



The cipher: space for the negotiation of
difference in hip-hop

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This report reflects on doctoral research on American hip-hop culture conducted at University College London between 2012 and 2016 and funded by the Bonnart Trust. The dissertation, titled *The politics of the cipher: hip-hop, antiphony, and multiculturalism*, focuses on hip-hop appreciation amongst students in Northern California. The project was driven by an interest in how hip-hop culture might combat intolerance and racism.

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Executive summary

In my study, I found that the cipher – a ring of rappers, DJs, beatboxers, or dancers improvising and taking turns with one another – is a powerful space. Not only do its participants freestyle, participation in the cipher is often entangled with ethical and political acts in which participants seek to elevate and revise their community through experiment and lived experience. The cipher has a particular mechanic of call-and-response or antiphony that inculcates a set of ethical repertoires that affect the way we relate to and appreciate others' differences. These ethical repertoires tend to be formed in the cipher and affect how its participants interact with one another both inside and outside it.

Defining the cipher

The cipher (sometimes spelled cypher¹) is simple on the surface. It involves three elements. First, a beat is required, either from speakers or a beatboxer creating a rhythm with just their mouth and a microphone. Second, as the beat comes on, the group forms into a circle. Third, the cipher requires a form of turn-taking in which each participant 'freestyles' or improvises rhymes and lyrics. To me, what is exciting about the cipher – and hip-hop culture by extension – is how it reorients the manner in which its participants negotiate the differences between them.

Background

Listening to or making hip-hop is not necessarily ethical or political. What I was interested in is how shared spaces of hip-hop appreciation – like the cipher – are used to amplify ethical and political responsibility among its participants. I found that many of the participants in the cipher treat it as the heart of their small community (a student society at a university). They feel responsible for it, and many debates within hip-hop – such as the 'authenticity' of a rapper or another's use of misogyny – are refracted through the cipher. It is through the cipher that

1. I use the term 'cipher' rather than 'cypher' to maintain consistency with the spelling in the teachings of 20th century African American religions, such as the Nation of Gods and Earths and the Nation of Islam, from where the term finds its way into hip-hop culture. See Miyakawa, 2005 and Knight, 2007.

hip-hop becomes something more than just music they listen to for pleasure, but rather a culture they seek to contribute and belong to. These contributions are framed through an ethics and politics formed through the interpersonal interactions in the cipher.

Below, I explore the cipher from two perspectives. First, I explain what the cipher is and briefly sketch its relationship to earlier African American musical practices. Looking into the history of the cipher in its naming and form reveals the importance of antiphony or call-and-response, an aesthetic structure central to 20th century African American music. In the second section, I consider several moments in a cipher to illustrate how the cipher becomes a space in which ethical and political acts unfold. To conclude, I speculate on how the cipher might be a blueprint for what I refer to as an *ecstatic* perspective on engaging with, rather than simply tolerating, difference. Ecstasy, in this context, refers to a comportment towards difference that is indeterminate and open rather than the connotation of joy and elation that it usually signifies in English.

The cipher as a practice

The cipher is a unique space with roots in the West African oral culture brought to the United States by enslaved Africans. It is an evolution of the ring shout, a communal musical practice amongst slaves in the Americas (Thompson, 2014). In the ring shout, participants would stomp their feet, shuffle, dance, shout, and sing (see Floyd, 1991: 267-268). Often, stories from the Old Testament would be 'dramatised' in the ring shouts (Chireau, 2000: 19). The ring shout was a space that was crucial to slave communities, affording continuity of their heritage, shared values, and their survival (Stuckey, 1987). Slaves would, on rare occasions when they had the opportunity, 'steal away' to gatherings at night known as 'frolics' (Thompson, 2014: 99). These were secret meetings in slave quarters or in forests, where they would dance, sing, and socialise for a short time away from the gaze of white slaveowners. The ring shout was one space in which enslaved Africans in the Americas could subvert white supremacy and gain authority over their own bodies, if only for a short time (Thompson, 2014: 120).

In a ring shout, an antiphonal or call-and-response practice is fundamental. Antiphony, in which “a leader sings phrases which alternate with phrases sung by a chorus”, is central to African and African diasporic music (Waterman, 1990: 90). In his book *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, Wole Soyinka (1990) stresses the role that antiphony has on community in African aesthetics; he argues that all members of the audience may imagine themselves to be a member of the chorus, making the musical act a collective one rather than that of a single performer. The antiphonal or call-and-response aesthetic of the ring shout remains in jazz and other African American music in which intertextuality, improvisation, and experimentation are central parts to their sound and their reception (Floyd, 1995: 98). Indeed, it is through jazz, soul, gospel, and many other genres that antiphony found its way into hip-hop.

My optimism for the ethics and politics of antiphony and the cipher comes in large part from a quote in Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*. The quote captures what I was trying to make sense of in my own study:

There is a democratic, communitarian moment enshrined in the practice of antiphony which symbolises and anticipates (but does not guarantee) new, non-dominating social relationships. Lines between self and other are blurred and special forms of pleasure created as a result of the meetings and conversations that are established between one fractured, incomplete racial self and others. Antiphony is the structure that hosts these essential encounters (Gilroy, 1993: 79).

I was attracted to this quote because it seems to speak to how the antiphonal practices in the cipher produce what I sense is a unique way of relating to difference. In particular, it seemed to me that Gilroy’s description of antiphony as a blurring of the boundaries between different, ‘incomplete’ selves was worth further investigation. Rather than seeing ourselves as complete identities, antiphony insists on a *process*, a journey not unlike an education, through which we articulate and build a diverse community by connecting with and responding to others with whom we share space.

Ciphers in action

Just like a remixed track, the word cipher has multiple layers of meaning. It came to the lexicon of hip-hop by way of the Nation of Gods and Earths, also known as the Five Percenters. The Nation of Gods and Earths is often described as an offshoot of the Nation of Islam, an African-American religion founded in 1934. Many early rappers were involved with the Five Percenters, who continue to practice their faith across the United States. Some of the teachings of both the Nation of Islam and the Five Percenters can be found in tracks such as *Wu-Revolution* by Wu-Tang Clan. Five Percenter mythology was particularly present in hip-hop in the 1980s and 1990s (see Miyakawa, 2005). When the Five Percenters would meet, they would form a circle that they called a cipher (Knight, 2007). The Supreme Alphabet and Mathematics are the basis for the Five Percenter's word play, which Yusef Nuriddin describes as "a visit to another world where normal rules of logic are suspended and an entirely new set of rules apply" (1994: 118). This description of Five Percenters' word play in their ciphers remains an apt description for hip-hop. While the content of the ciphers in hip-hop is very different to that of the Nation of Gods and Earths, the name remains.

The word cipher, however, has a longer history. Cipher is the English translation of the Latin word *zephirum*, which signifies the number 0. Drawing on the teachings of the Nation of Islam, Clarence 13X (who founded the Nation of Gods and Earths and took on the name 'Allah') used cipher to refer to the letter O and number 0 in the Supreme Alphabet and Supreme Mathematics, the cornerstone of the teachings of the Nation of Gods and Earths. Many influential rappers were Five Percenters. However, as Jay-Z (Shawn Carter) notes in *Decoded* (2011), people were rapping on street corners well before it was ever called a 'cipher'².

Before I left for California where I was to conduct my fieldwork, I decided that I wanted to explore how the cipher functioned amongst hip-hop fans. It is important to remember that in 2014, hip-hop was a mainstream popular music

2. Indeed, Elijah Wald (2012) draws a continuity between word play games such as The Dozens (in which increasingly complex and dramatic insults are exchanged) and freestyle rapping and word play that became part of hip-hop culture.

genre. This made studying a student group dedicated to hip-hop as a form of progressive activism a particularly relevant choice to explore how the cipher functions to affect the ethical and political agency of its participants. I spent a semester getting to know these students, attending their weekly meetings and participating in group activities. The collective, called Students for Hip-hop (S4HH), puts on a festival of hip-hop culture once a year for the campus community. Each week they have meetings in the university in which they debate different artists and discuss preparation for upcoming events. After the business section of each meeting, the lights are dimmed. Someone puts on a beat, taking advantage of the classroom's stereo system to create an ideal atmosphere for freestyle rapping. Each takes turns rhyming for as long as they can before someone else cuts in. Not everyone participates; some just listen, while others occasionally perform something they have written previously.

However, I witnessed imbalances and power dynamics within this group that could make the cipher uncomfortable. There were times when the atmosphere of the room broke down because someone said something offensive or inappropriate. Others felt too shy to try to rap. And some good rappers realised they might intimidate others. Here I unpack a few stories relayed to me by women in S4HH about their experience of ciphers. One of the challenges they often mentioned to me was the use of misogynistic lyrics in freestyles.

Sonia was one of the more confident participants in the cipher. She had developed her skills rapping with her brothers, but refuses to use misogynistic words in her rhymes. She is cognisant of the communal space that the cipher creates, and she seeks to build a community that resists the simplistic reliance on misogyny to make rhymes that might *sound* good but are offensive. She told me: "A circle is a site of energy exchange and that's why it's important who's with you in the circle, because you're going to imbibe a little bit of their energy, right? You're going to taste a little bit of their world" (Interview, 2014). By refusing to use such language, Sonia articulates a responsibility to her community, as well as trying to elevate the 'level' of the spaces she shares with those she raps with. By elevating the 'level' of the cipher, Sonia is referring to the ethics and politics

of the language used in the cipher that she perceived as often misogynistic. Reflecting on how this elevated the cipher, Sonia says:

Across the cipher, it just kind of raised the bar a little bit because you have one person that's not just talking about 'bitches and hos', like 'getting money' or 'moving bud', getting 'ounces' and 'pounds'. Because, you know, frankly, life is not about that (Interview, 2014).

In one of the ciphers in the middle of the semester, a relatively new arrival to S4HH was a very active participant in the cipher. He was among the best rappers in the group. But in one of his rhymes, he made a statement about women that had all of us taken aback. A woman in the group, Christine, was deeply offended and felt that she had to challenge him. At that point, all of us had stopped moving along with the beat and there was a pause that broke the atmosphere in the room. She sent back just a few lines at him, crisply delivered. In doing so, Christine used the battle rap style to 'take down' the other. It could be read as an act of destruction that sought to exclude not the rapper but his lyrics from the community. She felt compelled to 'check' him:

It's not as if I can be like, 'censor yourself', it's a freestyle, you don't know what you're going to say next. But that stuff comes out, it shows that something is really wrong with society if that's what you subconsciously say when you have nothing left. [...] You don't have to listen to things, right, if I am like, listening to a song that I really don't like, I can just change to a different one. But like, I'm stuck in the club, listening to some dude saying things that really offend me. And a lot of people, I could tell, felt really awkward. A lot of people were offended. I felt really compelled to speak up, it's not like I can just turn off (Interview, 2014).

Her response reveals something unique about the cipher. Christine is generous in that she recognises that in a freestyle, people speak faster than it is possible to think. What frustrates her is the rapper's reliance on offensive language when he is fumbling for words to keep going. By articulating her response, Christine did two things: she helped the group get back into its groove, and she called

on that rapper to behave differently in the future. Christine appreciates that it takes courage and ability to participate in the cipher, but as a member of the community, she demanded more from this rapper. As Sonia puts it: “You can kinda tell when somebody is rapping about bitches and hos when they don’t have anything to say. At that point, the problem is that you still have a flow, but you ran out of content. So stop, at that point.”

The cipher builds community in an experimental form through this play of ethical demands and responses. This moment between Christine and the other rapper is one part of a broader argument developed in my dissertation that explores how the cipher encourages ethical and political experimentation. In the ciphers of the Five Percenters, they ‘build and destroy’, practices that refer to the act of producing and criticising knowledge. Through what they build and destroy in the cipher, Sonia and Christine outline the ethics and politics that are negotiated within in these moments of discomfort and offence. Sonia says:

I think as a conscious, functioning component of the cipher, it is important to recognise when to speak and when to step back because of... this is going back to hip-hop... because ‘word is bond’ and we ‘build and destroy’ so we have to be conscious of what we’re building and what we’re binding ourselves to. Sometimes I think people do need to be checked (Interview, 2014).

Here, Sonia is drawing quite directly on the vocabulary of the Five Percenters. But the context is different: through the cipher, a particular standard of ethics and politics are built through encounters with one another. This is an indeterminate and decentred ethics that does not close off possibilities before they arise but remains willing to challenge and draw boundaries where necessary.

The cipher and the ecstatic relation to difference

There is a complexity to all of the interactions and moments in the ciphers I encountered in the course of my research. Christine’s experience, however, serves as an excellent snapshot of this complexity that helps bring the project’s

findings into focus. When Christine encountered the rapper who offended her, she (along with all of us in the cipher) had implicitly agreed to listen to him. By giving someone the floor in a cipher, we extend ourselves to that person. At the same time, by taking the floor in a cipher, we also offer something of ourselves to the others we are speaking to.

Drawing on the philosophers Jean-Luc Nancy and Édouard Glissant, I account for this position of being extended towards the other through the concept of 'ecstasy'. Following Nancy (1991), I use this term in its more literal sense as a state that refuses closure; literally 'ek-stasis'. In its simplest terms, in an ecstatic relationship, we are not meant to leave as the same person we were when we started. I argue that the antiphony in the cipher encourages a kind of comportment towards the others we encounter in such a space that is indeterminate and open. This is not a simple openness in which anything goes; rather, it is an affirmation of the 'incompleteness' of every self that comes to the cipher, and it is by extending ourselves towards one another, and even putting ourselves in the position of being offended, that we learn a particular way of relating to difference. Rather than seeing a difference as a signifier of identity, in the ecstatic relationships that emerge in the cipher, difference is rendered into an indeterminate object of play and experimentation.

The ethical and political stakes of this ecstatic relation to the other become clearer through a quote from Édouard Glissant. In his book, *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant is trying to develop an idea of what it means to genuinely relate to one another and for the ways we interact with one another to be transformed, a concept he associates with the idea of 'creolisation'. I do not have space here to develop this idea further (sections of the dissertation, particularly the conclusion, develop this). The ecstatic experience of antiphony represents the potential of a "moment [in which] I change my thought, without renouncing its contribution. I change, and I exchange. This is an aesthetic of turbulence whose corresponding ethics is not provided in advance (Glissant, 1997: 155)".

Participation in the cipher involves a certain form of risk. Samuel, a frequent participant in the ciphers, says:

When you're freestyling, things are just coming to your mouth, you might say some stuff that's a little raunchy, it might not even be something that you are thinking or really do, but you're *freestyling* – you feel me – things are going to come to your mouth that you can't control at times (Interview, 2014).

Samuel is pointing to the risk that in an improvisation in a cipher, a person cannot always control what they say, nor is what someone says necessarily representative of the speaker. But he affirms – as does Christine – that regardless of what someone says in the cipher, their right to speak must be respected, and they should be challenged by another rapper at the next turn. Slippages happen (and they should not be excused); but in the cipher, they raise a challenge for ethical experimentation. Samuel seemed to indicate, reflecting on situations in which such statements are made, that it was the responsibility of others to 'check' men when they relied on misogynistic rhymes: "I wish they would just step up and go hard on us". But I am not sure that this meets Sonia's demand when she relays that people run out of good content and fall back on misogynistic language to maintain their flow – she calls on others to *stop* when they run out of meaningful content. Here, Samuel seems to pass responsibility onto others, expecting them to 'go hard' on those who use that language (he rarely finds himself at a loss for words). Sonia is right insofar as all participants in the cipher have a responsibility to 'build' ethically, but to expect someone to bite their tongue in a state of subconscious improvisation is a challenging demand. This problem was never resolved in the time I spent with S4HH, and I doubt that today it has been resolved entirely. Thinking about these challenges between Christine, Sonia, and Samuel, and the way they negotiate these tensions, we can give more meaning to the concept of ethics and politics in the cipher, understanding ethics in this context as an experimental and improvisational process of responding to and becoming responsible for the others with whom we share spaces.

The ecstatic relationships I observed in ciphers I took part in are well described by Glissant's quote above; the 'turbulent' moments in which differences

(such as Christine's offence at the other rapper) inspire moments of ethical experimentation. This is ecstatic in that it is turned towards a responsibility to and for the people one shares space with. The antiphonal relationships in the cipher challenge participants – like the rapper who used those offensive lines – to 'change and exchange'. By affirming the incompleteness of its participants and the unfinished, iterative space of the cipher, Christine's response to that rapper is an example of a call for change grounded in the ethics and politics of the cipher.

We might read from antiphony and the cipher an ethics and politics of creolisation, which involves embracing and throwing ourselves headfirst into relationships that might be risky and uncomfortable. The cipher is a space where we can safely experiment in these kinds of innovative relationships. It seeks to train in us a comportment, a way of acting, that involves the humility of our own incompleteness while requiring from us experimental, improvisational ways of transforming ourselves and the spaces we share with others.

Related works

Ganesh, B. 2015. 'Traversing Racial Distance in Hip-hop Culture: The Ethics and Politics of Listening'. *Tropos*, 2:1, p. 22-31.

Ganesh, B. 2017. *The politics of the cipher: hip-hop, antiphony, and multiculturalism*. Doctoral thesis. London: UCL. Available: <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1549862>

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This is the second in a series of Braunthal Reports.

The Braunthal Reports are named after the Founder of The Bonnart Trust. Freddy Bonnart-Braunthal set up the trust in 2002 to *“establish and maintain scholarships at universities in the United Kingdom for research at the postgraduate level into the nature of racial, religious and cultural intolerance with a view to finding a means to combat it”*.

Freddy had personal experience of prejudice. At the outbreak of WWII he was studying economics at LSE and was evacuated to Cambridge, but in 1940 he was labelled an ‘enemy alien’ and interned to a camp in Canada for 10 months. He was eventually allowed to return to Britain to fight against Nazism. On joining the army in 1943, he changed his name to Frederick Bonnart. However, he was determined that his original name be preserved and associated with the actions of the Trust – hence we are calling these papers The Braunthal Reports.

The Braunthal Reports are based on analysis and recommendations drawn from the dissertations submitted for a doctorate by the Scholars funded by The Bonnart Trust. They are freely available and can be downloaded from the trust website. www.fbbtrust.org.uk

About the author

Bharath Ganesh is a Researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute focusing on the role of new media in contemporary cultures of hate and intolerance. His work draws on cultural geography, media studies, and politics. He completed his PhD in Geography at University College London in 2017.