

# **Rapping in the clouds: shifting identities and metamodern tendencies in Internet hip-hop**

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Abstract: The current anxieties and insecurities of identity felt by many in the wake of globalization exhibits a need for a shift in the way we see ourselves and the Other. In order to demonstrate one example of this shift, I will analyze a growing hip-hop scene heavily influenced by the Internet, and how it is fostering new pathways of cultural interaction and a resulting fluidity in the process of identity formation. I will first lay down a theoretical framework for such a shift using the works of cultural theorist Stuart Hall and postcolonial philosopher Édouard Glissant, as well as French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. From there, I will align this shift in the notion of identity with a larger cultural development labeled by Timotheus Velmeulen and Robin van den Akker as metamodernism, described as an *oscillation between irony and sincerity*, and explore some of the modes of expression which this development consists of. Finally, I will then analyze two case studies, the American rapper RiFF RAFF and the Swedish rapper Yung Lean, with these modes of expression and theoretical framework in mind, and explore the way in which their respective journeys illustrate this shift in identity.

## Introduction

Today we live in a unitary world where distances are reckoned by hours and no longer by weeks and months. Exotic races have ceased to be peepshows in ethnological museums. They have become our neighbors, and what was yesterday the private concern of the ethnologist is today a political, social, and psychological problem. Already the ideological spheres begin to touch, to interpenetrate, and the time may not be far off when the question of mutual understanding will become acute. To make oneself understood is certainly impossible without far-reaching comprehension of the other's standpoint. The insight needed for this will have repercussions on both sides. History will undoubtedly pass over those who feel it is their vocation to resist this inevitable development, however desirable and psychologically necessary it may be to cling to what is essential and good in our own tradition. Despite all the differences, the unity of mankind will assert itself irresistibly.

- Carl Jung, *The Undiscovered Self*, 1958

In our current age of ever increasing globalization, facilitated by mass media, mass transportation, and most importantly the Internet, the matter of identity has come to the forefront as something that drastically requires a proper exploration. Global developments such as the rise of “identity politics” in the West, best exhibited in the 2016 election of Donald Trump, the “Brexit” in England, and the rise of nationalist political parties in countries such as France, Poland, and Hungary, as well as the rise of ISIS in the Middle East, are symptomatic of a deep shift in the world stage. This shift, ushered in by ever-increasing global immigration and communication, has produced a new proximity between people of different cultures, ethnicities, and religions, creating the most large-scale convergence of differing identities in human history. Some embrace this hyper-proximity, opening up their identity to the influence of others and participating in a global exchange of culture and ideas. Others reject it, tracing their identity back to a traditional narrative that reaffirms their essential opposition to “the Other,” that being anyone who differs from oneself culturally, ethnically, or ideologically. Most fall somewhere in between, having an equal capability for both mindsets and drifting towards one or the other based on their environment. This simultaneous development in identity formation, both towards

and away from globalization and its volley of new outside influences, can be seen as symbolic of a larger schism between two opposing concepts of identity within human psychology: one as static, and the other as moving.

Since it is highly unlikely that recent trends in globalization will slow down or reverse, it is fair to say that an essential notion of identity, of who we are and how we come to be that way, will incite animosity and conflict wherever it is prevalent. For if one is convinced that their value as an individual is solely derived from their place of origin and has no capacity to evolve, then there is no real motivation to interact with those different from oneself. Furthermore, there *is* motivation to resist interactions with the Other, as such encounters risk contamination of one's original, essential self. Ideologies such as White Nationalism, showcased in the recent white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which shocked and horrified many in the United States who did not realize such communities still existed in large numbers, epitomizes such an attitude being taken to its extreme.

As people of differing cultures and backgrounds continue to enclose in on each other, both through mass media and increased physical contact, there is no doubt that static concepts of personal identity will be a central hindrance to achieving a multiculturalism of any sort. This is true not only of essential ideologies such as right-wing nationalism, but also of the countless everyday decisions we all make to ignore those who's differences make us uncomfortable. Therefore, in order to then make this transition into a hyper globalized society as smooth as possible, avoiding polarization and violence and reaping the benefits that might emerge from increased cultural exchanges, it appears necessary for a majority of the world's population to develop an image of themselves in *relation*, and not opposition, to those that are different from them. We will have to form a collective perception of individual identity as something that is

inherently open-ended, always widening by taking in the perspective of those we consider the Other.

To arrive at such a perspective, I will be exploring the emerging scene of Internet hip-hop<sup>1</sup>, and how it is fostering new pathways of cultural interaction and a resulting fluidity in the process of identity formation. I will begin by laying down a theoretical framework using the works of cultural theorist Stuart Hall and postcolonial philosopher Édouard Glissant, as well as French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, exploring the ways in which their work advocated for an evolution towards a more open-ended concept of identity. From there, I will align this shift in the notion of identity with a larger cultural development labeled by Timotheus Velmeulen and Robin van den Akker as metamodernism, described as an *oscillation between irony and sincerity*, and explore some of the modes of expression which this development consists of. Finally, I will then analyze my two case studies, the American rapper RiFF RAFF and the Swedish rapper Yung Lean, with these modes of expression and theoretical framework in mind, and explore the way in which their respective journeys illustrate this shift in identity as it is happening within a branch of hip-hop heavily influenced by the Internet. With this, I hope to help uncover a path forward towards a globalized, multicultural society of converging identities, by showing one specific area in which the prerequisites for such a society are making themselves known.

## Stuart Hall and the Old Logic of Identity

Stuart Hall once defined identity as, "...the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past." (70) Hall, in his lecture *Old and New Identities*, also outlines the progression of this process of positioning throughout the past few centuries, and how these developments have set the stage for a new concept of identity to emerge around the world. He begins this outline with an explanation of what he calls the *old logic of identity*, saying:

Philosophically, the old logic of identity... was often thought in terms of the origin of being itself, the ground of action... And we have in more recent times a psychological discourse of the self which is very similar: a notion of the continuous, self-sufficient, developmental, unfolding, inner dialectic of selfhood... (1997: 43)

Here, we see Hall describe in detail the essentialist notion of identity, of there being some pure, objective "self" that we are forever striving to be. He describes this line of thinking, though, in order to make the claim that it has now lost most of its power and influence in society, thanks to what he calls "the great de-centerings of modern thought." (43)

The de-centerings he describes, to be brief, begin with the rise of Marxism. For by framing the practices of humanity always within historical and economic circumstances, as Marx did, he weakened our sense of our own individual agency. Here, humans began to form a collective outlook on existence that acknowledged deciding factors in their own identity that were out of their control. The next major development came from Freud and psychoanalysis, by way of establishing an awareness of the subconscious and its enormous influence on our overall behavior. Once again, humans saw their sense of "self" as drifting further away from their own control. While the list of these developments go on, the point is that they set humanity on a path

of awareness under which the old notion of individual identity began to crumble.

Simultaneously, Hall says, the weakening of the individual “self” was paralleled by a “fragmentation and erosion of collective social identity.” (44) This fragmentation emerged as a result of the weakening of the old “master concepts” of race, gender, and class, which were derived from the traditional narratives of previous centuries. His point with describing all this was to demonstrate his belief that the *old logic of identity*, a single objectivity from which to find meaning is no longer applicable in the modern world. Hall is careful to note, though, that this dissipation of a collective framework of meaning is not symbolic of an end of our need for such a framework. Rather, it simply signifies that these old “master concepts” are no longer able to provide an adequate explanation of the world in all its complexity. The important question for Hall, then, becomes a simple one: What will come next?

To illustrate what comes next, he gives a short anecdote about Britain and tea. Tea, Hall argues, is a staple aspect of British identity. So much so, that when people around the world imagine a British person, them having a cup of tea is usually the quality that comes to mind. But this tea is not made by the British; rather, it is imported in from India. Though its consumption is vital to the British way of life, its production happens elsewhere, in a place far away, both culturally and geographically. For Hall, this observation demonstrates “the outside history that is inside the history of the English.” (49) It shows an ineradicable intertwinement of two cultures, defying the *old logic of identity* that they’re differences can’t benefit each other.

Hall himself was from Jamaica, where the British Empire had been acquiring its sugar from for centuries. In this way, although he had only immigrated to England in the 1950’s, he uses the metaphor that a part of him had always been present there, as the sugar resting at the bottom of the English cup of tea. His immigration, then, is more of a “coming home.” His work

in cultural studies is the sugar that has always been there finally acquiring a voice, and taking its rightful place in Britain's national conversation. Following this line of thinking, the notion of identity begins losing its rigidity. In Hall's words:

The notion that identity has to do with people that look the same, feel the same, call themselves the same, is nonsense. As a process, as a narrative, as a discourse, it is always told from the position of the Other. What is more is that identity is always in part a narrative, always in part a kind of representation... Identity is not something which is formed outside and then we tell stories about it. It is that which is narrated in one's own self... (1997: 49)

This description does well to serve as a foundation for the open-ended concept of identity I will be exploring throughout this thesis. While this is admittedly a daunting task to envision a way in which the entire globe might arrive at such a perspective, Hall nevertheless demonstrates how simple observations about the way globalization has affected our daily lives have the power to further lead us there.

## Édouard Glissant and the Poetics of Relation

A few years before Hall delivered this lecture, postcolonial author and philosopher Édouard Glissant published a book entitled *Poetics of Relations*, the content and context of which serves well to expand upon this new notion of identity. Born on the French-colonized island of Martinique, Glissant spent much of his young life campaigning for Martinique's independence. A big part of this movement for independence, and what his main efforts went towards, was the construction of a new national identity in place of the inferior and estranged position colonialism had left his people in. As he went about this task, though, Glissant gradually gravitated away from building a purely Martiniquan identity, and towards a new, global model of human relations. Describing this progression in his vision of postcolonial identity, Glissant said:

For more than two centuries whole populations have had to assert their identity in opposition to the processes of identification or annihilation triggered by these invaders. Whereas the Western nation is first of all an "opposite," for colonized peoples identity will be primarily "opposed to" - that is, a limitation from the beginning. Decolonization will have done its real work when it goes beyond this limit. (1997: 43)

Indeed, the whole text that follows is his attempt to go beyond that limit, to establish a new framework through which to understand the total human condition- *le Tout-monde* – as we undergo an ever-increasing process of globalization and cultural interaction. This framework goes beyond binary oppositions and operates through his concept of *relation*, in which “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other.” (11)

Glissant's inspiration for this idea partly lied in his observation of *creolization* as it took place within the Caribbean islands, in which those of African descent's culture and language merged with France's to create a distinctly new identity and language, known as *creole*. Through

this process, the rigid duality of the colonizer and the colonized began to give way to something new. To Glissant, this particular instance of cultural assimilation was illustrative of the potential for such a process to occur on a global scale. But rather than pin this process down with a single, generalizing principle, Glissant's model of relation is an open-ended *multiplicity*, in which varying processes of cultural interaction take place at different points of contact. What links them together is the *poetics* through which they can be approached, *poetics* being what the translator Betsy Wing calls a "transformative mode of history," (12) or an interactive and nonlinear approach to thought and analysis. Here we see a new approach to identity similar to that of Stuart Hall's, in which the importance of motion and contact overcome any sort of absolute notion of who we are.

Another important part of Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* is the concept of *opacity*. To understand opacity and its significance, it does best to start with its opposite, *transparency*. As Glissant describes, the West's original concept of human nature was *universally grounded*, meaning it tried to account for all human behavior through a single, generalizing philosophy. The problem is that this supposed universality was in fact derived from a very limited, one-sided perspective, and when the West applied it to the societies it encountered and colonized it rendered their valuable cultural differences see-through, or *transparent*, replacing them with a preconceived image drawn from the West's own "universal" knowledge. This was essentially the same process Stuart Hall referred to as the *old logic of identity*, in which the West sought to make its own identity the "ground of action."

*Opacity*, on the other hand, is "that which cannot be reduced." (27) It is something which at first might seem purely obscure, for it has no apparent meaning within the framework of the observer. This obscurity is often necessary, though, as it signifies new terrain that cannot simply

be reduced, but must be explored. This unexplored terrain might even exist within the observers themselves. Many might believe that living in a world where you can't immediately discern the meaning of everything around you would be unbearably chaotic, but Glissant actually argues that this might be exactly what we need. To understand the how and why of this process, it does well to quote Glissant at length:

The thought of opacity distracts me from absolute truths whose guardian I might believe myself to be. As far as my identity is concerned... I shall not allow it to become cornered in any essence... Rather, it does not disturb me to accept that there are places where my identity is obscure to me, and the fact that it amazes me does not mean I relinquish it. Human behaviors are fractal in nature. If we become conscious of this and give up trying to reduce such behaviors to the obviousness of a transparency, this will, perhaps, contribute to lightening their load, as every individual begins... taking himself apart in this manner. The rule of action (what is called ethics or else the ideal or just logical relation) would gain ground as an obvious fact by not being mixed into the preconceived transparency of universal models. The rule of every action, individual or community, would gain ground by perfecting itself through the experience of Relation. It is the network that expresses the ethics. (1997: 218)

Would a set of ethics expressed horizontally through network relations actually prove to be more fruitful and productive than a top-down model of universal morality? When one considers the terror and destruction caused by the West throughout colonization - the slave trade, the murders, the genocide, the cultural and historical annihilation of entire nations, all driven on by a perceived moral superiority - we are led to believe that *yes, it would*. Glissant's goal here is to elaborate on how a constant awareness of the *opacity* around us, even of the *opacity* within ourselves, helps to bring such a network into existence. For this opacity serves as a constant reminder of the limitations and relativity of all knowledge, loosening one's own identity from any sense of absolutism and reshaping it into an open-ended project. Such an attitude, Glissant

believes, is the key to developing a multicultural society worldwide, for it allows the interplay of nations, cultures, and ideas to happen organically, without the hindrance of preconceived notions or destinations.

This new model of global social relations is no less than a complete overhaul of the way the Western world has organized information, people, society, and history thus far. It is no coincidence then, that another one of Glissant's main inspirations for his *Poetics of Relations* is the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who with the idea of the *rhizome*, attempted such an overhaul. The *rhizome* is Deleuze and Felix's answer to the *tree*, which they label as the dominant mode of ontological thought in Western society thus far. The *tree* way of thinking is what we have all been raised with: hierarchies, binaries, linear causality, and all lines of thought and culture having some sort of *root* from which all else stems. The *rhizome*, on the other hand, is described as "an accentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automation, defined solely by a circulation of states." (1987: 21) It is a *multiplicity*, with *no one root*, and *no universal grounding*. Instead of a beginning and end, it remains perennially in the middle. Rather than being reducible to the individual and the collective, it *is* the constant interplay between the two. For this reason, Glissant labels his vision as the product of the principle of "rhizomatic thought," (11) and I will continue to use the word *rhizomatic* to describe the qualities of fluidity and nonlinearity within a network.

My reason for exploring these ideas is to lay down a theoretical framework for the shift in identity that I deemed necessary for our increasingly globalized world at the beginning of this section. By now, a pattern should be beginning to emerge. For while Stuart Hall, Édouard Glissant, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari are just a few authors within a labyrinth of writing

and research on this topic, their respective intellectual pursuits merge together well to paint a picture of how our world might, and in some places is already beginning to, make its way towards a global multicultural society, the likes of which previous generations could've only dreamt about. The central theme to this development is a major shift in perception, a *new awareness*, in the realm of personal and collective identity. This new awareness will completely deconstruct the idea of an overarching objective reality, of a set trajectory with both a beginning and end point, lying at the foundation of our being. In its place is only relation, and points of contact, and "lines of flight," as Deleuze and Guattari would say. For the points at which different cultures and identities meet is where they are most malleable, where there is the most potential for the creation of something new, and so these areas are a far more fruitful subject of enquiry than a homogeneity of any sort. For in a world consumed by apathy and anxiety towards the future, these areas point the way forward, while simultaneously telling us that the idea of "forward," of going towards some preconceived meaning of life that awaits us at the end, was only an illusion all along.

## Metamodernism

Yes, let us explore matter. All the same, with the confidence and skepticism mixed together in equal quantities of he who throws a coin and bets on heads, sees it fall on tails, and begins again. If matter answers no, we will nevertheless force it to answer “yes.”

- Victor Segalen, *Essays on Exoticism*, 1913

Now that I described in further detail what I mean when I talk about a shift in the concept of identity, I would like to take this argument one step further and position it within a wider framework of recent developments in philosophy, art, and culture. For while identity is the main arena through which this process of relation with the Other takes place, such a shift in perception requires a larger transformation in the overall *zeitgeist* of society, a transformation that inevitably materializes itself wherever there is human expression. While many would agree that a transformation of some sort is currently taking place on Earth, we are hard pressed to find a general consensus on what it exactly is, or what it should be. In an age which, as Stuart Hall noted, is void of any “master concepts” through to which to explain reality, it seems as though everyone has a different opinion on what’s happening. It for this reason that I argue the best framework through which to approach this new *zeitgeist*, this new level of consciousness and its various manifestations, is one which sets the *oscillation between* these opposing viewpoints as its essence. Such a framework is consistent with what we have already established about all knowledge and its *opacity*, its relativity. This framework is called *metamodernism*.

This term, first employed in this way by Timotheus Velmeulen and Robin van den Akker in their 2010 article *Notes on metamodernism*, is the proposed follow-up to the era of postmodernism. The prefix “meta,” meaning “between,” or “beyond.” Rather than a whole new structure of thought, though, metamodernism can be seen as a sensibility that exists always

*between* structures of thought, mainly postmodernism and modernism before it. For this reason, Velmeulen and van den Akker label it as “an emerging structure of feeling.” (2)

To briefly orient, modernism is essentially the unwavering faith in the ideas that emerged out of the Enlightenment, and reached their apex in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It seeks a universal humanism, a central truth independent of all human consciousness, that could only be attained through Science and Reason. Think, Stuart Hall’s *old logic of identity*. It is a mindset that is dead serious in its convictions. And while this modern enthusiasm has been beneficial in all sorts of ways, it also established a certain power structure that is quite harmful. For since its perceived objectivity was based purely in European and Western thought, the quests for power and progress in its name mainly rewarded white males, passing by the many other voices that were not heard.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, sought to deconstruct this naïve attempt at rational objectivity. Born out of the outbursts and social unrest of the 1960’s, postmodern thought sought to show the pre-established “master concepts” of modernism as social constructions, as tools used to reinforce a hegemonic power structure mostly benefiting white males. By doing this, it cleared the way for the formation of new subjective identities based on the experiences of the marginalized, and the social movements built around them: the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and the LGBTQ movement. Above all, though, postmodernism is suspicious of all convictions, and manifested itself as art, literature, and culture, meant to subvert the forms and traditions modernism had quite so seriously established.

## The Postmodern Problem

At first, this transition from the modern to the postmodern might seem to fulfill the necessary shift in identity formation I have been discussing in this paper. And while elements of it are certainly there - the breaking down of any *root* notion of our existence, the rise of relativity over objectivity, the acknowledgement of no set trajectory predetermined for us – there is one key difference. For just as the extreme sincerity of modernism has its downside, the extreme suspicion postmodernism holds for the world and truth does as well. It creates a sense of irony and cynicism, one that in doses is vital for confronting anything claiming to be absolute, but when left unchecked can lead to a sort of nihilism, an automatic disbelief of any attempt to weave the many stories of humanity back together into collective patterns or notions of any sort. Therefore, what this transition lacked was Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, the awareness of seeing yourself through the eyes of the Other. For without such an awareness, the new subjective identities born out of the breakdown of modernism's grand narratives have nothing linking them together, no good reason as to why they should interact. On the contrary, they have every reason to oppose each other, because as of yet there is not much else to ground their legitimacy in beyond that opposition. And with irony remaining as the dominant mode of expression, critiques of this dilemma are inevitably framed within the same cynical detachment that fostered the dilemma in the first place.

Author David Foster Wallace, whose work is often referenced as an example of the metamodern, described this process as it happened within art and literature in his book *Infinite Jest*, saying :

Postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists. Irony's gone from

liberating to enslaving. ... The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout our formative years. (1993: 243)

In essence, it became “hip” to point out the hypocrisy of all traditional values. So “hip,” though, that any attempt at a reconstruction of these values would be accused of that same hypocrisy. In his work *E Unibus Pluram*, Wallace goes into further detail about the way in which this “hip” irony came to pervade our entire popular and commercial culture in the US, mainly through the medium of television. Postmodern irony, Wallace argues, was quite useful for television shows, as it allowed them to appropriate the very criticism they received and present it back as entertainment. It set an immediate stage of disregard for the traditional, white picket fence reality it had once been created to endorse, and instead began aligning itself with postmodernism’s analysis of reality as a construction. By doing this, TV became its own best critic, purposefully exaggerating its own absurdities and faults so as to beat the critics to the punch. This trend can be still be seen in full effect today in the popular American cartoons *South Park* and *Family Guy*, which derive a majority of their humor from the constant hypocrisy and ignorance of the adult characters, the same adults that 1950’s American TV attempted to display as close to perfect. Through this process, Wallace says, “The real authority on a world we now view as constructed and not depicted becomes the medium that constructs our worldview.” (1993: 161) For America in 1991 when this written, and still now today, TV is that worldview constructing medium. The difference now is that, with the Internet, it is not the only one. The importance of the Internet is something I will return to as I draw closer to my case studies.

My reason for this short exploration of the development from modernism to postmodernism within society, art, and media is simply to provide further context for this new state that I argue is best labeled as metamodernism, and best seen as an authentic search for

meaning and connection emerging out of a world oversaturated with the commercialized irony of American popular culture. Metamodernism duly notes the criticisms postmodernism hailed against dogma and absolute truths of any kind, indeed it is born inside those criticisms, while at the same time it still draws on the sincere drive for truth which fueled modernism, creating a position where, as Vermeulen and van den Akker say, it “consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility.” (6) David Foster Wallace yearned for such a reemergence of authenticity as he closed his essay, saying “The next real literary “rebels” in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles...” (193) He also takes care to mention, though, that: “These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started.” Therein lies the impossible possibility. Metamodernist expression works through Wallace’s fear of this reemerging authenticity being outdated, though, as rather than countering the ironic and the absurd, it projects this new search for meaning through them. It takes the over-exaggerated, self-deprecating or self-aggrandizing representations of irony so pervasive in our culture and uses them as a starting point from which to attempt a real conversation. Rather than seeing the world ironically, metamodernists see themselves ironically, embracing their own *opacity* and projecting it out onto the world.

## Metamodernist Modes

In their essay, Timotheus Velmeulen and Robin van den Akker cite some different ideas in art as they relate to metamodernism, two of those being performatism and Neoromanticism. I will be drawing on both of these concepts in my analysis of two metamodernist case studies, and so I will explore and relate them briefly here. Performatism is a term first used by German theorist Raoul Eshelman, who described the notion as a process through which “the subject is presented (or presents itself) as a holistic, irreducible unit that makes a binding impression on a reader or observer.” This is in contrast to the regular concept of an artistic performance, where the subject is always presented in a particular context, on a particular foreground. Essentially, then, performatism is any piece of art or expression that creates and invites the observer into a new, closed framework, that is devoid of outside context and forces the observer to grapple with it on its own terms. It contains a central *opacity* to it, but an opacity that is so ever-present, so pervasive, it demands acknowledgement within the observer’s own framework, despite the impossibility of such a task. Such a style is currently surging to popularity in the art world through the Santa Fe art collective Meow Wolf. Meow Wolf owns a large warehouse in Santa Fe where they host “immersive, interactive experiences to transport audiences of all ages into fantastic realms of story and exploration.” This style of complete, interactive immersion in artwork that Meow Wolf has turned into a business model is quintessentially performative, and the experience apparently resonates very well with people, as shown by the 400,000 visitors they pulled in their first year in operation.<sup>2</sup>

A big part of what one goes through when experiencing performative and metamodern art is a sort of mystification of everyday experience, an “attempt to make the permanent transitory and the transient permanent.” (7) It for this reason Velmeulen and van den Akker claim that

metamodernism is most clearly expressed in an “emergent neoromantic sensibility.” (8) A possible explanation for this reemergence of romanticism could be to shake up the dry, matter-of-fact perception people mostly hold of life today. For, one can say, modern science and reason were developed to eradicate any mystery in the world, to leave no stone unturned. This scientific crusade on the mystery of nature and existence generated an attitude of skepticism among society and ushered in art movements such as “realism.” This, later paired with the postmodern distrust of peoples’ and societies’ convictions and truth in general, promoted a collective detachment from the imaginative and romantic views of life and the world. This of course, is a problem, as in our current age, with its chaotic web of systemic problems concerning immigration, economic inequality, political polarization, and more, we are in dire need of fresh outlooks that look forward at the possibilities and develop new solutions. For as the great author Lewis Carroll once said, “Imagination is the only weapon in the war against reality.” (1865) The recent metamodern developments in art do a complete reversal, though. They are an attempt at reinstating this romanticized image of the world, of rejuvenating the imaginative spirit of the observer through the heightening and displacement of life’s everyday qualities and scenery. Doing so promotes a new, heightened sensibility, a sensibility that reinspires us to the beauty and possibilities that lie all around us.

Another artistic strategy that I will relate to neoromanticism and metamodernism is that of magical realism, a term coined by German critic Franz Roh in 1925 which was first widely used to describe a Latin American literary movement which mixed fantasy elements with everyday life. Today, this term has come to encompass all works of art which present everyday life fused with surreal and imaginative qualities. This mode of expression follows this same line

of destabilizing our normal reality, of heightening our everyday experience. As a textbook on the subject notes:

The principle thing is not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances...The magical realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality or to wound it but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things.

(Leal, 1995: 192)

All of these different modes, grounded in the literary but also evident in all sorts of areas of human expression, are distinctly metamodern, as they seek a transcendence of sorts through a framework of oppositions forced into contact. Rather than completely framing reality within their own lens, as one could say original romanticism sought to do, they use the already established norms and perceptions of reality today and build off of them in unexpected ways. In this manner they attempt a synthesis that, though impossible to achieve absolutely, nevertheless proves fruitful in its attempts.

There is no doubt that this whole notion of metamodernism is fairly dependent on the Internet for its emergence, as the Internet and social media have opened up a whole new process of peer-to-peer-communication, labeled “horizontal media” by NYU Professor Jay Rosen, that has never before been possible. Rosen, in his piece “The People Formerly Known as the Audience,” describes this evolution in audience behavior from passive reception to constant interaction, saying “the people formerly known as the audience are simply *the public* made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable.” The reason for this, for the public being more *real* now, is that social media enables the simultaneous outpouring of all subjective viewpoints. It gives everyone a platform to have their say on what’s happening in the world, as well as the

power to connect and independently promote these perspectives. Such a process ends up widening the overall consciousness of society and forcing traditional industries to listen to and appease the opinions and desires of everyday people. This is not to say, of course, that social media always works out that way. Indeed, on the contrary, the quick spread of misinformation and the emergence of “echo chambers,” in which users only view content that supports their beliefs, are huge problems with detrimental effects on society. In spite of these problems, though, the Internet is still raising a new generation of “digital natives” constantly exposed to varying perceptions of reality. The effect of this drastic alteration in our environment is now beginning to emerge, in the way of art, music, philosophy, and popular culture that is comfortable inhabiting multiple subjectivities simultaneously, without clinging to any of them as absolute. Luke Turner, a British artist, described such a process in his *Metamodernist Manifesto*, saying: “The new technology enables the simultaneous experience and enactment of events from a multiplicity of positions. Far from signalling its demise, these emergent networks facilitate the democratization of history, illuminating the forking paths along which its grand narratives may navigate the here and now.” (2011) Navigate the here and now, we shall.

## A Look at Two Rap Stars, Born in the Internet Age

Music has always sent out lines of flight, like so many ‘transformational multiplicities,’ even overturning the very codes that structure or arborify it; that is why musical form, right down to its ruptures and proliferations, is comparable to a weed, a rhizome.

- Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

This central notion of the Internet’s decentralization and democratization of history has ramifications in all sorts of areas in society. Everyday, we see the old “gatekeepers” of industry – whether it be traditional music labels, major publishing companies, or even banks – lose more of their power to horizontally spread, grassroots networks within their industry.<sup>3</sup> There is a retaliation, of course, where these “gatekeepers” are infiltrating their way into the control of these horizontal networks. In some places, this has worked. But that does not change the fact that, after the Internet, those in positions of power are now forever in competition with a public who no longer passively receives top-down curations of their culture, but rather forcefully offers a curation of their own.

The music industry has especially been affected by this occurrence. Since the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the way popular music spreads, is listened to, and is created, has completely changed. While the production and distribution of popular music was once a long, tedious process, full of record deals, hoards of specialized technicians, and physically transported products, it can now all be done in a sixteen year old’s bedroom. Not only that, but it *is* being done, in many sixteen year olds’ bedrooms. The production cost and time required has so dramatically lowered with the widespread use of laptop DAW’s,<sup>4</sup> and the means of distribution so streamlined through free platforms such as YouTube and Soundcloud, that music is undoubtedly the most glaring example today of a horizontal media network challenging a

vertical one. While the central, vertical music industry still exists, and still retains power in selective areas, the overall wave of what is popular in music today has very much arisen horizontally through the Internet and social media, far removed from the board room strategies of old, white label executives. It has happened in a way that is very *rhizomatic*.

For the purposes of this section in my essay, I will be focusing in on hip-hop, which as of 2017, has overtaken rock as the most listened to genre within the United States.<sup>5</sup> Beyond its general popularity, though, I am focusing on hip-hop because there is a large volume of currently successful rappers that I deem as having emerged specifically out of Internet culture, emitting qualities that I argue can best be interpreted through a metamodernist framework. One of these rappers is named RiFF RAFF.

## Riff Raff: The Neon Icon



Source: Riff Raff

**“While you're searching for acceptance, I'm trying to spin the world in the opposite direction.**

**Subtle misconceptions, diamonds give reflections...” - Riff Raff<sup>6</sup>**

RiFF RAFF, real name Horst Christian Simco, is a notoriously vibrant and bizarre rapper from Houston, Texas who first rose to public prominence with a brief appearance on the MTV reality show *From G's to Gents*. RiFF RAFF was cast on the show in 2009, and although this was early in his rap career, he had already fully established the over-the-top persona he is famous for today, presenting it in full force on the show. Though he was voted off after only two episodes, this brief stint of publicity got his name out there and started a snowball effect of attention. Eventually, he was noticed by former MTV video jockey Simon Rex. Rex, who has a comedic rap persona of his own named Dirt Nasty, appreciated RiFF RAFF enough to invite him to move out to Los Angeles. RiFF RAFF accepted the offer and moved there in early 2011, several years into his rap career but still unknown to the general public. Once there he got right to work, releasing new music and aggressively marketing his zany image through social media, particularly the late video platform Vine. Soon, the buzz surround him began picking up quickly,

especially after he was signed to the independent electronic music label Mad Decent. By the end of 2012, the following year, he had successfully built himself up enough that there was no doubt that RiFF RAFF had become a viral sensation, one of the first bona fide stars of the Internet. His story does well to examine metamodern tendencies as they are currently playing out in society and popular culture.

One needs to look no further than RiFF RAFF's appearance to observe the pure surrealness his character exuberates, the absurdity that has simultaneously earned him the highest of praise and the harshest of critiques. He is a white man with cornrows and grills, draped in diamonds, with a short beard meticulously shaved into a zigzag pattern at all times. He is often wearing bright colors and dyes his hair bright colors, always wears a pair of Pit Viper sunglasses, and has a body which reveals a score of tattoos. The tattoos are important, for their content immediately betrays something special about RiFF RAFF. From BET and Bart Simpson on his chest, to WorldStarHipHop on his shoulder, and MTV on his neck, these marks pose RiFF RAFF as a literal embodiment of popular culture, a "kind of human meme," as *Rolling Stone* called him.<sup>7</sup>

His song lyrics build off this image of being a human meme, usually being a hodgepodge of cultural, historical, and commercial references. He often jams so many contrasting references together, of people, places, and things, that they begin to lose their original meaning and melt together into a sort of neoromantic auditory aesthetic, a bubbling energy concocted from bits and pieces of consumer and celebrity culture and infinite descriptive explanations of random scenarios. This can be exhibited in lyrics such as these from his song "Aquaberry Dolphin":

“It's Pierce Brosnan, cross you up like Allen Ivey / It's Allen Iverson, Versace rims with lemon tint / The lime Benz candy, coat it with the applesauce / The apple gloss on Miami Beach, David Hasselhoff / Hassle me I'm Tim McGraw, I don't pass the ball.”<sup>8</sup>

His social media use also exuberates this same energy. On Twitter, he is constantly changing his name (currently it is NEONARDO DA ViNCi), and every letter in every tweet is capitalized except for the letter “i,” the same way he spells his name. He delivers messages similar to his lyrics in this manner, such as: “i COULDA PLAYED FOR THE MiAMi HEAT BUT THEY FOUND CODEiNE UNDERNEATH MY LAMBORGHINi DRiVER SEAT.” The consistency with which he uses the lower case “i” font is a clear allusion to the iPhone, and the resulting culture of instantaneous communication it created, and from which RiFF RAFF sprung.

He is always projecting a flurry of quick humor, boasts of wealth and success, and occasional insight, all framed within repeated motifs such as putting “Versace” or “rap game” in front of every object or name mentioned, and the many nicknames he’s given himself, most notably Jody Highroller, which he often says is his “real name.” He speaks in the same language in virtually every video appearance as well, whether it be in an official interview or an Instagram video filmed in his kitchen. The frequency with which he delivers this meticulous yet erratic persona, and speaks in his language of neoromanticized popular culture, makes RiFF RAFF a living piece of performative art. For what he has done, or attempted to do, is create his own unique world, through which to enter one must leave all outside context at the door. He plucks away the original meaning and significance of elements of popular culture and refashions them in a way that transcends any contextual position within that same popular culture, utilizing a sort of magical realism that positions him as true “outsider,” not only from hip-hop but from everyday life itself. His popularity and success, as well as the overall evolution in current rap

towards this style, shows, though, that many have gone outside with him. As one popular YouTube comment noted on the music video for RiFF RAFF's song "Real Boyz," "riffraff proves that if you're weird enough and persistent enough then people will learn to love you no matter what you do."<sup>9</sup>

Not everyone always loved RiFF RAFF, though. Often times, he is accused of cultural appropriation, of "caricaturizing" Blacks and gangster rap in general. When one looks at his appearance, it is easy to understand this perception, as his cornrows, diamonds, grills, and overall demeanor, definitely portray that of the typical, "gangster" Black man as fostered and promoted by hip-hop. This critique of RiFF RAFF was well exhibited on an interview on the hip-hop radio station Hot 97, where he had to defend his authenticity against radio host Ebro Darden. "Ebro" is known for promoting an extremely traditional view of hip-hop, and during the interview he aggressively questions RiFF RAFF background, asking: "Are you from the hood? Or from the suburbs? Do you have rich parents or poor parents? Did you sell drugs? Tell us the story, paint the picture..." Basically, Ebro tries to get right to RiFF RAFF's *root*, to understand his identity within the context and framework of traditional hip-hop culture. This framework, as Ebro explains it, denotes that RiFF RAFF's diamond drenched swagger emerged out of the "hood," out of poor African American ghettos, as a coping mechanism for their rough living conditions. Therefore, Ebro interrogates RiFF RAFF repeatedly about his past, asserting that he has to know if his origin was a life of crime in poor urban areas or not in order to fully judge the authenticity of his character.

RiFF RAFF is reluctant to dive into his past, though, and defends his authenticity in a different way. He references Vanilla Ice, a rapper that in the 90's was heavily charged with culturally appropriating Black people's image, so much so that it permanently tarnished his

career. “I can remember seeing Vanilla Ice, and then through time, he stopped being Vanilla Ice,” RiFF RAFF says. “Me? I can remember being 7 years old... and I had these same ideas in my mind. I’m living my destiny right now.” Many more times throughout the interview he takes care to reference the consistency in his character. “This shit ain’t no joke!” he exclaims to Ebro.<sup>10</sup> Rather than culturally appropriating hip-hop and African Americans, then, I argue that RiFF RAFF is on a genuine quest for meaning, for success and recognition in his life, and that this quest goes through the channels of hip-hop and Black culture because these were the dominant framework in his environment through which to achieve success and recognition at the levels he desired. In his words, “I’m a rockstar, who dabbles in hip-hop.”<sup>11</sup>

To explore my argument further, it does well to go back to the beginning of RiFF RAFF’s life, when he was simply Horst Christian Simco. *LA Weekly* ran a piece on RiFF RAFF in which they explored his upbringing, noting he had grown up being just a “regular white suburban kid” from Texas, with no hint of a flashy personality to him in his younger years. He supposedly dropped out of high school, got his GED, and attended community college in a tiny town called Hibbing, Minnesota, near where his PTSD-stricken veteran father was receiving treatment. At the school he played basketball and studied liberal arts, but eventually dropped out. Upon returning to Houston, he began painting cars for work, and fell in with a group of friends who were predominately black. It’s noted that at this time he frequently switched apartments in the rougher areas of Houston, and sometimes struggled to make enough money to get by. His parents had also divorced and the health of his father deteriorated, leaving him basically on his own. In this situation, being constantly low on money and spending time in mostly Black crowds, Horst Simco turned towards the local hip-hop scene for inspiration.<sup>12</sup>

Around this point in Simco's life, multiple rappers from a Northern Houston hip-hop label called Swishahouse began receiving national attention. These rappers, including Slim Thug, Chamillionaire, and Paul Wall, embodied a new, brazen sense of swagger, an attitude that Simco was very impressed by. Often in interviews RiFF RAFF cites these artists as his main inspiration when beginning his rap career. The connection can be easily observed by watching the music video for Slim Thug's 2004 hit song "Like A Boss." In this video, Slim Thug can be seen rocking diamond grills and chains as he hangs with girls and rides in souped-up SUV's around Houston, proclaiming that he is in fact, "The boss of all bosses." He also sports braids quite similar to how RiFF RAFF's looked in the early years of his career. One thing RiFF RAFF is consistent about in interviews is his adoration for success and stardom, and that his desire for a life of glamour and excess is what drives him over anything musically related. In this video, we see that same attitude exhibited, and can only assume that as this song and others bumped out of the speakers in the local Houston garage where Horst Simco painted cars, the idea of RiFF RAFF began to crystalize. Horst Simco, poor and wanting something more of life, officially abandoned his birth name and began freestyling around local Houston parking lots, and selling CD's out of his car as RiFF RAFF. Soon, he began fully participating in the local hip-hop scene, frequenting all the events, and mingling with all the people. As he continued to show off his work ethic and make his presence known as the "crazy white kid on the block," he earned the respect of some local peers, eventually joining the ranks of the Swishahouse Label he had so admired, receiving the MTV spot, and beginning his journey to fame.

With this story, then, it appears that RiFF RAFF's character has its origins in a real love for the glamour of the rap scene, and not a desire to mock it. Therefore, when Ebro accused him of portraying "negative Black stereotypes," he had it backwards. In reality, RiFF RAFF is

transcending these stereotypes, by resisting the context in which they are supposed to be located. Furthermore, in the spirit of magical realism, he is taking the cultural and commercial products associated with rap stereotypes and reinvigorating them with mystique, both by cutting them off from their usual origins and by placing them within his wild imagery. For it is important to remember that when RiFF RAFF really began to take off, he took the swagger he had absorbed from the Houston hip-hop scene



Source: RIFF RAFF – “NEON ICON” [ALBUM COVER]

and built something entirely new with it, creating the flamboyant character I have already described. By doing so, by adding in the neon colors, the tattoos, the meticulously crafted dialect of popular culture, the flurry of brash imagery and visceral energy unleashed simultaneously through all available channels the Internet has to offer, RiFF RAFF became metamodern. And I argue that this metamodernist tendency of his is what has caused him to resonate with so many people and achieve success, despite his “haters.”

For what RiFF RAFF has done is master the art of combining absurdity with sincerity. He has created an image of himself so ridiculous that common sense tells us it must be a flat-out joke, and has evoked it as genuinely as he can, with absolutely no sarcasm, perplexing the masses in the process. The perplexion becomes a source of attraction for many, though, who can’t help but laugh at what a blatant state of confusion his music leaves them in. This humorous

sentiment was best described in a Vice article about RiFF RAFF, where interviewer Drew Miller notes “everything he does is so crazy that it must either be part of a metacontextual Dadaist joke and he is a genius, or he is just profoundly dumb and has been blessed by the Rap Gods with infinite luck. There is no other way of looking at it.”<sup>13</sup> This profound difference between the possibilities, of him either being completely tactical and intellectual, or just plain crazy, with no immediately viable way to know the answer, is what gives RiFF RAFF his signature aura. This perplexion he causes has significance, I argue, for it can be seen as giving our preconceptions about race and culture a healthy dose of *opacity*. It can be seen as a complication of our everyday notions about what we think of as normal, about which behavior and style belong to what race. Maybe, even, it plants a seed that the idea of any style or behavior belonging exclusively to one race is outdated, that the multifaceted inter-psychological processes we call culture and identity might be much more fluid than we thought they were. Glissant discusses such a process in *Poetics of Relation*, saying:

Discussing the comparative values of cultures would amount to maintaining that cultural values are stable and acknowledged as such. Contact among cultures infers, however, a relation of uncertainty, in the perception one has or the experience one senses of them. The mere fact of reflecting them in common, in a planetary perspective, inflects the nature and the "projection" of every specific culture contemplated. Decisive mutations in the quality of relationships result from this, with spectacular consequences that are often thus "experienced" long before the basis for the change itself has been perceived by the collective consciousness. (1997: 161)

A little more than three years after the Hot 97 interview, RiFF RAFF can be seen on a different interview show, *Sway in the Morning*. In this appearance, RiFF RAFF appears at ease, musing on the experiences of living life as a Hollywood celebrity. When asked about a recent siting between him and Katy Perry, RiFF RAFF gives a response which indicates a new self-

awareness in his character: “Sometimes things aren’t to be understood, but to be perceived.” He smiles and talks very slowly as he says this, pointing at his eyes, indicating that although it is in response to a shallow question, that this is a very serious sentiment of his. And indeed, this sentence perfectly captures his essence.

In the quote above Glissant references a “relation of uncertainty” which emerges out of cultures coming into contact with one another, as their supposed stability begins to fade. Glissant imagined this uncertainty in a positive light, but it is this same uncertainty that has led many in the traditional hip-hop world to attack RiFF RAFF repeatedly and label him nothing more than a caricature. For he calls into question the legitimacy of their identity’s *root*. This uncertainty exists all over the world, being held by members of any and all cultures as they continue to be more influenced by each other. This anxiety over uncertainty can be eased, though, I argue, by performative artists such as RiFF RAFF, for he uses humor and entertainment to point out the fragility in our underlying assumptions of life and people. His life as a whole can be seen as one of the “spectacular consequences” of cultural interaction Glissant speaks of. Rather than simply describing the current conditions of the world and its cultural possibilities, he is embodying them, so that even those who have no ability or interest in entertaining such notions are able and forced to perceive them. And to his credit, despite all the criticism he has received, many in the hip-hop world have also fully supported RiFF RAFF from the beginning, including Slim Thug and Paul Wall, the rappers he originally looked up to and eventually made a song with. Though some remain angry, it seems, many more have opened up, learning to laugh with RiFF RAFF at their own uncertainty.

As his popularity continues today, six years after his initial rise to stardom, and new artists begin to follow in his style, we see that there is indeed something real to this act after all.

For although RiFF RAFF lives a lifestyle of flagrance and excess, he appears to truly enjoy every second of it. He exuberates a visceral energy of excitement with everything he does, bringing a healthy dose of positivity into a music scene that is often full of darkness and vulgarity. And although his inhabitation of commercial and celebrity culture might seem shallow, it *is* after all the most dominant framework within our society, whether we like it or not. It was a way for him to reach as many people in as short of a time as he possibly could. In a way then, as funny as it sounds, RiFF RAFF

might be more pragmatic than most. For he built his own new world using what was already most predominately around us as the tools: mass media culture. This is the practicality, though, of a



Source: Heard Presents / Facebook

man with his head in the clouds. The practicality of a man who changes his name from Horst Simco to Jody HighRoller, dyes his hair pink and blue, wears a \$45,000 diamond chain of an Icee Slurpee, and names his house the “Codeine Castle,” all simply because he can. Because, without any ideological anchorage, the world is his playground, and the sky is the limit. “I’m a walking movie,” he tells Sway, with a sly smirk plastered across his face. “But you ain’t even pay for a ticket, its just free admission!”<sup>14</sup>

## Yung Lean: The Internet's Sad Boy



Source: YouTube

**“Molecules expand,  
molecules exist.  
I’m a molecule,  
but I stand in the mist.”  
–Yung Lean<sup>15</sup>**

Around the same time RiFF RAFF was becoming a superstar, in early 2013, another rapper from across the Atlantic began posting music videos that were equally, if not more, bizarre than those of RiFF RAFF’s. His name was Yung Lean, real name Jonatan Leandroer Håstad, and he was from Stockholm, Sweden. At the time he was only 16 years old, and together with two friends who produced beats, Yung Gud and Yung Sherman, they had just founded their rap group, Sad Boys. One of the first music videos he posted was for his first song ever written, “Hurt,” which before I describe in context, I believe I should describe in vivid detail in a standalone manner.

The music video “Hurt” begins with a slow zoom in on a mythical castle, shaded in purple, pink, and blue. The beat is soft, with a flute playing wistfully in the background. Next, it cuts to a pulsating visual of a green and black checkered floor with golden Greek pillars on either side. In the middle of the pillars, Yung Lean emerges, wearing a Polo bucket hat, sunglasses, and

clutching a Nintendo 64 cartridge. It then quickly cuts to a different shot of Yung Lean, this time with a Versace blanket draped across his head. As it cuts back and forth between these two shots, Yung Lean raps as his background continually transforms with graphics of Pokémon cards, floating Arizona Iced Tea cans, Gameboys, cough syrup, screenshots of computer programs and screensavers, and more. All the while, Japanese letters and words such as “sadness” and “emotion” momentarily flutter on screen, while he delivers lyrics such as: “Broken skies, fantastic fox / Got keys, but I'll never find the lock / Emotion boys we in the UFO / Skies pink when I'm on ecstasy / In Tokyo, playing Mario / Sad Boys blastin' your stereos.”<sup>16</sup>

Essentially, the video is sensory overload, and the rap was labeled by many as being “word salad.” To the average observer it is chaotic, absurd, and possibly offensive. The aesthetics of



Source: YouTube

the video, though, as well as the nostalgia emitted via the various commercial products from the early 2000's, did have real roots in a movement called “vaporwave,” which was described by *Esquire* as “the first genre to be born and live its life entirely on the Internet.”<sup>17</sup> More than a genre, though, vaporwave is certainly a mode of expression, such as the others I have previously described. The difference between vaporwave and other modes such as magical realism, though, is that vaporwave was entirely cultivated on online blog sites, most notably the visual-heavy Tumblr. Therefore, its essence is entirely derived from the sentiments that developed on those

blog sites. To capture its essence, an article from the University of New Mexico published in *University Wire* described some of vaporwave's main components:

One: Tranquility, as rain envelopes a small Japanese town wherein slumbering anxiety leaves you shielded away from the over-stimulation of city life. Kyoto glistens from out a small balcony; you dissect its radiance and solemnly breathe cigarette smoke between the echoes of passing cars and an occasional "meow" from the neighboring alleyway.

Two: Nostalgia, and the fast-paced hyper-consumerism culture of the '90s that violently, perhaps too passionately, celebrated itself. Elevator music, k-mart shopping sounds, crudely drawn Saturday morning cartoons, that blue and purple pattern on paper cups that never happened to die. The birth of the personal computer, modern technology's baby steps, the shallow, clip-art graphic design: artwork and sounds that would go on to be slaved and sundered by niche teenagers in 2015.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, the Sad Boys were some of the first of these "niche teenagers," although the aim and reception of their work was much more widespread than what is usually labeled "niche."

Fittingly enough, Yung Lean released a song and music video at the end of 2013 entitled "Kyoto," with an Asian-influenced instrumental sounding as tranquil as sonically possible. In this music video, which is possibly his most popular of all time with nearly 34 million views, Yung Lean wears a large blue Nike zip-up, a golden chain, a Polo hat, and circular rimmed sunglasses, as he and his crew wander Stockholm. They travel in and out of Asian shops and mess with merchandise, ride Go-Karts and Mercedes Benz, and emulate American rap hand gestures. At some points, alien spacecrafts are subtly present in the sky above them. The editing style is constantly warping and playing with the city surroundings, as if they are in a computer game, accenting a feel of pure surrealness that, like RiFF RAFF, completely mystifies and romanticizes an otherwise everyday environment. Here, unlike "Hurt," where Yung Lean

literally mumbles, he appears to be trying musically, singing in an auto tune-drenched voice that melds well with the atmospheric beat. And the production value of the video is very high, in contrast to the ultra low-tech feel of “Hurt” and his other videos. The obvious effort put into this song and video juxtaposes the rest of his material thus far, which seemed as though he was trying not to try. But there are also moments, such as when a flicker of black subtly reveals sad faces on everyone, or the constant close-ups of their Nike running shoes, that emit the humorous meme-like spirit of the earlier videos. In metamodernist fashion, Yung Lean’s first year of music was simultaneously a crazy joke, and the serious beginning of a career.

While the vaporwave movement is relevant to my thesis, as it involves the cooption and remixing of corporate imagery into new forms, much in the same way RiFF RAFF’s music does, the Sad Boys’ utilization of it alone would not have propelled them to international success, or to be a worthy case study in the topic of identity and metamodernism. The additional element that sets Yung Lean apart from traditional vaporwave, the thing that initially shocked and entertained viewers and listeners all over the world and especially in the US, was Yung Lean’s adoption and of various aspects of American hip-hop culture into an exaggerated, performative persona. This absurd embodiment of American rap obviously began with his name: “Lean” being promethazine, the intoxicating cough syrup that is popular with many American hip-hop artists, and “Yung” being a common prefix for American rappers’ names, used almost exclusively until then by Black artists. Mixed in with the themes of nostalgia and sadness, were lyrics about excessive drug use, disrespecting women, designer brands, and all kinds of tropes and phrases that are associated with American hip-hop. His lyrics were obviously exaggerations, and in most of his early music, very sloppily delivered, but for some reason, the sight of a young, baby face, Swedish kid wearing Versace and using words like “shawty” and “iced out” as he rocked

diamonds and held Pokémon cards was just too intriguing for many Internet users to pass up. And so, completely unexpected on his part, Yung Lean went internationally viral within months of posting his first music video.

As the views began pouring in on YouTube, the American hip-hop scene immediately tried to dissect him, much in the same way RiFF RAFF was. The resulting opinions of him, expectedly, ranged from brilliant to pointless. The popular music publication *Pitchfork* particularly dug into him, proclaiming he was “a rap-obsessed misfit from a summer camp who freestyles poorly,” and “ridiculous without knowing it.”<sup>19</sup> Basically, his critics asserted that he was simply copying hip-hop and Internet culture, without any real reason or achievement for doing so. Like RiFF RAFF, many wrote Yung Lean off as a simple joke, and a joke that wouldn’t last very long.

As the public got to know Yung Lean more, though, glimpses of sincerity began to emerge. For starters, it was found out that, despite the absurdity of his name, he had actually developed it organically. While he still did intend “Lean” as a reference to promethazine, it also actually was derived from his middle name, “Leandoer.” Therefore, in this regard, Yung Lean was no different than any other serious American rapper that used some variation of his real name with a “Yung” or “Lil” behind it, and had not simply made his name to be a mockery. And as different publications began to interview him and his group more, it became increasingly clear that they were all genuinely influenced by American culture. On his eleventh birthday, for instance, he received 50 Cent’s *Get Rich or Die Trying*, beginning his interest in hip-hop. That same year, he made his first mixtape, in which he says “most of the songs sounded like we were trying to be Eminem.”<sup>20</sup> In an article from the music publication *Noisey*, the author describes:

“When I Skype with Lean, he's guzzling foreign Pepsi and polishing off a bag of chips while producer Yung Sherman of their Sad Boys crew plays Super Smash Bros 64, and it becomes apparent that these kids are not, in fact, trolling. Aside from the awkward pauses in conversation when they consult each other in Swedish, they seem no different than restless American teenagers...”<sup>21</sup>

The difference is, of course, that Yung Lean and his crew grew up seeing American culture from the outside. Unlike American teenagers, urban Swedish teenagers are force fed American culture without any direct avenue to then go and join it, *except via the Internet*. As the producer Yung Gud noted in an interview: “For Swedes, American culture is simultaneously alluring and oppressive. We look at screens and we’re fed with American information, American music on the radio, American games, American everything. It's so vast and immersive, but it's also so infuriating what it does to the world.”<sup>22</sup> The effect of America’s dominance on the world that Yung Gud is referring to, one can infer, is both a stifling and cooption of local cultures, and a sense of alienation, created by constant exposure to a world that is forever out of reach. At the same time, though, they were still teenage boys, quite infatuated with the larger-than-life personas of American entertainment, and huge fans of hip-hop. And so, in this state of being simultaneously allured and oppressed by American culture, feeling both trapped by its pervasiveness and inspired by its grandiosity, the Sad Boys did what in all consideration was actually quite logical. They decided to hone in on the parts of American culture they liked the most, mainly hip-hop and vaporwave (the combination of which produced a hip-hop micro genre called “cloud rap,” which they are partly credited with creating), and use them as a channel through which to express a genuine feeling of melancholy and alienation. In this context, the initial chaotic impression of Yung Lean’s early work begins to take a much clearer shape.

Within a year of first releasing music, Jonatan Håstad had fully transformed into Yung Lean, the Internet star. He began touring the world, consistently selling out shows in America, as well as the UK and all over Scandinavia. He followed up his first album, which had been called *Unknown Death 2002*, with a new one called *Unknown Memory*, featuring a more refined version of the exact sound and look that had gotten him famous. A notable moment here is his song “Yoshi City,” where in the video Yung Lean can be seen standing on a moving smart car, drearily singing “Yoshi city we burn it down / I guess it's my turn now / Smoking loud, I'm a lonely cloud / I'm a lonely cloud, with my windows down.”<sup>23</sup> In just a few sentences he showcased his full lyrical formula, successfully referencing a Nintendo character, his loneliness, the hip-hop phrase “smoke loud,” and the new micro genre he was now proudly representing, cloud rap, which was also emerging simultaneously in various parts of the United States. Cloud rap was considered to be rap that had emerged from the blogosphere, and was usually lo-fi, atmospheric, and full of vaporwave imagery and sound. At the same time Yung Lean was pioneering this sound, famous American rappers such as A\$AP Rocky and Travis Scott were also drawing influence from it, creating a unique connection between them. Now fully established as frontrunners in a global Internet-bred culture, Yung Lean and the Sad Boys began connecting with artists all over Europe and the United States, continuing to push their new style. This phase didn't change much about Yung Lean's public reception: those who hated him still hated him, and those who loved him still loved him. But Lean wasn't worried, as was evident from his proclamation on his 2014 song “Volt”: “Thanks to everyone who hates me, only makes me fit my role!”<sup>24</sup>

His story does not end here, though. While my explanation of Yung Lean thus far has done well to demonstrate another example of a white man, or boy in this case, searching for

inspiration and identity through the traditionally Black culture of American hip-hop, and utilizing the pervasive and ubiquitous content of American mass media culture to create an outlandish, performative persona, which because of its *opacity* resonates with a mass audience, there is another chapter in his career which holds a significance of its own. For, while RiFF RAFF, as I previously described, has spent his whole career completely settled into his persona, Yung Lean has not. Instead, he has recently become much more serious, moving away from his old blend of Internet memes and absurdity towards an honest exploration of his emotions, psyche, and a truly original sound. This development does well to continue my exploration of identity, globalization, and metamodernism.

Following another successful US tour, Yung Lean began recording his third album in Miami. After the recording sessions, Lean decided to remain in Miami as the rest of his crew returned to Sweden. The months that followed, as reported by the music magazine *Fader*, consisted of Lean becoming heavily addicted to multiple substances, and descending into a state of mental instability. Eventually, after a particularly bad meltdown, he ended up in a mental hospital. His 29 year old manager and friend Barron Machat, on his way to the hospital to meet with Lean, then died in a car accident, supposedly with the drug Xanax in his system. Being just 18 years old, the experience was obviously hugely traumatic to Jonatan Håstad, who returned to Sweden with his father and spent months rehabilitating in general isolation.<sup>25</sup>

The music that Yung Lean produced upon his reentrance into society represented a huge shift in him as an artist, a shift that would make David Foster Wallace quite proud. One of his most important new songs, “Miami Ultras,” released alongside a music video, was obviously meant to address his dark time in Miami. The video shows a bloody Yung Lean wearing a hospital garb as he digs a grave in a forest. Other shots show him sitting in a hospital bed

wearing an IV, and rocking back and forth in a straitjacket. He delivers the song's verses with a harsh yell, exhibiting a sort of anger not heard before in his music, and in the bridge he gently sings lyrics such as "I miss some places / I wish we lived on another earth / You think you hate me / I know that it hurts."<sup>26</sup> Just like that, all the fun and meme-centric humor of his earlier work is gone, and in its place is a genuine exploration of Jonatan Håstad's pain. In another song and video, "Hennessy & Sailor Moon," Lean is seen clean-cut, in a suit coat as he stands on a stage, drearily singing into a microphone to an empty dance floor. Shots of him standing in the spotlight, normally dressed with absolutely nothing else around him, are the ultimate juxtaposition to the visual overstimulation of his earlier videos. And the simplicity of the video is complimented by Lean's honest reflection on his life, in lyrics such as "When I was in the hospital I saw you / I know what you're feeling inside cause I feel you / I gotta stay true, my money rain blue / Hennessy and Sailor Moon, I just wanna be with you."<sup>27</sup> Sailor Moon, an old anime show, can be seen to represent Lean's innocent beginnings, and Hennessy, the liquor that serves as the drink of choice for most American rappers, can be seen to represent the loss of his innocence, and the pain and consequences of fame and indulgence he has already come to know very well.

Yung Lean has continued this newfound maturity in his latest album, *Stranger*, which he released in 2017. The album was met with the most critical praise Lean has received to date, even leading Pitchfork, the publication who had been his chief critic his whole career, to declare he now was "no longer an outsider looking in, but an artist fully embodying himself."<sup>28</sup> His new music was also observed to stray away from being mostly rap, to having just as much singing, in a style that critics compared to Swedish indie pop bands of the early 2000's. That is not to say that his hip-hop influence disappeared, though. On the contrary, it is still very central to his

figure. He continues to use signature hip-hop hand gestures, talk about getting money and being “iced out,” and tattoos, dresses, and conducts himself in the vein of an authentic rap star. He also hangs out with everyone in the American music scene, from Lil Wayne to Justin Bieber. The difference now, though, is that he is no longer using this influence on his identity in a defining way, but as a jumping point from which he is creating something entirely original. If, before now, one could argue that Yung Lean was simply interpreting American culture



**Source: Yung Lean's Second Chance | The FADER.**

and performing it back to us, you can now definitively say that he has built a path through American culture to somewhere new, a fresh terrain of cultural, ethnic, and musical hybridity open for exploration.

For, as he and the Sad Boys move further into a new original sound, progressing his rapping style and song structures, and honing in on his Swedish roots, he will continue to influence and be influenced by the various scenes he is now connected to. And his emotional evolution, as he battles his demons and mental illnesses publicly through his music, as he has shown to do quite often now, will certainly affect his fans and collaborators as well. No longer is Yung Lean here just to make us laugh; he now has the real power to offer support and inspiration to listeners suffering from demons of their own. Instead of evolving within the borders of Sweden, he will evolve within a global, *rhizomatic* network of rappers, producers, musicians,

and fans, of all ethnicities and backgrounds, the effects of which will be various, scattered throughout the world with no center but only nodes of contact, lines of flight, all inducing ethnic and cultural hybridity to some degree.

This process, I argue, demonstrates the shift in identity through cultural interaction that Stuart Hall and Édouard Glissant discussed in their work. For what else was Yung Lean, if not an “Other,” that America saw itself through? He wasn’t an “Other” ethnicity-wise, of course, but his perception of reality truly was far different from the average American’s. To see how Jonatan Håstad interpreted American culture made some people laugh, others angry, and most just plain confused, but what this process eventually resulted in was a cultural and perceptual convergence that cannot be undone. And although he began his journey drifting outwards, attaching his identity to those foreign things he saw and felt a connection with, he is now venturing inwards, with a much wider frame of reference, both in the people he knows and the things and places he has experienced. Thus is the way in which cultural interaction, far from replacing one’s original identity, simply leads one to a fuller, more dynamic version of it. Glissant reiterated this end result in one poetic vision of his, predicting that after such interaction takes place, “that you come to the bottom of all confluences to mark more strongly your inspirations.” (1997: 45)

In July 2016, *Noisey* produced a video about Yung Lean in which they documented his experience in LA as he stopped there on his first worldwide tour since his meltdown. This video does well to cement the symbolism of Yung Lean’s existence, beginning when he admits that him and his two producers Yung Gud and Yung Sherman met at a Britney Spears fan club meeting. This simple fact of their origin, of these three Swedish boys beginning their life journeys through their interest in one of the biggest American pop stars of the 2000’s, speaks volumes. Further along in the video, Yung Lean can be seen happily walking down the streets of

LA singing along to “Adam’s Song,” by Blink 182. Right from its release, this song was a classic American teenage anthem of angst and alienation, and now, 19 years after its release, three minutes of pure nostalgia. As this sequence unfolds, and I watch Yung Lean sing all the lyrics, with a smile on his face, and a glaring tattoo of the Disney dog Pluto on his neck, a sudden feeling of interconnectedness washes over me. In this moment, I really begin to see that Yung Lean’s entrance into American culture is a lot like Stuart Hall’s metaphor of his entrance into British culture, as “the outside history that is inside the history of” America. For although I spent my whole childhood without any thought or sight of Jonatan Håstad or anyone else from Stockholm, and although he probably never thought of me, in a way we still grew up together. As children, we both played Pokémon and Nintendo 64, and as the Pluto tattoo shows, watched many of the same movies and TV as well. As teenagers, we partied to the same popular rap songs, and sang along to the same teenage anthems. With this in mind, any notion of Yung Lean as having ever been an “interpreter” of American culture seems quite arrogant. Rather, as Stuart Hall said, it is much more of a “coming home,” to the world Western media had dangled in front of him his whole life.

As the video nears its end, Yung Lean is shown performing to a sold out crowd in a Los Angeles venue, embodying this “coming home” in all its potential. For as it shows the young, enthusiastic, American audience revel in his music, and approach him afterwards for photos,



Source: Chris Almeida. Yung Lean & Princess Nokia // Gallery | LONDON IN STEREO.

donning the same bucket-hat-wearing style he became a meme of in 2013, it becomes obvious that Yung Lean is now just as much of an influencer of American culture as many of those who inspired him. What was once just a pair of distant, observing eyes, is now a full fledged rap star, exploring the turbulent life of fame and fortune he had grown up gazing at from afar. “I was down, so deep down, but time's turning,” Yung Lean sings in his new song “Red Bottom Sky,” with an air of resilient triumph. “Darkness in my mind, flip the mattress, I got dough / Harvest on my line, *I live the story I was told.*”<sup>29</sup>

## The Sincerely Ironic World of Internet Rap

When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro.

- Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, 1971

While I chose two white rappers as my case studies for this paper, I must acknowledge that by no means am I attempting to limit this process of cultural integration to one ethnic pattern, that of whites adopting or appropriating black culture. On the contrary, this is a process that I argue is simultaneously occurring amongst all ethnicities, as a large branch of rap culture and style continues to move away from the notion of the *root*, of legitimacy being grounded in one's origin, towards a new, more aesthetically and poetically determined system of measurement. For, while RiFF RAFF and Yung Lean were some of the first rappers to do this, to enter the hip-hop scene with a *sincerely absurd* persona and attract a large fan base because of it, they now exist within a sea of artists attempting to do the same.

To set the stage as to why this has taken place, why RiFF RAFF and Yung Lean were early precursors to a quickly growing trend, I will need to briefly recount the evolution in hip-hop that lead to this moment. To start with, it does well to acknowledge that hip-hop no doubt has its roots in the struggle of African Americans. And powerful artists, ranging back from KRS-One and Tupac, to Kendrick Lamar and J Cole today, have used rap to document and transcend the adversity African Americans experience everyday in ghettos and low-income areas. In this way, rap has been a vehicle for social change, of uniting and empowering African American communities in the face of hardship and racism, both institutional and overt. And this will continue to be the case.

There is another aspect to hip-hop, though, the production and marketing of an image, which one could say began with groups like N.W.A. and the launch of Interscope records, when

the image of the “gangster rapper” was discovered as being remarkably profitable, especially among suburban white audiences, who reveled in the vicarious excitement it brought them. Adam Ragusea, a teacher at Mercer University's Center for Collaborative Journalism, analyzed in an article his own feelings as a white man when he first became a fan of the music of NWA: “I was watching something from my own country, and yet it looked like something from another planet—a world totally unrecognizable from my own. The streetscape, the clothes, the dice games, the guns, the 40s... it was frightening, confusing and exhilarating.” The sensationalizing of black culture continued in the 2000’s with rappers like 50 Cent and his album *Get Rich or Die Trying*, the first hip-hop record Yung Lean ever heard, cementing swagger, sexual dominance, and excessive material wealth as key components of the “gangster” image. While wearing diamonds and golden chains might’ve emerged as a way for Black men in the ghettos to cope with their poor living conditions, as Ebro Darden explained to RiFF RAFF, it is undeniable that this image was taken on by the hip-hop music industry and propped up to new heights of flagrance and extravagance with a mass, largely white, audience in mind.

There is a plethora of economic, historical, social, and political explanations for this process of the development of rap’s larger-than-life “gangster” persona, enough to fill many other papers, but for the sake of my argument I will simply point out that, rather than decrease, the Internet and 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism has sped this process up dramatically. It seems as though, as time has gone on, the importance of a rapper’s “image” has steadily magnified, to the point we’re at today where it seems as though a requirement of “making it” in rap is being flagrant and excessive in some way. This can be seen in the dramatic violence of those in the Chicago “drill rap” movement, such as Chief Keef, who at 17 years old was known for frequently brandishing automatic weapons, committing violent crimes, and describing murder in explicit detail. It can be

seen in acts like Migos, who with their hit song “Versace,” began an unlikely trend of Atlanta “gangsters” wearing extravagant outfits made by Italian fashion designers. And it can be seen in the multicolored hair, brazen face tattoos, and volatile personalities of Billboard chart-topping artists such as the Lil Pump, 6ix9ine, and XXXTentacion, all of which are 21 and under.

My reason for recounting this is to set the scene for why and how Yung Lean and Riff Raff were able to enter the life of a rap star, a status born out of the African American condition, and how this process can be looked at in a positive light, rather than as cultural appropriation. For, as I have described, today’s hip-hop scene has watched the once generally homogeneous image of a “gangster,” which emerged out of the ghetto, warp in every direction possible, being pushed to its extremes in all sorts of ways simply because there is an economic demand for it. The demand comes from an increasingly global audience who, like Ragusea says when he recounts White’s infatuation with gangster rap, craves the “thrill of otherness,” the excitement of experiencing the life and psyche of someone that is exotic to them. While this process used to be mainly about suburban Whites vicariously experiencing the life of a “gangster,” though, the “Other” being experienced in today’s hip-hop has grown considerably weirder, weird enough in some areas that it has broken off completely from its African American *root*. When people listen to a RiFF RAFF song, for example, they are far less experiencing the mind of the type of African American he was accused of caricaturizing, than they are experiencing the mind of an alien, or of someone far in the future. It was for this reason that Diplo, the owner of the independent label Mad Decent, compared signing RiFF RAFF to finding a Macintosh computer in 1971.<sup>30</sup> The significance of this is considerable. For, many would argue that the hyper-masculine Black image hip-hop has promoted throughout its existence has produced a harmful stereotype of African American males and other resulting consequences, such as when Stuart Hall said Black men claiming this identity

“claim visibility for their hardness only at the expense of the vulnerability of black women and the feminization of gay black men.” (112) This process, then, can be seen as helping to force the stereotype to transcend its ethnic context, by exposing it as a construction. To say it in another way: if the flagrant, violent, over-the-top image of Black “gangster” rappers really was more of a mask than an authentic expression of self, than what better way to expose this, than by showing that others can successfully wear the mask too?



Source: YouTube

For example, in 2016, Brian Imanuel, a 17-year-old from Indonesia, posted a song and music video to YouTube entitled “Dat \$tick” under the name “Rich Chigga.” In the video, which now sits just above 90 million views, Imanuel delivers a typical collection of gangster rap motifs, as he boasts an obviously ironic swagger while wearing a pink polo and a fanny pack. Imanuel, who had learned English through YouTube videos just years prior, had already made comedic videos go viral before this. Consequently, it was not hard for him to study all the rap videos he could, and then deliver that same content back, with the comedic twist of him, a scrawny 17 year old Asian kid, being the rapper. The video immediately went viral, and as it did many people

took note that, although Imanuel was just messing around, that he actually possessed talent as a rapper. It was a joke, a parody video, no doubt, but by American rap standards, the song was actually pretty good. Imanuel took notice of this, and in response, did what any 17 year old well versed in American pop culture would do: he moved to Los Angeles to become a real rapper.

Fast forward a year and a half, and Imanuel, now having changed his name to “Rich Brian” in order to be taken more seriously, just released his debut album *Amen*, which he wrote and produced much on his own. Amazingly, *Amen* rose to the #1 album on the iTunes Hip-Hop charts after its release, making him the first ever Asian artist to do so.<sup>31</sup> This demonstrates that, not only is Imanuel in fact a “real” rapper now, but that he has already made history in the process, just a year and a half after posting “Dat \$tick” as a joke from half a world away. He even scored a remix of his song by Ghostface Killah, a member of the foundational hip-hop crew Wu-Tang Clan, showcasing an important moment of convergence between classic hip-hop and the new culture of Internet rap.

Imanuel’s story serves well as a final illustration of this new, metamodern dynamic in hip-hop, and how it serves as a facilitator for the process of *relation* as envisioned by Glissant. For, instead of finding their identity only in their *roots*, by where they come from, or what *transparent* idea they represent, these new Internet rappers’ identities are derived from an ever-evolving set of memes, aesthetics, and constructions. Their authenticity, in turn, is judged on their ability to balance the irony and sincerity with which they inhabit these three elements. The irony, to remain aware of the constructed nature of it all, and the sincerity, to keep moving it forward anyway. For, if Brian Imanuel had tried to be a serious rapper in his very first song, if he hadn’t presented the ironic character “Rich Chigga,” I argue he wouldn’t have encountered the same global virality he did, or the acceptance of the American hip-hop community. His presentation of himself in a pink

polo and a fanny pack signaled his self-awareness at the absurdity of him being a rapper in the traditional sense. But if the song had not also been received as actually being good, if it had not indicated that he still took his delivery seriously, had studied all the relevant motifs and practiced his flow, he would not have acquired those things either. It took both of these approaches simultaneously, the metamodernist approach, for Brian Immanuel to appear authentic in his interaction with American hip-hop culture, and subsequently gain the opportunity to join its ranks.

On a wider scale, what I am attempting to describe is an emerging *rhizomatic* network, through which content from American popular culture and hip-hop have transcended their original context and become the scaffolding for a process of cultural and ethnic interaction with global significance. The simplest explanation for why this is happening, I argue, is because of how pervasive and ubiquitous this content already is globally. For, although I have not discussed much about economics in this paper, it is important to acknowledge the way in which neoliberal economic policies have shaped globalization and allowed for Western capitalism, and subsequently Western media content, to find its way into every part of the world where there is a free exchange of products and information. As of now, this process is far from happening in reverse, meaning that, shallow and problematic as it may be, Western popular culture contains images and symbols which reach as close to universal recognition as any others at this time. This is precisely what Sad Boys producer Yung Gud was describing when he called American culture “simultaneously alluring and oppressive.” Therefore, does it not seem practical, as we attempt to build a flourishing globalized world, to utilize these images towards this aim, knowing full well their original backing of Western capitalism is able to be subverted and refashioned for other purposes? Once again, Glissant is relevant on this topic in *Poetics of Relation*:

Thus, within the pitiless panorama of the worldwide commercial market, we debate our

problems. No matter where you are or what government brings you together into a community, the forces of this market are going to find you. If there is profit to be made, they will deal with you. These are not vague forces that you might accommodate out of politeness. These are hidden forces of inexorable logic that must be answered with the total logic of your behavior.” (1997: 152)

It appears, then, that Glissant could envision his concept of *relation* to occur in such a manner, for in this passage he acknowledges the ubiquity of the “worldwide commercial market,” and the necessity of having a real discourse about our issues through this market. Glissant defined *relation*, to recall, as the process through which “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other.” Therefore, what better way to initially form this relationship with the Other, than to compare perspectives on a shared reference point, especially ones consisting of creative expression?

While I am proposing that many of these shared reference points exist within “American popular culture,” though, I must acknowledge the looseness with which I use this term. For as I have been discussing throughout this paper, building off the ideas of Édouard Glissant and Stuart Hall, no culture contains some objective, unified state, in which it then goes and interacts with other cultures. Rather, each culture is always negotiating itself through the various connections it already possesses with other cultures, and I argue this is probably truer of “American culture” than most others. Many consumer products from Japan, for example, including Pokémon, Nintendo, and the entire genre of “anime,” have been extremely popular in America for decades, and subsequently infused into American culture as the generation that was raised on them, my generation, utilized and referenced its imagery in our creative expression. While there is not much in the way of an official analysis on this process, my explanation is this: American teenagers and young adults, having associated all of these Japanese consumer products with childhood

memories, slowly infused the imagery of these products with a deep feeling of nostalgia. Faced with the chaos of the consumer world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then, things like vaporwave emerged, as young Americans turned to the Internet to fortify a sanctuary of nostalgic ambience on blogs like Tumblr. Jonatan Håstad was then heavily influenced by vaporwave as he developed his persona of Yung Lean, as shown by the constant barrage of Japanese products and aesthetics that peppered his early music. He then expanded upon this influence by adding in some original elements of his own, pioneering “cloud rap,” and continuing this perennial cycle of cultural exchange. My reason for recounting this is simply to point out that, as I propose the cooption of “American popular culture” as a real tool for cultural integration, I am not just talking about American products, but rather a *rhizomatic* web of cultural products and artifacts from all over the world, which converge as they are magnified and circulated through American-dominated global capitalism.

As far as media and cultural studies, this argument for the positive utilization of the symbols of popular culture most closely aligns with the work of John Fiske and Henry Jenkins. Fisk spent much of the 80’s and 90’s countering the postmodern cynicism of his contemporaries, based in the Frankfurt School of thought, who were entirely pessimistic as far as the effects of popular culture on society. To him, the notion of the inevitability of all problems his contemporaries foresaw popular culture causing failed to account for the agency which every human contains in this arena. “Popular culture is not consumption,” he argues, “it is culture - the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system.” (1989: 24) As I have discussed throughout this paper, the notion of meaning and culture emerging in a top-down manner has steadily weakened as we have come to understand, as Stuart Hall described, the increased role our modern condition has bestowed upon each individual in the production of meaning and culture. This simple notion was the root of the optimism that drove all

of Fiske's work in this area, as well as the optimism I evoke in my thesis: the notion that "Culture is a living, active process: it can be developed only from within, it cannot be imposed from without or above." Replace the word *culture* in that sentence with *identity*, and there is the exact observation by Stuart Hall that I began this thesis with. This same idea, it seems, like a *rhizome*, has many different entry points.

Henry Jenkins has sought to build off of Fiske's ideas with his concept of "Cultural acupuncture," which he uses to describe instances of fan fiction that have turned into civic engagement. As an example, he has delivered a lecture about the "Harry Potter Alliance," a group of activist youth who are always working within the framework of content from the Harry Potter series. Such an approach of "deploying popular culture metaphors and analogies to refresh political rhetoric," he argues, elicits youth to participate in the larger world much more effectively than usual political discourse. (2012: 7.4) This process is something I wholly agree with, and I believe the process I have described as occurring in hip-hop is very similar in that it is encouraging the youth to become more engaged with the world, with one key difference.

To explain this difference, I will start by acknowledging that I am not by any means calling RiFF RAFF, Yung Lean, or any other rapper I've mentioned in this essay an "activist." Nor am I saying that any of them built their careers with a certain philosophical or political purpose in mind. Indeed, it is much more likely that most of them, most of the time, are operating completely in their own self interest. I am also not saying that the fans of these artists are consciously supporting them with ideas such as metamodernism, neoromanticism, or civic engagement in mind. Nevertheless, I cautiously argue that there is real cultural and racial progress happening here, progress that I believe is being severely overlooked because of the subtlety with which it is occurring. For, rather than consciously, I assert much of this process has

occurred subconsciously. Rather than being the result of collective, conscious intent, as is the process of interaction with popular culture Henry Jenkins describes, I argue the dynamics of this emerging Internet hip-hop scene are a manifestation of a shifting *zeitgeist* within segments of society. This shift, to trace back to my original thesis, is the transformation in the way we see ourselves, the more fluid concept of identity, which I postulated as an inevitability and a necessity in our hyper globalized world at the beginning of this paper.

I chose RiFF RAFF and Yung Lean as my two central case studies for this paper, above all, because when they first rose to public prominence, most people treated them as if they were alien life forms. Everything about them appeared so entirely nonsensical, so offensive to many people's everyday ideas of reality, that they appeared to be nothing more than a mockery, a parody, and a bad one at that. What I have sought to show in this paper, though, is how both of these artists arrived at their personas on a genuine quest for meaning and fulfillment, and that under the apparent chaos of their journeys lie very clear and logical patterns of behavior in reaction to a society where mass media culture becomes more ubiquitous everyday. As I peruse the comment sections in their videos while writing this, it is pleasing to see, not only that they continue to draw just as much attention today, but also that the general consensus on both airs much more with my analysis of them now. On RiFF RAFF's videos, gone are the comments accusing him of cultural appropriation. Instead, there is seemingly endless praise, admiring the fact that, whether his persona is "authentic" or not, that he has stuck with it, found major success, and entertained countless people while doing so. And with Yung Lean, I am hard pressed to even find even one, genuine, "WTF?" Instead, the average comment reads a lot more like "Is he from the future?" *Opacity*, it appears, with all the potential for progress it brings, is finally in.

## Concluding Remarks

Mythology is eminently untragic. Indeed, wherever the mythological mood prevails, tragedy is impossible. A quality rather of dream prevails. As in dream, the images range from the sublime to the ridiculous. The mind is not permitted to rest with its normal evaluations, but is continually insulted and shocked out of the assurance that now, at last, it has understood.

- Joseph Cambell, *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, 1949

I began this paper with an assertion that, to many, might've seemed idealist or naïve. It was an assertion that, going forward, the human race as a whole will have to dramatically evolve our notion of identity, of the way in which we see others and ourselves, if we want globalization to end up as anything other than global turmoil. While I am obviously in no position to assert that such a process will actually pan out on a global level, my metamodernist optimism nevertheless encourages me to conduct myself as if it will, to, in the words of Velmeulen and van den Akker, "pursue a horizon that is forever receding." (12) In an attempt to reach out towards this ever-receding horizon, then, I have weaved together a wide web of philosophical ideas, literary modes, hip-hop micro genres, and historical anecdotes, all with the intent of highlighting this exact shift in identity as I see it taking place within the emerging scene of Internet hip-hop.

The significance of this emerging scene is overlooked, I conclude, for precisely the reason it is significant. It is overlooked because traditionally, when one envisions a rapper communicating a certain message, it is done through their lyrics, or through literal statements of their and thoughts feelings. Those like RiFF RAFF and Yung Lean, though, communicate with us in a different way, expressing something genuine through the totality of their being. This process is best described by Raoul Eshelman in his description of performativism, when he says "The medium is the messenger, and no longer the message." (2000: 5) This significance of the

messenger becoming the medium itself is that it produces a discourse which must be interactive, because it is entirely free from preconceived notions. After all, how much communication in this world isn't attempted simply because both sides of a conflict *assume* they know all there is to know about each other? With RiFF RAFF and Yung Lean, or any other metamodernist, this cop out isn't possible. By successfully positioning themselves *between* ideologies, and *beyond* the context of everyday life, they essentially force you into a genuine interaction with them. Just as with Glissant's *opacity*, this interaction is composed a sort of recognized difference, an acknowledgement of the inability to reduce its contents to a generalized universality. When embraced, this inevitably leads to a deepening and expansion of one's own identity, as previously held social boundaries dissolve in the wake of true *relation*.

Of course, there is no real need to embrace these characters yet, one could say. After all, there is no doubt that many have caught glimpses of these rappers only to tune them out completely, whether from confusion, disgust, or just plain indifference. If many people have either misunderstood or simply disliked these rappers, then, doesn't that negate their significance? Is the *opacity* for nothing if a majority of the world right now still does not appreciate it for the acknowledged difference it is? I would argue, no.

In his 1965 book *Rabelais and His World*, Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin postulated the notion of what he called the *carnivalesque*. He based this idea off of the real functions and characteristics of medieval carnivals, which he claimed were used to dissipate an unproductive *seriousness* of society by allowing free and full creative expression of all its members. In these carnivals, social hierarchies were momentarily suspended, and laughter and parody, two concepts that were usually nonexistent in these societies, took center stage as a sacred part of these events.

As I conclude this thesis, I would like to make the claim that what is currently happening in hop-hop, and American popular culture as a whole, can very much be described by this notion of the *carnavalesque*. For, as I have described throughout this paper, society as of late has very much been dominated by a *seriousness*, whether it be the deadest naivety of modernism or the never-ending irony of postmodernism. Either way, you could say that the fragmentation of “master concepts” and proliferation of new sub-identities has created an atmosphere of hostility, in which people seem to be completely unwavering in their perception of the world and those who they would allow to influence it.

Then, enter RiFF RAFF, Yung Lean, and all those like them, who can be seen as figures of the carnival, emerging to loosen the shackles of *seriousness* currently held by most, allowing all those who genuinely interact with them to transcend their usual social boundaries and perceptions of reality. On this process, and the resulting social effects, Bakhtin said:

The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world. They, too, are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed. This is one of the essential differences of the people's festive laughter from the pure satire of modern times. The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it...The people's ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it. (1965: 12)

To say this another way, when you see the countless interviews in which RiFF RAFF incites hearty laughter from all those he converses with, this is a new type of laughter. It is not the detached, holier-than-thou laughter of postmodern irony, but a metamodern laughter of ambivalence and *opacity*, a recognition of the fragility of our current identities and social realities through humor.

Therefore, I conclude that it doesn't matter whether or not all those who currently engage

with this world of Internet hip-hop come away fully understanding what they've experienced. For, as the Billboard charts show, all current trends in popular music are moving towards this direction, all aspects of image and representation being driven to the extreme in every way possible. It seems then, that as a society, we don't have a much of a conscious choice in this matter. For, on some level, the *carnavalesque* has already been set in motion, unleashing our deepest desires and anxieties and deconstructing our current perceptions of reality in order to clear the way for new perceptions. The figures that are emerging out of this carnival are no less than a new *mythology* for the youth of today, serving as real-life personifications of the pain, bewilderment, and aspirations brewing in our collective psyche. As the characters of this new *mythology* continue to develop and interact with each other, our generation will in turn continue to sort ourselves out, and learn more about who we really are. This aligns with Stuart Hall's assessment of popular culture, when he said:

It is an arena that is profoundly mythic. It is a theater of popular desires, a theater of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time. (2009: 113)

Thanks to the Internet, this process is beginning to play out on a global level in real-time. Whether it be with the Saudi Arabian rapper Skinny, the Peruvian R&B and hip-hop artist A.chal, the Chinese hip-hop group Higher Brothers, the South Korean rapper Keith Ape, or any of the other artists I have already described, it appears as though this emerging hip-hop scene has drawn figures from all corners of the globe. As these artists continue to converge, communicating truths about each other not through language but through the totality of their beings, our awareness of the relativity of our own knowledge and the fragility of our traditional

identities will continue to grow. We will continue to see and appreciate the diversity of the world in which we live, and the possibilities for progress when we understand our own identity not as an end-point, but as a starting-point, from which we grow and expand as we encounter all those who are different from us.

Such a perception is quintessentially metamodernist: it is an oscillation between and beyond all previous perceptions. It is simultaneously here and there, then and now, on the ground and in the clouds. And while on the ground, under the *old logic of identity*, everything might appear to be chaos, up in the clouds something hopeful and organic is happening. The way is being paved for the integration of the Other's perspective into our own identity, for a scene of global interaction never before seen in the history of this planet, and for a collective perception of reality that knows the story of who we are is always changing, always evolving, leading us not to some predestined meaning of life, but to new heights of a shared meaning that we have all created together.

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<sup>1</sup> When I use the phrase “Internet Hip-Hop” throughout this essay, I am referring to hip-hop that draws from culture associated with the Internet and accumulates most of its fans through independent and social media

<sup>2</sup> Robinson-Avila, K. (n.d.). Meow Wolf a howling success. Retrieved from <https://www.abqjournal.com/979553/meow-wolf-a-howling-success.html>

<sup>3</sup> When I say banks, I am referring to the challenge the industry faces from the rise in the popularity, usage, and value of cryptocurrency, which is very much a “rhizomatic” system challenging a “tree” one

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- <sup>4</sup> “DAW” stands for Digital Audio Workstation, referring to computer programs used to produce music such as Ableton, Logic Pro, Reason, etc.
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