From the Word Up:
The Poetic Message of Rap Music

by

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Abstract

Although rap music is rooted within West African cultural aesthetics and practices, it is best described as a form of contemporary urban American poetry. From a philosophical argument that *nothing comes from nothing*, the lyrical, musical, technological and symbolic elements composing rap music are highlighted and juxtaposed in order to articulate the process of *building upon*. These elements include rap music's sociolinguistic predecessors, socio-economic and material environments, and musical/narrative structure. However, it is the semantic revisionary characteristic of rap music lyrics that is of interest as I argue that symbolic redefinition constitutes the poetics of rap music. Through an analysis of rap music's poetic lyrical narratives, I attempt to demonstrate how rap music can be understood not only as contemporary urban poetry but as a pedagogy befitting today's technologically mediated world.

Keywords: Anthropology, poetics, rap music, lyrical analysis, hip hop, pedagogy, history, technology, tradition.

For my father:

soldier, road builder, star reader, breath giver.

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Table of Contents

Introduction: hardcore punk rock and rap music

When I was five-years-old I used to sneak down to my brother's bedroom while he was at school and listen to his records, mostly The Beatles and Cat Stevens. I soon discovered that my two sisters both had extensive record collections and soon I was listening to a lot of diverse styles of music. My siblings continued building up their collections and I would spend countless hours spinning their records and listening to the music until I began to accumulate records and cassettes of my own. But as far as I remember, none of my siblings listened to rap music.

My own introduction to rap music happened at the same time that MTV and MuchMusic started their twenty-four hour music video television stations. This was 1983-84 and one of the first videos I watched was Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five's "The Message." The video imagery consists of the band walking along a densely populated street (i.e., with people and automobiles) in New York. The video ends when the band stops at the corner of an intersection to continue their song. A police car pulls up beside them and the band is subsequently arrested, squeezed into the back of the car, and hauled away.

Throughout the 1980s I explored the sounds of European punk rock and new wave music. This interest soon brought me around to North American punk rock, or more precisely, "hardcore," as well as ska/reggae. In these latter styles of music, but mostly hardcore, I began to hear stories about social hierarchies, class war, anarchy and other polemical issues. In short, a lot of hardcore philosophy and lyrics were based on critiques of middle-class America. Studiously, I would read lyric sheets when they were available or spend countless hours trying to decipher what I was hearing (in fact I still do so with great enjoyment). Curiously enough however, it was through hardcore that I again became further acquainted with rap music. Two hardcore bands, Youth Brigade and 7-Seconds, both adopted rap music's style of heavy bass- and drum-driven rhythms mixed with spoken lyrics to record, respectively, "Men in blue pt.II"[1] and "Colorblind."[2] The narratives of these two songs dealt with police harassment and racism, two very common themes in rap music. And although I liked the songs, I would not hear any more rap music for another two years, at which point it was again brought to my attention by a graffiti artist from New York.

My point is that from being exposed to music on an intellectual level (i.e., reading, listening and interpreting), I began to develop the skills required for scholarly performance: questioning, social analysis, critique and deconstruction for examples. And since these academic practices are usually censored in public schools, hardcore music acted as an alternative pedagogy. Especially with its

"do-it-yourself (DIY)" philosophy, (i.e., "Punk ain't no religious cult/ Punk means thinking for yourself"[3]). Or, as Hebdige writes,

> a diagram showing three finger positions on the neck of a guitar over the caption: "Here's one chord, here's two more, now form your own band." (1979:112)

Mike D, of hardcore turned rap band, the Beastie Boys, describes the DIY spirit as

> DIY, that means do it yourself
> don't sit back waiting for somebody's help
> don't sit back and say good enough
> keep on striving, reinventing, keeping it off of the cuff.[4]

Hardcore also projected an optimistic vision of community based on the DIY ethos. That is, it encouraged people to organize local "scenes" connected by independent media operations based on limited resources. As SNFU puts it in "Get off your ass,"[5]

> So even if your scene dies
> you'll have the satisfaction
> of saying you tried...
> Work together avoid apathy
> We'll get a lot more done instead.

For instance, the basic hardcore band comprised one guitarist, one bassist, one drummer and one vocalist: music stripped down to three-chord percussive rhythms. Equally, print media was established by stapling or taping together (depending on budget restrictions) photocopied pages of music reviews, interviews, editorials, and other textual genres to produce "zines." Hebdige notes of this independent media that "[t]he overwhelming impression was one of urgency and immediacy, of a paper produced in... haste, of memos from the

front line" (1979:111). The "immediacy" of hardcore, found in the make-shift quality of its printed text, is also reflected in the velocity (i.e., very fast) of its musical/lyrical delivery and the reliance on "power chords." A power chord, as played on a guitar, is a minimal chord pattern made up of only two fretted finger positions allowing for quick and easy chord changes.

Three hardcore bands that really stand out in consideration of DIY are Minor Threat, The Dead Kennedys and Youth Brigade. Minor Threat vocalist Ian McKaye established Dischord Records with a four-track recorder (just enough tracks for the typical quadratic hardcore band structure) in the basement of his house in Washington, DC and began making records for various bands. In California, The Dead Kennedys established Alternative Tentacles and Youth Brigade started up Better Youth Organization (BYO). Ian McKaye continues this ethic in his present band Fugazi, insisting that if you want a Fugazi T-shirt you will have to make one yourself. A felt-tip marker and a white Fruit of the Loom T-shirt are usually the materials required for such fashion design. Along with its social-political awareness, hardcore's poetic symbolic play intrigued me. Symbols of metal studs, chains, safety-pins, leather and suit jackets, shaved heads/mohawks (bleached or dyed a variety of colours) and military fatigues all served to invert/challenge the status quo of white, middle-class America.

Throughout the 1980s, I became increasingly aware of rap music's growth as a popular style of music and its relationship to breakdancing and graffiti. Also, I was fortunate enough to have heard some cassettes that may

never again be available for listening pleasure. These live recordings of New York rap bands are known as "battle tapes" and were the primary vehicle for transmitting rap music before it became corporatized. But aside from a few select songs, I still was not paying much attention to the music. Now the 1990s are almost behind us and rap music, originally considered a form of black[6] American urban speech/music, is globally ubiquitous. And it is only now, after all my research for this thesis, that I realize why rap music did not grow on me: I did not know how to listen to it. As Keyes remarks, "people who react... negatively to... [rap music are] unable to decode its language" (1996:231). But what has that got to do with this thesis, you might ask. Well, although I may be generalizing, consider the similarity between a teenager's cringing at the sound of an opera and a senior's reaction to rap music as "noise." This is to suggest that sound and meaning (and their combination) are not objectively *a priori* to sensory perception as the functionalist paradigm of communication suggests. They are, instead, subject to interpretations influenced by, on the one hand, cultural relativity, and on the other, individual specificity (along with class, gender, and generation). Thus, any interpretive reading of rap's acoustic structure and linguistic symbolism requires a background knowledge of their cultural and social context.

Other analyses of rap music, beginning with Steven Hager's (1984) Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti and continuing through contemporary works have focused or focus on numerous

issues of interest to anthropologists: topics[7] such as **race** (Cross, 1993; Lusane, 1992 and 1993; McRobbie, 1995), **culture** (Fernando, 1994; Henderson, 1996; Ransby and Matthews, 1993; Rose, 1994a), **gender** (Keyes, 1993; McRobbie, 1995; Ransby and Matthews, 1993; Rose 1994a), **post-modernism** (Potter, 1995; Shusterman, 1992 and 1995), and **cultural aesthetics** (Bartlett, 1994; Brennan, 1995; Gladney, 1995; Shusterman, 1992; Walser, 1995). Their conclusions oscillate between praise for rap music as a fiercely ingenuous art form and its dismissal as mere noise.

Although some of these themes will be mentioned in the following text, my interest is in rap music's poetics. The poetic quality I am emphasizing involves building something new out of something old. Rap music's fusion of language and music demonstrates this notion of poetics through the musical techniques of "scratching" and "sampling" as well as the linguistic inversion of conventional middle-class semantics. It is particularly the latter that this analysis takes as its subject matter, as I demonstrate that rap music has an undeniable African heritage but is also a style of music with a global, cross-cultural popularity in terms of both its production and consumption.

In Chapter 1, rap's roots are traced out from two styles of black American speech: "rapping" and "signifyin.'"[8] Both are emic terms (i.e., used by the speakers themselves), however, I am treating them as theoretical frameworks within which rap can be grounded in its unique cultural/linguistic environment. Further, Paul Friedrich's theory of poetics is examined to grasp

an answer as to why rap music, starting as a specifically urban black American art, is today found in, for example, India's national film genre, the musical[9]. Using rapping, signifyin' and poetics in a sociolinguistic context helps me theorize and articulate the theme of *building upon* crucial to this analysis. However, it is necessary to understand rap music' s socio-economic and geographic context.

Thus, Chapter 2 retraces rap music from Jamaica to the New York City borough of the South Bronx. This is an to effort to contextualize rap music within a trans-Atlantic African diasporic aesthetic while simultaneously explaining how it differs from other diasporic musical forms such as reggae in terms of cultural and socio-economic disparities between their sites of production. Both scenarios, however, are illustrated to exemplify rap music's amazing DIY ethos in contrast with the infrastructural and economic collapse of American inner-cities during the 1970s and 80s. Rap music is then juxtaposed with graffiti, breakdancing and fashion styles to outline the larger phenomenon of hip hop. Within the context of hip hop, I refer to three important figures in rap music (i.e., DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa) as well as to the process of sampling in order to illustrate some stylistic, thematic, technological and social characteristics of rap music.

Chapter 3 then turns to the subject of rap music's revision of history through the redefinition of conventional historical signifiers, specifically, time and Columbus Day. In this chapter, I argue that the poetic of rap music

narratives is evidence of a hip hop pedagogy --a hip hop history classroom, so to speak.

As a form of modern urban poetry, rap music serves a generation of youth in making sense of symbols from the past by abutting them with extant referents and recontextualizing them within a contemporary framework. And it is this practice of making something new out of something old that makes up rap music's poetic quality.

Chapter 1
Three theoretical plays on language: rapping, signifyin' and poetics.

> Brilliant theory is only half the game. If it's the only half you play, you're on the side of hard-eyed businessmen, of government know-it-alls, of smug philosophers, of all the people who think, however secretly, that art is a childish diversion that we can well do without. (Edmundson, 1995:31)

> Slang creates new language just like poetry, and it can be regarded as a kind of folk poetry. (Goodman, 1971:612)

> In these times of melding cultures
> I give respect for what's been borrowed and lent
> I know this music comes down from African descent.[10]

The other half of the game, according to Edmundson, is poetry. And it is poetry that defines the subject of this thesis, which attempts a descriptive documentation/analysis of a unique poetry: the kind of word play that turns street slang folk poetry into a global phenomenon. That slang is rap, a style of talking poetry. And that phenomenon is rap music.

In this chapter, I begin my exploration of rap music by following a common thread through three sociolinguistic models (i.e., rapping, signifyin' and poetics) to point out their usefulness in an analysis of the poetic features in rap music and hip hop. The first two, rapping and signifyin,' are used by their speakers to describe specifics of black vernacular English common in the urban United States. The third, poetics, as put forward by linguist Paul Friedrich, focuses on a general, cross-cultural picture of language use.

"Rapping" and "signifyin'" describe two self-conscious and sometimes reflexive (i.e., the speakers know they are rapping or signifyin') black vernacular styles of speech. In contrast with "poetics," which is an academic term and theory I am applying to this study of rap music, rapping and signifyin' are named after the vernacular practices themselves. For the purpose of this analysis however, I am treating them as sociolinguistic models which aid in translating the vernacular to a non-speaker. In fact, as black vernacular speech, they serve not only as styles of communication but also "as the black person's ultimate sign of difference, a blackness of the tongue" (Gates, 1988:xix). As Gates explains, "[t]he theory of Signifyin(g) arises from these moments of self-reflexiveness" (1988:xxi). Thus, the distinction of "poetics" as a top-to-bottom approach, and rapping/signifyin' as bottom-to-top analysis, could be metaphorically summed up as the difference between the view from the "ivory towers of Academia" and the view from "the street." All three, however, maintain that linguistic virtuosity and semantic creativity are important ingredients in any cultural/linguistic analysis.

Therefore, the juxtaposition of rapping and signifyin' with poetics, in an analysis of rap music, is most appropriate in consideration of rap music's descent from (or rootedness in) an African cultural/linguistic aesthetic as well as its global popularity. In other words, whereas poetics is a lens through which symbolic redefinition can be viewed as a pan-cultural practice, rapping and signifyin' (as styles of speech) provide examples of such practice within a

specific cultural context as well as frameworks within which to interpret them. As will be shown, all three demonstrate that symbolic redefinition is a process of *building upon*.

As equally important in this analysis of rap music and hip hop culture, these three models of language use aid in elucidating or reconciling a relationship between individuals and structures (both concrete and abstract), that is, how people adapt to the variety of environments in which they live and how that adaptation relies on the re-definition of established cultural knowledge. As Gladney remarks, "[p]eople need to repeatedly reinvent their cultural expressions through... the pursuit of relevance" (1995:297). The best example to offer here is the individual born and socialized into a linguistic structure who alters the rules and/or norms of that structure to create a poem, idiom, joke, etc. More precisely, I am working from an understanding of the poetic as the making of something new out of something old, based on the etymology of 'poem' (from Greek *poiema*) meaning anything made: a construction. This is a definition that well identifies the poetic processes of rap music production and, in a Sapir-Whorfian sense, the construction of cultural realities or wor(l)dviews through language.[11]

In other words, I believe *nihil ex nihilo* (nothing comes from nothing). Conversely, something has to come from something. And it is this logic that threads through the three genres of language use --rapping, signifyin' and poetics-- as well as rap music. As MCA of the Beastie Boys raps,

> Step into the motherfucker and I get my flow on
> Amalgamating styles so I've got something to grow on.[12]

It is exactly the quality of "amalgamating... to grow on" that best characterizes the poetic quality of rap music as a *building upon*, particularly in lyrical narratives and the processes of "scratching" and "sampling."

Occurring within musical systems, scratching and sampling, as will be shown further on, contain semiotic reference and can function as punctuation and/or suprasegmental linguistic features. As defining traits of rap music, scratching and sampling deserve as much attention as the lyrical narratives. The importance of these non-linguistic, musical elements in rap music surfaces in cases where performed or recorded music replaces the "quasi-musical" a cappella generated in the metre and rhythmic rhyming of street rapping. That is, whereas

> [r]hyming... has become the signal indication of expertise among the young street poets.... The rhythm of the poems is also crucial to the desired effect, an effect in part reinforced by [the]... quasi-musical... delivery. (Gates, 1988:54)

As Perkins states, even more emphatically than Gates, "the foundation of rap [music] is the beat.... [T]he lyrics... and samples... play second fiddle" (1996b:6). More precisely, while

> analysts typically concentrate on demonstrating rap's verbal complexity and the cultural significance of its lyrics.... [T]he lyrics and reception of rap cannot be detached from the music. Even though many rappers and fans stress the primacy of the message delivered by the lyrics, some, like pioneering rapper Melle Mel [of Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five], argue that the instrumental parts are actually more important than the rap because they create the mood, set the beat, and prompt... engagement. (Walser, 1995:193-194)

This thesis, then, plays on the "second fiddle" of rap music, the lyrics, but will not completely overlook the "beat."

As the sounds and word play of rap music work complementarily, the acoustic components of scratching and sampling, like their linguistic counterparts, demonstrate an African diasporic cultural aesthetic. "It is," writes Bartlett, "the centrality of 'overlapping' that echoes throughout the African [diasporic] American musical tradition" (1994:643). As Rose notes, "[r]appers layer meaning by using the same word to signify a variety of actions and objects" (Rose, 1994a:39). This tradition of playing with "the meaning of time, motion, and repetition in black culture" (Rose 1994a:68) continues through rap music's "complex fusion of [African] orality and postmodern technology" (Rose, 1994a:85). Whereas "time" and "repetition" will be discussed further on, Bartlett (1994:643) notes that the concept of "motion" in the diasporic aesthetic is observable in train metaphors which reflect rap's "fusion of orality and... technology." Potter explains the aesthetic as "African-American modes of expression, [where] to 'break' with the past is itself a tradition; to 'cut' or 'bite' on one's precursors is to invoke them; to deviate is to remain true" (1995:28). This aesthetic is most evident in rap music's "samples" which are synonymous with, as Gladney puts it, "[c]uts" or "sound *bites* [my italics] taken from diverse sources" (1995:300 n.9). "The cut," he continues, "often parallels the footnote in literature" (1995:300 n.9) in signalling "artistic precursors" (1995:291). Sampling, and its relationship to the African diaspora,

will be discussed in more detail, but it should be remembered that the aesthetic or tradition is one that plays on the meaning of meaning in revising the past as a means of preserving tradition: it is a *building upon*. One example of how this aesthetic is currently proliferated is rapping.

Rapping

> But, before you can signify, you got to be able to rap. (Brown, 1972:206)

In the twenty-five plus years since linguist Thomas Kochman edited (1972a) Rappin' and Stylin' Out, the meaning of 'rap' has changed from a street term for a way of talking, to a sociolinguistic term describing a type of urban black American poetry and language use (i.e., speech), to a specific style of music that has taken on an undeniable global popularity. I can remember that one of my sisters used to talk about how she and her 1970s wannabe hippy friends would "rap about shit" over a game of cards. Now, her son and I talk about rap music.

In terms of rap as a form of black American urban poetry, Carolyn Rodgers identifies a style of black poetry she calls "*teachin'/rappin'*." This type of poem, she posits, "seeks to define and give direction to black people" (1972:536-537). Furthermore, with the *teachin'/rappin"* style of black poetry, the "poets hip you to something, pull the covers off of something, or run it down to you, or ask you to just dig it" (Rodgers, 1972:338). Rodgers' view of

rap as poetry and pedagogy will be brought up again in Chapter 3. First it is necessary to outline rap as speech action.

For an example of rap as speech action, Thomas Kochman suggests that rapping is a linguistic vehicle with which black men and women verbally negotiate sexual interest and politics. "Rapping," in Kochman's terms, stands in contradistinction to white male and female strategies for dealing with sexual scenarios. That is,

> [b]oth black and white cultural norms entitle men to express a sexual interest in women. Where the two cultures differ is in their acknowledgement that women are also entitled to express a sexual interest in men. White culture disallows this, or at least operates on the principle that women are not so entitled. Black culture, however, operates on the principle that women are. (1990:90-91)

This difference in cultural and sexual norms is supported by Penley's (1997) analysis of white (American) trash, pornography and class. Penley writes, "[w]hat's in the hearts of [white] men according to porn? A utopian desire for a world where women aren't socially required to say and believe that they don't like sex as much as men do" (Penley, 1997:106).[13] "Rap," as black vernacular, is commonly characterized as a highly stylized type of male speech action. For example, John Horton writes that "rap" can be

> used synonymously with street conversation, [but] rapping is really a special way of talking --repartee. Street repartee at its best is a lively way of 'running it down,' or of 'jiving' (attempting to put someone on), trying 'to blow another person's mind,' forcing him 'to lose his cool,' to give in or give up something. For example, one needs to throw a lively rap when he is 'putting the make on a broad.' (Horton, 1972:23)

Equally, Herbert Kohl writes that his young male informant on graffiti art, Johnny Cool, "had nice vines and a good rap.... [V]ines were clothes and... a rap was a line you gave a girl" (1972:112). The Sugarhill Gang's song "Rapper's delight"[14] provides an excellent example, almost a paraphrase, of this type of male sexual boasting:

> I got more girls than Muhammad Ali
> and I dress so viciously.[15]

The confident and boastful rap continues in the song when

> She said damn fly guy
> I'm in love with you
> The Casanova legend musta been true
> I said by the way baby what's your name
> She said I go by the name of Lois Lane
> And you can be my boyfriend, you surely can
> Just let me quit my boyfriend called Superman
> I said he's a fairy, I do suppose
> Flying through the air in pantyhose
> He may be very sexy or even cute
> But he looks like a sucker in a blue and red suit
> I said you need a man who's got finesse
> And his whole name across his chest
> He may be able to fly all through the night
> But can he rock a party til the early light
> He can't satisfy you with his little worm
> But I can bust you out with my super sperm.[16]

Kochman explains that "[b]lack male and female encounters acquire their sexual meaning through verbal negotiations" (1990:96). This negotiating, or rapping, is repartee where "[i]n response to [a man's] rap, black women are... as sexually assertive as black men;... [and] often... [as] verbally skilled, frequently *capping* [stopping] a male with an effective retort" (Kochman, 1990:93). Kochman offers the following example:

> A man coming from the bathroom forgot to zip his pants. An unescorted party of women kept watching him and laughing among themselves. The man's friends hip [tell] him what's going on. He approaches one woman --'Hey baby, did you see that big Cadillac with the full tires, ready to roll in action just for you?" She answers, 'No, mother-fucker, but I saw a little grey Volkswagen with two flat tires.' (Kochman, 1972b: 244)

The capping occurs with the woman *building* on the man's rap by twisting or inverting his metaphoric automobile boast into an insult, a denial of his claims and a refusal of his suggestion. The woman's "reply," writes anthropologist Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, "is indirect, sexual, and appropriate to the situation. In addition, it employs the same kind of metaphor and is, therefore, very effective" (1972:327). Potter's analysis of three versions of one song parallels the example of rapping provided by Kochman.

Potter analyzes three versions of the song, "Tramp," recorded originally by Lowell Fulsom in 1965. Potter transcribes Fulsom's version as follows:

> Tramp? You can call me that...
> I don't wear continental clothes...
> Stetson hats...
>
> [Chorus] *But I'm a lover... heh heh... mama was... papa was I'm their only child... lovin is all I know to do.*
>
> heh... call me country... right from the woods
> I'll answer when ya call me,
> heh, baby, that is, if it makes ya feel good.
>
> [Chorus]
>
> Now what if ya called me...
> heh, I'll even go for that.
> 'Course I keep a fat bankroll in my pocket, baby.
> You know I own three Cadillacs...
>
> [Chorus]. (Potter, 1995:29-30)

Fulsom's initial version is a male's monologue. He boasts that he is a "lover" with "a fat bankroll", and not a "tramp". In this version, the woman's voice is quoted but, as Potter notes, Fulsom's voice "'tramps' over the words of an unequal [that is, absent] speaker, a woman whose words are quoted only to be implicitly devalued" (Potter, 1995:29). However, in 1967, Otis Redding and Carla Thomas recorded the song, in the style of Kochman's rap perhaps, as a dialogue where the present woman's voice "provides undercutting commentary on the male singer's claims, commentary which reiterates her doubt as to his sincerity" (Potter, 1995:32-33). Potter transcribes this latter version of "Tramp"[17] as follows:

[Carla Thomas]	[Otis Redding]
Tramp!	
	What you call me?
Tramp!	
	You didn't!
You don't wear continental clothes or a Stetson hat...	
	But I'll tell you one doggone thing. It makes me feel good to know one thing... I know, I'm a lover
It's a matter of opinion, baby	
	That's alright... Mama was
so?	
	Papa too!
hmmmmm.	
	And I'm their only child, lovin' is all I know to do...
You know what, Otis?	
	What?
You're country!	
	That's alright!

You're straight from the
Georgia woods!

That's good!

You know what? You wear overalls!
Them big old brogan shoes...
And you need a haircut, tramp!

Haircut? Woman, you too Ooooh.
I'm a lover...mama was, grandma,
and papa too

Doesn't make you one!

Oh, that's alright. But I'm the only
son of a gun this side of the
school[?]

Tramp!
That's right, that's what you are!

Baby... brand new hat

You're a rat and a tramp!

You know what, Otis, I don't care
what you say, you're still a tramp!

What?

You haven't even got a fat bank roll
in your pocket. You probably haven't
even got twenty-five cents!

I got six Cadillacs, five Lincolns,
four Fords, six Mercuries, three T-
Birds, Mustangs... oooh I'm a
lover...

Prove it to me!

my mama was... my papa too

What?

I'm a tell you

Well, tell me!

I'm the only son of a gun this side
of the... so long!

You're a tramp Otis!

No!

I don't care what you say, you're
still a tramp

Don't call me that!

Looka here, you ain't got no
money!

I got everything!

You can't buy me all those
minks and sables and all that
stuff I want!

I can buy you rat, frog, squirrel,
rabbit, anything you want woman!

Look, you done go outta the Georgia
woods to catch them, baby!

Oh, but you're ruthless!

You still a tramp! A tramp, Otis!
Just a tramp! You wear overalls.
And you need a haircut, baby!
Cut off some o' that hair off
your head!
You think you're a lover, huh? (Potter, 1995:30-32)

In 1987, the rap music duo, Salt 'n' Pepa, recorded their version of "Tramp."[18] Potter's analysis of this song contends that "a (now barely audible) male voice... lingers in the choruses.... But once... Salt 'n' Pepa begin to rap, this voice hardly stands a chance; they don't even bother to address him directly" (1995:33). The male voice monologue of Fulsom's song has been reduced to "a one-dimensional comic foil" (Potter, 1995:33) which the hip hop version has effectively capped through Salt 'n' Pepa's rap.

The importance of these three examples of "Tramp," for this thesis, involves their being built one upon another (Salt 'n' Pepa's from Redding and Thomas' from Fulsom). That is, each one required an underpinning antecedent, a foil, so to speak.[19] Each subsequent song is not an exact replica, but an individualized or stylized interpretation. They are similar in using symbols of social status, such as automobiles, money and furs as metaphors gauging

sexual ability/allure, as in Kochman's example. They demonstrate that a good rap builds upon a previously established theme by changing its semantic reference. Again, this play on meaning is evidenced in the woman's metaphoric, automotive response in Kochman's above example of rapping.

Mitchell-Kernan, in reference to the automobile metaphor, helps to clarify my point when she writes, "[t]he woman wins the verbal duel by replying with an act of signifying which *builds on* [my italics] the previous one" (1972:327). These examples foreshadow the poetic/musical process of "talkovers" or versioning found in Jamaican reggae (Chapter 2). Another example of *building upon* as symbolic redefinition is found in the process of signifyin.'

Signifyin'

> [S]ense in its poetic significance is not limited to meaning, but derives from the connotations conveyed by the word chosen to express it. (Benjamin, 1968:78)

> To rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify. (Gates, 1988:xxiii)

Whereas individual writers define signifyin' (in the context of black vernacular) with a variety of words, the common element to them all is that of semantic indirection. Indirection, that is, in the form of indirect speech acts: saying something without saying it. A cheap, easy example of course is the couching of a request in a question: "could you please pass the salt?" Who really expects to hear a "no" in response to this indirect request? Similarly, in Kochman's example above, indirection is found as references to automobiles

in order to discuss genitalia: the obvious crux of the sexual metaphor. Mitchell-Kernan argues that

> [w]ithout the element of indirection, a speech act could not be considered signifying.... Meaning is not apparent meaning. Apparent meaning serves as a key which directs hearers to some shared knowledge, attitudes and values or signals that reference must be processed metaphorically. (1988:173)

Thus, the hearer must not only decode the message's metaphoric structure, but also "attend to all potential meaning-carrying symbolic systems in [signifyin'] speech events --the total universe of discourse" (Mitchell-Kernan, 1972:317). This "universe" consists not only of words but of "additional context from... background knowledge.... Facial expressions and tone of voice.... [And s]ituational context" (Mitchell-Kernan, 1972:317). But indirection is not the only characteristic of signifyin,' and therefore the following intends to pull out those aspects of signifyin' that best aid this analysis of rap music.

Most research on signifyin' attests, as the above quotation from Benjamin argues, that "meaning" requires more than dictionary definition. Meaning is to be garnered by juxtaposing the word(s) sound within the correct context(s). Context can include both paralinguistic features (i.e., body gestures) and suprasegmental features (i.e., tone) that make up the signifyin' speech action. As Mitchell-Kernan writes, "[c]hange in posture, speech rate, tone of voice, facial expression, etc., may signal a change in meaning" (1972:329). For example, the speed of lyrical delivery in rap music can connote a sense of urgency (i.e., time is running out) as does the sample of an air raid siren in

"Countdown to Armageddon."[20] The idea that time is running out, as will be shown in Chapter 3, is a common theme in rap music narratives. But note that the feeling of urgency found in musical features of rap is parallelled by the rap musicians' use of the bare minimum, the poetic succinctness, of language. For example, on the track "Move ahead"[21] KRS One raps, "to constantly dream about the lex with bulletproof tints," where "lex" is an abbreviation for Lexus (a make of automobile) and "tints" are tinted automobile windows. The interpretation of these whittled words, of course, requires some knowledge of automobile types and jargon. This familiarity demonstrates, albeit quite superficially, the most important context involved with interpretations of signifyin': that of a shared cultural semantic background.

Contrary to Brown's proclamation that one needs to learn to rap before one can signify, Gates asserts that Signifyin(g) is "the black vernacular... trope of tropes" (1988:48). So, the quote of Gates above, "to rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify." Or as Potter puts it, "[s]imply put, Signifyin(g) is repetition *with a difference*; the same and yet not the same" (1995:27). As Regna Darnell notes, "the smallest possible change... [can] up-end the meaning" (1998a). Gates' view of Signifyin(g) is of particular interest to this section on signifyin' because his is the most recent in a long chain of excellent analyses proposed by various researchers.

In fact, Gates subsumes rapping into his umbrella trope of Signifyin(g), along with other delineated black vernacular speech styles such as the dozens,

boasting, toasting, loud-talking, and marking, to name but a handful. Gates arrives at his encapsulating assertion by juxtaposing the "Pan-African trickster, Esu-Elegbara" (1988:88) with the black American equivalent, the Signifying Monkey, two mythic characters figuring regularly in African and African diasporic myths. In these figures and their relative mythologies, Gates finds the common thread of semantic play revealed in the opposition of literal and figurative language use and meaning.

Signifyin(g), in Gates' terms, "disrupt[s] the nature of the sign = signifier + signified equation itself" (1988:46). As an African rhetorical trope, Signifyin(g) is a cultural element that has proliferated with the movements and migrations of an African diaspora. Signifyin(g) is a "meaningful [cultural element], that could not be obliterated, and that they [enslaved Africans] chose, by acts of will, not to forget" (Gates, 1988:3-4). This aesthetic was as important as "their myths, their expressive institutional structures, their metaphysical systems of order, and their forms of performance" (Gates, 1988:4). Signifyin(g) and other African diasporic cultural aesthetics, states Gates, are found today in "the rapping of black kids on street corners, who recite and thereby preserve the classical rhetorical structures" (1988:88). However, I will argue, and I think Gates would agree, that these "kids on the street" have revised these "classical rhetorical structures" in taking their rap from the streets of urban America to ears the world over.

The difference between signifying and Signifyin(g), according to Gates, takes place at the site of the signifier. It is the difference of literal (white) and figurative (black) language use. Signifyin(g) constitutes the process of "supplanting.... both formal language use and its conventions, conventions established, at least officially, by middle-class whites" (Gates, 1988:46-47). The revision of the signifier "critique[s] the nature of (white) meaning itself, to challenge through a literal critique of the sign the meaning of meaning" (Gates, 1988:47). While white, middle-class culture (the language of the classroom, science and politics) favours positivist, taxonomically imprisoned, linear definitions (the pinned-down signified --the capped signifier), "the poetry of... [Signifyin(g)] turns upon the free play of language itself, upon the displacements of meaning" (Gates, 1988:53)[22] in the forum of free signifiers.

> In the context of music, the difference described by Gates exists where
>
> African-American music is fundamentally *at variance* from "Western" music, with its obsession with the precise [i.e., literal] reproduction of written notations.... (Potter, 1995:27)

The difference between signifying and Signifyin(g) could be diagrammed as:

```
        signified 1---------- sign 1
       /  (i.e., black)
Signifier
       \
        signified 2---------- sign 2
          (i.e., white)
```

The above schemata pictures "Signifyin(g)," described by Gates, as it

> turns on the sheer play of the signifier. [I]t refers to the style of language, to that which transforms.... [O]ne does not Signify some thing; one Signifies in *some way*. (Gates, 1988:78)

Additionally, signifyin' is, as Mitchell-Kernan argues, not only "a way of talking", but also "a way of encoding messages or meanings" (1972:315). I believe that rapping also involves a "way." In other words, rapping has a processual characteristic that differentiates it from signifyin.' A rap may make use of signifyin,' although it is not required to do so. Rap music, similarly, may make use of signifyin,' but need not. However, an example of signifyin' can be found in Boogie Down Productions' (BDP) "Who protects us from you?". Especially, as Mitchell-Kernan writes, "it is signifying to make fun of the police by parodying his motions behind his back" (1972:316).

Africana historian Tricia Rose (1994a) recounts BDP's narrative, "Who protects us from you?" in which KRS One depicts the police as the ones to fear. By "[r]endering the police criminals, KRS One points to the fragility and historical variability of notions of legality" (Rose, 1994a:107). Rose argues that KRS One's impersonation of the police, when he sings "You're under arrest," is employing "their victory cry... voiced against them" (Rose, 1994a:108). That is, KRS One uses the police's story, implicating them in a history of systemic racism and abuse of power and people: turning the tables, so to speak.[23]

Signifyin' occurs in this last instance with KRS One's revision of the police motto. Not the change of the words, but the inversion and indirect critique of the police:criminal binary. However, consider the following example, wherein KRS One "points to the fragility and historic variability" of the word 'slave.' Through his spoken and unaccompanied narrative, "Exhibit E," KRS One

hollows out the signifier of any conventional core. This time the critique is blatant, obvious and anything but indirect.

> Lincoln said in this piece here, he says... he frees the slaves-- he said "all slaves and armed rebellion." Slaves.
>
> Now understand one point, the African is not a slave. That's one point they didn't realize when they were writing this. The African is NOT a slave. The African has a history far more advanced than this 1990 history we're in right now --he's not a slave. Lincoln's ultimately saying now, you're born a slave, you'll always be a slave, and all I will ever see you as is a slave and I'll free you.[24]

Now, in returning to Rose's example, she writes that KRS One, in leaving the police "[u]nnamed, but clearly identified" questions "the force of the police... while its institutional name (its power) is silenced, marginalized and a critique of authority is positioned dead center" (Rose, 1994a:108). This parallels Potter's conclusion regarding Salt 'n' Pepa's version of "Tramp" wherein the duo identify through deletion the male voice of Fulsom's edition.

Rose provides an interesting ethnographic example of KRS One's question as posed in a real-life street situation. Rose "witnessed" a "confrontation... between a young black teenager and a white New Haven police officer" (Rose, 1994a:109). The police officer, after nearly driving into one youth bicycling on the street, was demanding identification and an explanation as to why this other kid was standing on the porch of a house. It turns out he lived there. But the officer's harassing narrative was ruptured "[f]rom the street [when] the boy on the bicycle said, 'Who protects us from you?'.... [T]his time a bit louder: 'Who protects us from you?'" (Rose, 1994a:109). Speaking indirectly, the kid caps the cop by emptying the police

promise of "to serve and protect" of any relative significance within a black neighbourhood. And, in turning the statement into a question, he exposes the hip(h)o(p)crisy of such a statement in consideration of the racially bound discourse of legality in the Americas. The young boy on the street, like KRS One, twists the signifier, juicing it like a lemon, and refills it with a new signified to produce the sign of police as suspect: as criminal. The boy's practical utterance of "Who protects us from you" was "part of a hidden transcript... used... to destabilize the police officer's performance of mastery" (Rose, 1994a:110). In other words, the mimetic performance, reinterpretation through imitation, of the police's rallying cry from the street effectively ruptured the master wannabe's (or cracker devil's, as in black vernacular) narrative. Losing his authoritative discourse, he left the scene, disappearing literally and figuratively, like Fulsom's voice in Salt 'n' Pepa's "Tramp."

Another example of a signifyin' play on the theme of police as criminal is found in Public Enemy's (PE) song "Hazy shade of criminal."[25] This is a particularly fitting example due to the title's immediate signifyin' on the grey area of meaning, the hazy shade of the sign: the unstable signifier. In shining light on the greyness of the signifier "criminal", PE's Chuck D asks "who's the criminal?" to question the stereotypes of black gang member and police working to serve and protect. He puts a spin on these conclusions, warning

> Goin fo a nigga neck
> Rollin in a blue n white gang
> Ready to bang biggeddy bang.

Through his testimony, Chuck D witnesses the police (although he does not implicate them directly by name, only by colour), as a gang prepared to gangbang in the performance of a drive-by shooting or some similarly stereotyped gang activity.

Now, in Gates' rendition of Signifyin(g), the difference between black and white cultural styles is based on the former's transformation of the latter's signifier. In a similar fashion, Grace Sims Holt calls this process "inversion" and explains that it "is a linguistic survival process" (1972:152): a way of "using The [white] Man's language against him" (1972:153). The idea of "using The Man's language" is exercised on one hand, in the automobile metaphor offered above (although in reference to man as a gender term), and on the other hand, in KRS One's exclamation, "you're under arrest." However, Holt explicates the process of semantic "inversion" more clearly in writing that

> [t]he traditional process of inversion was based on the concept that you can't disguise black skin but you can disguise speech which permits you to verbally "turn the tables" on an unknowledgeable opponent.
>
> Many blacks took the material of stereotyped utterances and used it to their own advantage. Words and phrases were given reverse meanings and functions changed.... This form of linguistic guerilla warfare... promoted group solidarity. The purpose of the game was to *appear but not to*. (1972:154)

The main difference, then, between white and black and signifying is that, in terms of the latter, signifyin' is not only a sign of African cultural (linguistic) continuity and expressive solidarity but also a manner of distinguishing difference (i.e., black, not white) through the inversion of the latter's signifier. That is, disrupting "The Man's" semantic order is a survival

strategy tying together the African diaspora stretching back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean. But, where signifyin,' like rapping, occurs more frequently and creatively as a consciously reciprocal and dialogic way of talking within black English, it is not unique to black vernacular. In fact, the revision of semantic orders is in part the universal essence of poetry as the following section on poetics demonstrates.

Poetics

> Evan Solomon: So why do you wear that big cross?
>
> Ice-T: It's a T.
>
> ES: Well, that's a happy coincidence.
>
> IT: Yeah, I was lookin' at it one day and said, "Yeah that's a T." It doesn't mean a thing to me. It means something to other people.
>
> But why do people wear crosses? They were a device of torture. Back in the day, when people saw crosses they said, "Oh shit, let's get the fuck outta here!" If they'd killed Jesus Christ on an electric chair, we'd all be wearing electric chairs right now. (Solomon, 1996:33)

And just like that, with a few words, the symbol of the cross is undressed of its conventional significance and framed in such a way as to give history a bit of a shock, a face-lift: a revision. In an interview with Ice-T that I caught by chance on TV, he suggests that the gold pistol pendant attached to the chain around his neck is a peace symbol because the president of his country (the US) says that military spending is a matter of arming for peace.

Ice-T's words appear to be, at once, both tongue-in-cheek parody and serious critique.

In his (1986) The Language Parallax: Linguistic Relativism and Poetic Indeterminacy, Paul Friedrich writes that "language, whether at the individual, sociocultural, or some universal level, is inherently, pervasively, and powerfully poetic" (Friedrich, 1986:17). I agree with Friedrich that the plays of the poet can be and are effected in any and all language(s). Otherwise, the translators had better empty their ink-wells and hang up their quills.

The poetic quality Friedrich refers to surfaces when

> situations... where conversational prefabs are juxtaposed and contextualized in relatively imaginative ways.... [O]ften in the case of some individuals and/or contexts, be it constructing a simile from prefabs, or juxtaposing two well-worn words to make a fresh metonym (or hearing the metonym in a haphazard juxtaposition). (Friedrich, 1986:23)

Friedrich's understanding of the poetic as the making of something new out of something old circles back to this chapter's opening claim that *nihil ex nihilo*. Equally, Friedrich's own analysis branches from a Sapir-Whorfian vein which argues that cultural realities or wor(l)dviews are linguistically relative and built on and out of the raw materials of language. It is the argument, in other words, that culture moves through the figures and categories of language. An example of such poetics in rap music comes from BDP's "Edutainment."[26] Rapper KRS One's splice of education and entertainment challenges and redefines the white, middle-class Euro-American convention of separating the spheres of education and leisure, or class time and recess.

Friedrich states that poetic language mediates the ubiquitously context-filled continuum of the individual and social imagination. In other words, context and meaning are everywhere, as Mitchell-Kernan puts it, in "the total universe of discourse" (1972:317). On either end of the semantic space are the poles of music and mythical meaning (Friedrich, 1986:17). Myth (i.e., lyrical narratives) can include "ideas, theories, and the like." Accordingly, myth can contextualize and aid in solving "conflicts and opposition in the culture or the imagination" because it "underlies the image of the self that is symbolized overtly by one's loyalties to place and people" (Friedrich, 1986:37-38). Myth(ology) allows for the ordering of culturally and individually meaningful memories, images and symbols. Myth is the framework in which history and meanings are shared through the performance of storytelling, the transmission of cultural knowledge and tradition.

On the other end of the continuum is music, which in Friedrich's view is integral to language. Music can be found in textualized and spoken language: syllabic metres, rhyme schemes, high front vowels and !Kung clicks [!] for examples. Music reciprocally complements myth as it "expresses, not feelings that are too vague for words, but ones that are too precise for words.... other forms of discourse, such as scientific ones... are less precise emotionally" (Friedrich, 1986:36-37). Subsequently, a rap musician,

> [b]y increasing the sonic speed of the beat --as well as... sampling... high- pitched horns, police sirens, automatic weapon fire and breaking glass--... reproduces sounds that conjure experiences ranging from an ordinary summer's day in the ghetto to an urban riot. (Decker, 1994:105)

Friedrich puts a twist on the Sapir-Whorfian hypothesis in considering poetic indeterminacy and the unique imagination. Friedrich lends unpredictable agency to the relationship between culture and language in suggesting that "the poet intensifies language [and Sapir-Whorfian reality] by challenging or even to some extent remaking the underlying [cultural] code or codes" (1986:34). In other words, the poet deconstructs, recombines and juxtaposes extant, culturally recognized expressions, meanings or concepts. That is, the poet puts an individual spin on "prefabricated [conventional] formulae" (Friedrich, 1986:33) in order to adapt established cultural/linguistic figures to new conditions. The creative act brings together old and new alike in the construction of fresh cultural figures and, potentially, new worldviews. Consider rapper Ice-T's preceding clever reinterpretation of history and the historical symbolism of the crucifix and the contemporary significance of the gun. Thus, built over the sonic polyphony, the aural montage of scratched and sampled sound bytes, are the rushed, ripped rhymes and lyrics of the rappers who have moved through figures from the street to the recording studio. Therein, as freelance journalist Fernando notes, their "rhymes take expression to new galaxies maximizing the potential of language by twisting it, stretching it, turning it on its head, obeying no conventions, and, of course, being as creative as possible" (1994:264). As chapter 2 will demonstrate, the move from street to studio definitely maximized "the potential" of street rap, as did the addition of music to the myth.

Summary

The preceding discussion has attempted to illustrate the sociolinguistic features of rapping, signifyin' and poetics that are significant in this thesis and to argue their utility in an analysis of the poetic features in rap music. The relevance of these models has been demonstrated by means of examples taken from a selection of rap songs and their lyrical content. Equally, I have argued that the characteristic shared by rapping, signifyin' and poetics (and their accompanying examples) is the making of something new out of something old, the feature which is undeniably the backbone of rap music production and hip hop culture.

Rapping appears in the contrast of black with white styles of sexual discourse. The difference stems from variable, culturally relative considerations of sexual norms and gender roles. Although rapping is typically considered a form of male storytelling, the *building upon* trait is most apparent in examples of raps that become gendered, dialogic repartee. Signifyin' is also projected against a backdrop of a black:white binary. Here the distinguishing factor is found in the difference between figurative (free signifiers) and literal (pinned signified) language use and meaning. Signifyin,' as "a way" of saying, requires the listener to consider all available non-/para-linguistic and suprasegmental features making up the meaning of the message. Also, the interpreter/hearer needs to be aware of the context of a shared cultural/semantic background

from which the rapping and signifyin' derive. The *building upon* of signifyin' is shown as the inversion of conventional meanings, words, phrases etc.

Whereas rapping and signifyin' explain culturally specific communication and encoding strategies, poetics incorporates the same trait of *building upon* found in rapping and signifyin.' And appropriately enough, poetics adds the specific non-linguistic polarity of music to the framework of myth in the equation of language and meaning. Meanwhile, my argument that poetics represents a universal or Ur-poetic[27] approach to meaning and culture comes from the consideration of rap music's global popularity. There is no denying that rap music today represents the most commonly produced and consumed style of music around the world: rap music, like meaning and context, is globally ubiquitous. And it is precisely because of its poetic quality that rap music has garnered such a wide, culturally-geographic distribution. However, my focus on rapping and signifyin' is meant to complement MCA's rap, "I know this music comes down from African descent."

And it is perhaps more the music than the words of rap that best demonstrates a cultural continuity of revision, renaming, inversion, etc. A tradition whereby "to break with the past is itself a tradition" (Potter, 1995:28). But, whether the metaphor is one of melting-pot or multiculturalism, or whether the argument is one of integration, assimilation or separation, it is imperative to remember that rap music as, generally, an African diasporic aesthetic and, specifically, a black American cultural practice, does not occur

in a homogeneous cultural vacuum. In fact, the acts of rapping and signifyin,' by definition, require the alterity of white cultural practices. As we will see in the next chapter, rap music is only one element in the larger, culturally heterogeneous phenomenon of hip hop.

So, the poetic quality of making something new out of something old is central to the musical scores and lyrical narratives of rap music. The table turning semantic plays of rap music presented in this chapter included the emptying and jettisoning of signifiers in KRS One's de(con)struction of 'slave,'[28] the reversal of the black gang member:police binary through a play on the "hazy shade of criminal" --the hazy shade of the sign, the splicing together of two otherwise meaningless affixes to form edu/tainment and the revision of the historical symbolism of the crucifix. Thus, Friedrich's "poetics" will be the primary lens through which the subject matter of this analysis is viewed and described. Poetics is chosen primarily for its recognition of music as a factor in interpreting meaning and because it helps to situate rap music's global popularity which transcends boundaries demarcated by gender, culture, race, language and class.

But it is not only rap music that displays the poetic quality of revision through inversion. In fact, this creativity is apparent in the other three elements of hip hop: graffiti, breakdancing and fashion. Therefore, the following chapter focuses on how each segment of hip hop constitutes or relies on the making of something new out of something old.

Chapter 2
Fresh! Word!

> I don't know, I just don't pretend to know what young people... how young people think. I do know that, generally speaking, that if you give them something that looks like it's really going somewhere and is meaning something, they'll be attracted to it.
>
> -William S. Burroughs[29]

> Take back the power, throw out the rules.
>
> -Youth Brigade[30]

> Here come the drums!
>
> -Public Enemy[31]

In the previous chapter, rap music lyrics were used to exemplify three models of language use: rapping, signifyin' and poetics. The frameworks of the first two, rapping and signifyin,' explained rap music's narrative and musical styles within an urban black American linguistic context (and African diasporic aesthetic). Poetics, in turn, aids in understanding how a culturally unique art form (i.e., rap music) possesses such a global appeal. All three, however, brace my argument that semantic play through symbolic revision of previously established conventions (i.e., reformulating signifiers) constitutes the core poetic quality of rap music narratives. This chapter attempts to demonstrate how the previously delineated poetic quality found in rap music is also found in graffiti, breakdancing and fashion styles, which, along with rap music, compose the phenomenon of hip hop.

My continuing reliance on Friedrich's theory of poetics throughout this chapter helps to, a) place rap music within a cross-cultural context by noting that the poetic processes involved with its production are similar to the processes of art and poetry throughout the world's cultures, and b) circumvent the constraints of teleological (i.e., epiphenomenal cause/effect relationships) approaches to various subject matter. In other words, by arguing that the poetry displayed in rapping, signifyin' and poetics is in essence an Ur-like quality, I am also arguing that, as such, it has no definable site or source of origin. For all anyone knows or can know, the conscious encoding of meaning may have, temporally speaking, preceded any meaningful speech act performed by a human (or human ancestor). While this may appear to contradict my argument that something has to come from something (or somewhere), it does not. For, while everything has its origin --and most likely its end-- it would seem arrogantly and absurdly shortsighted for anyone to claim a god's knowledge of such points in time and space. Some thought the atom was the end, "the indivisible writ of matter" (Darnell, 1988b). Now physicists chase "trace elements" (i.e., what is left of split atoms).

Nonetheless, a textual format demands beginnings and ends. Thus, I have chosen to start this chapter in the late 1950s' urban environment of Kingston, Jamaica. In juxtaposition to the previous chapter's focus on language, and in line with the polarity of music, this beginning point provides an underpinning musical backdrop for today's rap music: ska/reggae. The music

of ska/reggae was the sonic wave carrying DJ Kool Herc to the South Bronx, birthplace of hip hop and rap music. Therefore, the chapter moves to the South Bronx of the 1960s and 70s to characterize both the material and socio-economic environments of hip hop and rap music that distinguish them from other diasporic forms. In this case, rap music is contrasted with Jamaican reggae. Also, in order to align rap music within the larger context of hip hop, the elements of graffiti, breakdancing and fashion styles will be examined in terms of their own poetics, their own revisionary practices of *building upon*. Finally, the chapter returns to rap music to explore the technological processes of the music's production (i.e., "scratching" and "sampling") and to outline the faces of three of rap/hip hop's most important poets: DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa. Throughout this chapter, the thread of *building upon*, which tied together the three linguistic models of chapter 1, becomes evident as the soul glue of hip hop, holding together its various components, assuring its continued growth.

Other starting points

While I have chosen to begin with reggae in Kingston, other writers have focused extensively on rap music's roots and done excellent jobs of untying the network of its predecessors to provide a comprehensive identification of its lineage.[32] Two interesting currents worth mentioning, however, include the

traditions of the West African *griot* and of black American radio jocks of the 1950s.

In the oral traditions of the West African savannah belt, *griots* are the musicians and muses entrusted to store cultural knowledge and transmit it through the performance of music and storytelling. As Toop writes, the *griot*[33] "combines the function of living history book and newspaper with vocal and instrumental virtuosity" (1991:32). The *griots* use both praise and parody in their performances and require the ability to speak of both past and current affairs while underpinning their voices with the steady, polyrhythmic beats of their "talking drums" (Toop, 1991:32, cf. Fernando, 1994; Imani and Vera, 1996; Potter, 1995). In the same fashion, rap lyrics attest to yesterday's myths while simultaneously documenting today's world.

Similarly, during the 1950s, black American radio disc jockeys were rapping over radio airwaves and capturing the audience's attention with their hip rhymes and catchy phrases. Toop notes that one DJ, Jocko Henderson, used to throw out the line "great gugga mugga shooga booga." Toop also notes that this line was revised in ska musician Sir Lord Comic's "The Great Wuga Wuga" (1991:39, cf. Hager, 1984:45). Sir Lord Comic's version is

> Here comes the great wuga wuga
> with aruga
> Now that you people've seen
> You can't be [but] real keen
> and be no jelly bean
> Sir Lord Comic happens to be
> spinning real clean
> from his record machine.[34]

Although a brief outline, the inclusion of the *griots* and radio jocks in this picture of rap music's genealogy illuminates just how intertwined, stretched and deeply buried the roots of rap music really are in both time and space. *Griots*, the radio DJs and today's rap musicians all (re)articulate and continue the mythology of the trickster Esu, as bearers of the word. This last example involving Sir Lord Comic leads us to Jamaica.

Caribbean connections

During the 1950s, Marcus Garvey's effort to organize an independent Jamaican state came to fruition with the forging of an increasingly coherent Jamaican national identity. During this time, the urban hub of Jamaica, Kingston, was the site where Jamaica's musicians began to formulate a sound distinctive to the island, its inhabitants and its national identity. It follows that, in the 1950s, ska music came to incorporate and replace the American jazz and blues sounds brought back to Jamaica (via travellers, radio, and record shops) from various cities in the US.[35] With this new style of music, local music producers began to produce local artists. These producers opened the doors of recording studios and the airwaves of Jamaican dance halls by putting on wax such Jamaican talents as Prince Buster, Bob Marley and the Wailers, the Skatallites, Desmond Decker and the Aces and Sir Lord Comic. There was heavy competition between different recording labels as well as between dance

hall operators: each vying for the crowd, revenue and local reputation secured by hosting the top talents and best dance sounds.

Early Jamaican DJs, such as Prince Buster, would bring their sound systems onto the street attempting to draw a crowd of dancers. The DJs, "[t]he pioneers of ska [also] took American R&B records, especially instrumentals, and played them over amplified sound systems at parties, mixing in shouts of encouragement to the dancers" (Potter, 1995:37). These Kingston DJs were called "Yard DJs" (Perkins, 1996:6): Jamaican DJs. By the end of the 1960s, the tempo of ska was slowed and the lyrics became concerned with both Rastafari epistemology and Jamaican/African diasporic mythology. Thus, reggae soon came to be regarded as independent Jamaica's national music form.[36] But the scene was different in the South Bronx.

South Bronx, NYC

In 1959, the Bronx was upturned to make way for then Parks Commissioner Robert Moses' planned expressway. By 1968, this "urban renewal [sic]"[37] (Rose, 1994b:76) project, complete with a 15,000 plus apartment project on the circumference of the South Bronx (serviced by the expressway) drew the "middle-class Italian, German, Irish and Jewish neighbourhoods" away from the downtown core. This demographic change left behind emptied, unattended, vacated apartment buildings which were sold to professional, absentee, slumlords (Hager, 1984:2; cf. Rose 1994a/b).

According to Rose, Moses "elected a path that required the demolition of hundreds of residential and commercial buildings.... [S]ome 60,000 Bronx homes were razed" (1994b:33). So, during the time that ska was becoming reggae and Jamaica an independent country, the social structure and landscape of the South Bronx were undergoing a major uprooting.

Rose also records that, in 1977, the South Bronx was home to a prolonged power outage coupled with looting and vandalism. This event, as represented in national media, located "New York and the South Bronx as national symbols of ruin and isolation" while "popular film... [used] the South Bronx... as a backdrop for social ruin and barbarism" (Rose, 1994b:35, cf. Hager, 1984: 43).[38] In other words, the infrastructure of the predominantly black and Puerto Rican South Bronx was shredded, both materially and symbolically. Soon however, rap music filled the hollow surroundings. Overtop blank, brick walls graffiti artists did some renewing of their own. And breakdancers ignored the piles of rubble to dance in the streets. Under a hip hop banner, South Bronx youth began to (re)build identities of self and community that now, in retrospect, seriously challenged those images offered by American news and Hollywood.

New York, in the late 1960s and early 1970s was, consequently, home to youth sociality in the form of increasing (in number, geography, and activity) neighbourhood gangs. As reported by Hager, "[g]ang activity probably peaked in 1973, when there were an estimated 315 gangs in the city, claiming 19,503

members. The Black Spades [originally formed in the Southeast Bronx and called the Savage Seven] were by far the largest and most feared" (1984:10). So, by 1973, the youth demographic of the South Bronx was a stratification of mostly black and Puerto Rican residents, many of whom socialized within peer group gang structures. This change in social structure occurred at a time when the architectural infrastructure of the South Bronx was left to crumble, to be bypassed by the expressway.

But what of the economic climate in the South Bronx of the 1970s? Rose grounds her thorough analysis of rap music within a context of the post-industrial, urban landscape of the northern US: the locale of rap's largest demographics in terms of the music's production and consumption and the locus where "social alienation, prophetic imagination, and yearning intersect" (Rose, 1994a:21). Sociologist Lois Weis writes that "postindustrial... is... characterized by struggle over the symbolic realm of information and the production of culture more generally" (1990:9). In other words, it is a turn away from "the occupational structure... from blue-collar manufacturing... toward corporate and information services" (Rose, 1994b: 75). Additionally, during the 1970s and continuing through the Reaganomic cutbacks of the 1980s, inner-city schools' extracurricular activities were discontinued because of government budget cuts. This "reduced access to traditional [Western] forms of instrumentation and composition, [thus,] inner-city youth increasingly relied on recorded sound" (Rose, 1994b:78). It is, then, a post-industrial socio-

economic and political context which Rose emphasizes in arguing that rap music, as we will see, is a fusion of African cultural practices and symbols with contemporary communications technology in the US.[39]

Hip hop: graffiti, breakdancing and fashion

The issue of whether hip hop is or is not a culture is pertinent to contemporary anthropology, so I would like to discuss it briefly. Because of the unique socio-economic, infrastructural and mixed cultural context of hip hop's home in the South Bronx, it seems necessary to address the labelling of hip hop as a culture. So far, I have made reference to hip hop as a phenomenon. This is because I am not really sure I can understand it as anything other than hip hop. While I believe hip hop has more meaning in terms of generation than culture, I am equally convinced it is evidence of culture as a process. Hip hop is an eloquent way to express the human capability to adapt, by choice, in particular, to new environments. And what do humans adapt? Material resources, of course. Ask the archaeologists, they will confirm this. But myths, symbols and histories also need to be revised to meet the circumstances associated with new environments. So, if culture demarcates humans from other primates, then it is culture manifested in human modification of concrete and semantic environments.

What makes hip hop so appealing to me, as an adaptive process, is that it began with and maintains an aesthetic of making the most from the least. As Toop notes,

> hip hop... fostered an attitude of creating from limited materials. Sneakers became high fashion; original music was created from turntables, a mixer and obscure (highly secret) records; entertainment was provided with the kind of showoff street rap[40] that almost any kid was capable of turning on rival. (Toop, 1991:15)

Equally poetic, graffiti writers turn trains and building walls into canvasses while using felt markers and spray paint instead of the more expensive oil and water paints. But hip hop's DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos is not its only appeal.

As I mentioned above, I suspect hip hop has more do to with a generational context than a cultural one. I do not believe that Perkins is too far off the mark in writing that hip hop is "the defining cultural expression of the eighties [youth] generation" (1996:13), at least in the US. And as such, it is primarily a youth phenomenon formed within a very specific social and historical context. Cheryl Keyes offers the following solution:

> African American youth forged in the crucible of the street a youth arts movement called 'hip-hop' comprised mainly of djs, emcees, graffiti artists, and break dancers.... [H]ip-hop represents what I call cultural reversioning. (1996:224)

In order to grasp rap music as part of the larger scope of hip hop reversioning, the poetic lens needs to be focused on graffiti, breakdancing and hip hop fashion in order to outline them within their own poetic contexts.

Rap music in the South Bronx continued in the tradition of Jamaican DJs taking their sound equipment to the street. The Bronx DJs began by playing

house or street parties. The DJ's mission in both fora was to find a beat to which the dancers responded best and to keep that groove going for the whole party. When it came to street parties, the DJs would climb a street light/telephone pole and plug their sound systems into the outlet located by the bulb's socket.[41]

Breakdancing

By 1973, some black kids in the South Bronx were breakdancing. At this time, the primary breakdance music was bass-laden funk. Often, dancers would organize in "crews" of four to five members and perform intricately choreographed footwork combined with head, hand and back spins. Toop writes that breakdancers, practicing customs "dating back to... West Africa... would form a circle and take turns to solo in the center" (1991:142). Kids could breakdance on any street corner, using sheets of cardboard as a dance floor. The performance of breakdancing's athletic and acrobatic choreography reset the street as an outdoor dancehall and the sidewalk as dancefloor.

By 1978, breaking began to lose its popularity in the black neighbourhoods and was replaced by "the Hustle or the Freak.... [and] the Electric Boogie, a robotic mimelike dance" (Hager, 1984:83). But, at this same time, Puerto Rican youth were getting into breakdance in a big way. This new audience of Hispanic dancers propelled the addition of Latin music into the beats of rap music.[42] As Flores writes, breakdance has "obvious choreographic

reliance on rumba, mambo and Latin hustle movements" (1996:93). In keeping with the hip hop aesthetic of building from limited resources, and because of cuts to extra-curricular programmes for South Bronx schools, breakdancing became an alternative form of recreation, socializing and fitness. It made use of street space, cardboard and the most important resource of all, the body.

Breakdancing could be performed anywhere. And it was. The portability of breakdancing coincided with the popularity of large, transportable radio/cassette[43] players called either "ghetto blasters" or "boom boxes." Equally, the mobile dance crews began wearing loose, baggy clothing characterized most readily as sportswear: tracksuits, sweat pants/shirts, sneakers.

Hip hop fashion

As hip hop continued to grow throughout the 70s and 80s, sportswear (especially basketball sneakers) took on the status of high fashion for youth (as anyone who has paid for sneakers in the past fifteen years might agree). Hip hop fashion terms soon began to appear in everyday speech. Examples include, "kicks" for sneakers, "hoodies" for hooded sweatshirts, "tims" or "timbos" for Timberland boots, and "triple fats" for puffy, downfilled jackets. By the 1980s, fashion brand names had become regular references in rap songs. For examples, Run-DMC's "My Adidas," Schoolly D's "Put your Filas on," and Q-Tip rapping,

> I've got the timbos on the toes
> and this is how it goes.[44]

I suspect that, along with rap music and breakdancing, hip hop fashion is influenced by the increasing number of sportswear endorsements made by major sports personalities, particularly basketball players --most obviously, Michael Jordan doing Nike commercials. This postulated relationship between hip hop fashion[45] and pro basketball stems from the number of basketball references in rap music lyrics, the popularity of Air Jordan sneakers and of basketball in inner-city New York neighbourhoods. However, basketball is not the only sport to affect hip hop youth dress styles. Baseball hats are hip hop iconography, particularly when worn backwards. And hockey jerseys became hip hop fashion in the late 1980s. As we will see in Chapter 3, the use of basketball themes in rap music narratives is common.

Graffiti

The third component of hip hop is graffiti. In a letter to a young graffiti entrepreneur in Colorado, graffiti artist/author William Wimsatt writes,

> [c]avemen did it, so did Romans and Egyptians. The Incas did it, so did Greeks and Native Americans. There was graffiti on the New York Subway a year after it was built. (1994:41)

It was through graffiti that Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring were introduced to the art circles of New York City.

Graffiti, by and large, refers to logos painted, inked or dyed onto an architectural structure. Graffiti has, as Wimsatt says, been practiced by humans

for a long time in a lot of places. What makes hip hop graffiti especially impressive is not only its orthographic styles and use of spray paint, but its focus on "bombing" subway trains with huge murals.[46] Hip hop graffiti consists of "piecing" together murals on brick walls, outdoor basketball/handball court walls, and, to the joy of many graffiti writers, trains. Another form of hip hop graffiti is a "tag." A tag is usually a graffiti writer's *nom-de-plume* (or the pseudonym's initials) "thrown up" with a felt-tipped marker anywhere, like a breakdancer's sheet of cardboard.

Toop suggests that "[m]ost graffiti artists" identify TAKI 183 as the innovator of hip hop graffiti: "a Greek boy named Demetrios" who began tagging New York in 1969-70 (Toop, 1991:41-42). That is, TAKI was Demetrios' tag, wherein the 183 refers to 183rd Street.[47] Eventually, other writers began to spring up throughout New York throwing up tags similar to TAKI 183. And, over the course of twenty-five years, new styles of graffiti have continued to appear. Today, hip hop graffiti includes bubble style letters, cracked letters (imitating the cracks and decay of the building wall/canvasses) and the nearly indecipherable "wildstyle." Wildstyle, for lack of a better explanation, is a style of (graffiti) orthography that attempts to turn letters inside out.

Hip hop graffiti uses magic markers and spray paint --relatively recent inventions-- in lieu of more expensive oil and water paints, and in so doing accentuates the relationship between technology and hip hop. By taking art out

of the museum and into the streets (and onto trains), hip hop graffiti writers not only free visual art from the gallows of gallery walls, but also relieve the visual miasma of "[t]he drab landscape" (Imani and Vera, 1996:169) of urban environments. Graffiti writers, most important of all, build an imageric inventory, or worldview, appropriate, appealing and decipherable for kids, "screenagers"[48] (Rushkoff, 1996:3), interested in *Star Wars*, Smurfs, Superman and Shaolin Kung-Fu. Hip hop graffiti, with its cartoon-like appearance, is by far more relevant to today's youth than canonical works of yore. Hip hop graffiti writers colour the street setting for breakdancers and rappers. And, in the same way that Toop suggests train art is a welcomed alternative to advertising in trains and buses (1991:14), so too do the large murals on building walls offer a superior aesthetic to an urban environment in comparison to the overwhelming encroachment of advertising billboards.

Kingston:South Bronx (1970s)

The Kingston street scene was one of an emergent Jamaican identity evidenced in the change from ska to reggae. Ska music was played in the streets by rivalling soundmen (or yardmen) and came to take on a increasingly distinctive Jamaican character expressed particularly in the lyrical content of reggae. In other words, things were coming together for Jamaica: a coherence forming.

The South Bronx, on the other hand, was a scene of shifting demographics, socio-economic/infrastructural decline (or abandonment may be more appropriate), gang social structures and, because of the deaths of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and the Black Panthers, the loss of a generation of black storytellers, mythologists, elders and leaders. In New York, a ray of light was heard in the polyrhythmic drums and Afro-centric rap poetry of Harlem's Last Poets. The South Bronx and NYC are culturally, linguistically, etc., far more heterogeneous than Jamaica, thus hip hop took shape by tying together select pieces ("piecing" a graffiti mural) of its environment. Under a hip hop umbrella, expressive styles (music/poetry, graphic art, dancing) from many cultures were fused, filling in for the voices of a generation of missing elders.

DJ Kool Herc breaks the beats

Urban Kingston, 1967, was the scene from which DJ Kool Herc (then twelve-year-old Clive Campbell) emigrated north to the South Bronx. By 1973, Herc had begun to employ his own legendarily large and reputably very loud sound system (the speakers of which were dubbed "The Herculords") and reggae's "talk overs" (i.e., talking through a microphone over the background of a playing record, like a yardman) to DJ local parties.[49] DJ Kool Herc is regarded by many rap musicians and rapophiles as the inventor of rap music. Therefore, it seems only proper that I refer the reader to his summary of rap

and hip hop's lineage and, additionally, his explanation of the poetic quality of rap that underpins this paper. Herc takes the mic in a talkover saying:

> Listen to the sounds, the force coming to ya
> DJ Kool Herc, the king, the godfather,
> The innovator of hip-hop
> They took my simple song
> Thinking that they were so smart[50]
> And now they turn it into a symphony
> Cause New York City
> Is the place where it all come from
> And also part of the West Indies
> Roots
> Yes, it is a yard man start it
> Yes it came from the roots
> The island
> Drum and bass
> In your face
> Music that make you wind up your waist
> Yes, it is the merger of reggae and hip-hop
> Just like back in the days
> When the master throw away the chicken back
> And also the pig feet
> We pick it up and make something out of it
> That's what I did with the record
> The one's they throw away I bought
> Pick it up, turn it into something
> And now everybody gotta put a drum beat in their record...
> [Calls the names of other DJs, MCs, and crews]
> I call it black gold.[51]

Of course, it is an arbitrary choice to cite (site) Herc as the inventor (Godfather) of rap music, especially in consideration of its thick historical context. However, it is Herc's early transformation of the Jamaican DJ style that gives him a place in rap music's lineage. Herc's new style of DJing focused on the break of a song. The break of a song, as Rose points out, is "the point at which the thematic elements of a musical piece are suspended and the underlying

rhythms brought center stage" (1994a:72-3). In other words, all other instrumentation stops and only "the underlying rhythms" are heard, that is, most often, the drums and bass.

Perkins explains that "the break-beat of early hip hop was the percussion break popular among many groups of the 1970s" (1996b:6). The hip hop DJ isolates the break of a song and makes a beat out of it by rolling the beat over itself, cutting from one turntable to the other. This in turn forms a montage of sonic recursion and is the DJ's way of complementing the lyrical content of rap music in "infecting the crowd of dancers" (Perkins, 1996:6) to keep moving all night. Remember the boast in "Rapper's delight" where Hank challenges Superman's power in rapping, "but can he rock a party til the early light?" A DJ's task is to balance the MC's lyrics and urge the audience to dance by building a groove of breaks and blending them into a steady, continuous, party-long beat. As David Toop writes,

> Herc knew how to bring the crowd up to a frenzied peak and hold them there for hours. During these times, he seldom played an entire song. Instead, he played the hottest segment of the song, which was often just a 30-second "break" section --when the drums, bass, and rhythm guitar stripped the beat to its barest essence. Herc played break after break to create an endless peak of dance beats. (1991:32-33)

This new style of DJing required two turntables, two or more copies of each record, an exact sense of timing and finely tuned manual dexterity. It was a style of DJing that, in opposition to the disco DJs of the era who did little more than mix one song or twelve-inch-single into another "became known as the 'beats' or the 'break beats'" (Hebdige, 1987:138). Houston Baker notes,

"[w]hy listen --the early hip hop DJs asked-- to an entire commercial disc if the disc contained only twenty (or two) seconds of worthwhile sound" (1993:88-89). DJ Kool Herc, both hands moving records and both ears trained on the precise cueing required for mixing the beats one into another, soon drafted the rapping of two MCs: Coke-la-Rock and Clark Kent.

Soon other MCs and DJs began to appear in the Bronx. They subsequently individualized or stylized (versioned) this new form of music production which rejuxtaposes the turntables from instruments of musical consumption to musical production. Potter claims this "shift" in logic can "ultimately be traced back to Afro-Caribbean traditions of Jamaica" (1995:36). That is, he writes that "the making of... music out of materials made ostensibly for consumption (records) was certainly practiced in Jamaica long before... the South Bronx" (Potter, 1995:37). With rap music, however, it is a technological inversion, and it is the technological thematics of rap music that give it a unique phylogenetic branch in the African diaspora tree.

DJ Kool Herc's mixing of the break beats was the predecessor of today's digital sampling. In fact, since Herc revamped the turntables and the role of the DJ, much of contemporary recording technology and sound engineering has been influenced and modified by the new demands DJs and rappers put on available technology and production techniques. Again, what rap DJs are doing is not new in terms of an African diasporic cultural/musical aesthetic. There is, according to Andrew Bartlett, "a [historical] continuum in which African

American artists have put things learned by listening into action by way of *performance*" (1994: 640) stemming from, he argues, "an African American/African diasporic aesthetic which carefully selects available media, texts, and contexts for performative use" (Bartlett, 1994:639). The break beats isolated and repeated by the deft manual art of DJ Kool Herc are now broken and looped with digital recording equipment. Due to sampling's centrality in rap music, I will discuss it further on. However, it is necessary to point out an example of rap's technological connection to modern communications.

Grandmaster Flash scratches vinyl

In the early days of rap (i.e., early to mid-seventies[52]) another set of hands shaping hip hop belonged to Grandmaster Flash. Flash's first addition to the DJ and MC makeup was a technological innovation. Having studied electronics, Flash, in the post-industrial economy of the time, realized that the addition of a single pole, double throw (SPDT) switch on the DJs "wheels of steel" (the turntables) would let the DJ, listening through headphones attached to both phonographs, fade out from one table and tune into the other, thereby increasing the speed and accuracy of the beat mix. Flash says,

> I had to go to the raw parts shop downtown to find me a single pole double throw-switch, some crazy glue..., an external amplifier and a headphone. (Toop, 1991:61)

Flash is also credited for developing the technique of "scratching," which is a style of instrumentation unique to rap music. Again, Flash explains that "[a]

scratch is *nothing* but the backcueing that you hear in your ear before you push it out to the crowd" (Toop, 1991: 65). That is, the stretched percussive sound emanating from the stylus running through the track grooves on a record being cued up by the DJ's hand.

One style of scratching that Flash employed is known as "punch phasing"[53]: when a DJ plays a quick horn, drum or vocal slap (a James Brown grunt), "throw[ing] it out and bring[ing] it back" (Toop, 1991:65). According to Hebdige, punch phasing occurs "when the DJ hits a particular break on one deck while the record on the other turntable is still playing" (1987:139). Equally, as a suprasegmental feature in rap music, the punch phase can function as a punctuation mark in a rapper's sentence (Hebdige, 1987:139). For example, at the end of BDP's song, "The racist" KRS raps,

> If black and white didn't argue the most
> They could really see the government's
> Screwing them both.[54]

On the word "both," the drums stop, KRS' voice fades away in an echo, the percussive scratch of a record is heard (noting KRS' voice being scratched?), and simultaneously, a sample of two heraldic trumpet notes is repeated and echoed. The drums kick back in to accompany the horns and the DJ has formed a sonic exclamation mark to punctuate and emphasize KRS' message.

Another style of scratching developed by Flash is called "backspinning" which is the amplification of the sound resulting from cueing a record --only

really fast, and in both directions. Backspinning builds a heavy body of percussive sound. That is,

> cutting the record back and forth against the needle. Back and forth, back and forth. Making it scra:tch.[55] But let me tell you something, don't try it at home with your dad's stereo. Only under hip hop supervision. A'ight?[56]

Grandmaster Flash became the DJ for the MC crew, The Furious Five. Flash and The Five were one of the first rap groups to achieve attention in the commercial heyday of rap music in the early 1980s. This was a time when, following the commercial success of the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's delight," new MCs and DJs began to appear almost over night and over an ever growing geography. In 1983, Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five's "The Message" was the first rap I heard.

In 1982-83, with the advent of music video television (MTV/MuchMusic), rap music moved from the streets to the living rooms of "screenagers" throughout North America. One of the earliest videos at that time was The Furious Five's song "The Message." On the one hand, this song marked off a genre[57] of rap music known as "message rap," and on the other, because of its wide geographic distribution via television, it really increased the scope of rap music's audience, performers and content.

Lyrically, "The Message" is made up of several rhyming verses illustrating and describing the pressures and constraints faced by black youth in a post-industrial urban environment. These verses are interspersed by the chorus,

Don't push me, cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
It's a jungle out there,
Sometimes it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under.[58]

To set the physical scene of the urban environment, the rap begins with

Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs
You know they just don't care
I can't take the smell
I can't take the noise
Got no money to move out
Guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room
Roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley
with the baseball bat.

These lyrics conjure up familiar concrete urban sensations in the images of the "alley" and "broken glass." Similarly, inner-city conditions and experiences that escape the eye are captured in metaphoric references to sounds and scents. The abandonment of the physical and social environments is evidenced in the apathy ("you know they just don't care") and the presence of "rats" and "roaches." Danger is ubiquitous as the figure of "junkies... with the baseball bat" and poverty is nothing new. The rapper is stuck, constrained.

To bring out more of the urban setting, the rap tackles the imagery of city traffic and tenement living:

Standing on the front stoop
Hanging out the window
Watching all the cars go by
Roaring as the breezes blow
Crazy lady living in a bag
Eating out of garbage pails.

The reference to tenement living in the lines "the front stoop" and "windows" is followed by a note on the traffic as constantly present "as the breezes blow." Then, subtly, the metaphors change to remark on the pedestrian (everyday) traffic evidenced in the image of homelessness and eating out of garbage dumpsters with reference to what a I call 'local street characters,' the "Crazy lady." After a few more lines describing urban existence, the lyrics change to point out the physical and psychological affects such an environment can have on a human being:

> Neon, King Kong
> Standing on my back
> Can't stop to turn around
> Broke my sacrophylliac
> I'm mid-range, migraine,
> Cancered membranes
> Sometimes I think I'm going insane
> I swear I might highjack a plane.

Although the term post-industrial is not used in "The Message," the following lines characterize the situation faced by black youth in inner-city public schools and their bleak prospects for the future:

> My son said daddy
> I don't want to go to school
> Cause the teacher's a jerk
> He must think I'm a fool
> And all the kids smoke reefer
> I think it'd be cheaper
> If I just got a job
> Learned to be a street sweeper
> And dance to the beat
> Shuffle my feet.

The post-industrial reference comes from the opposition found in the choice between the service industry job, "street sweeper," (i.e., *minimum* wage jobs) and the unmentioned communications technology industry, a choice faced by more and more North American youth everyday. The poetic eloquence of "The Message" comes through in its lyric envisioning of everyday street observations. I make this statement in backstepping to my claim that graffiti is an art made for and by people (i.e., urban youth) who have no cultural context in which to place, say, Picasso's flowers. Similarly, the everyday lyrical configuration of "The Message" suggests a construction from limited resources. Now, with this picture of rap's technological and semantic revisionary practices, I turn to hip hop sociality.

Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation

As explained earlier, the predominant form of youth sociality in the South Bronx streets was that of a gang structure. And the largest of these gangs was the Black Spades. It is from the ranks of the Black Spades that Afrika Bambaataa emerged onto the hip hop scene. In fact, he is credited by some (i.e., Shusterman, 1992; Toop, 1991) as being the Godfather of hip hop.

Hager writes that by 1975, Bambaataa had "an increasingly influential role" within the Black Spades organization (1984:10). However, he also left the Black Spades and slowly began to build his own vision of the Zulu Nation as an alternative form of sociality for Bronx kids. As Keyes writes,

> Bambaataa established the foundation for a youth arts movement known as hip hop.... [His] concept of hip hop not only encompassed urban street expressions, it also embodied an attitude rendered in the form of gestures, language, and stylized dress associated with street culture. (1996:231)

In time, Bambaataa started DJing for the Soul Sonic Force whose performances began to attract crews of graffiti writers and breakdancers who took on hip hop identities for the Zulu Nation's urban artisan gatherings. And it was during this time that the template of hip hop was cast from its mold. Soon after Bambaataa began organizing hip hop events and "threw his first real party in November 1976 at the Bronx River Community Centre" (Fernando, 1994:6), others followed suit in other parts of NYC.

At these gatherings, the competition of the Jamaican DJs and the battles of street gangs were transposed into battles[59] between the hip hop DJs' beats, MCs' rhymes, breakdancers' spins and graffiti writers' tags/murals.[60] While these performances were sometimes just "about piecing [or breaking] while a jam was going on" (Rose, 1994a:35), Fernando writes, "[d]uelling deejays would usually set up opposite each other at a park, high school or community centre.... [where] they took turns, seeing who could attract the largest crowd (1994:7-8). Soon hip hop had reversioned NYC, the northeastern US, and in time, the world of young America.

While hip hop was building a coherent social and symbolic structure for kids living in the inner-city streets of post-industrial South Bronx, Bambaataa began DJing like Herc, in what was becoming the hip hop style. Bambaataa's

beats held together the rhymed lyrics of the Soul Sonic Force. Their album **Planet Rock** (1982), along with Bambaataa's Zulu Nation, make him "a pioneer in the roots development and eventual success of hip hop" (Toop, 1991:57). For **Planet Rock**, Bambaataa used electronic drum machines and synthesizers along with his scratches and samples. For example, on the track, "Looking for the perfect beat," a synthesized voice seems to prophesize rap music's growth in rapping

> We are the future
> You are the past.

Bambaataa "perfected Herc's style by including a variety of musical styles varying from soul, funk and commercial jingles" (Keyes, 1996:229) as well as the "German technorock" (Potter, 1995:142) of the band Kraftwerk.

Bambaataa then is unique in rap music for introducing the DJ style to a world of new music (the synthesized New Wave of the late 70s/early 80s) and for combining Keyes' "arts movement" with a social structure that was familiar to local Bronx youth. Flash added the technique of scratching as well as the SPDT switch to the turntables. And Herc began it all by breaking the beats, which leads me to the topic of sampling. As Chuck D says of rap music, it "[']s a sampling sport."[61]

Sampling

Sampling is an excellent metaphor for hip hop: a pinch of this, a dash of that. Prior to the demands rap DJs made on available recording technology,

samplers were used as shortcuts, "almost exclusively as time- and money-saving devices for producers, engineers, and composers" (Rose, 1994a:73). That is, musical samples were used to avoid paying for studio musicians and/or to fill in, or flesh out a piece of recorded music. Rap musicians, on the other hand, layer numerous samples to build a new musical piece: "a tissue of echoes and fragments of earlier texts" (Shusterman, 1992:205). Equally, Rose argues that, "prior to rap, the most desirable use of a sample was to mask the sample and its origin; to bury its identity." But, much as DJs turned the tables on the turn tables, "[r]ap producers have inverted this logic, using samples as a point of reference, as a means by which the process of repetition and recontextualization can be highlighted and privileged" (Rose, 1994a:71). The technology of sampling break beats of previously recorded songs, "points of rupture in their former contexts" (Rose, 1994a:74), challenges conventions of both musical composition and instrumentation.

The technology of sampling allows a DJ to conjure a multitude of feelings and/or images with sounds ranging from other works by other musicians or from one's own repertoire, video game sounds, advertisement jingles and television gameshow themes, telephone calls, taped speeches of Malcolm X, street sounds such as sirens and screeching tires. Sounds ordered to complement the MC's rap like fries to a burger. In short, any sonic is prey to sampling. Rose mentions that Jamaican versioning (i.e., recording different versions of one song, such as in a dub) and sampling are similar in that they

pay homage to and invoke the voice of the original artist (Rose, 1994a: 79), the same as Willy D and KRS One trade "props" (hip hop for paying respect) face to face. Bartlett writes that sampling acts as a "massive archiving" (1994:641) of African diasporic sonics and culture "signify[ing] and theoriz[ing] communality" (Bartlett, 1994:650). Sampling, Keil and Feld argue, elaborates a relationship between music and culture and

> *recovers* an oral tradition long covered by outsiders. This inversion --the reappropriation by black artists of black and white musical material through sampling and digital manipulation-- talks back to a whole history of white appropriation of black musical forms and styles. (1994:274)

These samples are of a single instrument, word, or sound and may be stretched out for an extended period or made to appear for a split second while pitch and tone can be altered. In short, the sample turns any recorded sound into malleable material. These fragmented samples can recontextualize sounds, expressions, etc. and bring out new or latent meanings just as isolating the lines "Our home and native land" and "Land of the free, home of the brave" locate the poetic quality of irony in Canada's and the US' national anthems.[62] Samples, furthermore, are organized in a layered, rather than linear fashion. And remember, this process of "'overlapping'... echoes throughout the African [diasporic] American musical tradition" (Bartlett, 1994: 643). For example, a sample of a break beat may be isolated and looped into recursion. On top of this beat, any number of sonic samples can be placed one on top of another, giving the sonics a tactile quality and demonstrating the process of *building upon*. The resultant bouillabaisse of sound is thus poetically complemented by

the layered words (and their meanings) of the MC. Rap music producer, Eric Sadler, quoted by Rose, explains the music's aural tactility as sounds

> darting in and out absolutely everywhere. It's like somebody throwing rice at you. You have to grab every little piece and put it in the right place like a puzzle. (Rose, 1994a:80)

This apparent chaos of multiple samples (like rice being tossed) balances against and on top of the repetition of the bass and drum-driven break beats. Sampling and rapping, then, work together in poetic unison in building an environment of semantic and sonic intertextuality. This is where the shared cultural background of signifyin' really makes sense. That is, in order to understand (read and/or listen to) rap music and hip hop in their own terms, one must know what they are made of and where they come from. And in the case of hip hop and rap music, that cultural knowledge is one shared by the youth of the post-industrial, technology-biased cultural polymorph of America (or the world). Coming from this background helps one distinguish the sample of a falling alien's bomb (from the video game, *Space Invaders*) from a shrill, cacophonous noise. It is to be able to read the writing on the wall.

Summary

> Due to the circumstances
> A man such as I has to take chances
> Fixed into a position
> I must take on the Bambaataa mission.[63]

Thus, rap musicians' effective combination of poetry and music can serve as the hip hop *griots'* weapon of choice in a "verbal shootout" (Toop,

1991:33) with --to cap-- the colonial elision (through omission) of African diasporic history in the Americas. In many ways, rap music records and testifies to life in urban America, although sometimes it is just meant to encourage people to dance. The DJs and MCs chronicle and archive an African diasporic history, but also make and record the history of hip hop's heterogeneous contexts of time and place. Rap music can be understood as a continuation of the *griots'* oral transmission of history *cum* cultural knowledge, or of the rhyming radio jocks and Jamaican DJs entertaining their audience. A formative element of hip hop, rap music articulates cultural visions with figures befitting America's first generation of "screenagers" and their environment of "fibre-optic distraction."[64]

> No matter what size, shape, or colour
> We can jam and enjoy each other.[65]

Like rap music, hip hop graffiti, breakdancing and fashion are characteristically poetic in their own processes of revisioning, reversioning, reformulating, etc, that is, in their specific practices of *building upon*. Graffiti is so with its layers of colour on concrete walls and trains; breakdancing with its merger of traditional Latin and African dance, choreographed for an electronically generated music; and hip hop's fashion's rejuxtaposition of work and leisure time as well as its determination of what is cool to wear on the streets --that is, in hip hop terms, what is "fresh."

Hip hop blurs the line between street art and canonical/conventional art. And the poetic quality of hip hop is brilliantly visible in the making use of

everyday materials by "artists... positioned with few resources in marginal economic circumstances" (Rose, 1994a:35): common street scenes, crazy glue and cardboard for examples. Hip hop's poetics continue a tradition of an African diasporic aesthetic much as reggae does. However, hip hop has a very specific socio-economic and cultural reality which distinguishes it from other African diasporic musical forms such as jazz, blues and funk.

With Herc, Flash and Bambaataa 'in the text,' I attempted to discuss the poetry of rap music and hip hop at the level of the poet and demonstrate how it ties into an analysis of language and culture in consideration of what Friedrich calls the "unique imagination." Each of these three pioneering hip hop DJs contributed a special style to their craft. In doing so, they helped shape the content and processes of hip hop as well as a viable, understandable future vision for inner-city youth. Equally, they inverted middle-class Euro-American logic and conventional technological functions in order to break down old songs and rebuild them into fresh, new break-beats. And Bambaataa deserves special attention for his effort to use art in a socially conscious manner.

As Rose states, rap music must be considered in terms of its specific technological interface. And remember Bartlett arguing that this same technology must be considered in its historically relative terms of who has and who has not had access to it in the past. Therefore sampling became my focus of attention in an attempt to reveal just how relative and complex the production of rap music can be. Sampling can effectively use sound-images, for

example the voice of Malcolm X, to pay respects and homage to cultural figures or icons. Or, consider for example, the sounds of a siren, screeching car tires and a car horn to symbolize a busy city street. Sometimes these samples are left to speak for themselves and other times they are recontextualized through the MCs' narratives and the DJs' beats and samples. Finally, in characterizing scratching and sampling as poetic processes in rap music, I argued that standards and conventions of music production and instrumentation are challenged and redefined. Whereas scratching opens up a new understanding of the turntable and the use of the vinyl record, sampling pushes the normative or traditional boundaries of musical production and engineering.

Chapter 3
Rap music's timely message

> History can never be made by one man, we must smash this one quickly. History is only made by the masses of the people, this is clear. Even a cursory glance at the fallash... fallacious presentation of history by the American capitalist system will demonstrate just this.[66]
>
> Page 1, page 2, page 3
> And still no signs of me.[67]
>
> Tick tock go the hands of time
> Time puts meanin' to my rhyme.[68]

In this chapter, I will return to a focus on rap music's lyrical message, particularly, to the teaching rap mentioned in chapter 1 as a form of black urban vernacular poetry, and in chapter 2 as message rap. As a case study, the lyrics of Public Enemy and Without Rezervation will be identified as examples of message rap. While I will make use of other hip hop references in my continuing pursuit of rap music's poetics in this chapter, my primary concern is message rap's hip hop pedagogy, that is, message rap's revision of the concept of time in its transmission of American history (read here as cultural knowledge). Rap music's pedagogy is referred to in hip hop terms as "dropping science," "dropping knowledge." As the Beastie Boys put it,

> dropping the new science and
> kicking the new k-nowledge[69]
> An MC to a degree [i.e., not Einsteinian reality of $e=mc^2$]
> That you can't get in college.[70]

This is a pedagogy proliferated by "teachas" and "philosophas", "so," as KRS One invites his listeners,

> pick up the drum and hum
> Sing along
> It's a poetry session
> Mathematically applied
> No guessing.[71]

The opening quotation of this chapter, the words of Malcolm X, posit that history is not epiphenomenal, that is, not reducible to one single icon (i.e., figurehead, martyr, messiah, etc). Although metonymic relationships are pragmatic for purposes of communication, upon close inspection they often appear to elide the complexity of human interaction through the time and space that make up history. Therefore, this chapter examines the critique of such historical figurations put forward in rap music narratives. In particular, it is the redefinition of a specific historical signifier that is of primary interest. That signifier is Columbus Day. And as will be demonstrated, the conventional American understanding of Columbus Day as the celebration of one man's discovery of a New World contrasts with the history pictured in the critique of Columbus Day by Public Enemy (PE) and Without Rezervation (WOR). In this sense, message rap reflects the "*teachin'*" style of rapping in which, as Carolyn Rodgers argues, "the poets hip you to something, pull the covers off of something, or run it down to you, or ask you to just dig it" (1972:338). Similarly, some rappers attempt to uncover an African diasporic cultural history appropriated and subsequently euphemized, delineated and "covered" (as Feld

and Keil put it) by a white, bourgeois Euro-American time frame or worldview. In other words, rappers continue the tradition of West African *griots* or "bards who played an especially important role in precolonial society, orally passing on the cultural history of their people" (Fernando, 1994:255). Fernando cites Pearl E. Primus' statement that "[t]he songs of the *griot* are more precise than any history book" (1994:255). The maintenance of West African oral traditions by rap musicians stands in the face of a colonial history that attempted to keep enslaved Africans illiterate by taking away their languages and outlawing their drums[72] "in the hopes of fashioning them into drones who had no concept of their true identity" (1994:255), that is, their culture and history. Therefore, I argue that rap music's poetic redefinition of the Western concept of time -- which is, "in industrial society... clock time" (Horton, 1972:19)-- and its reconsideration of historical signifiers articulates a hip hop pedagogy.

The calling into question of the history proposed by dominant powers is not unique to rap music. In fact, such a process in rap music takes part of a continuum of such contestations. Consider the following three examples wherein history, in the form of the state-sanctioned meaning, is reinterpreted through performance. On June 26 1992, Ward Churchill and several others were acquitted of numerous charges brought against them by the Denver city police. These charges resulted from Churchill's group peacefully halting a Columbus Day parade in Denver. The jury acquitted --stating they believed, beyond a reasonable doubt, Churchill's defense argument. Churchill presents

his legal argument in the chapter "Bringing the Law Home: Application of the Genocide Convention in the United States." In thirty-five pages and one hundred and 106 footnotes, Churchill established his group was merely performing a citizen's arrest in halting an event contravening "Article III of the UN's 1948 Convention on Punishment and Prevention of the Crime of Genocide (UN GOAR Res. 260A (III) 9 December 1948 -effective January 1951), section (C): Direct and public incitement to commit genocide." That is, the parade, argued Churchill, was inciting the policy of genocide which Columbus evoked in Hispanola to rid the land of the Tainos. Section (E) of the same article makes punishable by law "Complicity in genocide." But Churchill's group's actions were not the only active protests of state defined history, and, consequently, (re)definers of history themselves.

Commenting on the archaeological 'discovery' of Macchu Picchu and of the Incan method by which the monumental stones were placed and abutted, Taussig questions the effect of the images and meanings constructed in and of "the violent American past" (1992:38). Macchu Picchu, rather than being a monument to the technological secrets of ancient, pre-European Inca and to the 'discovery' of the New World can be viewed through the eyes of the shaman, Santiago Mutumajoy (as he explains his *yage* curing-vision, his *pinta)*, as "monuments to racism and the colonial authority to wield the whip" (Taussig, 1992:42). The meaning Macchu Picchu held for its original inhabitants is well hidden. But there is antinomy between the meaning painted by Santiago and

that gripped by the scientists who 'discovered' and study the ruins. The latter, and much more dominating discourse, handed down from the Spanish conquest, continues cracking the whip of colonial history (read, knowledge). And the former, rather than resisting the dominating discourse's dissemination of time, place and meaning, uses his understanding of the same imagery in a curative context, the same way, Taussig suggests, Latin American mothers of the "made to disappear" (sons thought to have been murdered by para-military squads --no corpses are found, the only thing known is that they have been "made to disappear") interpret their dreams of the missing's return not with the concepts and terrifying imagery inculcated by the state (who provoke, through various forms of propaganda, the uncertainty of not knowing, a state of siege), but by investing them with new meaning, writing a story significantly other than that of a state of siege, and impose upon themselves their own collective order. They reversion the disorder of not knowing.

The effects individuals have on society and vice-versa, as evidenced in the re-definition of social relationships and legal historical meanings by Mutumajoy and Churchill, are further exemplified in Gomez-Peña's article on activist performance and art taking poetics and politics to the streets. Writing in a decade of urban decay within America's "dysfunctional political and economic apparatus" (1994:209), Gomez-Pena juxtaposes the New World Order's "*fin de siecle* mythologfical]" (1994:211) celebration of the Columbus Quincentenary where Columbus is a "cheesy logo for friendly expansionism and

free trade (1994:209) with stories like "American Indian Movement activist Vernon Bellcourt" who

> "desecrated" it [a replica of the Nina] by throwing a pint of his own blood at its sail.... Japanese replicas didn't have any better luck. At every port they were welcomed by angry protesters. In Tampa, Florida, Indian performance activist Russell Means arrested Columbus... and put him in quarantine. In Minneapolis, Columbus was tried by historians and activists for eleven historical crimes against the indigenous population of the Caribbean and found guilty. (Gomez-Peña, 1994:209)

There is a responsibility that falls onto the shoulders of the artist who wishes to contest historical narratives. A responsibility that is exchanged for the freedom to create. That is, the responsibility of the "[r]apper, performance artists,... independent film makers" (Gomez-Peña, 1994:210) and poets "to force open the matrix of reality to admit unsuspected possibilities" (1994:212). And, "[s]urely," Gomez-Peña concludes, "if there is an art form that truly speaks for the present crisis of our communities, this form is rap" (1994:221).

Examples of message rap as critique

> To revise the received sign... is to critique the nature of (white) meaning itself, to challenge through a literal critique of the sign the meaning of meaning. (Gates, 1988:47)

As I mentioned earlier, not all rap music is message rap, however, that which is often focuses on critiques of Western symbols. This is similar to Gates' Signifyin(g) which inverts conventional (white, middle-class) signifiers and redirects them towards new, different signifieds. This is, of course, the same as Friedrich's poetic process of "challenging or... remaking... underlying...

codes" (1986:34). Message rap's poetic pedagogy (its historical revisioning) counters the omission[73] of African diasporic history and historical figures in the Americas, much as hip hop provided structure for South Bronx youth after the demolition of the borough's infrastructure and economic base during the tenure of Parks Commissioner Robert Moses and the presidency of Ronald Reagan. By interrogating conventional history and simultaneously reviving the voices of African diasporic cultural figures, rappers put a black face, so to speak, into the annals of history. Imagine KRS at Mt. Rushmore, spray painting a Malcolm's "X" on Lincoln's forehead.

The narrative of message raps generally involves critiques and inversions of stereotyped imagery and/or definitions. Consider, as examples, not only Ice-T as quoted earlier about his crucifix and KRS One's deconstruction of "slave," both of which give new meaning to old symbols but also PE's "Hazy shade of criminal" and its play on the contemporary colour signifiers (black gang member:"blue n white gang"). Another salient example of this latter style of rap narrative is Without Rezervation's (WOR) "Mascot."[74] The lyrics address the proliferation of racist imagery in American pro sports. In fact, they point out that Native Americans are the "only people still dissed for a team" and that the "racist attack disguised as the devil/ in a team uniform or logo" is evident when one considers that the other popular imagery in pro sports is of animals. That is, WOR riddles,

> To prove our point we'll play a little game,
> four mascots you pick the name,

which one doesn't belong not like the others...
ah yeah, is it the lions, tigers, bears, or Indians.

A relatively thick[75] example of rap music's interrogation and critique of colonial history is found in, PE's "Race against time."[76] MC Chuck D raps,

Pandemic
Who did it
Right who did it
That's who did it

Who/World Health Organized
Murderized

Came to the aid and got paid

Doctor doctor in a lab
Concocted a germ warfare to the booty
I rocked it

105 million goin down
in da ground

Most of da black and da brown
Ow!

How did I catch this riddle
if I didn't crossover
like a Hardaway dribble

They blamed it on some
green African monkey

Now ain't that funky

While da clock
was doin da tick and da tock

I didn't know

Dat da guns aimed and cocked
(On us, on us....)

We're runnin outta
Time.....Time
Race against time.

The title of the song plays on two meanings of race, as a competition and as a biological classification. That is, it is referring to the black race's race for survival against the clock of slavery and genocide that is American history. This theme is commonly found in reggae, usually in reference to fire, Armageddon and holy redemption for Rastafari. As the Last Poets, a spoken poetry/drum group from Harlem, put it,

Night descends
As the sun's light ends
[the decline of European colonialism]
And black
Comes back
To blend again.[77]

The opening lines of "Race against time" are characterized by a humorously well-hidden critique. It appears to be a versioning of the Abbot and Costello "Who's on First?" routine wherein Chuck D categorizes the World Health Organization as an institution of Western medical hegemony in rapping,

Pandemic
Who did it[?]
Right[!] WHO did it.
That's who did it.

WHO[?]/ World Health Organized
Murderized.

Chuck D suggests that health is a money matter in terms of Western medicine and that organizations like WHO would not exist if someone were not getting paid. In fact, Western medicine is so profitable that some "doctors in

a lab" do get paid to develop "germ warfare," the cost of which is the death of "da black and da brown." But "some green [fictitious?] African monkey" gets blamed. "Now ain't that funky?"

George Clinton, the head of the funk band Parliament and or Funkadelic (or P-Funk) claims that his brand of funk is the blues sped up "and called... 'funk'... a bad word to a lot of people" (Keyes, 1996:226). According to Keyes,[78] an etymology of funk traces it back to a Ki-Kongo word (*lu-fuki*) referring to a bad body odour, and Potter notes, "'funk'... carries its olfactory connotations" (1995:129). However, *lu-fuki* is also considered to be the smell of hard work. In jazz and black English it refers to "a return to fundamentals" (Keyes, 1996: 244 n.6). In Chuck D's rap, it signifies his suspicion of Western a bio-medical hegemony and its attempt to hold Africa somehow responsible for the HIV virus and AIDS. As Dyson suggests, "Race Against Time" is "Public Enemy's"

> evocation of prophetic common sense in understanding how plagues -- from the infamous Tuskegee experiment to AIDS-- have harmed and been identified with black people throughout the diaspora. (1996:170)

Chuck D admits to crossing over like the basketball dribbling of the NBA's Tim or Penny Hardaway in order to solve the riddle of "Who did it[?]". The term "crossover," in popular music, usually means a band's change in sound, particularly in terms of genre. For examples, the Bad Brains mixing reggae with hardcore punk or PE playing with the American heavy metal band Anthrax. In Chuck D's case, it responds to critiques of PE having "sold out."

But, only by moving within and understanding an antagonistic culture, having a "second sight"[79] (playing with bands like Anthrax and selling records to millions of white suburban kids) could Chuck D come to realize that much of Western medicine is built upon a long history of racist and ethnocidal platforms revealed as

> Bigger damage than the trigger & glocks
> Mass murder in mass from a
> blanket full of smallpox.

The critique of systemic racism is a central theme in the rap genre of music. The presence of racism and harassment, in police praxis for example, has been brought to the foreground in numerous incidents reported by news media, academics and other sources. In the case of relating present-day AIDS to the purposeful spread of smallpox during the colonization of North America, Chuck D touches on the manner in which time is conceptualized in rap music narratives.

Time layered and frozen

In the same manner that Gates distinguishes Signifyin(g) from signifying, so too can white and black articulations of time be said to differ. Gates argues that

> *signification* [i.e., white signifying] refers to the chain of signifiers that configure horizontally, on the syntagmatic axis. Whereas... Signifyin(g) operates... on a paradigmatic or vertical axis. (Gates, 1988:49)

That is, in terms of a "vertical axis," time is not thought of as points along a linear line but as stacked or layered, like samples. As Keyes[80] notes,

> [i]n rap music... the concept of time is technically complex.... [T]he Western concept of linear time is not sufficient for an analysis of African music... [which] is viewed as a network of layered structures. (1996:234)

Thus, Chuck D's message argues that even when genocide arrives in a different package, the contents are the same today as in the days of legalized enslavement. In other words, according to George Lipsitz,

> [i]n Public Enemy's music video "Fight the Power," Flavor Flav... displays a stopped alarm clock pinned to his shirt and explains... "this means we know what time it is." He does not elaborate on how the broken clock conveys this information, but from the context of the video his meaning is clear. The group believes... time has stopped, that progress is not being made, that the need for social change is so urgent that it obscures everything else about our time. (1994:17)

Lipsitz's interpretation of stopped time as a theme in PE's music and imagery is supported by quotations from two of their songs. The first, "By the time I get to Arizona"[81] is a condemnation of the state for perpetuating racism by rejecting a Martin Luther King day. While Chuck D is "waitin' for the date/ For the man who demands respect" he can see that

> The cracker over there
> He try to keep it yesterday
> The good ol' days
> The same ol' ways
> That kept us dyin'.

The second example in support of Lipsitz' claim comes from the song, "A letter to the New York Post."[82] The letter is PE response to an article the Post published about domestic violence in Flavor Flav's life. The song is more

thoughtful than the following quotation may demonstrate, but in terms of *now* being the same as *then*, Flavor Flav calls the Post "America's oldest continuously published daily piece of bullshit." Flav's words may not sound exactly like a Chomskian critique, but his argument is supported by Chuck D, who backs up his partner in rhyme in remarking that the *Post* was

> Founded in 1801 by Alexander Hamilton
> That is 190 years continuous of fucked news.

A clear example of layering time in rap music narratives is again found in PE's lyrics.[83] This time Chuck D brings the past up to date in a more contemporary robe by juxtaposing the slave trade and extant legal institutions:

> Look here come the judge
> Watch it here he come now
> I can only guess what's happenin
> Years ago he woulda been
> The ship's captain.

PE thereby abut the old and the new by redefining both past- and present-day politics in the US as the same point in time and space. Through their narratives, the theme that time is at once stopped and running out for black America becomes increasingly apparent as numerous examples are piled one on top of the next. As Rose writes, this technique is apparent "as a blueprint for social resistance and affirmation: create sustaining narratives, accumulate them, layer, embellish and transform them"[84] (1994b:82). Furthermore, Chuck D questions the authenticity and legitimacy of contemporary institutions descended from and built upon profits derived from the slave trade to demonstrate the racism inherent in legal institutions,

embodied by both the courtroom (the ship) and the judge ("the ship's captain"). The black experience in American law is no different, Chuck D concludes, from being "shackled, plus gang tackled"[85] on an enslaver's ship or auction block. This method of stacking old and new symbols parallels sampling's practice of "borrowing, editing, and combining" (Austin, 1995:157). That is, sampling's poetic exemplification of exposing sounds and expressions under a new light.

Historical signifiers: Columbus Day

Now, another example of rap music's poetics containing a pedagogic quality is found in the critique and re-interpretation of Columbus Day. PE provide an appropriate twentieth century metaphor in allegorizing

> I don't hate nobody
> I hate that day
> It's as crazy as Hitler Day.[86]

However, at this point, in order to fully demonstrate not so much a contestation or resistance as an active mobilizing of the cultural semantic field, more of "Hitler Day['s]" lyrics are transcribed and cross referenced with two narratives by WOR. Chuck D again collapses and rebuilds history by layering the calendric celebrations of Thanksgiving and Columbus Day. The resultant picture re-exposes both days as markers of an otherwise unacknowledged past and the continuing perpetuation of the physical and economic exploitation inherent in American history. The track begins with the falsehoods surrounding Columbus' arrival in a populated geobiocultural system.

(spoken intro)
500 years ago one man claimed
To have discovered a new world
Five centuries later we the people
Are forced to celebrate a black holocaust
How can you call a takeover
A discovery.

In this spoken introduction, the point is made clear that Columbus' first step into the New World was the start of a holocaust. As Chuck D notes in "Can't truss it," he is talking "about the holocaust... the one still going on." The idea that Columbus discovered anything is put to doubt by redefining post-Columbus colonization as a "takeover." That is, there were already people living in what has become the Americas. WOR questions whether Columbus was a "fool or was he a hero?"[87] This query they answer by stating "the motherfucker's lost that makes him a zero." Furthermore, WOR goes on to back up PE's claim that Columbus' "discovery" was a "takeover" in rapping

Put 'em down in American mythology
...a hero that never really could be
You see his claim to fame was discovering a land
Already claimed by ten million red men.

That Columbus day is a celebration of over five-hundred "years of wickedness"[88] is made evident when Chuck D announces,

Mass murderer
This side of the planet
Most people take it for granted
502 and still doin
Give a reason I'm hatin
October celebratin
The dead
Of the black the brown and red
Sick an tired

Of bein sick N tired
Don't jump to conclusions
Before I clear the confusion
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust
I'm talkin bout Columbus....

In "502 years," WOR provides the reason why it is important to listen to Chuck D's clarification of the facts in issuing the call to

Wake up, wake up, they could never hide their lies from me
and they call this the land of opportunity
if it's true, then why is it so
they hide the past, deny the truth
they don't want the world to know
that America is built on greed.

In "Was he a fool? (Columbus)" WOR refers to Columbus' legacy in contemporary terms as

Columbus, the modern day scenario
unbearable, incomparable
suppose some punk walked straight into your house
yelled out, get the hell out
raped your wife and beat your kids
that's what he did, god forbid
to make matters worse they throw him a party.

Chuck D takes the critique of Columbus Day a step further by comparing it to other holidays in the US. For example, Thanksgiving is posed as a continuation of the "take from the Indian trick" when Chuck D argues

Some thanks for the givin
When times are hard
& some got the nerve to pray to god
Ain't about turkey
& cider that gets me sick.

Whereas WOR wonders "how the hell did he think this was his land?"[89] they remark that the belief in Columbus' discovery is "what they teach us in

school." Therefore it is important to listen to Chuck D's story as he tries to keep alive the true picture of Columbus and the subsequent colonization, murder and slavery continuing to this day. Its persists because the common understanding of American history omits the view of, in this case, African diasporic and Native Americans. Chuck D claims

> May 31st when it comes it hurts
> Remember the dead and it makes me curse
> When they don't include 100 million
> Of us black folks
> That died in the bottom of boats
> I can carry on bout the killin till
> Dusk & dawn
> And war ain't the reason they gone
> Fourth of July a fuckin lie
> When did we ever
> Get a piece of the [apple] pie

The preceding examples of rap music's critique of Columbus Day demonstrate the theme of stopped time. Or, time as points stacked on one another as opposed to existing in a linear progression. Equally, the view of Columbus Day as a historical signifier and the resultant rapped critique/interpretation highlights the manner in which rap music's poetics can have a pedagogic function.

Summary

This chapter set out to argue that some rap music, as KRS One maintains, can be understood as "edutainment" --a hybrid of education and entertainment. Rap music's opening of the space between the signifier and the

signified can be viewed in terms of a pedagogy consisting of critique and redefinition in an age mediated by the screen. Rap music's viability as a contemporary pedagogy stems from its "fusi[ng]... Black popular and national culture" (Henderson, 1996:309). Henderson looks to rap music to provide such a synthesis in its marrying of the "polyrhythmic syncopations" (1996:309) of jazz which "embrace[s] both the nuances and jagged edges of the collective Black experience" (1996:309) in the Americas with the stories deliverable by the "lyric[s] of the poet" (1996:310), "the talking drum" (1996:310). During the 1970s, Henderson argues, rap music began developing, from roots in Garveyite reggae, the potential to be a politically mobilizing force by "tying together a relatively apolitical generation of the 1970s and 1980s with the staunch Black nationalist African American subculture of the 1960s" (1996:312). Henderson refers to message rap in terms of an Afro-centric nationalism and considers most message raps as a promotion of "a 'myth of action'" (1996:323). While Potter argues that rap music, by "[r]eanimating 'dead' sounds, [and] bringing repressed histories back to vivid life,... sustains a profound historical consciousness" (1995:118), the practices of even the most potentially effective socially and politically conscious rappers, states Henderson, "reduce... [politics] to showing Malcolm X or Martin King in a video instead of incorporating their precepts into praxis" (1996:323). Such "hollow imaging", writes Henderson,

> does not resurrect the images of the best of our Black community, it bastardizes it.... to compare their hollow theatrics with political

> organization does a great disservice to the legacy of those who struggled for our liberation. (Henderson, 1996:333-4)

Henderson's harsh criticism of rap music's poetics is summed up by his reference to most rappers being nihilistic and irresponsible (1996:332-3). In fact, he concludes that

> it should be understood that the nihilism in hip-hop and the glamorization of hip-hop "culture" really represents the absence of national culture (African-centered culture).... (Henderson, 1996:335)

Jeffrey Decker, on the other hand, argues that rap music's effectiveness as a pedagogy or polemic results from the practice of "looking forward and backward" (1994:100). When "nation conscious rappers conjure the spirits of, say, sixties revolutionaries" and focus on their "most progressive elements" they are "most effective... in the process of envisioning a new society" (1994:102). I have argued that by critiquing, for example, Columbus Day, some rappers point out the arbitrariness of historical interpretations. As such, they are, as Decker characterizes them, "organic intellectuals" (1994:102). Thus, whereas Henderson maintains that "[r]appers, who are making their pockets fatter helping themselves, are not, for the most part transforming reality, or even understanding their responsibility to change it" (1996:332), Decker realizes that at times they can be effective in manoeuvring the politicized civil rights strategies of the 1960s to meet and counter current socio-political discrimination. Decker concludes, "[i]n the absence of a black CNN [which Chuck D claims rap music is], rap records are an invisible network" (1994:103) filling the air waves with "apocalyptic noise of... racial crisis in America [that]

shatters a mythic past of nation" (1994:117). While it is clear that rap music speaks specifically from and to a black American population, it is my opinion that neither rap music nor any individual band or rapper alone can metonymically shoulder the responsibility of transcending socio-economic, generational and geographic disparities and thus messiah-like unite an entire nation of people. And whereas Potter writes that hip hop "has grown so complex that it can no longer be reduced to simple racial dichotomies" (1995:106), I suspect that rap music, if it is to be the voice of a collective, could only be that of a heterogeneous hip hop (ge)n(er)ation. That is, to be able to read rap music and hip hop symbolism one requires a background knowledge of the multi-mediated symbolic system of "screenagers."

Chapter 4
Conclusion

As I have put forward, the poetic practice of symbolic redefinition, the making something new out of something old, is the central characteristic of rap music. As such, it is found in the *building upon* processes of sampling and semantic revision as well as technologic(al) and social reconstruction associated with the production of rap music. Contextualizing rap music as a continuation of an African diasporic cultural aesthetic, especially one that undermines bourgeois Euro-American middle-class logic and conventions, is integral to begin understanding rap music as a form of contemporary urban poetry that contains cultural and social relevance as well as a long history through both time and space, as evidenced by the presentation of rapping and signifyin' as urban black American vernacular language use. However, because the combination of music and poetry is not unique to any one culture, and because rap music was born within an environment of cultural mélange, Friedrich's poetics provides a broader view of rap music in terms of its universal appeal. On the one hand, to deny rap music's ancestry would be no different than from the colonial negation and erasure of non-white history in the Americas. On the other hand,

to situate rap music solely as an African diasporic phenomenon would fail to account for its cross-cultural appeal.

Although there are potentially as many reasons for rap music's popularity as there are listeners, the post-industrial context offers one explanation. That is, without dismissing the differences between cultural experiences in American history (remember, for example, the statement of Malcolm X that to be black in America is to be stereotyped as a criminal),

> the gap in opportunity between youth of color and white youth is not as wide as it used to be. The hemorrhaging of stable manufacturing jobs and the steady disappearance of an inheritable parent culture organized around industrial labor have entrapped the "forgotten half" of noncollege youth of whatever color in the service and retail economies (if they are lucky enough to be employed), with little hope of bridging the gulf that divides dead-end jobs in fast-food eateries from semiskilled positions in the information and knowledge producing sectors. (Ross, 1994:7)

However, it is not only a shared socio-economic condition that makes rap music and its symbolism recognizable and appreciable by non-black audiences, but also its use of both historical and current imagery and iconography identifiable by "screenagers" in a post-literate culture. As Potter puts it,

> alliances [for example, the Zulu Nation] have been formed via hip-hop primarily among the younger generation of listeners, who are looking for (sub)cultural modes of identification, and finding them in hip-hop messages and style. (1995:89)

In this sense, rap music, for example through the practice of "sampling[,] has created a new technological literacy" (Schumacher, 1995:261). That is, to interpret hip hop generally, and rap music specifically, one needs to be able to read the intertextual sonic and semantic signs. Reading the acoustic samples

requires a familiarity with both black historical and popular iconography (i.e., from a Malcolm X speech to a video game sound), whereas to decipher the semantics of rap's words one must be able to recognize the signifiers being inverted. In either case, meaning is constructed by juxtaposing contemporary images and sounds with those of the past. Thus, Schumacher argues, hip hop sampling "critique[s]... the ownership of sound" (1995:265) and "challenges the concept of the singular artist as the only embodied voice in the text" (1995:267). So too does rap music's semantic play raise questions about the ownership of history as well as the authority to define and present that history.

With its redefinition of conventional signifiers, rap music is evidence of what Potter calls "remaking,... *revaluation*" (1995:108), whereby the layering of alternative worldviews and historical narratives builds up what Rose refers to as a hip hop "blueprint." Subsequently, by mixing the past into the documentation of the present, rap music not only "[re]*tells* history... it is history" in the making (Potter, 1995:117). That history is one of particular salience to black America,

> insofar as young white listeners come to hip-hop looking for an analog to their own alienation, these listeners will get a dose of "ghetto consciousness" that will give them a far better understanding of the politics of race and class than a Peter Jenning's special (or many college educations, for that matter). (1995:119)

In the example of Public Enemy and Without Rezervation's critiques of Columbus Day (as a historical signifier), the hip hop history lesson is framed within a distinctively African concept of time as layered. And, in the case of

slavery, racial discrimination and apartheid, time has stopped. But the hip hop heart beats strongly. Thus rap music's critique reflects "poetic language" as the "place where the social code is destroyed and renewed" (Hebdige, 1979:119).[90] This destruction and renewal characteristic of "poetic language" in turn parallels the rap DJ's deconstruction of rhythmic breaks and construction of a new beat. The poetic quality, defined in Chapter 1 as *building upon,* is visible in the lyrics of the rap and the samples of the beats and the pedagogic features of critique and social analysis are found in rap music's timely message.

In the Introduction, I mentioned that previous analyses of rap music have focused on several topics and issues of interest to anthropology. However, aside from the articles of Keyes (1996) and Walser (1995) that appear in *Ethnomusicology*, I found no other anthropological references in the literature. Toop's (1991) Rap Attack 2 appears very much to be an ethnography which combines both historical research and participant-observation. But Toop does not purport to be an ethnographer. Consequently, I would argue that Toop is one of the first hip hopgraphers. How then does rap music fit into an anthropological discourse? An answer to this question depends, of course, on how anthropology is defined. Rather than attempt such a definition, it is worthwhile to point out how some of anthropology's methodological characteristics have been applied to my analysis. Therefore, let us look at rap

music and anthropology in the context of micro/macro analysis, holism and cultural relativity.

As an academic discipline, anthropology has always struck me as existing between sociology and psychology. That is, anthropology combines both the macroscopic view of the former (i.e., culture and society) and the microscopic focus of the latter (i.e., individual and/or local). Therefore, rapping and signifyin' localize (i.e., micro) rap music in terms of black American speech styles (i.e., macro) which in turn are viewed (i.e., micro) within the larger picture of the African diaspora (i.e., macro). The theory of poetics, similarly, gives us a depicts rap music as, at once, a universal (i.e., the macro Ur quality) and an individual (i.e., the micro level of the unique imagination of the poet) practice of symbolic redefinition. This movement between levels of analysis allows anthropologists to build up a picture of *anthropos* accounting for and explaining cross-cultural differences and similarities. Consider, for example, the HRAF[91] wherein cultures are compared in terms of the presence or absence of a variety of cultural characteristics.

The concepts of holism and cultural relativity are also important anthropological considerations, especially in an analysis of rap music. In terms of holism, we must remember that, as Mitchell-Kernan notes, interpretation must take account of "the total universe of discourse" which includes linguistic and suprasegmental features. Such an attentive analysis, therefore, is characteristic of Geertz' notion of "thick" description. Cultural relativity was

brought up earlier in the discussion of language's and meaning's relation to the culture in which they are used. Thus, a discussion of rap music must take into account its African heritage in order to understand how categories, such as time, vary from culture to culture. However, because of rap music's unique cultural and socio-economic context, it must be viewed as relative to what this thesis (and many others) refer to as hip hop. And it is within the context of hip hop that a holistic perspective comes into play as rap music cannot be fully explored without reference to breakdancing, graffiti and hip hop couture.

Endnotes

1. From Youth Brigade's (1983) **Sound and Fury.**

2. From 7-Second's (1983) **The Crew.**

3. The Dead Kennedys "Nazi punks fuck off" on (n.d.) **In God We Trust.**

4. "The scoop" on (1994) **Ill Communications.**

5. From (1985) **No One Else Wanted to Play.**

6. At this point, I would like to clarify some terminology appearing in this thesis. As shown again in endnote 8 (this thesis), the politics of identity are bound to styles of language use. In particular, there is a political aspect to the practice of capitalizing, or not, certain letters within a word. Consider, for example, German-born American poet, Charles Bukowski, recounting his experience of such politics during his first year at college in Los Angeles at the outbreak of World War II:

> It was intellectually popular and proper to be for going to war with Germany, to stop the spread of fascism.... [H]aving been born in Germany, there was a natural loyalty and I didn't like to see the whole German nation, the people, depicted everywhere as monsters and idiots. In the movie theatres they speeded up the newsreels to make Hitler and Mussolini look like frenetic madmen. Also, with the instructors being anti-German I found it personally impossible to simply agree with them....
>
> Sometimes as the instructors talked on and on about the evils of nazism (we were told always to spell "nazi" with a small "n" even at the beginning of a sentence) and fascism I would leap to my feet and make something up. (Bukowski, 1982:236-237)

Since the discussion of rap music involves reference to the US, where the most popular discourse (in the context of rap) is carried out in terms of race, I have chosen to use the terms "black" and "white." Also, I have chosen to use small "b" and "w" for the following reason. The criteria used to define a "race" are multiple. References for race include (or have included) but are not limited to: geography, skin colour, temperament and hair-type. In fact, it is common to hear a string of supposedly racial categories in which each identity is measured according to a different attribute. For instance, someone may speak of the black, white, Indian and Chinese races. In this list, "black" and "white" denote skin colour, "Indian," unless referring to someone from India, is a misnomer for the First Nations of North America, and "Chinese" means either a language or a nationality. It is because black and white refer primarily to phenotypic colouring that I have chosen the small case. I recently had the

opportunity to ask a (black) friend if he used "B" or "b" when writing the word black. He responded saying he capitalized the "B." I then asked him if he thought I should follow suit when I was writing, to which he answered that it really did not make a difference to him one way or the other, but to some people it was an important issue. However, when I quote other authors, I will use their terminology. In these instances, my "black" is the same as other authors writing "African American" (which some hyphenate while others do not). Sometimes I will use "black American" as synonymous with "black" but will avoid so when possible in order to reduce redundancy. However, any time the reader reads black/Black and African American as the same s/he should not completely disassociate them from the larger picture of the African diaspora. African diaspora, in this thesis, points to the spread of West Africans and their cultural trappings from Africa to the Americas and Europe during the four centuries of legalized enslavement. When I write of the diasporic elements of rap music, I am attempting to move away from the race-centered discourse of American politics in favour of an anthropologically cultural perspective.

7. I have avoided quantitative approaches to rap music that generally focus on epiphenomenal cause and effect relationships.

8. As will become evident in Chapter 1, signifyin,' as a style of black vernacular speech, is contrasted with white signifying. Consequently, many authors attempt to delineate this difference through orthography. For instance, some write black signifying as signifyin' or Signifyin(g). In this thesis, I will use "signifyin'" to denote the black vernacular style and "signifying" for white English in my own text and will use Signifyin(g) to denote, specifically, Gates example of signifyin.' When I quote other authors, I will use their orthography and clarify, when needed, whether they are referring to white or black styles. Gates writes signifying as Signifyin(g). The capital S denotes his differentiation of signifying and signifyin.' The bracketed (g) denotes the dropped velar stop from the nasal velar suffix (-ing) as it is pronounced in the black vernacular (i.e., signifyin'). I do not agree with Gates that there is a difference between black and white *processes* of signifying, despite his insistence of their being only homophonic. For example, Kochman argues that in terms of black and white sexual norms "white men couch messages implying sexual interest in the form of innocent requests. They ask women to have a cup of coffee" (1981:81). In other words, indirection can and does occur in white speech acts. In this case, the superficially innocent "cup of coffee" comes to signify more than just a cup of coffee. The difference I would note here is that whereas rapping/signifyin' makes room for a thematically reciprocal response, signifying, in this example at least, only leaves room for a yes or no response. Therefore, I suspect Gates' Signifyin(g):signifying binary has a polemic significance referring primarily to the black vernacular inversion of, specifically, white cultural signifiers. This, point, however will be unpacked later in the main body of the text. However, note the

preservation of black vernacular pronunciation employed by rappas when they talk of being philosophas, teachas and gangstas. Here it is likely that, as Gates writes,

> [t]he bracketed or aurally [orally] erased *g*, like the discourse of black English and dialect poetry generally, stands as the trace of black difference in a remarkably sophisticated and fascinating (re)naming ritual[...]. (1988:46)

9. Thanks to Indira Ayyar (1998) who provided me with this interesting point.

10. From "Alright hear this" on Beastie Boys (1994) **Ill Communications**.

11. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis considers the relationship between language and culture in terms of conceptual categories. That is, whereas all languages have what are called grammatical categories (i.e., nouns, verbs, adverbs, etc.), the words belonging to them vary from language to language and word meaning is relative to the specific culture/language. Equally, as language is used to name and categorize (i.e., give meaning to) the world, it follows that worldviews are also culturally relative. Thus, concepts such as time, space and matter differ from one culture/language to another. Whorf quotes Sapir's argument that

> [w]e see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choice of interpretation. (Whorf, 1971:134)

As an example, Whorf, in terms of language *cum* culture, states that Hopi and SAE (Standard Average European) differ in that speakers of Hopi conceptualize "reality in terms of events" and the speakers of SAE "in terms of what it calls 'things'" (Whorf, 1971:147). Whorf notes that linguistic relativity is not merely confined to cultural differences. He writes that

> "scientific thought" is a specialization of the western Indo-European type of language, which has developed not only a set of different dialects, but actually a set of different dialects. THESE DIALECTS ARE BECOMING MUTUALLY UNINTELLIGIBLE. The term 'space,' for instance, does not and CANNOT mean the same thing to a psychologist as to a physicists. (Whorf, 1971:246)

12. From "Do it" on Beastie Boys (1994) **Ill Communications**.

13. Cf. Foucault's "A hysterization of women's bodies" in (1978) History of Sexuality, Vol I: An introduction. Vintage Books: New York. P. 104.

14. This song, it should be mentioned, was the first commercial rap song to receive extensive radio play and consequently is cited as a very influential song by many contemporary rap musicians. A fact equally evidenced by the amount of samples other rappers have used from this seminal rap. To foreshadow both the coming discussion on sampling in the diasporic aesthetic (Chapter 2) and the example of rap as pedagogy (Chapter 3), it is also important to note that this popularly recognized rap song contains the slightly altered recital of a rap line given by H. Rap Brown. He writes,

> Yes, I'm hemp the demp the women's pimp
> Women fight for my delight. (1972:207)

And Hank of the Sugarhill Gang sings,

> Check it out.
> Well I am the demp the ladies pimp
> The women fight for my delight.

15. From "Rapper's delight" on Sugarhill Gang's (1979) **Rapper's Delight 12"**. Sugarhill Records, Ltd.

16. From Sugarhill Gang's (1979) **Rapper's Delight 12"**. Sugarhill Records, Ltd.

17. It should be noted that both Fulsom's and Thomas' and Redding's versions of "Tramp" are an admixture of spoken and sung sentences.

18. Although useful for comparison with the two preceding versions I do not consider it necessary that Salt 'n' Pepa's version be transcribed into the text of this thesis.

19. Despite my statement that something must come from something, I cannot offer any plausible antecedent in support of Fulsom's version. Perhaps his may simply derive from the rapping of street slang.

20. The opening track on Public Enemy's (1988) **It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back.**

21. From the compilation album (1997) **Muggs Presents... The Soul Assassins Chapter 1.**

22. It is, as Taussig writes of Western academic disciplines specifically, and no doubt Western culture generally:

> [n]o matter how sophisticated we may be as to the constructed and arbitrary character of our practices, including practices of representation,

> our practice of practices is one of actively forgetting such mischief each time we open our mouths to ask for something or to make a statement. Try to imagine what would happen if we didn't in daily practice thus conspire to actively forget what Saussure called "the arbitrariness of the sign"? Or try the opposite experiment. Try to imagine living in a world whose signs were indeed "natural". (1993: xvii-xviii)

Try to imagine asking for the salt and receiving a sober "no" in response.

Gates would thus argue that the arbitrariness of the sign is best exploited by the poet at the point of the signifier. The signifier, in Signifyin(g), is turned around to force out a new, black vernacular signified, and thus sign. The idea of natural, immutable, and context-free signs demonstrates, according to Gates, "[t]he folly depicted... [in] insist[ing] --to the point of rupture of the always fragile bond of a human institution-- on one determinate meaning, itself determined by vantage point and the mode one employs to see" (1988:35). In other words, Gates cites the difference of Signifyin(g):signifying as the binary of figurative:literal encoding/decoding, respectively. I would add, and have added, that white culture also signifies in an indirect manner (i.e., cup of coffee). However, it is Gates' and Mitchell-Kernan's view that signifyin' is more frequently a consciously chosen way of speaking in black vernacular than in white English. So, if Gates is correct, as I suspect he is, that Signifyin(g) involves the spinning of the white signifier, then I would like to suggest that it is a speech strategy that, despite the forced illiteracy of enslaved Africans in the colonization of the Americas, served as an adaptation to a particular set of circumstances: the need to communicate without seeming to do so.

23. In terms of suprasegmental features in rap music, Rose writes, "[w]hen... [KRS One] says, 'You were put here to protect us, but who protects us from you,' his voice is harsh, pointed, and in an echo chamber" (1994a:108). Rose suggests that these non-linguistic elements of KRS One's delivery are "magnifying and doubling his authority" (1994a:108). His authority, and I might add, his presence in the erasure of the police's voice.

24. From "Exhibit E" on Boogie Down Productions' (1990) **Edutainment**.

25. On Public Enemy's (1992) **Greatest Misses**.

26. The name of the 1990 BDP album as well as a track on the album. The idea behind edutainment is that music, in particular rap music, can have and has a pedagogical efficacy. Remember that, as mentioned earlier, Rodgers' "teachin'/rappin'" style of poetry "seeks to define and give direction to black people" (1972:337) and the "poets hip you..., pull the covers off..., or run it down to you" (1972:338).

27. Despite going on to draw numerous differences between white and black styles of encoding messages, Gates does admit that Esu and Hermes are more or less the same.

28. Leaving the ship dead in the water, so to speak.

29. William S. Burroughs' spoken intro to "Words of advice for young people" on (1993) **Spare Ass Annie and Other Tales: The Operator's Manual.**

30. From Youth Brigade's "Throw out the rules" on (1996) **To Sell The Truth** (promo copy).

31. The opening sentence of Public Enemy's "Can't truss it" on (1991) **Apocalypse 91... The Enemy Strikes Black.**

32. In particular, see Toop (1991).

33. For more on the relationship between the *griots* of West Africa and rap music see Fernando, 1994; Imani and Vera, 1996; Keyes, 1996; and Potter, 1995.

34. This is from a personal recording without any information regarding the date of this song. However, I am confident that it is from the early to mid-1960s.

35. When asked by Corbett what he was listening to during the early days of Jamaica ska, Lee "Scratch" Perry, a mythological figure in the history of reggae, and now rap music, from the very start, responded:

> American music! What do you think I am, stupid?! Blues, soul. And I'm a rock man, can't change that. (Corbett, 1994:128)

36. See Camara's (1996) discussion on popular music, the *samba* and Brazilian national identity.

37. This is Rose's "[sic]" signifyin' sarcasm.

38. By the 1980s, writes Potter, "[t]he media [were] treating drugs and crime as *causes* rather than *symptoms* of urban blight, combined with the Reagan-Bush rhetoric to recast black (and Hispanic) urban America as a land of pushers and killers" (1995:128). For more on the political discourse concerning inner-city black youths see Rose's (1994) "Rap Music and the Demonization of Young Black Males" in *USA Today*, May 1994: 35-36 (cf. with Lipsitz, 1994:19).

39. As Andrew Bartlett argues, technology, "in the context of hip hop sampling has to take into account the question of musical technology and the contexts for exercising that technology historically in the US" (1994:641). Equally, William Perkins notes that hip hop and video game technology both democratize and demystify technology and could be useful pedagogic mediums in contemporary post-industrial and post-literate classrooms (1996b:39-40, n.10).

40. Such "showoff street rap" is similar to, or best represented popularly by, the rhyme and rhythm Muhammad Ali used to psych out and intimidate his opponents (Hebdige, 1987: 139). As Perkins writes, "Ali's... poetic couplets during the peak of his career between 1964 and 1972 provided new inspiration to inner-city youth who specialized in 'signifying' or playing the 'dozens'" (1996b:4).

41. According to Lipsitz this is called "lampin'" (1994:25).

42. In fact, many Latin dances are stepped to percussive beats. Thus, Perkins identifies the relationship of rap music's Latin inspired beats and break dancing's rap inspired footwork (1996b:6). However, the beats of Latin dance may arguably have African roots, as may the *samba*. For more on the syncretic relationship between African and Latin music/dance traditions see Camara (1996:204). For more on the Puerto Rican connection to hip hop specifically, see Flores (1987, 1994, 1996) and del Barco, (1996). Flores argues that hip hopgraphers do not sufficiently emphasize the Puerto Rican (Nyorican) influence in hip hop. Agreeably, it is important to note that many of the earliest breakdance crews were Puerto Rican, the most popular being the Rock Steady Crew. And many of hip hop's earliest graffiti writers were Nyorican as well. Cypress Hill, a Los Angeles based rap band of the early 1990s, clearly articulate the Latin influence by rapping in a combination of English and Spanish, Spanglish. Equally, according to Hebdige, Herc "found that the New York black crowd would not dance to reggae. So he began talking over the Latin-tinged funk that he knew *would* appeal" (1987:137).

43. This simultaneity is metaphoric for the intersection of hip hop with contemporary technology, especially, as we will see with, in the case of digital "sampling." The technological interface of breakdancing is explained by Toop as "body-punishing spins" of West African origin

> "[c]ombined with the Electric Boogie (like shock waves jerking through the limbs), Moonwalking (the illusion of gliding across the ground), Joint Popping, Freezes, Mime and Robot Imitations... a freestyle dance that actualized all the key imagery of space age, video age, computer age, comic book and superhero America" (1991:142).

Dance moves also incorporated Karate and Kung-Fu movements and imagery. One dance was even called the Smurf. And it is important to keep in mind that in the mid-1970s two of the most popular films were the martial arts films of Bruce Lee (especially *Enter the Dragon*) and *Star Wars* with its unprecedented special effects (and consequently, its high-tech update of the good vs. evil mythology where the free play of the signifier is the "force"). Similarly, video games and cartoons were proliferating at a rapid rate as was the popularity of the television cartoons, the Smurfs, Robotech and Transformers.

44. "My Adidas," on Run-DMC's (1986) **Raising Hell**; "Put your Filas on," on Schoolly D (1986, **untitled**); Q-Tip on the Beastie Boys' "Get it together" on (1994) **Ill Communications**.

Schoolly D also has a song called "Gucci time" which, according to Toop, "mix[es] up Italian brand names with abstract concepts like time" thereby playing on "the blur between fantasy and reality" (1991:171). Similarly, as Rose notes, the growing ubiquity of hip hop sportswear exemplifies "a number of contradictory tensions between work, time and leisure" (Rose, 1994b:80). As we will see in the following chapter, themes of time and history are commonly found in rap.

45. Terms for contemporary fashion often appear in rap lyrics. Even if the song concerns an anti-consumerism, anti-corporate theme as in De La Soul's "Take it off" on their (1989) **3 Feet High and Rising**. "Gazelles" are a style of Adidas' sneakers that were popular and cheap in the late 70s. The were reestablished as youth fashion in the late 1980s early 90s and priced very expensively. The reference goes,

> Take those Converse off
> And those Gazelles too.

46. Graffiti on subway trains is nothing new. Hager writes that "[d]uring World War II someone wrote 'Kilroy was here' in numerous places throughout the US.... The New York City subway system was one of his favorite doodling spots" (1984:13). Equally, during the depression era of the 1930s, many unemployed men travelled around the US by train in search of work, food, shelter etc. Soon, chalked icons began to appear on the trains to tell other travellers of what to expect when travelling in certain directions. Wimsatt writes that this symbolic, "simple language was a way... to transmit information --and mark territory" (1996:29) without drawing unwanted attention to the text. The difference in hip hop train graffiti is that it is concerned with large, multicoloured and intricately scripted murals on the side of train cars and city walls that say, "I'm here!" Also, it is again important to note the proliferation of video game, animated cartoon and comic book imagery since the 1970s.

47. Tagging is an inexpensive form of expression when compared with, as Regna Darnell notes, "personalized license plates" (1998b).

48. Rushkoff defines a "screenager" simply as "the child born into a culture mediated by the television and computer" (1996:3).

49. DJ Kool Herc used such street slang expressions as "rock the house," "rock on my mellow! This is the joint," or simply calling out the names of the people at the party (Hager, 1984 and Hebdige, 1987). This of course is similar to the aforementioned radio jocks and Jamaican DJs ("Wuga wuga"). Some rap music, especially that music arranged specifically for breakdancing, would include lyrics composed of instructions to the dancers. For example, "Break dance-Electric boogie" by the West Street Mob on K-Tel's compilation album (1984) **Breakdance/Electric Boogie**, where the speaker's voice is electronically distorted in mimicry of a robotic or computer voice in urging the crowd to

> Breakdance. Freeze.
> Spin on your back and spin on your hands
> Spin on your knees then freeze...
> Spin your body on the floor
> And show no shame.

Calling out names over the music has led to a style of rap lyric composition that involves calling out the names of everyone "in the house" over the music. While I suspect the metaphor of "in the house" has a specific meaning in black vernacular, in rap music it is a way of paying respects or homage or simply saying hello to people present or absent. An excellent example is KRS One's talk over the intro music of BDP's "The Kenny Parker Show" (on BDP's 1990 **Edutainment**):

> On the wheels of steel it's Kenny Parker
> As we say he can't get no darker
> All about action, not a fast talker
> All the wick-wack sucker DJs
> gotta try much harder
> My man Willy, Willy, Willy D
> Tagging up BDP with a fat [phat] marker.

The intro is recorded live and Kenny Parker is BDP's DJ (i.e., he controls the music while KRS One emcees with his poetry). Thus, the title of the song itself pays respects to the DJ. KRS starts off by noting that the maker of the music, on the "wheels of steel" (the turntables) is DJ Kenny Parker and he is as black as can be. Because the DJ is confined to speaking through his manual manipulation of sounds KRS explains that the DJ is "all about action" and no

other DJs can compare to him. And then KRS spots audience member Willy D writing "BDP" with his magic marker. As Willy D pays respects to BDP with his graffiti, so does KRS return the favour with his rhyme.

50. Notice the poetic technique of alliteration in the repetition in lines 3, 4 and 5. Textually the alliteration repeats the letter "t". However, phonetically, it duplicates the voiced [th], moves to the voiceless theta on "Thinking" (l.5) and comes back to reduplicate the voiced [th]. Notice too that lines 4-7 all end on a word beginning with [s] (i.e., consonance) and the rhyming vowel in the final words of lines 14-16 (i.e., assonance). For a more elaborate example of phonetic poetics consider KRS One's homophony in this "etymology for '[police]' officer", this "rapid fire verbal morph" (Potter, 1995:150) from BDP's 1993 "Sound of da police" (transcribed in Potter, 1995:150):

> Overseer, overseer, overseer, overseer,
> Offa-seer, offa-ser, offa-ser, officer
> Yeah, officer, from overseer
> Ya need a little clarity?
> Check the similarity.

51. DJ Kool Herc's spoken intro to "Make room for thunder" on Terminator X and the Godfathers of Threatt's (1994) **Super Bad**.

52. Perkins writes "Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash, and Kool Herc... agree that rap was born in 1974 in the South Bronx. The term *rap* came later, but Bambaataa...borrowed the term *hip hop* from Lovebug Starski" (1996:5; cf. Keyes, 1996b: 231). According to Keyes, Lovebug Starski was "a South Bronx disc jockey, who" would shout out, "'hip hop you don't stop that makes the body rock'" (1996:231. Note, Keyes is quoting Bambaataa),

53. Shusterman calls this technique "punch phrasing" (1992:204).

54. From "The racist" on BDP's (1990) **Edutainment**.

55. The colon (:) is used to denote a long vowel. The increased length of the vowel in the word "scratch" is similar to the extension of the cueing sound in a scratch.

56. This quotation is a transcription of the intro to "Alright hear this" on the Beastie Boys' (1994) **Ill Communications**. If I am reading the album's liner notes correctly, it is a sample taken from Michael Holman's "Graffiti rock" (n.d).

57. Rap has proliferated into numerous genres much as science has since Linnaeus' taxonomy. The two most common genres are gangsta rap and message rap.

58. The transcription of "The Message" is taken from a personal recording of the song.

59. Through these events hip hop's geography increased. While breakdancing itself is movement and graffiti gets its coverage from murals on trains that travel through different parts of the city, state, etc., Mike D of the Beastie Boys reflects on public transportation, education, the early days of hip hop competition, its street status as "underground" (i.e., anti-corporate? "underneath the skyscrapes") and rap's movement through the sale and trade of "battle tapes" as he raps, in a song appropriately entitled "Root down" on (1994) **Ill Communications,**

> Every morning I took the train to the High Street Station
> Doing homework on the train, what a fucked up situation
> On the way back up hearing battle tapes
> Through the underground underneath the skyscrapes
> Like Harlem World Battles on the Zulu Beat Show
> It's Kool Moe D vs. Busy Bee, there's one you should know.

Fernando locates Harlem World at 116 Street and Lennox Avenue in Harlem, one of the "epicentres of rap" (1994:15).

60. For more on the hip hop fusion of rap, breaking dancing and graffiti see Toop, 1991; Rose, 1994a/b; and Hager, 1984.

61. From "Caught, can I get a witness!" on Public Enemy's (1988) **It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back.**

62. See Corbett's "Bleep this motherf*!#er: The semiotics of profanity in popular music" (in 1994:68-73) for sampling, technology and censorship.

63. From "In dayz '2' come," on the Jungle Brothers (1989) **Done by the Forces of Nature.**

64. From "Do it" on the Beastie Boys' (1994) **Ill Communications.**

65. From "What 'U' waitin' '4'" on the Jungle Brothers (1989) **Done by the Forces of Nature.**

66. The voice of Malcolm X sampled to introduce "Beef" on BDP's (1990) **Edutainment.**

67. From "Acknowledge your own history" on the Jungle Brothers' (1989) **Done by the Forces of Nature.**

68. From "Done by the forces of nature" on the Jungle Brothers' (1989) **Done by the Forces of Nature.**

69. "Knowledge" is transcribed with the hyphenated "k-" in order to denote the separate [k] phone. That is, "knowledge" is pronounced as three syllables: k/gnaw/ledge.

70. From "The sounds of science" on the Beastie Boys' (1988) **Paul's Boutique.**

71. From "Original lyrics" on BDP's (1990) **Edutainment.**

72. Consider the parallel here with the outlawing of the Ghost Dance and the potlatch.

73. Being excluded from a historical narrative is equivalent to being deprived of the roots required for future growth: the substance of extant being. Rap music, in one sense, demonstrates the attempt to retain a grounding in a past to maintain the present to move into the future. Nonetheless, black history has been otherwise neglected, omitted or blurred in American history classes. John Singleton's film, *Boyz n the Hood,* opens with a poignant scene. While the viewer is presented a close-up of a collage of children's drawings of police cars, police helicopters, and prostrate bodies, a voice describing Columbus' discovery of the New World is heard. As the camera pans up and back, the view of a class room of primary school children, all black children, emerges from behind the collage. They are listening to the history-professing voice of a white teacher. Next to this filmic scene imagine Chuck D singing

> The red is for blood shed
> The blue is for the sad ass songs
> We be singing in church while white man's heaven is
> black man's hell
> The stars what we way when we
> Got our ass beat
> Stripes whip marks in our backs
> White is for the obvious
> There ain't no black in that flag.

From "Aintnuttin buttersong" on Public Enemy's (1994) **Muse Sick N Hour Mess Age.**

I am suggesting here that the combination of the two mediums, film and music, offers a new way of looking at audio/video technology in the classroom.

74. From Without Rezervation's (1994) **Are You ready for W.O.R.?** For more on the imagery of Native Americans see Churchill, 1994.

75. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz writes, anthropological "[a]nalysis," as cultural interpretation (i.e., ethnography), "is [the] sorting out [of] the structures of signification... [that is,] established codes" (1973:9). When interpretation requires consideration of, as Mitchell-Kernan argues, "the total universe of discourse" (1972:317), then it is easy to understand why Geertz calls "ethnography... thick description" (1973:10). Through "thick description," the interpreter attempts "to grasp and then render" a "multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit" (1973:10). As Benjamin suggests, "translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge" (1968:76). In terms of a "thick description" of rap music, it must be argued that not only are "established codes" to be "grasp[ed] and... render[ed]," but the translator must also show how these conventions are redefined.

76. From Public Enemy's (1994) **Muse Sick-N-Hour Mess Age**.

77. From the track "Wake up, niggers" on the Last Poet's (c.1972) **Douglas 3**. In "Can't truss it" (1991 **Apocalypse 91... The Enemy Strikes Black**) Chuck D sums up redemption from nearly five decades of slavery when he raps,

> When it comes Armageddon
> Mean I'm gettin' mine
> Here I am turn it over [i.e., pay up Uncle] Sam
> 427 to the year
> Do you understand?

78. Keyes cites Robert Farris Thompson's (1983) Flash of the Spirit. Vintage: NY.

79. Bartlett argues that what W.E.B. Du Bois calls "second sight" is a "process by which the 'minority' knows the majority not only better than the obverse, but often better than the 'majority' knows itself" (1994: 639).

80. Keyes is referring to time in music, as in rhythm. Nonetheless, her note that concepts of time are culturally relative is what I am pointing out.

81. From (1991) **Apocalypse 91... The Enemy Strikes Black**.

82. From (1991) **Apocalypse 91... The Enemy Strikes Black**.

83. "Can't truss it" from PE's (1991) **Apocalypse 91...The Enemy Strikes Black**.

84. Actually, Rose writes of "hip hop" specifically. However, her "blueprint" (1994b:91) is found in all aspects of hip hop, especially rap music. As Flores adds, "it is... [the] joining of expressive forces,... [the] construction of a new cultural memory..., that comprises the most immediate source of hip hop" (1994:93). Therefore, rap music, with its combination of music and spoken poetry, effectively builds a worldview (vision) or "new cultural memory." Although the majority of lyrical examples I have brought forward in this chapter involve a particularly black experience in the building of American history, I argue that the poetic quality attributable to Friedrich still exists in this examination of rap music's pedagogy. On the one hand, for non-black listeners, or more specifically, white audiences, the history laid down by, for example, PE, fills in the gaps and the omissions in common sources of historical reference (textbooks, news media, etc.). In other words, it adds texture to history and builds a diorama out of and upon a straight line. I am not arguing from a functionalist perspective of communication (i.e., that which is encoded will always be decoded objectively without any subjective interpretations -- Gates would call it signification). Rather, I am writing from the other hand that, as Rose calls hip hop a blueprint for social and cultural cohesion, specifically for members of the African diaspora, so too can it provide a framework for negotiating intercultural relations. Flores writes that hip hop's

> unifying potential has certainly been one of its strongest legacies and sources of appeal among youth in countless settings around the world. But another attraction of hip hop, equally a part of its underlying ethos, is that it shows how to draw boundaries, mark off terrain, face up to differences and call them by their name. (1994: 93)

85. "Can't truss it" from PE's (1991) **Apocalypse 91... The Enemy Strikes Black.**

86. "Hitler Day" from PE's (1994) **Muse Sick-N-Hour Mess Age.**

87. From "Was he a fool? (Columbus)" on (1994) **Are You Ready for W.O.R.?**

88. From "502 years" on (1994) **Are You Ready for W.O.R.?**

89. From "Was he a fool? (Columbus)" on (1994) **Are You Ready for W.O.R.?**

90. Hebdige is quoting Julia Kristeva's (1974) La Revolution du langage poetique.

91. "HRAF" stand for the Human Relations Area File which is

> a research data pool containing information on 335 major societal

groups, each coded for the presence or absence of about 700 cultural[, material] and environmental traits. (Crapo, 1993:14)

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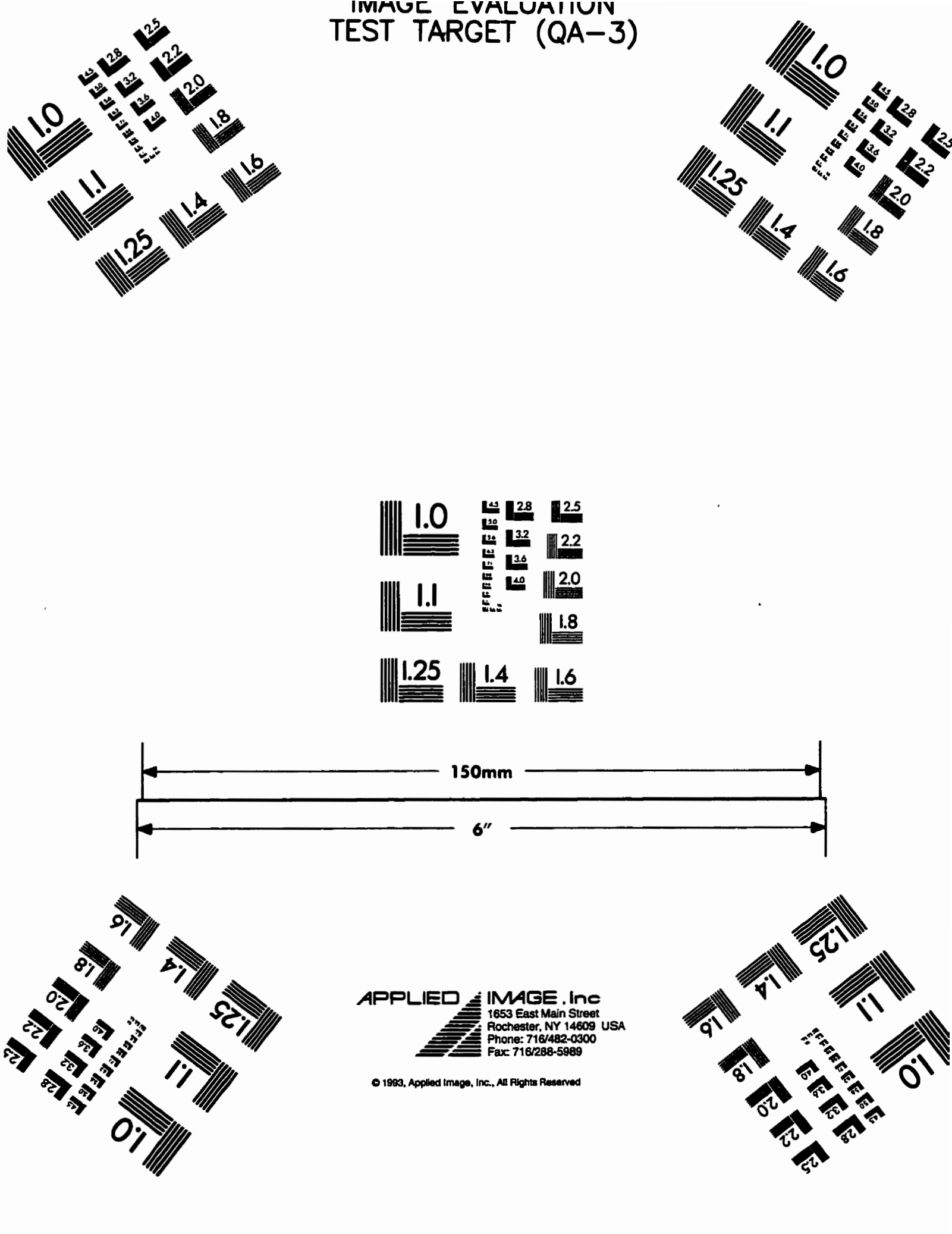

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