Russell A. Potter

HISTORY – SPECTACLE – RESISTANCE

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Russell Potter’s essay (a chapter from his book Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism) needs to be read alongside the Hebdige and Gilroy pieces in this anthology. In many ways it’s a theoretically and methodologically simpler contribution than theirs, and in part that is because it is making the case that hip-hop has been able to mount resistance to the hegemonic culture in the States. One reason that it can make this case in terms that are much less nuanced than those that Hebdige proposes for British subcultures is that the division between white and African-American cultures goes much deeper and is much more entrenched than class (or even ethnic) divisions in the UK. Indeed race divisions are absolutely central to US past, present and future in ways that outsiders often don’t see because they are routinely officially unacknowledged. The whole Gramscian vocabulary of articulation, hegemony, negotiation, appropriation breaks down in the face of this history of African-Americans in the US. And the de Certeauian analysis of tactical resistance quickly reaches its limits, as becomes clear in this essay too.

Russell Potter’s essay was written in the early 1990s, and hip-hop has moved on since then. At one level it’s become more mainstream; it’s hybridized itself with other genres – soul, raga and so on; it’s internationalized itself; it’s geographicized itself, with London and Southern rap becoming genres all of their own; it’s reorganized itself around the dramatic transformation of the record business in the wake of digitalization and the download not least by channelling more power and autonomy to the producers who are now the kings of commercial rap music in particular; it’s become more distant from the street and school cultures in which it is still nourished, and, with producers like Wu Tang’s RZA
it has aestheticized itself too. But the appeal and project that Potter describes and theorizes remains in place.


We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces—reinforces the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic. But that is a question we must leave open.

Fredric Jameson

1. Tactics of Resistance

Jameson’s question has been the starting point for numerous analyses of the problematics of consumer culture, most of which work from within a theoretical/philosophical network of texts. Only a few of these analyses pay much attention to material culture, and fewer still have founded their arguments on the specific historical experience of African-Americans in contemporary culture. Yet, I would argue, the history of African-American cultures provides the most astonishing and empowering account of resistance, and of a resistance which from its earliest days has consisted of strategies for forming and sustaining a culture against the dominant, using materials at hand. Deprived by the Middle Passage and slavery of a unified cultural identity, African-American cultures have mobilized, via a network of localized sites and nomadic incursions, cultures of the found, the realized, the used—and cultures moreover which have continually transfigured and transformed objects of consumption into sites of production.

This remaking, this revaluation, is especially evident in hip-hop; through its appropriation of the detritus of “pop” culture and use of the African-American tradition of Signifying, it hollows out a fallout shelter where the ostensible, “official” significance of words and pictures is made shiftable, mutable, unreliable. A television jingle for a breakfast cereal, a drum break from Booker T and the MG’s, the William Tell overture, a speech by Huey Newton or Louis Farrakhan—all these are intermingled and layered together in a musical fusion that transforms and transposes, in the process constructing its own internal modes of Signifying. These modes are not only constructed, but endlessly form and repeat an “open,” reconstructable structure—since the rhythm track, the words, or the mix of Funkadelic may be sampled by digital underground, which in turn will be sampled by Craig G, which in turn will be sampled by .... Hip-hop audiences do not, at any rate, merely listen—passive reception is no longer possible. Layer upon layer—one to dance to, one to think on, one to add to the din. Hip-hop itself is not merely music (though it is certainly that); it is a cultural recycling center, a social heteroclite, a field of contest, even a form of psychological warfare. When a jeep loaded with speakers powered by a bank of car batteries blasts “Gangsta Gangsta” over the lawns of the “vanilla suburbs” of the “chocolate cities” (the phrases are George Clinton’s) it is not to sell ice cream.
Of course, hip-hop itself is continually commodified by the music industry, "made safe" (it's only a song) for the masses, recycled yet again into breakfast-cereal ditties and public service announcements. Yet this commodification frequently backfires, transvalued before it even reaches the streets; commercial hip-hop jingles are re-recycled into lyrical and political metaphors, as when the Goats rap,

I was turning, now I'm done turning other cheeks
You had ya time to beef, now let Madd like speak
Ya just a Honey nut, Honey Nut Cheerio
I pour some rhymes in and now you're soggy, yo!

In tropes such as these, Signifyin(g) draws from jingles, newspaper headlines, and slogans in the same way that vernacular discourse for centuries has made use of the locally available (street names, political slogans, folkloric aphorisms)—as texts from and against which to mark a difference. However much hire commercial applications—such as Kool-Aid's use of Naughty by Nature's "Hip-Hop Hooray" beat—borrow from the music, the vernacular reservoir is in no danger of drying up.

Such verbal (and necessarily cultural) recycling may not, by itself be or be thought of as an act of resistance, of course. When a farmer in a hardscrabble rural economy claims parts from one tractor to repair another, or a kindergarten class makes puppets out of discarded milk cartons, these are hardly actions that trouble either the economic base or the ideology of consumer capitalism. Yet this does not at all preclude the mobilization of such acts, their deployment as tactics against the dominant modes of production and consumption. Again, De Certeau:

A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for maneuvers of unequal forces...what is there called "wisdom" (sabedoria) may be defined as a stratagem...innumerable ways of playing and filing the other's game (jouer/déjouer le jeu d'autre), that is, the space instituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along with a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have. In these combatants' stratagems, there is a certain art of placing one's blows.

While certain of De Certeau's observations are inapplicable here (certainly African-American cultures do not "lack their own space," though the space(s) they do occupy are themselves 'vernacular' in the sense that they are often zones abandoned by white and middle-class residents, and isolated via police curfews, bank and insurance company redlining, and even in many cases physical barricades), I think he is quite right in describing a certain tactical position which many disenfranchised classes, races, genders, and sexualities have occupied (not by choice), and have used to their collective advantage. When, in Loka Leno, a trip to the market turned into an underground news broadast, when a nineteenth-century quilting bee turned into a Women's Suffrage meeting, when an Oakland block party turned into a Black Panther rally, when a New York City power outage turned into a riot—in
all these instances, disenfranchised groups have made use of vernacular spaces and technologies. Hip-hop, armed with electricity (back in the day, pirated from a city light pole), cheap turntables, makeshift amps, and used records, was bricolage with a vengeance, and the fact that this bricolage has in its turn been commodified does not interrupt but in a crucial sense *fuels* its own appropriative resistance, rendering it both more urgent and more richly supplied with ‘recyclables.’

The doubleness, the anxiety of authenticity which haunts such acts of bricolage within African-American culture—and indeed, in the wake of the cultural violence of the Middle Passage, almost *everything* has had to be constructed from fragments of both the “African” and the “American”—is in this way intensified to the “breaking” point with hip-hop. Every past commodification—of blues, of rock-n-roll, or jazz, and of hip-hop itself—haunts the musical mix, sometimes in person (a digital sample), sometimes only as a “ghost” or trace (a passing act of Signifyin(g) on some past text). It is hard to think of anything less distinctively “black” than Kraftwerk’s “Trans-Europe Express,” Queen’s “We Will Rock You,” or Frank Zappa’s “Tiny Umbrellas”—yet each in its turn has been claimed by DJs and used to make distinctive and lasting contributions to hip-hop. At the same time, ample samples of distinctive moments in the history of black musical expression, from Monk to Hendrix to Bootsy Collins, have always been central to the hip-hop aesthetic. It is not what you take, it is the attitude with which you take it (and what you do *with* it) that situates hip-hop within black diasporic traditions.

In any case, hip-hop artists and audiences function in a way that obviates any one-way model of production and consumption, and form instead a high-speed dialectical network, in which producers consume, consumers produce, and today’s “anotha level” is tomorrow’s old school. To put it another way, hip-hop is not merely a critique of capitalism, it is a counter-formation that takes up capitalism’s gaps and contradictions and creates a whole new mode, a whole new economics. It is a mode that, inevitably, exercises a huge attraction on capitalistic machines, since it seems to promise a virtually endless source of new waves on which corporate surfers can try their luck (not to mention an attractive source of income for tracks that record companies already own)—and yet it can also drown them in the tide or leave them caught in some suddenly motionless backwater. And, unlike the days when a Pat Boone cover could clock more sales than a Little Richard original, the lid is off the old musical apartheid; record companies have had no lasting success with Vanilla Ice and his ilk, and have at least been forced to deal with the artists who created the artform. There has been exploitation, to be sure, but the deal is on, and rappers who have learned the ins and outs of the business have been able to gain both financial reward and increased creative control.

This of course ups the ante in some ways, putting the burden on rappers and producers themselves to navigate the sometimes treacherous waters of self-commodification, responsible for creating the product, though far from fully enfranchised in its success. For their part, rappers make few apologies for being ‘out to get theirs,’ and the status-conferring power of commodities such as jewelry or expensive cars has long been verbal and visual stock-in-trade. Nonetheless, there is a strong ethic against ‘selling out,’ which for most rappers is not a matter of sales figures but of playing too hard for what Gang Starr calls ‘mass appeal.’ It is fine if a record sells well, and a large white audience *per se* does nothing to de-
authenticate a rap record. "Selling out" is about attitude, about 'hardness,' about a refusal of stasis, predictability, or music that is too easy to listen to. As Chuck D intones in "The Sticka," "Every now and then, I think people wanna hear something from us nice and easy. But there's just one thing, you see, we never ever do nothing nice and easy. We always gotta do it hard, and rough." This hardness is hard in more ways than one—for starters, it is "hard" to define. But it is a central part of the hip-hop aesthetic, this sense of "here's where I'm coming from, take it or leave it." Even rappers who have a fairly R&B-flavored, radio-friendly sound, still have that attitude; conversely, when rappers who lack attitude try to put on a "hard" exterior—such as MC Hammer—they lose the reciprocal respect of the core audience. This may or may not translate into lower sales—and for that matter, the same goes for the "hardest" hard attitude—but there is often a remarkable degree of consensus among rap's audiences. This consensus is at times powerful enough to irrevocably damage an artist's reputation, and spell doom for his or her current or future recordings, however well-promoted and bankrolled by the music industry.

The "core" of this hardcore audience, too, may be hard to define—and it is certainly not readily delimited by race. The tremendous commercial success of "gangsta" rap in 1994 showcased all angles of the 'attitude' question, as it demonstrated that the most hardcore sounds often had the broadest audience—with stellar sales for artists such as Dr. Dre, Snoop Doggy Dogg, and Ice Cube—even as the industry hurriedly launched a stream of would-be gangsta rappers, most of whom shot their way straight into the cutout bins. "Can't bury rap like you buried jazz," Ice Cube intones, and yet with his spectacular refusal of commodification, he sells two million records: "I'm platinum, bitch, and I didn't have to sell out." Far from being a mere screen or surface-level add-on, attitude ultimately demonstrates the substance of style. If 'style' were only that, the record industry ought to be able to produce it on demand, but it has not. Added to the ostentatious criticism that the music industry levels against itself in places like the pages of Billboard magazine (recently rife with articles denouncing gangsta rap), the industry's frustration at not being able to find its way to the street without a guide Dogg is to a large extent symptomatic of its hypocrisy, and of the economics of the spectacle in general.

It is hardly news, after all, that the same large television, film, and music industries which so readily take up the cry against 'violence' effectively increase the value of the goods they market by doing so. The industry has in fact learned a few new tricks about reverse marketing from hip-hop's own strategies; the more vehemently a record is denounced, the more a certain kind of authenticity attaches to it, the more fervently it is desired. Leaving aside the more well-known case of Ice-T (whose controversial Cop Killer record, whatever else it was, was not a hip-hop album), there are numerous other cases where negative publicity added measurable market value. Paris, a radical political rapper from Oakland, encountered difficulties with Time-Warner (corporate parent of Tommy Boy, to whom Paris was contracted for his second album) over the featured cut "Bush Killa" and the accompanying cover concept (which featured an armed Paris crouching in the shrubbery, ready to assassinate a smiling President Bush). Paris was released from his Tommy Boy contract and took the record to two other labels, both of which rejected it out
of fears similar to those expressed by Time-Warner's lawyers (that the song could violate laws against "threats of assault upon federal officials"). Finally, Paris released the album himself on his own Scarface Records, and despite the fact that in the course of the delays Bush was voted out of office, advance orders climbed from 75,000 to 200,000 on the strength of the publicity surrounding what was now known as a "banned" record. In the end, Paris's established reputation enabled him to profit from the attempt at censorship (and indeed set an example followed by Ice-T in his break with Time-Warner a few months later).

Of course, however one reads these events—whether one chooses to see them as the rappers using the industry or vice versa—there remains a more material threat in terms of what such pressure might mean for less well-established artists. KMD, for one, a group with a widely-respected debut album, saw their sophomore effort summarily dropped by Elektra after an article in Billboard criticized the racial politics of its cover artwork. Thanks to the acquisition of several major hip-hop labels by large corporations in the mid-'80s, only two substantial independent labels—Priority and Profile—could offer artists an alternative to corporate ways and means. The music industry's policy of acquiring successful independent labels has led to an economic re-colonization of the music, against which rappers continue to struggle; in a strictly economic sense, it is at least as important that Ice Cube's million-selling records are on Priority as that they are militant and uncompromisingly hardcore. If hip-hop wants to make a serious challenge to the forces of commodification, it needs to do more than simply make lyrical resistance; to date, few rappers have acted on this necessity with the degree of awareness of, say, Isaac Hayes or James Brown, both of whom backed their calls for musical and cultural black self-reliance with industry savvy and their own business organizations. Paris's independent release, Ice-T's move to Priority, and the formation of independently managed subsidiaries suggest that such awareness is on the rise.

Nonetheless, the large record companies do serve some of the interests of rap artists; as the only entities with sufficiently deep pockets to sustain the cost of signing numerous new acts, they bring a lot of new talent into the pool, though admittedly a lot of dross as well. Veteran rapper Chuck D describes their attitude: "what's goin' on through rap music, is, sign anybody you can find, and throw it up on the wall, and what sticks sticks, and what doesn't will slide off into obscurity." However clumsily, this process offers one route for new rappers to gain access to the market. Small labels, in contrast, can only promote a relatively small pool of artists, and if too many new acts bomb, the solvency of the whole company may be on the line. The narrow pathway to nationwide distribution is one reason why hip-hop acts often have a difficult time getting a good contract, good promotion and distribution, and getting their albums released in a timely manner. While hip-hop is finely tuned to the issues of the moment, the record industry frequently bumps back an album for months at a time in search of a more auspicious set of competing releases, a delay which in some cases reduces the impact of their message or stylistic innovations.

A still deeper difficulty underlying all of the marketing problems with hip-hop is the fact that its central black urban audience has only a fraction of the buying power of predominantly white suburban listeners. Alternatives to purchase,
whether listening to the radio, dubbing tapes for friends, or buying lower-priced bootlegs, are a necessary part of rap's urban circulation, but none of them add to sales figures, giving more affluent fans a distortedly high influence on the artists and albums the music industry considers "successful." Partly in response to this, and partly as an alternative to the clogged and crooked pipeline of major-label success, there exists a burgeoning underground hip-hop scene in many major cities, where artists with self-produced tapes are able to get club and radio play sufficient to sustain their artistic and financial needs. Underground success can sometimes lead to label contracts, but even if it does not, it is often worn as a badge of honor. To use Paul Gilroy's "wavelength" metaphor, underground rap is on a very low frequency; its sound may not be heard as widely, but it is heard more intensely, and has a powerful though often unseen influence on hip-hop as a whole.

Hip-hop's loose "posses," "families," and "crews" are another counter-hegemonic structure, one that often bridges the major-label, independent, and underground scenes. Rappers and DJs who have enjoyed major-label success frequently do everything they can to nurture new talent, and are among the biggest (and most powerful) fans of the underground scene. Whenever possible, these artists give guest spots to unsigned mentors, and in many cases they have been able to negotiate record contracts for these same mentors. It is a linked chain of community that cleaves close to the black vernacular ethos of friendship; if you are "down with" another artist, you become a link on that chain. Record companies, for their own motives, are receptive to these chains, since often their A&R departments aren't as strong with rap as with other genres of music, and this structure gives them a free connection to other potential successes. At other times, though, the posse ethos takes record labels down a dead-end street; not everybody's sister-in-law or second cousin is an unrecognized genius. Whatever its commercial analogues, however, this collective ethos is one of the central and recurrent features of hip-hop, and whatever disses are exchanged on the mic, almost every rap album has a page-long list of shouts and props.

Finally, it is important to note the double valences of hip-hop's overall success in the 1980s. However the process of commodification may have skewed the development of rap, rappers and DJs themselves have generally managed to stay one step ahead, setting new trends which the industry only belatedly apprehends. And, in creating the first generation of hip-hop superstars, the industry has also ended up supporting those artists' work, including their music, live shows, and their own internal industry projects. The answer to the question "who's commodifying whom?" is as dialectically unresolvable as Apache and Nikki D's "Who Freaked Who?" Many rappers see their profits as a payback from a corrupt system; Chuck D has his own model of his ties with Sony Music, saying "I try to do my best to stick 'em, I say, well, they're the ones to stick up more than anybody"—or as Sir Mix-a-Lot puts it, "I'm the pimp, and the ho's the system."
2. History as Resistance

In his pioneering study of black culture in the United Kingdom, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*, Paul Gilroy sets forth three key themes around which the resistances mobilized by black expressive culture have been deployed: a critique of work, a critique of the state, and

A passionate belief in the importance of history and the historical process.

This is presented as an antidote to the suppression of historical and temporal perception under late capitalism.

This third point is, I think, crucial; in the increasingly amnesiac world of bourgeois American culture, history itself is, in potential at least, a form of resistance. Much of suburban America presents a landscape singularly devoid of history; everything is new or at least remodeled. The educational process does little to foreground historical consciousness; for the most part, the past is presented as an arbitrary series of dates and events, with little evident relevance to the present. Even and especially when it comes to contemporary events, suburbia retains a thick buffer of reference; the events in the inner cities that replay themselves over television screens are as remote—perhaps more remote—than the Vietnam war. What little use capitalism has for history is by way of connotative associations with isolated historical synecdoches: Crazy Horse Malt Liquor, Ajax detergent, King Arthur flour.

In stark contrast to this de-historicization, this leveling of the past that bourgeois consumers habitually ingest, hip-hop, as rapper Michael T. Miller insists, is “a vehicle for the telling of history,” and more: a vehicle for telling the repressed and suppressed histories of African-American culture. The central histories at stake, inevitably are recent—the worsening situation in the cities under Reagan’s funding cuts, crime, drugs, police brutality, and U.S. militarism abroad—but they also extend b(ackwards through the years of hope and frustration in the ’60s and ’70s (Paris’s “The Days of Old”) back to the experience of slavery and the Middle Passage (Public Enemy’s “Can’t Truss It”). And, unlike high school textbooks that alienate historical events from their cultural contexts, the urban griots of hip-hop offer visceral, first-person histories, complete with sound effects, street dialogue, and samples that re-invoke the affective presence of the past. As the “tour guide” voiceover on Ice Cube’s “How to Survive in South Central” puts it, “Ain’t nothin’ like the shit you saw on TV!”

Finally, with all the other histories it re-tales, hip-hop offers its own history, whether through didactic raps such as Ice-T’s “Body Rock” or Subsonic 2’s “Unsung Heroes of Hip Hop” or via the ongoing and infinitely extendable dialectic of “diss” and “payback” tracks (e.g., the battle between Marley Marl’s Juice Crew and Boogie Down Productions, which began with “The Bridge” and BDP’s “The Bridge is Over” in 1986 and continued through numerous personal paybacks ranging from Roxanne Shante’s “Have a Nice Day” (1987) to MC Lyte’s “Steady Fuckin’” (1993). Even in a track not explicitly identified as a “payback” or “answer” rap, the numerous instances of Signifyin(g) on previous rappers’ turns of phrase, combined with the verbal “shouts” thrown out to peers and heroes, continue to
build a complex historical web of influence, confluence, and effluence; it is not so much that hip-hop tells history, it’s that it is history; drop the needle anywhere and you will find lyrical vectors to every other site on the hip-hop map.

The points of reference in hip-hop’s histories, however, as often musical than verbal, and while the vast bulk of samples date to the ’70s, many rappers have reached back to such ’60s funk and R&B pioneers as the Meters, Book T. and the MG’s, Rufus Thomas, and Otis Redding; the rapper Laquan even reaches back to 1937 to sample the opening line of a blues by the legendary Robert Johnson. The recycling of these samples resituates them in a postmodern milieu even as it invokes the past; many hip-hop DJs pick a sample precisely because it is obscure, though others are just as ready to sample a trademark riff (Naughty by Nature’s OPP for instance, which is built around substantial samples from the Jackson Five’s “ABC”). In many cases, DJ raids upon the music of previous generations reach back well before their own birthdates, such that their own search for sounds becomes a kind of genealogical research; as a fringe benefit, many older listeners may first be drawn to a rap by the familiarity of the sampled material.

To see just how revolutionary these continuing raids upon the sound archives of black history are, one has only to listen to a few hours of heavily-formatted “oldies” programming on any of the hundreds of stations across the country that support it. On “oldies” radio, James Brown’s 1960’s (or George Clinton’s 1970’s) are nowhere to be heard; instead, listeners are inundated with a top-ten “pop” chart wave, over which they can surf safely without wondering what they are missing. Garry and the Pacemakers, the Beatles, the Byrds, the Hollies, the Four Seasons, Crosby, Stills, and Nash, James Taylor, Jefferson Airplane—the “oldies” playlists falsify not only the aural archive of the past they pretend to represent, but even the actual sounds of pop radio in the decades they “recreate”; from the mid-’60s through to the dawn of Album-Oriented Rock in the mid-’70s, AM radio was a multicultural crossroads—at least when compared to ’80s and ’90s format-driven radio.

In the face of this homogenized, safety-sealed version of history, hip-hop brings back the musical past that many white and middle-class listeners have conveniently forgotten. And, to the soundtrack of this historical incursion, it adds powerful beats and rhymes that draw listeners into the Signified situation, pushing the limits of connotation to make language come undone in a zipless fuck of aural frenzy:

Step to this, as the derelict re-animates
No jim hat as my mouth ejaculates
1 states mumbo, I speaks jumbo
Phonetics are a phonograph of rhyme, ya petro...

3rd Bass, “Derelicts of Dialect”

Reanimating “dead” sounds, bringing repressed histories back to vivid life, hip-hop sustains a profound historical consciousness, all of which serves to frame contemporary struggles within a continuum of African-American history.

Look at an inner city hood—South Bronx, South Side of Chicago, South Central L.A.—and you’ll see a place marked—pockmarked—with history. Vacant warehouses and factories testify to a lost industrial base and the shattered dream
of the “great migration” north and west; hole-filled streets testify to a declining
tax base accelerated by bank and insurance company redlining. At the same
time, liquor stores and convenience stores at every corner testify to yet another
generation of immigrants who are enjoying a slice of the American pie that many
African-Americans are still denied; in this context, Ice Cube’s threat to burn Korean
grocery stores “to a cinder” becomes suddenly comprehensible. Overhead, police
helicopters flash the streets with searchlights, giving the residents of broken-down
bungalows and row houses a free soundtrack to Apocalypse Now (minus the Wagner).
The underlying logic is clear enough: history is a burden to be borne; those who
can afford to have already dispensed with theirs.

All this leads up to the question of the contemporary, with which, despite
its deep historical roots, hip-hop is most concerned. Again, there exists a kind
of media apartheid; black issues, black interests, black perspectives are hard to
find on cable TV (outside of BET and a few shows on Fox); the news media
pander to white paranoia and present the inner cities as a landscape of criminals,
carjackers, and drug fiends, to which the comfortable residents of Simi Valley
(or Westchester county, or any other suburb of a large urban area) respond by
voting for more police revenues and stiffer jail sentences (this despite the fact the
mandatory prison terms (most for drug-related offenses) have made the United
States the most incarcerating nation on the planet, both per capita and in overall
numbers). Against this protected bourgeois enclave, [...] hip-hop offers a different
drama, one in which the ghetto, like a chaos-ridden post-colonial nation (Somalia,
anyone?) is under siege by police that act more like an occupying army than “peace
officers,” in which life moves at a literally “breakneck” pace (“with cocaine, my
success came speedy,” raps Ice-T), roaring down the streets in a low rider, equally
on the lookout for police and other gangs.

If there’s a contemporary analogy, it may well be Northern Ireland. Just as
Ulster Protestants and Ulster Catholics, though inhabiting the same “nation,” have
different histories, different remembered grudges, different holy days, different
neighborhoods, and different rationales for their paramilitary forces, inner-city
blacks and Latinos inhabit a concrete and psychic territory that is less familiar to
many white Americans than the surface of the moon. Hip-hop, at least, offers two
revolutionary possibilities: (1) by getting inner-city kids to see the cost of endless
gang warfare and black-on-black crime, they can unite them in opposition to the
larger power-structures of racism; and (2) 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 many college educations.

“The race that controls the past, controls the living present,” declaims a voice
(Louis Farrakhan’s?) at the beginning of Public Enemy’s Fear of a Black Planet, and
ture to this insight, hip-hop fights its battle on both fronts, making insurrections
against both the homogenized past and the safety-coated present. Even in tracks
that don’t contain obvious political references, the recursion of sampled sounds
and the linguistic slippage of Signifyin(g) at least disorient the listener, forcing her
or him to recheck their “bearings,” just as the heavy bass and booming drums
have the often-underestimated virtue of irritating those who don’t want to hear
the message they carry. And, on hip-hop’s home territories, the music gives a
soundtrack to the everyday ups and downs of life, even though in the inner cities random killings, police raids, and poverty are everyday.

3. The hip-hop continuum: refabricating the prefabricated

Given the continual struggle against commodification that hip-hop has had to fight, how has it managed to endure? One answer, albeit a tentative one, is offered by Hal Foster in his collection, Readings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics. Unlike so many art critics, Foster is well attuned to cultural and political issues, and he departs from other critics of modernism in finding political valences where others have seen only a flight from the political. Foster takes a cold hard look at bourgeois culture’s tendencies towards appropriation and recuperation of subcultures. Foster knows better than David Samuels the implication of “violent black youth” being transformed from a threat into a commodity; since bourgeois culture craves difference, appropriating subcultural forms and turning them into commodities solves two problems in one blow. For example, as Dick Hebdige has delineated in Subculture, while “punk” in the United Kingdom was, for a brief shining moment, a thoroughgoing high-voltage attack on everything respectable (in becoming which, of course, it made appropriations of its own), it was not long before studded leather jackets, dark glasses, and bleached and spiked hair made a miraculous journey across the Atlantic, where, stripped of their cultural significance, they neatly took the place of faded jeans, rock t-shirts, and ponytails as handy-dandy markers for American youth in search of a quick fix of rebellion.

For Samuels, the popularity of rap is nothing but a rerun of this appropriative commodification—his problem was he never saw the sequel. Foster, along with his awareness of the rapidity with which commodity culture dismantles and re-assembles subcultural signs, sees the flipside of such a move: robbing the mythmakers. Whether performed in the name of “recovering” the “original” context of the commodified sign, or “to break apart the abstracted, mythical sign and...reinscribe it in a counterm Mythical system,” such reappraisal emerges as not merely a, but the tactic of resistance. Hebdige notes the appropriations via which punk invented itself—from glam-rock, the mods, and the more militant West Indian club scenes—and Foster acknowledges the power of subsequent re-appropriations, such as those via which elements of punk style have resurfaced again and again (even forming a central element in the early Def Jam recordings of artists such as the Beastie Boys and Public Enemy).

Hip-hop recognizes what Samuels does not: there is no “unfabricated” community, no “essential” blackness outside of the continual, tactical enactment of blackness. When Chuck D raps about brothers going “under color,” he’s Signifying a move beyond the merely undercover; he’s talking about the erasure of identity. Whereas the ideology of bourgeois consumerism takes “black” as a quality that, while always symbolically dislocated (by the spectacular “black underclass”) from middle-class status, remains intact despite the (all too rare) achievement of status (e.g., The Cosby Show), Chuck D insists that blackness is something that has to be made, whose making cannot be negotiated without taking on the ideologies
and myths of race. And this is not because there is no authentic "blackness," but rather because within the African-American dialectics of identity that hip-hop moves, authenticity and constructivism are not antagonistic but mutually resonant. Black Americans have always had to make something out of nothing, to make use of materials at hand; they have not been as heavily influenced by the ideology of the "lone creative genius" for whom "originality" is always such an obsession. A look at the acknowledgments on a typical hip-hop album demonstrates a collectivity that is larger than (and indeed, sustains) the specific agonistic stances of one or another rapper or DJ. In a collective work such as hip-hop, there is in a sense no singular "author," however many instigators of discourse there may be; rather, there is a cast of characters: Flavor Flav and Chuck D, Humpty-Hump and Shock-G, Professor X and Professor Griff. None of these would be substantial without their costumes, without their enactment: Flavor Flav's clocks, Humpty's nose, or Professor X's ankh-emblazoned leather hat. Yet this does not at all prevent these "stagings" from being "serious" (another rather Eurocentric standard); despite the fact that his big nose is plastic, Humpty can still cut a rap ("No Nose Job") about how cosmetic surgery is used to erase blackness:

They say the whiter, the righter; yeah, well that's tough
Sometimes I think that I'm not black enough

Hip-hop stages the difference of blackness, and its staging is both the Signifyin(g) of its constructedness and the site of its production of the authentic.

In this staging, hip-hop follows in the tradition of the blues, jazz, and jump blues ("rock-n-roll"), exchanging the unreal "real" for the "real" production of the constructed. From the Red Hot Jazz Babies to Sun Ra's Space Arkestra, from Cab Calloway to George Clinton, this staging has always had its costumes, its lingo, its poses. And, as with these other artforms, the insurrectionary aspect of this "act" has been that it has forced Euro-American culture to take stock of its own costumes, lingo, and poses—that is, to see "whiteness" as a quality; it is not surprising, in this light, that many young white kids in this century have turned to black culture to get culture, to search for identities. The logic of the "same"—of the white, middle-class world as a norm which never has to account for itself—is called violently into question by the Signification of difference, and this Signification has never been played as far to (and beyond) the limit as it has been by hip-hop culture. Indeed, part of the attraction of hip-hop for many white fans is precisely that it brings difference and identity back into play, while for black fans there can be the compensatory sense that blackness is restored to the apex of the cultural pyramid. Critiques of the historical 'errors' or conflation of Afrocentric rappers are beside the point, as the mythic history at stake here is—just as with its Eurocentric counterparts—not an effect of "actual" history (as if such history could be wholly recovered) but an imaginary genealogy whose point is a sense of cultural continuity, unity, and pride.

For, as Paul Gilroy makes compellingly clear, 'whiteness' and 'blackness' have both been constructed, though often via polarizing dialectics that have justified injustice and rationalized racism. If people are to recover a sense of identity that is both usable and relevant, they must of course know and understand this bitter
history, but they must also gain the license to forge cultural links and empowering narratives. England, after all, had no sound historical evidence upon which to hook its genealogy to Aeneas and the martyred city of Troy, and yet it did so—and gave itself a mythology otherwise lost in the collision of its Saxon and Norman pasts. Inhabitants of black diasporic cultures have repeatedly created mythic pasts and Utopian futures, drawing on African, Judaic, Islamic, Christian, and secular histories, and to try to invalidate such creations by an appeal to historical accuracy is wildly hypocritical. At the same time, critics such as Gilroy are right, I believe, in criticizing versions of Pan-African particularism which fall into the same error as the most disreputable Eurocentrism—that of assuming that some ‘pure’ identity exists which could be assumed without taking account of its imbrication within other cultural histories and myths, from which, indeed, so much richness and complexity derives.

The Afrocentrism of hip-hop, in any case, should not be overly generalized; many rappers, even when adopting African names, dress, and icons, are as conscious of the construction of this identity as any ‘70s funk band suiting up in its bell-bottomed ‘space cowboy’ outfits. Others, while they may joke at times about their dress, are absolutely serious in their call for a separatist black nationalist order. For these Afrocentric rappers, particularly X-Clan, the use of African beats and Egyptian headgear, constructed or not, are signs of a self-conscious ‘step blackwards’ that picks up where Garveyism and the Nation of Islam left off; “African” consciousness forms the ethical center of these rappers’ rhyming practice. Hip-hop reflects the whole range of Afrocentrism, ranging from the didactically particularist to the playfully constructivist, and indeed includes rappers whose message partakes of other paradigms altogether, such as KRS-One’s tactically-modified humanism or Michael Franti’s eschewal of the roped-off models of culture implicit in some strains of identity politics. There is even, in the House of Pain, a historical reclamation of the (no less diasporically conflicted) Irish-American identity as a site of resistance.

Yet if there is no pure blackness, does that mean, as Michel Foucault claimed, that there is ‘no soul of (or in) revolt’? If postmodernity reconfigures identity, is resisting consumption tantamount to shattering images in an infinite house of mirrors? Not necessarily. The vernacular conjunction of forces that enabled the uprisings in LA, (whether in 1965 or 1992) shattered more than glass, and the cultural “noise” of hip-hop has done more than simply given Tipper Gore an earache. In this ‘society of the spectacle,’ as Guy Debord has dubbed it, cultural myths rise and fall in an almost operatic struggle upon the electronic stages of television, radio, and compact disks. The myth of the ‘concerned’ liberal white goes toe-to-toe with hip-hop’s carnivalesque mirroring of his/her own stereotypes; the Goats’ “Uncle Scam” runs drug cartels, wars, and drive-by shootings like booths at an amusement park. If images of Willie Horton scared middle-class Americans into voting for George Bush, the images and words of Ice Cube, putting his gat in the mouth of Uncle Sam and shooting “‘til his brains hang out” will scare them more, and this fear in turn will inspire laughter (as when Cube, on Predator, samples the voice of a young white girl in a talkshow audience and loops the results “I’m scared...I’m scared...I’m scared”).

Exploding myths via exaggeration, hyperbole, and the carnivalesque may not be the strategy of sober-minded politicians, but in the hands of rappers it
is a powerful tool; Queen Latifah isn’t kidding when she says M.C. stands for “microphone commando.” And, in a time of the stagnation and indeed the reversal of civil rights and economic gains won during the struggles of the 1960s, even progressive sober-minded political agendas sound like the ditherings of pre-’60s “Uncle Toms,” as the rhetoric of Malcolm X is suddenly contemporary again. If white kids, in Ice Cube’s phrase, “eavesdrop” on hip-hop, the message they get will not only dramatize this scandalous history (as invisible to many suburban whites as the initial struggles of the SCLC in the deep south), but call on them to declare, as in the old union song, which side they are on. Ice-T, in his caustic prophesy “Race War,” predicts that in the coming struggle a lot of white kids will be “down with the Africans,” just as many blacks (he implies) will be more loyal to class position than to race (“down with the Republicans”).

If consumer capitalism were to succeed in making even these kinds of dire warnings into titillating products on a par with adventure movies (and indeed, the increasing isolation of white and black worlds makes such confusion likely), then indeed the grounds for resistance would seem slight. Yet the African-American experience is rich with occasions where the self-conscious return to roots—whether blues tonality, West African rhythms, or the oral tradition of the Dozens, has marked a successful revolt in both stylistic and cultural terms. Indeed, were it not for the success of these revolts (each of which has taken place during a time of social and economic setbacks), there would be no distinct African-American culture alive today. In a symbolic reopening of the old assimilationist/separatist dichotomy, hip-hop demonstrates not only that an insistence on difference is both vital and sustainable, but that perhaps the agonistic tension between spectacular subjectivities is precisely the psychic engine needed to create and maintain difference against a hegemonic consumer culture.

There are hazards here—among them the romanticization of underclass status and the all-too-readily-granted symbolic “superiority” that have again and again marked white responses to African-American culture—but also a recognition. A recognition that in a crucial sense, the old “American dream” of an undifferentiated society never was and never will be, that aesthetics never breathed apart from questions of power, that in fact all of us, whoever “we” are, are situated by and within African-American culture—this is the recognition which hip-hop militantly throws back “in your face,” and which necessarily works to undermine the strategies with which whites have distanced themselves from the urgent problems of the inner cities. It is no coincidence that in 1991, the song “From a Distance,” a pseudo-folkie love anthem, waxed lyrical about how peaceful and harmonious everything looks “from a distance”; what went unsaid was that the distant eye of this song was implicitly white, and that the problems that passed before its pathetic gaze were those of urban America, postcolonial Africa, and the Middle East (where a new crusade against the Infidel was fanning nationalist sentiments in the United States).

At that same historical moment, rappers, reflecting urban discontent and a lack of sympathy with Bush’s “Desert Storm,” took a far more oppositional series of tactics. Public Enemy linked the experience of the Middle Passage to the “holocaust still goin’ on” in the cities with “Can’t Truss It,” and produced a guerilla song and video staging the assassination of Arizona Governor Edward
Meecham (an unreformed racist and opponent of the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday). The Disposable Heroes of Hip-Hoprissy attacked Bush's Gulf war policy with "The Winter of the Long Hot Summer," as well as corporate consumer culture in "Television: Drug of a Nation." Not to be outdone, Ice Cube delivered his sharpest raps against the U.S. government on his album Death Certificate, whose cover featured the body of "Uncle Sam" laid out in a morgue with a toe tag, and whose lyrics inveighed against Bush's patriotic rhetoric:

Now in 91, he wanna tax me
I remember, the son of a bitch used ta ax me
And hang me by a rope till my neck snap
Now the sneaky motherfucka wanna ban rap
And put me under dirt or concrete
But I can see through a white sheet
Cos you the devil in drag:
You can burn your cross, well I'll burn your flag
Try to gimme the HIV, so I can stop makin' babies like me
And you're givin' dope to my people, chump
Just wait till we get over that hump
Cos yo ass is grass, cos Imma blas'
Can't bury rap like you buried jazz
Cos we stopped bein' whores, stopped doin' floors
So bitch you can fight your own wars

So if you see a man in red, white, an' blue
Bein' chased by the Lench Mob crew
It's a man who deserves to buckle
I wanna kill Sam cos he ain't my motherfuckin' uncle...

Not since the heady days of the late '60s and early '70s, when cuts like Edwin Starr's "War," the Last Poet's "White Man's Got a God Complex," and the James Brown's "Funky President" provided the soundtrack for the political trials of the Black Panthers, had such a potent dose of lyrical dynamite been tossed at the feet of the U.S. government. Many African-Americans, indeed, perceived the situation in 1991 as a war on two fronts: against Iraq in the Persian Gulf (and the U.S. attacks on civilian areas in an Islamic country touched a nerve with many inside and outside the 5% nation) and against black youth in the inner cities (the 'Nam-like overtones of the constant sound of helicopters was not lost on a South Central Los Angeles which was home to many black veterans).

Eric B. and Rakim dramatize this sense of the ghetto as a war zone in their 1992 track "Casualties of War":

Casualties of war, as I approach the barricade
Where is the enemy, who do I invade?

The scene here could be '65, '68, or '91; the barricade could be in Watts, Saigon, Paris, or Basra. The political dislocation of the African-American, called upon for
combat to defend the very freedoms that were eroding at home, was dramatized by
the cases of black veterans of Desert Storm, many of whom returned home only
to face greater violence than that of the “war,” wounded in drive-by shootings,
or (in one much publicized case) killed in what at first appeared to be random
gunfire.

Shortly after the media-hyped “victory” in the Persian Gulf, the urgencies of
race overtook the spectacle of American militarism abroad. The brutal beating of
black motorist Rodney King by a number of L.A.P.D. officers had stirred outrage
when it was first televised, and King’s name had already been added to hip-hop
recitations of the victims of racist violence; what distinguished King’s case was, as
an A.C.L.U. spokesperson remarked, not that it happened, but that it was taped.
For years, arguably ever since Grandmaster Flash’s “The Message” in 1982, hip-
hop had spoken of the increasing tensions in the cities, where opportunities were
shrinking and the “war on drugs” was in effect a “war” on black youth. There was
apprehension as the verdict approached early in 1992, and in the uprising that
followed the not guilty verdicts, the old Panther slogan (revived by rappers) once
again sounded loud and clear: “we’ve come for what’s ours.” The LA uprising, in
fact, was the first multicultural urban revolt of its kind, as a substantial number
of the participants were Latinos—and indeed, west coast rap had for some years
reflected the new ethnic mix via the careers of rappers such as Kid Frost (the
‘Hispanic Causing Panic’) and Mellow Man Ace (the ‘brother with two tongues’).
This was a revolt foretold by hip-hop, fueled by its rhetoric, and which in its turn
fueled the radical agenda and symbolic intensity of the raps that have followed
in its wake. From Ice-T and Black Uhuru’s “Tip of the Iceberg,” which made
a groundbreaking alliance between old-school political reggae (as opposed to
dancehall) and hip-hop, to Ice Cube’s album The Predator, which featured dialogue
of Ice Cube going door-to-door killing off members of the L.A.P.D. jury along
with the officers they acquitted, the hip-hop response has been one of redoubled
rage, and the rage is still smoldering; as Ice-T puts it “the fire is out but the
coals are still hot.”

Could one quantify the degree to which hip-hop has been responsible for a
new black radicalism, and the extent to which this radicalism played a role in the
LA uprising? In this complex and contradictory world of American race relations,
there will never be a revolt-o-meter fine-tuned enough, but at the very least, hip-hop
has served as a means of communicating political solidarity, not only in the United
States but in the Caribbean and the United Kingdom as well. As Paul Gilroy has
amply documented, the ‘underground’ dancehall scene in West Indian neighborhoods
in England for years served as part of a tripartite sounding-board for the African
diaspora; American R&B traveled to West Kingston and became Ska; Ska traveled
to England and gave rise to Two Tone, which in turn traveled back to Jamaica and
the United States. In these cultural nomadisms, not only the music but the critique
of racism, or colonialism, and (implicitly) of capitalism (especially in the United
Kingdom, where pirate radio and blank-label pressings created a truly underground
scene) made its way through the diaspora, linking communities whose common
interests might otherwise not have come together. Insofar as a perceived common
set of interests is a first step towards a more revolutionary consciousness, hip-hop
has been a crucial factor in shaping the cultural landscape of resistance.
And yet it has done more: the 1980s were a critical decade in U.S. race relations, but the worst symptoms of the crisis were hidden from the view of middle- and upper-class whites. The media, treating drugs and crime as causes rather than symptoms of urban blight, combined with Reagan-Bush rhetoric to recast black (and Hispanic) urban America as a land of pushers and killers; white television viewers saw only a parade of such characters (often in arrests every bit as staged as a Broadway musical—as when L.A.P.D. Chief Gates invited Nancy Reagan and a cadre of local and national TV cameras over for some fruit salad and a tour of a “coke house” bust). This spectacle—the Willie-Hortonizing of black America—brought calls for longer prison terms, more cops, and a mysterious silence on the part of many white political activists as to the increasing violations of civil rights. The older generation of black leaders looked impotent; even as the rights they fought for were eroded by the Reagan court, the economic ills of their communities were worsened still more by the sixty percent cutback in urban aid under Reagan.

Of the senior generation, only Jesse Jackson retained credibility (and never more than among rappers; Melle Mell’s “Jesse!” has a pioneering place among political raps). Yet after Jackson’s rebuff in 1988 from the new Democratic “centrists,” it became clear that the Democrats, too, were joining in the rush to the right. For young African-Americans and Hispanic Americans living in the tattered ruins of the inner cities, 1988 was the first of a series of “long hot summers,” and the urgency and militancy of much political rap increased proportionately at just this time—most notably, 1988 was the year that a loose agglomeration of Los Angeles hip-hoppers once known as World Class Wrekin’ Cru re-launched their career as N.W.A. (Niggaz wit’ Attitude) and caught the ears of white and blacks alike off guard with the no-holds-barred militancy of “Fuck tha Police.”

In a spectacular society, filled with flower-waving cheerleaders at Reagan election rallies and syrupy video sunsets that could advertise the Republican Party as easily as they could “breakfast at McDonald’s,” hip-hop made spectacular resistances. Its strategy has been that it is just as effective to pump up the volume, to magnify (and distort) the image of white America’s fears as it is to displace them with accurate descriptions of urban reality (though these two strategies often work together, and the strategic mix varies widely from artist to artist). Yet the fact that rappers play with these stereotypes in a way that has a certain tactical effect of white listeners and viewers is not evidence that hip-hop has “sold out” to white audiences. Indeed, only a privileged white audience could conceive of the notion that the spectacle was all being done for their benefit. On the contrary, for many rappers the primary function of this spectacularized Signifyin(g) is to reclaim via a combination of collective anger (and laughter) the inheritance of difference that lies at the center of African-American self-knowledge. How to know oneself without measuring with the oppressor’s ruler? How to maintain dignity and a sense of historical place in the face of the pressures of assimilation? In large part, hip-hop, like jazz and the blues before it, serves this kind of inner function at least as much as it serves to produce an agenda for others. In the funhouse reflections of hip-hop, as through black comedy such as In Living Color or the monologues of Paul Mooney, there is compensation for the distortions perpetrated by white stereotypes, and a whole school of rappers—Digital Underground, the Pharcyde, DEL the Funkie Homosapien, and Funkdoobiest—mix funky bass lines with comedy
skits, wild rhymes, and “in” jokes to produce a vernacular funk that carries on the tradition started by George Clinton in the early ’70s.

This P-Funk (as in Parliament) school, as it is often called, makes some political points, but most of its energy is directed inward; its central locus is in the BASS register, and its wordplay and images make verbal art out of scatological references. After all, “funk” still carries its olfactory connotations, and what can be “funkier” than a “booty”? Similarly, the so-called underground school makes a virtue of its anti-commercialism and seeks to sustain ghetto audiences without any concessions to radio airplay, boppers, or heavy dance beats. On one level, “underground” connotes uncommercial, even as it invokes the underground railway of slavery days. Yet there are also humorous metaphorical linkages: Das EFX raps about hangin’ around in “da sewer” and filmed a segment of Yo! MTV Raps! from an underground tunnel in New York City; they also broke the first big rap on diarrhea (“Looseys”). The magazine Rap Pages recently did a nationwide survey of the “underground,” and documented the increasing movement towards an inward-facing, funky, and resolutely hardcore hip-hop scene—a scene that already marks the beginnings of another bop-like turn away from commodification.

The underground sound is certainly one reason why, despite the commercialization of hip-hop, new artists and new sounds continue to evolve completely outside the industry’s official A&R proving grounds. Hardcore rap is another; while associated in the popular press with a monolithic “gangsta” outlook, hardcore rappers in fact have laid claim to a wide variety of ground, ranging from Public Enemy’s almost didactic political and social raps to Big Daddy Kane’s lyrical fantasies of himself as a super-sexed Luther Vandross, to Dr. Dre’s threatening yet laid-back paybacks against his former hip-hop allies. Jazz-influenced (and influencing) rap, touted in 1993 with Guru’s Jazzmatazz and Greg Osby’s 3-D Lifestyles, has in face been around for a while, at least since the Dream Warriors’ debut back in 1990, and continues to grow both via live bands (e.g., the Brand New Heavies, or Freestyle Fellowship’s in-house “Underground Railway Band”) and samples (the digable planets’ use of Sonny Rollins). And, all along, rap’s broadest influences have been on dance music, not only with “New Jack Swing” but with a new generation of musicians who have crossed over from R&B into hip-hop, such as Mary J. Blige. It is no longer possible to take the diverse agglomeration of music that falls under “hip-hop” and make sweeping statements, whether of praise or condemnation.