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# The Fine Art of Rap

Richard Shusterman

. . . rapt Poesy,  
And arts, though unimagined, yet to be.  
Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*

**I**N THE VIEW of both the culturally elite and the so-called general public, rap music lurks in the underworld of aesthetic respectability. Though it is today's "fastest growing genre of popular music,"<sup>1</sup> its claim to artistic status has been drowned under a flood of abusive critique. Rap has not only suffered moral and aesthetic condemnations but also organized censorship, blacklists, arrests, and the police-enforced stopping of concerts.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, on a different level of cultural combat, we find attempts to dilute and undermine rap's ethnic and political content by encouraging and exploiting its most bland, "sanitized," and commercialized forms. None of this should be surprising. For rap's cultural roots and prime following belong to the black underclass of American society; and its militant black pride and thematizing of the ghetto experience represent a threatening siren to that society's complacent status quo. The threat is of course far more audible and urgent for the middle-brow public who not only interact more closely and competitively with the poor black population, but who rely on (and thus compete for) the same mass-media channels of cultural transmission, and who have a greater need to assert their sociocultural (and ultimately political) superiority over black America.<sup>3</sup>

Armed with such powerful political motives for opposing rap, one can readily find aesthetic reasons which seem to discredit it as a legitimate art form. Rap songs are not even sung, only spoken or chanted. They typically employ neither live musicians nor original music; the sound track is instead composed from various cuts (or "samples") of records already made and often well known. Finally, the lyrics seem to be crude and simple-minded, the diction substandard, the rhymes raucous, repetitive, and frequently raunchy. Yet, as my title suggests, these same lyrics insistently claim and extol rap's status as poetry and fine art.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I wish to examine more closely the aesthetics of rap or "hip hop" (as the cognoscenti often call it<sup>5</sup>). Since I enjoy this music, I have a personal stake in defending its aesthetic legitimacy. But the cultural issues are much wider and the aesthetic stakes much higher. For rap, I believe, is a postmodern popular art which challenges some of our most deeply entrenched aesthetic conventions, conventions which are common not only to modernism as an artistic style and ideology but to the philosophical doctrine of modernity and its differentiation of cultural spheres. By considering rap in the context of postmodern aesthetics, I hope not only to provide academic aestheticians with a better understanding of this much maligned but little studied genre of popular art. I also hope to enhance our understanding of postmodernism through the concrete analysis of one of its unique cultural forms.

Postmodernism is a vexingly complex and contested phenomenon, whose aesthetic consequently resists clear and unchallengeable definition. Nonetheless, certain themes and stylistic features are widely recognized as characteristically postmodern, which is not to say that they cannot also be found to varying degrees in some modernist art.<sup>6</sup> These characteristics include: recycling appropriation rather than unique originaive creation, the eclectic mixing of styles, the enthusiastic embracing of the new technology and mass culture, the challenging of modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy and artistic purity, and an emphasis on the localized and temporal rather than the putatively universal and eternal. Whether or not we wish to call these features postmodern, rap not only saliently exemplifies them, but often consciously highlights and thematizes them. Thus, even if we reject the whole category of postmodernism, these features are essential for understanding rap.

### Appropriative Sampling

Artistic appropriation is the historical source of hip-hop music and still remains the core of its technique and a central feature of its aesthetic form and message. The music derives from selecting and combining parts of prerecorded songs to produce a "new" soundtrack. This soundtrack, produced by the DJ on a multiple turntable, constitutes the musical background for the rap lyrics. These in turn are frequently devoted both to praising the DJ's inimitable virtuosity in sampling and synthesizing the appropriated music, and to boasting of the lyrical and rhyming power of the rapper (called the MC). While the rapper's vaunting self-praise often

highlights his sexual desirability, commercial success, and property assets, these signs of status are all presented as secondary to and derivative from his verbal power.

Some whites may find it difficult to imagine that verbal virtuosity is greatly appreciated in the black urban ghetto. But sociological study reveals it is very highly valued there; while anthropological research shows that asserting superior social status through verbal prowess is a deeply entrenched black tradition which goes back to the griots in West Africa and which has long been sustained in the New World through such conventionalized verbal contests or games as “signifying” or “the dozens.”<sup>7</sup> Failure to recognize the traditional tropes, stylistic conventions, and constraint-produced complexities of Afro-American English (such as semantic inversion and indirection, feigned simplicity, and covert parody—all originally designed to conceal the real meaning from hostile white listeners)<sup>8</sup> has induced the false belief that all rap lyrics are superficial and monotonous, if not altogether moronic. But informed and sympathetic close reading will reveal in many rap songs not only the cleverly potent vernacular expression of keen insights but also forms of linguistic subtlety and multiple levels of meaning whose polysemic complexity, ambiguity, and intertextuality can sometimes rival that of high art’s so-called “open work.”<sup>9</sup>

Like its stylized aggressively boasting language, so rap’s other most salient feature—its dominant funky beat—can be traced back to African roots, to jungle rhythms which were taken up by rock and disco and then reappropriated by the rap DJs—musical cannibals of the urban jungle. But for all its African heritage, hip hop was born in the disco era of the mid-seventies in the grim ghettos of New York, first the Bronx, and then Harlem and Brooklyn. As it appropriated disco sounds and techniques, it undermined and transformed them, much as jazz (an earlier black art of appropriation) had done with the melodies of popular songs. But in contrast to jazz, hip hop did not take mere melodies or musical phrases, that is, abstract musical patterns exemplifiable in different performances and thus bearing the ontological status of “type entities.” Instead it lifted concrete sound-events, prerecorded token performances of such musical patterns. Thus, unlike jazz, its borrowing and transfiguration did not require skill in playing musical instruments but only in manipulating recording equipment. DJs in ordinary disco clubs had developed the technique of cutting and blending one record into the next, matching tempos to make a smooth transition without violently disrupting the flow of dancing. Dissatisfied with the tame sound of disco and commercial pop, self-styled DJs in the

Bronx reapplied this technique of cutting to concentrate and augment those parts of the records which could provide for better dancing. For them

the important part of the record was the break—the part of a tune in which the drums took over. It could be the explosive Tito Puente style of Latin timbales to be heard on Jimmy Castor records; the loose funk drumming of countless '60s soul records by legends like James Brown or Dyke and the Blazers; even the foursquare bass-drum-and-snare intros adored by heavy metal and hard rockers like Thin Lizzy and the Rolling Stones. That was when the dancers flew and DJ's began cutting between the same few bars on the two turntables, extending the break into an instrumental.<sup>10</sup>

In short, hip hop began explicitly as dance music to be appreciated through movement, not mere listening. It was originally designed only for live performance (at dances held in homes, schools, community centers and parks), where one could admire the dexterity of the DJ and the personality and improvisational skills of the rapper. It was not intended for a mass audience, and for several years remained confined to the New York City area and outside the mass media network. Though rap was often taped informally on cassette and then reproduced and circulated by its growing body of fans and bootleggers, it was only in 1979 that rap had its first radio broadcast and released its first records. These two singles, "Rapper's Delight" and "King Tim III (Personality Jock)," which were made by groups outside the core rap community but which had connections with the record industry, provoked competitive resentment in the rap world and the incentive and example to get out of the underground and on to disc and radio. However, even when the groups moved from the street to the studio where they could use live music, the DJ's role of appropriation was not generally abandoned and continued to be thematized in rap lyrics as central to the art.<sup>11</sup>

From the basic technique of cutting between sampled records, hip hop developed three other formal devices which contribute significantly to its sound and aesthetic: "scratch mixing," "punch phrasing," and simple scratching. The first is simply overlaying or mixing certain sounds from one record to those of another already playing.<sup>12</sup> Punch phrasing is a refinement of such mixing, where the DJ moves the needle back and forth over a specific phrase of chords or drum slaps of a record so as to add a powerful percussive effect to the sound of the other record playing all the while on the

other turntable. The third device is a wilder and more rapid back and forth scratching of the record, too fast for the recorded music to be recognized but productive of a dramatic scratching sound which has its own intense musical quality and crazed beat.

These devices of cutting, mixing, and scratching give rap a variety of forms of appropriation, which seem as versatily applicable and imaginative as those of high art—as those, say, exemplified by Duchamp's mustache on the Mona Lisa, Rauschenberg's erasure of a De Koonig canvas, and Andy Warhol's multiple re-representations of prepackaged commercial images. Rap also displays a variety of appropriated content. Not only does it sample from a wide range of popular songs, it feeds on classical music, TV theme songs, advertising jingles, and the electronic music of arcade games. It even appropriates nonmusical content, such as media news reports and fragments of speeches by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

Though some DJs took pride in appropriating from very unlikely and arcane sources and sometimes tried to conceal (for fear of competition) the exact records they were sampling, there was never any attempt to conceal the fact that they were working from pre-recorded sounds rather than composing their own original music. On the contrary, they openly celebrated their method of sampling. What is the aesthetic significance of this proud art of appropriation?

First, it challenges the traditional ideal of originality and uniqueness that has long enslaved our conception of art. Romanticism and its cult of genius likened the artist to a divine creator and advocated that his works be altogether new and express his singular personality. Modernism with its commitment to artistic progress and the avant-garde reinforced the dogma that radical novelty was the essence of art. Though artists have always borrowed from each other's works, the fact was generally ignored or implicitly denied through the ideology of originality, which posed a sharp distinction between original creation and derivative borrowing. Postmodern art like rap undermines this dichotomy by creatively deploying and thematizing its appropriation to show that borrowing and creation are not at all incompatible. It further suggests that the apparently original work of art is itself always a product of unacknowledged borrowings, the unique and novel text always a tissue of echoes and fragments of earlier texts.

Originality thus loses its absolute originary status and is reconceived to include the transfiguring reappropriation and recycling of the old. In this postmodern picture there are no ultimate, untouchable originals, only appropriations of appropriations and simulacra of simulacra; so creative energy can be liberated to play with familiar

creations without fear that it thereby denies itself the opportunity to be truly creative by not producing a totally original work. Rap songs simultaneously celebrate their originality and their borrowing.<sup>13</sup> And as the dichotomy of creation/appropriation is challenged, so is the deep division between creative artist and appropriative audience; transfigurative appreciation can take the form of art.

### Cutting and Temporality

Rap's sampling style also challenges the work of art's traditional ideal of unity and integrity. Since Aristotle, aestheticians have often viewed the work as an organic whole so perfectly unified that any tampering with its parts would damage the whole. Moreover, the ideologies of romanticism and art for art's sake have reinforced our habit of treating artworks as transcendent and virtually sacred ends in themselves, whose integrity we should respect and never violate. In contrast to the aesthetic of organic unity, rap's cutting and sampling reflects the "schizophrenic fragmentation" and "collage effect" characteristic of the postmodern aesthetic.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to an aesthetic of devotional worship of a fixed untouchable work, hip hop offers the pleasures of deconstructive art—the thrilling beauty of dismembering (and rapping over) old works to create new ones, dismantling the prepackaged and wearily familiar into something stimulatingly different.

The DJ's sampling and the MC's rap also highlight the fact that the apparent unity of the original artwork is often an artificially constructed one, at least in contemporary popular music where the production process is frequently quite fragmented: an instrumental track recorded in Memphis, combined with a back-up vocal from New York, and a lead voice from Los Angeles. Rap simply continues this process of layered artistic composition by deconstructing and differently reassembling prepackaged musical products and then superimposing the MC's added layer of lyrics so as to produce a new work. But rap does this without the pretense that its own work is inviolable, that the artistic process is ever final, that there is ever a product which should be so fetishized that it could never be submitted to appropriative transfiguration. Instead, rap's sampling implies that an artwork's integrity as object should never outweigh the possibilities for continuing creation through use of that object. Its aesthetic thus suggests the Deweyan message that art is more essentially process than finished product, a welcome message in our culture whose tendency to reify and commodify all artistic expression

is so strong that rap itself is victimized by this tendency while defiantly protesting it.

In defying the fetishized integrity of artworks, rap also challenges traditional notions of their monumentality, universality, and permanence. No longer are admired works conceived in Eliotic fashion as “an ideal order” of “monuments” timelessly existing and yet preserved through time by tradition.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the standard view that “a poem is forever,” rap highlights the artwork’s temporality and likely impermanence: not only by appropriative deconstructions but by explicitly thematizing its own temporality in its lyrics. For example, several songs by BDP include lines like “Fresh for ’88, you suckers” or “Fresh for ’89, you suckers.”<sup>16</sup> Such declarations of date imply a consequent admission of datedness; what is fresh for ’88 is apparently stale by ’89, and so superseded by a new freshness of ’89 vintage. But, by rap’s postmodern aesthetic, the ephemeral freshness of artistic creations does not render them aesthetically unworthy; no more than the ephemeral freshness of cream renders its sweet taste unreal.<sup>17</sup> For the view that aesthetic value can only be real if it passes the test of time is simply an entrenched but unjustified presumption, ultimately deriving from the pervasive philosophical bias toward equating reality with the permanent and unchanging.

By refusing to treat art works as eternal monuments for permanent hands-off devotion, by reworking works to make them work better, rap also questions their assumed universality—the dogma that good art should be able to please all people and all ages by focusing only on universal human themes. Hip hop does treat universal themes like injustice and oppression, but it is proudly localized as “ghetto music,” thematizing its commitment to the black urban ghetto and its culture. While it typically avoids excluding white society (and white artists),<sup>18</sup> rap focuses on features of ghetto life that whites and middle-class blacks would rather ignore: pimping, prostitution, and drug addiction, as well as rampant venereal disease, street killings, and oppressive harassment by white policemen. Most rappers define their local allegiances in quite specific terms, often not simply by city but by neighborhood, like Compton, Harlem, Brooklyn, or the Bronx. Even when rap goes international, it remains proudly local; we find in French rap, for example, the same targeting of specific neighborhoods and concentration on local problems.<sup>19</sup>

Though localization is a salient characteristic of the postmodern breakdown of modernism’s international style, rap’s strong local sense is probably more the product of its origins in neighborhood conflict and competition. As Toop notes, hip hop helped transform

violent rivalries between local gangs into musical-verbal contests between rapping crews (*RA* 14–15, 70–71).<sup>20</sup> By now it is difficult to point to sharp stylistic differences between the music of the different locales, though more Los Angeles rappers seem less concerned with black militancy and white oppression than their brothers in New York. Of course, local differences are hard to maintain once the music begins circulating through the mass-media system and is subjected to its commercializing pressures. For such reasons, rap lyrics often complain about its commercial expansion just as they celebrate it.

### Technology and Mass-Media Culture

Rap's complex attitude toward mass circulation and commercialization reflects another central feature of postmodernism: its fascinated and overwhelming absorption of contemporary technology, particularly that of the mass media. While the commercial products of this technology seem so simple and fruitful to use, both the actual complexities of technological production and its intricate relations to the sustaining socioeconomic system are, for the consumer public, frighteningly unfathomable and unmanageable. Mesmerized by the powers technology provides us, we postmoderns are also vaguely disturbed by the great power it has over us, as the all-pervasive but increasingly incomprehensible medium of our lives. But fascination with its awesome power can afford us the further (perhaps illusory) thrill that in effectively employing technology, we prove ourselves its master. Such thrills are characteristic of what Jameson dubs the "hallucinatory exhilaration" of the "postmodern or technological sublime" (*NLR* 76, 79).

Hip hop powerfully displays this syndrome, enthusiastically embracing and masterfully appropriating mass-media technology, but still remaining unhappily oppressed and appropriated by that same technological system and its sustaining society. Rap was born of commercial mass-media technology: records and turntables, amplifiers and mixers. Its technological character allowed its artists to create music they could not otherwise make, either because they could not afford the musical instruments required or because they lacked the musical training to play them (*RA* 151). Technology constituted its DJs as artists rather than consumers or mere executant technicians. "Run DMC first said a deejay could be a band / Stand on its own feet, get you out your seat," exclaims a rap by Public

Enemy.<sup>21</sup> But without commercial mass-media technology, the DJ band would have had nothing to stand on.

The creative virtuosity with which rap artists have appropriated new technology is indeed astounding and exhilarating, and it is often acclaimed in rap lyrics. By acrobatically juggling the cutting and changing of many records on multiple turntables, skillful DJs showed their physical as well as artistic mastery of commercial music and its technology. From the initial disco equipment, rap artists have gone on to adopt more (and more advanced) technologies: electronic drums, synthesizers, sounds from calculators and touchtone phones, and sometimes computers which scan entire ranges of possible sounds and then can replicate and synthesize the desired ones.

Mass-media technology has also been crucial to rap's impressively growing popularity. As a product of black culture, an essentially oral rather than written culture, rap needs to be heard and felt immediately, through its energetically moving sound, in order to be properly appreciated. No notational score could transmit its crazy collage of music, and even the lyrics cannot be adequately conveyed in mere written form, divorced from their expressive rhythm, intonation, and surging stress and flow. Only mass-media technology allows for the wide dissemination and preservation of such oral performance events. Both through radio and television broadcasting and through the recording media of records, tapes, and compact discs, rap has been able to reach out beyond its original ghetto audience and thus give its music and message a real hearing, even in white America and Europe. Only through the mass media could hip hop become a very audible voice in our popular culture, one which middle America would like to suppress since it often stridently expresses the frustrating oppression of ghetto life and the proud and pressing desire for social resistance and change. Without such systems rap could not have achieved its "penetration to the core of the nation" (Ice-T) or its opportunity to "teach the bourgeois" (Public Enemy).<sup>22</sup> Similarly, only through the mass media could hip hop have achieved artistic fame and fortune, its commercial success enabling renewed artistic investment and serving as an undeniable source of black cultural pride.

Rap not only relies on mass-media techniques and technologies, it derives much of its content and imagery from mass culture. Television shows, sports personalities, arcade games, and familiar name-brand commercial products (for example, Adidas sneakers) are frequently referred to in the lyrics, and their musical themes or jingles are sometimes sampled; a whole series of rap records was based on the Smurf cartoons. Such items of mass-media culture

help provide the common cultural background necessary for artistic creation and communication in a society where the tradition of high culture is largely unknown or unappealing, if not also oppressively alien and exclusionary.

But for all its acknowledged gifts, the mass media is not a trusted and unambiguous ally. It is simultaneously the focus of deep suspicion and angry critique. Rappers inveigh against its false and superficial fare, its commercially standardized and sanitized but unreal and mindless content. "False media, we don't need it, do we? It's fake," urge Public Enemy,<sup>23</sup> who also lament (in "She Watch Channel Zero") how standard television shows undermine the intelligence, responsibilities, and cultural roots of black women. Rappers are constantly attacking the radio for refusing to broadcast their more politically potent or sexually explicit raps, and instead filling the air with tame "commercial pap" (BDP). "Radio suckers never play me," complain Public Enemy, a line which gets sampled and punch phrased by Ice-T in an eponymous rap condemning the radio and the FCC for a censorship which denies both freedom of expression and the hard realities of life so as to insure the continuous media fare of "nothin but commercial junk."<sup>24</sup> Scorning the option of a "sell-out," Ice-T raises (and answers) the crucial "media question" troubling all progressive rap: "Can the radio handle the truth? Nope." But he also asserts the reassurance that even with a radio ban he can reach and make millions through the medium of tapes, suggesting that the media provides its own ways of subverting attempts at regulatory control: "They're makin' radio wack, people have to escape / But even if I'm banned, I'll sell a million tapes."<sup>25</sup>

Finally, apart from their false, superficial content and repressive censorship, the media are linked to a global commercial system and society which callously exploits and oppresses hip hop's primary audience. Recognizing that those who govern and speak for the dominating technological-commercial complex are indifferent to the enduring woes of the black underclass ("Here is a land that never gave a damn about a brother like me . . . but the suckers had authority"), rappers protest how our capitalist society exploits the disenfranchised blacks both to preserve its sociopolitical stability (through their service in the military and police) and to increase its profits by increasing their demand for unnecessary consumer goods.<sup>26</sup> One very prominent theme of hip hop is how the advertised ideal of conspicuous consumption—luxury cars, clothes, and high-tech appliances—lures many ghetto youth to a life of crime, a life which promises the quick attainment of such commodities but typ-

ically ends in death, jail, or destitution, thus reinforcing the ghetto cycle of poverty and despair.

It is one of the postmodern paradoxes of hip hop that rappers extol their own achievement of consumerist luxury while simultaneously condemning its uncritical idealization and quest as misguided and dangerous for their audience in the ghetto community to which they ardently avow their solidarity and allegiance. In the same way, self-declared “underground” rappers at once denigrate commercialism as an artistic and political sell-out, but nonetheless glorify their own commercial success, often even regarding it as indicative of their artistic power.<sup>27</sup> Such contradictions are perhaps expressive of the postmodern fragmentation of the self into inconsistent personae, but they may be equally expressive of more fundamental contradictions in the sociocultural fields of ghetto life and so-called noncommercial art.<sup>28</sup> Certainly there is a very deep connection in Afro-American culture between independent expression and economic achievement, which would impel even noncommercial rappers to tout their commercial success and property. For, as Houston Baker so well demonstrates, Afro-American artists must always, consciously or unconsciously, come to terms with the history of slavery and commercial exploitation which forms the ground of black experience and expression.<sup>29</sup> As slaves were converted from independent humans to property, their way to regain independence was to achieve sufficient property of their own so as to buy their manumission (as in the traditional liberation narrative of Frederick Douglass). Having long been denied a voice because they were property, Afro-Americans could reasonably conclude “that *only* property enables expression.”<sup>30</sup> For underground rappers, then, commercial success and its luxury trappings may function essentially as signs of an economic independence which enables free artistic and political expression, and which is conversely also enabled by such expression. A major dimension of this celebrated economic independence is its independence from crime.<sup>31</sup>

### Eclecticism, History, and Autonomy

I have already mentioned the wide-ranging eclecticism of rap’s appropriative sampling, which extends even to nonmusical sources. Its plundering and mixing of past sources has no respect for period, genre, and style distinctions; it cannibalizes and combines what it wants with no concern to preserve the formal integrity, aesthetic

intention, or historical context of the records it plunders, absorbing and transforming everything it cuts and takes into its funky collage.

Rap historian David Toop gives a sense of this wild eclecticism: "Bambaataa mixed up calypso, European and Japanese electronic music, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and rock groups like Mountain; Kool DJ Herc spun the Doobie Brothers back to back with the Isley Brothers; Grandmaster Flash overlaid speech records and sound effects with The Last Poets; Symphonic B Boys Mixx cut up classical music on five turntables" (*RA* 105; see also 149, 153).

Perhaps more than any other contemporary art form, rap not only exemplifies but proudly thematizes the eclectic pastiche and cannibalization of past styles that is central to the postmodern. Some, like Jameson, regret this "random cannibalization of all the styles of the past" (*NLR* 65–66) and its unprincipled "play of random stylistic allusion" (*NLR* 66) for its disintegration and derealization of a coherent and real past, one which might otherwise be retrieved to help us better understand our problematic present and guide us toward a more liberated future. For Jameson, postmodernism's eclectic "historicism effaces history" (*NLR* 65). Instead of "real history" and "genuine historicity" (*NLR* 68), the organic reconstruction of "some putative real world" (*NLR* 71), we are supplied with nostalgia, a jumble of stereotypical images from an imagined past. We are thus confined to the prisonhouse of ideological representations, "condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach" (*NLR* 71) and hence unavailable as a source for political critique and liberation.<sup>32</sup>

But the whole idea of real history, the one true account of a fully determinate past whose structure, content, and meaning are fixed and unrevisable, is itself a repressive ideological construction and a vestige of absolute realism which cannot compel much conviction in our age of postfoundationalist philosophy. Neither the past nor the present is ever purely given or reported; they are always selectively represented and shaped by discursive structures reflecting dominant interests and values, which are often simply those of the politically dominant. In being historicized, history is not so much lost but pluralized and openly politicized, instead of having its implicit political agenda concealed under the guise of neutral objectivity where it cannot be challenged or even recognized as political. History, objectively and univocally conceived, is a metaphysical naturalization of *his*-story, the story of "The Man"—the term black culture uses to denote not only the police but the dominating, oppressive white male society which controls and polices the institutions of cultural

legitimacy, including the writing and teaching of history.<sup>33</sup> A fascinating feature of much underground rap is its acute recognition of the politics of culture; its challenge of the univocal claims of white history and education; and its attempt to provide alternative black historical narratives which can stimulate black pride and foster emancipatory impulses. Such alternative narratives extend from biblical history to the history of hip hop itself, which is thus constituted and valorized as a phenomenon worthy of historical testimony and documentation.<sup>34</sup>

If rap's free-wheeling eclectic cannibalism violates high modernist conventions of aesthetic purity and integrity, its belligerent insistence on the deeply political dimension of culture challenges one of the most fundamental artistic conventions of modernity: aesthetic autonomy. Modernity, according to Weber and others, was bound up with the project of occidental rationalization, secularization, and differentiation which disenchanting the traditional religious worldview and carved up its organic domain into three separate and autonomous spheres of secular culture: science, art, and morality, each governed by its own inner logic of theoretical, aesthetic, or moral-practical judgment.<sup>35</sup> This tripartite division was of course powerfully reflected and reinforced by Kant's critical analysis of human thinking in terms of pure reason, practical reason, and aesthetic judgment.

In this division of cultural spheres, art was distinguished from science as not being concerned with the formulation or dissemination of knowledge, since its aesthetic judgment was essentially nonconceptual and subjective. It was also sharply differentiated from the practical activity of the realm of ethics and politics, which involved real interests and appetitive will (as well as conceptual thinking). Instead, art was consigned to a disinterested, imaginative realm which Schiller later described as the realm of play and semblance.<sup>36</sup> As the aesthetic was distinguished from the more rational realms of knowledge and action, it was also firmly differentiated from the more sensate and appetitive gratifications of embodied human nature—aesthetic pleasure residing, rather, in distanced, disinterested contemplation of formal properties.

Hip hop's genre of "knowledge rap" (or "message rap") is dedicated to the defiant violation of this compartmentalized, trivializing, and eviscerating view of art and the aesthetic. Such rappers repeatedly insist that their role as artists and poets is inseparable from their role as insightful inquirers into reality and teachers of truth, particularly those aspects of reality and truth which get neglected or distorted by establishment history books and contemporary media

coverage. KRS-One of BDP claims to be not only “a teacher and artist, startin’ new concepts at their hardest,” but a philosopher (indeed, according to the jacket notes on the *Ghetto Music* album, a “metaphysician”) and also a scientist (“I don’t drop science, I teach it. Correct?”).<sup>37</sup> In contrast to the media’s political whitewash, stereotypes, and empty escapist entertainment, he proudly claims:

I’m tryin’ not to escape, but hit the problem head on  
 By bringing out the truth in a song.  
 . . .  
 It’s simple; BDP will teach reality  
 No beatin’ around the bush, straight up; just like the beat is free.  
 So now you know a poet’s job is never done.  
 But I’m never overworked, cause I’m number one.<sup>38</sup>

Of course, the realities and truths which hip hop reveals are not the transcendental eternal verities of traditional philosophy, but rather the mutable but coercive facts and patterns of the material, sociohistorical world. Yet this emphasis on the temporally changing and malleable nature of the real (reflected in rap’s frequent time tags and its popular idiom of “knowing what time it is”<sup>39</sup>) constitutes a respectably tenable metaphysical position associated with American pragmatism. Though few may know it, rap philosophers are really “down with” Dewey, not merely in metaphysics but in a noncompartmentalized aesthetics which highlights social function, process, and embodied experience.<sup>40</sup>

For knowledge rap not only insists on uniting the aesthetic and the cognitive, but equally stresses that practical functionality can form part of artistic meaning and value. Many rap songs are explicitly devoted to raising black political consciousness, pride, and revolutionary impulses; some make the powerful point that aesthetic judgments, and particularly the question of what counts as art, involve political issues of legitimation and social struggle in which rap is engaged as progressive praxis and which it advances by its very self-assertion as art. Other raps function as street-smart moral fables, offering cautionary narratives and practical advice on problems of crime, drugs, and sexual hygiene (for example, Ice-T’s “Drama” and “High Rollers,” Kool Moe Dee’s “Monster Crack” and “Go See the Doctor,” BDP’s “Stop the Violence” and “Jimmy”). Finally, we should note that rap has been used effectively to teach writing and reading skills and black history in the ghetto classroom.<sup>41</sup>

Since postmodernism dissolves the relative autonomy of the artistic sphere crucial to the differentiating project of modernity and equally

crucial to the high modernist aesthetic which refused contamination by the impurities of practical life, politics, and the common vulgarities of mass culture, Jameson suggests that its disintegration of traditional modernist boundaries could provide the redemptive option of “a new radical cultural politics” (*NLR* 89), a postmodern aesthetic which “foregrounds the cognitive and pedagogical dimensions of political art and culture” (*NLR* 89). Jameson regards this new cultural form as still “hypothetical” (*NLR* 89), but I submit that it can be found in rap, whose artists explicitly aim and succeed at teaching and political activism, just as they seek to undermine the socially oppressive dichotomy between legitimate (that is, high) art and popular entertainment by simultaneously asserting the popular and the artistic status of hip hop.

Like most culture critics, Jameson is worried about the potential of postmodernist art to provide effective social criticism and political protest, because of its “abolition of critical distance” (*NLR* 85). Having undermined the fortress of artistic autonomy and enthusiastically appropriated the content of workaday and commercial living, postmodern art seems to lack the “minimal aesthetic distance” (*NLR* 87) necessary for art to stand “outside the massive Being of capital” (*NLR* 87) and thus represent an alternative to (and hence critique of) what Adorno called “the ungodly reality.”<sup>42</sup> Though anyone tuned in to the sound of Public Enemy, BDP, or Ice-T can hardly doubt the authenticity and power of their oppositional energy, the charge that all contemporary “forms of cultural resistance are secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might be considered a part” (*NLR* 87) might well be directed at rap. For while it condemns media stereotypes, violence, and the quest for luxurious living, rap just as often exploits or glorifies them to make its points. While denouncing commercialism and the capitalist system, rap’s lyrics are simultaneously celebrating its commercial success and business histories; some songs, for example, describe and justify the rapper’s change of record company for commercial reasons.<sup>43</sup>

Hip hop surely does not lie wholly outside what Jameson, in a questionable organicistic presumption, regards as the “global and totalizing space of the new world system” (*NLR* 88) of multinational capitalism, as if the congeries of contingent events and chaotic processes which help make up what we call the world could ever be fully totalized in one space or system. But granting for the moment that there is this all-embracing system, why should rap’s profitable connection with some of its features void the power of its social critique? Do we need to be fully outside something in

order to criticize it effectively? Does not the postmodern and post-structuralist decentering critique of definitive, ontologically grounded boundaries put the whole notion of being “fully outside” seriously into question?

With this challenging of a clear inside/outside dichotomy we should similarly ask, Why does proper aesthetic response traditionally require distanced contemplation by a putatively transcendent and coolly disinterested subject? This assumption of the necessity of distance is yet another manifestation of the modernist convention of artistic purity and autonomy which hip hop repudiates. Indeed, rather than an aesthetic of distanced, disengaged, formalist judgment, rappers urge an aesthetic of deeply embodied participatory involvement, with content as well as form. They want to be appreciated primarily through energetic and impassioned dance, not through immobile contemplation and dispassionate study.<sup>44</sup> Queen Latifah, for example, insistently commands her listeners, “I order you to dance for me.” For, as Ice-T explains, the rapper “won’t be happy till the dancers are wet” with sweat, “out of control” and wildly “possessed” by the beat, as indeed the captivating rapper should himself be possessed so as to rock his audience with his God-given gift to rhyme.<sup>45</sup> This aesthetic of divine yet bodily possession is strikingly similar to Plato’s account of poetry and its appreciation as a chain of divine madness extending from the Muse through the artists and performers to the audience, a seizure which for all its divinity was criticized as regrettably irrational and inferior to true knowledge.<sup>46</sup> More importantly, the spiritual ecstasy of divine bodily possession should remind us of Vodun and the metaphysics of African religion to which the aesthetics of Afro-American music has indeed been traced.<sup>47</sup>

What could be further from modernity’s project of rationalization and secularization, what more inimical to modernism’s rationalized, disembodied, and formalized aesthetic? No wonder the established modernist aesthetic is so hostile to rap and to rock music in general. If there is a viable space between the modern rationalized aesthetic and an altogether irrational one whose rabid Dionysian excess must vitiate its cognitive, didactic, and political claims, this is the space for a postmodern aesthetic.<sup>48</sup> I think the fine art of rap inhabits that space, and I hope it will continue to thrive there.

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#### NOTES

1 See Jon Pareles, “How Rap Moves to Television’s Beat,” *New York Times*, 14 Jan. 1990, Arts and Leisure, pp. 1, 28.

2 Rap's censorship became national news when Two Live Crew were banned and arrested in Florida in the summer of 1990. For details on earlier attempts to repress rap, see the pamphlet, "You Got a Right to Rock, Don't Let Them Take It Away" written by the editors of *Rock & Roll Confidential* and published by Duke and Duchess Ventures Inc., New York, Sept. 1989; and Dave Marsh and Phyllis Pollack, "Wanted for Attitude," *Village Voice*, 10 Oct. 1989, 33–37. The censorship of concerts and the "parental" blacklisting of records, vigorously pursued by the Parents Musical Resource Center (PMRC), are sometimes thematized in rap lyrics and related to issues of aesthetic and political freedom of expression, as for instance in Ice-T's "Freedom of Speech."

3 We see this in Spike Lee's provocative film about the black ghetto, *Do The Right Thing*, Forty Acres and a Mule Productions, 1989. The film's climactic race riot, which destroys the local pizzeria (owned and run by a lower-middle-class Italian family and employing one of the neighborhood blacks), is set off by the proprietor's violent refusal to allow rap music to be played in his shop "because of the noise." Rap's typical loudness, one of its most offensive and criticized features for bourgeois sensibility, is a consciously calculated and thematized feature of its aesthetic, as we can see in Public Enemy's song "Bring the Noise," a slogan adopted by many other rappers.

4 I have taken the title from the lyrics of Ice-T's "Hit the Deck," which aims to "demonstrate rappin' as a fine art." There are countless other raps which emphatically declare rap's poetic and artistic status; among the more forceful are: Stetsasonic's "Talkin' All That Jazz"; BDP's "I'm Still #1," "Ya Slippin'," "Ghetto Music," "Hip Hop Rules"; and Kool Moe Dee's "The Best."

5 Hip hop actually designates an organic cultural complex wider than rap. It includes breakdancing and graffiti and also a stylized but casual style of dress, where hightop sneakers become high fashion. Rap music supplied the beats for the breakdancers; some rappers testify to having practiced graffiti; and hip-hop fashion is celebrated in many raps, one example being Run DMC's "My Adidas."

6 I explore the aesthetic dimension of postmodernism in much greater detail in Richard Shusterman, "Postmodernism and the Aesthetic Turn," *Poetics Today*, 10 (1989), 605–22.

7 See, e.g., Roger Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle* (Chicago, 1970), whose study of a Philadelphia ghetto revealed that speaking skills "confer high social status" (p. 39) and that even among young males "ability with words is as highly valued as physical strength" (p. 59). Studies of Washington and Chicago ghettos have confirmed this. See Ulf Hannerz, whose *Soulside* (New York, 1969) notes that verbal skill was "widely appreciated among ghetto men" not only for competitive practical purposes but for "entertainment value" (pp. 84–85); and Thomas Kochman, "Toward an Ethnography of Black American Speech Behavior," in *Rappin' and Stylin' Out*, ed. Thomas Kochman (Urbana, 1972), pp. 241–64. Along with its narrower use to designate the traditional and stylized practice of verbal insult, black "signifying" has a more general sense of encoded or indirect communication, which relies heavily on the special background knowledge and particular context of the communicants. For an impressively complex and theoretically sophisticated analysis of "signifying" as such a generic trope and its use "in black texts as explicit theme, as implicit rhetorical strategy, and as a principle of literary history," see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford, 1988), p. 89 et passim.

8 Such linguistic strategies of evasion and indirection (which include inversion, shucking, tommying, marking, and loud-talking, as well as the more generic notion of signifying) are discussed at length in Grace Simms Holt, "Inversion' in Black

Communication" and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying, Loud-Talking, and Marking," both found in Kochman, *Rappin' and Stylin' Out*.

9 I demonstrate some of this rich complexity by a close reading of Stetsasonic's "Talkin' All That Jazz," in chapter 8 of my *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford, 1992).

10 David Toop, *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop* (Boston, 1984), p. 14, hereafter cited in text as *RA*.

11 See, e.g., Ice-T's "Rhyme Pays," Public Enemy's "Bring the Noise," Run DMC's "Jam-master Jammin'," and BDP's "Ya Slippin'."

12 It is called scratch mixing, not only because this manual placement of the needle on particular tracks scratches the records, but because the DJ hears the scratch in his ear when he cues the needle on the track to be sampled before actually adding it to the sound of the other record already being sent out on the sound system.

13 See, e.g., Public Enemy's "Caught, Can I get a Witness," Stetsasonic's "Talkin' All That Jazz," and BDP's "I'm Still #1," "Ya Slippin'," and "The Blueprint." The motivating image of this last rap highlights the simulacral notion of hip hop originality. In privileging their underground style as original and superior to "the soft commercial sound" of other rap, BDP connects its greater originality with its greater closeness to rap's ghetto origins. "You got a copy, I read from the blueprint." But a blueprint is itself a copy not an original, indeed it is a simulacrum or representation of a designed object which typically does not yet (if ever) exist as a concrete original object.

14 See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, 146 (1984), 53–92, 73, 75, hereafter cited in text as *NLR*.

15 For a critique of this early view of Eliot's and for an explanation of the reasons why Eliot himself abandoned it in formulating his later theory of tradition, see Richard Shusterman, *T. S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York, 1988), pp. 156–67.

16 See, respectively, "My Philosophy" and "Ghetto Music." The lyrics of "Ya Slippin'" and "Hip Hop Rules" respectively date themselves as 1987 and 1989. Public Enemy's "Don't Believe the Hype" has a 1988 time tag, and similar time tags can be found in raps by Ice-T, Kool Moe Dee, and many others.

17 By the same token I trust that my present account of rap is worthwhile, even though it will probably soon become outdated through developments in the genre.

18 There are rap records from white groups like Blondie, Tom Tom Club, Beastie Boys, Third Bass, and from the white solo rapper Vanilla Ice. The notorious punk rock manager Malcolm McLaren has also recorded in this genre.

19 See, e.g., the French rap album *Rapattitudes*, in which the rappers refer to their specific neighborhoods in Paris and their problems of housing and social acceptance. French rap remains, however, rather derivative from its American source.

20 It might well be argued that hip hop provides an aesthetic field where physical violence and aggression get translated into symbolic form. Certainly, fierce rivalry and aggressive competition are essential to the aesthetic of rap. Perhaps the most common theme in rap lyrics is how the rapper is superior to others in the power of his rhymes and ability to "rock" the audience, how he can take on the challenge of other rappers (who criticize or "dis" him) and make them look weak and foolish when they duel with him in rap. This duelling is often described in extremely violent terms, as it is in the traditional verbal insult contests of "the dozens" and "signifying" (see the sources cited in n. 7). However, together with this uncompromising competitive assertion to be "the best," rappers also express in their lyrics their underlying solidarity with other rap artists who share the same artistic and political agenda.

21 See Public Enemy's "Bring the Noise."

- 22 See Ice-T's "Heartbeat" and Public Enemy's "Don't Believe the Hype."
- 23 Public Enemy, "Don't Believe the Hype."
- 24 See BDP's "Ghetto Music," Public Enemy's "Rebel Without a Pause," and Ice-T's "Radio Suckers." However, as these rappers admit, some stations on some occasions (usually late at night) will play the raw reality sound.
- 25 Ice-T, "Radio Suckers."
- 26 Public Enemy, "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos." On this theme of black exploitation by white society see also BDP's "Who Protects Us From You" and Ice-T's "Squeeze the Trigger."
- 27 For examples of the former tension see Ice-T's "High Rollers," "Drama," "6'N the Morning," "Somebody's Gotta Do It (Pimpin Ain't Easy)," and Big Daddy Kane's "Another Victory"; for the latter, see Ice-T's "Radio Suckers" and BDP's "The Blueprint." A still more troubling contradiction is that despite rap's condemnation of minority oppression and exploitation, it frequently adopts the "pimpin' style" which consists of horribly macho celebrations of the (often violent) exploitation of women.
- 28 Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984) best exposes the hidden logic of material, commercial, and class interests and mechanisms which allow for the workings of so-called pure, noncommercial art, and for its effective misprision as pure and noncommercial.
- 29 Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 34–63.
- 30 See, e.g., Ice-T's "Rhyme Pays," Kool Moe Dee's "They Want Money" and "The Avenuc."
- 31 Baker, *Blues, Ideology*, p. 57.
- 32 Jameson connects this eclecticism, stereotypy, and effacement of history with the common charge that postmodern art is depthless and superficial. But much of its perceived superficiality, I believe, results from judging it in terms of modernist conventions of depth rather than in terms of its oppositional and dialectical relationship to those conceptions, a relationship which can give its superficiality a reflected depth by contextual, ironic contrast. To demonstrate this, however, even in the one area of rap, would require more scope than is available in this paper.
- 33 This possible pun of "his-story" is recognized and employed by BDP in "Part Time Suckers": "These people make me laugh / The way they like to change up the past / So when you're there in class learnin' His-story, learn a little your story, the real story." For discussion of "The Man," see Claude Brown, "The Language of Soul, Ken Johnson, "The Vocabulary of Race," and Grace Sims Holt, " 'Inversion' in Black Communication," all in Kochman, *Rappin' and Stylin' Out*.
- 34 See, BDP's "Why is That?," "You Must Learn," and "Hip Hop Rules."
- 35 See, e.g., Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 1–22.
- 36 See Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Oxford, 1982).
- 37 See BDP, "My Philosophy" and "Gimme, Dat, (Woy)." The lyrics of their knowledge rap "Who Protects Us From You" describes it as "a public service announcement brought to you by the scientists of Boogie Down Productions."
- 38 See BDP, "I'm Still #1." For BDP's attack on establishment history and media and its stereotypes, see especially "My Philosophy," "You Must Learn," and "Why is That?"
- 39 This phrase and notion, for example, provides the central theme of Ice-T's "Do You Know What Time It Is?" and appears in many other raps. Hip hop's heightened sense of temporality is expressed in other striking ways. For example, Flavor Flav of Public Enemy always appears with a large clock hanging from around his neck.

40 For a brief account of Dewey's aesthetics and its contemporary relevance, see Richard Shusterman, "Why Dewey Now?" *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 23 (1989), 60–67; and (for more detail) chapter one of my *Pragmatist Aesthetics*.

41 The best example of this is Gary Byrd, a New York radio DJ who developed a literacy program based on rap. For more details on this, see Toop, *RA*, pp. 45–46.

42 T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London, 1984), p. 322.

43 See, e.g., Ice-T's "409" and BDP's "Nervous." It is noteworthy that even these artists who identify themselves as noncommercial bear names that suggest the commercial business world. Ice-T's group or "crew" is called "Rhyme Syndicate Productions" and BDP, of course, stands for "Boogie Down Productions."

44 Grandmaster Flash complained when, at the novelty and virtuosity of his cutting, "the crowd would stop dancing and just gather round like a seminar. This is what I didn't want. This wasn't school, it was time to shake your ass." See Toop, *RA*, p. 72.

45 See Queen Latifah, "Dance for Me" and Ice-T's "Hit the Deck." For a similar emphasis on the mesmerizing possession and physically and spiritually moving power of rap in both performer and audience, see Kool Moe Dee's "Rock Steady" and "The Best."

46 The point is made most explicitly in Plato's *Ion*.

47 See, e.g., Michael Ventura, *Shadow Dancing in the U.S.A.* (Los Angeles, 1986); and Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York, 1984).

48 For an elaboration and defense of such a more embodied, functional, and political aesthetic, see my *Pragmatist Aesthetics*.