to bounce off one another at oblique angles.” Constellations of oblique, rather than right angles, may provide a starting, although not an ending, point for thinking about Skeme’s meaning of funk in this context. At the same time, funk may be contrasted with rigidly symmetrical letter geometries,

If you look at Fuzz’s pieces, as a white dude, his shit had a little flair to it. But a lot of white dudes didn’t have it: their style was less rhythmic, a little stiffer, and largely based on straight letters. Only a couple of white dudes broke the barrier—writers like Billy 167. Say you have a couple of white friends but only one of them can dance: it’s the same thing with writing. Some white dudes had the same feel to their work as the black dudes, and it came across in their art. Billy was an example of that. If you looked at black and Hispanic writers, you could see the difference in painting and color choices reflected in their work. Take Mitch 77’s stuff for example: I don’t mean this in a derogatory manner, but it has a Puerto Rican look due to his color choices, and perhaps also the patterns and influences when he was growing up. I’m not saying one is better than the other, just that I can see the differences in the way distinct racial groups painted back then. (p. 136 in Chalfant and Jenkins 2014)

We will return to the question of race that Skeme brings up, but, for the moment, let us reflect on the fact that more rhythmic styles (of which funk must of course be considered one) featured a contrast to the styles which were “a litter stiffer, and largely based on straight letters.” Straight and stiff letters could, of course be understood in a number of ways, one of them would be to reflect on the fact that straight and stiff right angles exemplify the logic of the Cartesian coordinate system, which varies, for instance, with other systems with variable integer divisions. A letter could be said to be funky, to some degree, when the styles offer a non-rigid, rhythmic series of angles in its stylus shape and stroke sequence.

This means that funk may lead us to thinking of changes to the possibilities of our rhythmic counting systems: while a stiff 4/4 measure bases its counting system in the symmetry of its integer-identified beats, we might imagine, with the help of funk, of course, a counting system where integers may have oblique relationships to each other, such that we need not imagine extreme symmetry. Stiffness and symmetry imply pieces of information which can be computed in measurable reference to each other, and so understood in a propositional system, thus also in reference to a programmable series. However, the aesthetics of funk points to a kind of sociable flexibility in the structure of integers, and so informatics, of the rhythmic structure.

Recalling Coleman's claim for Afrofuturist technologies, we might note several members of the legendary musical group, P-funk, have noted the unique way that funk manipulates and invents counting structures in the "metronomical" sense, suggests Danny Bedrosian referring to bass P-Funk bass player Cordell 'Boogie' Mosson:

Bedrosian explains, "Cordell 'Boogie' Mosson, who was a long-time bass player in Parliament Funkadelic, used to describe the pocket in terms of looking at the period of a musical measure on a graph, where there are a million places that you can land the beat within the parameters of that actual measure, without being too early or too late. The way that you can stretch the time between beats to the point where, with P-Funk music specifically, the beat comes at the last possible moment before it would be considered late, almost to the point where it is late to someone who is very metronomical. As long as you can maintain that within each beat, it can be a really beautiful pocket that transports people to places that they've never gone to before — both the audience and musicians. It really does have a mathematical and a spiritual side to it."<sup>cccxc</sup>

Such comments echo Mare's claims the integration of spirit and mathematics in practice of art. The pocket also echoes Skeme and Mare's claims for intuition and muscle memory. Here an artist's "feel" provides more dynamic precision than the "metronomic" mechanisms, the ergonomics of the "hips" and the "fingers" allow P-Funk's Bernie Worrell to find such unique places to position the rhythm's numbers that it offered a "trademark" style:

The pocket is completely 100% feel oriented," says Danny, and a lot of P-Funk's trademark rhythms can be traced to the rhythmic feel of one of the band's originators — and Danny's personal mentor — Bernie Worrell. "Bernie was the original keyboard player for Parliament Funkadelic, and he is cited as the chief architect of the type of pocket that P-Funk works with. Cordell 'Boogie' Mosson pointed to Bernie as the one who really started it all for them in terms of how they looked at the pocket: where to put the one and where to put the back beat. With Bernie, it all literally came from his hips and his fingers — how he moved, and how he felt each note. (ibid)

We may begin to consider the ways that the Writers’ “fingers” articulated the possibility of their own “integer structures.” An anthropologist at San Francisco State University, Brad Erickson provides research offering a similar point regarding the variable rhythmic structure of the spacing of the beat’s integers:

Clinton’s observation that “y’all funk...sounds like it got a three on it,” referring to the third beat, is not a compliment. In rhythmic music, the beat is the place where you probably tap your feet. In the standard four-beat measure, the *one* or *downbeat* is the first and most emphasized beat in the measure. Secondary emphasis is given to the third beat or the *three* and, in rock music, the *backbeat*, or second and fourth beats are stressed with snare-drum hits. In funk music, the rhythm section emphasizes *the one* above all else, often leaving the other beats to fend for themselves. For example, the funk bassist will hit the one precisely yet often displace the other beats with syncopated or off-beat phrasing. As guitars, keyboards, horns, and singers push and pull against the rhythm, the groove you experience might be your bodily sense of the beat oscillating in and out of phase. In funk, *the one* is all-important both as a musicological and mythical place of origin (Smith) and as the key to liberation:

Ready or not here we come  
Getting down on the one which we believe in Here’s my chance to dance my way  
Out of my constrictions

In “P-Funk,” Clinton seizes control of the airwaves. The gesture of taking power is repeated in the song “Mothership Connection (Star Child),” beginning to establish a pattern of militant gestures articulating black mastery in the face of white dominance, in these cases, of both contemporary and ancient technology:

Well, all right, Star Child  
Citizens of the universe, recording angels We have returned to claim the pyramids<sup>cccxcii</sup>

In this sense, some see funk and hip hop as a form of creative “balance between the machine and human,” as states Guillaume Dupit, cited by Ystasha Womack’s *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*:

“Funk music is the perfect way to explain Afrofuturism,” says Guillaume Dupit. Dupit, a French-born musician, wrote his doctoral music thesis on funk and Clinton. Immersed in the French jazz scene, he was intrigued by funk’s creation. He compares the repetition in funk to the laced sampling in hip-hop as a machine-meets-man duality. “It’s like if you take a sample, the same way you can in hip-hop, you play it and play it, and repeat it,” he says. “In the composition of the funk, you take a sample and you play it thirty minutes or four hours with instruments. A lot of their songs have the same construction. The same drumbeat, just small variations. And yet, the idea of repetition in funk is machine-like.”

He continues, “You can’t reproduce the notion of the groove with a machine. If you take the same sample and repeat it, it’s not the same result if you play it with instruments. It’s like science fiction, this balance between the machine and human. I think the point of replaying a sample with an instrument, something that can be relayed by a machine is really specific and hard to replicate. When you see Bootsy Collins playing his bass, it’s not playing soul or jazz or rock. It’s like a machine playing a sample, with micro variations and a totally different feel.

“They create something that the machine can’t reproduce. Machines are supposed to do that. Machines are supposed to take a sample and replay it, but the results aren’t the same,” says Dupit.<sup>ccxcxciii</sup>

With this in mind, let us revisit our version of the imitation game. If, as, Dupit claims, it were true that machines cannot replicate the uniquely machine-like characteristics of funk, how would we know that they had such limits? Conversely, how might an understanding of funk in this sense change our mathematical suppositions which guided our imitating robot? However, I would like to pause on another variation of the question: why should funk be specifically heroized in reference to an anti-machinic set of analytical values? Why would we need to heroize the failure of the AI, rather than the genius of an artist who could Write the successfully funky code? We may ourselves turn back to the question in terms of Style-Writing.

## A TALE OF A FEW INFINITIES AND THE QUESTION OF THE CHINESE

### SPEAKING ROBOT

Recall the earlier thought experiment: not only would a computer need to read the funky Style-Writing, the computer would need to then produce its own. This emphasizes the points in Turing's *Imitation Game* which suggests that "electricity cannot be of theoretical importance" in this question in the first place:

The fact that Babbage's Analytical Engine was to be entirely mechanical will help us to rid ourselves of a superstition. Importance is often attached to the fact that modern digital computers are electrical, and that the nervous system also is electrical. Since Babbage's machine was not electrical, and since all digital computers are in a sense equivalent, we see that this use of electricity cannot be of theoretical importance. Of course electricity usually comes in where fast signaling is concerned, so that it is not surprising that we find it in both these connections. In the nervous system chemical phenomena are at least as important as electrical. In certain computers the storage system is mainly acoustic. The feature of using electricity is thus seen to be only a very superficial similarity. If we wish to find such similarities we should look rather for mathematical analogies of function.<sup>cccxciv</sup>

Not only is the "feature of using electricity" finally "trivial," but that one would communicate with the computer through a "teleprinter communicating between the two rooms":

In order that tones of voice may not help the interrogator the answers should be written, or better still, typewritten. The ideal arrangement is to have a teleprinter communicating between the two rooms. Alternatively the question and answers can be repeated by an intermediary. The object of the game for the third player (B) is to help the interrogator.<sup>cccxcv</sup>

This means that it would need to operate with the ability to specifically process a variable and limited series of not simply visible, but more importantly, informatically designed phenomena. With the discussion of funk in mind, we might arrive at the question, how would the computer read and in turn produce the funky letter styles?

Let us turn to some basic historical pretexts for the idea of artificial intelligence which set the stage for this question before proceeding. Nguyen et. al.'s article *How we do things with words*, discussed above, is of course a nod to J.L. Austin's *How to do Things with Words* (1962). Another philosopher

under the influence of Austin, John Searle, also engaged with AI theory in an extension of Turing's scenario, as discussed in Teodor Negru's 2013 paper "Intentionality and Background: Searle and Dreyfus against Classical AI Theory" Summarizing a Turing-like question, Negru refers to Searle's argument that

it is inadequate to say that the brain processes information but rather that "it is a specific biological organ and its specific neurobiological processes cause specific forms of intentionality" (Searle, 1992, p. 226).

Searle's conclusion is that formal programs can be neither constitutive nor sufficient to produce mental phenomena.<sup>cccxi</sup>

Searle's claim that phenomena we can call "mental" (as an analog for intelligence) called for the thought experiment where we are asked to reflect on the distinction between the cognitive processes of 1) someone (like an AI) who simply uses a set of rules to interact using the symbols of foreign language (without ever have knowledge of the language), and 2) a native speaker of the language, explains Negru (quoting Searle):

a person considered to have no knowledge of Chinese is locked in a room with a rulebook by means of which s/he can answer any question in Chinese. This rulebook is so accurate that it not only contains all the answers but the answers it offers "are indistinguishable from those of a native Chinese speaker." (Searle, 1984, p. 32) Therefore, the requirement of the Turing test is fully met, i.e., the person in the room behaves as if s/he were a highly competent user of Chinese. Similarly, the requirement of a formal system is met, the answers being given only following the syntactic rules of the symbols used, their meaning remaining totally unknown to the user locked in the room. However, this is the starting point of Searle's objection: nowhere in the process of syntactic use of Chinese ideograms occurs the possibility of understanding their meaning, i.e., understanding their semantic content. In other words, the formal character of computer programs unfolds only syntactic sequences, without the possibility of inferring the interpretation or assignment of meanings to symbols thereto.

"What goes for Chinese goes for other forms of cognition as well. Just manipulating the symbols is not by itself enough to guarantee cognition, perception, understanding, thinking and so forth."<sup>cccxii</sup>

In some ways, Searle's argument extends and reiterates the longer questions of AI which might be traced to Turing's original point: simply executing tasks according to rules (as a computer does) may not achieve what we hope for in delivering an AI truly competent in the forms of intelligence necessary for robust human, and, recursively, humanoid and beyond, ecologies.<sup>cccxcviii</sup>

The influential 21<sup>st</sup> century philosopher of phenomenology and computer science, Hubert Dreyfus also addressed these questions of AI, asking about, in Negru's terms, "a difference between

the information processed by a computer and the information processed by its natural analogue.”

Negru cites Dreyfus’ claim that

It is not processing the information which is processed by the simulated analogue, but entirely different information concerning the physical or chemical properties of the analogue. Thus the strong claim that every form of information can be processed by a digital computer is misleading. One can only show that for any given type of information a digital computer can in principle be programmed to simulate a device which can process that information (Dreyfus, 1972, p. 107).<sup>ccccix</sup>

The problem of the simulation rather than the process, again echoes the problem of the ability of AI technologies to model the human mind. Let us ask here, how would we judge the progress of technology for AI. Imagine that in the future we use a perfect supercomputer to model the billions of neurons and synapses of the human mind (Turing reflects on such details reflecting on, in his words the “nervous system”). Even then, we only have the apparatus, but not a clear strategy for activating that apparatus effectively. Given the chaotic possibilities of organizing, and manipulating the many coordinated points of data, how would we know how much of the human's cognitive processes are even effectively mapped?

This question is different from asking: “could we map the chaos of the human mind.” Turing’s comments (such as those on “informal behavior”) also address a similar question regarding the ability of computers to parallel the, apparently, uniquely human of ability of improvisation. Reflecting on that idea, we may by extension also consider that many of the more "human" patterns like emotions etc. are so often semi-random, and cannot be easily conceptualized in a way that can be measured and modeled. If we take the statement in regards to artificial intelligence, at least one fundamental point seems inescapable. Since its components do not activate and synchronize without human influence, an artificially constructed system will always be subject to an integrative structure which aligns with the activities of the human’s conceptual processes, as well as their mental model of the system as a whole.<sup>cd</sup>

However, this brings me to my question: in the scenario, which set of criteria could we use to measure non-human intelligence which is not also a set of criteria structured according to human models of thought? Again, if there was an intelligent AI, how would we be able to recognize that intelligence, if it were in fact fundamentally differentiated from human thinking?<sup>cdi</sup> If so, might there not be intelligent processes which remain highly opaque to human perception, appearing only (almost necessarily) as the chaotic patterns we (as humans) deem non-intelligent?<sup>cdii</sup>

This variety of questioning of course is inspired by many of Turing's foundational concepts and questions in *Imitation Game*. Let us reflect on one subtlety that some versions of AI research (such as Searle's Chinese speaking robot) have left unattended. Turing writes:

We have thus divided our problem into two parts. The child-programme and the education process. These two remain very closely connected. We cannot expect to find a good child-machine at the first attempt. One must experiment with teaching one such machine and see how well it learns. One can then try another and see if it is better or worse. There is an obvious connection between this process and evolution.<sup>cdiii</sup>

Perhaps our curiosity would lead us to ask, were we to hypothesize a robot behind a curtain successfully executing the perfect command logic of the Chinese language, how would, per Turing, that robot have been programmed to execute that language? In contemporary times (2022) for instance, many aspects of that robot could very have likely been sourced in material, design and programming from, in fact, Chinese national and Chinese affiliated producers in areas like Shenzhen.<sup>cdiv</sup> Let us accept this as the conditions of our concluding thought experiment.

The idea of the robot requires a historical meaning: which artifices, and whose, were used in its production? Whose programs are written and executed? Without more clarity about the meaning and tangible mechanisms of the idea of the robot in the critique of "the Chinese speaking Robot." I would suggest that it is difficult to complete the idea of the scenario, if we try to imagine a Chinese speaking robot without the influence of a Chinese programmer (or, at least, one or more fluent

Chinese speakers). In this thought experiment, the robot must be understood as a composite of, at least in large part, inter-disciplinary networks of Chinese laborers (and many other nationalities).

With this detail in mind, our question of the Chinese speaking robot grows more complicated: the conversational user of the robot would, in fact, be interacting with the encoded expressions and conversant structures of many natively Chinese speaking programmers, designers and material technicians. Moreover, the only way to imagine the achievement of even a shadow of a Chinese conversant robot would require several years of user testing cycles, which recursively produce information used by the Chinese programmers to make the robot more fluent. Ultimately, the user is interacting with, in large part, the programmer: indeed the robot, far from offering a strong sense of autonomous intelligence in its Chinese fluency, would often represent the only point(s) of interaction in the network between the programmer and user.

I concede that Turing's points about the learning processes of a "late-child" computer blunt the scope of my scenario's purported insight, but scope is not my ambition, and I would like to focus here on a particular example within the general idea of "learning machines" (Turing's words) and consider the example in terms of language. Rather, I hope to point out the range of questions we can ask about the conversations we now may explore when considering the influential essay in reference to the technologies of the Style Writers. My curiosity lies at the edge of claims later in Turing's genealogy of influence, for the possibility of a "Chinese speaking robot": in my opinion the debate has not yet addressed one of its most interesting questions implied by the scenario.

The robot could be understood to in fact be a very concentrated object within the very broad networks of cycles of human interactions. We may consider it more as a series of conversations in the cycles between the programmers and the users, with the moment of the apparent "Turing Test" itself representing a core moment of these interactions. Indeed, as I suggested above, in many ways, the robot is simply the coded conversation between programmer

networks and user networks. In turn, the robot's moments of autonomy, are in fact also understandable as operative moments in the digitized logical parameters of the interaction points of the chosen media (in this case, ostensibly, the integrated circuitry of the microprocessor).

In other words, any interaction with artificial intelligence is only a very complex interaction with the long historical record of engineering technicians who developed the possible inputs, configurations and outputs of that intelligence. Interactions with Chinese-speaking robots are ultimately, among other things, a continuing interaction with Chinese people (often working in bleak conditions to refine the machines we use to write these documents). If we accept that the historical conditions of Chinese speaking programmers would be at the core of the "Chinese speaking robot" question, then we would have to accept that part of the question also turns on the question of information design. If, however, at this point we simply say that any interaction with a robot is an interaction with a human producer(s) behind it, then we miss the subtlety of Turing's test.

Turning the analogy to our aforementioned extension of the *Imitation Game*, we might ask: where would the networks of human influence appear in the funky code that the robot uses to Write its Style? We might consider the unique details of the aesthetics of funk at play here: funk presents a problem for the possibility of artificial intelligence reading or writing because its variably expressed rhythmic positions implement a kind of infinity of precision that calls on a unique difficulty to model in the language of a computer. Computers depend on communications through systems of possible ranges of values, for instance if I told the computer to pick (even a random) rhythmic position between the second and third beats, in hope of programming it learn a funk rhythm, then I would have to use the logical form: "Computer, pick a position between the integers two and three; this position must be determined to the second decimal point."

In this way I might hope to increase the precision so that it could find the rare rhythmic points in the pocket (which function similar to graphable asymptotes, per Bedrosian's comments

above). We might imagine that the interrogator suspects the supposed “funk” rhythm is not in fact in sync with the enigmatic funk beat. Perhaps the funk rhythm at beat 2.05 feels too late, but 2.04 feels too early.

Fortunately, I have the resources of an infinitely perfected computer, so I can train it to find a beat at 2.045. This cycle will repeat, as the computer will only be able to imagine the possible ranges of values that program it to understand. However, to my frustration, the interrogator again notes that the rhythm feels off, and lacks the funk. No matter how far I train my computer, the fact that it would rely on the aforementioned system of scalable ranges of accuracy (in this case expressed in decimal points) is a fact that will always leave me at risk of an infinite pursuit which remains just aside from, always circling but never finding, the more infinitely precise moment of funk.

Imagine the scenario continues for thousands of years, we want the funk from the computer’s style, even just a little bit of the beat, but we just can’t get enough from this robot. Here lies the problem: the robot must constantly somehow project a “perfect” state of mathematics, where it can somehow propose an analysis of the rhythm further than the integrated total of the programming might specify at any given moment in the learning and/or testing process. However, mathematics is an expressive function of the human experience, as much as a descriptive one.

The only way for the robot to deliver the rhythm of funk would be if it somehow received and interpreted the information about funk’s precisions. The programmers must constantly ask themselves about the scope of the program’s archives: “do we program the computer to calculate to four decimal points, or five?” offers a simple version of the question faced not simply at that local issue of programming 2.04 to 2.045 but a problem in the mathematics and the logical idea underlying that issue.

Before a computer can program any given numerical position of the thought-experiment's funk rhythms, it must be provided with the information about those rhythms (or at least the possibility of their existence within the possible range of a given scalar function i.e. a fractal which could "access" the point of the beat were it programmed to be scaled to that point). However, the computer's ability to "receive" the rhythms depends on a mechanical reading of the input information about funk, this step in the process is necessary whether that be a coded description of the music or an auditory receipt (for instance, a computer would require a parallel function to something like optical character recognition before it could read a text). This means that the mechanics of the computer would have to already somehow be tuned to the elements of information which we hoped to communicate to it, but this too requires teaching the computer a reading-focused code which could interact, in partial fluency, with the funk of the input.

We may note additionally that we find a broader recursive condition in the programming of the ecosystem of human and computer, of the computer providing an anchor number with an infinitely variable closeness to, and so an infinitely well-defined sectioning off-from, the precise position of the funk "pocket", is itself a scaled recursive structure in the form of funk as discussed above (e.g.  $1 + \dots$  pocket beat). In this way, the competitive infinities, which the human will always "win" in this thought experiment, exhibit a unique trait: as the infinity of the human's "funk" continually outpaces that of the computer, might we not say that it "hacks" the computer, simply by sequentially using the rules of the game to orient the computer's output in such a way that the computer must engage in a particular pattern (here resembling funk) by variably approving or rejecting that computer's output's closeness to the impossibly precise funk rhythm. Extending this question, we might ask if there is ultimately a difference between hacking and training a computer: could this use of the computer's non-precision be a way to, inversely, train it to not only more

closely approach a single point, but then to train it, based on a series of imprecisions, in the art of funk? Perhaps in a better future.

But imagine a variation on this step in our line of inquiry, as Kase II's "Computer Style" leads one to imagine: what if rather than a computer seeking to imitate a person, what if the artist sought to imitate a computer? If a person could succeed in fluently imitating the robot, then we find ourselves abundantly engaged with the logical conditions necessary for the robot's success: the information they produce should be able to provide a way to teach the computer beyond the supposed limits above. In this spirit, we might attune the nuances of our questions, rather than limiting ourselves to the first step, which is asking, "In which ways does a particular technology risk failing our human needs?" we might ask in another way. For we might benefit from a nuance in the question, "In which ways can we as humans express ourselves through the use of technologies when broadly understood?"

The subway network's variable rhythms of circulation, alongside the Writer's seemingly "crowdsourced" (to use a contemporary term) expert review from viewing positions like the 149<sup>th</sup> st. Grand Concourse, allow one to imagine a form of social computing which would not only recursively evaluate different geometric stylistic programs, but also provide a competitive compilation process which ensured that limited memory space (i.e. the subway trains) could be re-written and written-over as necessary to ensure the most masterful experiments survived.

Should we pursue this line of thinking we might begin with the question of "Information Design" a term used by information scientists and technical designers to refer to the way that informational components (such as the directional symbol of an arrow, to reference Rammellzee) are understood as technical components of, for instance, computer graphics. Next, in closing, we will see that Writers such as Skeme provide complex studies and experimentations into the technical components of the academic research in information design. Specifically, we will see that Skeme's

claims for funk allow for a more dynamic understanding of what information designers and user-experience researchers would call “attentive processing.”

## LEGIBILITY IN ATTENTIVE PROCESSING: INFORMATION DESIGN AND ROBOT FLUENCY

The reader may be curious to know that the questions of variable infinities in the above mentioned example resemble questions of anti-aliasing and curve fitting. A digitally represented curve will always be one step behind, and so have a smaller projected vision of infinity, the analog curve of the Writer’s handstyle. These questions of legibility in information design thus invite considerations from Style-Writers such as Skeme, whose discussion of funk and legibility can be related to what computer graphics interaction researchers, such as Healey and Enns, call attentive processing in their “Attention and Visual Memory in Visualization and Computer Graphics.” Their article argues that, as we increase the reduction of the degree of variability in visual properties, we also increase the ease of visual detection (especially pre-attentive, meaning according to them: “the way human vision rapidly and automatically categorizes visual images into regions and properties based on simple computations that can be made in parallel across an image.”<sup>cdv</sup>

Note that the reduction of variability is not simply the reduction of sheer volume of characteristics, but the number of axes along which differentiation occurs.

Hue is not the only visual feature that is preattentive. In Figs. 1c and 1d, the target is again a red circle, while the distractors are red squares. Here, the visual system identifies the target through a difference in curvature. A target defined by a unique visual property — a red hue in Figs. 1a and 1b, or a curved form in Figs. 1c and 1d — allows it to “pop out” of a display. This implies that it can be easily detected, regardless of the number of distractors. In contrast to these effortless searches, when a target is defined by the joint presence of two or more visual properties, it often cannot be found preattentively. Figs. 1e and 1f show an example of these more difficult conjunction searches. The red circle target is made up of two features: red and circular. One of these features is present in each of the distractor objects — red squares and blue circles. A search for red items always returns true because there are red squares in each display. Similarly, a search for circular items always sees blue circles. Numerous studies have shown that most conjunction targets cannot be detected preattentively. Viewers must perform a time-consuming serial search through the display to confirm its presence or absence.

If low-level visual processes can be harnessed during visualization, they can draw attention to areas of potential interest in a display.<sup>»cdvi</sup>

Healey and Enns show that the ease of visual detection increases in relation to the progressive reduction of the number of types differentiations in a visual pattern. The user values resulting from the differentiation of visual variables occurs not only along the axis of hue (i.e. red vs. blue), but the axis of seemingly “mechanical” variations like curvature and corner structure.

In relation to Style Writing, a key value of some of the most seasoned practitioners is to demonstrate an understanding of how to maintain functional (if difficult) legibility of visual components in a composition rather than create a gibberish, or “bad infinity”, of underdeveloped and unintegrated visual excesses. Letters can be created by manipulating the variations between relationships of visual characteristics (such as color or mechanics) while implementing systematic control of the differentiations among those characteristics. The Writer’s difficulty increases with the complexity of the system required to maintain control over the varying relationships between visual features. In other words, mastery as a Writer requires a balance between 1) complexity of visual variation and 2) ability to control the integration of that complexity.

Common criticisms of inexperienced Writers (often labeled “toys”) target letter composition methods that leave visual variability under-integrated in the stylistic whole of the Writer’s approach. If one implements too many extraneous details without any formally integrated stylistic method, i.e. a “*signature*” style, one’s prominence among the reading community of other Writers is lost to the unstylized clutter of letter constructions. Alternatively, funk provides a way to create, share and recursively engage, multiple and even competing forms of infinity. In some respects, the analysis of funk so far could be said to access a highly continuous form of mathematics, while digital computation relies on a discontinuous form (we may note the difference, again between the

continuity of a curve and the discontinuity of a curve modeled as a series of corners). Yet, for all this, funk musicians have successfully deployed the discontinuities of discrete mathematics (in the form of digital information systems) so often, precisely in their self-aware use of digital machines, networks and personas. Even as the media and instruments of their choosing would rearticulate their aesthetics into the asymptotic limitations of digitally discontinuous mathematics, artists who use funk seem to fearlessly and successfully generate their aesthetics exactly with these asymptotic (and so inherently unsuccessful) mathematical forms.

In other words, we find that funk artists, such as Skeme and Chain 3, wield computational structures in manners that are, according to some computational frameworks, such as the one I proposed earlier, logically impossible. After all, what are computers but networks and rhythms of conversations and cycle rates, between makers, mechanics, users and so many other names we have for our ecologies of stakeholders?

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<sup>i</sup> 2:20 in Rodriguez “Mare139 Latin Nation” 2022. See also, for instance, Jessica Nydia Pabón-Colón’s *Graffiti Grrlz* p.26 “Like the trains that inspired the New York graffiti writers of Abby’s generation, the Internet is now the vehicle for communication and the destination of the message.”

<sup>ii</sup> Jacobs 1961, p. 87.

<sup>iii</sup> Basquiat 1993.

<sup>iv</sup> Alexander 2020

<sup>v</sup> Schulz 2015

<sup>vi</sup> Basquiat *The Notebooks*

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Muñoz p. 145

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> Muñoz 152. See also “Butler counters Zizek's charge by asking the following question of his formulations: "What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of *misrecognition*, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?" Butler answers her query by writing, "It may be that the affirmation of that slippage, that the failure of identification is itself the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference."

<sup>xiii</sup> Davis 1990, pp. 177-178

<sup>xiv</sup> Pabón-Colón *Graffiti Grrlz* p. 46

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xvi</sup> Muñoz 165-166.

<sup>xvii</sup> TIME *Sport: Who Won*, 1950

<sup>xviii</sup> Schwarz *Broadway Boogie Woogie* p. 151.

<sup>xix</sup> Muñoz 169-172.

<sup>xx</sup> Basquiat *The Notebooks*.

<sup>xxi</sup> See, for instance: Spratt, Kieran “The Suzie Q To The Hammer, Fiver Signature Punches That Changed Boxing Forever.” 11 April 2021. <https://www.thesportsman.com/features/the-suzie-q-to-the-hammer-five-signature-punches-that-changed-boxing-forever>

<sup>xxii</sup> See also *The Notebooks*: “FLICK OF THE WRISK

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<sup>xxiii</sup> Hughes 314-315.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Wyatt *The legacy of Joe Louis' loss to Max Schmeling on Juneteenth*.

<sup>xxv</sup> Tate 2016, p. 127.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Moynihan 1970, p. 7.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Rose 1994, p.22.

<sup>xxviii</sup> “Riding the rails” 2019.

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<sup>xxxix</sup> In the form of two pathbreaking compilations from Routledge *Understanding Graffiti: Multidisciplinary Studies from Prehistory to the Present* (Lavotta and Otten 2015)—filed under “Anthropology/Cultural Studies/Art History”—and the *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* (Ross 2016)—filed under “Sociology/Criminology/Urban studies.” Appearing to have more treatment of reading and writing, another survey is forthcoming from Routledge: *Graffiti and Street Art: Reading, Writing and Representing the City* (Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi 2016). Major conferences on the subject are also few and far between, although the recent “Graffiti Sessions” conference at UCL showed a new direction as the field began to coalesce as a discipline and even received a keynote from Chantal Mouffe, a scholar of significance external to the field.

<sup>xxx</sup> Joe Austin’s 2001 *Taking the Train* remains the strongest book length account to dates. Declared in 2001 as “the most comprehensive history of graffiti now available” by Lachmann (2002), whose 1988 sociology article remains one of the most cited pieces in the scholarship. The anthropologist, Rafael Schacter’s 2014 *Ornament and Order* has established a thorough and politically sophisticated theoretical framework for an aesthetic and spatial inquiry.

<sup>xxxi</sup> “Stroke of Identity,” Chaz Bojórquez’ foreword to *Cholo Writing*, provides the only engagement with the distinctive connection between the archive and the inscriptive aesthetics of Writing that I am aware of. He suggests the union between the inscriptive moment and the exteriorization of a community identity that is simultaneously a mnemonic device. However, the occasion does not allow for a systematic account of the inscriptive moment in relation to a community archive. Bojórquez himself also distinguishes his claims for the “stroke” from the repetitional aesthetics of the New York school of Writing writing. This suggests a major difference between for instance Cholo style and New York Wildstyle. In Los Angeles the Writing is based on culture and race. “In Cholo writing only one person writes for the whole gang and you tag only within your own territory. In New York Writing, the emphasis is on being more of an individual and not about ethnic identity, where «getting up» all-city or all-state with your tag is more important than the group.” Chaz Bójoquez “Stroke of Identity” in Chastanet 2009

<sup>xxxii</sup> Notable exceptions include: Ong 1990, a short early piece which relies largely on Castleman 1982 for data. Ong provides a keen sense of stakes of Style as writing, but mistakenly subordinates that inscription as “less specialized” than the aesthetics of visuality in the end. Fienni 2012 takes a very strong Deleuzian approach but ultimately retains the wall rather than the letter as the *telos* organizing his inquiry. Gabrielle Gopinath’s “Ornament as Armament: Playing Defense in Wildstyle Graffiti” does implicitly choose the paraph of the letter as her object of study, and does well in taking Rammellzee, an enormously influential Writer within the culture, as her primary example. But she neither discusses these themes in terms of referential semiotics, makes substantive mention of theories of the signature as a form of inscription, nor thoroughly situates Rammellzee’s aesthetic distinctions within a historical and/or geographical network of graffiti styles (pp.117-128 in Lovata and Olton 2015).

Andrea Mubi Brighenti, has made a useful shift in claiming that the wall inscribed upon by a Writer “is a syntagmatic, rather than paradigmatic, view. For a writer, the present, actual wall is an affordance and an invitation, but in itself remains only a part of a larger, virtual wall—it is just a sentence in a continuing conversation.” He positions the syntagmatic possibilities of walls in relation to territoriality. His excellent analysis of territorialization calls for it to be “seen as a specific type of “prolongation” between the material and the immaterial.” See pp.325 and 329 in Mubi Brighenti 2010.

Joan Gari’s “Speech and writing in graffiti,” offers a thorough investigation of graffiti through various semiotic theories, but only a limited analysis of the aesthetic, iterative and archival aspects (1993. *Occasional Papers in Systemic Linguistics* 7: 105-114). While Susan A. Phillips’ “Deconstructing Gang Graffiti” (pp. 48-60 in Ross 2016), offers an excellent account of visual specificity among various gang styles, as well as semio-linguistic aspects of the intersection between territoriality and group identification, if not a complete connection between paraph, signature, and *linguistic* semiotics. Such observations are in many ways importable to a discussion of the tradition I focus on when carefully adjusted. For instance, her claim that “rather than symbolizing control over turf alone, gang graffiti signals control over respect in neighborhoods” (52). Baudrillard’s 1993 “Kool Killer” is a touchstone of one branch of the scholarly literature. Another French/English publication (of uncertain provenance), of the essay as a booklet includes a graphic of the “superstrut” tag. Commentaries include Ott 2011, and Sonja Neef’s excellent “Graffiti Passages” offers a trenchant critique of Baudrillard’s nihilism (2012).

Most of the semiological accounts focus on an analysis of group vs. group communicative agonism, and so will depend on a kind of competition neglecting the practice’s primary dimension, the aesthetics of writing, which my study focuses on. For instance, despite a focus on discursive construction, Adams and Winter 1997 devote a section of their paper to “Distinguishing gang graffiti from tagging” and the tradition of “graffiti” that is not for gangs. Sliwa, Martyna and Cairns’ “Exploring Narratives and Antenarratives of Graffiti Artists: Beyond Dichotomies of Commitment and Detachment” usefully focuses on a reading of Banksy that seeks to move beyond graffiti artists being “either vilified and seen as detached from norms of society or justified through incorporation into the discourse of modern art” (73) but remains outside of an analysis of written inscription (in *Culture and Organization*. 13.1 (2007): 73-82. Print.).

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xxxiii See Brewer, Devon and Miller 1990; Ferrell 1993, Kramer 2017, Thompson 2012, and the work of Jeffrey Ian Ross (editor of the *Routledge Handbook*).

xxxiv Bougdanos, 2002; Elias 2013; Kramer 2016

xxxv Bloch 2016; Halliday 1976.

xxxvi Campos 2013

xxxvii The many sociological (and anthropological) studies often implicitly deploy a logic of the partitioning of social archives without attending to the poetics. Lachmann 1988; Waldner and Dobratz (2013); TA Ten Eyck 2016

xxxviii Bloch 2012, 2016 “Challenging the defense of graffiti, in defense of graffiti” in Ross 2016; Bloch 2016; Pugh, E. 2015

xxxix Megler, Banis and Chang 2014

xl Goidanich 2010

xli Gartus, Klemer, Leder 2015 and Feitosa-Santana C, et al. “Art through the Colors of Graffiti:

From the Perspective of the Chromatic Structure.” *Sensors (Basel, Switzerland)*, vol. 20, no. 9, 2020,

doi:10.3390/s20092531.

xlii Hughes 2009

xliiii For instance, Halsey and Young, 2006. 275

xliv For instance, Lachmann’s early 1988 and well cited sociology article states, “The vast majority of graffiti writers never progress beyond tagging to produce graffiti murals. Murals are defined here as any graffiti that encompass more than the writer’s basic tag” (236). A whole car [mural] takes hours, more when I worked alone” (1988, 240). Though notable for the validation it proffers to “independent public artists” (his terms), Schacter (2014) still ultimately frames the analysis of the art in reference to the city’s (primarily architectural) surfaces where the art appears. Cockroft, Weber and Cockroft’s landmark *Toward a People’s Art* (1998) is an excellent example of the trend, where Writers can seemingly only be legitimized by being an archived as a temporary malformation, one under development toward (re)assumption in the mural tradition.

xlv See his master’s thesis “Mi Casa No Es Su Casa: Chicano Murals and Barrio Calligraphy as Systems of Signification at Estrada Courts 1972-1978” (1991); and “Space, Power, and Youth Culture: Mexican American Graffiti and Chicano Murals in East Los Angeles” (1995).

xlvi Lattore 2008.

xlvii Gottlieb 2008.; Jacobson 2000; Gadsby, Jane 1995.

xlviii For digital archives: Neef 2012, Findlay 2012 and Edwards-Vandenhoeck, S. "You Aren't Here: Reimagining the Place of Graffiti Production in Heritage Studies." 2015. For rejections of the museal: Austin, Joe. 2010. “More to See Than a Canvas in a White Cube: For an Art in the Streets” and Neef 2012.

xlix Mettler “Graffiti museum: a First Amendment argument for protecting uncommissioned art on private property.” 2012.

l Caffio "Street Art and the Cultural Heritage of the Contemporary City" (2013)

li Heathcott 2015

lii Goidanich 2010.

liii Gomez 1993.

liv Chaz Bojórquez, Lady Pink and Barry TWIST McGee appear in Ian Lynam and Randy Nakamara’s *Parallel Strokes*. See also the landmark work of Christian P. Acker’s *Flip the Script: a Guidebook for Aspiring Vandals & Typographers*. (2013), and the associated Handselecta group.

lv Sliwa and Cairns (2007) cite Youthward, B. “Graffito ergo sum” (2005).

lvi Dumar Novy writes the preface to Schacter’s *Ornament and Order*, and authors the provocative psychodramatic hypertheory-narrative of *What Do One Million Ja Tags Signify?*. Possible Books, 2015.

lvii See Snyder 2009, Ferrell 1993, and Holmes 2010. For broader critical resources on ethnography and documentary see Clifford, James, et al. *Writing Culture : The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* 2010, Denzin, Norman K. *Interpretive Ethnography* 1997, and Ellis, Carolyn, and Michael C. Flaherty 1992.

lviii (193)

lix Ferrell 2021, p. 12-13.

lx Ibid. p. 115.

lxi Eric Margolis, "Video Ethnography: Toward a Reflexive Paradigm for Documentary," 1994 and Taylor 2003.

lxii Brooks *Subway City: Riding the Train, Reading New York* 1997.

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- lxi Brooks' p. 54.
- lxii Lachmann 1988.
- lxiii Ibid. 249.
- lxiv For his most influential work see Glazer, 1980.
- lxv Mollenkopf 1992.
- lxvi Austin 2001.
- lxvii For the sample, see 7:00 in *Wildstyle*.
- lxviii Nas. *Illmatic*, 1994.
- lxix See the director's commentary at 4:20.
- lxx 10:05 - 11:30 *Wildstyle* 2013, disc 2 extras.
- lxxi *Wildstyle* 1:30-1:59.
- lxxii See *Wildstyle* extras, "Lady Pink '10" interview, 1:00. *ibid*.
- lxxiii Rorke, 2016.
- lxxiv 11:25-12:02 *Wildstyle: 30th Anniversary*. Directed by Charlie Ahearn. Submarine Deluxe, 2013.
- lxxv 1:08:00 - 1:08:38 *ibid*
- lxxvi Director's commentary 1:11:00, *ibid*.
- lxxvii 14:20 *ibid*
- lxxviii Alva 2021. See also the notes on the famous 1976 "Freedom Train" (also discussed in the prologue to Joe Austin's "Taking the Train"):
- What do you remember about the 1976 ten whole cars 'Freedom Train' production?
- (ROGER) CAINE came up with the concept and being that we were basically running the #7 yard with me and the crew from Broadway park, that was made up of some of the boys from Jamaica like MOVE 1, SIN 158 as well as CHINO 174, DOC 1 and others. He called me up with the concept; 'We're gonna do a whole train, both sides'. I said all right, cool and we got together, went over to this guy SPEEDY's house, which was off Astoria Blvd in the 80's, near 25<sup>th</sup> Avenue. At SPEEDY's, CAINE had already painted a whole train on the bumper of his car with a depiction of what he wanted to do. I was like; 'Oh shit, let's go for it!'
- (FREEDOM) I saw mostly buffed versions of the Freedom Train, and didn't know its place in history until a few years later. The Freedom Train was the first whole train ever painted, from what I understand, the Wanted crew came close by painting 8 whole cars previously.
- (Martha) Only in photos. A woman showed up at GPI with a photo album with photos of that train. I have a picture of her with Caine but I didn't get her name. That photo is in my book Hip Hop Files.
- (ROGER) SPEEDY provided all the paint, they had 300-400 cans of red and blue paint, that was distributed for the concept CAINE wanted. My mother had a big old station wagon that we used and I fit CAINE, CHINO 174, SPEEDY and DOC 1 in it. We parked on the opposite side of Flushing Meadowlands, across from the LIRR tracks, took all the paint to the yard. Ultimately there must have been 30-40 people involved in the production, because 10 people weren't going to paint the whole train. People say they paint a train with 3 people but that doesn't happen, a whole train has a lot of surface area, it's a lot of work doing both sides of it.
- (LADY PINK) I was 12 years old in 1976 and living in Brooklyn at the time so access to the 7 line was really limited, never really saw his work until I moved to Queens later on. I'm sure the Fab Five were influenced by the Freedom Train since it was the first whole train production, someone like LEE would have heard about it but you have to ask him more about that, he can be hard to reach sometimes. The first time I introduced LEE to CAINE, they hit it off so well, that they sat all night talking about Graffiti and LEE went on to do a painting later on of that night. It was spray paint on metal canvas of a brunette and blonde dude talking as they overlooked the #7 train yard, some collector bought it. LEE always said it was a memorable night.
- lxxix As Braithwithe's historical name as a Writer "Fab Five Freddy," appears beside a Zoro tag, while Braithwithe plays a fictionalized version (Phade) of another historical leader (Phase 2).
- lxxx 13:30 in *Wildstyle* 2013.
- lxxxi 11:10 *ibid*.
- lxxxii 16:45 - 17:09 in *Wildstyle* disc 2 extras, *Lee Quinones* interview by Charlie Ahearn, *ibid*
- lxxxiii 0:10 - 3:05 in *Wildstyle* extras, *ibid*
- lxxxiv 6:10-7:05 in *Wildstyle* extras *Lady Pink '06 interview* *ibid*.
- lxxxv *Wildstyle* extras.
- lxxxvi See for instance, Mansbach 2016.
- lxxxvii "Cap Interview" 2022.
- lxxxviii 127 in Cooper and Chalfant 2009.
- lxxxix 8:30-9:50 in Miranda 2020.
- lxxxx "@149st 18 July 2022.

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- xciii Sar 2020.  
xciv P.6 in Lange, Tod, and Lee George Quinones, 2019.  
xcv P. 860 in Caro 1974.  
xcvi Chang 2005 p.11  
xcvii Lange 2019 p. 4  
xcviii Austin quoting Phase 2, p. 67 in Austin 2002.  
xcix Mansbach and Phase II, Accessed 2022.  
c Skeme 2017.

ci Phase II 1996.

- cii P. 22 in Phase II, Stampa alternativa, and Cornell University Library Hip-Hop Collection. 1996.  
ciii See for instance, Maia Morgan Well's dissertation "*Intertwining Art Worlds: Graffiti's Rise Into Fine Art* and her "Graffiti, street art, and the evolution of the art market" in Ross, Jeffrey Ian, and Ronald Kramer, eds. *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*. London: Routledge, 2016. Web.  
civ Schmidlapp's scene was based around curators such as Fab 5 Freddy, Patti Astor's Fun Gallery and Stefan Eins' Fashion Moda. Schmidlapp's work also stands among other documentarians of Style-Writing, and more generally, early New York hip hop culture: photographers, and filmmakers such as Martha Cooper, Henry Chalfant, Jack Stewart, Joe Conzo, Gusmano Cesaretti, Jamel Shabazz, James Prigoff, and Charlie Ahearn. For instance, when one searches through Cornell's archive, issues contain Writing and political editorial from South Africa under apartheid. Through interviews with Schmidlapp and Phase II I fill out the details of these archives' movements.  
cv TAKI 183 would of course become sacralized as a founder in concert with his appearance in the New York Times (1971). Not only do I examine these publications as repositories "in themselves," but I also focus on the appearance of certain media which took on a continuing repetition, dispersed as "illegitimate" copies at crucial junctures during the globalization of graffiti. Photocopies of Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant's *Subway Art* were critical to the tradition's development in Brazil.  
cvi It is not uncommon to see a younger writer meet an older writer for the first time and thank them for their influence, recounting the moment of encountering the veteran's paraph in a particular *secondary* media. For instance, in 2015 at the former Ithaca walls run by Cap Matches Color, and partnering with the Hip Hop Collection, a young artist (making not writing, but a mural at the time) thanked SKEME for his "K": as SKEME's inscriptions had traveled with the 1983 film *Style Wars*.  
cvii Ferrell 10.  
cviii See Kaser 2019 and Baske 2017.  
cix Smethurst 2005, p. 172  
cx Feuer 2009  
cxii Caro 1974, pp. 366-395  
cxiii "City Hails Passage of Bridge Measures" 1929  
cxiv "*WALKER OPENS WORK ON TRIBOROUGH SPAN*" 1929.  
cxv "*15,000 OF JOBLESS TO WORK ON ROADS*" 1933  
cxvi "Infrastructure New York City (NYC) Triboro Bridge" 2022  
cxvii "NATURAL CEMENT COMES BACK" 1941  
cxviii Ibid.  
cxix "Moses Believes Fair's Traffic Solved by Long-Range Plan" 1938  
cxxx "Triborough Bridge Authority Traffic Crossings" 1940. See also, <https://www.abebooks.co.uk/Triborough-Bridge-Authority-Traffic-Crossings/30671451653/bd#&gid=1&pid=1> and *Richard's Car Blog* <https://richardscarblogger.com/2020/06/>  
cxxx See also the titles of Moses' "arterial" plans for not only New York City, but other northeastern cities such as Pittsburgh ("Arterial Plan for Pittsburgh" Moses and Pittsburgh Regional Planning Association, 1939).  
cxvi "*1,000 CARS AN HOUR USE TRIBOROUGH SPAN*" 1936.  
cxvii "*GREAT LINKED IS ACCLAIMED*" 1936.  
cxviii Ibid.  
cxix Ibid.  
cxxxv For more information on these patterns, see Ivor Miller's *Aerosol Kingdom*, and Joe Austin's *Taking the Train* (especially the introduction and first chapter).

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<sup>cxxvi</sup> Sacks, 2021.

<sup>cxxvii</sup> Miller 2012, p. 23.

<sup>cxxviii</sup> Chalfant, 1983.

<sup>cxxix</sup> Chalfant and Silver, 2003.

<sup>cxxx</sup> Ibid.

<sup>cxxxi</sup> “Riff 170” in *Subway Outlaws*, 2022. See also: “Many writers would continue many of RIFF 170’s innovating approaches to the aerosol alphabet, such as movement of letters, breaks, cracking letters, interconnecting arrows, whips, interconnecting stars in the letters as well as his signature color schemes. Kool-Aid 131, Noc 167, Part 1, Chain 3, Slave and Dondi as well as writing groups like TDS, TMT, MTA, TSF, CIA, would be some of the notable writers and groups to carry out many of Riffs approach to lettering styles. Many of these writers would develop their own style and start a cultural phenomenon that would grow world wide.”

<sup>cxxxii</sup> See also Ansi Arte “The first form is *Broadway Elegant*. It was initiated by a writer named Top Cat 126 who moved from Philadelphia to Manhattan in the early 1970s. This is supposed to be one of the first local masterpiece styles. It became popular among writers such as T-Rex 131, Shade 2, Jace 2, Star-III and Piper 1 to name a few. The second form is the *Platform* style – also from Top Cat. It was popularized by writers like Jive 3, Riff 170 and Death TC5. It’s said to be the first style together with Phase 2’s Soft letters to achieve an all-city popularity. The third form, *Soft* style, with it’s various permutations such as Bubble letters, Ball letters, Foot and Hump letters, became standard repertoire for a generation of early to mid 1970s New York. Here we find artists like Ale 1, Comet, Blade, Tracy 168, Silver Tips, Staff 161 and Cliff 159. The fourth, *Marshmallow* style, is said to have been invented by the today mysterious Super Kool 223. The Marshmallow letters were used by amongst others In, Jive 3, Te Kool, Doc Cool 1, Riff 170 as well as Blade. Towards the end of the 1970s mainstream styles shifted from Soft to Hard wildstyles. The fifth form, *Hard* style, became more and more complex. A lot of experimentation took place. A classic example is in the movie *Style Wars* when Kase 2 demonstrates his Computer Rock style which makes his letters unreadable” in *Dokument Press*, 2018.

Given the predominance of Style Writers of African descent, it is worth noting that, per Smethurst, “Rather than in the creation of enduring institutions in black communities, the importance of New York and other East Coast centers, particularly Washington, D.C., Boston (a notable locus of African American visual arts, especially outdoor murals, in the 1960s and 1970s), and Philadelphia, for the Black Arts movement lies largely in the ways black intellectuals, artists, and often short-lived institutions in the region prepared the ground for the movement. The Northeast, with its long history of African American nationalist, Left, and avant-garde intellectual, political, and artistic movements, was an incubator for Black Power and Black Arts ideologies, poetics, and activists. As Lorenzo Thomas argues, there was a kind of African American artistic underground during the 1950s and early 1960s in which ‘scholars of Marxism, left-over Garveyites, and Pan-Africanists’ provided ‘alternative’ role models to younger black artists and intellectuals. Larry Neal also claimed in the 1970s that the important influence of the Communist Left on the creation and circulation of African American literature lingered, though ‘transmuted or synthesized,’ in the 1960s. Nowhere in the United States was there a greater concentration of older Marxists and nationalists than in New York City.” (pp. 107-108)

<sup>cxxxiii</sup> @149st, 2022. See <http://www.at149st.com/bench.html>

<sup>cxxxiv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>cxxxv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>cxxxvi</sup> A campaign which continued across regimes, “The mayoral regime of Rudy Giuliani in New York City, for example, from the late 1980s onwards gave defining importance to the issue of graffiti’s eradication from the subway system in New York’s claims to symbolic and actual regeneration.” (Halsey and Young 2006, p. 275)

<sup>cxxxvii</sup> Hays, 1989.

<sup>cxxxviii</sup> Rodriguez, Carlos “Style Wars MARE 139 Interview”

<sup>cxxxix</sup> Rodriguez, Carlos “Mare 139. Лекция на V1 BATTLE 2018.”

<sup>cxl</sup> Ibid. Also see here Mare’s comments on the connection to Mayakovsky: “This is also important but this comes a little later with Mayakovsky so now I just connected graffiti subway painting to agitprop train paint now I’m gonna connect trap Mayakovsky to wrap because Mayakovsky had a certain style of poetry but he also identified it as R, A, P”

<sup>cxli</sup> See here Mare’s presentation of his engagement with Tatlin’s “Corner Relief” to his Russian audience. The transcript reads: “This is where it gets very interesting between the train tunnels and museums; I started to think about graffiti differently. I started to see it differently. So, I started looking at modern art, people you may know like Picasso and other movements from France, Italy and Russia. So, I made this sculpture influenced by the Futurists, but the one that really changed the way I thought about how I was gonna make my art was a Russian and his name was Vladimir Tatlin. He’s one of the most amazing artists of your culture in his day this was wild style. That’s Vladimir Tatlin, you may know this, do you guys know this? And this is a little sculpture that I made that was inspired by this. But why Russians? Why the constructivists? Because they understood raw material and emotion through material. So you could see all the energy in

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the center of these pieces. But if you think about wild style and you think about b-boying it's that same energy but pulling it forward.”

cxlii 17:26 *ibid.*

cxliiii 15:40 *ibid.*

cxliv For more on the role of a hemispheric approach to research see Diana Taylor's *The Archive and The Repertoire*

cxlv See Mare et. al. "Crossing Paths" 2015

cxlvi Rodriguez 2011.

cxlvii Schwarz 1997, p. 199.

cxlviii Such as the kind considered by even some of the most radical of the Modernist painters that Mare looks so, such as Malevich. See Altieri 1989: "Malevich was fond of tracking the genealogy of painting from Cézanne through Cubism to his Suprematist work. So it should not be surprising to find traces of Cézanne's structures in his practice." (Altieri 13)

cxlix See "Carmichael Gallery Presents" (2012)

cl Altieri, 13. Altieri's accounts of abstraction in Modernist art and poetry are numerous and have made a significant impact in that field. See for instance *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry*. As for his approach to the question of the variety of possible accounts for how aesthetic forces are embodied in such artworks, we might look to his essay 2009 "Why Modernist Claims for Autonomy Matter" where Altieri looks to Malevich's Suprematist Painting 1917 asking that we: "Consider the structural push and pulls between planes in this painting. The planes are more intricate than Cezanne's because they rely so much on color tones. But there is the same sense of endless mutual modification, now raised to the degree that every tilt of every mark requires our adjusting our sense of the force of every other mark that strikes our attention" (p. 13).

cli See "Carmichael Gallery Presents" (2012)

clii Schwarz 1997, p. 18.

cliii *Ibid.*

cliv *Ibid.*

clv Altieri 2009, P. 16.

clvi Rodriguez 2011.

clvii *Ibid.*

clviii Perkinson 2021

clix Rose 1994 p. 42.

clx *Ibid.*

clxi *Ibid.*

clxii Rose 1994 p. 43

clxiii Rose 1994 p. 45

clxiv Derrida 1988, 21.

clxv Brighenti 2010, 329

clxvi *Ibid.*

clxvii Christiansen 65

clxviii Rodriguez "Language of the Wall", 2014

clxix Algarin, Miguel, and Miguel Pinero. *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings*. New York: Morrow, 1975. Print.

clxx Rodriguez "Language of the Wall", 2014

clxxi Miller 2012, p. 32.

clxxii *Ibid.*

clxxiii *Ibid.*

clxxiv Negron continues (Negron 2015 p. 296) "While salsa was not a cultural object outside the market, to argue that its transformation from local musical expression to global phenomenon eventually subsumed its cultural significance reifies dominant paradigms of a monolithic market that reduces culture to economic interests. [...] An analysis of the film's aesthetic and material context reveals that New York Puerto Rican communities both participated in and benefitted from the music's commodification and commercialization while resisting the reduction of their own identities to commodities for global consumption" (296).

clxxv *Ibid.*

clxxvi Rodriguez "Language of the Wall", 2014

clxxvii Miller 2012, p. 19

clxxviii As a detail of reference, in 1974, Algarin and Piñero's claims in *Nuyorican Poetry* "Nuyorican Poetry" would envision a poetry where: "the poet carries the tension of the streets in his mind and he knows how to execute his mind in action. The past teaches the young to juggle all the balls at the same time. The poet juggles with every street corner east of First Avenue and south of Fourteenth Street ending at the Brooklyn Bridge., Poetry is the full act of naming. Naming states

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of mind. The rebellious, the contentious, the questioning personality wins out. And poetry is on the street burning it up with its visions of the times to be:

Now only our tomorrows  
Will tell if that arrow  
Of love with a head  
Of art penetrates into  
Higher dimensions.  
("Sad Will Be The Nights  
If The Planets Will No Longer Shine" by Lucky  
CienFuegos)"

The poet sees his function as a troubadour. He tell the tale of the streets to the streets. The people listen. They cry, they laugh, they dance as the troubadour opens up and tunes his voice and moves his pitch and rhythm to the high tension of "bomba" truth. Proclamations of hurt, of anger and hatred. Whirls of high-pitched singing. The voice of the street poet must amplify itself. The poet pierces the crowd with cataracts of clear, clean, precise, concrete words about the liquid, shifting latino reality around him.

Ismael Rivera is "*el sonero mayor*" as Joey's house. The troubadour among troubadours is the man who sings the live sweat pulse of a people. Ismael's words are about the island, his mother-in-law, his love, life. Ismael is Nuyorican rhythmic communication. Stripped, Ismael is the clean, unspoiled voice of Puerto Ricans both in New York City and the island of Puerto Rico. He is the passionate historian of both worlds."

clxxxix Ibid. 283

clxxx Miller 2012, P. 38.

clxxxi Lomas 2008, p. 25.

clxxxii Ibid.

clxxxiii Fernandez 2011, p. 149. Smethurst points out that the Young Lords' leader, Victor Hernandez Cruz, and Felipe Luciano provide an example of the broader relationship between the Young Lords and uptown poetics and Luciano specifically "went on to greater fame uptown" as a member of "an early configuration of the Last Poets," I would argue that one can see a broader cultural inquiry into the questions of militant (an idea, which, according to Smethurst should be understood in distinction from the mistaken associations which assume a relationship of "Writers of Puerto Rican descent joined the Black Arts movement in New York almost from its beginning. Victor Hernandez Cruz, like many of his black con- temporaries on the Lower East Side, mingled with members of the second- generation New York school while at the same time joining in African American nationalist institutions and events. Both Cruz and his friend Felipe Luciano hung around the edges of the Umbra group and downtown black bohemia. Cruz's poetry appeared in several Black Arts journals as well as in the anthologies Black Fire and The New Black Poetry. Luciano went on to greater fame uptown as part of an early configuration of the Last Poets before becoming a leader of the Young Lords."

clxxxiv Ibid.

clxxxv Born 1936 in Ponce, Puerto Rico before moving to New York where he lived on 28<sup>th</sup> street, at the age of 9 Ortiz joined the Madison Square Boy's Club on 29<sup>th</sup> street after being enthralled by what he claims was "the most beautiful thing I have heard and ever seen. I mean that ball was going: boogadoo-boogadoo-boogadood. "That noise! I says. "This is beautiful. I got to learn to punch that" (Ecksel 2106).

clxxxvi Fernandez 2011, p. 151.

clxxxvii Lissner 1967

clxxxviii Miller 2012, p. 16.

clxxxix Anderson, 1967.

cx Ibid.

cxci As quoted in Miller 2012, pg. 6.

cxcii Caro 965

cxciiii Ibid

cxciiv Chalfant, *All City*, 1983.

cxciiv Coulthard 2014, *Red Skin White Masks*, p. 3.

cxciiv Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition*, p. 6.

cxciiv We might take note of Mare's mention of the indigenous "mathematical calculation" of the dancer's technique (as discussed more thoroughly in chapter 7. Might Mare's insight provide us with a way to consider Rammellzee's critique of empire?

cxciiv Christiansen 2019, p. 68.

cxciiv See Miller 2022's entry for the Oxford's African American Studies Center.

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<sup>cc</sup> Halsey & Young, p. 275.

<sup>cci</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>ccii</sup> See their claim for a haptic understanding on p. 296: “Perhaps, then, it is necessary to admit that illicit writers inhabit spaces *haptically* instead of optically—that for particular kinds of bodies a surface is never just ‘looked upon’ so much as it is felt or lived.” See their claim for “deterioration” and “signifying practices” on p. 286.

<sup>cciii</sup> Ibid.: “There is good evidence to suggest that many illicit writers look upon urban and rural streetscapes in ways that differ from the gaze deployed by other bodies. However, this variance in ocular orientation is generally not, as many assume, one which has as its objective the destruction or defiling of property. Rather, it is a mode of envisioning which begins on the basis that the surfaces which make up the city are always already marked by signs of deterioration and decay (such as rusted facades, storm-damaged roofs, cracked stonework, weathered timber), and constituted by competing and questionable aesthetics (such as the signs telling of the presence and nature of business, or of political candidates, or of speed limits, no parking zones and one-way streets). The consequence of such a view is that orthodox notions of cleanliness and purity undergo something of an implosion. Indeed, for many writers, there are no such things as ‘blank’ walls so much as locales of, and for, a ceaseless writing. Such a writing never ends and is never completed (either by the illicit writer or by any of the city’s more legitimate authors): as such it is a ceaseless *becoming-other*, taking place in the countless locales where each surface intersects with and is an extension of the numerous signifying practices of which graffiti is but one example.”

See also, “‘negative space’—and there-fore as something to be filled out or brought to life. Here, there is little if any conception of illicit writing detracting from or destroying the urban aesthetic. Rather, such activity adds to, and induces a performance from, otherwise ‘lifeless spaces’. Most importantly, for many writers the sur- faces that make up the built environment present more in the order of a *flow* than a structure. They are, in other words, canvasses permanently in waiting. When one writer remarks that he is ‘thinking it’s gonna look alright when it’s done’, the wall has already been actively transformed into a space replete with possibilities. This is accomplished through the nature of the writer’s gaze, which does away with the actual (banality) and ushers in the virtual (creativity)” (288). See also: “it must be asked whether there is, or ever could be, a pure or original surface or aesthetic worth fighting for. We would contend that such a surface is an impossibility if only because so- called ‘clean’ or ‘blank’ spaces constitute, paradoxically, spaces of infinite variation and potential. The challenge, it would seem, is to engage openly and constructively with illicit writers in order that we might better under- stand why the city and the writing of its surfaces feature so prominently in all our lives” (299).

<sup>cciv</sup> Rammellzee and Rabotnik, 2018.

<sup>ccv</sup> Halsey and Young 2006, p. 289.

<sup>ccvi</sup> Halsey and Young 2006, p. 292-293.

<sup>ccvii</sup> Peñalver and Katyal 2010, p. 109.

<sup>ccviii</sup> Medina 2020.

<sup>ccix</sup> Fainsten and Fainstein (ed. Mollenkopf) 1988.

<sup>ccx</sup> Ibid. p. 165

<sup>ccxi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ccxii</sup> Ibid., p. 165-167.

<sup>ccxiii</sup> Rammellzee and Rabotnik, 2018.

<sup>ccxiv</sup> Chalfant, *All City*, 1983.

<sup>ccxv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ccxvi</sup> Rammellzee, Gill and Cooper 2015.

<sup>ccxvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ccxviii</sup> Rammellzee and Rabotnik, 2018.

<sup>ccxix</sup> Rammellzee and Rabotnik, 2018.

<sup>ccxx</sup> Christiansen, p. 39-40, citing Tate, *Flyboy 2*, 2016, p. 132.

<sup>ccxxi</sup> Rammellzee and Rabotnik, 2018.

<sup>ccxxii</sup> As Christiansen suggests, it was the secretly “encrypted” archives of mons that first inspired Rammellzee, who “clearly admired how the monks had put encrypted information inside their handiwork, and the idea that script could be a secretive vehicle.” (41-42). Here we should underline Christiansen’s insight into the fact that the letter structure of the “script” itself could function as a “secretive vehicle” for “information.”

<sup>ccxxiii</sup> Rammellzee and Rabotnik, 2018.

<sup>ccxxiv</sup> Rammellzee, *Ionic Treatise*, 2003.

<sup>ccxxv</sup> The boundary between diegetic content and real-world political problems proved malleable in Rammellzee’s eyes: Christiansen notes that “According to friends, Rammellzee thought his Letter Racers so scientifically accurate that they might be used as templates for military vehicles. Convinced of their functionality, he contacted the Defense Department to offer his services” (49). We might consider Kodwo Eshun’s comments here (also cited by Christiansen):

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“Science unravels the world into endless allegories, eclipsing consensual order in an overwhelming opacity of overlapping directives.

Science doesn't instruct, it inducts you into secret states of innervation, initiates useless quests for the 3rd Eye, spreads a daze of confusion only occluded by the powers of the Inner Mind's Eye. Science turns vinyl into a mass medium for channelling information mysteries, private MythSystems, fragments from endless infoverses. Science takes advantage of vinyl's replayability by turning listening into a full-time job. Science wants you for an acolyte, wants to initiate you into a hermeneutics which elides reality. “ (see Eshun, *More Brilliant*, 29).

ccxxvi Tate 2016, p. 132.

ccxxvii See Stewart *Graffiti Kings*, glossary p. 226

ccxxviii Stewart cites: David Ley and Roman Cybriwsky, “Urban Graffiti as Territorial Markers,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Dec. 1974, v. 64.

ccxxix Stewart 2009, 13.

ccxxx *Ibid.*, 14-15.

ccxxxi *Ibid.*, 16.

ccxxxii See, <http://www.at149st.com/glossary.html> (@149st, 2022).

ccxxxiii “Chain 3” 2021.

ccxxxiv Recalling Brighenti's claims as we consider the extensions and transformations from wall to subway, we might begin to consider new ranges of vectors as various as the poetry of the Style-Writers, echoing and extending the critique of the metropolitan hegemony of “orthogonal” rather than “longitudinal” trajectories.

ccxxxv See Christiansen 2019 p. 50, who cites Guerilla Art, 2012.

ccxxxvi See Miller 2022.

ccxxxvii Christiansen 2019, pp. 40-141.

ccxxxviii Rabotnik 1986

ccxxxix See Rammellzee 2003.

ccxl *Ibid.*

ccxli *Ibid.*

ccxlii Hutchinson 2018, p. 55.

ccxliii Hutchinson 2018, p. 56 (quoting Levi-Strauss).

ccxliv Christiansen 2019, pp. 43-44.

ccxlv Galli 85

ccxlvi Rammellzee, 2003.

ccxlvii Here we may recall Ramm's phrase “wings, or dreams of wings” in his 1986 interview with the Dutch experimental television news group Rabotnik (who also resisted the idea of government naming). See Rammellzee and Rabotnik 2018.

ccxlviii Galli 85

ccxlix As quoted by Gopinath 2015 citing Rammellzee 2012a, see also Rammellzee 2012b.

cd As quoted by Gopinath 2015 citing Dery 1994, p. 183, and Dery's citation of Rammellzee 1993, p. 20.

ceii Style Writers in the late 1970s and early 1980s focused their attention on the style of their writing much more often than the performative exhibition of one political ideology or another; Rammellzee exemplifies how their stylistic pursuits established alter-archives and sustained their own regimes of power

Again, Rammellzee went to great lengths to show how the practiced militancy of armamentation superseded the ornamentation of discursive statements: in illuminated manuscripts written under the eye of medieval rulers, or in the delicate wrestling of fine grained differentiations between the theoretical valuations of specific speech acts (per Schacter's Habermas). While Schacter focuses on what “Independent Public Artists” do for the public sphere at large—and their contributions remain underestimated—I am somewhat moreso seeking to understand what Writers did for themselves when the public sphere had abandoned their spaces.

ceiii Ivor Miller, 2012, 68

ceiiii *Ibid* 59.

ceiv Galli, 2009, 115.

ceiv *Ibid.*

cevi Bennet et. al. p. 233 in Anderson and Fluker eds. 2019.

cevii Jennings and Fluker p. 63, in *ibid.*

ceviii *Ibid* 65, citing Coleman 2009.

celix Jennings and Fluker 2019, pp. 64-66.

celx *Ibid*, p. 66.

celxi Austin 130

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- celxii Ibid.
- celxiii Rammellzee 2003.
- celxiv “Riding the Rails” 2019.
- celxv Tate 2016, p. 130.
- celxvi Rammellzee, 2003.
- celxvii Rammellzee and Rabotnik, 2018.
- celxviii Tate 2016, 129-130.
- celxix Galli 2009, 118.
- celxx Tate 2016, p. 132.
- celxxi DeAk 1983.
- celxxii DeAk, 1983.
- celxxiii See also Algarín and Piñero’s 1975 *Nuyorican Poetry* p. 13 “A clique (a New York street clique) is a group of people who offer each other safety. Safety in numbers is nationalism. Nationalism is mutual protection. The clique can be small or large. Large nationalist cliques (ITT, Dupont, Chase Manhattan Bank) protect and define their laws. A small nationalist clique is any city gang that is geographically located in a particular neighborhood or city block and protects its laws. The purpose for wearing colors, designing a flag, or having an anthem is to develop an identity. A city clique needs to have a geographical identity as inviolable as that of any nation formally recognized by the UN. But above all a clique offers protection and a sense of “national safety” for its immediate members.”
- celxxiv Caro 967
- celxxv See, for instance, Christiansen “Sounds of Alter-destiny” p.44, who cites Alexxa Gotthardt, “How 1980s Cult Artist Rammellzee Mesmerized Everyone From Basquiat to the Beastie Boys” (2018): “New York in the 1970s was riddled with poverty and discrimination, bolstered by deepening class and racial divides. Starting in the ’50s, poor, primarily black communities had been pushed out of Manhattan all the way to subsidized housing in the beach community of Far Rockaway, where Rammellzee’s family landed. For him, and for many early graffiti writers, spraying trains and walls became a way to let off steam, wield power, and claim space.”
- celxxvi Caro 967
- celxxvii Caro 963
- celxxviii As quoted by Caro p.849. Elizabeth Barlow Rogers points out that while “‘Slum clearance’ is a deeply suspect term today. In Moses’s time, however, no one was especially critical of language characterizing slums as blighted, obsolete, cancerous parts of the urban tissue that needed to be cut away by radical surgery. He could speak of “the scythe of progress” as a reasonable means to a desirable end. Indeed, the word “progress” was particularly associated with the polemics of modernist design theory. People’s lives could be upended by the march of progress in the belief that rich, poor, and middle class alike would subsequently live in a more rational and salubrious city.”
- celxxix Caro 968
- celxxx As quoted by Annie Cohen-Solal in her *Leo and his Circle*, p. 387.
- celxxxi Henkin 35
- celxxxii Henkin cites contrasting opinions among historians and critics of the grid: Lewis Mumford and John Reys made a point of “stressing its bland and brazen artificiality and its value to spectators, and others (like Hendrik Hartog and Elizabeth Blackmar) emphasizing its vision of Republican neutrality” and notes the similarity to Jefferson’s 1875 land ordinance of “endlessly repeating rectilinear subdivisions.” (36) See also Henkin’s claim that the grid “promulgated a radically integrative version of urban space in which land values (based largely in accessibility to concentrations of population) could be represented on paper at any given time and social knowledge was flattened and refashioned by market relations” (36)” and “Within the grid, land is homogenized, its unique features liquidated into a uniform currency. Points on a map become interchangeable units of space distinct from one another only in terms of size and relative location” (36). Henkin also cites Philip Fisher’s “Democratic Social Space: Whitman, Melville, and the Promise of American Transparency” reference to “Cartesian social space” such that the “uniqueness of place disappears.”
- celxxxiii Caro p. 509
- celxxxiv Caro 491
- celxxxv Caro p.487
- celxxxvi Jacobs *Death and Life*, p. 121
- celxxxvii Rogers, Elizabeth Barlow. 2008, 139
- celxxxviii Ibid.
- celxxxix Ibid.
- celxc Caro 572
- celxci “As the publicity spread beyond New York, so did the cheering. Life was not all white suits and black ties; it was also academic gowns and mortarboards; it was during the Thirties that Moses began to spend his Junes traveling to out-of-town colleges to receive honorary degrees; he would eventually be a Doctor of Laws eleven times over, a Doctor of

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Engineering six times over, a Doctor of Humane Letters twice ("I never wrote a humane letter in my life," he protested), as well as Bachelor and Master of Arts (twice each) and a Doctor of Fine Arts and of Public Administration as well as Philosophy. Park and horticultural associations all up and down the eastern seaboard began to give him awards; the Boston-based Trustees of Public Reservations, for example, commended him for "distinguished service in conservation." So fast did the awards flow in, in fact, that he found that if he traveled to each out-of-town event at which he was to receive one he would have little time for work; he therefore made a practice of not attending, and of reading his acceptance speech over the telephone on his desk, which was hooked up at the dais at the event to an amplifying device that enabled the audience to hear it. For a time his wife and secretaries mounted the medals, medallions, plaques and illuminated scrolls on the walls of his office—along with one memento that Moses insisted be placed in a prominent position, a memento that Fortune described as "a letter of restrained commendation" dated 1930 and signed Franklin D. Roosevelt. The office walls were soon filled, and Mary Moses covered a long wall in the living room of their apartment with them. But they continued to pour in so fast that his secretaries finally just began storing them in packing cases.

Other cities began to send their planners and engineers to New York to see what all the fuss was about. Buses chartered by the park associations of Boston and Philadelphia brought matrons by the score to see the new playground design. And the response was invariably that of the hundred members of the American Shore and Beach Preservation Society whose reaction following a day-long tour of Moses' works was summed up by a Herald Tribune reporter as "amazed." Arriving back at City Hall after a similar tour, Mayor William B. Hartsfield of Atlanta asked a reporter, "Where does New York get all the millions to do this?"\* Urban improvements on such a scale had never been seen—had, perhaps, never been dreamed of—in America before; there were, for example, more miles of divided through highways uninterrupted by intersections at grade in the New York metropolitan area in 1940 than in the next five largest cities in the United States—Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Los Angeles and Cleveland— combined." pp.571-572 in Caro.

For this detail, Caro cites page 25 of *The New York Times* February 5, 1942.<sup>ccxc</sup> There front-page reads: "*AID ON WAY, WAVELL TELLS SINGAPORE, M'ARTHUR PARRIES BLOWS AT FLANK; AXIS REGAINS DERNA ON LIBYAN COAST.*" This headline aside smaller titles "WAR OUTLAY VOTED NEARS 150 BILLION FOR 3-YEAR PERIOD," "SUBMARINE SINKS ANOTHER U.S. SHIP; 2 KILLED, 40 SAVED" and "CONGRESS IS URGENT TO RECLAIM PROFIT Todd Shipyards Agent Asserts Firm Made Too Much and Would Tax Away Access."

<sup>ccxcii</sup> Specifically, point out Mindy Thompson Fullilove and Rodrick Wallace, redlining had long set the pretext for urban decline,

"The dominant policies we have identified are segregation, redlining, urban renewal, planned shrinkage/catastrophic disinvestment, deindustrialization, mass criminalization, gentrification, HOPE VI, and the foreclosure crisis. [...] Segregation is an important feature of American urban life. As Thomas Hanchett has documented in his book, *Sorting Out the New South City*, people of different races and classes were intermingled in American cities 150 years ago. The policies of separation were instituted gradually, but inexorably, leading to a radical separation by both race and class, what Massey and Denton later called "American Apartheid." Such separation continues to be a feature of American life, at this point, most prominent in the organization of residential areas.

Redlining, instituted by the federal government's Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1937, was designed to steer investment away from risky places. These were defined as those places with older buildings and non-white residents. Literally, the presence of a single Negro family meant that an area was given the worst possible rating, thus setting up the material basis for white flight. Hanchett observed, "The handsomely printed map with its sharp-edged boundaries made the practice of deciding credit risk on the basis of neighborhood seem objective and put the weight of the U.S. government behind it..." (p. 382)

<sup>ccxciii</sup> Audible: "a perfect ordered civilized metropolis"

<sup>ccxciv</sup> As a note, in the images seen above, I cropped away the upper and lower strips of the images for the sake of simplicity. Also, the immediately publicly available link ([https://tubitv.com/movies/517733/mst3k-escape-2000-escape-from-the-bronx?start=true&utm\\_source=google-feed&tracking=google-feed](https://tubitv.com/movies/517733/mst3k-escape-2000-escape-from-the-bronx?start=true&utm_source=google-feed&tracking=google-feed)) will take you to a "Mystery Science Theatre" roast of the film. In the latter the scene is located at 21:24 and in the original (on Amazon) it is located at 16:09.

<sup>ccxcv</sup> Wallace *A Synergism of Plagues* 1988 p. 1

<sup>ccxcvi</sup> Ibid. See also Wallace (1990) "Urban Desertification, Public Health, and Public Disorder: 'Planned Shrinkage', Violent Death, Substance Abuse and AIDS in the Bronx" where he writes of parallels in Harlem: "This nexus is embedded in conditions of preexisting poverty and overcrowding whose impacts have been exacerbated by the loss of community and of social networks associated with severe out-migration such as McCord and Freeman noted for Harlem."

<sup>ccxcvii</sup> Ibid. See also, for instance p. 17: "the ratio of maximum to mean decreased proportionally more than the mean, consistent with the classic diffusion of population concentration as well as its transfer by migration. Unsurprisingly, the

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burnout of the South-Central Bronx which took place between 1970 and 1980 redistributed housing overcrowding along with population. Figures 12a and 14a, showing drug death and housing overcrowding concentrations for 1970-1973 and for the 1970 census, respectively, are similar. They display the same strong concentrations in the South-Central Bronx, the traditional 'poverty spine' of the Bronx. We could, again, use correlation by health area or spatial correlation by map to quantify the similarity, but that seems unnecessary.

Evidently the city's program of what Duryea (1978) called "planned shrinkage" and Mega (1978) called fire service "redlining" for the Bronx drastically changed the geography of drug abuse from being tightly and centrally distributed in the traditional poverty communities of the South-Central Bronx into a split and bifurcated pattern covering a much larger area, and embedded in a badly disorganized "community" of displaced and disoriented refugees whose social networks appear to have been seriously truncated by the process of displacement (Wallace and Bassuk, 1987). Community disorganization and the truncation of social networks have the gravest implications for success of AIDS control programs."

ccxcviii Ibid., p. 1-2.

ccxcix Fullilove and Wallace 2011, p. 383.

ccc Alexander, p. 52.

ccci Alexander cites MacLeod's influential 1987 book (a project initiated in 1981 and republished with continued interviews with the original research subjects in 1995 and then 2009), *Aint no Makin It*. MacLeod's research in Clarendon Heights ("a low-income housing development in a northeastern city") presents as "This book's basic finding— that two substantially different paths are followed within the general framework of social reproduction— is a major challenge to economically determinist theories" (p.3).

cccii Alexander p. 48.

ccciii Alexander p.55.

ccciv Lavine p. 425.

cccv Lavine p. 424.

cccvii "Ecology" had not yet become the term it is now. Caro cites two designers of the time, Exton and Weinberg, who sought more environmentally engaged approaches to development, specifically seeking the difference between Moses' anticipated vantage point of the driver, and the anticipated vantage point of "the pedestrian spends a long time at one spot." see p. 543 in Caro.

cccviii Caro p. 846.

cccxiii Gannon 2020.

cccxix Fernandez 2007 "In the Bronx Blight Gave Way to Renewal" *NYTimes* 2007

cccex *White House at Work*, National Archives. 1997

cccxi See Rodriguez 2018, "Mare 139. Лекция на V1 BATTLE"

cccxi Caro 970.

cccxi Hezakaya News and Films, 2022.

cccxi See Rodriguez 2018, "Mare 139. Лекция на V1 BATTLE"

cccxi Ibid.

cccxi We might be reminded of Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement* which also notes: "While Williams is justly famous for his use of American dictions and rhythms derived from varieties of everyday speech, it was his visual placement of vernacular American English on the page, including his use of the triple line break (under the influence of Russian futurism, cubism, and other avant-garde schools of visual art that he absorbed as part of Alfred Stieglitz's artistic circle in the early twentieth century), that made his work so arresting. One might add that Langston Hughes performed much the same operation in such early poems as "The Owl and the Saxophone, 2. A.M. ."

cccxi See also Fekner 2022 (<https://johnfekner.com/feknerArchive/?p=72>) and Fekner's stencil at John "Crash" Matos' show: (<https://johnfekner.com/index.php>).

cccxi "A New Look" *NYTimes* 1983

cccxi As for chaos as a category of devaluation and error, we might consider the value of the chaos at work in the moment that, per 1974's *Nuyorican Poetry*: "A new day is born.

A new day needs a new language or else the day becomes a repetition of yesterday. Invention is not always a straightening up of things. Oftentimes the newness disrupts. It causes chaos. Two languages coexisting in your head as modes of expression can either strengthen alertness or cause confusion. The streets resound with Spanish and English. The average Nuyorican has a working command of both and normally uses both languages simultaneously. Ordinary life for the Nuyorican happens in both languages. The factory laborer reads instructions in English but feels in Spanish. Thus he expresses responses to the conditions of his environment in Nuyorican. The standardization of a street-born language is always perilous and never easy. Around existing, formally recognized languages whole empires of rules grow."

cccxi M139 Design, "Breaking Algorithms at Apollo Theater" 2022

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<sup>ccccxi</sup> See also: “One reason for the importance of poetry as a Black Arts genre is not merely because it is more easily and dramatically performed than prose, particularly the novel, but also that the relative brevity of the lyric poem lends itself to the space and economic constraints of journal and small press publishing far better than the novel. Despite a deeply ingrained feeling in the United States that poetry is a relatively rarefied genre as compared with fiction, these small press publications often sold many more copies than novels by authors associated with the movement who were published by “mainstream” presses.

<sup>ccccxii</sup> See <http://www.mtv.com/news/2495908/king-of-style-kase-2-remembered/>

<sup>ccccxiii</sup> “System builders” may be understood as:

“Individuals, teams, or in some cases institutions capable not only of producing ground-breaking inventions, but also imagining and bringing into being the large ensembles of techniques, practices, institutions, and other technologies needed to support and sustain them. The range of this system-building work demands skill and care within multiple registers: technical, but also organizational, social, institutional, etc. Successful system-builders must therefore act as “heterogeneous engineers,” working together not only technologies and the material world, but also people, organizations, values, knowledge, and expectations and other technologies needed to support and sustain them.” “One of the most careful and suggestive accounts of infrastructural development to date comes from historian Thomas Hughes’ *Networks of Power*, an analysis of the early development of electrical power in the United States and Western Europe [2]. Hughes’ work, and that of the “Large Technical Systems” (LTS) school that followed [3], provides a compelling account of the way in which technical systems (as opposed to isolated technologies) are brought into being, stabilized, and extended over time. Key to this process are system-builders — individuals, teams, or in some cases institutions capable not only of producing ground-breaking inventions, but also imagining and bringing into being the the large ensembles of techniques, practices, institutions, and other technologies needed to support and sustain them. The range of this system-building work demands skill and care within multiple registers: technical, but also organizational, social, institutional, etc. Successful system-builders must therefore act as “heterogeneous engineers,” working together not only technologies and the material world, but also people, organizations, values, knowledge, and expectations [4]. A canonical example here is Thomas Edison’s role in the history of electricity. Other inventors had already hit upon light bulbs; what set Edison apart was his conception of a comprehensive lighting system, including generators, cables, and light bulbs, dedicated above all to the provision of an integrated system of electrical lighting. Parallel examples may be found in the early role of companies such as Univac and IBM in producing not just digital computers, but an integrated data processing system, built around a suite of input, output, and storage devices, but also software, training, and a variety of customer services. (This history is reflected in IBM’s recent embrace of services as the center of its business model.)” from *Understanding Infrastructure: History, Heuristics, and Cyberinfrastructure Policy* by Steven J. Jackson, Paul N. Edwards, Geoffrey C. Bowker, and Cory P. Knobel. *First Monday*, volume 12, number 6 (June 2007), URL: [http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue12\\_6/jackson/index.html](http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue12_6/jackson/index.html)

<sup>ccccxiv</sup> See also Anderson and Fluker’s volume, which also addresses the question of “gateway” creation in the essay by Sherese Frances “The Electric Impulse.”

<sup>ccccxv</sup> P. 1 in *Infrastructural action in Vietnam: Inverting the techno-politics of hacking in the global South*

<sup>ccccxvi</sup> P. 21 in Easterling, Keller. *Extrastatecraft: the Power of Infrastructure Space*. Verso, 2014.

<sup>ccccxvii</sup> See for instance “Yet all the paradoxical stories together with the mutability of the zone suggest that this, the MSDOS of urban software, might be productively hacked. Despite its internal isomorphism, the global epidemic of zone building also means that it has become a powerful multiplier, one capable of carrying messages that unravel the zone formula itself. Its ubiquity represents at once a threat and opportunity. The first hack to the zone formula might deploy any number of active forms related to, for example, labor, the environment, building construction, telecommunications, or security—forms that might circulate within a population of zones with compounding effects.” *Ibid.* p. 68

<sup>ccccxviii</sup> Quoted in Medina, Samuel “Keller Easterling on Hacking the Operating System of Our Cities.” *Metropolis*.

<https://www.metropolismag.com/cities/keller-easterling-hacking-operating-system-our-cities/> Accessed July 8, 2020.

<sup>ccccxix</sup> *Ibid* 68

<sup>ccccxx</sup> Fullilove and Wallace 384, who also cite Watkins BX. *Fantasy, Decay, Abandonment, Defeat, and Disease: Community Disintegration in Central Harlem 1960–1990*. New York, NY: Columbia University; 2000.

<sup>ccccxxi</sup> See Mare 2011a and 2011b

<sup>ccccxxii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>ccccxxiii</sup> At the unofficial “united nations of Graffiti,” 5 Pointz.

<sup>ccccxxiv</sup> Each style may be understood to define its signature at least partially at the point of randomness in determining the corners of curves (and, the curves of corners) in a question of the mathematics and logic partially shared by researchers such as Ron Eglash in their investigation of anti-aliasing (and logarithms more generally).

<sup>ccccxxv</sup> See for instance the cover of Austin 2001 or Cooper and Chalfant 1997

<sup>ccccxxvi</sup> See Susan Stewart *Crimes of Writing*

<sup>ccccxxvii</sup> <https://museumofgraffiti.com/kel-first-style-master/>

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cccxviii 2:20 See Mare 139 Latin Nation (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PRLUvhAPlc>) see also “A legitimate artform done illegitimately” (~1:00) . Other TFP members, such as the British Jadell use the contemporary internet to reconfigure, remix and redistribute content . Jadell’s membership in TDS is lauded by Chum101 (<https://www.paxtonglew.com/chum101>).

cccxix See <http://www.at149st.com/news2.html>

cccxl See <https://www.webbyawards.com/press/press-releases/may-9-2006-10th-annual-webby-awards-unveil-years-best-web-sites/>

cccxli As I am an amateur in that field, I situate that term primarily in the sense where it refers to the progressive conditions appearing after the transformation of a global regime of colonialism in the later twentieth century.

cccxlii While the Mosesian highways leveraged the abstract plasticity of cement at the macro-scale of social infrastructures, on a local level, artists like Ilya Bolotowsky imagined futures of abstract integrations within the social services Day Room D-31 at the “welfare hospital” on Roosevelt Island. Here the infrastructural bureaucracies succeeded in delivering aesthetic strategies as applied to intertwined human-ecological factors, which together could mitigate a feeling of being walled-in and fenced off from the rest of world. Therefore I [Ilya] have sought to create a feeling of free, open space...The shapes of the doors and windows all around the day room have been woven into the design .... Since straightlines are the most restful things to contemplate, this mural is of straight lines and geometric shapes. The day room, its architecture, and its mural form one plastic unit...I believe the Chronic Disease Hospital should have a mural in its dayroom as modern and progressive as the structure of the building and as the medical science of its staff. (As quoted by Hutchinson 2018 p. 49)

Here the technical science of medicine, the social engineering of architecture, and the aesthetic modernity of wall-images all create a “plastic unit” which, as George Hutchinson becomes activated in the interplay of human and natural environments: “the sensual experience of the patient in this ‘day room’ is thus contingent on the progressive interaction between natural light, architecture, painting, and individual point of view—a constantly changing visual synthesis of diverse material effects” (ibid).

cccxliii P. 329 in Mubi Brighenti, Andrea. “At the Wall: Graffiti Writers, Urban Territoriality, and the Public Domain.” *Space and Culture*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2010, pp. 315–332.

cccxliiv See Crawford, Margo Natalie. *Black Post-Blackness: the Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics*.

University of Illinois Press, 2017., and Smethurst, James Edward. *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. Web.

cccxlv Smethurst 90

cccxlvi Ibid.

cccxlvii Fullilove, Mindy Thompson, and Rodrick Wallace. “Serial Forced Displacement in American Cities, 1916-2010.”

*Journal of Urban Health*, vol. 88, no. 3, 2011, pp. 381–389.

cccxlviii See <http://www.at149st.com/disco.html>

cccxlix Ibid.

cccl Ibid.

cccli See Kit’s Instagram post [https://www.instagram.com/p/CSq\\_bXuL0JcMqEG554hLyw0DKelcq7s-h262TY0/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CSq_bXuL0JcMqEG554hLyw0DKelcq7s-h262TY0/) See also <https://kit17mgs.wordpress.com/2017/10/04/kit-17-bio-2/>

ccclii See <http://www.dailydiggers.com/2009/06/graffiti-legends-iz-wiz-rip.html>

cccliii P. 131 in Chalfant, Henry, and Sacha Jenkins. *Training Days: the Subway Artists Then and Now*. Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2014.

cccliv See also Skeme’s Instagram Post with this work:

“THROW-BACK THURSDAYS!!!!

37 Years ago, at the age of 16,...I painted this piece on a 40 ft high elevated platform way uptown in the Boogie Down Bronx. Finishing just before the crack of dawn, I had the presence of mind to call Henry Chalfant at home and alert him to the creation of what I swore was the best burner ever to grace NYC MTA steel,...without hesitation, Henry C. jumped out of bed, and slid down his fireman's pole to catch the latest Alphabetical Algebraic Equation!! While I waited in the cover that was dawn” Skeme. Throw Back Thursdays. *Instagram*. 2 November 2017.

[https://www.instagram.com/p/Ba\\_wcjXAL82/?igshid=fjqtlu7tv5f](https://www.instagram.com/p/Ba_wcjXAL82/?igshid=fjqtlu7tv5f).

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A remaining question is whether this train itself or a handball court at the 3 yard carries the piece that Skeme refers to-- per my research at the time of writing, the 3 yard's was located "uptown," but not far enough to be considered the Bronx, and moreover, it offered ground level access to trains, not a "40 ft. high elevated platform."

ccclv P. 139 in Chalfant, Henry, and Sacha Jenkins. *Training Days: the Subway Artists Then and Now*. Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2014.

ccclvi P. 87 in Castleman, Craig. *Getting up: Subway Graffiti in New York*. MIT Press, 1982.

ccclvii Fenton Lawless, 1976 New York Graffiti Experience, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=842705192588474>

ccclviii Ibid

ccclix Ibid

ccclx Chalfant and Silver, *Style Wars*

ccclxi Castleman 172

ccclxii Jacobs 118

ccclxiii Jacobs 447

ccclxiv Skeme, *Graffiti Legends - Skeme TMT Talks Train Yards The Bombing Missions StyleWars Subway Art & More*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_xhW3xEU62Y&list=PLKs89edidu7UX-kkb2wdXSwkZDMXKRiC2&index=1,22:00](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xhW3xEU62Y&list=PLKs89edidu7UX-kkb2wdXSwkZDMXKRiC2&index=1,22:00)

ccclxv Crawford 32

ccclxvi See Chuck Galli, who argues that the subway would "Remove any continuity one would have in making such a trip (such as walking or biking from Harlem to Chinatown, passing through all neighborhoods in between) and literally blot out the very existence of neighborhoods and people along the way, much like an expressway does"

ccclxvii Caro 758-9

ccclxviii Ibid

ccclxix Caro 797

ccclxx P. 159 in Sparberg, Andrew J. *From a Nickel to a Token: the Journey from Board of Transportation to MTA*. First edition., Empire State Editions, An imprint of Fordham University Press, 2015.

ccclxxi Ibid 33

ccclxxii Crawford 53, quoting her own 2012 interview with Gerald Williams.

ccclxxiii Crawford 21

ccclxxiv Miller cites Mintz & Price explaining the way that Afro-American sources built their lifeways to meet their daily needs.

ccclxxv Crawford 49

ccclxxvi See All City TaxiTalk Show 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_xhW3xEU62Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xhW3xEU62Y)

ccclxxvii Kel1st 2 Many 2 Name The New York City Graffiti History of the number 2.

ccclxxviii <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhENfQtHn1c> see also: "Was the one yard notorious? ... It was multi-level, lower half mostly dead trains, upper half was multi level"

ccclxxix <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhENfQtHn1c>

ccclxxx As my dad, an engineer, once told me, each form is only a language used to express someone's ideas about the world.

ccclxxxi See Barta, Eglash, Barkely and Lyles *Math is a Verb*

ccclxxxii Nguyen et. al. 2019 p.18

ccclxxxiii Nguyen et. al. 2019, p. 13.

ccclxxxiv Although, such work is becoming increasingly popular in, for instance, research centered in publicly funded academic efforts in conjunction with Baske's Kulturezentrum in the German city of Karlsruhe). See Baske and Siegmund 2020.

ccclxxxv Nguyen et. al. 2019, p. 12.

ccclxxxvi Turing, 1950.

ccclxxxvii Turing 1950, p. 442.

ccclxxxviii Guastello 2014, p. 316-317.

ccclxxxix Turing 495.

ccclxe P. 139 in Chalfant and Jenkins. *Training Days* 2014.

ccclxi Mayes-Wright 2018. As my mom, a musician and mathematician pointed out, these variable integer structures can be seen throughout the musical world.

ccclxii Erickson 2016, p. 567.

ccclxiii Womack 2013, 66-67.

ccclxiv Turing 1950, 439.

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<sup>cccxcv</sup> Turing 434.

<sup>cccxcvi</sup> Negru 2013, p. 21.

<sup>cccxcvii</sup> Ibid. p. 20.

<sup>cccxcviii</sup> However, we might find this circularity itself to be telling. Guastello points out that Turing also contributed to the development of a branch of mathematics called *symbolic dynamics*. Suppose we had a sequence of objects or events, and gave each object or event a letter code  $a...z$ . [...]

Real problems are seldom this simple or this obvious. Nonetheless, the math eventually facilitated some more sophisticated operations. For instance, we could identify a sequence of program code, make an operation on it to change it in some way, and put it back into the program where it originated. We can write rules for how these program changes would take place. In doing so, we also arrive at an important insight: There is no fundamental distinction between program and data. The combination of both can be called *program* or *data* interchangeably. All that matters is that symbols that are found somewhere are manipulated by rules found somewhere else, and the rules can be manipulated by other rules in indefinite recursion. (316-317)

The insight that there is "no fundamental difference between the data and the program" (Guastello p. 313) of a computer, resembles the question at the core of the humanoid-AI debate above.<sup>cccxcviii</sup> See also Turing's Comments on Babbage: "Although Babbage had all the essential ideas, his machine was not at that time such a very attractive prospect. The speed which would have been available would be definitely faster than a human computer but something like 100 times slower than the Manchester machine, itself one of the slower of the modern machines. The storage was to be purely mechanical, using wheels and cards.

The fact that Babbage's Analytical Engine was to be entirely mechanical will help us to rid ourselves of a superstition. Importance is often attached to the fact that modern digital computers are electrical, and that the nervous system also is electrical. Since Babbage's machine was not electrical, and since all digital computers are in a sense equivalent, we see that this use of electricity cannot be of theoretical importance." (*The Imitation Game*, 439)

From here we might ask about how the historical development of AI changes the scope of, and provides the possibility of legible meaning to, our conceptual questions about the relationship between devices, intelligence and human ecology.

<sup>cccxcix</sup> Negru p. 23.

<sup>cd</sup> That strong relationship between the mental models of the human producers and the functional structure of the AI seems hard to avoid, since even the "natural" analogs such as "swarms" and other non-humanoid robotic forms mentioned by Guastello still can only function if we assume that the performance of the AI paralleled the natural examples, which means that the thinking of designers and engineers also successfully paralleled the natural examples.

<sup>cdi</sup> Take for example Guastello's example of the 1987 stock crash where the autonomous AI "agents" acted outside the scope of human criteria for intelligence:

*agents can create a problem for each other, however. The stock market crash of 1987 resulted from trading programs reading each other's trades; a pattern of sales was detected, then the drops in prices following the sales triggered more sales at a loss. There were no fundamental problems with the securities themselves or the market conditions as a whole. (Guastello 333)*

This stock market securities crisis provides an exemplary case of AI failing to meet human criteria, and the need for an additional category of human thought to make sense of the computer's non-intelligence:

*The Securities and Exchange Commission responded by imposing an agent of its own: If the Dow-Jones index drops more than 100 points in an hour, all trading stops to give the automated and real-time investors a chance to reset their parameters. (ibid)*

This scenario presents an interesting opportunity to ask, aside from the human intervention, how would we measure intelligence in the computer system? Even if the non-human actor had displayed intelligent behavior in "trading programs reading each other's trades" how would we, as humans be able to recognize that intelligence?

<sup>cdii</sup> I am seeking to connect the comment above to a discussion of, on the one hand philosophy and on the other contemporary explorations in the possibilities of mutual intelligence shown by human-AI relations in the field of "choreo-robotics" (see for instance, the work of Catie Cuan. In summary, I am curious about the the problem of consensus for informational and communicative conditions implied by the gap I sought to describe above. By this I mean the gap between a human and computer (or any multiple of "intelligent" parties) which cannot recognize each other's mutual intelligence because the criteria for intelligence result from each parties own limited perspective.

<sup>cdiii</sup> Turing 1950 p. 456.

<sup>cdiv</sup> Shenzhen being one example of the "urban software" – in lineage of Chinese Special Economic Zone which Easterling treats in her book *Extrastatecraft* (see above).

<sup>cdv</sup> Healey and Enns 2012 p. 1170.

<sup>cdvi</sup> Ibid p. 1171.