HYBRIDITY, THE RAP RACE, AND PEDAGOGY
FOR THE 1990S

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A functional change in a sign-
system is a violent event.
—Gayatri Spivak

Yes
Was the start of my last jam
So here it is again, another def jam
But since I gave you all a little something
That we knew you lacked
They still consider me a new jack
—Public Enemy, "Don't Believe the Hype"

I

Turntables in the park displace the machine in the garden. Postindustrial, hyperurban, black American sound puts asunder that which machines have joined together . . . and dances . . . to hip-hop acoustics of Kool DJ Herc. "Excuse me, sir, but we're about to do a thang . . . over in the park and, like how much would you charge us to plug into your electricity?" A B-boy campsite is, thus, established. And Herc goes to work with two turntables and a truckload of pizzazz. He takes fetishized, commodified discs of sound and creates—through a trained ear and deft hands—a sound that virtually commands (like Queen Latifah) the assembled listeners to dance.


It was the “monstrous” sound system of Kool DJ Herc which dominated hip hop in its formative days. Herc came from Kingston, Jamaica, in 1967, when the toasting or DJ style of his own country was still fairly new. Giant speaker boxes were essential in the competitive world of Jamaican sound systems, . . . and Herc murdered the Bronx opposition with his volume and shattering frequency range (Toop 1984, 78).

It was Herc who saw the possibilities of mixing his own formulas through remixing prerecorded sound. His enemy was a dully constructed, other-side-of-town “discomania” that made South and West Bronx hip hoppers ill. Disco was not dope in the eyes, ears, and agile bodies of black Bronx teenagers, and Queens and Brooklyn felt the same.

There are gender-coded reasons for the rejection of disco. Disco’s club DJs were often gay, and the culture of Eurodisco prominently featured gays. Hence, a rejection of disco carried more than judgments of exclusively musical taste. A certain homophobia can be inferred—even a macho redaction. But it is also important to note the high marketplace maneuvering that brought disco onto the pop scene with full force.

The LeBaron-Taylor move was to create a crossover movement in which black R&B stations would be used as testing grounds for singles headed for largely white audiences (George 1989, 149–158). Johnnie Taylor’s 1975 “Disco Lady” was one of the first hits to be so marketed; 2.5 million singles were sold. And the rest is history.

What was displaced by disco, ultimately, as general “popular” entertainment was R&B, a funky black music. Also displaced (just dissed) were a number of black, male, classical R&B artists. Hey, some resentment of disco culture and a reassertion of black manhood rights (rites)—no matter who populated discotheques—was a natural thing. And what the early hop hoppers saw was that the task for the break between general “popular” and being “black by popular demand” had to be occupied. And as Albert Murray, that longtime stomper of the blues who knows all about omni-Americans, put it: “In the break you have to be nimble, or not at all!” (Murray 1973, 101)

Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx decided “to B,” to breakdance, to hip hop to rhythms of a dismembered, sampled, and remixed sound meant for energetic audiences—in parks, in school auditoriums, at high school dances, on the corner (if you had the power from a light post . . . and a crowd). And Herc was there before Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa. And hip hop was doing it as in-group, urban style, as music disseminated on cassette tapes . . . until Sylvia Robinson realized its general “popular” entertainment possibilities and sugared it up at
Sugarhill Productions. Sylvia released “Rapper’s Delight” (1979) with her own son on the cut making noises like, “To the hip hop, hippedy hop/ You don’t stop.” The release of “Rapper’s Delight” began the re-commercialization of B-ing. The stylistic credo and cryptography of hip hop were pared away to a reproducible sound called a “rap.” And rap was definitely a mass-market product after “Rapper’s Delight” achieved a stunning commercial success. “B-Style” came in from the cold. No longer was it—as crossover/commercial—“too black, too strong” for the popular charts. (But, of course, things have gotten stranger and 2 live since then!)

II

So, rap is like a rich stock garnered from the sudden simmering of titanic B-boy/B-girl energies. Such energies were diffused over black cityscapes. They were open-ended in moves, shoes, hats, and sounds brought to any breaking competition. Jazzy Jay reports:

We’d find these beats, these heavy percussive beats, that would drive the hip hop people on the dance floor to breakdance. A lot of times it would be a two-second spot, a drum beat, a drum break, and we’d mix that back and forth, extend it, make it 20 minutes long.

If you weren’t in the hip hop industry or around it, you wouldn’t ever have heard a lot of these records (Leland and Stein 1988).

Twenty minutes of competitive sound meant holding the mike not only “to B,” but also to set the beat—to beat out the competition with the “defness” of your style. So . . . it was always a “throwdown”: a self-tailored, self-tutored, and newly cued game stolen from the multinational marketplace. B-style competed always for (what else?) consumers. The more paying listeners or dancers you had for circulating cassettes or for ear-shattering parties in the park, the more the quality of your sneakers improved. The idea was for youth to buy your sound.

Herc’s black, Promethean appropriation of the two-turntable technology of disco and his conversion of discotech into a newly constructed black urban form turned the tables on analysts and market surveyors alike. For competing disco DJs merely blended one disc into the next in order to keep the energized robots of a commercial style (not unlike lambada) in perpetual motion on the dance floor. “To disco” became a verb, but one without verve to black urban youth. What Herc, Flash, and their cohort did was to actualize the immanent possibilities of discotechnology. They turned two turntables into a sound system through
the technical addition of a beat box, heavy amplification, headphones, and very, very fast hands.

Why listen—the early hip-hop DJs asked—to an entire commercial disc if the disc contained only twenty (or two) seconds of worthwhile sound? Why not work that sound by having two copies of the same disc on separate turntables, moving the sound on the two tables in DJorchestrated patterns, creating thereby a worthwhile sound? The result was an indefinitely extendable, varied, reflexively signifying hip-hop sound—indeed, a deft sounding of postmodernism.

The techniques of rap were not simply ones of selective extension and modification. They also included massive archiving. Black sounds (African drums, bebop melodies, James Brown shouts, jazz improvs, Ellington riffs, blues innuendoes, doo-wop croons, reggae words, calypso rhythms) were gathered into a reservoir of threads that DJs wove into intriguing tapestries of anxiety and influence. The word that comes to mind is hybrid.

III

Discotechnology was hybridized through the human hand and ear—the DJ turned wild man at the turntable. The conversion produced a rap DJ who became a postmodern, ritual priest of sound rather than a passive spectator in an isolated DJ booth making robots turn. A reverse cyborgism was clearly at work in the rap conversion. The high technology of advanced sound production was reclaimed by and for human ears and for the human body’s innovative abilities. A hybrid sound then erupted in seemingly dead, urban acoustical spaces. (By “postmodern” I intend the nonauthoritative collaging or archiving of sound and styles that bespeaks a deconstructive hybridity. Linearity and progress yield to a dizzying synchronicity.)

The Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens—called by some in the Reagan/Bush era the black “holes” of urban blight—became concentrated masses of a new style, a hybrid sonics hip hoppingly full of that piss, sass, and technological vinegar that tropes Langston Hughes, saying, “I’m still here!” This is a black hole shooting hip, hop quasars and bum rushing sucker, political DJs.

1. I’ve been scarred and battered.
   My hopes the wind done scattered.
   Snow has friz me, sun has baked me.

   Looks like between ‘em
   They done tried to make me
   Stop laughin’, stop lovin’, stop livin’-
   But I don’t care!
   I’m still here!
IV

What time was it? Time to get busy from the mid-seventies into the
wild-style popularizations of the eighties. From Rosa Parks to Priority
Records—from random sampling to Run DMC. Fiercely competitive
and hugely braggadocious in their energies, the quest of the emergent
rap technologists was for the “baddest” toasts, boasts, and signifying
possible. The form was dominated by males, although KRS One and the
earliest male posses will tell you the “ladies” were always there, answer-
ing back, “dissing” the ways of menfolk and kinfolk alike who tried to
ease them into the postmodern dozens. Millie Jackson had done the
voiceover with musical backdrop—had talked to wrongdoers menfolk
(at length)—before Run or Daryl had ever even figured out that some
day they might segue into each other’s voices taking ’bout some “dumb
girl.” Indeed!

Rap technology includes “scratching”: rapidly moving the “wheels of
steel” (i.e., turntables) back and forth with the disc cued, creating a de-
constructed sound. There is “sampling”: taking a portion (phrase, riff,
percussive vamp, etc.) of a known or unknown record (or a video game
squawk, a touch-tone telephone medley, a verbal tag from Malcolm X
or Martin Luther King) and combining it in the overall mix. (The “sam-
ple” was called a “cut” in the earliest days.) And there is “punch phras-
ing”: to erupt into the sound of turntable 1 with a percussive sample
from turntable 2 by “def” cueing.

But the most acrobatic of the techniques is the verb and reverb of the
human voice pushed straight out, or emulated by synthesizers, or emu-
lating drums and falsettos—the rhyming, chiming sound that is a mne-
monic for black urbanity.

The voice is individual talent holding the mike for as long as it can
invoke and evoke a black tradition that is both preexistent and in for-
mation. “Yo, man, I hear Ellington, but you done put a new (W)rap on
it!” For the rap to be “def-ly” yours and properly original, it has got to
be ours—to sound like us.

The voice, some commentators have suggested, echoes African griots,
black preachers, Apollo DJs, Birdland MCs, Muhammed Ali, black
streetcorner males’ signifying, oratory of the Nation of Islam, and get-
down ghetto slang. The voice becomes the thing in which, finally, rap
technology catches the consciousness of the young.
What time is it? It is the beginning of the decade to end a century. It is postindustrial, drum machine, synthesizer, sampling, remix, multitrack studio time. But it is also a time in which the voice and the bodies of rap and dance beat the rap of technologically induced (reproduced) indolence, impotence, or (in) difference.

Why?

Because sales figures are a mighty index. But also . . . the motion of the ocean of dancers who fill vast, Olympian spaces of auditoriums and stadiums transnationally when you are (à la Roxanne) "live on stage" is still a principal measure of rap success. Technology can create a rap disc, but only the voice dancing to wheels of steel and producing a hip-hopping, responsive audience gives testimony to a fulfilled break. In other words, you ain’t busted a move until the audience lets you know you’re in the groove.

VI

What time is it? It’s “hardcore” and “message” and “stop the violence” and “2 live” and “ladies first”—1990s—time. Microcomputers, drum machines, electric keyboards, and synthesizers are all involved in the audio. And MTV and the grammarians of the proper Grammy Awards have had their hands forced.

Rap is a too-live category for the Grammies to ignore, and Fab Five Freddy and “Yo! MTV Raps” have twice-a-week billing these days. Jesse Jackson and Quincy Jones proclaim that “rap is here to stay.” Quincy has even composed and orchestrated a cross-generational album (Back on the Block, Warner Brothers 260202) on which he announces his postmodernity in the sonics of rap. Ice-T and Big Daddy Kane prop him up “on every leaning side.”

But it is also time to “fight the power,” as Public Enemy knows—the power of media control. In their classic rap “Don’t Believe the Hype,” Public Enemy indicates that the primetime media are afraid of rap’s message and consider it both offensive and dangerous. In Philadelphia, one of the principal popular music stations confirms the group’s assessment. For WUSL (Power 99) proudly advertises its “no-rap workday.” Secretaries fill a sixty-second ad spot with kudos for the station’s era-sure of rap. Hence, FCC “public” space is contoured in Philly in ways that erase the energy of rap’s postmodern soundings. “Work” (defined as tedious office labor) is, thus, publicly constructed as incompatible
with "rap." Ethics and outputs of wage labor are held to be incommensurate with postmodern, black expressive culture. Implicit in a no-rap workday, of course, is an agon between industrial (Taylorite) strategies of typing pool (word processing pool?) standardization and a radical hybridity of sound and morals. For rap's sonics are disruptive in themselves. They become even more cacophonous when they are augmented by the black voice's antiestablishment injunctions, libido urgings, and condemnations of coercive standardization. To "get the job done" or "paid in full" in the economies of rap is scarcely to sit for eight hours cultivating carpal tunnel syndrome. Nope. To get the job done with rap style is to "get busy," be innovative and outrageous with fresh sounds and defly nonstandard moves. One must be undisciplined, that is to say, to be "in effect."

Eric B and Rakim, Twin Hype, Silk Tymes Leather, Kingpin Redhead, De La Soul, Q-Tip, The DOC—the names in themselves read like a Toni Morrison catalogue of nonstandard cultural denomination. And such named rap ensembles and the forms they produce are scarcely local or parochial. For rap has become an international, metropolitan hybrid. From New Delhi to Ibadan it is busy interrupting the average workday.

VII

A prime example of rap's hybrid crossovers is found in 3rd Bass. The duo is primitively white, but defly black urban in its stylings and "gas face" dismissals of too-melodic "black" artists such as MC Hammer (Benjamin 1990). ("Holy Moly!" as a notorious media character used to say.) White boys, one of them a graduate of Columbia, are dissing a melanin-identified black boy for being not black or strong enough. Which is to say that "we" are no longer in a Bronx or Brooklyn or Queens era but at the forefront of transnational postmodernism. The audience begins at eleven or twelve years of age and extends, at least, through postundergraduate achievement. Rap is everywhere among adolescents, young adults, and entry-level professionals. It is a site of racial controversy, as in Public Enemy's anti-Semitic fiascoes (Christgau 1990). It is a zone of gender problematics, ranging from charges against the form's rampant sexism (2 Live Crew is too flagrant here) through the throwdown energies of Queen Latifah and her "Ladies First," to the irony of the squeaky-clean Good Girls. It is a domain of the improper, where copyright and professional courtesy are held in contempt. Rappers will take what is "yours" and turn it into a "parody" of you—and not even begin to pay you in full. For example, N.W.A.'s line, "It's not
about a salary,” is signifying on Boogie Down Productions (BDP) whom, I am told, they cannot abide. Rap is a place of direct action protest against authority: N.W.A., again, with “_____ Tha Police.” Class is also a major determinant in the rap field. Its postmodernity is a lower-class, black urban emergent speaking to (as Public Enemy has it) “a nation of millions.”

VIII

Microcomputation, multitrack recording, video imaging, and the highly innovative vocalizations and choreography of black urban youth have produced a postmodern form that is fiercely intertextual, open-ended, and hybrid. It has not only rendered melody virtually anomalous for any theory of “new music” but also revised a current generation’s expectations where “poetry” is concerned. Technology’s effect on student expectations and pedagogical requirements, in, say, English literature classrooms, is tellingly captured by recent experiences that I have had. To prepare myself for a talk I was to give at New York’s 1989 Poetry Project Symposium, entitled “Poetry for the Next Society,” I decided to query my students in a course devoted to Afro-American women writers. “What,” I asked, “will be the poetry for the next society?” To a man or woman, my students responded “rap” and “MTV.”

We did not stop to dissect their claims, nor did we attempt a poetics of the popular. Instead, we tried to extrapolate from what seemed two significant forms of the present era a description of their being-in-the world. Terms that emerged included: “public,” “performative,” “audible,” “theatrical,” “communal,” “intrasensory,” “postmodern,” “oral,” “memorable,” and “intertextual.” What this list suggests is that my students believe the function of poetry belongs in our era to a telecommunal, popular space in which a global audience interacts with performing artists. A link between music and performance—specifically popular music and performance—seems integral to their definition of the current and future function of poetry.

They are heirs to a history in which art, audience, entertainment, and instruction have assumed profoundly new meanings. The embodied catharsis of Dick Clark’s bandstand or Don Cornelius’s Soul Train would be virtually unrecognizable—or so one thinks—to Aristotle. Thus, Elvis, Chuck Berry, and the Shirelles foreshadow and historically overdetermine the Boss, Bobby Brown, and Kool Moë Dee as, let us say, “people’s poets.”
My students' responses, however, are not nearly as natural or original as they may seem on first view. In fact, they have a familiar cast within a history of contestation and contradistinction governing the relationship between poetry and the state.

The exclusion of poets from the republic by Plato is the primary Western site of this contest. (One envisions a no-poetry workday, as it were.) In Egypt it is Thoth and the King; in black America it is the Preacher and the Bluesman. It would be overly sacramental to speak of this contest as one between the letter and the spirit, and it would be too Freudian by half to speak of it as a struggle between the law and taboo. The simplest way to describe it is in terms of a tensional resonance between homogeneity and heterogeneity.

Plato argues the necessity of a homogeneous state designed to withstand the bluesiness of poets who are always intent on worrying such a line by signifying and troping irreverently on it and continually setting up conditionals. "What if this?" and "What if that?" To have a homogeneous line, Plato advocates that philosophers effectively eliminate poets.

If the state is the site of what linguists call the constative, then poetry is an alternative space of the conditional. If the state keeps itself in line, as Benedict Anderson (1983) suggests, through the linear, empty space of homogeneity, then poetry worries this space or line with heterogeneous performance. If the state is a place of reading the lines correctly, then poetry is the site of audition, of embodied sounding on state wrongs such as N.W.A.'s "-- Tha Police," or Public Enemy's "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos." What, for example, happens to the state line about the death of the black family and the voiceless derogation of black youth when Run DMC explodes the state line with the rap:

Kings from queens
From queens come kings
We're raising hell like a class when the lunch bell rings!
Kings will be praised
And hell will be raised
Suckers try to phase us
But we won't be phased!

In considering the contestation between homogeneity and heterogeneity, I am drawing on the work of the scholars Homi Bhabha (1986, 1989) and Peter Stallybrass (1986, 1991), who suggest that nationalist or post-revolutionary discourse is always a discourse of the split subject.² In

². I had the honor of being featured prominently in this article. My picture even appeared in the gallery of Kurtis Blow, Kool Moe Dee, DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, and Run DMC.
order to construct the nation it is necessary to preserve a homogeneity of remembrance (through such symbols as anthems, waving flags, and unifying slogans) in conjunction with an amnesia of heterogeneity. If poetry, like rap, is disruptive performance, or, in Homi Bhabha’s formulation, an articulation of the melancholia of the people’s wounding by and before the emergence of the state line, then poetry can be defined, again like rap, as an audible or “sounding” space of opposition. Rap is the form of audition in our present era that utterly refuses to sing anthems of, say, white male hegemony.

IX

A final autobiographical instance of rap-shifted student expectations on the pedagogical front will conclude my sounding of postmodernism. In February 1990 I had the experience of crossing the Atlantic by night, a journey followed by a metropolitan ride from Heathrow Airport to North Westminster Community School, in order to teach Shakespeare’s Henry V to a class of GCSE (general certificate of secondary education) students. Never mind the circumstances occasioning the trip—no, on second thought, the circumstances are particularly important. A reporter for London’s The Mail on Sunday had gotten onto the fact that I advocated rap as an absolute prerequisite for any teacher attempting to communicate with students between the ages of twelve and twenty-five (Waldron 1990). So there I was in London, in a school with students representing sixty-seven nationalities and speaking twenty-two languages, in the Paddington/Marylebone area. “Once more into the breach dear friends/Once more into the breach/Or let us close the wall up with our English dead” was the passage the students were supposed to have concentrated on, paying special attention to notions of “patriotism.”

Introduced by the head of the English department to a class doing everything but the postmodern boogie on desktops, I pulled up a chair, sat down, and calmly said: “I’ve come from the United States. I’ve been awake for thirty-six hours, and I have to listen to you so that I can answer questions from my teenage son about what you are listening to, what you are into. So, please, start by telling me your names.” Even as they began to give me their names (with varying degrees of cooperative audibility), a black British young woman was lining up twelve rap cassette boxes on her desk immediately in front of me. (She knew I had nothing to teach her!)
To make an exciting pedagogical story brief, we took off—as a group. I showed them how Henry V was a rapper—a cold dissing, def con man, tougher than leather and smoother than ice, an artisan of words. His response to the French Dauphin’s gift of tennis balls was my first presentational text. And then, “the breach.” We did that in terms of a fence in the yard of a house that you have just purchased. A neighbor breaches it. “How, George? How could your neighbor breach it?” George jerked up from that final nod that would have put him totally asleep and said, “What?” “Could your neighbor do anything to breach your fence, George?” “No, sir, I don’t think so.” “Come on, George!” “Sir, . . . Oh, yeah, he could break it.”

And then the anterior question about “breaches” and “fences” was arrived at by another student, and I leaped out of my chair in congratulation. “Sir, the first question is, Why was the fence there in the first place?” Right! What time was it?

X

It was time for Public Enemy’s “Don’t Believe the Hype.” Because all of that Agincourt admonition and “breach” rhetoric (the whole hybrid, international class of London GCSE students knew) was a function of the English church being required to pay the King “in full,” and the state treasury can only get the ducats if ancient (and spurious) boundary claims are made to send Henry V and the boys into somebody else’s yard. “Patriotism,” a show of hands by the class revealed, is a “hype” if it means dying for England. Bless his soul, though, there was one stout lad who held up his hand and said he would be ready to die for England. My black British young lady, who had put her tapes away, shouted across the room, “That’s because you’re English!”

Hybridity, a variety of sounds coming together to arouse interest in a classic work of Shakespearean creation.

The Mail on Sunday reporter told me as we left North Westminster that the English department head had asked her to apologize to me in advance for the GSCE group because they would never listen to what I had to say and would split the room as soon as the bell rang. What the head had not factored into her apologetics was the technology I came bearing. I carried along my very own Panasonic cassette blaster as the postmodern analogue of both “the message” and the “rapper’s delight” that Shakespeare himself would include in his plays were he writing today. At a site of postmodern, immigrant, sonic (twenty-two languages) hybridity produced by an internationally accessible technology,
I gained pedagogical entrée by playing in the new and very, very sound game of rap. Like Jesse and Quincy, I believe rap is here to stay. Other forms such as "house" and "hip house" and "rap reggae" may spin off, but "rap" is now classical black sound. It is the "in effect" archive where postmodernism has been dopely sampled for the international 1990s.

REFERENCES