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Counterpoints

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9. Spoken Word and Hip Hop

The Power of Urban Art and Culture

PRIYA PARMAR AND BRYONN BAIN

In the most populace of American cities, one can attend a spoken word poetry reading or hip hop concert any night of the week. Hip hop and spoken word poetry embody a post-modern aesthetic in that they reach a wide range of audiences at national and international levels, regardless of race, culture, and ethnicity. In a cultural context, both use powerful language to articulate the experiences and marginality that African American and Latino working-class people experience. Rap music and spoken word give voice to these communities and other groups protesting the oppressive conditions experienced in the neighborhood, workplace, and institutions of learning.

The art of spoken word, a revival of oral poetry movements dating back to ancient times, utilizes the dynamic range of the voice and engages the nuances of vernacular speech. Commonly referred to as simply “spoken word,” the naming of the form itself stands in contrast to the “written word” in which the verse of the Western literary canon is traditionally composed and experienced. “Performance poetry” has also been used interchangeably with spoken word poetry. Both terms suggest the meaning of a spoken word poem cannot be realized completely until performed or recited. As one pioneering spoken wordsmith of the renowned Nuyorican Poets Café observes, “A performance poem is a poem written to be performed . . .”

Spoken word poets regularly appear as “opening acts” for major hip hop artists at rap concerts, and their poetry has an increasingly noteworthy presence in theater, film and on television. As a result, there are increasingly more of writing conferences and poetry-oriented programs for urban youth, such as Youth Speaks and the Living Word Project in California, Young Chicago Authors in Illinois, and Urban Word in New York. With the widespread popularity of poetry “slam” competitions, literary poets, historically embraced by publishing houses and academic institutions, now have a far more considerable audience than they once had. Thousands of graduate students are also enrolled in Master of Fine Arts programs across the country seeking to further hone their writing and performance skills.

Hip hop culture is experienced worldwide in a variety of contexts. Briefly, the original elements of hip hop culture are described as follows: (a) graffiti art also referred to as “graf writing” (b) DJing (deejaying), also referred to as “turntabling;” (c) MCing (emceeing) also referred to as “rhyming” or “rapping” and (d) b-boying, a gendered reference to the style of hip hop dance, commonly referred to as “breakin” and “break-dancing,” which was also popularized by “b-girls” from its inception.

Mainstream media and postmodern techno-culture have capitalized on hip hop culture as evidenced by the increasing number of advertisements, films, and television programs that use it to attract audiences to buy products. Other obvious examples are the selling of clothing lines, especially athletic clothing and footwear, beverages (both alcoholic and non-alcoholic), and beauty/make-up products. Although all four elements of hip hop culture exist simultaneously, MCs have been the focus of mainstream media attention because rap was more easily packaged, marketed, and profited from as a commercial product than the other three elements.

The high quantity of sales and profit rap music has garnered may account for the flood of images of rap artists used to merchandise various products. According to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), rap’s share of the popular music market doubled from the late 1980s to the 1990s. Rap and rhythm “n” blues together accounted for 23% of sales in 1990, up from 16% in 1989. Because the popularity and sales of rap music alone skyrocketed so much in 1998, the RIAA announced that rap was the best-selling musical genre in the United States. Furthermore, what had traditionally been known as “Black music” had crossed the color line. In fact, Nielsen SoundScan, a company that tracks retail sales, found that in 2001 more than 70% of rap consumers were white suburban youth. In 2003, for example, Soundscan found that Rap and R&B songs comprised 70% of the top 40 songs that made the weekly top 100 list in 2003. It should be noted that these sales figures and statistics do not account for the widely popular practice of selling bootleg copies (a lower quality replica of a tape, movie, or CD), thus resulting in a misleading gauge of rap’s popularity. In addition, advances in computer technology have allowed easy and often virtually free access to songs downloaded (or file sharing) from the Internet, making it even more difficult to accurately depict the sales or distribution of any musical genre, much less determine the racial, cultural, and/or ethnic makeup of its consumers.

Mainstream media tend to over-publicize, over-glamorize, and over-glorify those rap lyrics

that promote sexist, violent (“gangsta” rap), homophobic images, thus, perpetuating false perceptions and stereotypes of African American, Latino, and other marginalized people who represent the music and culture. hip hop poet and slam champion Jerry Quickley explains that while hip hop may be the most revolutionary artistic movement to emerge in the last hundred years, it is riddled with all of the problems and contradictions any global movement with millions of participants can be expected to possess. The problems are not the hip hop stars of the moment, but those he refers to as the “gatekeepers”: massively consolidated radio conglomerates, concert promoters, and record executives (CBS, Polygram, Warner, BMG, Capitol-EMI, and MCA who, by 1990, controlled record chain distribution) effectively control what rap music is released, and place the vast majority of their resources behind. Today’s commercial hip hop music, according to poet/actor Saul Williams, is mainly concerned with the portrayal of rough street life with little hope of reaching success, or over-representations of material wealth reflected through designer wear and lifestyles with virtually no critical analysis or social commentary. As media conglomerates capitalized on an increasingly white suburban hip hop consumer base, commercial rap records have come to be criticized by hip hop generation poets as no more than “. . . amazing ways to talk about the same ol’ shit.”

Quickley also maintains that “underground hip hop” represents the overwhelming body of rap music produced globally. Unfortunately, regardless of their work’s content, most of these artists never receive nearly the support their talent warrants. The commercialization and over-amplification of a very narrow segment of rap music is a problem that has inspired many hip hop generation poets to seek other forms of creative expression. Although spoken word poetry began to provide a space beyond these tensions more than a decade ago, as the art form has been increasingly popularized and commodified, the circumstances constraining the evolution of rap music threaten to arise within the spoken word arena as well.

Although the following series of essays is not an exhaustive account of the rich aesthetic traditions that comprise hip hop culture or the spoken word movement, we attempt to present an introduction to the historical evolution of both. Our position is that hip hop and spoken word provide legitimate forms of a cultural pedagogy worthy of study and practice within the context of urban education, in both public schools and teacher education programs. Cultural workers must be knowledgeable, well-informed, and respectful of the history of these cultural and artistic forms for their inclusion in the classroom to be effective.

The first part of this series, entitled “Spoken Word: From the Ancient Storyteller to the Urban Scribes,” traces the history of the spoken word movement, from its roots in ancient civilizations to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, continuing into and beyond the postmodern era. The second series entitled, “The Original Elements of Hip Hop Culture: Tags, Beats, Rhymes, and Breaks,” explains the evolution of hip hop, describing how the four urban elements from which hip hop emerged have contributed to the development of a broader cultural phenomenon. The second series ends with a brief description of how hip hop has evolved to include other elements such as fashion and entrepreneurship.

Finally, we conclude with “Poetry of the Oppressed: Pedagogy of the Urban Lyricist” which examines hip hop culture and spoken word poetry as postmodern texts. Based on the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, we argue that the implementation of hip hop and spoken word is an empowering, liberating pedagogy for students, educators, and prospective educators in teacher education programs.

The Spoken Word: From Ancient Storytellers to Urban Scribes

The Origins of the Spoken Word

Spoken word poetry is a contemporary art form fusing elements of verse, music, and theater. Though widely popular throughout the United States in the early twenty-first century, its roots can be traced from the protest songs of the Civil Rights Era, to the blues and sermonic traditions of the American South, and as far back as the ancient storytelling tradition of the African “griots.” Historical influences notwithstanding, the unprecedented global impact of hip hop culture, and specifically rap music, have helped to usher into existence this renaissance of oral poetry which simultaneously defies, embraces, and expands the boundaries of previous poetic movements.

The current literature suggests this popular revival of poetry has been marginalized by academia in part because of its emphasis on oral performance. Not only has spoken word been relegated to the status of “poor poetry” by some academic critics, it is written off entirely by others as not poetry at all. As a cultural practice inextricably linked to African oral traditions, this tendency is consistent with colonial scholarship which has historically dismissed the oral traditions of pre-colonial African societies as “primitive”. Zulu praise-poems, for example, were once labeled “artless and uninformed repetitions of tribal culture” and considered no more than a “crude accompaniment to tribal dancing.”

Although such highbrow mandates for what poetry ought to be are not the source of this turn-of-the century movement, their popular rejection has certainly helped it to gather momentum. While a “poetry” section has yet to be included in most record stores in America, you are more likely to come across a compact disc bin with recordings labeled “spoken word.” Titles such as the compilation, “Eargasms,” or “All That and a Bag of Words,” or even “Grand Slam! The Best of the National Poetry Slam,” are among those commercial releases categorized under this heading.

Historical Significance of the Spoken Word

Oral poetry is by no means an anomaly in human civilization. On the contrary, it is a recurring aspect of cultures around the world, from the meditative poetry of the Eskimo to the mediaeval European and Chinese ballads. Oral poets have composed and passed through the

generations the lengthy praise-poem honoring the nineteenth century Zulu warrior Shaka, with hundreds of lines of verse, as well as the compact imagery of the Somali “miniature” lyric. Orally composed European works such as the Homeric epics, *The Iliad*, and *The Odyssey*, have passed through the generations in written form and become the subject of widespread Western scholarship.

It has been argued that the epic is the most developed form of oral poetry. The epic is a form that has been widely disseminated throughout the world for several millennia. Consistent with other epics passed on from generations past, the legendary epic of Mali, “Sunjata,” comprises a long narrative poem emphasizing the heroic. The category runs the gamut from the Congolese Mwindo, the early Irish Tain Bo Cuailgne, lengthy nineteenth and twentieth century epics recorded in the former Soviet Union, and the West Sumatra recordings of Anggun Nan Tungga, whose recitation takes as much as seven nights to complete. Other epics range from the sacred works such as the Indian Mahabharata, and the ancient Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh, to the “Gesar” epic circulated throughout Tibet, Mongolia, and China. For centuries, the essential aspects of the extensive Gesar epic have survived dissemination throughout a vast region reaching parts of China, Tibet, and Mongolia. Even more astounding is the Indian Rgveda, containing 10 books, over 1000 hymns, and approximately 40,000 lines which has been handed down orally since its composition around 1500-100 BC.

Through the ages, the yogis and seers of India have worshipped the “word” god. Yet the Hindus are not alone in placing this centrality on the human utterance. The Judeo-Christian tradition also attaches mystic significance to the sacred word. In the Bible, the first audible expression is considered the earliest and most exalted sign of life: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was God.” The Islamic tradition reserves a comparable sanctity within its doctrine of the mystical word. Parallels of this kind can also be found in the traditions of the Zoroastrians, whose religion predates the lives of Buddha, Christ, or Mohammed.

The power of the spoken word holds a sacred position in religious and spiritual traditions the world over. Whether through mantras, prayers, hymns or calls to worship, the link between these varied traditions lies in the understanding that the sound vibrations of a particular utterance possess the power to bring about change. This belief is the ancient seed sprouting forth from the fertile soil of urban America in the spoken word movement today.

Spoken Word Poetry Today

Since the 1990s, the spoken word poetry movement has given rise to the re-surfacing of poetry on the American cultural landscape. Poets now perform and workshop their original work at community centers, colleges and universities, correctional facilities, coffee houses, poetry cafes, and open mike nights in bars and clubs nationwide. The performance of poetry has become so widespread that it is increasingly common for poets to tour the nation sharing their poems with audiences in each state in the union. Every year a different American city

hosts a poetry tournament, which brings together teams of performance poets from over fifty US cities and Canada to compete for a national title.

As with other examples of oral poetry, the spoken word must be experienced in context to be fully comprehended. If the performance space or time is changed, or if the same piece is performed by another poet or before a different audience, the identity of the poem is altered. The performance is not peripheral, rather it is an integral part of a “communicative event” requiring both the oral delivery of the poet and the aural reception of the audience. The mood of the audience, the ability and attitude of the performer, the purpose and location of the event, the sound, lighting, and aura of the venue, as well as the sequence of performers are all aspects that may contribute to the meaning of a poem. The verbal text may be recorded and replayed, but audio and visual recordings fall short of capturing the full effect of a live performance poem.

Early Twentieth-Century Influences: Uptown Blues and Downtown Beats (1920s–1950s)

The Harlem Renaissance and Langston Hughes

As the final shots of World War I were being fired, a cultural explosion began roaring through the streets and salons of New York City’s Upper West Side. Between 1917 and 1935, a northern migration spawned a renaissance that transformed Harlem into the epicenter of the African experience in the Americas. Initially referred to as the “The New Negro Movement”, The Harlem Renaissance marked an era when black artistic expression was redefined. Poets and writers such as James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, Anne Spencer, Arna Botemps, Countee Cullen, and Angelina Grimke were among the most influential figures of this era.

While Marcus Mosiah Garvey mobilized millions with the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), white patrons funded the high-society black writers and artists that Zora Neale Hurston dubbed the Harlem “Niggerati.” Seeking to embrace and honor the essence of black folk culture, Langston Hughes chose not to emulate his “New Negro” peers then mastering traditional western literary forms. Along with noted writers such as Jean Toomer and Claude McKay, Hughes experimented courageously. Enduring the chastisement of poets more concerned with gaining acceptance among white patrons of Negro literature, Hughes drew inspiration from the folk *orature* of blues artists such Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith in much of his poetry.

In so doing, Hughes laid a rebellious aesthetic foundation that would be emulated by generations of poets to follow. Hughes’ profound respect for his own heritage and history, as well as his personal struggles with race, class, and sexuality, foreshadowed much of the terrain to be traversed by poets for the remainder of the century ahead. Indeed, aspects of

Hughes's celebration of folk culture are echoed in the later work of Bob Kaufman, Ted Joans, and the Beat poets.

The Beat Poets

Having grown up during a dismal depression and survived the Second World War, in 1948 Jack Kerouac coined the phrase that would become widely used to describe the post-war sense of malaise experienced by his immediate circle of writers: the beat generation. Notions of spiritual enlightenment, sexual liberation, and what was commonly considered "anti-establishment" values inspired the writings of the Beat poets.

Like Langston Hughes, Kerouac would abandon a life of letters at Columbia University and ultimately become one of the most influential poets of his generation. The quintessential "beatnik," he is lauded as a legend among contemporary poets in part because of another manner in which he followed Hughes's footsteps. By looking to jazz and the blues tradition to inspire his experimental writings, and dismissing the standards established by the academic poetry critics of his day, Kerouac mirrored the improvisation of black American folk music in his spontaneous writings. Like many spoken word poets writing and performing today, Kerouac sought not to see "what the poem was," but to see "what life is," and to demonstrate that beauty in the creation of the poem.

His close friend and fellow poet, Allen Ginsberg, looked to the cadence of popular speech, song, and various aspects of the Biblical tradition for inspiration. Well-known for his avant-garde poetics, politics, and experimentation with illegal drugs, Ginsberg's personal life also paralleled that of Hughes in that both challenged the dominant mores with regard to sexuality. Furthermore, Kerouac and Ginsberg both possessed an extraordinary stage presence that resonates remarkably with the performance-oriented culture of spoken word poetry today. In 1956, a historic Bay-area reading by Ginsberg pointed further in the direction of movements to come by recognizing the need for poets to do more than merely read or recite poetry to an audience. More than any other work of that time, his performance of "Howl" is said to have been a prelude of the performance poetry that would emerge nearly half a century later.

The Beats' image as drug-induced, renegade-roadsters came to symbolize a national counterculture that only began to wane in the late 1960s. With Vietnam emerging as the next arena of international conflict, social and political art saw increasing prominence. With the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., shortly after he spoke publicly in opposition to the Vietnam War, the frustrated progress of the Civil Rights advocates would give rise to the more militant demand for Black Power. As it was before, race would once again be an issue of critical concern for the wordsmiths of the day.

Mid-Twentieth Century Influences: The Black Arts Movement (1965–1975)

The Black Arts Movement was an informal association of black nationalist intellectuals and artists during the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. Associated with the militant advocacy of armed self-defense, separation from “racist American domination,” and pride in and assertion of the goodness and beauty of Blackness, the Black Power and Arts movements brought together participants with a wide range of political and philosophical perspectives, including a spectrum of ideologies reaching from pan-Africanism and ideologies upheld as remnants of pre-colonial societies, to womanism and revolutionary Marxism. The divergent perspectives within the movement were often a source of great debate and controversy, yet consensus was met in the urgent demand for black liberation and self-determination that was heard nationwide.

The notion of “performance art,” as an artistic practice referred to as such, was being newly established in the 1960s and 1970s. The predominance of poetry readings during this time was seen as rooted in a “communal tendency” toward the oral tradition. This is in part because of the central place of orality in the traditions enslaved Africans brought to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade, but was reinforced by laws that made it illegal for slaves to read and write. The continuing impact of this era must be considered here since it is common for the members of the current generation of Black poets to link their artistic work to that of Black Arts pioneers.

Elements of the Movement (Africana and Jazz)

The Role of the Arts

Poetry, drama, and music (especially “free” jazz) were among the most widely enjoyed artistic genres of the era. This was due in part to the facility with which music, theater, and verse could be incorporated into movement events. Protest rallies, marches, speeches, demonstrations, and community organizing meetings were brought to life in innovative ways with the inclusion of the performing arts.

As with the contemporary spoken word movement, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the black arts movement began. One possible beginning might be the 1965 founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School (BARTS) in Harlem by Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones). His Obie Award-winning play, *Dutchman*, was published in 1964, and by the following year a broader black arts movement had taken hold of the nation. Black musicians were significantly impacted by Black Power politics and Black Arts aesthetics. Anthems recorded by best-selling artists such as James Brown and Curtis Mayfield urged popular music in the direction of black pride, self-love and self-determination with anthems like “Say It Loud (I’m Black

and I'm Proud)" and "Keep On Pushing." Among the most visible artists of the movement were jazz musicians like Sun Ra and Archie Shepp.

National Organizations

The Nation of Islam, and specifically its chief spokesman in the 1960s, Malcolm X, introduced many jazz musicians in the 1960s to notions of black consciousness that would later drive the Black Arts Movement. The foundation for the movement was also laid by pioneering organizations like Umbra, a network of black writers that emerged in the Lower East Side of New York City. As artists became involved with organizations like Collective Black Artists in New York, they honed innovative ideas about their traditions and new identities as artists, activists, and intellectuals.

From the ranks of such groups emerged renowned Black Arts activists and intellectuals including Ishmael Reed, David Henderson, and Askia Muhammad Toure. A nationalist politic infused the work of artists in nearly every black community, and on college and university campuses where organizations increasingly engaged the art and culture of the African diaspora. The close of the Black Arts Movement is as much a challenge to locate as its genesis. As the membership of Black Power organizations like the Black Panther Party began to diminish during the mid-1970s, Black Arts groups and activities slipped away as well.

Whenever it came to an end, it was destined to have an impact on art, culture, and politics in America long after it disappeared. Within contemporary hip hop music, for example, strains of the movement's urgency, militancy, and cross-genre aesthetics can be found even today.

Leading Figures of the Movement

Among the leading writers of the Black Arts Movement were playwright Ed Bullins and novelist Toni Morrison, and poets Gil Scott-Heron, Larry Neal and Haki Madhubuti. The work of black editors like Addison Gayle Jr., and scholars such as Harold Cruse, helped to shape the vibrant debates between artists and intellectuals of the day. Musicians like Abbey Lincoln, Max Roach, and Charles Mingus challenged the economic inequalities of the music industry, linked their own experiences with it to larger social issues, and performed explicitly political material.

Amiri Baraka/Leroi Jones

Amiri Baraka is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures of the movement. Baraka's poetry, theater, cultural criticism, and commentary were fiercely radical. He presented the art of the 1960s as an extension of African culture and spirituality, and argued the Black Arts Movement to be the cultural arm of the black liberation struggle. Written off by as anti-white, anti-semitic, sexist, and homophobic by his critics, they could not deny

that his work deployed an inspiring vision of unity for black America which proved tremendously significant in defining the widespread public conversation surrounding the “black aesthetic.”

Before founding BARTS, Baraka’s work had a critical influence on black nationalist drama throughout the late 1960s. Furthermore, as Salaam observes: Baraka was a highly visible publisher (Yugen and Floating Bear magazines, Totem Press), a celebrated poet (Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note, 1961, and *The Dead Lecturer*, 1964), a major music critic (*Blues People*, 1963), and an Obie Award-winning playwright (*Dutchman*, 1964). Other than James Baldwin, who at that time had been closely associated with the Civil Rights Movement, Jones was the most respected and most widely published Black writer of his generation.

Nikki Giovanni

A native of Knoxville, Tennessee, Nikki Giovanni is a groundbreaking poet who began writing during the Black Arts Movement and who continues to celebrate black culture and life in her writing today. The poetry books she published in the late 1960s built for her a name as among the most accessible of the young poets voicing the call for black solidarity and revolution.

If Baraka was the most influential male poet, Giovanni’s controversial and gendered demand for blacks to, “Learn to kill niggers/Learn to be Black men” led her to emerge as the most influential female writer of the movement. Giovanni was also well-known for dynamic performances of her poetry, and the several albums she recorded of her work set to music, including the best-selling “Truth Is on Its Way” in 1971. In her poetry, as in her essays and speeches, Giovanni continues to celebrate black identity, which she sees as the defining characteristic of African American poets.

Sonia Sanchez

Born Wilsonia Driver in Birmingham, Alabama, Sonia Sanchez moved to Harlem as a young girl. Sanchez has become an influential writer, activist, and educator, focusing on black women’s struggle with racism. Sanchez was radicalized first by the Congress for Racial Equality, and then by Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam (NOI). Sanchez parted with the NOI in the early 1970s in protest of the Nation’s treatment of women. Much of her poetry from this period, experimental and irreverent in form, content, and presentation, pointed to the problematic nature of the black nationalist project as characterized within Black Arts poetry. Sanchez became known for bravura spoken word performances that sung the cadences of black speech patterns in the United States.

The Last Poets

Despite their name, critics have argued that the Last Poets’ innovative and communal lyricism made them the first rap group. In 1968, Abiodun Oyewole, David Nelson, Gylan Kain, and percussionist Nilija formed the original group at a Harlem memorial gathering for

Malcolm X. From their inception, the poetry of the Last Poets represented the militant politics that drove the Black Arts Movement. Their music emphasized both African-inspired drumming and the spoken word. In the mid-1980s the Last Poets was discovered by a new audience when young hip hop musicians began sampling and quoting selections of the Last Poets' songs in their own work.

Late Twentieth Century Influences: The Poetry of Hip Hop Culture (1970s-present)

Contemporary Poetry Competitions

Hip Hop Battles

Beginning in the late 1970s, rap "battles" emerged as the ultimate test of lyrical skill in hip hop culture. A battle involves at least two lyricists, accompanied by an instrumental track, engaged in a back-and-forth rhyming competition. Likened to a lyrical boxing match, a victor is customarily determined by audience applause. Increasing with the rising popularity of rap during the 1980s, battle rhymes ultimately came to be recorded, and could either significantly enhance or severely damage the career of the wordsmith judged to have won or lost.

Historic rap battles during the early 1980s featured clashes involving rap icons such as Kool Moe Dee and Busy Bee, and the Brooklyn-based rap group UTFO versus Queens native Roxanne Shante. One of the most legendary battles of the past three decades featured a feud between another Queens rapper, MC Shan, and South Bronx-bred KRS-One. KRS-One's classic "The Bridge is Over" was a response record to MC Shan's pioneering release, "The Bridge."

In the 1990s, Tupac Shakur and the Notorious BIG both topped the charts as fans eagerly awaited the release of their next battle record. The murders of Tupac and BIG in 1996 and 1997 brought an end to their exchange, and for the next few years high-profile battles on record came to a halt. More recently, rap stars have revived the tradition by responding to each other's "diss" records. Most notably, these battles have included clashes between rappers such as Ja-Rule and 50 Cent, Nas and Jay-Z, and the lesser known rapper Ray Benzino, who only appeared on Billboard's top-selling chart after launching his controversial attack on multiplatinum rapper Eminem.

From Poetry Bouts to Slam Poetry

In 1981, bartender and poet Al Simmons ran his first "poetry bout" in Chicago. Inspired by the idea of putting on a lyrical boxing contest, not unlike the rap battles launched years earlier in New York City, Simmons's first bout was a three-fight card featuring a ten-round fight, billed as the WPA's "Main Event" Poetry Fight. The poets traded poem for poem and verse for verse. Simmons held two additional bouts later that year in Chicago's Old Town, and

the other at a club in the Wrigley Field area. By the mid-1980s, *The Chicago Tribune* reported of another local poet and performance artist, Marc Smith, who was hosting poetry competitions not entirely unlike Simmons' bouts. Smith dubbed his bard battles "slams" and staged them at the Green Mill Lounge, a landmark jazz bar and former Al Capone Speakeasy, in Chicago's Uptown area.

The poetry slam is a contest in which judges are randomly selected from the audience, and asked to rank each poem performed on a scale of one to ten. While the specifics may vary depending on the particular venue, the initial rules allowed each poet three minutes to perform an original poem. Smith launched the slam in Chicago and encouraged the audience to let each poet know exactly what they thought of their work by reacting to the performance as they saw fit. By establishing an environment in which crowd participation was expected, poetry slams have helped to build a broader audience for the spoken word. The weekly poetry slam in Chicago spread across the nation in the years following its inception, with individual poets and poetry teams from every state in the union ultimately convening for an annual spoken word poetry tournament. More than fifty cities were recently represented in Chicago for the tenth anniversary of the poetry slam. Beyond its rapid spread within the United States, slam championships have been held internationally in England, Germany, Israel, and Sweden.

Smith praises the slam as responsible for bringing together people from diverse backgrounds, moving everyday folks to become passionately involved with art, performance, words and ideas, and having given others a sense of purpose and direction by challenging them to examine themselves. Nonetheless, Smith acknowledges how the slam has also afforded young poets the opportunity to mimic the voice of others they hear on a CD or see on television. He regrets that the wide range of styles, personalities, characters, and subject matter alive in the early years of slam poetry have come to be homogenized into a "rhetorical style" designed to secure winning scores.

Whether it is to the credit of the Chicago-inspired poetry bouts and slams that have swept the nation, or the pioneering New York City rap battles that laid the foundation for the global impact of hip hop culture, spoken word poetry today enjoys a growing worldwide audience in cafes, coffeehouses, concert halls, bars, theaters, and increasingly within the academy. Poetry anthologies seemed to reproduce themselves, literary magazines that would formerly have perished after a year remain in print, independent publishers have gained substantial readership, and there is an abundance of CDs and videos introducing the next generation to new paths to poetry.

The Multimedia Poetry Renaissance

The Impact of the Nuyorican

At the epicenter of the national spoken word explosion is the Nuyorican Poets Café, as well as the various poetry venues its alumni have established over the years: Bar 13, CBGB's

Urbana, and the Bowery Poetry Club. One of the oldest and most influential spoken word cafes in the country, poet and producer Bob Holman brought the poetry slam to the café in the early 1990s. The Nuyorican continues to hold a packed-to-capacity slam each week, in addition to its regular schedule of youth events, theater festivals, and the longest running hip hop open mike night in New York City.

Rap music was propelled into the global spotlight during the first decade of heightened media focus on hip hop culture; 1980s motion pictures like *Wildstyle*, *Breakin'*, *Beat Street*, and *Electric Boogaloo*, to name a few, would be followed by the advent of popular television shows such as *Yo MTV Raps* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. Beginning in the 1990s, a series of theater productions, television shows, and films would similarly bring widespread attention and acclaim to spoken word. While the poetry slam had taken root in Chicago bar rooms and been replicated by thousands around the nation, the multimedia attention that would introduce millions to the art of performance poetry would reflect the aesthetic of artists emerging from New York's innovative underground arts scene, and, most notably, from the Nuyorican.

In 1996, a groundbreaking ensemble musical entitled: "*Bring in Da' Noise, Bring in Da' Funk*," took Broadway theater by storm. Winning four Tony Awards with the direction of George C. Wolfe, the choreography of Savion Glover, and the poetry of Nuyorican slam champion Reg E. Gaines. In the same year, Emmy-winner Paul Devlin directed a highly regarded feature-length documentary entitled "SlamNation" about the 1996 National Poetry Slam in Portland, Oregon. Devlin approached the event from a sports-journalism perspective, using interviews and live footage of the competition. The performances of record-setting national slam champion and former *Boston Globe* columnist Patricia Smith, newly elected Poetry Slam International president and slam veteran Taylor Mali, and Nuyorican Grand Slam champion Saul Williams, among others, welcomed a new era for poetry in this adrenaline-driven film.

The following year, a Chicago-based poet, performer, author and national slam champion, Regie Gibson, would help catapult the impact of the spoken word movement even further. His life and work were the inspiration for New Line Cinema's 1997 motion picture, "Love Jones," starring Larenz Tate, Nia Long, Bill Bellamy, and Isaiah Washington. In 1998, director Marc Levin's totally improvised, low-budget film, *Slam*, was named Best Feature Film at the Sundance Film Festival with a multicultural cast including the same acclaimed hip hop-inspired poet who had entered the spotlight two years earlier in Devlin's documentary, Saul Williams. Another Nuyorican wordsmith previously featured with Williams in "SlamNation" appeared as a character appropriately named "Poet" on the prison drama "Oz." Using the poetic sensibility poet/actor Mums the Schema had also honed at the Lower East Side cafe, Homicide producer Tom Fontana took viewers inside a fictive experimental correctional facility, and worked to bring a philosophical perspective to incarceration in this HBO series.

In 2001, a film capturing the true story of the turbulent life of Puerto Rican poet, playwright, actor, and Nuyorican founder, Miguel Piñero, was released by Miramax Films.

“Piñero” tells the story of a Latino icon who captivated New York City’s elite in the 1970s and 1980s. Piñero was a formerly-incarcerated Tony Award-nominee, a heroin addict whose poetry was a pre-cursor to hip hop, and a writer of hit TV shows whose life was cut short at age forty. The film chronicles his rise from prison to his work in the renowned New York Public Theater and his success on Broadway with his play “Short Eyes.”

By December of 2001, HBO aired its first season of Def Poetry Jam. This televised showcase has featured both well-established and up-and-coming poets from across the country, and was accompanied by the release of the 283-page anthology, “Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam,” edited by acclaimed poet Tony Medina. This weekly 30-minute TV series placed spoken word center-stage in homes throughout the United States and abroad, using the revised format of its predecessor, Def Comedy Jam, also backed by hip hop mogul Russell Simmons and aired on HBO. A staged version of this televised poetry reading soon followed at the Longacre Theater in New York City. Simmons once again enlisted the expertise of Stan Lathan, along with a hip hop DJ, and a dynamic troupe of young, seasoned poets to present Def Poetry Jam on Broadway. Six of the nine poets comprising the cast, from cultural backgrounds as vastly different as acclaimed Palestinian author/activist Suheir Hammad and internationally renowned Chinese-Jamaican performance poet Stacey-Ann Chin, joined the Tony-award winning show after several years of performing at the Nuyorican as well.

Despite the acclaim the show has received, critics argue that the popularization of poetry under the Def Poetry Jam brand threatens the integrity of the art form. Medina makes clear his apprehension with regard to the rush of poets to gain the exposure offered by these televised and staged shows. In the opening pages of *Bum Rush the Page*, he argues that not all poets who are referred to as “spoken word artists” are genuinely concerned with performing poetry to promote social change; rather they are in the “business” in hopes of gaining approval or status. As a result, serious poets, especially artists of color, are not taken seriously as writers.

The Original Elements of Hip Hop Culture: Tags, Beats, Rhymes, and Breaks

Hip hop originated in the predominantly African American, economically-depressed South Bronx section of New York City. This borough experienced radical changes in the 1960s because of poor urban planning, which included construction of an expressway through the heart of the Bronx and a huge apartment complex, which later was sold to slumlords because of its high vacancy rates. Thus, the neighborhood deteriorated, leaving many run-down and vacant buildings. When middle class families of Italian, German, Irish, and Jewish descent moved out of the Bronx because of the diminishing quality of life, poor African American and Hispanic families soon replaced them. There was a rise in crime, drug addiction, and unemployment. Eventually, these poor living conditions and economic dispari-

ties led young people to engage in graffiti painting, DJing, MCing, and b-boying, which comprise hip hop culture. Many people predicted hip hop would be a passing fad or trend, but this “fad” endured and came to be known as hip hop culture.

Tags or Graffiti Art

Graffiti art (or taggin’) is considered to be a form of non-mainstream art. Gang members, in general, use graffiti as a means of expression. Gangs in the 1950s used graffiti for self-promotion, marking territorial boundaries, and as a method of intimidation. Street gangs emerged in the southeast Bronx in 1968 and grew rapidly, reaching their peak in 1973. Steven Hagar in “*Hip hop: The illustrated history of break dancing, rap music, and graffiti*” contends that their behavior stemmed primarily from normal adolescent concerns: the need for peer respect and approval, security and protection, group support and acceptance, and age and sex role identification. Street gangs in the 1950s differed slightly from gangs in the late 1960s. While gangs in the late 1960s had similar characteristics, in 1969 gangs in New York City used graffiti as a means to communicate in code the language, behavior, and meeting places for its members.

In 1968, seven teenagers calling themselves the Savage Seven laid the groundwork for the domination of street gangs in the Bronx for the next five to six years. Within a short time, gangs appeared on every street corner, and names like Black Spades, Savage Skulls, Seven Crowns, Latin Kings, and Young Lords, to name a few, could be seen in graffiti everywhere. Gang activities reached their peak in 1973, and then slowly died out one after the other for several reasons: rival gang members wiped out many gangs; some gangs were too heavily involved in the drug scene; and others grew to be so large that their members did not want to be involved anymore. Times were also changing as people in the 1970s became more interested in frequenting parties and club scenes to dance to the rhythm of the music. In addition, the number of gangs decreased because an increasing number of people and former gang members were becoming interested in the new activities of hip hop culture. The basic idea of hip hop culture is to compete, not with violence, but through one of the four elements of hip hop culture. The driving force behind all these activities was the impetus to break out of anonymity, to be heard and seen, and to spread one’s name.

Hagar and S. Jenkins in “*Graffiti: Graphic scenes, spray fiends, and millionaires*” argue that this shift led to the graffiti movement made famous in the early 1970s by a young Greek American teenager named Demetrius, who resided in the Washington Heights area of New York City. Demetrius signed or “tagged” his name TAXI 183 (“TAXI” being Demetrius’ nickname and “183” being the street number where he lived) whenever and wherever possible, but mainly on the walls throughout the New York City subway system. This trend soon spread rapidly, as many artists began “tagging” their names not only throughout the subway system but also in New York City neighborhoods and on city buses when they stopped to pick up passengers. Other famous tag names found in the city at that time were PHASE 2, TRACY 168, and LEE 163d.

Graffiti art became so popular by 1975–1976 that youth in the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn were spray painting colorful murals, not only with their names, but also with portraits of their deceased loved ones, particularly those who lost their lives to gang-related violence. In addition, imagery from underground comics and television, and even Andy Warhol-style art began to emerge on the sides of subway cars.

Although graffiti art was initially associated with inner-city youth, “artists” from all economic backgrounds began displaying their work. Whether it was created by upper-class white kids from the Upper West Side or by middle-class Black kids, graffiti art had embedded itself in the lives of many New York City youths. This colorful art form gradually evolved into art works with a wide array of images, ranging from block letters to figures, signs, and symbols (stars and flags), to full-size cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse and Popeye, which could be seen virtually everywhere, inside and outside of subway cars, often even obscuring commercial maps and billboard advertisements.

The Metropolitan Transit Authority responded with dogs, barbed-wired fences, paint-removing acid baths, and undercover police squads. As a result of the Transit Authority’s attempt to clean up the city, Lee Quinones, a graffiti artist well known for his subway murals, resorted to painting on handball courts. Quinones’ court murals intermingled cartoon imagery with a strong moral sensibility (e.g., one mural pleaded for the end to the arms race). Quinones’ passion and obvious talent for drawing soon caught the attention of Fred Brathwaite, another local graffiti artist, who later became known as Fab 5 Freddy, the host of *Yo! MTV Raps*. Brathwaite approached Quinones about painting murals for pay. Quinones agreed, so together they formed a graffiti mural painting group known as the Fab 5. The other members were Lee, Doc, and Slave.

At this time, the Fab 5 graffiti artists painted for personal pleasure rather than for monetary reward. Later, however, the Fab 5 placed an advertisement in *The Village Voice*, offering to paint murals at a cost of \$5.00 per square foot. In an article in the February 12, 1979, *Village Voice*, after interviewing Brathwaite, Harold Smith implied that it was absurd to try to sell graffiti art works when the city was trying so hard to eradicate graffiti. Brathwaite, however, used his “street knowledge” to respond to Smith’s comment, describing graffiti art as the purest form of art that New York City had ever created, and revealing that his Fab 5 was heavily influenced by New Wave artists such as Warhol, Crumb, and Lichtenstein. It was reported that Brathwaite, in fact, knew that graffiti muralists were not influenced by, nor had they even heard of, these New Wave artists, but he responded in this way in an effort to link graffiti art to the hip downtown New York art scene. Nonetheless, the *Village Voice* article caught the attention of Claudio Bruni, an Italian art dealer, who invited the Fab 5 to display five of their canvases at an art show in Rome. All five paintings sold for a thousand dollars each. Soon other influential art dealers in the United States, Europe, and Japan were exhibiting graffiti in major galleries, giving it the kind of recognition and exposure that allowed this art form to reach mainstream audiences.

In the 1970s, the United Graffiti Artists (UGA) and the Nation of Graffiti Artists (NOGA) were formed, aiding in the development of workshops where youngsters could paint

and display their graffiti art in gallery shows. However, at the same time that graffiti art appeared to be prospering, it was receiving negative press, with stories and headlines that read, "Subway Graffiti Here Called Epidemic" (*The New York Times*, February 11, 1972); "Defacing New York has Become a Real Art" (*The Toronto Star*, October 20, 1972); and "Question Plan to Use Dogs to Fight Graffiti" (*The New York Daily News*, July 31, 1974) (Jenkins, 1999). Graffiti art had a twofold effect, because it reappeared in the 1980s as the background for music videos by artists such as Blondie (in her video with the song "Rapture"), in documentaries (*Style Wars* by Henry Chalfant), and in books (*Subway Art* by Henry Chalfant), as well as in movies (*Wild Style* and *Beat Street*).

Among the events that popularized graffiti art in the 1970s and 1980s, Hagar contends that one in particular played an instrumental role in connecting graffiti to hip hop culture. An article by Richard Goldstein in *The Village Voice* in December 1980 is credited with making this first connection. Goldstein, who was also the first to write about the positive value of graffiti art in a New York magazine in 1973, claimed that graffiti artists were not antisocial as they were often portrayed. Rather they were bright and intelligent people, who used this form of art to express the conditions in which they lived. In his article, Goldstein went on to link graffiti art and rap music, claiming that both originated from the same cultural conditions. His claim and/or assumption was the first of its kind. It has been argued that Goldstein's assumption was valid because of the success of some prominent graffiti writers, including PHASE 2 and Fab Five Freddy (Brathwaite), who later became a successful rap artist.

Beats or DJing

Kool Herc has been credited with being the first major hip hop DJ, beginning in 1973. Herc was born in 1954 as Clive Campbell in Kingston, Jamaica. He moved to the Bronx in 1967, uniting with his mother who had already migrated there in hopes of achieving a better life for her family. While attending high school in 1970, Campbell was given the nickname "Hercules" because of his impressive physique and aggressive style on the basketball court. Hercules was later shortened to Herc and soon after to Kool Herc, the tag name he used when he took an interest in graffiti writing. In addition to his strong passion for sports and graffiti writing, Herc was fascinated with music.

Herc's fascination with music stemmed from his upbringing in his native Jamaica. As a young boy, he frequently sneaked peeks through fences at yard parties. These parties were known as "dancehall culture" or "blues dances." One definition of "dancehall culture" frequently used today likens it to modern-day reggae. However, dancehall culture was simply a place where dances took place, whether it was in a large hall or in a slum yard in a ghetto of Jamaica. The rising popularity of rhythm "n" blues music introduced by Black American sailors stationed on the island, as well as by Black radio stations in nearby Miami, caused it to be in high demand. Some favorite rhythm "n" blues artists were Fats Domino, Amos Melburn, and Roy Brown.

Dick Hebdige in *"Cut'n'mix: Culture, identity and Caribbean music"* asserts that since local Jamaican bands were unsuccessful at replicating the sounds of American rhythm and blues artists, mobile sound systems with recorded music were created and were the largest, loudest, and most powerful mobile discotheque systems in Jamaica. These systems were comprised of roadies, engineers, and bouncers. In the spotlight of these sound systems were the DJs, who frequently talked over the music they played, a technique known as "toasting," which is considered to be the direct forebear of modern rap. "Toasting" is a rhymed monologue, which tells stories in the first person and which often thrived in prisons, street life, and the army. John Szwed, in *"The real old school"* defined "toasting" as an AfricanAmerican (rather than a Jamaican) poetic form that typically retells the stories of heroes who often spoke against the grain or status quo of society. Furthermore, David Toop in *"The rap attack: African jive to New York hip hop"* described toasts as lengthy rhymes told mostly by men who are usually "violent, scatological, obscene, misogynist," and were "used for decades to while away time in situations of enforced boredom, whether prison, armed service, or street corner life." A DJ would "toast" over the music by screaming short phrases to liven up the crowd and dancers. Examples of simple toasts were "work it, work it" or other popular phrases or slang expressions being used at that time. It was common to hear the DJ acknowledge people who were in attendance at the party as well.

Kool Herc took his knowledge of Jamaican culture, with its mobile sound systems and toasting, to the Bronx with him and began practicing extensively in his parents' apartment. According to S.H. Fernando Jr., in "Back in the day: 1975–1979" in 1973, Herc made his first DJ appearance at his sister's birthday party in a recreation center in the lobby of his apartment building. Soon thereafter, Herc began playing at block parties, parks, and community centers, slowly gaining popularity and a reputation as a skillful and talented DJ. His popularity grew so much that he started playing at then famous clubs like The Twilight Zone and the T-Connection.

What set Herc apart though, from other popular club DJs who played continuous music of the day (then it was disco music), was the revolutionary technique he created to spin the records. Herc never played an entire song, only the section that excited people the most, or the "break." This was the part where the beat was played in its purest form, where just the drums, bass, and rhythm guitars took over. Because the breaks of the songs were only a few seconds long, Herc expanded them by using two turntables with two records. He learned to extend the breaks indefinitely by using an audio mixer and two identical records by which he continuously replaced the desired segment or percussion sections of the day's popular songs. This technique became known as "beats" or "break-beats," which laid the foundation for "MCing." The MC or master of ceremonies is an entertainer on the microphone who amuses the people and makes them dance to his rhymes, which is called "b-boying." (Rhyming and b-boying will be discussed later.) Break-beats have also been credited with giving rise to much hip hop, dance, techno, and jungle or "house" music today.

Another feature that set Kool Herc apart from other DJs at the time was that he used various musical genres to break-beat in addition to disco. He played funk songs such as James

Brown's "Give It Up or Turn It All Loose" and soul and R&B (rhythm and blues) records such as Baby Huey's "Listen to Me" and Jimmy Castor Bunch's "It's Just Begun" to emphasize the loud percussion sounds during the break segment of the songs.

Herc incorporated Jamaican toasting with his DJ style at first by shouting short phrases but soon leaving the "shout outs" and microphone duties to others, due to the concentration he required to mix the beats in new and creative ways to move and entertain the crowd. Hebdige reported that Herc passed the microphone to two of his friends, Coke La Rock and Clark Kent, who subsequently became the first MC team called Kool Herc and the Herculoids. Herc's now-legendary status inspired other underprivileged youth to take an active interest in DJing, opening the doors for others to create new styles and techniques of their own, contributing to the development of hip hop culture today. Two other notable DJs worth mentioning are Afrika Bambaataa, known as Bam, and Joseph Saddler, known as Grandmaster Flash.

Kool Herc left an especially lasting impression on one particular youngster from the Bronx River Projects on the South Side—Afrika Bambaataa (born Kahyan Aasim in 1957) or Bam for short. The name Afrika Bambaataa originated with a famous nineteenth-century Zulu chief and meant "affectionate leader." Bam became known and respected as the "godfather" or the "grandfather" of hip hop culture. He was also the leader of one of the largest and most notorious street gangs in the city called the Black Spades (mentioned earlier).

Bam was an avid record collector and DJ. His interest in Kool Herc's DJ style inspired him to DJ more frequently, thus perfecting the skills that eventually gave him an opportunity to run a sound system at the Bronx River Community Center. Although Bam was the highly respected leader of the Black Spades, he formed The Organization, a community activist program that educated people about the threat of violence and drugs. Bam was so extremely intelligent and articulate when speaking about his visions of uniting Blacks and Hispanics to work toward positive change that in 1974 he actually inspired many gang members to participate in the projects under The Organization.

That same year, Bam reorganized The Organization and renamed it The Zulu Nation, inspired by his studies in African history and, more specifically, about the Zulus who fought with honor and simple weapons against colonialist Britain, in spite of these Africans' feelings of inferiority. Bam and The Zulu Nation comprised of DJs, MCs, break dancers, and graffiti writers, thus continuing to build upon the tradition of hip hop culture.

Bam's success as a DJ and his work with The Zulu Nation continued well into the late 1970s as he formed a relationship with Tom Silverman from Tommy Boy Records. This association led to the formation of the group Afrika Bambaataa and the Jazzy 5, who soon released the song "Jazzy Sensation" from the album *Tommy Boy 2*. In 1982, Bam's hit "Planet Rock" helped Silverman build Tommy Boy Records into a reputable leading record company as well as begin the electro-funk revolution, a sound that was later sampled in the works of popular artists such as the Chemical Brothers and Fatboy Slim. The Zulu Nation is known today as the Universal Zulu Nation, defined as "an international hip hop movement that upholds such principles as knowledge, wisdom, understanding, freedom, justice, equality, peace, unity,

love, and respect in their manifesto.”

Another important and relevant contributor to hip hop culture was another Bronx DJ with Jamaican roots by the name of Grandmaster Flash, born Joseph Saddler. Grandmaster Flash earned his nickname by his impressive hand-eye coordination when he mixed beats by listening to one record through a set of headphones while the other record continued to play. Although Theodore Livingston, the brother of Flash’s partner, Mean Gene, invented the art of the “needle-drop,” Flash is often credited with mastering the art, consequently surpassing Herc in skill and popularity. Needle-dropping prolonged short drum breaks by playing two copies of a record simultaneously and moving the needle on one turntable back to the start of the break while the other played (the two records did not need to be identical as was the case with Herc’s break-beat style). A technique known as “scratching” was invented around the same time by a DJ named Grand Wizard Theodor. Scratching is very similar to needle dropping in that the DJ slides the record back and forth underneath the needle in order to create rhythmic effects.

Flash incorporated a drum machine known as the “beat box” into his performances, which gained him even more respect and popularity as a DJ. The beat box was a manually operated machine, which produced an electronic beat with which Flash would drum a part in time with the track. This phenomenon led to later rap groups using their mouths, lips, and throats to produce sounds often referred to as the “human beat box.”

Rhymes

Rhyming allowed DJs to express their thoughts and feelings in a creative, expressive, and energizing manner, thus spreading a feeling of anticipation and excitement among the audience. Along with Herc, Flash has been credited with introducing and popularizing the art form known as MCing, as part of hip hop culture. As mentioned earlier when defining the DJing element of hip hop culture, MCing occurred when DJs “rapped” or “rhymed” short phrases over their music. Among the wider variety of oratorical precedents cited for MCing besides the Jamaican style of toasting, were the epic histories of the West African griot (the African oral traditionalist or storyteller who recites the history of his/her tribal community), talking blues songs, jailhouse toast (long rhyming poems recounting outlandish deeds and misdeeds), and the dozens (a ritualized word game based on exchanging insults, usually directed toward members of the opponent’s family). Other influences on MCing included the hipster-jive announcing styles of 1950s rhythm “n” blues DJs such as Jocko Henderson, the Black Power poetry of Amiri Baraka, Gil Scott-Heron, and the Last Poets, as well as the rapping sections in recordings by Isaac Hayes and George Clinton.

“Rapping,” although not called that at the time, was heard in America as far back as the 1850s. The trading of tall tales, the rhyming and trading of insults (the dozens), and creatively producing one’s own rhythmic “chest-whacking,” “thigh-slapping” sounds originated in West Africa. All of these forms have been known to contribute to hip hop culture and rap music in one way or another. Many of these traditional African tales or toasts cel-

brated mythical bad men boasting about how “bad” and/or powerful they were. Toasting with style and clever rhymes gave one status and power among one’s peers.

While it is acknowledged today that rap music had its roots in a variety of sources, including those mentioned above, Jamaican reggae music contributed just as much to rap’s development. Fernando describes the connection and similarities found between both genres of music, claiming that both emerged from oppressive environments that mirrored the attitude and reflected the lifestyle of the ghetto, both are rhythmic forms of music emphasizing the sounds of the bass more than any other chord, and both found their roots in African griots and Jamaican toasting.

As the lyrical art form of toasting or rapping evolved, it offered unlimited challenges for many. The only rules were to create authentic rhymes that synchronized with the beats of the music. This art form was accessible to anyone—rich, poor, or the inexperienced (no lessons were needed). One simply needed to practice and perfect his verbal skills in order to rhyme freely. The content of rap could be about anything, allowing for one’s imagination to run freely. The MC strived for originality and to be considered by one’s peers as being imaginative, inventive, or in slang, “def” (cool). In 1977, Grandmaster Flash used his DJing skills once again to impact hip hop culture, by popularizing and implementing the use of MCs in his performances. He formed a five-member group of his own known as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (similar to Afrika Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation). Members of the Furious Five included Cowboy (Keith Wiggins), Melle Mel (Melvin Glover), Kid Creole (Danny Glover), Scorpio (Eddie Morris), and Rahiem (Guy Williams). Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five have been credited with pushing MCing to an entirely different level because of their complicated routines such as back-to-back rhyming, in-tandem flows, and choreographed moves. The Furious Five were unique in that although they would break up phrases and all were rhyming, their rap sounded as if only one person was actually doing the rhyming. They were synchronizing in perfect harmony with one another.

By 1978, MCs became even more popular than DJs since they interacted more directly with the crowd, evoking unlimited surges of energy, excitement, and liveliness when dancing to the recorded sounds of music. Other famous MCs following in the Furious Five’s footsteps were Grand Wizard Theodore and the Fantastic Five, and the Treacherous Three.

Breaks or B-Boys and B-Girls

The word “b-boy” is derived from “break-boy” (“b-girl” meaning “break-girl”), a term DJ Kool Herc often used when describing the person(s) who stepped out and danced during the instrumental break in the music (break on the breaks). Breaking emphasizes various forms of body movement that create a unique style of dance and expression. Breaking involved dance moves that incorporated many different dance styles, reminiscent of every period from the Lindy hop or the jitterbug era to the African-rooted Brazilian martial art of capoeira. Many also claim that the “b” in “b-boying” originated from the African word “boioing,” which meant to “hop” or “jump.” All of these styles of dance can be seen in some shape or form in break-

ing known today as the “old school” style of dancing. The “old school” style included breaking, locking, and popping, whereas the present-day term “new school” style of dance incorporates all of the “old school” dance styles, but with more creative and futuristic moves.

DJ Kool Herc started using the term “b-boy” in the ghettos of New York City in the early 1970s. The term eventually became common urban vernacular when describing true, devoted hip hop males or females (“b-girls”) who understood the history of the culture. In the beginning, most b-boys/b-girls tended to be Black, underprivileged youth from the New York City ghettos. However, b-boying generated so much interest and popularity among Latino youth from the same area that it quickly became associated with them as well. B-boys/b-girls emphasized creating their own style and moves. The more difficult and creative a move was, the more likely one was to be given the prestigious label of being a “b-boy/b-girl.” Some popular moves still known and practiced today are the windmill (legs are spread in a v-shape while b-boy spins around from his upper back to his stomach, then returns onto his back, and so forth), the flare (legs spread in v-shape, b-boy supports himself on hands while spinning legs around him), the head spin (spin using the head as the pivot point), the body wave (move where it appears as if an invisible wave is traveling through the body), and the robot (mimicking robots seen on television in the 1970s), to name a few.

As mentioned earlier, real hip hop dancing (b-boying) originated in the streets and served as a substitute for violence (although at times, breaking caused fights to start due to the intense nature of the competitions). Many of the participants (as was the case with graffiti writing, MCing, and DJing) were former gang members who, rather than fighting, competed in breaking competitions to earn respect. Every element of hip hop culture described thus far involved earning respect and gaining recognition through competitions. “Breaking battles” involved “breaking crews” (groups of dancers who practiced and performed together) who were in competition with one another for the reputation of most creative and original moves.

The first known breaking crew was The Nigga Twins, followed by Afrika Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation, The Seven Deadly Sinners, Rockwell Association, Starchild La Rock, and the Rock Steady Crew. Breaking battles took place in a variety of places, ranging from the streets to parks, and eventually, to downtown nightclubs. According to Fernando, perhaps the most notable b-boy, who brought breaking to national exposure, was Richie “Crazy Legs” Colon, a member of the Rock Steady Crew. In 1983, representatives from Paramount Pictures approached Crazy Legs after witnessing his dancing skills at a previous show held in the Roxy. He was offered a cameo appearance in the movie *Flashdance*. He was to fill in for Jennifer Beal’s character during one of the dance scenes involving a backspin. It was at this point, and to the chagrin of Crazy Legs, that the media coined the term “break-dancing” as an art form. Crazy Legs (cited in Fernando’s, *The new beats: Exploring the music, culture, and attitudes of hip hop*) explained that the b-boys in the parks would dance when the DJ’s took a break from their beats. Crazy Legs was adamant in noting that the b-boys were referred to as “break boys” in the streets and not as “break dancers” as mainstream media termed the dancers.

Hollywood capitalized on the new “fad” of breaking as more movies and documentaries attempted to portray hip hop culture the way “they” interpreted it to be. For example, in 1984, Harry Belafonte produced *Beat Street*, a movie portraying the lives of legendary b-boys from the crews Magnificent Force, Rock Steady, and the New York City Breakers. However, the actors in the movie were much older than the real life b-boys, and their feeble attempts to sound as if they had grown up on the streets were ill-received, as they were viewed as being fake and unrealistic. The barrage of media exposure that breaking received at this time (on *David Letterman*, *20/20*, prime time’s *Fame*, and in performances for Queen Elizabeth and Prince Charles, to name a few) ironically also killed its popularity by 1984. The 1990s to present-day have, however, seen a revival of the art form, reintroducing breaking to the stage as an integral part of hip hop culture.

Hip Hop Fashion

As mentioned earlier, hip hop culture is continuously growing and expanding as it also includes its own fashion, language, and lifestyle. The baggy style of clothing commonly worn by today’s youth may be considered by some as the “new school” style of hip hop, but it should be made clear that this style did not originate from hip hop culture. Such common misperceptions are often perpetuated through the media, as well as by youth today who do not fully understand the history and culture of hip hop.

The style of clothing that b-boys, graffiti writers, DJs, and MCs wore included cheap Addidas and Puma sneakers, tracksuits, and hooded sweatshirts to hide the writers’ identity and protect their heads from the wire fences at subway yards. There are other theories that deserve mentioning and that have credibility. One explanation that people living in urban communities offer for the baggy clothing was the poverty in which they lived. Many poor families could not afford to buy clothes for all of their children, so once older siblings outgrew their clothes, they would pass them along as “hand-me-downs” to their younger siblings. Another valid argument is that this “style” actually originated from prisons as the outfits worn by prisoners were often too baggy and/or loosely fitting (no belts were allowed for obvious reasons); thus many prisoners walked around with their pants hanging off their hips. Upon release, these prisoners (often, young minority men) brought this style back to their old neighborhoods, thus creating a style of dress that would continue for many years to come.

Poetry of the Oppressed: Pedagogy of the Urban Lyricist

Rap Music as Postmodern Oral Poetry

In the wake of the heightened social and political consciousness of the 1960s, postmodern perspectives on popular culture began attempting to breathe life back into art by focusing

on form rather than authorship. What a text says, as a function of how it says it, came to mean more than what an author was attempting to express. The form became the art. Hip hop lyricists, commonly referred to as “MCs” or “rappers,” emerged within this postmodern milieu and reformulated oral poetry by fusing rhymed lyrics with musical tracks recorded and replayed using advanced technologies.

Since its emergence in the South Bronx, rap music has drawn heavily on the lyricism and layered meanings within the black vernacular and sermonic traditions. Failing to acknowledge the significance of these linkages, some critics have attempted to reduce rap to its roots in the “toast” tradition by claiming it had more to do with “talking hype” than with oral expression or poetry. Arguing for a more expansive view, acclaimed poet Tracie Morris in M.D. Jones’s “SOULS: *Understanding the New Black Poetry*” observes, hip has been the primary force behind the resurgence of the “spoken word” movement even for those who do not use the techniques.

While rappers may not commonly regard themselves “spoken word artists” because of the particular structure and aesthetics associated with “MCing,” the link between these art forms has grown considerably during the last decade. The live energy of both the hip hop concert and the spoken word performance resurrect a sense of spontaneity in poetry. The simultaneously distinct and interconnected nature of these related forms challenges rigid traditional notions of form altogether. The melding of these two art forms in this manner is not only enriching for each art, it also allows audiences new ways to interpret and participate in each art. If hip hop and spoken word poetry have the liberatory potential to create such energetic, inspiring responses and encouraging audience participation that elicit social consciousness, we contend that each art form can easily be integrated into and practiced simultaneously in classroom contexts at all education levels.

Based upon the philosophy of Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire, hip hop and spoken word poetry are just one example of a cultural literacy that, as a political discourse, all people can assert their right and responsibility not only to read, understand, and transform their own experiences but also to reconstitute their relationships with the wider society by writing, voicing, and performing these experiences.

All four original elements of hip hop culture (graffiti art, DJing, rhyming, and breaking) can be considered postmodern texts that can be deconstructed, critiqued, and analyzed because of their creative, energetic, and expressive nature, as well as their empowering potential to excite crowds whether it be visually, verbally, kinesthetically, or auditorily. For example, graffiti art is a postmodern text because of its constantly changing and creative means of expression. Furthermore, graffiti art expressed the untold story of oppressive social and living conditions; DJing is a postmodern text due to its expressive, creative, and ever-evolving nature as employed by the DJ when playing, mixing, and talking over records played from a turntable; rhyming provides an empowering postmodern text because of the potential liberatory and empowering interpretations the lyrics may evoke; the creativity and unique body movements involved in the art of breaking can be read, analyzed, and deconstructed just as an English teacher has students read traditional written texts. The expressive nature

found in all four elements or texts can lead to many different interpretations and inferences supporting the ideologies reflected in critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy invites students to look at “what is” to determine “what could be,” and to find a way to move from “where we are” to “where we want to be.” Analyzing, critiquing, and interpreting hip hop texts and ultimately performing them through the spoken word from a critical perspective allows students to ask and answer such questions. Critical pedagogy also means taking a close, critical look at schooling and society, and employing a historical perspective to determine how we came to be where we are. Critical pedagogues often refer to this kind of critique as historical materialism. Within this context, we are forced to ask questions such as these: How is it that the material conditions we are currently experiencing are the result of the progress of history? What actions can we then take to effect changes? What are the obstacles to change? Why are they there? How can they be overcome? The obstacles to freedom cannot be overcome until one is aware that they exist. This questioning and coming to awareness is what Paulo Freire called *consciencization*.

In order for students to study hip hop texts and perform their spoken word poetry, cultural workers like Freire emphasize that we must first explore the history of hip hop and the spoken word movement by introducing students to the origins and culture of both hip hop and spoken word. Freire believed that freedom begins with the recognition of a system of oppressive relations and with the realization of one’s own place in that system. Incorporating hip hop and spoken word as critical pedagogical tools in the classroom enables members of an oppressed group to develop an awareness or critical consciousness of their situation as a beginning point of liberating and emancipatory change. This liberating practice requires reflection and action, as well as interpretation and change. In the classroom, Freire’s critical, liberatory pedagogy translates into the deconstruction and interpretation of hip hop texts that transcend to praxis in the form of performance (spoken word) poetry.

The critical, liberatory pedagogy Freire refers to helps students develop the skills necessary to critically examine the social, political, and economic injustices that affect their lives. Empowering students in such a way gives them a “voice” that has previously been silenced, thus legitimizing their power. Critical pedagogy encourages students to think critically, to question conflicting sources of information, and to formulate and understand concepts themselves. According to cultural worker Melissa Fernandez’ (leadership trainer, poet, and artist) testimonial, “hip hop, poetry, and spoken word are tools in the leadership training experiences I design for children and teens throughout New York City. By reading and understanding the lyrics of other great poets, the power of words, ideas, and visualization in poetry become a tangible, recognizable reality. In writing poetry, students are given the opportunity to explore and identify their own feelings, an important part of personal development and growth. They are also afforded the opportunity to realize the universality of their individual experiences and hopefully recognize that poetry and art are instruments they can use to liberate their greater human self expression.”

Critical educators or cultural workers who, as Freire suggests, “talk to learners and with them” and “from listening to learners to being heard by them” is similar to what James Beane

in "*Curriculum integration: Designing the core of democratic education*" refers to as "integrative learning" or "unforgettable learning experiences." Beane describes integrative learning as having constructive, reflective experiences that not only broaden and deepen both parties' present understandings of the world but that also enable both students and teachers to learn from one another in such a way that new and subjugated knowledge may be formed, carried forward, and put to use in new situations. By collaborating with each other, both teachers and students feel less of a need to compete, and tend to be more thoughtful and cooperative. Empowering students in this way actually frees the teacher to join their students in facilitating growth rather than constantly having to monitor, direct, and supervise their learning and behavior. A curriculum organized around personal, social, cultural, economic, and political issues builds a sense of community and belonging, as well as brings the notion of democracy back into the classroom.

Educators are cheating both themselves and their students by not working in and with the various mediums that speak loudest to their students. Excluding the various forms of hip hop texts from the curriculum excludes voices from being heard, denying the valid existence of life experiences, languages, and cultural expressions of many students. The refusal to incorporate such a pedagogy supports the belief that the culture that students bring to the schools is not legitimate or valued. The inclusion of the students' views (subjugated knowledge) creates an awareness that all individuals can claim an identity on their own rather than one forced on them. Kincheloe and Steinberg in *Changing multiculturalism* argue that when individuals reach such awareness and are able to create their own identity, they are then able to confront the forces that have previously shaped them, which ultimately moves people to redefine their worldview and way of seeing.

A testimonial by Núrí Chandler-Smith, Ed.M., who has taught hip hop at Northeastern and Harvard Universities asserts, "Hip hop is a conduit for youth expression and a means for transforming the world through its social commentary. Because of this, and the tremendous influence hip hop has on the lives of young people on a global level, it can be used as an incomparable tool for education. Learning is more meaningful when it's not just about gathering knowledge of facts and figures that someone else thinks are important, but when you can see that the world you're learning about is your world. Students learning through hip hop become engaged in the material immediately because they can relate to it, because hip hop is the soundtrack of their existence." As testimonials of educators already integrating hip hop texts and spoken word poetry into their classrooms prove, both art forms are one kind of cultural literacy whose addition to the classroom curriculum renders positive benefits that include the legitimation of student knowledge, student voices, and student agency.