

The BreakBeat Poets

New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop

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Introduction

Ciphers rise together:

The Black Poets, edited by Dudley Randall

Black Fire, edited by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal

The New American Poetry, edited by Donald Allen

"Scenario," by A Tribe Called Quest, featuring Leaders of the New School.

Posse Cuts, and the Rock Steady Crew. The Harlem Renaissance and the Native Tongues. The Black Arts Poets and the Good Life Cafe. Flavor Unit and the Beat Generation.

This is the first anthology of poems by and for the hip-hop generation. And it's about time. This book is this first of its kind. It includes more than four decades of poets and covers the birth to the now of hip-hop culture and music and style. This is the story of how generations of young people reared on hip-hop culture and aesthetics took to the page and poem and microphone to create a movement in american letters in the tradition of the Black Arts, Nuyorican, and Beat generations and add to it and innovate on top. We are in the tradition—and making one up. Hip-hop saves young people from voicelessness and art-less public educations. We came to writing in numerous ways, inside and outside of academia. We are dropouts and MFA degree holders, money folders and working folk. The story of how we got here, how I got here, is indicative of how many of my peers and colleagues came to the page, to the poem, and to this book.

Here we go:

At some point I was building on the phone with Idris Goodwin, rapper/poet/essayist and hip-hop's August Wilson. A continuing conversation, trying

to assess and theorize and practice what hip-hop generation writers are doing that's different from writers of other generations. How we flip it and make it fresh, our own, how it's similar attention to the syllabic breath unit paid by Gwendolyn Brooks, John Coltrane, and Lil Wayne, how it's some AFRICOBRA kool-aid color realist portraiture and also legible/illegible graffiti wildstyle and sometimes simultaneously Sun Ra futurism/future world/reclamation of history, on some Lerone Bennett Jr., Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Howard Zinn—type shit.

It was the early '90s. Not too long after *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* and, after reading a magazine whose title I can't remember, I realized this particular magic was meant for me. In this magazine the words of Sekou Sundiata, Willie Perdomo, and Paul Beatty appeared. So did something about Poets, the Lower East Side, and New Africa. Something like that. That experience was similar to when I first read Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, Nikki Giovanni, Amiri Baraka, and Haki Madhubuti, of sitting cross-legged in the stacks of a public library completely engrossed in Dudley Randall's anthology, when I felt that finally *here* is poetry that is alive and relatable, a language of the working: all the horror and hope and humanity. And here, via Willie and Paul particularly, was, in my mind, how hip-hop might look and read and sing and break and holler on the page.

Reading these poets sent me to find the public cultural spaces of hip-hop praxis. The open-mic live spots and B-boy/B-girl jams that operate as aesthetic showcase and battleground and communal sanctuary. In Chicago, it was the Blue Groove Lounge, a Monday-night set run by DJ Jesse De La Pena and the Afro-centric oil and book shop Another Level at Lit-X's Saturday-night live open-mic spot. These were public cultural spaces where budding practitioners brought their kung-fu out in the open. Hip-hop's need and desire to connect to an audience, in the call and response, made manifest.

So Idris and I were talking, right... and conferring on the growing audience for this work, the tens of thousands of young people we are in front of on a yearly basis with this new poetic, who give it back tenfold in the growing hyper/multi-literate hip-hop-centric educational ciphers and spaces, informal and otherwise, in the organizations we build and build with: Youth Speaks in the Bay and the Brave New Voices network; Urban Word in NYC; the Neutral Zone in Ann Arbor, MI; the First Wave cohorts in Madison, WI; crews of young writers in Tulsa, OK; Dallas-Fort Worth, TX; Omaha, NE; DC-Maryland-Virginia; South Florida; Hamilton, Ontario; Boston; Nashville; Seattle; and of course the tens of thousands of young writers we have

communed with around the word at Young Chicago Authors and the Louder Than A Bomb festivals blossoming around the country. Today, there are dozens of community-based organizations engaged in building and educating around this work. And we were talking about this new mass and growing movement and army, and we were on one and thinking about the whole thing and Idris said something crazy like, "Yeah man, you know, we are the BreakBeat Poets, our generation, this is what we do." And I was like... *excuse me?* And then I was silent for a minute and knew he was on to something and felt like some miracle break just happened and it took me back and I think my eyes watered and think I might've let a tear drop... maybe.

The BreakBeat Poets. Poets influenced by the breaks. The break down, polyrhythmic, funky sections of records extended by Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash to lay a sonic foundation for the largest global youth culture in the history of the planet rock. The break where dancers, break boys and break girls (B-boys and B-girls), emerge on the floor to pop and lock and spin and defy the limitations of body and gravity. To break from the norm. The BreakBeat is the earth of hip-hop, what rappers began to rhyme couplets over. They extended those couplets to make verses and choruses and began to slant rhyme and enjam and extend the line and line break in odd, thrilling places. A break in time. A rupture in narrative. A signifying of something new. Fresh. Dope. Ill. A generation unto itself. Arrived and here. A break from the Beats, an extension of the Black Arts, a continuation of the Nuyorican crew on the Lower East Side, a pidgin and Nation language, to cite Kamau Brathwaite. Hybrid and mixed. The BreakBeat Poets blow up bullshit distinctions between high and low, academic and popular, rap and poetry, page and stage. A break from the wack. A break from the hidden and precious, the elite and esteemed. A break from pejorative notions about what constitutes art, who it's for and by and why. A break with the past. The bridge is over. The BreakBeat Poets and hip-hop culture are saving american poetry.

When I was in high school, and still in many in high schools now, poetry, and often art in general, is taught through the lens of a eurocentric, white supremacist, boring-ass canon. Poetry, perhaps more so than any other art, is not taught as a practice but only as a site of pseudo-criticism and reading comprehension. It seemed dead white dudes who got lost in the forest were the only ones to pick up a pen, and what they wrote had to be about horses or beechwood. I also thought all the poetry had already been written. All the books closed, all the poets dead (and white). I garnered this from the backward, destructive way

teachers were/are taught to teach poetry. Perhaps it was when DJs put their hands on the records, something you were *never* supposed to do as a kid, that the idea of writing and contributing to a public rhythmic, civic discourse became so prevalent in the minds of a generation.

KRS-One called himself a poet (and teacher). Chuck D, Big Daddy Kane, MC Lyte, and Rakim are all poets. These are some of the first poets my generation fell in love with and whose prose and style we wanted to emulate. Rappers made poetry relevant and readable and likeable and popular and populist. They sent us into the libraries to read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and then find the other books in that section. In the stacks is where we found the Black Arts Poets and Gwendolyn Brooks, Howard Zinn, and Lerone Bennett Jr. In the cited samples on the back of an album or digging through our parents' record collections, we heard again and for the first time Gil Scott-Heron (Rest In Power), the Last Poets, and the Watts Prophets.

Hip-hop made poetry an everyday thing well before Billy Collins. We recited poetry out loud on trains and buses, on our walks to school, bumped poetry in the jeeps of our imaginations. We knew anthologies of new american letters by heart. Poems readable, listenable, relatable, and unfuckwitable. Descriptions of neighborhoods like or unlike our own were an invitation to record, to look out the window, into the streets, and put our surroundings down on paper.

Hip-hop made poetry relevant. It was no longer this dreadful, dead-white-male-centered, highly dull piece to sleep through in English class. It was very much alive and in our Walkmen and notebooks. Hip-hop wrote poetry about the block and aspirant, working-class hopes. It is a culture made by latchkey kids in the crack era, left to their own devices to experiment wildly and make language and art new and meaningful. A poetics designed to move the crowd, a poetics designed to relate to the crowd, to save the crowd. Hip-hop is participatory, radically democratic culture. Everyone is invited and asked to contribute, to get down, in their own way and on their own terms.

Hip-hop invited us to write. To do what Gwendolyn Brooks told thousands of young writers in Chicago and everywhere: tell the story that's in front of your nose. We began to document, to represent, to represent the physical, metaphysical, and emotional spaces we inhabited and hoped to create. We became *magnetized by the mixing* to quote the g-d Rakim. Everyday language, slang, multisyllabic words we copped in a thesaurus, names of people we knew, blocks we ran, schools we went to, haircuts we got, all were viable pronoun particulars to put in the poem. If Mos Def was talking about Broadway and Myrtle Ave in

Brooklyn and Willie Perdomo was talking about 110th and Lexington Ave in Spanish Harlem, then we knew to talk about our block.

To paraphrase KRS-One, the poems in our anthology are not doing or about hip-hop (though some of them are indeed *about* the music and culture): these poems *are* hip-hop. They are engaged in the aesthetic, cultural, and often public practice of the art form. These poems are readable at multiple levels of accessibility. Some references will fly over the head of the reader not immersed in the culture or generation. Therefore the poems practice what graffiti art bequeathed the page, a legible/illegible read, the public and stealth aspects of style. The graffiti artist can write a legible handstyle that communicates with the largest possible audience; the same artist or writer can also create wildstyle letters only “readable” by practitioners or trained viewers. This happens again and again. The artist has multiple conversations in one moment. A viewer can see a piece of graffiti and perhaps recognize it as letters or someone’s name, or maybe not read it at all but understand it as a mass of color, or just vandalism and criminal activity. A writer might be able to read the letters on the wall and also have a sense of what block they grew up on, what crews they ran with, whose style(s) they are mimicking or mastering.

In ways similar to how blues influenced the Harlem Renaissance or the ways jazz influenced the Black Arts Poets, the music and culture of hip-hop shape this moment of American letters and create a generation engaged in similar and variant aesthetic principles and experimentations. The BreakBeat Poets are not all strict hip-hop heads and some folks in the collection might not consider what they do to be hip-hop cultural practice at all. Word. Hip-hop is open and comprised of every culture and music, though it is rooted in and part of African diasporic cultural histories and practices. Hip-hop is Black, therefore hip-hop poetics are Black and are created in part as a response to the historic and currently maintained legacies and realities of white supremacy and institutional racism, the war of drugs, and the growing privatized prison-industrial complex and school-to-prison pipeline, a.k.a. the new Jim Crow, as Michelle Alexander calls it.

Like all diasporic cultures, hip-hop also values and pedestalizes the mix, has a fetish for the fresh. If it wasn’t for the collision of uptown and downtown in the late ‘70s/early ‘80s on the Lower East Side in New York and the mixing of punk and late disco in Larry Levan’s Paradise Garage or the house Frankie Knuckles and Ron Hardy built in Chicago, then we would not be in the same place and perhaps there would be no book or records or global youth culture that changed and are changing

the world. The B-boy and B-girl are synthesizing martial arts, robotic flicking, gymnastics, capoeira, cartoon expressionism, uprock, salsa, African dance, and more in the same moment to create something in the tradition and altogether fresh. As a vocational high-school student in the South Bronx, Grandmaster Flash took the electric circuits of two turntables and placed a simple light switch between them: Hegelian synthesis. The mix was born, again, and opened a space-time diasporic continuum to usher in the miscegenated moment, a place firmly entrenched in the era and simultaneously beyond time. Magic. Aime and Suzanne Césaire, Sun Ra Black Surreal Super-real, indigenous-future funk. The mix is what miscegenated the dance floors, what blended the records and languages, a pidgin bridge to the future world.

Hip-hop saved american poetry. Made it new, fresh, made it something anybody gave a fuck about. Hip-hop did this. Black and Brown and Asian writers made poetry a tool to communicate with an intentionally large audience and also went out in the streets and clubs and community centers to organize and build and find that audience. american poetry is growing in popularity because of hip-hop poetics, the public performances and widely diverse strategies of publishing poems: YouTube, mixtapes, chapbooks, constant gigs, readings, tours, crews, television shows, popular documentaries, school assemblies, slams, open mics, and online journals are all avenues to publish poems broadly. In addition, hip-hop generation writers are beginning to infiltrate ivory towers, their magazines and presses. Hip-hop saved poetry from becoming classical music. It dusted it off, brought it out the closet, put some Js on its feet, told it to speak with the people, *all the people*. Have a conversation, tell a story, rouse the spirit, spit the truth. Hip-hop is making poetry cool in schools across the country, changing the culture of literature and thereby the culture of education. Poets now walk high-school hallways like star athletes. Hip-hop did this.

There are a number of aesthetic innovations in hip-hop poetics/ BreakBeat poetics that some of the authors in this collection will explore in the last section of the book, the *Ars Poeticas & Essays* section. One foundational principle of the poetic that binds us all is an overt and intentional participation in civic discourse. These poems are political and intensely human and arc toward justice and a new, fresher future world. Hip-hop culture reimagines the public sphere and claims agency in sites and systems of disenfranchisement. Hip-hop is a pastiched community at the margins of dominant discourse that uses the creative elements of dance, graffiti, turntablism, and oral and written poetics to insist on participation at the center of the

american experience. Hip-hop and BreakBeat poetics is the desire to see and be seen, to paraphrase Denizen Kane, as is a tag on a street sign or the inclusion of a familiar horn stab sample, a robotic tic or Rerun uprock. Hip-hop and BreakBeat poetics use the familiar—food, family, and neighborhood—to connect to a vastly disparate audience in order to bring awareness to the sanctity and humanity of the people and places at the center of the poem. The South Bronx was abandoned by the country/city and hip-hop insisted it look and be heard. In this collection are stories and peoples and experiences systematically denied, whose experiences are untold or criminally underreported in the media and history class. Hip-hop/BreakBeat poetics sets the record straight or at least scratches it, pulls it back, makes it stop and alters it, cuts it, until it's fresher, until we re/member the parts the artist desires us to recall. Hip-hop and the BreakBeat generation(s) are the people who said no more columbus day, no more fuckery and denial and exclusion and exemption from whatever story or institution or art or sport or country/club white supremacists wished to keep restricted. Hip-hop generation artists and intellectuals and people, just people ultimately, bum rushed the show and changed the game and flipped the script and constantly are at war with a country and history that seeks to murder its young and Black and Brown and hip-hop is ultimately a weapon for life and against the wack, the white supremacist. Hip-hop has its shortcomings (I concede). Some of these shortcomings are well traversed in this collection as well as in other places. But hip-hop is a space where we are able to have incredibly honest and difficult and essential conversations about the issues of the day in order to push the crew and community forward.

The BreakBeat Poets has more than seventy writers in it. I wanted more, and more deserve to be here. There are some poets we reached out to who never got back. Some folks we couldn't get in touch with. Some have gone off the grid. There are a few I really wanted in whose absence I feel, and there are many, many more to come.

The poets in this collection were born between 1961 to 1999. There are established and highly decorated poets with several publications and there are poets whose first time appearing in print is this collection. All dope and equally relevant. Hip-hop cultural space practices a kind of meritocracy. If you have skills you can participate in the cipher. No bio or pedigree follows you in. Dope is dope. The poets cover much terrain both stylistically and creatively in terms of poem form and narrative content. Readers may notice different capitalization or hyphenation among the authors. We chose to keep these creative differences

expressed in the poems and essays since poets purposefully play with (the aesthetics of) language. I am honored that such a giant crew of people dispersed throughout the country gave us the opportunity and honor to publish their work.

I want to note that my coeditors and colleagues are homies and men I admire. Nate is a former student and Quraysh someone I looked up to way before we met many years ago. Both stay teaching me shit about the word and the world and I am so grateful to them for their work and trust through this process.

I trust this book to be a piece of the growing discourse on how art can be used to create a fresher world, a useful tool to further and extend and generate conversations in classrooms and ciphers, on the corner, in living rooms, in institutions, and in the renegade spaces young people carve out for themselves despite state control. This is a call with the anticipation of the undoubted response. Hip-hop has connected more people on the planet than any culture in the history of ever. This is a prayer book and a shank, concrete realism and abstracted futurism.

Yet the work is far from finished cuz this is america and the world, and we have much to do and far to go. The work is somewhere in the mix, is in accounting for the beauty and freshness of each body, each culture and utterance, and seeing/hearing/not harming its essential dopeness and bringing that into the cipher, the radically democratic cultural space where hip-hop lives actually and as metaphor for how we might (re)organize our selves. "Have you forgotten why we buildin' in a cipher / Yo hear me kid, government is building in a pyramid," says KRS-One. And the work is in extending the cipher, the party/jam is open to anyone willing to get down, and you can get down and "punks jump up to get beat down," Brand Nubian insists we remember. Remember, we, this country and culture, are at a breaking point. These poems are the work and will fuel the work. And the work is to make a fresher, more equitable world for all. And the work don't stop. Yes Yes Y'all / It Don't Stop.

Kevin Coval

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