

The Problem of Maturity in Hip Hop

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*...I strive to be healthy
My goal in life is not to be rich or wealthy
Cause true wealth comes from good health, and wise ways
We got to start taking better care of ourselves
—Dead Prez*

INTRODUCTION

Conventional wisdom says that hip hop speaks to inner city black and Latino youth and their counterparts in the white suburbs. In the case of the latter, their membership to what is often called “the hip hop community” is a function of their *performance* of blackness in the face of their racial and political designations of white membership. The blackness they perform, however, *as hip hop culture*, is what could easily be recognized by members of black communities as *black adolescent culture*. The same conclusion applies to black and Latino participation in hip hop. Hip hop has, however, become a primary exemplar of authentic black culture. This development is attested to not only by the multitudes of black adolescents and folks in their twenties and thirties (and even older) who are drawn to it in their quest for an authentic black identity, but also globally as even adolescents in Africa and among black indigenous populations in the South Pacific do the same. We could add performances of blackness in Asian and Latin American countries to this roster of loose membership. We may wonder, however,

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about the consequence of investing so much of a claim to black authenticity into what is in practice and sentiment black adolescent culture. From a philosophical perspective, there is already a fallacy and a form of decadence at work when a part of a community subordinates the whole, when what is in effect a subgroup eliminates the legitimacy of the larger community from which it has sprung.

One effect is that there seems to be more lay-ethnographic interest in black teenagers and older black folk who behave like teenagers as spokespersons of the rest of the black community, or better yet—*communities*. Where else do we find such an approach to the study of a people that is able to avoid the objections of misrepresentation? Even with working-class white youth in 1970s England, from whom the Punk movement was born, there was an effort, on the part of those who studied them, to distinguish their subcultural behavior from the wider category of working-class white people. One understands that part of being young is behaving in ways that stretch the limits of culture marked by the weight of responsibility. There is, however, a peculiar absence of such caution in popular and many scholarly treatments of hip hop, where black adolescents seem to have become the wellspring of knowledge and creativity as though tapped into the divine force of the gods—or at least ancestral voices of resistance. And at times, the acknowledgment of such ascriptions translates not into an objection but an affirmation: What's wrong, in other words, with advancing black adolescent communities as exemplars of black authenticity?

And so our discussion begins.

I

Let me say at the outset that I am not against hip hop as a form of cultural play. Much of hip hop is quite simply fun, and many of the expressions of joy and outrage that manifest activities from rapping over a beat to spray-painting a mural exemplify the Harlem literary critic and philosopher Alain Locke's (1989) insight that "Man cannot live in a valueless world." But human beings cannot *live* in a world in which there is no one minding the children. A world without adults is a world without limits, and the consequence is hardly a world in which children could receive the support mechanisms that enable them to be children in the first place. Yet

this problem of a children-run world, of Peter Panism, faces more acute problems when the ever-spoiling dynamic of "race" is thrown into the proverbial mix. To spell out what I mean, consider the reflections of Frantz Fanon in his classic 1952 text, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Fanon argued that however healthy a black individual might be, he or she would experience the secretion of alienated forces when making contact with the white, antiblack world. That is because that world has waiting for such individuals a sociogenic construction called *the black* but most often signified by *le nègre*—ambiguously "negro" and "nigger." This construction is reflected from the eyes of whites, whose points of view are social-politically constituted as *the point of view on reality*, as how black individuals "appear" in the social world. Such an appearance stimulates asymmetrical invisibility: The black individual *encounters* such a *notion* of blackness that is not how he or she lives but is how he or she *is supposed to be*. The immediate effect is a doubled reality between the lived and the believed. To appear, then, as what one is not is to encounter the self as always other than the self, which makes the lived-self an invisible reality because of the absence of that self as a source of appearance. The result is, as Fanon observed, a destruction of the self into many fragments—to be torn apart—and thrown out into the world of a journey in search of putting together a dismembered self. Added to the situation is the ability of this soul torn asunder to see how he or she is seen, to become, in other words, the mirror whose reflection is already a distorted one. In the fifth chapter, "The Lived Experience of the Black,"¹ this search takes Fanon on a course from embracing a neurotic Reason to diving into the depths of rhythmic ecstasy as the waves of Negritude push him ever deeper, and paradoxically ever forward, in a black sea.

To Fanon's chagrin, his moment of rapture is torn away from him as he finds himself in a moment of dry, sober reflection of its escapist status: negritude, Jean-Paul Sartre (1956) showed, was a negative moment in a dialectical struggle for universal humanity. "Robbed," as he announced, of his last chance, Fanon began to weep.

The significance of tears, the reintroduction of fluids, of washing, of catharsis, is a familiar aspect of our ongoing struggle with reality. Sometimes, in fact often, reality is difficult to bear. Tears do more than wash our eyes; they wash away, symbolically, psychologically, and existentially, what we have built up as resistance against what we are unwilling to face. Fanon's autobiographical admission of his

own efforts at delusion and the tears that washed them away present to us the ironic aspect of any struggle against a suffocating world: Our struggles are double-directional—both without and within.

Fanon's tears prepared him for facing the problem of psychopathology and *le nègre*. The difficult truth, Fanon argued, is that Western society has no coherent notion of a black *adult*. Whether it is as the pathetic plight of the assimilation-hungry petit-bourgeois black or the rebellious, illicit economy lumpenproletariat black—whom Richard Wright (1987) portrayed as Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*—the consequence is of the former not “really” being black and the latter standing as the kind of black to be “controlled.” In short, both poles represent displacement, and because of this, neither can stand for the normal. Yet paradoxically both stand as normal *for blacks*, which means that black psychology is entrapped in *abnormal* psychology. Literally, to be black is to be abnormal. The effect, Fanon observed, is that to be black is never to be a man or a woman. It is to be, under this collapse into pathogenic reality, locked in underdevelopment, frozen, in other words, in perpetual childhood.

How, then, can black liberation be possible in a world that denies adulthood to black people? And worse, how could black people hope to achieve liberation through adopting an alien reflection of ourselves that militates against the possibility of maturity?

II

The question of black adulthood raises questions of the context of our query and the legitimacy of its social aims. That we are talking primarily about the question of black, brown, and beige people in the modern world, a world in which they are indigenously, means that the problem of their relationship to Western civilization is ironic and symbiotic. They are an aspect of modern Western humanity. To throw *les nègres* out of the West is to render them homeless.

When we think of the clothing of hip hop—the sweat suits, the sneakers, the hats, stocking caps, the T-shirts, and even the gold-capped teeth—where but in the contemporary neo-global economies of Western civilization can we find their source? The same applies to the technology of hip hop aesthetic production from

vinyl records on which to scratch to the spray paint through which to make thought and name visual.

The Fanonian question poses, however, an additional problem whose roots are in the thought of the German philosopher and philologist Friedrich Nietzsche and whose modern manifestation is in the blues: the question of social health. In *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, Nietzsche (1968) argued that the ancient Greeks were aware of the suffering that lay at the heart of life itself, and their health was manifested by their response to it, namely, the creation of Attic poetry, drama, and music in tragic plays. For Nietzsche, in other words, health is not a function of the absence of disease and adversity but instead a matter of an organism or community's ability to deal constructively with such challenges. That the underside of life is suffering and death does not negate the value of life itself. In fact, it makes it more precious. Yet, a healthy attitude to life requires its affirmation without the kinds of seriousness that lead to over-attachment and cowardice. Although the authors of such works died long ago, the underlying messages of their work continue to speak to humanity across the ages.

The underside of modern life was outlined well by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1987) in his "Discourse on the Arts and Sciences," where he introduced the problem of the dialectics of enlightenment. Think of the scale of human suffering that accompanies the progress promised by modernity—modern war, conquest, colonization, slavery, racism, genocide; the proliferation of new kinds of disease; and the profound level of alienation of human beings from each other, to name but a few.

Accompanying European reflections on the limits of modernity were also writings by African and African Diasporic thinkers such as the Ghanaian born Wilhelm Amo and Ottoba Cuguano. Both made an effort to bring the problem of slavery to the forefront; the former, through a critical study of rights and law; the latter, through philosophical reflections on the meaning of slavery as evil in a world where a good God sought a message of ultimate good. Such a dual reality offered little more than a stalemate on life for those who made the effort to wake each day and live with eyes wide open. Modern life offered much celebration to those who could walk freely through its well built streets and afford to partake in its pleasures. For those whose lives were under its crushing heels, the modern world was one of constant contradiction—declarations of freedom on the foundations of slavery; equality on

the grounds of stratified inequality; continuous war as a condition of perpetual peace; mass starvation accompanying unprecedented productions of food; great wealth amid the proliferation of poverty; talk of “humanity” while denying most human beings such membership. The eyes and hearts of black people offered a leitmotif for such modern misery in the form of the blues.

The blues speaks to the contradictions of the modern world. As ancient tragedies brought the epic struggle of human suffering to the realm of art, so, too, does the blues in its multifaceted presentations in modern and contemporary cultures both popular and elite. The structure of the blues is illuminating: A repeated phrase of suffering is stated and then met with an ironic twist that reveals human agency. How many blues women sing, in repetition, of their men who don’t love them and treat them awful mean? Or men who cry, please, Baby, come home? In blues music, the singer may cry out her suffering and then note something about its cause that brings home collective responsibility. Saddened blues women, such as Billie Holiday and Dinah Washington, sometimes reflect on how their *other men*, men on the side, turn out not to be so “salty.” The guttural cry (what might be the musical notation for that?) that so many blues men lamented, as Ray Charles and even Otis Redding reflected, brought blues even to the neighbor next door.

A peculiar feature of the blues is how, regardless of the age of the artist, the manifestation is always one of adult responsibility. The blues speak to the realities of adult ethical life—that things are not always neat, that making decisions are complicated, and that people often make mistakes. Add the realities of race, where there is not much room afforded for mistake, and the significance of the blues becomes more apparent, as Richard Wright (1992) so aptly reflected in the closing realization of his anti-hero in his philosophical novel *The Outsider*: What can be worse for a man whose humanity has been denied than to find himself incapable of guilt because of structural innocence paradoxically built on preconceived guilt? If one is always presumed guilty, then one could never really *be* guilty since one’s actions are, ultimately, irrelevant. Only a child can *never* be guilty. That is why all blues artists seem “old.” They lack innocence.

The blues, as I am using it here, transcends the specificity of what is formally called blues music. In jazz, there is a form of blues performance that is not like the Delta blues of, say, Muddy Waters, but it is the blues nevertheless. There is rhythm and blues, which often takes the form of dance music. There is soul, through which

James Brown, Aretha Franklin, and Al Green are exemplars of a blues sensibility. Reggae, particularly in its dub and political forms, is a blues music. And think through the reflections in the samba manifested by "Black Orpheus" or "Samba de Orpheus." These reflections on life in the modern world, of the unique forms of love and sorrow endemic to this world, our world, find their way across race and class. Think of Frank Sinatra's appeal in communities across racial lines in his performances with Count Basie and his powerful outpouring of pain in his engagements with samba. Think, as well, of how the blues offered the Beatles a medium through which to portray life up to the third quarter of the twentieth century.

In the blues, there is an understanding of the struggle for what it means to be a man or a woman, for what it means to face the travails of modern life with both eyes and ears open.

III

Modern life has placed a variety of burdens on the aesthetic production of black designated people. On the one hand, there is racist imposition that challenges whether black people have an inner life, which imperils the notion of even a creative life. Black aesthetic production, in this sense, is locked at the level of pure exteriority, of ritual and repetition, the result of which is without diversity and individuation; it is purely unanimistic, locked in sameness of experience and worldviews and devoid of reflection. On the other hand, there are the bold assertions of genius that marked black music in particular in the twentieth century. Accompanying them were the intellectual and political work that brought the inner life of black folk to the fore and, with that inner life, the creativity of black folk. Think of the efforts of Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. A dialectical reassertion of racist reasoning followed, however, in which black aesthetic production shifted from individual creativity interacting with community to *racist causal explanations* of inherent predilections toward rhythmic performance, which meant, in effect, that no black artist is ultimately different from another, so the motif of unanimism returned. What's more, a peculiar racist structure of white critics of black aesthetic production also accompanied these developments. In effect, blacks became the site of expressive experience to be interpreted by white reflective consciousness. The obvious

consequence of a form of epistemological dependency or colonialism became the order of the day, and it took some time until the emergence of more than one black critic (dubbed so as a representative by virtue of access to white audiences) became a mundane feature of contemporary life.

Added to problems of individuation are demands of political efficacy. Once black aesthetic productions emerged as *aesthetic productions*, black artists began to receive criticisms premised upon the view that the black artist had a special calling to serve the interests of black liberation. Such arguments undergirded the development of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, and they continue to haunt the work of black artists today. We should be reminded, however, that the claim that art should be more than the creative expression of an artist is not limited to black reflections on the subject. Leo Tolstoy, for instance, was concerned about the moral dimension of art. Karl Marx's thought led to generations of scholars and activists seeking out the revolutionary potential of art. Martin Heidegger worried whether we were losing places in which art can properly "dwell." And Jean-Paul Sartre appreciated the ways in which art suspended seriousness, although he defended the role of the politically "engaged" artist. What distinguishes black aesthetic production here is the impact of racism and its baggage full of color questions. Black artists may be drawn toward art because of a sheer love of art, but the context in which that love is expressed is a world wrought with many social contradictions. Just as W. E. B. Du Bois argued that black folk encounter ourselves as problem people in a white dominated world, the black artist constantly encounters black art as problematic art in a white dominated art world. Black art becomes, as Fanon observed with black psychology, *abnormal art*. It functions as a disruption of the "normal" scheme of things. The result is expectations that, like the black athletes and large numbers of incarcerated black folk, black art must flow from paradoxically naturalistic, causal forces linked to blackness itself—never hard work, individual talent, and reflection—simply purely causal mechanisms infused by experience. The black artist produces work in a context in which there is already a glass ceiling on the potential of the work to appear beyond the social limits imposed on the artist. How, then, could black art be politically effective when its aesthetic efficacy has been stratified, and turned the other way, how could the aesthetic quality of black art be defended in a world of black political impotence?

Our question betrays a symbiotic relationship between the work of art and the political conditions of its possibility. Those who speak of the revolutionary potential of art without thinking of art in artistic terms face contradictions in the fact that artistic revolutions do not always accompany social and political revolution. And similarly, social and political revolutions may face a lag time in the development of accompanying revolutions in art. The impact of a racist social world could be such that the *content* of black art may be more affirming of that world than its rejection. Although some commentators might impute irony to black aesthetic productions that portray black folk as lazy, licentious, stupid, and violent, how could such work be defended when it asserts itself as *authentic*? Further, conjoin such portrayals with an affirmation of capitalism, of a celebration of material excess, and we find a constant assertion of the profit motive. Capitalism is, after all, the dominating economic system in most of the world, which means that its rationalization often collapses into a prescription of facts—capitalism as both what is and what ought to be. Ironically, although it should mean that capitalism doesn't have to account for itself, it is only capitalists who feel compelled to defend what sells. This is because of the brutality of the naked fact of capitalism: profit matters more than people. Think about the spate of popular cultural industry awards these days that amount, in the most part, to affirmations of the subordination of other values simply to what is selling.

Such is the context of the emergence of hip hop and rap music. Although born from the celebratory outlets of inner city youth in New York City and the constant flow of people back and forth through the Anglophone and Hispanophone Caribbean, the music itself has taken a path from its underground economy and street art stage to a multibillion dollar industry. Accompanying this path has been the constant imposition of political demands for legitimation as authentically black at first as a site of political inspiration but then as a concern for rigorous commodification: If at least *perceived authentic blackness* sells, then it becomes important that that perception be aligned with rules that govern other commodities. We thus encounter a paradox: to legitimate black commodification requires the marketing of black authenticity; but black authenticity makes an appeal to revolutionary social change; thus, it becomes important to market revolutionary social change, which means the commodification of black revolutionary social change, which means the

colonization of black liberation by market forces. This amounts to commodifying black resistance to legitimate commodification. Although some of the artists themselves may simply have been aiming to produce work that is listened to, the process of legitimation needed for them to appear and be heard may be an extraneous one.

Complicating matters is also the near hegemonic rise of postmodern discourses in the study and interpretation of culture since the 1970s. The interplay of the impact of the studied on the studier and the language of the latter on the former emerged full form in the popularity of postmodern cultural studies in and outside of the academy. Even non-academics use the words "deconstruction" and "critique" to the point of academic literature on such communities functioning in ways similar to the cinematic and televised images of authenticity offered up to complexions black, brown, and beige. That inner city communities are extraordinarily diverse and for a long time listened to a wide range of music ranging from rhythm and blues and gospel to salsa and even country western was pushed to the wayside in the scramble to articulate and defend sites of blackness amenable to postmodern criticisms of the mainstream. Particularly odd was the extent to which academics of color became valorized spokespersons for black, brown, and beige communities in which many of them did not live but of which they, worse, feared. Often, what was offered as the set of values black, brown, and beige communities supposedly endorsed was quite alien to such folks when they enrolled in universities and encountered their supposed reflections in such texts. In many ways, the attack on totalizations, essentialism, binaries, masculinism, patriarchy, and homophobia that served as features of (often) left *academic culture* sought inspiration from an exoticized and often mythical off-campus community. That "authentic blackness" doesn't jibe well with such a project of anti-essentialism may have been avowed but hardly practiced. As academic after academic abrogated responsibility for expert knowledge, a leveling out of the "critical" in critical thought took its toll as even theory itself began to fall sway to relativistic "criticism." The rap artist and hip hop communities rose, in this context, to the level of prophets endorsed by Ivory Tower priests of knowledge who sought such commodified photogenic objects in the marketplace of knowledge exchange and legitimation. The more alien such prophets are, the more needed are their translators.

There was, and continues to be, however, a dimension of postmodern cultural studies of hip hop that is right on target and is,

perhaps, the best way to approach the study of hip hop, and that is, ironically, a nonpostmodern realization of its *accuracy*. This requires the distinction between postmodern *form* and its content. To say that hip hop is postmodern is hardly supportable by the content of hip hop since much of what is often endorsed by hip hop artists is very modern and often, worse, conventional. Even the more rebellious hip hop often affirms the more negative side of, say, patriarchy on the one hand (a world of only “bitches” and “ho’s”) or the more stereotyped conceptions of 1960s and early 1970s notions of revolution on the other. Dead Prez’s depictions of being revolutionary Africans in “I’m A African” drew much, for instance, from popular cultural images of black militancy—and beautifully, cleverly, and powerfully so (one of my children’s and my favorite cuts for these reasons)—but it does leave at least this listener wondering what is revolutionary about conventional and nostalgic images of black revolutionaries:

*Nigga the red is for the blood in my arm
The black is for the gun in my palm
And the green is for the tram that grows natural
Like locks on Africans
Holdin’ the smoke from the herb in my abdomen
Camouflage fatigues, and daishikis
Somewhere in between n.w.a. and p.e. . . .*

Would not a revolutionary development articulate, as well, an image that transcends the present in a forward direction? Yet, the *form* the music takes is unmistakably revolutionary, and it is so in a powerfully postmodern way with an underlying, unexpressed but felt duality: hip hop may ultimately affirm one set of values, but it also voices the artists’ shared irritation with the travails of modern life, especially as it has been dished out to people of color. That irritation has taken aesthetic form in many of the innovations offered by hip hop culture.

The postmodern aspect of hip hop music and culture is that it is unruly. Hip hop breaks nearly every modern aesthetic convention. The abstract features of such conventions appeal to repetition, harmony, resemblance, and similitude, the violations of which, I have argued in *Her Majesty’s Other Children* (1997, pp. 240–244), could be shown through how singing, poetry, and musical accompaniment have played themselves out in hip hop.

Hip hop music began as “rap.” That it involves music with lyrics enables such work to be listed as “songs,” yet it would be a mistake to call talking, often in rhymes, over a beat the same thing as singing. Moreover, when rappers do sing, they rarely ever sing on key. In effect, they defy the conventions of singing and the rules of a song. Even at the level of accompaniment, it is often the beat that prevails over chords and instrumental *obligato*. The human voice echoes and supports the rapper in ways that bring the novice to the fore. It is almost better in hip hop *not* to sound like a talented singer. Think of the wonderful and not-so-wonderful grunts and squawks that mark performances by such artists as Biz Markie (e.g., “Just a Friend”) and Ja Rule (e.g., “Mesmerize”), and even though more polished, Mos Def and Kanye West do, in the end, often sing off key. By contrast, the impact of rap has been such that talented singers (in the conventional sense) came to hip hop at first as purveyors of the chorus, but eventually as standing up front throughout as we see in music by such artists as Ashanti, D’Angelo, Lauryn Hill, Mary J. Blige, Alicia Keys, and Angie Stone. There may be some debate on whether these artists are properly *hip hop* artists, versus, say, soul and R&B, but it is clear that they are highly favored among hip hop fans. The point, however, is that the rules that govern professional singing are challenged by them. Even when they sing on key, it is not out of necessity. In effect, hip hop singing has an usually communal dimension; it invites the listener to sing along because *however one sings will be fine*. The absence of criteria by which a song can be sung better by some versus others locates this aspect of hip hop performance as postmodern.

The grammar of hip hop, played out in rap lyrics and both break dancing and the ways in which folks simply move to the beat, defies similar conventions. Some aspects of African-American and Afro-Caribbean slang speech are used by most artists, but they also intentionally play on words, especially orthographically (why write “business” when “biznez” poses the irony of preserving meaning in sound while defying rules of spelling). Although there are trademark reasons for choosing an unusual spelling for a name, the general practice in hip hop is to choose unusual spellings in all representations. There is the classic suspension of seriousness here, for in preserving meaning while spelling words differently—to the point of even using the number “2” for the preposition “to” and the letter “u” for the pronoun “you”—suggests a form of grassroots hermeneutics. It is in stream with what hermeneutical philosophers

such as Paul Ricoeur (1991) and Tsenay Serequeberhan (1994) have argued as the clue of freedom in the interpretive enterprise. In effect, the orthography of hip hop stands as a refusal to seek recognition in a system of rules in relation to which black, brown, and beige youth have often been politically and pedagogically constructed as illiterate. That there are millions of white youth busily working at hip hop literacy is an ironic development of hip hop play on words and their spelling. But more, this orthographical play could only make sense in a context where there is a normative politics of words and their spelling. In such a world, the play only makes sense where the artist and the audience can spot the inside joke—they must, in other words, *be literate of at least two worlds*. Add the slew of hip hop terms from the conjunction of words both slang and conventional and the outsider would face negotiating a full-fledged semiology of doubling and layers and layers of meaning. The message of hip hop grammar, then, is one of metastability, of a world of constantly shifting meanings. It is no wonder that the grammar of hip hop embodiment is always slightly off; everything, from how one stands to the clothing one wears, is a celebration of the idiosyncratic, the offbeat, and the polyvalent.

The ongoing force of the postmodern “not” or “negation” continues in hip hop poetry, which is a form of poetry that is not quite poetry. Spoken-word poetry, which has become a staple of hip hop scenes, exemplifies much of the politics of hip hop singing. Some are good, but, in the end, sheer audacity is what matters. One may wonder why poetry is so prized. Poetry, after all, requires more work for the listener and the reader than any other form of writing. One is never *really* sure about one’s interpretation of a poem—at least a very good one. Here, the argument about hermeneutical play and the assertion of meaning returns: on a long trail of inferences, the author of the poem lurks by virtue of absence—although in spoken word there is the interactive element of audience response. The effect, then, is of work *in* community, although the artist is asserting the value of having a point of view.

The postmodern elements of hip hop emerge most poignantly, however, in the primary means of producing the musical accompaniment to the rapper. That most of hip hop music was produced without actual musicians performing the music—only snippets of recorded performances from the past, and in some cases of no performance beyond a programmed drum machine and synthesizer—makes hip hop a natural ally of the death of the author motif

of postmodernism. As with singing, there are two tiers of hip hop musical production. On the one hand, there is the complete dependence on technology, of computer generated music, and on the other hand, there is work, both electrical and acoustic, produced by musicians who sometimes also perform on instruments. That hip hop offers music without musicians *and* music with musicians testifies to its defiance of aesthetic deference. To all this must be added the postmodern significance of "scratching." The act of turning a record back and forth for the sound of scratching vinyl is one of the quintessential innovations of the DJs in hip hop. Instead of simply looping the recorded music behind the rapper, the DJ emerges also as musical innovator by offering rhythmic scratches. What, however, defies modernist conventions of music, even of dissonance, more than scratching? Beyond the *sound* of scratching is also the *fact of scratching*—scratching paradoxically interrupts the music *musically*.

IV

An impact of the postmodern sentiments of hip hop has been the leveling out of differential authority between generations. The result has been the ascent of black youth as the authoritative voice of black communities. The legitimacy of this voice rests on its claims to authenticity. An immediate problem raised by the ascent of hip hop as a representative of authentic black culture is, as we have seen, its valorization of adolescence. It is not that all of hip hop has to be that way, but where can hip hop go if a libertine politics of retrenchment is its dominating credo?

It is perhaps not accidental, from the standpoint of a logical response to political impotence, that hip hop ascended during the 1980s and took on a regressive popular cultural image through the 1990s to the present. In the 1970s, it stood as an expression of adolescent play in the inner cities of the eastern, mid-Atlantic states and the synergy and cross-fertilization of ideas from the Caribbean and North America, especially from the music evolving in the clubs of the Anglo-Caribbean and their creolization with the Latin-Caribbean in New York City. Urban politics in the wake of the Black Power movement of the late 1960s focused on developing outlets and education resources conducive to good citizenship. Such aims meant creating public spaces for speech and catharsis,

such as the city parks. I recall the many dance events and MC battles that took place in city parks in the Bronx of my adolescent years of the mid-through-late 1970s—a world in which the public schools were also places where after school activities were the rule not the exception, where adult education also brought cross-generation exchanges on where we should be going as a society. By the 1980s, most of this disappeared under the anti-public sphere politics of the Reagan era. As the streets and parks and schools suffered a decline in resources, the ever-creative black and Latino youth cultures went indoors (with occasional forays on sidewalks) and eventually to vinyl and compact disk and to radio, television, and the movies. Although these were great strides in the development of the forms of art associated with hip hop, the political reality of the nation was increasingly conservative, and the attitude toward political forms of resistance that involved taking on the state and transforming its identity into a people-based entity suffered. Constructive politics declined in a world increasingly marked by political nihilism; it was no accident that the political *critic* began to take the place of the grassroots leader with a plan. As the society became more repressive, populations became less *actional*, and a turn to a focus on the self became the preferred claim to political activity. The “me” generation was not simply a function of greedy young urban business people but also disenfranchised populations obsessed with fixing themselves.

In many ways, the course that hip hop music took during this period parallels Nietzsche’s observations on nihilism and the forms of art correlated with it in periods of social decline. According to Nietzsche, the initial upsurge of great Greek tragedy can be found in Aeschylus’ more music-oriented productions with the chorus playing an active role. The next stage was Sophocles’ wordy plays in which a protagonist had a more significant role than before. And then with Euripides, the realm of sexual difference (the question of woman) takes center stage. Whether this progression is good or bad is not my concern here, although Nietzsche considered it a regression instead of a progression. What cannot be overlooked is the striking parallel. Early hip hop had a more central role for the chorus, audience, and music. The beat and scratching were more significant. By the 1980s, the MC took center stage. And by the 1990s, there was a shift to libidinal displays centering on the female body. Think of the move from early productions by Grand Master Flash to the advent of the Sugar Hill Gang and then the emergence

of Public Enemy (with a *silent* entourage of militant protectors) and then the West Coast NWA (Niggas with Attitude) and the eventual sexual homage of 2 Live Crew made memorable by the phrase: "Me so horny, me love you long time."

The paradox of hip hop is that there have all along been alternative voices of hip hop, and those have always maintained a connection with the blues that stayed attuned to its dual reality of flesh and thought fused in a conception of the erotic and the mature that, perhaps, could best be characterized as thoughtful flesh. I am thinking here of the cd's offered by Meshell Ndegéocello—namely, *Plantation Lullabies* (1993), *Peace Beyond Passion* (1996), *Bitter* (1999), *Cookie* (2002), and *Comfort Woman* (2003). There is nothing childish about Ndegéocello's work. In each musically virtuoso performance, she brings out the contradictions of contemporary life in ways that are attuned to what it means to bear responsibility for one's actions. She achieves such reflections through exploring themes ranging from listening to music from periods of social resistance (1993):

*Just sit back. Relax
Listen to the 8-track
I'll dig you like an old soul record
Remember back in the day
When everyone was black and conscious. And down for the struggle.
Love brought us all together.
Just sittin' 'back and talkin'.
Cultivating a positive vibe.
Blue lights in the basement.
Freedom was at hand and you could just taste it.
Everything was cool. Diggin' on me diggin' on you.
Everything was cool and brothers were singing.*

to those precious moments of erotic life in which one pays close attention to such features as one's lover's hair (1993):

*Let me run my fingers through your dread locks
Run them all over your body 'til your holler stops.*

and on even to theological reflections on race and sexuality, as in "Leviticus: Faggot" (1999):

*...Let he without sin walk amongst the hated and feared and know true trial
and tribulations
See my dear we're all dying for something searchin' and searchin'*

*Soon mama found out that god would turn his back on her too
Save me save me from this life
I pray to my Lord above save me they say you're the way the light.*

Although all music is ultimately a form of play, of suspending the weight of seriousness on life itself, adult play is in truth different from child's play. Child's play seeks never to end, which means, at its heart, it is a desire for the impossible. Adult play is aware, always, of an impending end. In the midst of adult play is the lurking underside of life itself, namely, death. Life is lived, from such a perspective, because of a sober realization of the limits of life.

Ndegéocello is not alone. There is, as well, the constellation of artists that transcend the New York-California divide in the construction of hip hop as a battle between two adolescent sensibilities—namely, the hip hop contributors to what is sometimes called the Philly music scene. Although these Philadelphia artists are technically "east coast" artists, there is a difference between their musical style and the themes of their music. Many of them are influenced by the black nationalist politics of northern and western Philadelphia, some of which, in fashion and interpretation of history, is influenced by Afrocentrism and the multitude of Black Muslim and Christian, and even Black Jewish congregations, in the city. There is, as well, the impact of the musical education offered by some of the public schools for the arts and the Quaker Friends schools, which has resulted in a cadre of excellent musicians. Such artists include D'Angelo, Erika Badou, Jill Scott, Angie Stone, and, of course, the Roots. The connection between them and the spiritual and urban blues laments of John Coltrane and Nina Simone can easily be heard.

Angie Stone, the most recent to ascend in that group, explores many of life's themes through the lense of Northern Philly black liberation politics, for example, in her 2001 *Mahogany Soul* album in ways reminiscent of the kinds of critique found in music by Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington, and Abbie Lincoln. Beginning with "Soul Insurance," in which she invokes the ancestral voice of soul through calling forth the expression, "Hey, sista/soul sista," as a lyric, she then moves on to "Brotha," in which she declares her love for brothas, reminding her listener,

*But fo' your information—a lot of my brothers got education
(now check it)*

*You got ya wallstreet brotha, ya blue collar brotha,
Your down for whatever chillin on the corner brother A talented brotha,
and to everyone of yall behind bars
You know that Angie loves ya."*

Then, in the cut, "Pissed Off," she alerts the listener that her love isn't blind as she explores the dynamics of an abusive, insecure relationship.

*So pissed off
Lookin' at life through the glass that you
Shattered
Little shit like love doesn't matter anymore baby,
Whassup?
Nigga, you so ticked off
Can't let up long enough to get over it
Brotha can i live, can a sister live
God dam. . . You're over-protective and you're jealous
Change when you're around the fellows. . .
Look at you, look at you, running around like a damn. . .
In my heart or in my head, can't let you back in my
Bed*

Later on, over the music to the Philadelphia classic R&B group the O'Jay's "Back Stabbers" (1972), she explores the dimension of needing to find a way to get over an ended relationship in "Wish I Didn't Miss You":

*. . . Call my lover, hang up, call again
What in the world is happening
Listen in, but don't yell at me. . .
Memories don't live like people do
I'm sick for ever believing you
Wish you'd bring back the man i knew
Was good to me, oh lord. . .
i can't eat, i can't sleep anymore
Waiting for love to walk through the door
I wish i didn't miss you anymore.*

Stone's album addresses themes of life in the inner city, themes of conflicts over love and economic desperation and the struggle against despair. In "What U Dying For":

*Heard you thought about committing suicide
Was it your pride that made you wanna die*

*Leave your momma, wonder why
And your baby here to cry
And was it over a jilted lover
Trusted brother, operating undercover
Make you turn your back on your god
Tell me what you cryin' for, let him go
He don't want you no more
what you dyin' for, stupid
You'll never know
Cuz once yo' eyes are closed
That's all she wrote*

Later, addressing similar despair from a brotha facing suicide, she responds,

*Hey hey, bro' man, with the masterplan, craving in pain
Doing all you can to win your prima-donna
Sexy brown, coochy down
Thought the love you had was iron clad
But her you caught chillin' at your homeboy's pad
And now you wanna put a bullet in your cap
Are you mad
Tell me what you cryin' for, stupid
Let her go
She don't want you no more*

The album closes with "Time of the Month," a song about the anger stimulated by the overwhelming weight of bills and premenstrual syndrome:

*See i'm in pain, these my brains
And my cramps are getting near . . .
it's that time of the month
Don't even mess with me . . .*

All these songs are done with Stone's alto voice and choruses of rich, soulful harmony over hip hop beats. I've spent much time on Stone's album primarily because it both exemplifies the spirit of the artists with whom she is associated and also because the themes she writes and sings about bring the tragic and poignant dimensions of life to the fore, as in her interlude performance of Curtis Mayfield's "The Makings of You":

*. . . Love of all mankind should reflect some sign
Of the words I'm trying to recite*

*They're close, but not quite
Almost impossible to do
Describing the makings of you.*

In New York, as well, there are artists fighting the cause for a conception of hip hop that transcends American racist expectations of childish, naive banter. Mos Def and Talib Kweli are two leading examples of such a development. In his 1998 album *Black on Both Sides*, Mos Def reflected in "Fear Not Man":

...
*Listen . . . people be askin' me all the time,
"Yo Mos, what's gettin' ready to happen with Hip-Hop?"
(Where do you think Hip-Hop is goin?)
I tell em, "You know what's gonna happen with Hip-Hop?
Whatever's happening with us";
If we smoked out, Hip-Hop is gonna be smoked out
If we doin alright, Hip-Hop is gonna be doin alright
People talk about Hip-Hop like it's some giant livin in the hillside
comin down to visit the townspeople
We + are + Hip-Hop
Me, you, everybody, we are Hip-Hop
So Hip-Hop is goin where we goin
So the next time you ask yourself where Hip-Hop is goin
ask yourself . . . where am I goin? How am I doin?*

Def's lyrics call for lovers of hip hop to take collective responsibility for it. And there are more artists that could be mentioned, including Brooklynite MC Lyte and Chicago's Kanye West, who manage to present in their lyrics an image of hip hop that suggests an alliance with intelligence and maturity that is not necessarily a contradiction of terms. Since the focus of hip hop is primarily and ultimately entertainment, however, a formulaic route for the mature hip hop artist seems for the most part to be the avenue of cinema, of which the list of artists here, with the addition of Queen Latifah, Will Smith, and LL Cool J, are clear instances. Their ability to work across many areas of entertainment is a testament to their extraordinary talent, but the serious question is whether such transitions for these artists stand as a form of moving beyond versus affirmation of hip hop. That hip hop works in comedy and violent action films is already evident, but it remains to be seen how it unfolds as drama.²

Hip hop is clearly not *analytically* incapable of taking the drama of life, "blues legacies" as Angela Y. Davis (1999) so aptly put it in her

book on female artists, to a level both contemporary and relevant. But herein is the rub. Hip hop artists face the realities of commodification as did their predecessors. Much money has been made and continues to be made by a version of hip hop culture that takes the dollar to near levels of idolatry. Such versions will take their inevitable course in the short-term medium of popularity, decay, and death. The enduring capacity of artistic expression that speaks to our *adult* sensibilities is marked, simply, by the fact that we all face the winds of change over time and, with them, the reflective force of age and aging. That hip hop is not only its music, not only its visual art, not only its witty proliferation of terms and hip syntax, but also an attitude toward life itself raises the question of what it would mean for grayed hair and eyebrows and wrinkled skin to reflect on life in baggy pants, exposed underwear, weaves, and a display of diamonds (the *bling!*) and gold.³ The follies of youth, when collapsed into a resistance against change itself, fall from a leap to the stars to the mire of the ridiculous.

Optimism is perhaps the best demand of youth. We need young people to believe in things, to strive for things, to be imaginative. But youth, by definition, is limited by perspective. The world for young people always appears smaller than it is precisely because they have not had enough time to live it. What the aged offer is the realization of how precious life is and how humbling is the echoing cry of all those who have preceded us and the near debilitating weight of responsibility we all have for the world offered to those who will succeed us.

CONCLUSION

It is easy to exaggerate the role of art in our daily lives. Art does not have to change the world, but it always plays a role in how we live. A human being in a valueless world would suffer a profound sense of loneliness. For values, as the existentialists have shown so well, are something we bring to the world.⁴ Where-ever and whenever we encounter art, we find an accompanying human spirit. Hip hop speaks to adolescents for the same reason that artistic expressions of joy and resistance have always spoken to adolescents: such a difficult time of life could be crushing if walked alone. But life must eventually be faced, and our ability to live with an adult sensibility of not being alone requires a maturation of mundane life—one that is not escapist but at the same time not devoid of play.⁵ We may think

of the metaphor that behind the dull thump of the bass drum and its repetition, of the message it conveys, in spite of all that is rapped over the beat, in spite of the clever scratches, in spite of the twists and pelvic gyrations that stimulate awe, life itself marches on toward death in a message always greater than ourselves.

Still, the heart of hip hop—black, brown, and beige inner city youth—clearly suggests that the *blackness of hip hop* stands in a different relation to the future than the nonblack world that celebrates it. For how can one have an aesthetic relationship to aesthetic production in a world that offers no alternative to such an attitude toward life? How can play be coherent if its participants are consigned to perpetual childhood? Hip hop, in this sense, suffers from an unfortunate circumstance of *serious play*. Paradoxically, it needs to have a possibility beyond adolescence in order for even mundane adolescence to emerge. Without such a possibility, hip hop would stand as another manifestation of black, brown, and beige limits. It would be all that can be in a world in which we crave, hungrily, for more.

NOTES

1. This passage appears in the English translation as “The Fact of Blackness,” but the French refers to *L’expérience vécu du Noir*, which is more aptly translated as “The Lived Experience of the Black.”
2. A piece of trivia might be informative here: Queen Latifah was originally cast with leading man Robert De Niro to play the role that Halle Barry played with Billy Bob Thornton in *Monster’s Ball* (2001). See the website: <http://www.contactmusic.com/new/xmlfeed.nsf/mndwebpage/latifah%20almost%20landed%20monster.s%20ball%20role>. On the question of drama, the 1997 movie *Love Jones* might qualify as a hip hop movie given the place of spoken-word poetry as the context for the film and the place of hip hop in its soundtrack.
3. This question and description haunt hip hop and pop culture, for example, in the third season (2004) of VH 1’s *The Surreal Life*, which featured Public Enemy’s Flavor Flav as the only black member of the cast.
4. See, for example, the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.
5. There is not enough space here to develop this thesis here, but I encourage the reader to consult my discussion of the aesthetics of mundane life in revolutionary practice in chapters 3 and 4 of my book, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (Gordon, 1995).

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