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**Introduction, *Spectacular Vernaculars:  
Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (1995)**

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>

The broader cultural debates about postmodernism have in recent years become almost a kind of cottage industry fueled both by fascination and loathing, as critics alternately extol the "postmodernity" of some text or social phenomenon, or decry the intellectual bankruptcy of a "postmodernism" that they regard as a sort of willful intellectual meltdown. As a result, it has become almost conventional to insist that there are multiple postmodernisms, and for each new text to claim for itself a different textual genealogy made up of the books, texts, or cultural happenings that it prefers to regard as characteristically postmodern. It can seem a wearying gesture, but nonetheless it needs to be made in part precisely because it is all too easy to wave the banner of "multiplicity" in front of every confounded reader, as if complexity all by itself were an occasion for critics to abdicate judgment and jump into a happy free-for-all of floating signifiers. For "postmodernism" is all too often read as the idea that *nothing is at stake*, a signpost on the way to relativistic chaos, whereas I share with many other writers the sense that a great deal is at stake, and that what is perceived as relativism is really an attempt to confront some of the most troubling contradictions of contemporary culture.

One influential model of this troubled dichotomy is Theresa L. Ebert's discussion of "ludic" and "resistance" postmodernism.<sup>3</sup> "Ludic" postmodernism, as its name implies, is the postmodernism of play, of free fall, of delight in irresolution; "resistance" postmodernism, with which Ebert aligns her critical practice, is a model of critique which, while aware of the complex interdeterminations of social and textual subjectivities, draws deeply on Marxism's insistence on the correlatives of material conditions, and seeks quite explicitly to "resist" what it sees as humanistic pluralism. However compelling and useful Ebert's dichotomy may be, I would like to immediately undercut it by suggesting the possibility of a play that in its ethos and effects is a form of resistance. That is, rather than polarize postmodernism, in the manner of Monty Python, into "silly" and "serious" camps, I would like to suggest that play—and not only in obvious forms, such as parody and satire—is potentially a powerful mode of resistance.<sup>4</sup> Play certainly can be an idle distraction, but it can also be the mask for a potent mode of subversion, and indeed I argue in this book that hip-hop culture in particular,

and African American culture in general, is precisely such a form. What needs emphasis here, however, is that there is something at stake in constructions of postmodernity, that political questions are not rendered moot by postmodern indeterminacies, that indeed post-modernism has as profound an ethical dimension as any modernism.

Another question about postmodernism, and one that has been played upon by many critics, is what exactly it is post. And, while there remains an inevitable slippage into chronology, I think the central problem of postmodernism is that its *own time* is deeply and repeatedly untimely. Bennet Schaber and Bill Readings put it this way in the introduction to their book, *Postmodernism Across the Ages*:

For us, the postmodern marks a gap in the thinking of time that is constitutive of the modernist concept of time as succession or progress. This is something we feel strongly about. It commits us here to resisting a number of existing images of the postmodern. We do not resist in the name of truth or purity, but in order to refuse that the postmodern be given a truth, circulated as current and legitimate coinage.<sup>5</sup>

Here we have a different kind of resistance—a resistance to the very kind of history that would anoint the bearers of pre-, present, and post-. And there is what I would identify as a central trait or trope of the postmodern: its refusal of fixed or progressive models of time. As much "not yet" as "not *then*," decidedly after a kind of time that constitutes itself as progressive (even if that time is still ticking); perhaps running in grand Viconian cycles of eternal return, perhaps preferring the kind of local interruption of time that takes place in a musical sample of previous recordings. Not that this sort of postmodernism has no roots, that it is not susceptible to a diachronic survey but rather that its succession is always in (and indeed *about*) dispute, as Schaber and Readings might say, *illegitimate*.

How exactly hip-hop culture can be seen as *postmodern* has everything to do with this same peculiar splitting of time. In one sense, African Americans have good reason not to give too much credence to "progressive" time, since for four hundred years most of the economic "progress" in the United States has disproportionately benefited its white citizens. Yet at the same time, there has been an unyielding hunger and thirst for the promise of the future what bell hooks calls "Yearning"-coupled with a bitter awareness of the presence of "past" oppressions. This split in time, in turn, has potent connections to the inner-spatial "double consciousness" articulated almost a century ago by W.E.B. DuBois: that African Americans, even as they have sought to build from within a full sense of self-authenticity, have had to exist in a nation where the fundamental symbolic structures continually place them in the position of "Other." As Paul Gilroy demonstrates compellingly in his book, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, there are potent yet obscured common genealogies at stake here—including but not limited to the philosophical dialectics of master/slave relations, the reflexive constructions of "whiteness" and "blackness," and indeed the metastasis of parts of the racist epistemology of eugenics in the current ascension of cultural studies.<sup>6</sup>

Gilroy, who has a healthy suspicion of the simplistic relativism of some avatars of postmodernism, prefers to see these black cultural formations as oppositional modernities, rather than postmodernities. Yet precisely because these formations inhabit recurrent moments of resistance, situated both in and as "breaks" in progressive time—and because,

in their intrinsic structures, they constitute both a counteraesthetic and counter-ethos to the fuzzy humanism of many modernist movements—I feel strongly that they are more accurately described as *postmodern*. In particular, even within black modernisms, there has been, as Gilroy describes it, "both an imaginary anti-modern past and a postmodern yet-to-come."<sup>17</sup> The chronological bifurcation, analogous to double consciousness, is profoundly different from the one-way street of the vast majority of "modernist" movements, and constitutes the core of a full-blown postmodern sensibility that in its fundamental structures refuses the terms of Eurocentric modernisms (which themselves owe much more than they often care to admit both to the conceptual terms of "blackness" and to particular black expressive arts).

In this sense, it could be said that all black artistic movements are postmodern. In fact I would argue that, while in a very general sense such a statement has its truth, in actual historical practice postmodernity has marked a particular part of the cycle of African American arts, a part intimately related to its material situation. For there is history at stake here, not only the history of the structures of resistance, from spiritual songs to Calypso stick-dancers to Public Enemy's S1W security force, but the already double(d) history of "white" appropriation, commodification, and dilution of black artistic expressions. From the minstrel shows of the nineteenth century, through the "swing" jazz cover bands that cashed in on the Jazz craze of the '30s, to the white musicians who appropriated jump Blues and called it rock-n-roll, African American arts have always been dogged by the backhanded compliments of exoticization and commodification. A great deal of value has been placed on black arts, but this value has been largely negotiable only in terms of white dollars. Conscious of this recurring act of appropriation, African-American artists have again and again wrenched new time out of old, refusing and interrupting the commodification of their work. And, while much of this has been represented by its chroniclers as a species of modernism (and here I am thinking of moments from the Harlem Renaissance to Bop to the Black Arts movement), each has been pointedly sited on *culturalbreaks* breaks with pre-existing black traditions that had been appropriated and retailed to suit mass (read white) tastes, and at the same time returns to previous moments within the black artistic continuum. The resulting radical now, based on the irruption of unaccounted histories and as-yet unfulfilled futures, itself constitutes a gap in progressive time, a gap which both draws from and gives voice to the frustrations felt when the artistic expressions of black diasporic communities are once again taken out of the control of their originators and producers.

Despite these potent and suggestive connections between black vernacular artforms and the modalities and ethics of postmodernism, there has been a longstanding—and oftentimes justified—suspicion of the part of black writers and philosophers over what (if anything) postmodernism could possibly offer for the kinds of critical histories they were engaged with constructing. As recently as 1989, it was possible for Cornel West to allow, in his essay "Black Culture and Postmodernism," that "the current 'postmodernism' debate is first and foremost a product of significant First World reflections upon the decentering of Europe."<sup>18</sup> West, as one of the leading black philosophers of our time, saw both the parochial and ludic elements of postmodernism as signs of its insufficient engagement with black culture, even as he gestured towards "a potentially enabling yet resisting postmodernism."<sup>19</sup> Yet in the light of critiques and analyses by scholars such as bell hooks and Paul Gilroy, it has become increasingly evident that what had earlier been articulated primarily as the

subcultural resistance of black artforms has in fact had a long and intimate relation with the founding dialectics of "Western" modernism. At the same time, "postmodernism" as a field of discourse has widened, moving a considerable distance from Jean-Francois Lyotard and his circle of abstract intellectual vanguardists. While some now disparage what they see as "vulgar" postmodernism, perhaps what has in fact happened is that the earlier coterie of postmodernists has been forced to reckon with more material formations of postmodernism, many of which are no longer willing to wait for their cue.

So "resistance postmodernism," as I hope to articulate it in this book, is not simply a theorization of a more political postmodernist stance; it proposes (against the grain of many self-announced "resistance postmodernists") that the material and social forms resistance takes in a specific cultural context exceed and may well be indifferent or even hostile to some of the academic formulations of postmodernism. And, in the case of black cultural histories, the reason for this hostility lies not solely or even primarily in what is too readily construed as a reactive hearkening towards a pre-modernist worldview, but in a deeply historical and resonantly informed vernacular articulation of anti-modernism. Too many ostensibly "radical" intellectuals are so filled with the conviction of their own radicality that they can only conceive of rejection by the *people* in whose name they articulate resistance as a reactionary *move*. The "organic intellectual," raised as a hopeful sign, is dropped all too quickly when he or she refuses to walk in step with the announced theoretical vanguard. Particularly in the case of black cultures, where there has been, as Paul Gilroy hints at, a vernacular ethics, a vernacular history, and a vernacular version of 'modernism,' it is vital to recognize that there are material inheritances—such as slavery whose reverberations need not be recorded by a seismograph in a sealed laboratory, but can be and are felt in the everyday life of black diasporic cultures.

All of this comes down to almost a single proposition: the historical experience of slavery—which by no means ends with the "emancipation" proclamation—makes a fundamental difference in the cultural and philosophical modes of expression of black cultures. Black cultures have inhabited the contradictory space of what Gilroy calls the "slave sublime," have glimpsed the fundamental rotteness of European modernism from its very intestines long before Europe noticed any trace of indigestion. Living, talking, making music, and writing in the subjectivity of resistance that was built—had to be built—against the economic and philosophical bulwarks of slavery and colonialism, black cultures conceived postmodernism long before its "time" as construed by writers who had to wait and take their cue from Derrida, Foucault, or Lyotard. This is not to (re)make the particularist argument that black postmodernisms, because earlier or more visceral, are therefore superior—but it is at least to stake a claim that they are of equally fundamental importance. More importantly, I do not want to advance any notion that black postmodernisms, because lived or felt are in any sense less *thought-a* problem which inhabits many claims as to the value of black artforms. Instead, I would say that European and black traditions (which are now of course also European, as well as American, Caribbean, and so forth) stand of different sides of a specific historical ideological formation, one which rationalized slavery in the name of "higher" pursuits, and underpinned the vast ethical disaster of raising an "Age of Reason" on the profits of an unjustifiable trilateral trade in slaves, sugar, and rum. Slavery, as Gilroy insists, can no longer be seen as merely incidental to capitalism, or to the philosophical movements which have attended or been produced by capitalist societies. Black history carries the subversive truth that

contemporary rationales for poverty, ghettoization, and trickle-down economic policy that justify the increasing wealth of a few on the backs of a growing black underclass are also part and parcel of this ongoing capitalistic hegemony, and black arts are the signal site for the return of these repressed realities.

Black diasporic cultures, immediately linked to this economy of enslavement, have re-articulated the West from its pre-history on up, starting with the reading of the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt that underpins the whole worldview of the tradition of spiritual song. In so doing, they were most emphatically not seeking to turn time *backwards* (the past of Jewish slavery being read as present) but rather to focus an intense energy on an as-yet utopian future--and yet as much an earthly utopia much as a heavenly one. Building culture out of remembered fragments, linked together with anagogical syntheses appropriated from the slavemasters' cultural past, and yet intensely directed towards a visionary and personal future this is the modality within which black modernisms have arisen, and from which, in ages of renewed despair and struggle, black postmodernisms have proceeded. Black modernisms, of course, have never been hermetically sealed off from European or Euro-American modernisms, and indeed the substantial debts of modernism to black cultures are as yet only partly tallied--but what is most significant here is that the untimely sense of time so fundamental to postmodernism arrived considerably earlier within black diasporic cultures--and has as a result had antecedents and results distinct from, though not at all unrelated to, those of European (post) modernisms.

So what time is it? With this question, rappers situate themselves within a black diasporic timezone, outside the "official" time of calendars and digital watches; for hip-hopppers, as for the Last Poets, "time is running out."<sup>10</sup> Or perhaps it has already run out; as Sun Ra says, "it's after the end of the world." Flavor Flav's gargantuan timepieces, like Dali's wilted watches, mark a surreal incursion, a time radically at odds with the modernist world. Hip-hop's triad of graffiti, dance, and rap are post-apocalyptic arts, scratches on the decaying surfaces of post-industrial urban America; they are not monuments to some romanticized "human spirit," but fundamentally anti-monumental arts. If there are analogous moments in European chronologies, they are not in Joyce's Dublin or Eliot's London, but in the carcereal dementia of Piranesi's Rome, or the situationist juxtapositions of Debord's Paris. Hip-hop's time is post-apocalyptic, and its landscape is the Society of the Spectacle, in which the ultimate commodity form is that of the spectacularized image. Rather than, as most modernist texts would do, reject such a society and yearn for a return to a world made whole by art, hip-hop aims for a world made *hole*, aporic, fracturing the fragmented, graffiti on the graffiti. If there is a communality in hip-hop—and I think there can be no doubt there is—it is the communality of the recognition that "it's like that, and that's the way it is" that the time for naive idealism is past, that the world's in a non-stop state of emergency that no amount of rose-colored rhetoric can amend.<sup>11</sup> Instead of grand projects cut from a single block, hip-hop rebuilds art from parts, mobile and recombinant.

Debord saw the spectacle as the ultimate commodity form, and thus the central currency of a post-industrial age. The spectacle is "capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image," and marks "the moment when the commodity has taken the total occupation of social life."<sup>12</sup> Resistance to such commodification seems futile in such a model, and yet it continues to occur. From

the historical position of post-industrial, postmodern urban arts, the recognition that everything is or will soon be commodified has instead served as a spur, an incitement to productivity; within specifically African-American arts, it is a move with a long history. For every musical form that black culture has produced has been appropriated and commodified by white culture in the name of a very particular kind of spectacle, whether it be a minstrel show, a big band concert, or a rock-n-roll extravaganza. Black Americans, having experienced the violence of slavery's subjugation, have had the singular historical experience of having their blackness made into a spectacular commodity of great value, even as they themselves have been denied the profits of such commodification.

As middle-class Americans have danced their tango with the society of the spectacle, they have, it is true, become aware of its vacuousness. And, at each step, many have turned to African-American culture for something to spice up the bland gruel of their existence. And, aware that their cultural capital bore an inverse relation to their material wealth, Black Americans have frequently deployed the arts of Signifyin(g), giving white audiences what they thought they wanted, while at the same time giving themselves what they needed: a mode of communication which could signal solidarity. None of these relations are, in the end, reducible to their material components (though the profit sheets of the major record companies can bear ready testament to "who stole the soul?"); they are instead spectacular relations, cultural exchanges along an uneven, class and racially-inflected social fault line: you take your stereotype and I'll take mine. Hip-hop culture is the ultimate incarnation of this spectacularized cultural exchange; never has black rage been more up front; never have consumers been so ready to buy. Many such purchases, no doubt, will be recontained by the very commodity structures that enabled the exchange in the first place; for some consumers, a hip-hop CD may be simply a safety-sealed black rage in a handy 5 x 5 inch package. Yet despite this, hip-hop's message of disaffection and rage has many other points of resonance in post-industrial America, and can readily be the catalyst for identification across racial lines. As bell hooks puts it,

The overall impact of the postmodern condition is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding, even if it is not informed by shared circumstance. Radical postmodernism calls attention to those sensibilities which are shared across the boundaries of class, gender, and race, and which could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy ties that would promote recognition of common commitments and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition.

In this sense, I would put hip-hop forward as one form of radical postmodernism, a postmodernism whose representational strategies, while complex and contradictory, do not for that reason lose their liberatory potential. While its rhetorical and musical structures clearly come out of African-American vernacular traditions, its audience has from the start crossed racial and regional lines, and the substantial sales figures of hip-hop albums by groups such as Public Enemy, De La Soul, and A Tribe Called Quest clearly indicate that their audience includes both black and white listeners of a wide range of social classes.<sup>13</sup> As Chuck D has remarked, hip-hop has come to mark more of a generational line than a racial one, and

indeed this is one reason why it is so threatening to the dominant race-class system; it invites identification across forbidden lines, and demonstrates widespread disaffection from the machinery of capitalism at a time when the free market is widely hailed in the media as the great economic savior.<sup>14</sup>

Lines of race, gender, and social class are not the only ones hip-hop crosses; particularly in the early '90s, it is increasingly clear that hip-hop has become a transnational, global artform capable of mobilizing diverse disenfranchised groups. Following the diasporic byways of the black Atlantic, which as Gilroy has demonstrated have been pivotal cultural vectors for centuries, rap music has surfaced in a wide range of cultural and intercultural sites.<sup>15</sup> Contact between West Indian and East Indian communities in England has produced the so-called Bhangramuffin (from `Bhangra,' the traditional rhythm-driven music of Punjabi emigres, and `ragamuffin,' a cognate of "reggae" used to describe the rapid-fire dancehall toasting popular in Jamaica today) style exemplified by artists such as Apache Indian; in Paris, the Senegalese rapper MC Solaar has established himself with his mixture of New York attitude and smooth rapid-fire French; in South Africa, the traditional rhythms of resistance have joined with hip-hop-inflected vocals of groups such as Prophets of the City. In this sense, while hip-hop's time signature is "after the end of the world," its locus is simultaneously local and global; 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. 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" or canonical 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. Problematising this act has been one of the central themes of many postmodernist artforms.<sup>16</sup>

Despite these promising rifts and openings, much of the criticism that surrounds and frames the debates over postmodernism has 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, to date, been proclaimed primarily in a language which only those already within the world of academic postmodernism can readily understand.

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 ostensibly discredited "high" culture, the analysis of the popular has taken its place, forming a new elite 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>17</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 traveling roadshows of such avowedly antiacademic 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').

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 (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 1930s, 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. Even when the one doing the studying is a member of the community, 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>18</sup>

What is 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 that comprise the contemporary moment is neither to overvalue nor to undervalue any particular part of it. The necessity forced upon 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 valued 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 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 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 others 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.

For instance, postmodern theorists have spent a great deal of time talking about the ways in which identity, far from being reducible to essentialized categories such as race, class, and gender, is in fact more of a patchwork of overlapping—and in some cases, conflicting—identities. Yet despite the many books echoing this theme, in the spectacularized world of the mass media, essential identities continue to have ample airplay; hip-hop's engagement with this world is direct and ongoing. Well aware of the power of media such as television and radio, rappers have managed to bum-rush the Spectacle, to hijack the media by its own devices. If violent black males in hoodies are stirring up fear on the evening news, rappers will represent with guns in their hands, "sending out mad shots, making devils run naked."<sup>19</sup> Yet check under the hoods and you will find a different message, a message of solidarity with other African-American communities, a message of survival against the odds. It's what N.W.A. calls "the strength of street knowledge"; there is power in language, the power to make oppressors tremble, and more: the power to make them think.

While this might seem in some ways to signal a still more essentialized, exoticized blackness, I would say instead that it signifies on white fears about black culture; its building blocks are stereotypes, and yet the ultimate effect of heaping them up is to render the stereotype untenable. Furthermore, the identities represented by rappers are themselves direct

embodiments of capitalism's deep contradictions; inveighing against white capitalism, rappers call out the praises of Jeeps, BMWs, Gucci watches, and fat bankrolls; criticizing white standards of beauty embodied by hair straighteners and blue contact lenses, many rappers end up pointing the finger at black women more than the cosmetic industry. And yet at the core, even these material icons, like graffiti-bombed subway cars, remain in transit both towards and against the larger capitalistic system; as Boots of the Oakland rap group the Coup puts it,

Capitalism is like a spider The web is getting tighter I'm strugglin' like a fighter ...

. . . just when I think I'm free It seems to me the spider steps. This web is made of money, made of greed, made of me

Or what I have become in a parasite economy...

The Coup, "Not Yet Free" <sup>20</sup>

In their material icons, as with their political messages, hip-hop texts themselves are 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 marked by homophobic metaphors; a rap that dramatizes the plight of the Los Angeles ghetto (e.g., N.W.A.'s "Straight Outta Compton") goes out of its way to diss women with misogynistic epithets.<sup>21</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" 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>22</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>23</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 theorists of postmodernism—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 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. 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 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 revolutionary 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 "city life"<sup>24</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 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>25</sup> Indeed, there has been considerable class tension *within* African-American cultures, as exemplified (albeit in diluted 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.

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>26</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>27</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 1970s. 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 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 unattainable grail; such a quest can only succeed by erasing historical difference.<sup>28</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. For many African-Americans in the United States, the disappointment of the political and economic dreams of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, 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 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, not so much on account of chronology as on account of what Bakhtin calls "chronotopes" the linked prismatic synecdoches of cultural history.<sup>29</sup> Hip-hop's central

chronotope is the turntable, which Signifies on its ability to 'turn the tables' on previous black traditions, making a future out of fragments from the archive of the past, turning consumption into production. With this mode of turning and re-turning, 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, as well as black music on a global scale.

Yet even as I use this term—"black music"—I encounter the difficult but central question of the terminologies of art and identity. While I use the term "African American" where it is appropriate, I also use the term "black," by which I mean not only African American peoples and cultures, but the full continuum of the multiple and interlinked African diasporic cultures in the Americas, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe. Too often, as Paul Gilroy has demonstrated, cultural formations which move across multiple borders are nonetheless treated as isolated national phenomena. Gilroy has shown, beyond any doubt I believe, that what he calls the "black Atlantic" is a densely interconnected cultural formation which, despite and in some cases because of discontinuities, continues to mobilize, encode, and transmit cultural matter without which, none of its particular diasporic outposts can be understood. Gilroy does not capitalize "black," and in this way marks his difference from the kinds of conservative and essentialistic conceptions of "black" that have formed and fueled some black nationalist movements. Yet I am continually conscious, as I hope my readers are, that throughout the Americas and Europe, racial inequality and injustice continues on a massive scale. Having cast off the telltale robes of political apartheid, racism hides behind ostensibly autonomous formations, such as economics and demographics, the more reprehensible because the more insidious. In such a climate, it is inevitable that polarizing dichotomies of race will continue to be central, and indeed the spectacular politics of race, within and against which hip-hop is struggling, are fundamental to its emergence. Some writers take it for granted that postmodernist theories, because they proclaim the erasure or complication of racial dichotomies, seek to evade or grant dispensation for racist ideology, but on the contrary I see radical postmodernism as a powerful weapon against such ideologies.<sup>30</sup> Radical postmodernism gives us a third option, neither the essentialized racial identities cherished by separatists on all sides nor the erasure of difference which is so dear to so-called "liberal" theorists who still dream of a "melting pot" society, but a concrete "double" and perhaps even multiple consciousness—the awareness that "white" is no less a construction than "black," and that cultural differences emanate not from hermetically-sealed universes, but from an insistent and ongoing mix.

So while the term "black" designates a very specific cultural formation, this formation itself exists in a particular kind of historical bind: culturally speaking, it is highly permeable, and is continually crossed and recrossed by language, music, and visual arts. Yet on a social level, as a result of the economic and social structures of racism, "black" and "white" are rendered impermeable two different neighborhoods, two different boxes to check on a form, two different spectacularized opponents. The struggle against this ongoing racism pushes its way up through music, not only because (as Gilroy observes) music is so central to African diasporic cultures, but because most other outlets for its mediation or expression have been blocked. Unblocking those routes, connecting across racial polarities, is perhaps the most revolutionary work of hip-hop music and culture; as KRS One puts it, "Black and white ain't the real fight, that's the only thing the media hypes."<sup>31</sup> This move, moreover, is one that must become as

central for "whites" as it has been for "blacks"; perhaps rather than hoping for an end to the kind of double-consciousness first described by DuBois, we should be working to spread it around. The central trope of "white" is, I think, the luxury not to think doubly, to see the world through the one-eyed vistas of privilege, rather than having to account for one's own identity within and against a fundamentally multiple culture. Making this latter kind of consciousness not only possible but necessary may be the only way to re-open the lines of communication that the economic apartheid of the '80s and '90s has severed; to the extent that hip-hop (along with Ska, Reggae, and other diasporic African musics) carries messages across the polarizing lines of racism, it has the potential to accomplish just that.

Finally, I must account for my own position—or, more accurately, positions—in relation to both hip-hop and postmodernism. Both formations have their own protocols for making such an account—hip hop has its ubiquitous name-, place-, and date-tagging ("Ice Cube, motherfucker, comin' at cha in the nine-tray"; "South Bronx, South South Bronx"), and postmodernism has its reflexive self-accounting in terms of race, gender, class, and sexuality. These modes, whatever their rhetorical protocols, have a great deal in common; both are highly contingent, aware of the multiplicity and flux that surrounds any act of self-accounting, and both recognize themselves as performative acts, acts of self-staging. Yet beyond these stage directions, it's crucial to account for the material cultural discourses which inform and support any text, especially in the context of hip-hop culture, which is shaped both within and against commodity formation. Hip-hop CD's and university-press books both come from within very specific discourses and places of production, and both (though for different reasons) often express an underlying anxiety about how the pressures of commodification affect their 'product.'

For cultural critics, the exemplary question is that posed by Michel de Certeau 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>32</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>33</sup> Which is to say that it is rarely, if ever, in the interests of "insurrectionary knowledges" (such as hip-hop) 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 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 1940s] 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>34</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 constituted as *knowledge*, and given ultimate value.<sup>35</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>36</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 Manu Dibango to 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, to an even greater extent 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 an act of violence to appropriate its indigenous knowledges and practices merely in order to annex them to academic modes of knowledge. And nonetheless, that is exactly what much scholarly writing about rap has done; this book itself opposes but cannot 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 they constitute a postmodern politics of resistance? These questions cannot be answered without reference to the networks of power/knowledge within which hip-hop circulates, which must include television coverage of the Los Angeles uprising, MTV, the controversies over 2 Live Crew, Ice-T's "Cop Killer," and Snoop Doggy Dogg, the 1994 congressional hearings on gangsta rap, the 5% Nation, and the local hip-hop scenes in New York, Miami, Oakland, Los Angeles, Houston, Detroit, Philadelphia, and other major urban areas. 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 fail to realize that whatever their material privileges and shelf-load of degrees, their planet and the hip-hop planet are one and the same, and if the music doesn't seem to speak to them, perhaps it's because they just haven't been listening. As recent work by scholars such as Houston A. Baker Jr., Tricia Rose, Paul Gilroy, and Cornel West amply demonstrates, hip-hop and academia *do* have a great deal to say to one another, particularly within black studies, but also within cultural studies as a whole. Rappers and producers, for their part, have been an increasingly visible and proactive force on college campuses; Public Enemy's Chuck D sets aside a part of each year to travel the college lecture circuit, and rappers such as Sister Souljah, KRS-One, and Queen Latifah have also lectured at major universities. College towns are also primary sites for rap in performance, especially since the mid-'80s wave of paranoia about violence at rap concerts, which closed many major stadium and indoor venues to rap artists.<sup>37</sup> Finally,

college radio has supplied the only substantial nationwide airplay for rap music, which except for Los Angeles' now-defunct KDAY and a small number of maverick stations that program a few hours of rap a week, has very little radio exposure outside of New York City.<sup>38</sup>

I hope this book enters into the mix, bringing academics, performers, and all who care about society in a postmodern, post-industrial world together, dropping some knowledge and breaking down some barriers. I hope, too, that it does something to dispel the pernicious notion that rappers are somehow non- or anti-intellectual, or that in describing the crises facing urban America and the world they are somehow glamorizing or advocating the conditions of which they testify. On the academic side, I hope that no one will any longer be able to think of music or poetry in the late twentieth century without assigning rappers a primary place, both out of an awareness of the urgency of their message, as well as on account of the tremendous poetic power and variety of their expression. And for rappers themselves, and everyone in the vast and growing hip-hop nation, I hope this book will help make evident the multiple connections between hip-hop's insurrectionary knowledges and the historical and societal forces against which they are posed, and in so doing expand and strengthen the depth of our determination to "fight the powers that be."

#### NOTES:

1. *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1 (September 1990).
2. Sun Ra, "It's After the End of the World," available on *Soundtrack to the Film Space is the Place*, Evidence Records ECD 22070-2.
3. Theresa Ebert, "Writing the Political: Resistance (Post) modernism," address. ess delivered at a conference on "Rewriting the Postmodern: (Post) Ck',- )Colonialism/Feminism/Late Capitalism," University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Ma March 30, 1990, discussed in Donald Morton and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, "Theory, Pedagogy, Politics: The Crisis of `The Subject' in the Humanities," in Morton on 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.
4. This point by itself is not new; it has been developed most significantly bIv by Linda Hutcheon, in her lucid book *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), particularly in chapter 4, "The politics of parody."
5. Bill Readings and Bennet Schaber, *Postmodernism Across the Ages* New York: Syracuse University Press 1993> 6.
6. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cad Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1993).
7. *Gilroy, The Black Atlantic, P. 36.*
8. Cornel West "Black Culture and Postmodernism " in Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (eds.), *Remaking History* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989): pp.87-88.
9. West, "Black Culture and Postmodernism," p. 96.
10. The Last Poets, "Run, Nigger," on *The Last Poets*, Celluloid CEL 6101. As Tricia Rose observes, "What time is it?" is the first part of the Nation of Islam's well-know call-and-response, to which the answer is "Nation Time." Yet it is the *first* part of this exchange,

with its air of "if you have to ask, you don't know," that has become part of the hip-hop's central tropology, circulating far beyond NOI circles.

11. Run DMC, "It's Like That," from Greatest Hits, 1983-1991 Profile PCD-1419.
12. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Red & Black, n.d.), sections 34, 42.
13. It should be underlined at this juncture that hip-hop was from the start a product of *multiple* cultures, even though its primary producers and audiences were black. Many of the first posses of rappers, break-dancers, and graf writers were Puerto Ricans; as Juan Flores points out, the scene for the emergence of hip-hop in New York in the late '70s was almost as much Puerto Rican as African-American, despite some tensions between these groups (see Juan Flores, "Puerto Rican and Proud, Boyee!: Rap Roots and Amnesia," in Andrew Rossi & Tricia Rose, *Microphone Fiends. Youth Music and Youth Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994)). There were also several early collaborations between white punkers and black and Latino rappers, such as those between Futura 2000 and the Clash, or Afrika Bambaataa and John Lydon (a.k.a. Johnny Rotten and the Sex Pistols); see the Celluloid sampler *Roots of Rap: The 12-inch singles* (CELD-6205).
14. Chuck D, lecture at Colby College, Waterville, Maine, September 1993.
15. GiIroy, *The Black Atlantic*.
16. Whether or not materialist theories of ideology mark an end to aesthetics remains a hotly contested issue, but my point here is that it is no longer possible to construct an aesthetic without at least taking ideology into account. See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), or for a pragmatist turn, see Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics. Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), which has a suggestive chapter on rap music.
17. Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture*, pp. 9-10.
18. 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.
19. Gang Starr, "Tons-o-Guns," on *Hard to Earn* (CD 7243 8 28435 2)
20. The Coup, "Not Yet Free," from *Kill My Landlord*, Wild Pitch CD 07777-89047-25.
21. 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, 01991 Priority Records Inc.): MC Ren 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, 01988 Priority Records Inc.
22. 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" (*Signifying Rappers*, p. 89). My own position, as I will elaborate in the chapters that follow, is that hip-hop has always been heteroglot, and has *knoum* it, whereas the white middle-class hege mony, 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 Kwame 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."

23. "Black is Black / White is White / That's all right / No need to fight, Yol / 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).

24. "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." George Yancy, quoted 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.

25. This preference is certainly understandable, given that, in the reductive crucible of the society of the spectacle, there is often room for only *one* cultural synecdoche (e.g. Italians = pizza, Poles = sausage, Muslims = terrorists). Henry Louis Gates Jr., for one, has expressed caution about seeing rap as "the fons *et origio* of contemporary blackness," or over hailing militant rappers such as Chuck D as Gramscian 'organic intellectuals.' (Henry Louis Gates Jr., letter to the author, 12 December 1991). In the place of Chuck D, Gates expressed a preference for the Disposable Heroes of Hip Hop's Michael Franti, or other rappers who "have a message you don't have to apologize for" (Gates, same letter). 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 think that Chuck's messages in part *because* they come out of a more problematic and contradictory nexus of black nationalism, Islam, and the contemporary rhetoric of race, class, and gender-deserve as or more urgent consideration as more "P.C." rappers such as Franti. To invoke the 'organic intellectual' only to decline his or her message because it doesn't pass a litmus test devised by *academic* intellectuals seems somewhat hypocritical. See the section "Homeboys Meet Gramsci" in Jeffrey Louis Decker's "The State of Rap," in Tricia Rose and Andrew Ross, eds. *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 101-2.

26. Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. xxii.

27. 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 alue 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).

28. I owe this latter point to Karen Carr, who in our discussion 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.

29. "The chronotope is an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture from which they spring." M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. and trans. Michael Holmquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 426; see also Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 4-5, and 225 n. 2.

30. Much of this criticism has focused around Paul DeMan, the deconstructionist critic who, it was discovered, had written anti-Semitic articles in Belgium during the Nazi occupation. Even if one takes DeMan's earlier writings as an indictment of his later views, DeMan's value as an anti-intellectual poster boy to the political right has been far in excess of any complicity between racism and post-structuralist theorists, who in point of fact have at every turn critiqued and worked to oppose racist ideologies.

31. From the title track to H.E.A.L. (Human Education Against Lies).

32. Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 129.

33. De Certeau, p. 129.

34. Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), p. 18.

35. on Michael Spencer, preface to *The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap* (*Black Sacred Music, Vol. 5, No. 1*), p. iii.

36. From "The Hate that Hate Produced," on *360 Degrees of Power*, EPIC EK 48713 (1992).

37. See the excellent accounting and analysis of the politics of hip-hop concerts and "violence" in Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: University Press of New England/Wesleyan University Press, 1994), pp. 130-137.

38. See the article "Real Rap Radio," by Roni Sarig and Bobbito (*VIBE*, March 1994, p. 26). The list of radio stations included with this article shows both the commitment of college radio to rap music and the limited visibility of rap on commercial radio (typically, commercial stations program only three or four hours of rap a week, and it is often aired between 11 p.m. and 2 a.m.). As another indicator of the hip-hop college connection, at least two radio shows Professor Jeff Foss of Hofstra University's "Post-Punk Progressive Pop Party" on WRHU FM in New York, and my own "Roots-nRap" shown on WMHB in Waterville, Maine, are hosted by college professors.