

Natural Selections

A NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

The Golden Age of Hip Hop on the Silver Screen

OWEN CLARK

Hip hop is dead. I can't exactly recall the point at which I first heard this phrase, but it seems to be etched in my earliest memories of acquainting myself with rap music, and all of its accompanying baggage. Undoubtedly, journalistic decries of the death of entire genres of music, sports, or really anything entertainment related, have become tiresome clichés. Jazz is dead; boxing is dead; this writer's short-lived career is dead—frankly these assertions are as banal as they are dubious. However, the only upshot of such a declaration is that it often elicits a thoughtful discourse as to how we reached this supposed nadir, and the state of things to come.

Let me just say from the outset, if you're looking for a detailed analysis on the current state of hip hop music, you can stop reading. I'm *far* from an expert on the subject, and in all honesty, I detest the critic culture that currently dominates internet journalism. However, like many others, I share an affinity for rap, and see it as having a fairly unique origin and evolution that will always fascinate me. If I may be so bold, I will say that my introduction to rap music probably occurred before the standard age of the nerdy, white, middle-class demographic that I belong to. I was nine or ten when I purchased my first rap album, *It Was Written*—Nas's sophomore studio offering, and follow up to the highly acclaimed

Illmatic. I'm possibly stretching the truth for the sake of my 'rep'; I definitely possess several of Shaquille O'Neil's critically-lauded singles in my old CD rack, so who can say which came first, but let's just say I started listening around the time that those black and white 'parental advisory' stickers started appearing on CDs—great job Tipper Gore, you really deterred our interest. This isn't some sort of brag; had my sister not attended Abbeydale Grange, Sheffield's version of *Dangerous Minds*, I might have been listening to the same Spice Girls CDs as my peers, but I think it led me to buy into the idea that post-gangsta rap music just wasn't worth my time.

Flash-forward to the present, rap is certainly alive and well. Summer sixteen (the summer, not the album) was about the time I realized that the genre is to some extent semi-unrecognizable from the rap I know and love. That August, my former roommate/current friend and I attended a Lil Dicky show in Manhattan. For those of you that don't know, Lil Dicky is a technically flawless, comedy-focused rapper, whose ingenious [parodies](#) effectively spell out all of rap's shortcomings. The venue reeked of weed and was populated almost exclusively by teenagers (the most frightening

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The Get Down's Shaolin Fantastic learns the ropes from Grand Master Flash.

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demographic). Lil Dicky preceded Lil Yachty (why are rappers always diminutive?), who at the time I hadn't even heard of—but that man, with his braids so bright, managed to whip the crowd of vape-high/Bud Light-drunk teenyboppers into a frenzied state. I stood back, terrified, but also intrigued. The next day, I perused Lil Yachty's tracks on Spotify, from the safety of my living room, and came to the realization that his particular style of drawling, atonal, syncopated rap-talking, in essence exemplified the current movement in hip hop that somehow emerged right under my nose.

Accepting that you're no longer 'down with the kids' can be a tough pill to swallow. But for me it came at a time when I happened to notice an uptick in the appearance of documentaries/dramatic portrayals exploring the early origins and development of hip hop music. This might be a slightly tangential straw at which I'm grasping at, but this speaks to me as a collective acceptance, that rap has in a way, come full circle. Maybe not in the true sense of that phrase, but what I mean is we've reached the point where we can sit back ('with a Buddha sack') and wax lyrical about the earlier days of the music, with a sense of nostalgia that only comes with firm, mainstream, establishment; and some current, unfamiliar deviation from our perceived norm. So with that muddled sentiment in mind, I will end this long-

winded introduction and briefly review some of these excellent offerings.

Hip Hop Evolution

Originally airing on HBO, and currently streaming on both HBO and Netflix, this four-part documentary follows Canadian rapper Shadrach Kabango (stage name Shad) on a musical pilgrimage to discover hip hop's origins in the crime-stricken streets of 1970s South Bronx, and trace key developments throughout the 70s, 80s and 90s, as the genre took new and exciting directions, and garnered mainstream success. Shad takes us on a fascinating journey, revealing remarkable insights that are accompanied by a plethora of interviews with key figures in the rap community, both past and present.

The show explores crucial innovations in hip hop, beginning with the founder himself, DJ Kool Herc, and his 'merry-go-round' idea of using side-by-side turntables playing the same (or similar) record, in order to elongate rhythmic drum beats in soul and funk tracks—known as break beats—at legendary parties in the recreation room of the Bronx project he called home. Herc would punctuate these breaks with rhyming slang phrases, normally delivered through an Echoplex delay, and thus hip hop was born. We see how some of the originating icons built on the methods of others to finesse early hip

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hop—Grand Master Flash’s ingenious technique for identifying the precise location of break beats; Melle Mel’s use of rap to bring awareness to the social strife experienced in the woefully deprived communities of inner city America, in the timeless classic *The Message*; Run-DMC’s at the time startling decision to drop the instrumental samples and rap purely over beats; Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin’s savvy entrepreneurial strategy that turned rap into a multi-million dollar business, and took hip hop center stage with acts like LL Cool J and The Beastie Boys. The final episode explores the genres infiltration into West Coast circles, and how the crack epidemic, police brutality, and rising gang warfare on the streets of LA engendered the gangsta rap that came to dominate the 90s.

There’s a thought-provoking [scene](#) in the short-lived and divisive HBO drama *Vinyl*, in which we see a presumed DJ Cool Herc—honing his craft by spinning funk records side by side to create break loops—maligned by the elders and their calls to ‘let the record play man!’ This perfectly illustrates the salient message of *Hip Hop Evolution*, that these developments were not simply step-by-step progressions on a clear-cut path, but truly imaginative innovations that exceeded against all odds. There’s also a theme here that pervades throughout *Vinyl*, of betting on the wrong horse—whether it be record company execs or the general public. When *Hip Hop Evolution* details Run DMC’s 1986 collaboration with Aerosmith on *Walk This Way*, we’re reminded that throughout its early history, hip hop was often scoffed at as a passing fad that would never materialize into mainstream success. For a hip hop group to collaborate with a larger than life rock band was actually a huge deal at the time. What’s even more remarkable is that some twenty years on, it’s actually hip hop that is unquestionably the more dominant mainstream genre, and rock is unfortunately falling by the way side.

[The Get Down](#)

Although *The Get Down* was produced completely independently of *Hip Hop Evolution*, in many ways it serves as the perfect companion piece. This six-part Netflix-original drama, which takes its name from the slang term for those gold dust-like break beats, follows a group

of teenagers as they navigate the burning Bronx of the late 1970s—struggling to steer clear of the street gangs, rising crime, and political corruption that blighted the city, while establishing a hip hop crew mighty enough to topple the throne of Grand Master Flash. Although co-creator Baz Luhrmann’s trademark style of production provides a brightly colored, comic book feel; the show weaves a captivating narrative—perfectly illuminating the key developments of the 70s hip hop scene described in *Hip Hop Evolution*, with a dramatic spin. We’re treated to scenes like Grandmaster Flash sending his protégé Shaolin Fantastic, on a dangerous race against The Savage Warlord street gang, to retrieve a rare copy of a record to sample (which was a huge part of gaining an edge for early DJs). We see the inside of one of DJ Cool Herc’s aforementioned parties (also depicted in *Vinyl*), in a hunt for a mystery bootlegger—a key feature of the dissemination of early hip hop tracks; and we get a glimpse of what life was like for kids whose playgrounds were the burnt down tenement buildings and abandoned lots around the [South Bronx’s Charlotte Street](#).

The show does a great job of using fictional portrayals to educate viewers about key events that changed the course of hip hop, such as Grand Master Flash handing Shaolin Fantastic nothing more than a purple crayon to impart the lesson of creating break loops (see if you can figure it out). However, the standout highlight is the depiction of the [1977 New York blackout](#), when an electrical fault caused the entire city to lose power for an entire night and day, during a brutal July heat wave. While this event will forever be remembered as a shocking display of carnage—where mass looting and rioting saw some 1,600 stores damaged, with over 1,000 fires, leading to almost 4,000 arrests—it served as a crucial facilitator in the development of hip hop, where stolen DJ equipment tripled the number of functional hip hop crews overnight. The blackout was of course covered in *Hip Hop Evolution*, but gaining some perspective on what it was actually like to live through, gives the show a touch of magical realism, reminiscent of another Netflix original, *Narcos*, in which as a viewer you’re frequently brought to disbelief, questioning whether these seemingly bizarre events actually happened. The producers also do a great job of splicing in

period footage to solidify pertinent scenes.

One of the reasons why I call New York home is its riveting history, particularly the 70s and 80s, where soaring crime rates and near-bankruptcy led parts of the city to resemble a dystopian war zone. I’ve read books on the subject, and watched myriad [YouTube videos](#) cataloging the widespread arson that leveled the Bronx in particular (where my mother grew up in the 40s and 50s), but until now I’ve had to make do with *The Warriors* as the closest thing to a historical portrayal of this captivating period. *The Get Down* fills an obvious void, and manages to tie multiple developments together such as graffiti artistry, disco music, breakdancing, and Ed Koch’s mayoral campaign, over six hour-long episodes, while maintaining a compelling story.

[Time Is Illmatic](#)

This was always going to be a winner for me. In my humblest of humble opinions, I can say without any shadow of a doubt that Nas’s 1994 debut album *Illmatic* is the greatest rap album of all time. This record is to hip hop, what Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue* is to jazz, somehow managing to effectively distill the beauty of all that preceded it, while blazing a new and exciting path. The intro on the album’s first musical track, [NY State of Mind](#), still gives me chills. With its triplet swing-style rhythm on drums; the crescendo of the blues scale-derived riff played on upright bass; and the piano, peppering the bass line with an offbeat altered chord—the track lays a groove deeply rooted in jazz, that sets the scene for Nas’s hilariously self-deprecating ‘I don’t even know how to start this,’ prior to dropping one of the greatest verses in the history of rap. Spoiler alert—*Time Is Illmatic* ends with Nas spitting this verse to headphone monitors in the studio, contextualizing its brilliance. While I haven’t always been so opinionated on the matter, I think the fact that twenty-five years after its debut, holding the title of the only rap album that I periodically come back to time and time again, without skipping a single track, is testament to its preeminence.

Time is Illmatic (which viewers can watch via streaming on Amazon Prime) expertly intertwines Nas’s early life growing up on the streets of Queensbridge (in America’s largest public housing

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project) with the production of *Illmatic*—weaving a complex story of personal strife that sowed the seeds for a precocious 21-year-old Nas to produce this iconic masterpiece. For me, what sets the album apart from other classics is the coupling of musicality—jazz-derived rhythmic grooves that permeate through every track; with deeply poetic storytelling—a tradition firmly rooted in the country blues music of the early 20th century, of which Nas has unquestionably mastered. With this in mind, it's particularly interesting to explore Nas's relationship with his father, a Mississippi-born jazz musician (who actually makes a cameo playing cornet on the outro of the album's third track), and to see an in-depth examination of the production of these tracks. I kind of see myself as a slightly better looking version of Ryan Gosling's Seb in the film *La La Land*—I genuinely hold the opinion that if you don't at least somewhat appreciate jazz and blues music, then you don't deserve to listen to rap or rock. Thus, I feel somewhat validated by this aspect of the documentary. It also really highlights how important instrumentation is to the album, with Nas sampling jazz legends

like Ahmad Jamal, in contrast to others that rely heavily on samples from very well established famous songs (*cough* Kanye *cough*). Serving as a sort of internal control, *It Aint Hard to Tell*, which samples Michael Jackson's *Human Nature*, is probably *Illmatic's* corniest track.

Other highlights include an examination of another flawless track, *One Love*, with words from its producer Q-Tip. Here we delve into the tragedy of a generation of young black males lost to the mounting mass incarceration that pervaded the latter half of the 20th century, and continues to this day. *One Love* is definitely a stand out track on the album, in which Nas's rap takes the form of a letter to a friend in prison, exploring both the horrors faced behind bars, and the void that's left on the streets—exemplified by the line 'plus, congratulations, you know you got a son//I heard he looks like ya, why don't your lady write ya?' This message is arguably even more relevant now than it was then, with the industrial prison complex at an all-time high, perfectly illuminated in the recent Netflix documentary [13TH](#). Again there's an interesting precedent to this, wherein early blues music would often center around the hardships of the penitentiary

and the forced labor that came with it—the trials and tribulations encountered in navigating a system that's designed to keep you down.

I think this documentary and the album itself serves as an interesting follow up to *Hip Hop Evolution* and *The Get Down*, since you'll notice Nas's frequent nods to the old guard (also coincidentally, Nas introduces each episode of *The Get Down* with a tailor-made rap). Lines like 'A smooth criminal on beat breaks' or 'I reminisce on park jams, my man was shot for his sheep coat', as well as 'back in 83 I was an MC sparkin, but I was too scared to grab the mics in the parks and, kick my little raps'—are all brought to life with the knowledge of how early hip hop took shape during Nas's childhood. At times in the album the instruments will even drop out for a couple of lines, allowing Nas to rap solely over beat breaks, merging the old with the new—an audacious feat for a 21-year-old newcomer. You might be able to tell at this point that I'm struggling to resist the urge to digress into a song by song review of *Illmatic*, so I'll cap this off with words from the man himself—'Sip the Dom P, and watch this document-ary till you're charged.' Ok I rejiggered it a little, but you get the message.



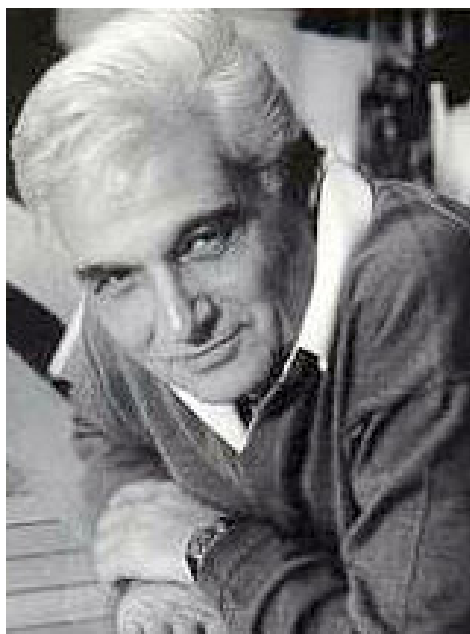
Culture Corner

"Truth" in Painting

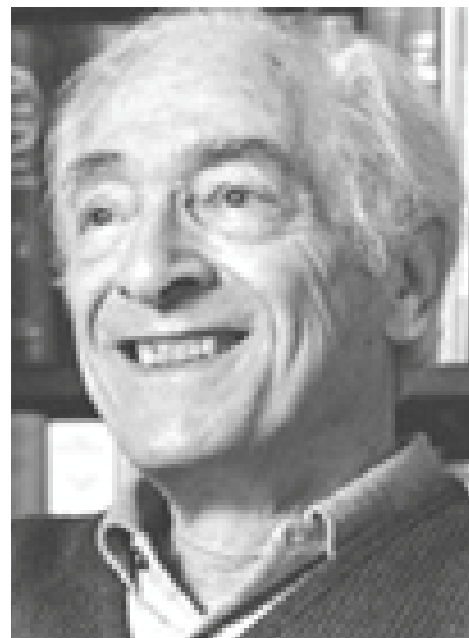
BERNIE LANGS



Bernard Berenson



Jacques Derrida



Meyer Schapiro

Getting to a 'core essence' in a mystic or revelatory sense can be as elusive as tracing the path of an electron or photon, famously described as both particle and wave. The arts can be utilized as a conduit to higher states of consciousness. In music, the drone of an Indian sitar or a choral work by Mozart can carry the mind of the listener to abstract and blissful states. In the 19th century, Walter Pater redefined the approach to the study of art in history and art history itself in his book of essays, *The Renaissance*. When writing about the Italian Renaissance painter Giorgione, he noted "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" and later asserts that the mind's impressions are "in continual flux." Pater states that a passion for the arts has "the greatest potential for staving off the sense of transience, because in the arts the perceptions of highly sensitive minds are already ordered."

Bernard Berenson presents his theory of how and why painting grabs hold of the viewer, in his book *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, a compiled series of essays written from 1894 to 1907, and reissued in 1952. Berenson's famous ideas on the 'tactile' process of how paintings bring the viewer to a heightened state starts with his observation of what form does in paintings: "It lends a higher coefficient of reality to the object represented, with the consequent of accelerated psychical processes, and the exhilarating sense of increased capacity in the observer." He

observes this as a retinal sensation and that the tactile sense stems from childhood revelations and joy in the discovery of the physical aspect of the sense of touch.

Alison Brown describes in her essay *Bernard Berenson and 'Tactile Values' in Florence* the evolution of Berenson's theory, noting that Berenson saw his ideas more akin to psychology rather than philosophy, and that he had been heavily influenced at Harvard by his professor, William James, and his writings on psychological aesthetics.

What I took from reading Berenson's book over two decades ago, was the idea of the shortcut offered by paintings to heightened states of the sublime, which leaves the door open to many kinds of revelation, including, yet far beyond, the psychological. In the mid-1990s, I purchased a book of collected essays by Meyer Schapiro, who at the time was Professor Emeritus of Art History at Columbia University. I'd read Schapiro's book of selected papers on late Antiquity, early Christian and Medieval art that had impressed me in its scientific, sleuthing, and exhaustive examination of art, much along the lines of the awe-inspiring and groundbreaking approach of Princeton's Erwin Panofsky. The 1990s collection includes the essay, *Mr. Berenson's Values* from 1961, boasting cutting gems of prose such as his analysis of Berenson's conversion from Judaism to Christianity.

Schapiro notes that Berenson failed to

grow as a theorist and critic and chose to be a connoisseur rather than an art historian or philosopher of art, which indeed Berenson did regret. Schapiro describes the theory of 'tactile values' in painting as a "strange appeal to physiology" and that Berenson used these ideas "with no deepening sense, as personal clichés imposed on any sort of problem."

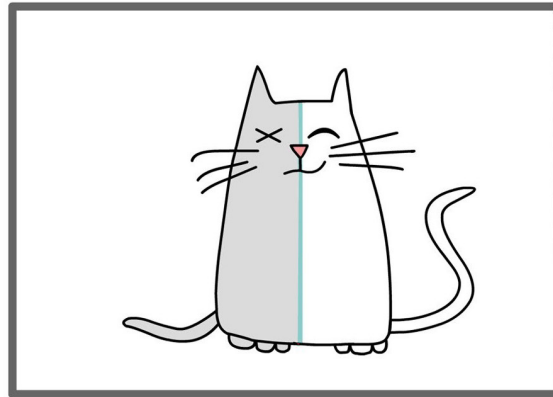
Around the time I read Schapiro's book, I was trying to incorporate the study of art history in cultural context using the methodical approach of Professors Schapiro and Panofsky, and others combined with the bullet train to higher states I'd created in my mind around Berenson's ideas.

About ten years ago, I chanced to read *The Truth in Painting* by French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida's writings are uncommonly difficult and convoluted, and he is both praised and derided as the main force behind the philosophical school of Deconstruction. When reading Derrida, I'm always struck by his underlying humor, and when I really believe I'm catching the gist of his purposely obtuse arguments, it's a source of sublime understanding.

Derrida's approach is akin to a circling war party, each on his own horse surrounding one solitary covered wagon, where all riders have their own notion of what may be hidden in that wagon, and whatever it is may have an

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Schrödinger's Cat



'ultimate' end to it. But as we circle, it becomes clear that there's a good chance that there is absolutely nothing inside the wagon (or perhaps Schrödinger's cat!) and also that we're never truly going to get a clear look at it. But by moving closer and closer and sharing all angles of viewing, we'll perhaps find the ghost or essence of the core.

One of the essays in *Truth in Painting* is Derrida's work *Restitutions of the truth in painting [pointure]*. Gianluca Spinato in his essay, *Philosophy of Art: Martin Heidegger and Meyer Schapiro*, argues that "Jacques Derrida's well-known discussion of the conflict between the faculties in question locates Heidegger on the side of the 'truth' of art and finds Schapiro on the side of historical and dialectical, even materialist accuracy. The resulting 'haul', as Derrida names it at the end of his own evaluation of Schapiro's original assessment, 'is a meagre one for the picture police, for this discourse of order and propriety/property in painting.'

Derrida examines, in his playfully maddening manner, approaches to understanding Vincent Van Gogh's famous painting *Old Shoes with Laces*, as well as other paintings by the artist of peasant boots. Two significant quotes begin the exposition, the first by Cezanne that "I owe you the truth in painting, and I will tell it you" and Van Gogh's own words, "But truth is so dear to me, and so is the seeking to make true, that indeed, I believe I would still rather be a cobbler than a musician with colors."

After a long discourse on shoes, peppered with doubts of whether they can even be called "a pair" and other unsubstantiated "givens" in

discussing Van Gogh, *Restitution* continues on to jab at Professor Schapiro and his approach to studying art, including the questioning of one of his most famous essays in his book on late Antiquity and early Christian art. *Restitution* included an unexpected view of Schapiro that both Heidegger and Derrida bring down on him, seemingly implying that their philosophical query into the underlying truths in Van Gogh and in painting, are something akin to abstract notions defined by the ancient Greeks, and ignored and beyond the comprehension of an art historian. Schapiro's criticism of Heidegger is made to look like an attempt at grabbing back the paintings to his field of study and away from the other school. Derrida writes of "A symbolic correspondence, an accord, a harmonic. In this communication between two illustrious professors who have both of them a communication to make on 'a famous picture by Van Gogh'—one of the two

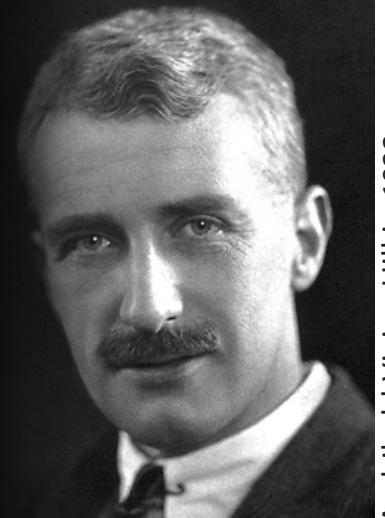
is a specialist. Painting, and even Van Gogh, is, so to speak, his thing, he wants to keep it, he wants it returned...They owe the truth in painting, the truth of painting and even painting as truth, or even as the truth of truth."

In complete contradiction to my circling wagon deconstructive metaphor, Derrida describes examining the problem from a stationary standpoint. It reminded me of a lecture I attended many years ago by then-Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Philippe de Montebello. He discussed that to get the full power of a painting, one has to look at it for a very long time. He punctuated this point with a funny anecdote of how, while visiting the Frick Collection, he stared so long at a painting that the security staff grew concerned and a guard approached him demanding to know what he was doing. It reminds me to keep looking, keep looking long and hard.

Quotable Quote

"It is quite certain that science cannot progress properly except by the fullest internationalism"

A.V. Hill (Nature, 1933)



Archibald Vivian Hill in 1922

Lesson 5

New York City Dialect New York-ese

AILEEN MARSHALL

Yo! Welcome to lesson five in our series on the New York City dialect. I hope you've been practicing. By now you should be able to hold a light conversation in New York-ese, and order a bagel with a schmear. To review last month's lesson, a number of words in the city dialect have an elongated A sound, sounding like "aw." Our vocabulary words were *tawk*, *thawt* and *dawg*. Here are some more examples of them used in a sentence.

Don't sit next to that guy *tawkin'* to himself.

I *thawt* he was a tourist *askin'* for directions, but he was a bum *askin'* for change.

You can make money in your spare time as a *dawg* walker.

Other examples of the elongated A are walk, cough and taught. Here are some examples of these words used in a sentence.

If you want to get around in the city, don't pay any attention to *wawk* signals.

Bus exhaust usually makes me *cawf*.

My mother *tawt* me never to touch the handrails in the subway.

This month's lesson:

Native New Yorkers often drop the H in words that start with that letter. The two most common instances of this are huge and human.

Here are some examples of words using the dropped H words used in a sentence. Click on the links to hear the pronunciation.

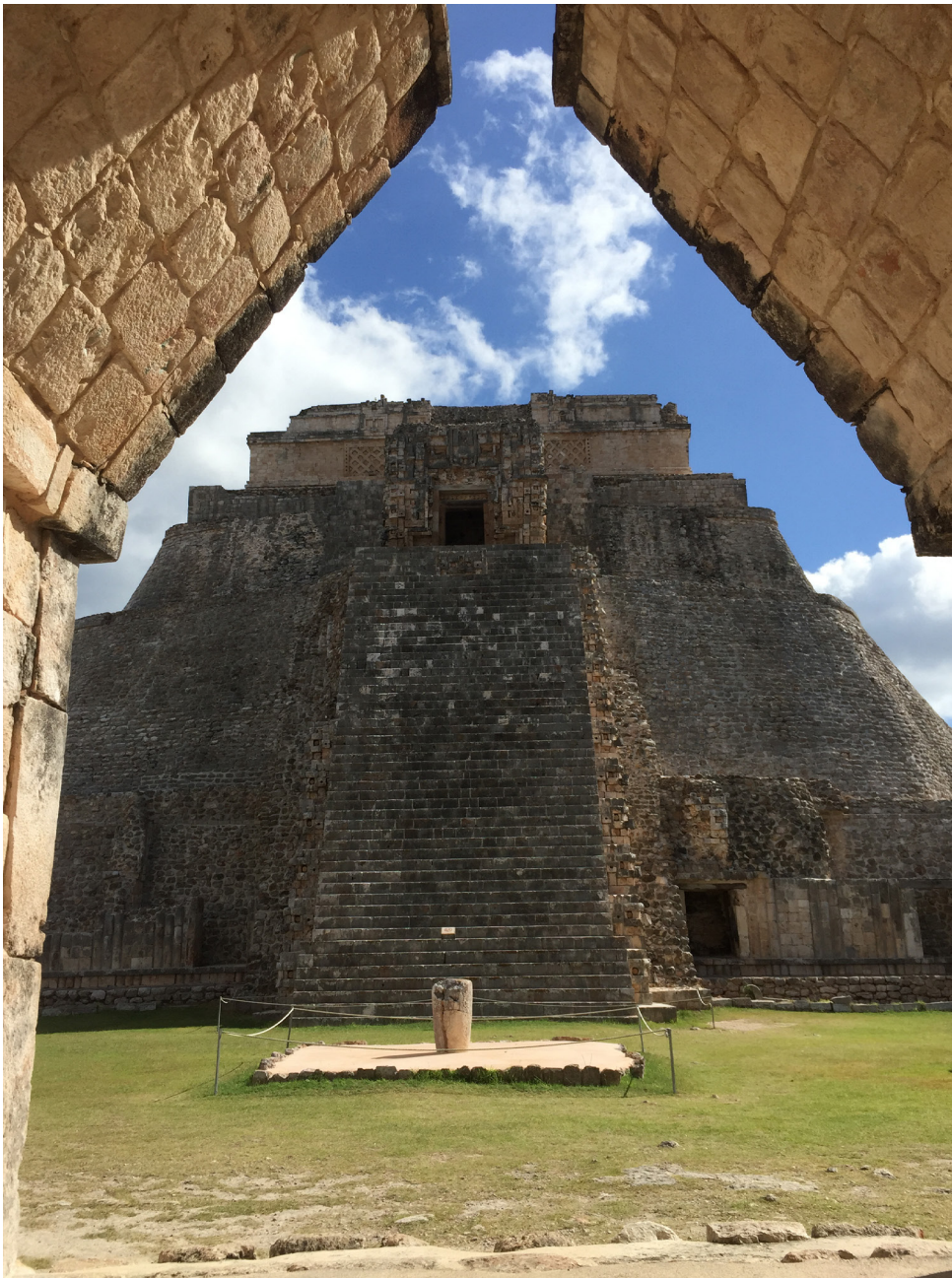
Dat demonstration on 57th Street is really *goin'* to be ['uge](#).

It's been good to see New Yorkers stand up for ['uman](#) rights.



Keep practicing by listening to locals conversing. Hang out at your neighborhood pizza joint. The two traditional establishments in this neighborhood are Sutton Pizza, on First Avenue and 63rd Street, and Pizza Park, also on First Avenue, at 66th Street. Tune in next month for a test of your newly acquired language skills.





Life on a Roll

QIONG WANG

This was my first visit to Mexico, and my first visit to the Yucatán peninsula, which must be a magical land. Despite a plan for every detail on the trip, things started to fall apart the moment I landed. However, all the adventures became so worthwhile when I finally saw the ancient Mayan civilization. Here is a peek at the great Chichén Itzá, the breezy Tulum ruins, and the magnificent Governor's Palace at Uxmal.

