In Praise of Shadow Boxers

An exploration of the 'Crisis of Originality and Authority in African-American Pictorial Culture Versus the Wu Tang Clan.'

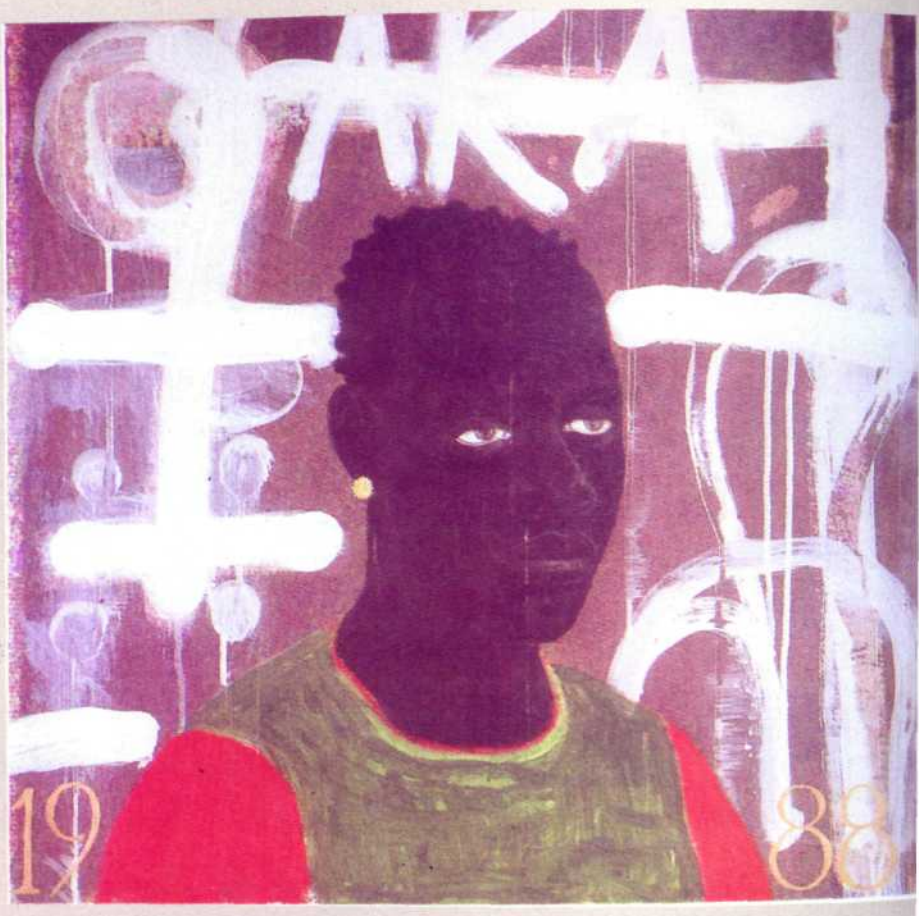
by Greg Tate

In hiphop, we don't have a sense of sacredness about our music yet. Hip-hop is in the purest form of an African tradition, orally related, and we don't have no books that can tell you the shit you need to feel. Ever hear of Old DJ Mario from The Bronx? He couldn't read or write, but he built his own speakers. Give him a manual, he'd throw that away. Our education has come from outside the classroom. From our dance to our murals. Fuck the Sistine Chapel, we've done the third rail. You see what I'm saying? Risking our lives for a ten-piece on the third rail. Michelangelo, we are with you—do you hear me? Picasso, we are with you—do you hear me?

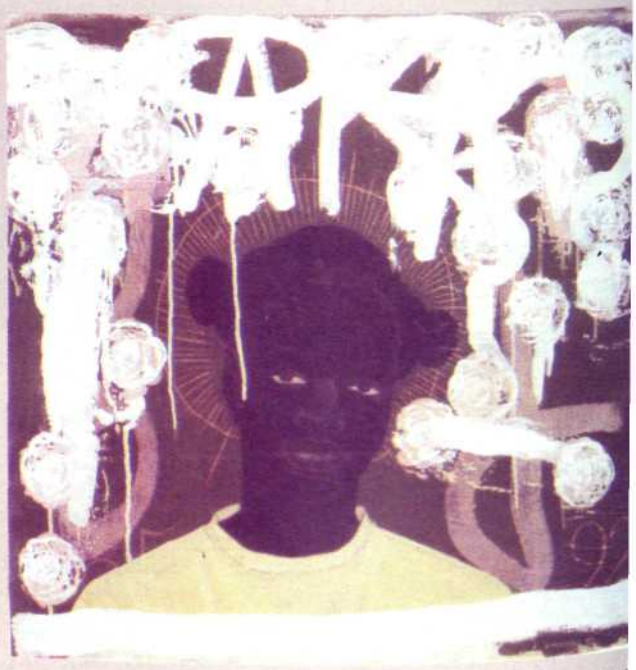
— Djindi Brown in conversation with the author

Everything I've ever written betrays my obsession: Black modernity and its discontents. Black modernity and its dissonance. Black modernity and its dissidents: all the tricksters bent on expanding and/or obliterating the envelope in which American Blackness has been apprehended.

We were enslaved but never slaves, say the pundits. We were only captives, prisoners of war. But all men and women in chains were not creative equals, as some imaginatively forged the path of oppositional negotiation Ralph Ellison once described as changing the joke to slip the yoke. Basquiat knew the road from Sambo to SAMO is paved with good puns.



In the visual arts, acceptance of Blacks as moderns depends upon artists producing works that both resonate with Black acculturation and conform to the marketable definitions of style and abstraction prevalent in the contemporary art world. The invention of metaphoric, iconic and expressive means which accomplish these tasks has been the triumph of a relative few. These names come readily to mind: Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Bob Thompson, Jean Michel Basquiat, David Hammons, Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Kerry James Marshall, Gary Simmons, Kara Walker, Robert Colescott, Ellen Gallagher, Michael Ray Charles. There have been successful African American artists who did not foreground Black figures in their work —Jack Whitten and Martin Puryear for instance— but by and large, the Black artists whose names have currency have addressed the problematic of Abstracted Black figuration, which my ace boon associate, Arthur Jafa, also describes as the problem of the "Black body in white space". Derogatory imagery of Blacks from cartoons and Coon Art (euphemistically referred to these days as Black Memorabilia) has provided many of these artists with a ready made vocabulary of racialized signs.



Among the contemporaries on that list, David Hammons, Marshall, Walker and Simmons rank as masters of making Black figuration speak a modernist tongue, and of conceptually extending Coon Art imagery into deeper metaphoric and social space. Hammons found Black signifiers in throwaway material that bore the distinction of having once been touched by Black skin. Paper impressed by vaseline-greased black bodies. Greasy rib joint bags the artist bejeweled with glitter. Barber shop sweepings. Chicken wings. Wine bottles and bottle caps. Shards of 45 rpm records. This trail of reclaimed offings and waste would eventually lead the artist to working in big balls of elephant dung. With humor and love Hammons reinscribed what Lisa Kennedy calls The Black Familiar with modernist re-enchantment. Kerry James Marshall, our foremost classicist, paints Renaissance-influenced ren

OPPOSITE PAGE:
(top) Kerry James Marshall, *Lost Boys: AKA Black Sonny,1998* acrylic and collage on canvas,24x 251/2"
(bottom) *Lost Boys:AKA Lil Bit, 1993* acrylic and collage on canvas

RIGHT:
Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Anthony Clarke,1985,* acrylic,oilstick and xerox collage on wood
961/8x543/4 inches

derings of Edenic early Project scenes, suggesting an exchange of 'ghetto' and 'Giotto'. Kara Walker, our high priestess of perversity, fanatisizes and fetishizes Black sexual violation in the antebellum South. She also dares provoke the uncomfortable prospect of sadomasochistic complicity with her silly-ass silhouettes. Ligon's family albums interjecting Black porn shots into middle class domesticity also lyricize tragedy, transgression, taboo and forbidden intimacies.

Are these the best we have? Do they worry the wall White Mythology has erected between The Black and The Modern?

The Romantic extravagance, poetic whimsy and free-wheeling play of signs and form evident in Basquiat and hip-hop, is not as unrestricted in the works of these artists. What Basquiat and hip-hop do more effectively than today's foremost Black modernists is transcend the symbolic and rhetorical expectations Black figuration typically implies without erasing the presence of a Black discursive voice. A Derridean notion comes to mind, that of a mode of speech that indicates nothing other than self-consciousness and self-absorption.

There are two ideas of Black culture we should stop and consider here—the Black culture of the Black collective, Ms Kennedy's Black Familiar, responsible for Cornel West's dec-

laration that there are things one cannot not know as a Black person. And then there is the cult of The Black Individual. The Black modernity I love has always been that which works the space between the collective and the individual, critically, poetically, animistically. The last term in that series is a keyword in the discussion, suggesting a link between eternal African cosmologies and imminent Black American desires.

Black modernists do not make work which aspires to the power of gods and the forces of nature. Hip-hop artists do, however, as did Basquiat, hip-hop's greatest contribution to modernism (and vice-versa, y'dig?). Having already written two Basquiat hagiographies, I won't repeat myself. I will instead focus on hip-hop esthetics and hip-hop mysticism. First, a clarification of terms. What I mean by "hip-hop" are that unified field of practices known by cognoscenti as The Four Elements of Hip-hop: MCing, turntabling, breakdancing or B-boying, and writing, commonly called graffiti or more eloquently, 'graf', the most under-recognized school of American painting in history and, in Jafa's description, the only legitimate successor to Abstract Expressionism. Graf was easily the most evolved of the hip-hop art forms when the success of the Sugar Hill's 1979 'Rappers Delight' brought the culture above ground for mainstream attention and plundering. My friend Danny Hamilton likes to say that graf stopped being interesting when it stopped being about vandalism. Jafa believes that instead of going to canvas when the art form moved into the galleries, graf artists should have begun doing Wildstyle sculpture in serra-sized metal casts to preserve the epic scale of the work done on subway trains. I have always thought the only appropriate gallery display of the art form would be the diary size `piece-books' of those original graf artists who put work up on the trains. What links the sentiments of Hamilton, Jafa and Tate is the sense that graf got silenced in the galleries while other elements of hip-hop kept getting louder and louder. The stylish plasticity and cultural leveling graf initiated became a hip-hop staple as other forms began to keep apace. Hip-hop's four elements have arguably been holographically consolidated in the form of the superstar MC, her or his hit CD and two-million dollars and counting music video. Yet hip-hop continues to present an esthetically driven victory over American popular consciousness, rather than a marketing group conquest over same.

The longstanding deployment of digital techniques in hip-hop, more pronounced than anywhere else in Black culture (where even major magazine editors are known computer-illiterates), has made the hip-hop recording medium one where synthenasia, the psychedelic confusion of one sensory mode with another, is the rule and the guiding light. Hip-hop music is recorded to evoke seeing and mental imaging in the manner of radio plays and virtual displays. The best MCs such as Rakim and the late Biggie Smalls concocted their rhymes with the intention of extending their poetry and narratives reach beyond the auditory and into the nervous system. Hip-hop is conceived not just with music lovers and dancers in mind but as a full-on sensorial assault on book addicts, wine tasters, auto drivers, filmgoers, art-lovers and mystics. A great hip-hop album is a multimedia production on silicon, effortlessly joining narrative tropes and consumer categories.

In responding to the furor that broke out when Cornel West declared that Black artists were invisible in the Black community, Jafa came to recognize a difference between Black potency in the realm of The Visual and Black deficiency and underdevelopment in the realm of The Pictorial. Holding Black painters up for special drubbing as 'mostly mediocre', Jafa saw them as victims of preemptive esthetic maneuvers of European modernists beginning with Picasso. Without fully entering that debate, what Great Western painting shared as a critical prerequisite with hip-hop and jazz before 1980 (and the European tradition of The Novel as defined by Kundera) is an Olympian standard of achievement where anything less than the extraordinarily beautiful and the conceptually visionary will be considered a mediocrity. Where the mandate is magic or oblivion, few will survive. As in the art world, hip-hop has become a medium where the demands of esthetic credibility and market access can snuff out many a dreamer. Concomitantly, the repression of the Black voice in popular American cinema has fueled the desire for hip-hop to become more dream-like, cinematic, spectacular and monetarily successful.

Cinema has been called the Art form of the twentieth century, and with our time also being known as a scientific century, cinema has usually been thought to wear that laurel because of its technology angle. Here at the end of a century which seems more and more like a consensual hallucination rather than a verifiable fact, cinema provides the most stable and legible record of a time spent in Freud's shadow trying to sort out the difference between reality and consciousness.

For African-American spectators, heir to a double consciousness about The American Century, that antiquated canard of my 60s Motorola childhood, "Do you dream in black and white or do you dream in color?" is loaded with allusions to the nation's conflicted racial heritage, both socially and cinematically.

Malcolm X liked to say that Blackfolk weren't living an American Dream but an American Nightmare. As trite as that may sound now, in the early 60s it bordered on treason. Not so much against the US government as against the dream's ur-machines, capitalism and white male supremacy. The sickening notion that the fantasies of the powerful should also direct the subconscious of the Black and disempowered has provoked a century's worth of Black cultural resistance. It has also drawn Blackfolk closer to rather than further from Ameri-

Wu-Tang Clan member
Photo: Spark St. Jude

ca's bosom. The assassination of Malcolm X spawned a reflexive Black counter-supremacy, most memorably through the paramilitary ghettocentric Marxism of The Black Panthers and the esthetic nationalism of Amiri Baraka's Black Arts Movement. Both organizations fascinated and fed the national media's lust for Black visual novelty through promoting an imaginary hyper-Black reality. The exhaustion and trivialization of Baraka and The Panther's most militant (and tropes by Hollywood's Blaxploitation conceit of counter-insurgency created a void in the realm of Black representation. The Black American hunger for images that captured us In Our Terribleness, as Baraka once described Black beauty most natural and confrontational state, is a desire hip-hop was made to reactivate.

The 1993 release of the Wu Tang Clan's Enter the 36 Chambers, and the subsequent release of solo projects by Wu Tang members, Method Man, Raekwon, Ol' Dirty Bastard, GZA and Ghostface Killah, gave late 20th century Blackness a new and fearsome mask. A ninja mask to be precise—imagery drawn from group leader RZA's passion for your more philosophical kung fu flicks, and reflective of an opaque Orientalist Blackness that expressed a preference for military discipline, skills and strategy over thuggish brutality. The recordings of the Wu were as funky and dramatic as West Coast gangsta rap, as literate and avant-garde as Public Enemy, A Tribe Called Quest and De La Soul, and possessive of enough commodity-value to propel Method Man and Ol' Dirty Bastard into duets and videos with neo-soul divas Mary J Blige and Mariah Carey. The group was formed by members RZA and GZA, who had earlier achieved minor fame and eternal shame as bubblegum rappers Prince Raheem and The Genius. In creating The Wu, RZA drew upon a motley crew of reformed dope dealers he turned into adherents of the self-improvement programs of the Five Percent Nation, a break off sect of the Nation of Islam formulated by one Clarence X in the 70s. Applying X's lessons (termed 'Mathematics' for their freemason-like faith in numerical syllogisms) to the hip-hop game, the Wu went on to manage the impossible feat of defining the edge in hip-hop and becoming an MTV staple. The Wu experimentation was an Afrocentric millennialist philosophy that was stunningly seductive. As a rule (and true of nothing else in American life), the best hip-hop being made at any given time has almost always been the most popular.

The Wu's open love for Marvel super-heroes, kung fu films and the occult assures a bond between them and those young suburban whites who writer dream hampton (sic) identifies as "the Dungeons and Dragons/PlayStation crowd", but the Wu eminently satisfy the musical desires of electric Miles Davis devotees (such as myself) as well.

The album that best displays the Wu esthetic and worldview, is *The Chef Raekwon's Only Built for Cuban Linx*

featuring Ghostface Killah. The title alone is so richly allusive and double border crossing as to present a veritable Rubik's cube of interpretative possibilities. Think of Cuba, the guerilla freedom fighter's state and Cuba, the police state; recall Linx the feral animal, hot dog links, chain-linked fences, chain-linked slaves, the historical forces linking Afro-Cubans to African-Americans, as well as the sense of group oppression that forges psychic communication links between all African-Americans who share a siege-mentality. Many of the album songs are preceded by an interpolation of sound bites from kung fu films with dialogues between dope dealing brothers on the corner. The effect is tragicomic as the artificiality of the dubbed English extracts, rank with sentimentality and cloying Asiatic wisdom, are contrasted with the blunt ghetto realness of the Wu. The moral codes and philosophies of kung fu swordsmen also provided the Wu's members a means of escapism and an escape hatch from the self-destructive drug peddler's life. Therefore the contrast isn't just between reality and fantasy, but between contemplative and reactive modes of being, raw instinct and evolved intellect. Nowhere is this better exemplified on the album than on the prelude to cut #5, 'Incarcerated Scarfaces' where two or more Euro-Asian accented fighters politely discuss the proper demeanor of an assassin:

Voice 1: *He looks determined without being ruthless. Something heroic in his manner. There's a courage about him. Doesn't look like a killer. Comes across so calm. Acts like he has a dream. Full of passion.*

Voice 2: *You don't trust me, huh?*

Voice 3: *Well, you know why.*

Voice 2: *I do. We're not supposed to trust anyone in our profession anyway.*

The song that follows is a desperate, pile-driven volley of slashing, cryptic rhymes that Raekwon spits out with the well-enunciated bite of a Bogart or a Cagney. Even after years of listening, I don't understand all the references, but his insinuations of heroic passion and determined dreaming are abundantly clear:

Niggas: *Yo, they be folding like envelopes, under pressure like Lou Ferrigno on coke. Yo, Africans denying niggas up in yellow cabs: must be like funk, waving they arms to A-rabs. Sit back, cooling like Kahluas on rocks, on the crack spots rubberband rap on my knots. You bitches who fuck dreads on Sudafeds. Pussies hurting, they did it for a yard for the Feds. Word up cousin. Nigga, I seen it: like a 27 inch Zenith: believe it! Now, yo yo, what up yo? Time is running out, it's for real though. Like let's connect, politic, ditto. We can trade places, get lifted in the staircases. Word up, peace incarcerated scarfaces.*

It's been said that the black men in prison are forgotten men but not in the annals of hip-hop, where stereotypes and labels take on human form, human attributes, human needs. Cuban Linx is an album-length epic poem whose recurring theme is how Raekwon saved himself from the dope game through joining the Wu. The first half of the album is a graphic rendering of that world's betrayals, fatalism, morbidity, methodologies, regrets, and mourning. Listen to "Rainy Days" where a wrenching female voice wails over how she's lost her man to the street life as Ghostface Killah and Raekwon essay on how love for hip-hop presented the light at the end of the tunnel. And that love becomes expressed as an esthetic worth fighting for in the spirited dialogue Ghostface and Raekwon have about hip-hop esthetics:

Rae: *Niggas be biting mad styles and shit from niggas man. Thats what I be hating, I cant stand a biting ass nigga, wanna be using your own your lines all ahead of time before you get a chance to shine on your own shit.*

Ghost and Raekwon: *Let me tell these niggas something God—I dont want niggas sounding like me on no album...or nobody from my clan. Keep it real, get your own shit man and be original. Word up, you'll be a better man. And you gonna come out your own way, whatever, however you gonna take it, fuck it.*

There is a book begging to be written on the correspondences between what hip-hop does and what Derrida talks about: Writing as The Body, The Oppositional Body as Writing, Writing as Poison and Remedy, Writing as Suture, Cut, Incision, The Indivisibility of Speech, Mind and Body, Writing as Divining, Writing as Warfare, Writing as Righting, and Rite-ing. There are times in *Of Grammatology* when Derrida seems to be a disciple of graf theoretician, Rammelzee, who believes graf train-writing was all about armoring The Holy Letter against diseased Western culture: to wit: "A war was declared and a suppression of all that resisted linearization was installed. And first of what Leroi-Graham calls the "mythogram," a writing that spells its symbols pluri-dimensionally, in which there is a meaning not subjected to successivity, to the order of logical time, or to the irreversible temporality of music. This pluridimensionality does not paralyze history within simultaneity, it corresponds to another level of historical experience and may consider linear thought as a reduction of history. Leroi Graham recalls the unity, within the mythogram, of all the elements of which linear writing marks the disruption: technics (particularly graphics), art, religion, economy.

The Wu Tang Clan has brought the notion of hip-hop as mythogram to its fullest realization. A work like *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx* challenges all African-American artists to discover and recover their Voice within the Void and Veil of Noise, which lends Black Rite-ing pluri-dimensional resonance, to divine the true depths and dangers of our darkness and deviate rapturously from domesticated modernist readings of Black pathology and invest in self-mythologizing epics of Black desire, vulgarity and violence.

Last Line: I once saw Wu Tang leader RZA (who now performs in a mask under the guise of Bobby Digital) on an MTV hip-hop roundtable. There he spoke of Wu Tang music no one will ever hear because "Y' all," meaning everybody within earshot, including fellow ghetto superstars Wyclef, Nas and Mase, "dont deserve to hear it." This reminded me of RZA's Orientalist, if not Joycean penchant for silence, exile and cunning. It also brought to mind a boast of RZA overheard in a chic downtown Korean restaurant to some Asian dinner companions that, "We made Shaolin famous didn't we?" That same morning while riding the downtown A train, an Asian man wearing a gauze mask over his mouth(most likely from dental surgery) and a companion boarded and sat directly across from me. New York decorum prevails until a brother who could be RZA's cousin comes down the aisle selling battery-operated hair clippers, and decides he must rudely interrogate the Asian fellow as to why he's wearing the mask, whether he has a cold, etc. I sensed RZA's doppelganger felt intimidated by the mask. The man disregarded his taunter and dignifiedly deboarded at the next stop. The entire encounter made me realize that The Wu Tang Clan have collapsed two ethnic stereotypes—the inscrutable Asian and The Surly Negro/ Dealer in Urban Contraband—to form an artistic/corporate entity capable of tunneling (and barreling) through all levels of global-millennial society with supreme cultural confidence and ease. Where, I wonder, are the Black visual artists possessed of such fluency, unity and currency?**GR**