

## **Down at the Cross Roads: Hip-Hop, Postmodernism, and African-American Vernaculars**

It is sadly ironic that the contemporary discourse which talks the most about heterogeneity, the decentered subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of otherness, still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience, one that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge. If radical postmodernist thinking is to have a transformative impact then a critical break with the notion of "authority" as "mastery over" must not simply be a rhetorical device, it must be reflected in habits of being, including styles of writing as well as chosen subject matter.

--bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness" <sup>1</sup>

It's after the end of the world. Don't you know that?

-- Sun Ra<sup>2</sup>

It has become a customary -- and in some cases rather gruelling -- ritual to start any new book with the word "postmodern" in its title with a debate on just what postmodernism *is*. By the time such a debate is completed, most readers in search of a stimulating and engaging text will have been successfully warded away, leaving the stage clear for the cognoscenti to address each other in the familiar terms of their ongoing arguments among themselves. I would like to begin instead with an *opening* for readers, starting with a sample of Umberto Eco: "Postmodernism is not a trend to be chronologically defined, but, rather . . . a way of operating."<sup>3</sup> Such a definition, while it by no means encompasses all the arts and practices which set themselves forth -- or are set forth -- as postmodernisms,

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<sup>1</sup> *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 1 no. 1 (September 1990).

<sup>2</sup> I heard this line years ago on one of the untitled, hand-decorated LP's that Sun Ra used to press for his own label in Philadelphia.

<sup>3</sup> Umberto Eco, *Postscript to the Name of the Rose*, 66.

has at least the virtue of setting aside the question of chronology in favor of the question of modes or ways of operating. Postmodernism becomes then not so much a moment in time, but a vector passing through many discrete times and moments, moments marked by their pervading sense of having come *after*. For postmodernism, as Sun Ra says, it's always "after the end of the world."

The end of "the" world, after all, may be only the beginning of *worlds*, of a realization that the declarative determinisms of "the West" or "America" or "the Contemporary" are no longer possible. And while this sense is no doubt for many a *tragic* one, most postmodernisms take it rather as a point of departure, a new possibility. For one, the line between what was at one time construed as "high" culture and what was set aside in the same move as "popular" culture, can no longer be drawn with any certainty; indeed the very act of drawing such a line at all appears suddenly as an *ideological* rather than an *aesthetic* act. Problematizing this act has been one of the central themes of many postmodernist texts. And yet, despite this, most of these texts have remained foreclosed, set under the hermeneutic seal of a new vocabulary of technical terms drawn from psychoanalysis, Marxism, and philosophy, and linked to a heavy-handed, often plodding academic apparatus. The dissolution of "high" culture has thus been proclaimed primarily in a language which only those already within the world of academic postmodernism can readily access.

If the claims that postmodern theorists make about the insupportability of any clear boundary between ostensibly privileged knowledge and 'popular' knowledge are valid -- and I think they are -- they are claims that these theorists have largely failed to enact. While the insistence that 'theory is necessarily a practice' is often advanced as a defense, it is rendered ludicrous by the ways in which many postmodern theorists have to date regarded culture at large only as a kind of grand field of objects for analysis. Architecture, television, film, and music have all provided grist for the academic mill, and yet the wonders that they disclose, rather than recirculating across cultural boundaries, have too often been recontained. In the

absence of the now-discredited "high" culture, the analysis of the popular has taken its place, forming a new élite community of discourse. As Steven Connor puts it,

[We are told that] the waning of the cultural authority of the West and its political and intellectual traditions, along with the opening up of the world political scene to cultural and ethnic differences, is another symptom of the modulation of hierarchy into heterarchy . . . [and yet] something [happens] in postmodernist theory . . . which names and correspondingly closes off the very world of cultural difference and plurality which it allegedly brings into visibility.<sup>4</sup>

Yet despite this apparent closure, there exist many strata of discourse within which postmodernisms continually cross and recross the boundary zones which many of its theorists are so reluctant to transgress. For one, there is a fair amount media coverage -- albeit much of it negative -- of the broad outlines of postmodernist debates. The arguments over the dissolution or reconstruction of literary canons (to take an example) are widely reported -- whether in the television coverage of Stanford students shouting "Hey ho, hey ho, western culture's gotta go" or the travelling roadshows of such avowedly anti-academic proselytizers as Camille Paglia or Dinesh D'Souza (for whom such a dissolution is either a joyful bonfire of academic vanities or a cause for decrying the 'decline of Western Culture').

Yet these scattered moments when academic postmodernism enjoys its 'fifteen minutes of fame' can hardly be taken as the ground for a sense of 'postmodern culture' at large. To do so would only replicate the logic of academic postmodernism, which thinks of itself as its own ultimate enactment of "the" postmodern. On the contrary, if postmodernism has any validity at all, then it must be a phenomenon that broadly suffuses contemporary cultural practices. To date, most postmodern theorists have re-enacted the very thing Marx criticized the old rationalistic philosophies for doing: they have sought to bring philosophy 'from heaven to earth' (or even, in the case of the study of "popular culture," from 'earth' to 'heaven' ), calling for "materialist" critique and yet never conceiving

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<sup>4</sup> Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture*, pp. 9-10.

(as Marx only dimly conceived) that the people and practices which they sought as the *object* of their study were already *subjects* in their own right.

Some academic theorists -- among them marxists, feminists, and cultural historians -- have recognized this problem, and have consciously sought to provide different models. In this cause, attempts have been made to see certain cultural phenomena -- whether it be the emergence of the IWW in the 1930's, Star Trek fanzines, or group activities ranging from gangs to skateboarding -- as examples of indigenous resistance instigated by 'organic intellectuals.' The problem of the objectification implicit within academic discourse has, however, proven difficult to overcome; the inhabitants of the cultural zones under scrutiny are rarely in a position that enables them to critique the "knowledge" that is made of those zones. And yet even when the one doing the studying is a member of the very community s/he is studying, the difficulty of regarding one's own culture as somehow *remarkable* (as well as the suspicion suddenly cast on anyone whose task is to regard their friends and neighbors as objects of study) is almost impossible to overcome, as Zora Neale Hurston discovered when Franz Boas sent her to Eatonville, Florida to collect folklore. "To see myself as somebody else" -- as Hurston puts it -- requires a kind of Zen mind few people possess.<sup>5</sup>

So what's a committed postmodernist to do? How can one write and speak of the contemporary while at the same time working within academic discourses which continually reinforce the demand that the productions of the present be looked at *as objects*, that they be defined, commodified, and described to the point where one becomes a stranger to one's own time? I do not want to suggest that there is no solution to this problem, but I do think that it must be continually borne in mind. Another, closely related difficulty in writing across and among the many cultural practices which comprise the contemporary moment is neither to overvalue nor to undervalue any particular part of it. The necessity forced upon

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<sup>5</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, excerpt from *Mules and Men*, reprinted in *I Love Myself When I am Laughing . . . And Then Again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive*. Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1979, p. 82.

archaeologists in their study of cultures long dead is both to extrapolate from partial findings (and every dig, however rich, is partial) and yet not to place too great a significance on the accidents of survival; a culture's most central practices may have left only the slightest trace, and yet their refuse heaps may be perfectly preserved. The person who wishes to write of the contemporary must similarly be able to extrapolate from inevitably partial experiences among the multiple cultures s/he inhabits while at the same time resisting the urge to hold forth any one thing as a static synecdoche for the vast and intricate webs of cultures.

Despite the difficulties involved, the urgency of this task is great, as all of us live in a world where both the oversupply of information and mutual unintelligibility among cultures are increasing at a fantastic rate. This is not to say that any particular cultural practice -- and one could include academic as well as hip-hop language -- bears a responsibility to be always easy to understand; some work, some interaction with the cultural communities at stake will always be required of any reader or listener. Yet what *will* be lost if academic discourse and contemporary artforms such as hip-hop drift out of each other's zones of intelligibility is an understanding of the numerous and vital connections which already exist between them. Hip-hop, far from being a simple object which a postmodernist project could 'bring to light' or offer up as exemplary, is itself an active, ongoing, and highly sophisticated postmodernism -- a postmodernism which in many ways has gone farther and had more crucial consequences than all the academic books on postmodernism rolled into one.

To return to the passage from Eco sampled above: if postmodernism is a *way* of thinking or acting, rather than a moment -- if the belatedness of its "post" is more a sensibility than a chronology, what exactly is its *modus operandi* ? I would like to posit a postmodernist mode as one which is both *multiple* and *resistant to foreclosure*. Its multiplicity may be perceived (as with conflicting interpretations of the same text) or even actively produced (as when Taylor and Wells offer readers two *King Lear*s, or when a dance single offers four 'alternate mixes' of the same song). Its resistance to foreclosure, on

the other hand, is *always* active, though it may act in the direction of what Derrida celebrates as the 'free play of signification' or in a more politicized mode where the categories of the dominant are actively refused and attacked. The more playful mode has been aptly dubbed "ludic postmodernism" by Theresa Ebert, who terms the more political mode "resistance postmodernism."<sup>6</sup>

The openly political stance of many rappers, such as Ice Cube, Paris, Ice-T, or Public Enemy would seem to offer a perfect example of a "resistance postmodernism" in that its heteroglossia of speech, samples, and noise are aimed directly at the ideologies of racism -- and indeed in one sense it is. Yet the situation is in fact far more complicated; since the hip-hop texts themselves are in fact no less conflicted than the multiple cultural positions which produced them. Thus a rap that attacks American militarism and racism, such as Ice Cube's "I Wanna Kill Sam," is also be marked by homophobic metaphors; a rap that dramatizes the plight of the L.A. ghetto (e.g. N.W.A.'s "Straight Outta Compton") goes out of its way to denigrate women with misogynistic epithets.<sup>7</sup> In liberal circles, it's commonplace to lament that rap's revolutionary potential is "marred" by these subtexts, but in the heteroglossaic space of hip-hop, there is no way to filter out the "noise" -- in a sense the very desire for some kind of "pure" revolutionary spirit, unmarred by other struggles, discloses a kind of pre-modernist nostalgia for a world in which ethics and politics are less conflicted. One of the tasks, then, of this book is to resist this very kind of reading -- not in the name of a pure or authentic cultural space, but rather to oppose the discourse of "purity"

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<sup>6</sup> Theresa Ebert, "Writing the Political: Resistance (Post)modernism," address delivered at a conference on "Rewriting the Postmodern: (Post)Colonialism/Feminism/Late Capitalism," University of Utah, Salt Lake City, March 30, 1990, discussed in Donald Morton and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, "Theory Pedagogy Politics: The Crisis of 'The Subject' in the Humanities," in Morton and Zavarzadeh, *Theory/Pedagogy/Politics: Texts for Change* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 29-30 n.l.; see also Mas'ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton, *Theory, (Post)Modernity, Opposition* (Washington, D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1991), 106-130.

<sup>7</sup> Ice Cube describes the U.S. war against Iraq ("Desert Storm") as Uncle Sam trying to "fuck a brother up the ass," and later refers to Uncle Sam as "the devil in drag" ("I Wanna Kill Sam," on *Death Certificate*, Priority Records CDL 57155, ©1991 Priority Records Inc.); Eazy-E tells women he sees in concert that "I'm gonna call you a bitch, or a dirty-ass ho" in "Straight Outta Compton," from *Straight Outta Compton*, Ruthless/Priority CDL 57102, ©1988 Priority Records Inc..

itself. This is indeed a move which many rappers also make (Chuck-D, in "Fear of a Black Planet," intones "Who is pure? What is pure? Is it European, I ain't sure"), although it is almost always deployed, as in this example, against white, Eurocentric culture.<sup>8</sup>

Yet hip-hop, even as it makes politicized incursions against the dominant, is founded on the verbal play of signification; in this sense it does not exclude the "ludic" from its modes of resistance. When Chuck-D proclaims that he will "cock a doodle do a riddle," or Humpty Hump declares "I use a word that don't mean nothin', like loopted," the dichotomy commonly assumed between "play" and "seriousness" collapses.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as I will argue in greater detail below, the history of the African-American mode of Signifyin(g) is a history of a serious unseriousness, a power/play, a verbal game in which the stakes continually escalate. Thus, the postmodernism of hip-hop pushes the boundaries of the political, in the process redefining the very structures of resistance.

Another question that has vexed postmodern theorists -- especially those who are committed to a political struggle -- is the dichotomy between theory and practice. Many political postmodernists are haunted by a sense that their theoretical work, despite its intellectual efficacy, does not actually intervene in the reproduction of the dominant ideology. Some of these anxieties derive from a sense that the language of postmodern

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<sup>8</sup> Clearly, rappers make this critique against the ideology of the white power structure because the concept of 'purity' has historically been most frequently invoked when a dominant group wishes to oppose itself to (or purge itself of) an oppressed group. Yet the opposing notion of black 'authenticity' has its own ideology of purity, which some have attacked, as when the authors of *Signifying Rappers* taunt Chuck-D for being "unable to locate even one pure black source." My own position, as I will elaborate in the chapters that follow, is that hip-hop has always been heteroglot, and has *known* it, whereas the white middle-class hegemony, while no less heteroglot, has *denied* it. For even the most Afrocentric rappers, those most concerned with creating and sustaining an 'authentic' culture, have done so precisely by appropriating artifacts from mass culture, as when Afrika Bambaataa took the "Zulu Nation" name from an the British film *Zulu* (see Toop, *Rap Attack 2*, 57), or when groups such as X-Clan, Lakim Shabazz, or Kwamé appropriate hieroglyphics, "Egyptian" dance moves, and names (e.g., "Isis"). What is "authentic," in these instances, is clearly *produced*, even though it may well form the core of a dialectic of "authentic" vs. "sell-out" or "phony."

<sup>9</sup> "Black is Black / White is White / That's all right / No need to fight, Yo! / Much respect if your nature's in check a little / If not expect me to cock-a-doodle-do a riddle," from "Hit da Road Jack" (C. Ridonhour/K.Shocklee/Gary G-Wiz, ©1992 Def American Songs) from the album *Greatest Misses* (Def Jam/Chaos OK 53014), 1992; Humpty-Hump's line is from "The Humpty Dance" (G. Jacobs, E.Humphrey; © 1990 Tommy Boy Music Inc.), from the album *Sex Packets*, Tommy Body TBCD 1026 (1990).

theory itself forms a kind of barrier, excluding from the discourse of postmodernism the very subjects who are presumed to be most implicated in it; other anxieties come from a sense that critical practice, however powerful, is marginalized within the academy and society as a whole. Indeed, these anxieties are in many ways justified -- but only to the extent that academic practice fails to enact its own possibility. Yes, intelligibility is political - - but then again, so is *unintelligibility*; academia may be marginalized in some ways, but in others it can readily mobilize new discourses, never more effectively than in the necessarily heteroglossaic space of the classroom.

Hip-hop's poetic and musical practices offer here an exemplary case, militating against any such simple dichotomy. Its Signifyin(g) lingo, continually shifting and expanding, serves as a kind of permeable membrane, admitting anyone willing to listen and learn; indeed some rappers such as Chuck-D and Ice-T have argued that hip-hop is at its most effective when it enters the ears of white teenagers. At the same time, its multimedia presence -- including and perhaps most importantly the blaze of media criticism -- serves as a continual engine; hip-hop's activity stirs media re-activity, which in turn spurs hip-hop activity still further. Thus, as George Yancy has observed, hip-hop is "fundamentally a form of praxis," an everyday and ongoing militancy; in Ice-T's terms, it's a "cultural movement" that is a direct product of "urban life"<sup>10</sup> It is tempting, indeed, to think of hip-hop music as the missing *practice* which theories of the postmodern have gestured towards -- but in fact such a conception would only re-enact the very dichotomy that I would like to problematize, by

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<sup>10</sup> "On one level rap is *descriptive* of a certain fluid everydayness (*alltaglich*): tales of concrete situations (reminiscent of folklore); distinctive styles of dress; shared plights; shared socio-historical realities; shared unconscious associations, etc. On another level, however, rap is *prescriptive* (as anyone knows who has listened to Public Enemy, Poor Righteous Teachers, et. al.). But rap as a modality of prescriptive didacticism and socio-political discontent is nevertheless couched in a mode of linguisticity intrinsic to a sociality of shared experience. In short, whether viewed as a form of description or prescription, rap presupposes the contention that discourse is fundamentally a form of praxis." Qtd. in James G. Spady, "Password: Nation Conscious Rap," in Joseph D. Eure and James G. Spady, *Nation Conscious Rap: The Hip-Hop Vision* (Brooklyn: PC International Press, 1991), p. 414; Ice-T's lines "[hip-hop] is not some fad / created overnight / it is a cultural movement / that's bred by city life" are from "Body Rock," © 1984 Electrobeat Records.

implying that these 'practices' are somehow naive, somehow lacking their own indigenous theories.

That this assumed naiveté is such a widely-held presupposition is symptomatic of the ways in which the theory/practice line itself has class and race connotations which have a long history; ultimately they are connected to the romanticized 'simplicity' or 'naturalness' of black culture for predominantly white audiences that dates back at least to the 'minstrel' shows of the mid-nineteenth century. The ideological slippage from the privileged dichotomies of racist ideology takes the form of a series of displacements that can be traced rather in the manner of a series of "Miller Analogy Test"-like couplets: Practice is to theory as action is to thought, as "primitive" is to "sophisticated," as natural is to artificial, as physical pleasure is to intellectual contemplation. Within such an ideologically charged series, it's all too easy for hip-hop to be dismissed -- both by "liberals" who regard hip-hop as a form of pandering to the stereotypes of the violent black male -- black hate as a titillating gift-box that ticks but does not explode -- and (ironically) also by African-American intellectuals who, wary of the fact that hip-hop is often taken by whites searching for a simple synecdoche of "blackness," would prefer to substitute Ornette Coleman's jazz or Toni Morrison's fiction.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, there has been considerable class tension *within* African-American cultures, where some perceive hip-hop as a *déclassé* genre (a tension exemplified, albeit in a relatively softened form, in the sitcom *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, where a 'streetwise' Philadelphia kid (played by rapper Fresh Prince) goes to live with his snobby upper-middle class relatives in their ostentatious Bel-Air home).

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<sup>11</sup> This preference is certainly understandable, given that in the reductive world of popular ideology and media hype, there is often room for only *one* cultural synecdoche (e.g. Italians = pizza, Poles = sausage, Muslims = terrorists). Henry Louis Gates, to take one example, expressed wariness about what he took as my implication that rappers such as Chuck-D ought to be instantly hailed as Gramscian 'organic intellectuals' (that is, spokespeople for the underclass that arise spontaneously without taking a cue from the old-school Marxists' 'vanguard of intellectuals') (# cite letter from Gates, give date). I would certainly agree to the extent that I don't think that Chuck-D or any individual rapper ought to be regarded as the one authentic black revolutionary spokesperson -- but disagree in that I *do* think that the collective work of the more political rappers potentially constitutes a powerful force against the ideologies of race, class, and gender.

More specifically, given that hip-hop's problematics of race and class take place on the level of language, I think this entire question is best addressed through an analysis of the possibility of resistance *via* language. One exemplary text -- though not one I would wish to invoke without caution -- is Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey*, which he explicitly names a *vernacular* theory.<sup>12</sup> Gates's central contention in this book is that African-American texts have had a very highly developed theoretical framework from the start, a framework which like African-American culture itself has roots which can be traced back through novels, poems, slave narratives, and tall tales back to West African interpretative rituals and protocols. The caution I would attach to this work -- which I will elaborate later as I engage with hip-hop culture itself -- is that to assume a singular, unified, and transhistorical African-American vernacular is to do violence to the complexity of the histories through which African-American culture -- and "American" culture in general -- have taken form. Speaking in the "vernacular" has not always been a valued mode of resistance, and is not necessarily empowering, even today.<sup>13</sup> There is, in any case, no single African-American "vernacular"; the vernacular of the Afro-Caribbean inhabitants of Barbados in the seventeenth century is not the same as the Rasta-Jamaica patois of Bob Marley, and neither of these is the same as the everyday vocabulary of a young girl in the South Bronx in the late 1970's. The point of this linguistic heteroglossia is only amplified when other cultural forms, such as art, music, dress, and body language are taken into account -- and in any case is compounded still more by differences of social class and

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<sup>12</sup>Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxii.

<sup>13</sup> This point is made compellingly by Donald B. Gibson in his response to Gates's paper "Canon-Formation and the Afro-American Tradition," in which Gibson states: "[For Frederick Douglass] there was no value in the stock of the vernacular; nothing to be achieved by claiming it as valuable in the mid-nineteenth century. One may claim its value now, but only from a very high station. One who has proved his mastery of the master's discourse may then claim the value of the vernacular, for no one doubts the claimant's credentials. Woe be the claimant who is not firmly in control of the language of the dominant culture, for he will not have earned the right to deal in such black-market currency. He will be silenced, not heard." Gibson, "Response" to Gates, from Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Patricia Redmond, eds., *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990's* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

gender. Within this tissue of overlapping and at times contradictory vernacular cultures, to valorize a particular voice or tradition as *the* African-American vernacular becomes a romanticized quest for an inattainable grail; such a quest can only succeed by erasing historical difference.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, I do not think this crucial point should obscure Gates's other argument, which can readily be rephrased in the plural: that African-American vernacular cultures have always been as theorized, and as capable (perhaps *more* capable) of *irony* and abstraction as "Western" culture (which itself must also be seen as the fictional conflation of difference that it is). Indeed, the practice of *Signifyin(g)*, which Gates demonstrates compellingly lies at the heart of much vernacular African-American language and art, is a theorized practice which is fundamentally ironic, fundamentally *postmodern*. *Signifyin(g)*, briefly put, is both the trope of pastiche and a pastiche of tropes, and its most central trope is that of the sly exchange of the literal for the figurative, and hip-hop is its most profound and lively incarnation. I will illustrate this point directly with hip-hop in the chapters that follow, but for now suffice it to say that in this sense, at least, African-American cultures have been producing postmodernisms of their own for centuries.

If postmodernist art can be said to be haunted by a sense of belatedness, a sense of living in the ruins of the abandoned structures of modernism, then it should come as no surprise that African-American art in general -- and hip-hop in particular -- has come into its own at just this juncture of history. The incipient aesthetic of art constructed from debris has haunted societies at just those points when their brightest dreams have gone down in flames; as Kali Tal has suggested, postmodernism is an appropriate mode of art for a 'Viet Nam Generation.'<sup>15</sup> For many African-Americans in the United States, the disappointment

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<sup>14</sup> I owe this latter point to Karen Carr, who in our discussions and debates on the question of "the" vernacular always insisted that there could be no "the," no historically transcendent vernacular somehow 'outside' of the dominant discourse.

<sup>15</sup> Kali Tal is the editor of an outstanding journal whose full title is *Viet Nam Generation: A Journal of Recent History and Contemporary Issues*.

of the political and economic dreams of the civil rights movement of the 1960's, along with the worsening economic situation of the inner cities have combined to bring about a similar sense of life on the edge; for rappers, the ghetto is best evoked by images of Vietnam (For Ice-T, it's "the killing fields," "the home of the bodybag"; for Ice Cube' it's a "Concrete Vietnam"). If the Blues is the 'classical' music of African-American culture, and Jazz is its 'modernism,' then hip-hop has a powerful claim to be regarded as their postmodern successor. With its profound sense of 'coming after' all other African-American musical traditions, hip-hop's appropriative art (born of sonic collage and pastiche, reprocessed via digital technology) is the perfect backdrop for an insistent vernacular poetics that both invokes and alters the history of African-American experiences.

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Finally, I must account for my own position as the producer of *this* text. The situation of a writer who takes up a cultural field such as rap or hip-hop music is often highlighted in a cursory manner, but rarely scrutinized, even though it in many ways deserves every kind of suspicion. Like some kind of elaborate mantra of apology, many critics feel compelled to say before beginning their text that they are black/white female/male middle class/working class homo/heterosexual and so forth; the more privileged positions the writer occupies, the longer the preamble. There are many problems with this gesture, but certainly the most egregious is its implicit assumption that one can somehow *account* for all of one's subjectivities, for every shaping cultural force of one's identities. Even assuming that such an account could be made, it is either redundant (if one assumes, as these writers ostensibly do, that the text is a product of one's cultural position no matter what one does) or falsely penitential, like a prayer for the soul of the soon-to-be-departed uttered by an Inquisitor bearing a torch.

This does not mean, however, that some accounting cannot or should not be made. The exemplary question is that posed by Michel deCerteau in *Heterologies*: "From what position do the historians of popular culture speak? And what object do they constitute as a result of that position?"<sup>16</sup> And again: "The uncertainty about the boundaries of the popular domain, about its homogeneity over against the profound and always reinforced unity of the culture of the elites -- does it not signify that the popular domain has yet to exist, because it is impossible for us to speak without annihilating it?"<sup>17</sup> Which is to say that it is rarely, if ever, in the interests of 'insurrectionary knowledges' -- if that is what rap or hip-hop culture is -- that the historians or chroniclers of "culture," as constituted by the knowledges of semiotics, anthropology, or literary theory, have spoken. The ultimate interest of these knowledges, which dominate the discursive spheres of academia, is quite frequently not to *preserve* the cultural phenomena that they study, but to (re)constitute these phenomena (as I noted above) as the *object* of pre-existing knowledges, or perhaps (at best) of new or modified modes of academic knowledge. Amiri Baraka framed much the same problematic in relation to jazz and white jazz critics when he wrote in 1967 that:

What had happened [in the 1940's] was that even though the white middle-brow critic had known about Negro music for only about three decades, he was already trying to formalize and finally institutionalize it. It is a hideous idea. The music was already in danger of being forced into that junk pile of admirable objects and data that the West knows as culture.<sup>18</sup>

This difference is particularly significant in the case of hip-hop, for as Jon Michael Spencer has observed, both rappers and scholars partake of a discursive universe where skill at appropriating the fragments of a rapidly-changing world with verbal grace and dexterity is

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<sup>16</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 129

<sup>17</sup> De Certeau, p. 129

<sup>18</sup> Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 18.

constituted as *knowledge*, and given a high value.<sup>19</sup> This parallel emphasis is echoed within rap's own discursive terminologies; a particularly skilled rapper is known as a 'teacha' or a 'professa,' who 'drops knowledge' on the mic and gives her/his opponents 'schoolin.' Yet unlike a college professor, whose competence is underwritten by degrees and certificates, a rapper's competence is constituted primarily by her or his continuing skill at the ongoing practice of rapping; indeed many rappers, such as Sister Souljah, explicitly deride academic expertise: "The experts, the scientists, Ph.D.'s / Souljah pays no homage to a paper degree."<sup>20</sup> The *knowledge* which rappers draw on is not only their own- day-to-day experience, but also the entire recorded tradition of African-American music (as well as other African, American, and European musics, from Kraftwerk to Spandau Ballet to the Incredible Bongo Band) -- which it re-reads and Signifies upon through a complex blend of strategies, including samplin', cuttin' (pastiche), and freestylin' (improvisation). Thus, even more so than has been the case with earlier African-American artforms, hip-hop constitutes *itself* as a knowledge, complete with its own discursive forms, both citing and siting its own tradition(s). For such an established 'cultural movement' as hip-hop, it would be a signal act of *violence* to appropriate its indigenous knowledges and practices merely in order to annex them to academic modes of knowledge. And nonetheless, to a greater or lesser extent, that is exactly what much scholarly writing about rap has done; this book itself oppose but not entirely escape this problematic.

Thus the question is not: "Of what significance could I (or the ubiquitous academic "we") declare rap to be?," but rather, "What are rap's own modes of signification, intelligibility, and reference?" And how might that be deployed for a postmodern politics of resistance? These questions cannot be answered without reference to the networks of

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<sup>19</sup> Jon Michael Spencer, preface to *The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap* (*Black Sacred Music*, Vol. 5 No. 1), p. iii.

<sup>20</sup> From "The Hate that Hate Produced," on *360 Degrees of Power*, EPIC EK 48713 (1992). It's equally worth noting, however, that rappers such as KRS-One, Chuck-D, and Queen Latifah have returned the interest of academia by lecturing at several college campuses, including NYU, the University of Pennsylvania, and Harvard.

power/knowledge within which hip-hop circulates, which must include television coverage of the L.A. uprising, MTV, the controversies over 2 Live Crew and Ice-T's "Cop Killer," the music business (got to walk a straight line / in the bizness / Yo, and I'm out to get mine, in tha bizness<sup>21</sup>), the 5% Nation (of Islam), and the local hip-hop scenes in Oakland, L.A., Houston, Detroit, Philadelphia, and New York. As with other cultural productions, there is no essential inside/outside, only enactments of who or what is "in" or "out". Academics only remain "outside" if they make no effort to understand or participate in hip-hop. On the other side of the coin, it is possible even for the most "in" insider to lose the respect of large segments of the hip-hop audience, as happened with MC Hammer.

Nonetheless, my own position with regard to hip-hop is at most that of a thoughtful listener and student of its histories. If KRS-One, himself one of the most compelling and influential 'teachas' of rap, can say (as he does in the liner notes to *Sex and Violence*):

KRS-ONE is the teacher because KRS-ONE is the student. Being first a student gives you the right to be called teacher.<sup>22</sup>

then who am I to take up the position of "teacher"? I cannot pretend for a moment that I am not, by writing about hip-hop culture, taking up a position in which I will, sooner or later, be sited/cited as some kind authority on hip-hop as a subject. Yet, if I do not write at all, then I am in even greater danger of falsifying my own work by pretending that hip-hop does not have fundamentally important things to say to and about *my* work in the academy. The most I can do, I would argue, is to take up, temporarily, a place at the *crossroads*. For it is at the crossroads where rap's discourses and modes of signification intersect with all the other heterolectic interchanges of which it is a part, and whatever its own knowledges, they cannot help but exist in an interplay -- indeed in a *struggle* -- among other such

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<sup>21</sup> From A Tribe Called Quest, "Show Business," from *The Low-End Theory*, Zomba/Jive 1418-2-J, © 1991 Zomba Recording Corp.

<sup>22</sup> KRS-ONE (Kris Parker), liner notes to *Sex and Violence* (Jive/Zomba 01241-41470-2); © 1992 Zomba Recording Corporation.

knowledges. Of course, to take up a place at the crossroads is (as Houston Baker has observed) a risky business. There is a dangerous tendency for any discourse so sited to take up either the position of one who speaks in the name of a romanticized Other who is somehow in "need" of intellectual interpretation or validation, or else the 'masterful' position of one who immobilizes the itinerant text by categorizing it, neatly cutting and pasting it into pre-existing Eurocentric cultural paradigms. Yet the positive value of crossroads discourse is equally great -- provided, as Baker notes, that it insists upon "the relinquishing of a self-certainty that strives to annul 'otherness' and to masterfully fix its place"<sup>23</sup> The alternative -- *silence* -- is in any case no less problematic; to continue to teach and discuss poetry as if it still consisted of only of printed poetry in the European tradition perpetuates an exclusion which reinscribes the cultural apartheid of dominant knowledges.

The meeting of critical and cultural theory with Rap or hip-hop music is perhaps more an urban intersection than a rural railroad crossing -- but like Baker's meditations on the blues, it remains a discourse founded on the ground where the signification of critical theory intersects with the Signifyin(g) language of African-American vernaculars -- and with other kinds of signification as well. Like that urban intersection, this book may at any given moment contain numerous conflicting modes of signification -- but unlike those who would shut out the heteroglossaic din, I prefer to second Chuck-D's motion to "bring the noise." Thus, rather than imposing the discourse of semiotics, cultural theory, or materialist critique *upon* hip-hop significations, this text will attempt to juxtapose rap and critical theory as two elements in a heterolectic interchange, an interchange which itself is an instance of Signifyin(g). For it is precisely the point of the Signifyin(g) game that the reception of discourse is a vexed question, a site of a struggle not only over "meaning" but over modes of signification themselves. And, while it is constituted by verbal indirection, figuration, and homonymic slippage, the ultimate point of Signifyin(g) has always been *power*.

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<sup>23</sup> Baker, Houston A., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1984).

