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## A Style Nobody Can Deal With

Politics, Style and the Postindustrial City  
in Hip Hop

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Life on the margins of postindustrial urban America is inscribed in hip hop style, sound, lyrics and thematics.<sup>1</sup> Emerging from the intersection of lack and desire in the postindustrial city, hip hop manages the painful contradictions of social alienation and prophetic imagination. Hip hop is an Afro-diasporic cultural form which attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity and community. It is the tension between the cultural fractures produced by postindustrial oppression and the binding ties of Black cultural expressivity that sets the critical frame for the development of hip hop.<sup>2</sup>

Worked out on the rusting urban core as a playground, hip hop transforms stray technological parts intended for cultural and industrial trash heaps into sources of pleasure and power. These transformations have become a basis for digital imagination all over the world. Its earliest practitioners came of age at the tail end of the Great Society, in the twilight of America's short-lived federal commitment to black civil rights, and during the predawn of the Reagan-Bush era.<sup>3</sup> In hip hop, these abandoned parts, people and social institutions were welded and then spliced together, not only as sources of survival, but as sources of pleasure.

Hip hop replicates and reimagines the experiences of urban life and symbolically appropriates urban space through sampling, attitude, dance, style and sound effects. Talk of subways, crews and posses, urban noise, economic stagnation, static and crossed signals leap out of hip hop lyrics, sounds and themes. Graffiti artists spray-painted murals and (name) "tags" on trains, trucks and playgrounds, claiming territories and inscribing their otherwise contained identities on public property.<sup>4</sup> Early breakdancers' elaborate, technologically inspired, street-corner dances, involving head spins on concrete sidewalks, made the streets theater-friendly, and turned them into makeshift youth centers. The dancers'

electric, robotic mimicry and identity-transforming characterizations foreshadowed the fluid and shocking effect of morphing, a visual effect made famous in *Terminator 2*. DJs who initiated spontaneous street parties by attaching customized, makeshift turntables and speakers to streetlight electrical sources revised the use of central thoroughfares, made "open-air" community centers in neighborhoods where there were none. Rappers seized and used microphones as if amplification was a life-giving source. Hip hop gives voice to the tensions and contradictions in the public urban landscape during a period of substantial transformation in New York, and attempts to seize the shifting urban terrain, to make it work on behalf of the dispossessed.

Hip hop's attempts to negotiate new economic and technological conditions, as well as new patterns of race, class and gender oppression in urban America, by appropriating subway facades, public streets, language, style and sampling technology are only part of the story. Hip hop music and culture also relies on a variety of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American musical, oral, visual and dance forms and practices in the face of a larger society that rarely recognizes the Afro-diasporic significance of such practices. It is, in fact, the dynamic and often contentious relationship between the two—larger social and political forces and black cultural priorities—that centrally shape and define hip hop.

The tensions and contradictions shaping hip hop culture can confound efforts at interpretation by even the most skilled critics and observers. Some analysts see hip hop as a quintessentially postmodern practice, while others view it as a present-day successor to premodern oral traditions. Some celebrate its critique of consumer capitalism, while others condemn it for its complicity with commercialism. To one enthusiastic group of critics, hip hop combines elements of speech and song, of dance and display, to call into being through performance new identities and subject positions. Yet to another equally vociferous group, hip hop merely displays in phantasmagorical form the cultural logic of late capitalism. I intend to demonstrate the importance of locating hip hop culture within the context of deindustrialization and to show how hip hop's primary properties of flow, layering and rupture simultaneously reflect and contest the social roles open to urban inner city youth at the end of the twentieth century.

In an attempt to rescue rap from its identity as postindustrial commercial product, and situate it in the history of respected black cultural practices, many historical accounts of rap consider it a direct extension of African-American oral, poetic and protest traditions to which it is clearly and substantially indebted. This accounting, which builds important bridges between rap's use of boasting, signifying, preaching and earlier, related, black, oral traditions, produces multiple problematic effects. First, it reconstructs rap music as a singular oral poetic form which appears to have developed autonomously (outside hip hop culture) in the 1970s. Quite to the contrary, rap is one cultural element within the larger social movement of hip hop. Second, it substantially marginalizes the significance of rap as music. Rap's musical elements and its use of music technology are crucial

aspects of the use and development of the form, and are absolutely critical to the evolution of hip hop generally. Finally, and most directly important for this discussion, it renders invisible the crucial role of the postindustrial city on the shape and direction of rap and hip hop and makes it difficult to trace the way hip hop revises and extends Afro-diasporic practices using postindustrial urban materials. Hip hop's styles and themes share striking similarities with many past and contiguous Afro-diasporic musical and cultural expressions; these themes and styles, for the most part, are revised and reinterpreted using contemporary cultural and technological elements. Hip hop's central forms—graffiti, breakdancing and rap music—developed, in relation to one another, within Afro-diasporic cultural priorities, and in relation to larger postindustrial social forces and institutions.

What are some of the defining aesthetic and stylistic characteristics of hip hop? What is it about the postindustrial city generally, and the social and political terrain in the 1970s in New York City specifically, that contributes to the emergence and early reception of hip hop? Even as today's rappers revise and redirect rap music, most understand themselves as working out of a tradition of style, attitude and form which has critical and primary roots in New York City in the 1970s. Substantial postindustrial shifts in economic conditions, access to housing, demographics and communication networks were crucial to the formation of the conditions which nurtured the cultural hybrids and sociopolitical tenor of hip hop's lyrics and music.

## The Urban Context

Postindustrial conditions in urban centers across America reflect a complex set of global forces which continue to shape the contemporary urban metropolis. The growth of multinational telecommunications networks, global economic competition, a major technological revolution, the formation of new international divisions of labor, the increasing power of finance relative to production, and new migration patterns from Third World industrializing nations have all contributed to the economic and social restructuring of urban America. These global forces have had direct and sustained impact on urban job opportunity structures, have exacerbated long-standing racial and gender-based forms of discrimination and have contributed to increasing multinational corporate control of market conditions and national economic health.<sup>5</sup> Large-scale restructuring of the workplace and job market has had its effect upon most facets of everyday life. It has placed additional pressures on local, community-based networks of communication, and has whittled down already limited prospects for social mobility.

In the 1970s, cities across the country were gradually losing federal funding for social services, information service corporations were beginning to replace industrial factories, and corporate developers were buying up real estate to be converted into luxury housing, leaving working-class residents with limited affordable housing, a shrinking job market and

diminishing social services. The poorest neighborhoods and the least powerful groups were the least protected and had the smallest safety nets. By the 1980s, the privileged elites displayed unabashed greed as their strategies to reclaim and rebuild downtown business and tourist zones with municipal and federal subsidies exacerbated the already widening gap between classes and races.

Given New York's status as hub city for international capital and information services, it is not surprising that these larger structural changes and their effects were quickly and intensely felt in New York.<sup>6</sup> As John Mollenkopf notes, "during the 1970s, the U.S. system of cities crossed a watershed. New York led other old, industrial metropolitan areas into population and employment decline."<sup>7</sup> The federal funds that might have offset this process had been diminishing throughout the 1970s. In 1975, President Ford's unequivocal veto to requests for a federal bail out to prevent New York from filing for bankruptcy made New York a national symbol for the fate of older cities under his administration. The New York *Daily News* legendary headline, "Ford to New York: Drop Dead," captured the substance and temperament of Ford's veto and sent a sharp message to cities around the country.<sup>8</sup> Virtually bankrupt and in a critical state of disrepair, New York City and State administrators finally negotiated a federal loan, albeit one which accompanied an elaborate package of service cuts and carried harsh repayment terms. These dramatic social service cuts were felt most severely in New York's poorest areas and were part of a larger trend in unequal wealth distribution and were accompanied by a housing crisis which continued well into the 1980s. **Between 1978 and 1986, the people in the bottom twenty percent of the income scale experienced an absolute decline in income while the top twenty percent experienced most of the economic growth. Blacks and Hispanics disproportionately occupied this bottom fifth.** During this same period, thirty percent of New York's Hispanic households (for Puerto Ricans it is forty percent) and twenty five percent of black households lived at or below the poverty line. Since this period, low-income housing has continued to disappear, and blacks and Hispanics are still much more likely to live in overcrowded, dilapidated and seriously undermaintained spaces.<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising that these serious trends have contributed to New York's large and chronically homeless population.

In addition to housing problems, New York and many large urban centers faced other major economic and demographic forces which have sustained and exacerbated significant structural inequalities. While urban America has always been socially and economically divided, these divisions have taken on a new dimension. At the same time that racial succession and immigration patterns were reshaping the city's population and labor force, shifts in the occupational structure, away from a high-wage, high-employment economy grounded in manufacturing, trucking, warehousing and wholesale trade, and toward a low-wage, low-employment economy geared toward producer services, generated new forms of inequality. As Daniel Walkowitz suggests, New York has become

sharply divided between an affluent, technocratic, professional, white-collar group managing the financial and commercial life of an international city and an unemployed and underemployed service sector which is substantially black and Hispanic.

Earlier divisions in the city were predominantly ethnic and economic. "New York," according to Mollenkopf, "has been transformed from a relatively well-off, white, blue-collar city into a more economically divided, multi-racial, white-collar city." This "disorganized periphery" of civil service and manufacturing workers contributes to the consolidation of power among white-collar, professional, corporate managers, creating the massive inequalities in New York.<sup>10</sup>

The commercial imperatives of corporate America have also undermined the process of transmitting and sharing local knowledge in the urban metropolis. Ben Bagdikian's study, *The Media Monopoly*, reveals that monopolistic tendencies in commercial enterprises seriously constrain access to a diverse flow of information. For example, urban renewal relocation efforts not only dispersed central-city populations to the suburbs, they also replaced the commerce of the street with the needs of the metropolitan market. Advertisers geared newspaper articles and television broadcasts toward the purchasing power of suburban buyers—creating a dual "crisis of representation" in terms of whose lives and images were represented physically in the paper, and whose interests were represented in the corridors of power.<sup>11</sup> These media outlet and advertising shifts have been accompanied by a massive telecommunications revolution in the information processing industry. Once the domain of the government, information processing and communication technology now lie at the heart of corporate America. As a result of government deregulation in communications via the break up of AT&T in 1982, communication industries have consolidated and internationalized. Today, telecommunications industries are global data transmittal corporations with significant control over radio, television, cable, telephone, computer and other electronic transmittal systems. Telecommunication expansion coupled with corporate consolidation has dismantled local community networks, and has irrevocably changed the means and character of communication.<sup>12</sup> Since the mid-1980s, these expansions and consolidations have been accompanied by a tidal wave of widely available communications products which have revolutionized business and personal communications. Facsimile machines, satellite-networked beepers, cordless phones, electronic mail networks, cable television expansions, VCRs, compact discs, video cameras and games and personal computers have dramatically transformed the speed and character of speech and of written and visual communication.

Postindustrial conditions had a profound effect on black and Hispanic communities. Shrinking federal funds and affordable housing, shifts in the occupational structure away from blue-collar manufacturing and toward corporate and information services, along with

frayed local communication patterns, meant that new immigrant populations and the city's poorest residents paid the highest price for deindustrialization and economic restructuring. These communities are more susceptible to slumlords, redevelopers, toxic waste dumps, drug rehabilitation centers, violent criminals, mortgage redlining and inadequate city services and transportation. It also meant that the city's ethnic- and working-class-based forms of community aid and support were growing increasingly less effective against these new conditions.

In the case of the South Bronx, which has been frequently dubbed the "home of hip hop culture," these larger postindustrial conditions were exacerbated by disruptions considered an "unexpected side effect" of a larger, politically motivated, "urban renewal" project. ~~In the early 1970s, this renewal [sic] project involved massive relocations of economically fragile people of color from different areas in New York City into parts of the South Bronx. Subsequent ethnic and racial transition in the South Bronx was not a gradual process that might have allowed already taxed social and cultural institutions to respond self-protectively; instead it was a brutal process of community destruction and relocation executed by municipal officials, under the direction of legendary city planner Robert Moses.~~

Between the late 1930s and the late 1960s Moses executed a number of public works projects, highways, parks and housing projects which significantly reshaped the profile of New York City. In 1959, city, state and federal authorities began the implementation of his planned Cross-Bronx Expressway, which would cut directly through the center of the most heavily populated working-class areas in the Bronx. While he could have modified his route slightly to bypass densely populated working-class ethnic residential communities, he elected a path that required the demolition of hundreds of residential and commercial buildings. In addition, throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, some sixty thousand Bronxites homes were razed. Designating these old blue-collar housing units as "slums," Moses's Title I slum clearance program forced the relocation of 170,000 people.<sup>13</sup> These "slums" were in fact densely populated stable neighborhoods, comprised mostly of working- and lower-middle-class Jews, but they also contained solid Italian, German, Irish and black neighborhoods. Although the neighborhoods under attack had a substantial Jewish population, black and Puerto Rican residents were disproportionately affected. Thirty-seven percent of the relocated residents were non-white. This, coupled with the subsequent "white flight," devastated kin networks and neighborhood services. Between the late 1960s and mid-1970s the vacancy rates in the southern section of the Bronx skyrocketed. Some nervous landlords sold their property as quickly as possible, often to professional slumlords, others torched their buildings to collect insurance payments. Both strategies accelerated the flight of white tenants into northern sections of the Bronx and into Westchester. Equally anxious shopkeepers sold their shops and established businesses elsewhere. The city administration, touting Moses's expressway as a sign of progress and modernization, was

unwilling to admit the devastation that had occurred. Like many of his public works projects, Moses's Cross-Bronx Expressway supported the interests of the upper classes against the interests of the poor, and intensified the development of the vast economic and social inequalities which characterize contemporary New York. The newly "relocated" black and Hispanic residents in the South Bronx were left with few city resources, fragmented leadership and limited political power.

The disastrous effects of these city policies went relatively unnoticed in the media until 1977, when two critical events fixed New York and the South Bronx as national symbols of ruin and isolation. During the summer of 1977 an extensive power outage blacked out New York, and hundreds of stores were looted and vandalized. The poorest neighborhoods (the South Bronx, Bedford Stuyvesant, the Brownsville and Crown Heights areas in Brooklyn, the Jamaica area in Queens and Harlem) where most of the looting took place were depicted by the city's media organs as lawless zones where crime is sanctioned, and chaos bubbles just below the surface. The 1965 blackout, according to the New York Times, was "peaceful by contrast," suggesting that the blackout which took place during America's most racially tumultuous decade was no match for the despair and frustration articulated in the blackout of the summer of 1977.<sup>14</sup> The 1977 blackout and the looting which accompanied it seemed to raise the federal stakes in maintaining urban social order. Three months later, President Carter made his "sobering" historic motorcade visit through the South Bronx, to "survey the devastation of the last five years," and announced an unspecified "commitment to cities." (Not to its inhabitants?) In the national imagination, the South Bronx became the primary "symbol of America's woes."<sup>15</sup>

Following this lead, images of abandoned buildings in the South Bronx became central popular cultural icons. Negative local color in popular film exploited the devastation facing the residents of the South Bronx and used their communities as a backdrop for social ruin and barbarism. As Michael Ventura astutely notes, these popular depictions (and, I would add, the news coverage as well) rendered silent the people who struggled with and maintained life under difficult conditions:

In roughly six hours of footage—*Fort Apache*, *Wolfen* and *Koyaanisqatsi*—we haven't been introduced to one soul who actually lives in the South Bronx. We haven't heard one voice speaking its own language. We've merely watched a symbol of ruin: the South Bronx [as] last act before the end of the world.<sup>16</sup>

Depictions of black and Hispanic neighborhoods were drained of life, energy and vitality. The message was loud and clear: to be stuck here was to be lost. And yet, while these visions of loss and futility became defining characteristics, the youngest generation of South Bronx exiles were building creative and aggressive outlets for expression and identification. The new ethnic groups who made the South Bronx their home in the 1970s

began building their own cultural networks, which would prove to be resilient and responsive in the age of high technology. North American blacks, Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean people with roots in other postcolonial contexts reshaped their cultural identities and expressions in a hostile, technologically sophisticated, multiethnic, urban terrain. While city leaders and the popular press had literally and figuratively condemned the South Bronx neighborhoods and their inhabitants, their youngest black and Hispanic residents answered back.

## Hip Hop

Hip Hop culture emerged as source of alternative identity formation and social status for youth in a community whose older local support institutions had been all but demolished along with large sectors of its built environment. Alternative local identities were forged in fashions and language, street names and most importantly, in establishing neighborhood crews or posses. Many hip hop fans, artists, musicians and dancers continue to belong to an elaborate system of crews or posses. The crew, a local source of identity, group affiliation and support system, appears in virtually all rap lyrics and cassette dedications, music video performances and media interviews with artists. Identity in hip hop is deeply rooted in the specific, the local experience and one's attachment to and status in a local group or alternative family. These crews are new kinds of families forged with intercultural bonds which, like the social formation of gangs, provide insulation and support in a complex and unyielding environment and may, in fact, contribute to the community-building networks which serve as the basis for new social movements.

The postindustrial city, which provided the context for creative development among hip hop's earliest innovators, shaped their cultural terrain, access to space, materials and education. While graffiti writers' work was significantly aided by advances in spray-paint technology, they used the urban transit system as their canvas. Rappers and DJs disseminated their work by copying it on tape-dubbing equipment and playing it on powerful, portable "ghetto blasters." At a time when budget cuts in school music programs drastically reduced access to traditional forms of instrumentation and composition, inner-city youth increasingly relied on recorded sound. Breakdancers used their bodies to mimic "transformers" and other futuristic robots in symbolic street battles. Early Puerto Rican, Afro-Caribbean and black American hip hop artists transformed obsolete vocational skills from marginal occupations into the raw materials for creativity and resistance. Many of them were "trained" for jobs in fields that were shrinking or that no longer exist. Graffiti writer Futura graduated from a trade school specializing in the printing industry. But since most of the jobs for which he was being trained had already been computerized, he found himself working at McDonald's after graduation. Similarly, African-American DJ Red Alert (who also has family from the Caribbean) reviewed blueprints for a drafting company until computer automation

rendered that job obsolete. Jamaican DJ Kool Herc attended Alfred E. Smith auto mechanic trade school while African-American Grand Master Flash learned how to repair electronic equipment at Samuel Gompers vocational high school. (One could say Flash "fixed them alright"). Salt-N-Pepa (both with family roots in the West Indies) worked as phone telemarketing representatives at Sears while considering nursing school. Puerto Rican breakdancer Crazy Legs began breakdancing largely because his single mother could not afford Little League baseball fees.<sup>17</sup> All of these artists found themselves positioned with few resources in marginal economic circumstances, but each of them found ways to become famous as entertainers by appropriating the most advanced technologies and emerging cultural forms. Hip hop artists used the tools of obsolete industrial technology to traverse contemporary crossroads of lack and desire in urban Afro-diasporic communities.

Stylistic continuities were sustained by internal cross-fertilization between rapping, breakdancing and graffiti writing. Some writers, like black American Phase 2, Haitian Jean-Michel Basquiat, Futura and black American Fab Five Freddy produced rap records. Others writers drew murals that celebrated favorite rap songs (for example, Futura's mural, "The Breaks," was a whole car mural that paid homage to Kurtis Blow's rap of the same name). Breakdancers, DJs and rappers wore graffiti-painted jackets and T-shirts. DJ Kool Herc was a graffiti writer and dancer first, before he began playing records. Hip hop events featured breakdancers, rappers and DJs as triple-bill entertainment. Graffiti writers drew murals for DJ's stage platforms, and designed posters and flyers to advertise hip hop events. Breakdancer Crazy Legs, founding member of the Rock Steady Crew, describes the communal atmosphere between writers, rappers and breakers in the formative years of hip hop:

Summing it up, basically going to a jam back then was (about) watching people drink, (break) dance, compare graffiti art in their black books. These jams were thrown by the (hip hop) DJ . . . it was about piecing while a jam was going on.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, sharing ideas and styles is not always a peaceful process. Hip hop is very competitive and confrontational; these traits are both resistance to and preparation for a hostile world which denies and denigrates young people of color. Breakdancers often fought other breakdance crews out of jealousy; writers sometimes destroyed murals, and rapper and DJ battles could break out in fights. Hip hop remains a never-ending battle for status, prestige and group adoration which is always in formation, always contested and never fully achieved. Competitions among and cross-fertilization between breaking, graffiti writing and rap music was fueled by shared local experiences and social position, and similarities in approaches to sound, motion, communication and style among hip hop's Afro-diasporic communities.

As in many African and Afro-diasporic cultural forms, hip hop's prolific self-naming is a form of reinvention and self-definition.<sup>19</sup> Rappers, DJs, graffiti artists and breakdancers all

take on hip hop names and identities which speak to their role, personal characteristics, expertise or "claim to fame." DJ names often fuse technology with mastery and style: DJ Cut Creator, Jazzy Jeff, Spindarella, Terminator X Assault Technician, Wiz and Grand Master Flash. Many rappers have nicknames which suggest street smarts, coolness, power and supremacy: L.L. Cool J (Ladies Love Cool James), Kool Moe Dee, Queen Latifah, Dougie Fresh (and the Get Fresh Crew), D-Nice, Hurricane Gloria, Guru, MC Lyte, EPMD (Erick and Parrish Making Dollars), Ice-T, Ice Cube, Kid-N-Play, Boss, Eazy-E, King Sun, and Sir Mix-A-Lot. Other names serve as self-mocking tags, or critique society, such as Too Short, The Fat Boys, S1Ws (Security of the First World), The Lench Mob, N.W.A. (Niggas With Attitude) and Special Ed. The hip hop identities for breakdancers like Crazy Legs, Wiggles, Frosty Freeze, Boogaloo Shrimp, and Headspin highlight their status as experts known for special moves. Taking on new names and identities offered "prestige from below" in the face of limited legitimate access to forms of status attainment.

In addition to the centrality of alternative naming, identity and group affiliation, rappers, DJs, graffiti writers and breakdancers claim turf and gain local status by developing new styles. As Hebdige's study on punk illustrates, style can be used as a gesture of refusal, or as a form of oblique challenge to structures of domination.<sup>20</sup> Hip hop artists use style as a form of identity formation which plays on class distinctions and hierarchies by using commodities to claim the cultural terrain. Clothing and consumption rituals testify to the power of consumption as a means of cultural expression. Hip hop fashion is an especially rich example of this sort of appropriation/critique via style. Exceptionally large, "chunk," gold and diamond jewelry (usually "fake") mocks yet affirms the gold fetish in Western trade; fake Gucci and other designer emblems cut up and patch-stitched to jackets, pants, hats, wallets and sneakers in custom shops, work as a form of sartorial warfare (especially when fake Gucci-covered B-boys and B-girls brush past Fifth Avenue ladies adorned by the "real thing.") Hip hop's late 1980s fashion rage—the large plastic (alarm?) clock worn around the neck over leisure/sweat suits suggested a number of contradictory tensions between work, time and leisure.<sup>21</sup> Early 1990s trends—super-over-sized pants and urban warrior outer apparel, as in "hoodies," "snooties," "tims" and "triple fat" goosedown coats, make clear the severity of the urban storms to be weathered and the saturation of disposable goods in the crafting of cultural expressions.<sup>22</sup> As an alternative means of status formation, hip hop style forges local identities for teenagers who understand their limited access to traditional avenues of social status attainment. Fab Five Freddy, an early rapper and graffiti writer, explains the link between style and identity in hip hop and its significance for gaining local status:

You make a new style. That's what life on the street is all about. What's at stake is honor and position on the street. That's what makes it so important, that's what makes

it feel so good—that pressure on you to be the best. Or to try to be the best. To develop a new style nobody can deal with.<sup>23</sup>

Styles "nobody can deal with" in graffiti, breaking and rap music not only boost status and elevate black and Hispanic youth identities, they also articulate several shared approaches to sound and motion which are found in the Afro-diaspora. As black filmmaker and cultural critic Arthur Jafa has pointed out, stylistic continuities between breaking, graffiti style, rapping and musical construction seem to center around three concepts: *flow*, *layering* and *ruptures in line*.<sup>24</sup> In hip hop, visual, physical, musical and lyrical lines are set in motion, broken abruptly with sharp angular breaks, and yet sustain motion and energy through fluidity and flow. In graffiti, long winding, sweeping and curving letters are broken and camouflaged by sudden breaks in line. Sharp, angular, broken letters are written in extreme italics, suggesting forward or backward motion. Letters are double- and triple-shadowed in such a way as to illustrate energy forces radiating from the center—suggesting circular motion—and yet the scripted words move horizontally.

Breakdancing moves highlight flow, layering and ruptures in line. Popping and locking are moves in which the joints are snapped abruptly into angular positions. And yet, these snapping movements take place in one joint after the previous one—creating a semiliquid effect which moves the energy toward the fingertip or toe. In fact, two dancers may pass the popping energy force back and forth between each other via finger-to-finger contact, setting off a new wave. In this pattern, the line is both a series of angular breaks, and yet sustains energy and motion through flow. Breakers double each others' moves, like line-shadowing or layering in graffiti, intertwine their bodies into elaborate shapes, transforming the body into a new entity (like camouflage in graffiti's wild style) and then, one body part at a time, revert to a relaxed state. Abrupt, fractured, yet graceful footwork leaves the eye one step behind the motion, creating a time-lapse effect which not only mimics graffiti's use of line-shadowing, but also creates spatial links between the moves which gives the foot series flow and fluidity.<sup>25</sup>

The music and vocal rapping in rap music also privileges flow, layering and ruptures in line. Rappers speak of flow explicitly in lyrics, referring to an ability to move easily and powerfully through complex lyrics, as well as to the flow in the music.<sup>26</sup> The flow and motion of the initial bass or drum line in rap music is abruptly ruptured by scratching (a process which highlights as it breaks the flow of the base rhythm), or the rhythmic flow is interrupted by other musical passages. Rappers stutter and alternatively race through passages, always moving within the beat or in response to it, often using the music as a partner in rhyme. These verbal moves highlight lyrical flow and points of rupture. Rappers layer meaning by using the same word to signify a variety of actions and objects; they call out to the DJ to "lay down a beat," which it is expected will be interrupted, ruptured. DJs

layer sounds literally one on top of the other, creating a dialogue between sampled sounds and words.

What is the significance of flow, layering and rupture as demonstrated on the body and in hip hop's lyrical, musical and visual works? Interpreting these concepts theoretically, it can be argued that they create and sustain rhythmic motion, continuity and circularity via flow; accumulate, reinforce and embellish this continuity through layering; and manage threats to these narratives by building in ruptures which highlight the continuity as it momentarily challenges it. These effects at the level of style and aesthetics suggest affirmative ways in which profound social dislocation and rupture can be managed and perhaps contested in the cultural arena. Let us imagine these hip hop principles as a blueprint for social resistance and affirmation: create sustaining narratives, accumulate them, layer, embellish and transform them. But also be prepared for rupture, find pleasure in it, in fact, *plan on* social rupture. When these ruptures occur, use them in creative ways which will prepare you for a future in which survival will demand a sudden shift in ground tactics.

While accumulation, flow, circularity and planned ruptures exist across a wide range of Afro-diasporic cultural forms, they do not take place outside capitalist commercial constraints. Hip hop's explicit focus on consumption has frequently been mischaracterized as a movement *into* the commodity market (hip hop is no longer "authentically" black if it is for sale). Instead, hip hop's moment(s) of "incorporation" are a shift in the already existing relationship hip hop has always had to the commodity system. For example, the hip hop DJ frequently produces, amplifies and revises already recorded sounds, rappers prefer high-end microphones, and both invest serious dollars for the speakers that can produce the phattest beats. Graffiti murals, breakdancing moves and rap lyrics often appropriate and sometimes critique verbal and visual elements and physical movements from popular commercial culture, especially television, comic books and karate movies. If anything, black style through hip hop has contributed to the continued blackening of mainstream popular culture. The contexts for creation in hip hop were never fully outside or in opposition to commodities; they involved struggles over public space and access to commodified materials, equipment and products. It is a common misperception among hip hop artists and cultural critics that during the early days, hip hop was motivated by pleasure rather than profit, as if the two were incompatible. And it would be naive to think that breakdancers, rappers, DJs and writers were never interested in monetary compensation for their work. The problem was not that they were uniformly uninterested in profit, rather, many of the earliest practitioners were unaware that they could profit from their pleasure. Once this link was made, hip hop artists began marketing themselves wholeheartedly. Just as graffiti writers hitched a ride on the subways and used its power to distribute their tags, rappers "hijacked" the market for their own purposes, riding the currents that are already out there, not just for wealth but for empowerment. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the market for hip hop was still based inside New York's black and Hispanic communities.

So while there is an element of truth to this common perception, what is more important about the shift in hip hop's orientation is not its movement from precommodity to commodity, but the shift in control over the scope and direction of the profit-making process, out of the hands of local black and Hispanic entrepreneurs and into the hands of larger, white-owned, multinational businesses. And, most importantly, while black cultural imperatives are obviously deeply affected by commodification, these imperatives are not in direct opposition to the market, nor are they "irrelevant" to the shape of market-produced goods and practices.

Hebdige's work on the British punk movement identifies this shift as the moment of incorporation or recuperation by dominant culture, and perceives it to be a critical element in the dynamics of the struggle over the meaning(s) of popular expression. "The process of recuperation," Hebdige argues, "takes two characteristic forms . . . one of conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music and so on) into mass-produced objects and the 'labelling' and redefinition of deviant behavior by dominant groups—the police, media and judiciary." Hebdige astutely points out, however, that communication in a subordinate cultural form, even prior to the point of recuperation, usually takes place via commodities, "even if the meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or overthrown." And so, he concludes, "it is very difficult to sustain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other."<sup>27</sup>

Hebdige's observations regarding the process of incorporation and the tension between commercial exploitation and creativity as articulated in British punk are quite relevant to hip hop. And hip hop has always been articulated via commodities and engaged in the revision of meanings attached to them. Conversely, hip hop signs and meanings are converted and behaviors relabeled by dominant institutions. Graffiti, rap and breakdancing are fundamentally transformed as they move into new relations with dominant cultural institutions.<sup>28</sup> In 1994, rap music is one of the most heavily traded popular commodities in the market, and yet it still defies total corporate control over the music, its local use and incorporation at the level of stable or exposed meanings.

These transformations and hybrids reflect the initial spirit of rap and hip hop as an experimental and collective space where contemporary issues and ancestral forces are worked through simultaneously. Hybrids in rap's subject matter, not unlike its use of musical collage and the influx of new, regional and ethnic styles, have not yet displaced the three points of stylistic continuity to which I referred earlier: approaches to flow, ruptures in line and layering can still be found in the vast majority of rap's lyrical and music construction. The same is true of the critiques of the postindustrial urban America context and the cultural and social conditions which it has produced. Today, the South Bronx and South Central Los Angeles are poorer and more economically marginalized than they were ten years ago.

Hip hop emerges from complex cultural exchanges and larger social and political conditions

of disillusionment and alienation. Graffiti and rap were especially aggressive public displays of counterpresence and voice. Each asserted the right to write<sup>29</sup>—to inscribe one's identity on an environment which seemed Teflon-resistant to its young people of color; an environment which made legitimate avenues for material and social participation inaccessible. In this context, hip hop produced a number of double effects. First, themes in rap and graffiti articulated free play and unchecked public displays, and yet the settings for these expressions always suggested existing confinement.<sup>30</sup> Second, like the consciousness-raising sessions in the early stages of the women's rights movement and Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s, hip hop produced internal and external dialogues which affirmed the experiences and identities of the participants, and at the same time offered critiques of larger society which were directed to both the hip hop community and society in general.

Out of a broader discursive climate in which the perspectives and experiences of younger Hispanic, Afro-Caribbeans and African-Americans had been provided little social space, hip hop developed as part of a cross-cultural communication network. Trains carried graffiti tags through the five boroughs; flyers posted in black and Hispanic neighborhoods brought teenagers from all over New York to parks and clubs in the Bronx and eventually to events throughout the Metropolitan area. And characteristic of communication in the age of high-tech telecommunications, stories with cultural and narrative resonance continued to spread at a rapid pace. It was not long before similarly marginalized black and Hispanic communities in other cities picked up on the tenor and energy in New York hip hop. Boom boxes in Roxbury and Compton blasted copies of hip hop mix tapes made on high-speed, portable, dubbing equipment by cousins from Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn. The explosion of local and national cable programming of music videos spread hip hop dance steps, clothing and slang across the country faster than brushfire. Within a decade, Los Angeles County (especially Compton), Oakland, Detroit, Chicago, Houston, Atlanta, Miami, Newark and Trenton, Roxbury and Philadelphia have developed local hip hop scenes which link (among other things) various regional postindustrial urban experiences of alienation, unemployment, police harassment and social and economic isolation to their local and specific experience via hip hop's language, style and attitude.<sup>31</sup> Regional and, increasingly, national differences and syndications in hip hop have been solidifying and will continue to do so. In some cases these differences are established by references to local streets and events, neighborhoods and leisure activities, preferences for dance steps, clothing, musical samples and vocal accents. At the same time, cross-regional syndicates of rappers, writers and dancers fortify hip hop's communal vocabulary. In every region, hip hop articulates a sense of entitlement, and takes pleasure in aggressive insubordination. Like Chicago and Mississippi blues, these emerging, regional, hip hop identities affirm the specificity and local character of cultural forms as well as the larger stylistic forces that define hip hop and Afro-diasporic cultures.

Developing a style nobody can deal with—a style that cannot be easily understood or

erased, a style that has the reflexivity to create counterdominant narratives against a mobile and shifting enemy—may be one of the most effective ways to fortify communities of resistance and simultaneously reserve the right to communal pleasure. With few economic assets and abundant cultural and aesthetic resources, Afro-diasporic youth have designated the street as the arena for competition and style as the prestige-awarding event. In the postindustrial urban context of dwindling low-income housing, a trickle of meaningless jobs for young people, mounting police brutality and increasingly demonic depictions of young inner-city residents, hip hop style *is* black urban renewal.

## Notes

This essay is excerpted from *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Wesleyan Press, 1994).

1. I have adopted Mollenkopf's and Castell's use of the term postindustrial as a means of characterizing the economic restructuring that has taken place in urban America over the past twenty-five years. By defining the contemporary period in urban economies as postindustrial, Mollenkopf and Castells are not suggesting that manufacturing output has disappeared, nor are they adopting Daniel Bell's formulation that "knowledge has somehow replaced capital as the organizing principle of the economy." Rather Mollenkopf and Castells claim that their use of postindustrial "captures a crucial aspect of how large cities are being transformed: employment has shifted massively away from manufacturing toward corporate, public and nonprofit services; occupations have similarly shifted from manual worker to managers, professionals, secretaries and service workers." John Mollenkopf and Manuel Castells, eds., *Dual City: Restructuring New York* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1991), p. 6. Similarly, these new postindustrial realities, entailing the rapid movement of capital, images and populations across the globe, have also been referred to as "post-Fordism" and "flexible accumulation." See David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988). For an elaboration of Bell's initial use of the term, see Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
2. My arguments regarding Afro-diasporic cultural formations in hip hop are relevant to African-American culture as well as Afro-diasporic cultures in the English- and Spanish-speaking Caribbean, each of which has prominent and significant, African-derived, cultural elements. While rap music, particularly early rap, is dominated by English-speaking blacks, graffiti and breakdancing were heavily shaped and practiced by Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and other Spanish-speaking Caribbean communities which have substantial Afro-diasporic elements. (The emergence of Chicano rappers took place in the late 1980s in Los Angeles.) Consequently, my references to Spanish-speaking Caribbean communities should in no way be considered inconsistent with my larger Afro-diasporic claims. Substantial work has illuminated the continued significance of African cultural elements on cultural production in both Spanish- and English-speaking nations in the Caribbean. For examples, see Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford Press, 1986); Ivan G. Van Sertima, *They Came Before Columbus*

- (New York: Random House, 1976) and Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Random House, 1983).
3. See Allen J. Matusow, *The Unravelling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).
  4. In hip hop, the train serves both as means of inter-neighborhood communication and a source of creative inspiration. Big Daddy Kane says that he writes his best lyrics on the subway or train on the way to producer Marly Marl's house. See Barry Michael Cooper, "Raw Like Sushi," *Spin* (March, 1988), p. 28. Similarly, Chuck D claims that he loves to drive; that he would have been a driver if his rapping career had not worked out. See Robert Christgau and Greg Tate, "Chuck D All Over the Map," *Village Voice, Rock n Roll Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 3 (Fall 1991).
  5. See John H. Mollenkopf, *The Contested City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 1983), especially pp. 12–46 for a discussion of larger twentieth century transformations in U.S. cities throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s. See, also, John Mollenkopf and Manuel Castells, eds., *Dual City: Restructuring New York* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991); Michael Peter Smith and Joe R. Feagin, eds., *The Capitalist City: Global Restructuring and Community Politics* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Michael Peter Smith, ed., *Cities in Transformation: Class, Capital and the State* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1984); and Saskia Sassen, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labor Flow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
  6. I am not suggesting that New York is typical of all urban areas, nor that regional differences are insignificant. However, the broad transformations under discussion here have been felt in all major U.S. cities, particularly New York and Los Angeles—hip hop's second major hub city—and critically frame the transitions that, in part, contributed to hip hop's emergence. In the mid-1980s very similar postindustrial changes in job opportunities and social services in the Watts and Compton areas of Los Angeles became the impetus for Los Angeles' gangsta rappers. As Robin Kelley notes: "The generation who came of age in the 1980s, under the Reagan and Bush era, were products of devastating structural changes in the urban economy that date back at least to the late 1960s. While the city as a whole experienced unprecedented growth, the communities of Watts and Compton faced increased economic displacement, factory closures, and an unprecedented deepening of poverty. . . . Developers and city and county government helped the process along by infusing massive capital into suburbanization while simultaneously cutting back expenditures for parks, recreation, and affordable housing in inner city communities." Robin D. G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics" forthcoming in Eric Perkins, ed., *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1994). See, also, Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1989).
  7. Mollenkopf, *Contested City*, p. 213.
  8. Frank Van Riper, "Ford to New York: Drop Dead," *New York Daily News* (October 30, 1975), p. 1.
  9. Philip Weitzman, "'Worlds Apart': Housing Race/Ethnicity and Income in New York City," *Community Service Society of New York* (CSS), 1989. See, also, Terry J. Rosenberg, "Poverty in New York City: 1980–1985" (CSS), 1987; Robert Neuwirth "Housing After Koch" *Village Voice* 7 (November 7, 1989) pp. 22–24.
  10. Daniel Walkowitz "New York: A Tale of Two Cities" in Richard M Bernard ed., *Snowbelt Cities: Metropolitan Politics in the Northeast and Midwest Since World War II* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1990); Mollenkopf and Castells, eds., *Dual City* p. 9. See, also, parts 2 and 3 *Dual City*, which deal specifically and in greater detail with the forces of transformation, gender and the new occupational strata.
  11. Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987). Despite trends towards the centralization of news and media sources, and the fact that larger corporate media outfits have proven unable to serve diverse ethnic and racial groups, a recent study on New York's media structure in the 1980s suggests that a wide range of alternative media sources serve New York's ethnic communities. However, the study also shows that black New Yorkers have been less successful in sustaining alternative media channels. See Mitchell Moss and Sarah Ludwig, "The Structure of the Media," in *Dual City*, pp. 245–265.
  12. See Tom Forester, *High-Tech Society* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1988) and Herbert Schiller, *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (New York: Oxford Press, 1989).
  13. Similar strategies for urban renewal via "slum clearance" demolition took place in a number of major metropolises in the late 1960s and 1970s. See Mollenkopf, *Contested City*, especially ch. 4, which describes similar processes in Boston and San Francisco.
  14. Robert D. McFadden, "Power Failure Blacks Out New York; Thousands Trapped in Subways; Looters and Vandals Hit Some Areas," *New York Times* (July 14, 1977) p. A1, col. 5; Lawrence Van Gelder, "State Troopers Sent Into City as Crime Rises," *New York Times* (July 14, 1977) p. A1, col. 1; Charlayne Hunter-Gault, "When Poverty is Part of Life, Looting is Not Condemned," *New York Times* (July 15, 1977) p. A4, col. 3; Selwyn Raab, "Ravage Continues Far Into Day; Gunfire and Bottles Beset Police," *New York Times* (July 15, 1977) p. A1, col. 1; Editorial, "Social Overload," *New York Times* (July 22, 1977) p. A22.
  15. Lee Dembart, "Carter Takes 'Sobering' Trip to South Bronx," *New York Times* (October 6, 1977) p. A1, col. 2, B18, col. 1; Richard Severo, "Bronx a Symbol of America's Woes," *New York Times* (October 6, 1977) p. B18, col. 1; Joseph P. Fried, "The South Bronx USA: What Carter Saw in New York City is a Symbol of Complex Social Forces on a Nationwide Scale," *New York Times*, (October 7, 1977) p. A22, col. 1.
  16. Michael Ventura, *Shadow Dancing in the USA* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher Press, 1986) p. 186. Other popular films from the late 1970s and early 1980s which followed suit included *1990: The Bronx Warriors* and *Escape From New York*. This construction of the dangerous ghetto is central to Tom Wolfe's 1989 best-seller and the subsequent film *Bonfire of the Vanities*. In it, the South Bronx is constructed as an abandoned, lawless territory from the perspective of substantially more privileged, White outsiders.
  17. Rose interviews with all artists named except Futura, whose printing trade school experience was cited in Steve Hager, *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Breakdancing, Rap Music, and*

- Graffiti* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), p. 24. These artist interviews were conducted for my book on rap music, entitled *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Wesleyan Press, 1994).
18. Rose interview with Crazy Legs, November 1991. "Piecing" means drawing a mural or masterpiece.
  19. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. Gates's suggestion that naming be "drawn upon as a metaphor for black intertextuality" is especially useful in hip hop, where naming and intertextuality are critical strategies for creative production. See pp. 55, 87.
  20. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979). See, especially, pp. 17-19, 84-89.
  21. For an interesting discussion of time, the clock and nationalism in hip hop, see Jeffrey L. Decker's article in this collection.
  22. Hoodies are hooded jackets or shirts, snooties are skull caps and tims are short for Timberland brand boots.
  23. Nelson George, et al., eds., *Fresh: Hip Hop Don't Stop* (New York: Random House, 1985) p. 111.
  24. While I had isolated some general points of aesthetic continuity between hip hop's forms, I did not identify these three crucial organizing terms. I am grateful to Arthur Jafa, black filmmaker and cultural critic, who shared and discussed the logic of these defining characteristics with me in conversation. He is not, of course, responsible for any inadequacies in my use of them here.
  25. For a brilliant example of these moves among recent hip hop dances, see "Reckin' Shop In Brooklyn" directed by Diane Martel (Epoch Films, 1992). Thanks to Arthur Jafa for bringing this documentary film to my attention.
  26. Some examples of explicit attention to flow are exhibited in Queen Latifah's *Ladies First*: "Some think that we can't flow, stereotypes they go to go"; in Big Daddy Kane's *Raw*: "Intro I start to go, my rhymes will flow so"; in Digital Underground's *Sons of the P*: "Release your mind and let your instincts flow, release your mind and let the funk flow." Later, they refer to themselves as the "sons of the flow."
  27. Hebdige, *Subculture* pp. 94-95.
  28. Published in 1979, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* concludes at the point of dominant British culture's initial attempts at incorporating punk.
  29. See Duncan Smith, "The Truth of Graffiti" *Art & Text* 17, pp. 84-90.
  30. For example, Kurtis Blow's "The Breaks" (1980) was both about the seeming inevitability and hardships of unemployment and mounting financial debt, and the sheer pleasure of "breaking it up and down," of dancing and breaking free of social and psychological constrictions. Regardless of subject matter, elaborate graffiti tags on train facades always suggested that the power and presence of the image was possible only if the writer had escaped capture.
  31. See Bob Mack, "Hip-Hop Map of America" *Spin* (June, 1990).

## Puerto Rican And Proud, Boyee! Rap, Roots and Amnesia

Juan Flores

MC KT (Tony Boston) of Latin Empire commented recently on a television special:

There's a lot of Puerto Ricans out there that don't speak Spanish and aren't into the Spanish music, a lot of them, and they're still proud to be Puerto Rican. But if you don't know nothing about it, if you don't try to learn about it, then you're gonna be lost in the sauce.<sup>1</sup>

Writing and performing for a wide range of audiences while projecting "a Puerto Rican perspective" has keyed Latin Empire, the best-known Nuyorican rap group, into the dynamics of cultural identity. Many of their own raps are about who they are and where they come from, and their experience as rappers, both in the streets and in the "business," has been a constant struggle to uphold that self-representation in the face of strong pressures to re-do their act so that it fits into more familiar, preestablished categories.

In his brief comment, KT is actually setting forth a view of culture and identity. First he disengages cultural belonging and pride from any necessary attachment to the recognized markers or traditions of the culture, thus freeing the young Puerto Ricans raised here from the weight of having to "prove themselves" and compensate for their remove from familiar roots and life-ways. But leaving them room does not mean letting them off the hook: addressing his fellow Nuyoricans directly, KT reminds them that if one pitfall is the strait-jacket of fixed codes and canons, the other is "the sauce," the undifferentiated hodgepodge of contemporary cultural blending under the sway of the commercial media and pluralist ideology.

If you want to draw lines and mark yourself off, you have to be willing to reconnect; if you want to celebrate borders, you have to learn how to build bridges and know about the alternatives. Culture as a source of identity does need to be understood as a flexible, open-ended process grounded in lived experience; but it is also a process in the sense