

---

---

## TRUE HEADS

### Historicizing the Hip\_Hop “Nation” in Context

by R. Scott Heath

Hip\_hop culture is intricately linked to any comprehensive understanding of race and national identity in the United States at the turn of the twentieth-first century. What was initially developed as a mode of marginal expression, conceived as a countermeasure to the material and social inequities of American postindustrialism, has, in the past several years, become perhaps the most prominent medium by which blackness is represented in the U.S. and by which blackness and Americanness are represented globally. And hip\_hop, which might best be imagined as a way of reading and critiquing public culture, is itself troubled by the ways that it is read and recontextualized by its detractors and proponents alike. For this reason it is imperative that we explore the extent to which hip\_hop discourse seems to typify American convention as much as it informs it, particularly in light of recent international events that have reignited some tough discussions about what Americanness means. This project elucidates the challenges of historiography as it concerns a cultural practice that has been racially marked as black and that has been understood as a site of militant, class-based struggle and resistance.

Hip\_hop and conversations around hip\_hop almost necessarily compromise the boundaries of private and public expressive spheres, challenging us as critical thinkers to account for the consistent evidence of alternative intellectualisms and revised epistemologies. The work facilitates a dialogue through which parameters of nationalist community and cultural authenticity are defined and readjusted constantly. In addressing hip\_hop as a functional cultural text, I am giving some fresh attention to its transition from a system of alterity to an internationally operative organizing mechanism, and I am pushing my instinct that the idea of this transition will become increasingly less compelling unless we begin to investigate more intently the details of this process and its ramifications for the ways that African Americanness is constructed and appropriated. Considering some new theoretical possibilities around a holistically situated hip\_hop, this project brings together some apparently disparate cultural media and found objects toward a useful critical effort.

#### Brooklyn in a Box: Institutionalizing Hip\_Hop Culture

In December 2000, I visited the *Hip-Hop Nation: Roots, Rhymes, and Rage* exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (BMA).<sup>1</sup> The groundbreaking project, which had begun its

tour at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, was comprised of more than 400 artifacts—from original party flyers to vintage shell-toe Adidas sneakers—juxtaposed in such a manner as to document what was referred to in this case as the thirty-year history of hip\_hop culture. The items were arranged thematically with the intention of situating hip\_hop within a continuum of African American popular expression. This headlining display included interactive centers (mock turntables and the like) that extended into the lobby of the BMA, creating a noisy spectacle in contrast to the typically sober atmosphere of the building. And, as if to emphasize hip\_hop's commercial resonance and consumerist propensities, the museum shop was fully stocked with t-shirts, stickers, CDs, and other wares to accommodate a traffic of patrons that was certainly larger, more ethnically diverse, and more bustling than usual. I dodged elbows and tight surveillance and somewhere among the smudged glass cases, amid the chicken scratch of Tupac Shakur's composition book and Queen Latifah's diary, I located a space of inquiry about who had organized this information and about who were its intended readers. Cultural critic Tony Bennett discusses the function of museums in the formation of the bourgeois public sphere and in the enlistment of art and culture for the cause of social reform through the governance of knowledge acquisition. In a statement about alterity and the shaping of cultural identity, he observes that

The construction of the public sphere as one of polite and rational discourse [. . .] required the construction of a negatively coded other sphere—that comprised the places of popular assembly—from which it might be differentiated. If the institutions of the public sphere comprised places in which its members could assemble and, indeed, recognize themselves as belonging to the same public, this was only because of the rules which excluded participation by those who—in their bodily appearances and manners—were visibly different. (28)

The public sphere to which Bennett refers is one that Jürgen Habermas describes as a bourgeois society comprised of literary and philosophical gatherings, coffee houses, academies, art galleries, and salons—institutions that allowed the cultural elite to self-consciously distinguish themselves from the masses of the population.<sup>2</sup> The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw the inception of the public museum as we know it. Exhibits formerly relegated to the private collections of royalty were opened to the broader populace under the auspices of the bourgeois classes who would, by the middle-to-late nineteenth century, incorporate the museum into a civilizing mission designed to reform the culturally illiterate toward a more enthusiastic appreciation of the accomplishments of Western man. Displays were arranged in such a manner as to direct the movement of patrons' bodies and to govern their perception and digestion of information. Like city libraries and other government-funded institutions, public establishments like the BMA are theoretically open and accessible to the entire citizenry so that anyone may have access to the knowledge contained therein and so that everyone might participate in this establishment of cultural identity and documentation of national heritage. Regarding museum attendance, however, there still exist certain obvious discrepancies between theory and

practice that can be marked along lines of race and class. The institution still maintains the residue of an exclusionary past that smacks of discrimination, objectification, and imperialist “discovery” in the ordering of things. This is a difficult subject in itself, but the matter of discrepancy can become especially important when we begin to consider the methods by which a hip\_hop nation is conceptualized.

The idea of nation as formulated through a shared cultural text is inherently essentialist in that it assumes a likeness of interpretive methodology and an acceptance of cultural convention as prescribed by certain, often self-appointed, bodies. Further, the notion of hip\_hop nationhood is specifically problematic in that the selective classification and evaluative historicization of this intellectual work can be in some ways restrictive to the development and expansion of the culture itself.<sup>3</sup> Benedict Anderson’s idea of imagined community, well known in the conversation of nation building and perhaps a bit hackneyed in certain circles, is worth revisiting here in the context of hip\_hop culture and its expressive practices. Anderson defines a nation as an “imagined political community” whose members, though personally and geographically disparate, are bound together by a shared text of language and ideas. This community is “imagined,” he writes, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). The dissemination of the connective text that makes this communion possible is, Anderson contends, greatly facilitated by the advent of print capitalism—that is, a nascent publishing industry—such that in the space of what he calls “homogeneous, empty time” an omniscient reader is made able to imagine the “anonymous, simultaneous activity” of his fellow readers on the other side of the globe (26). Accordingly, in this era of radio, television, DVDs, and MP3s, the cultural products of hip\_hop aestheticism are being disseminated and transposed more broadly and more rapidly than ever before. A practitioner in one part of the world reappropriates pieces of popular nostalgia to compose an autonomous, representative text that informs a global “nation” of hip\_hop heads who happen, at any moment, to be spinning the same CD. As a model of community organization, this “nation” of hip\_hop is necessarily figurative in that the consolidated group of cultural producers and consumers would be recognized as *international* and *transnational* in terms of nation proper.

A community of “imagined readers” also represents an assumed audience for the author whose text provides an imaginary communal space. Certainly, in terms of hip\_hop production, the assumed audience varies per artist and sometimes per artist’s composition. Discourse commonly taken as outward statements of a rebellious youth against the inequities of mainstream society is often part of an important dialogue happening inside the cultural text itself. This conversation is exemplified in the tradition of battling that pervades hip\_hop. An emcee, deejay, b-boy, or graffiti writer is, in many cases, addressing another member of his or her community; aesthetic advancement and innovation are frequently instigated by the challenge of besting an artistic rival. As much as the hip\_hop nation endeavors to define itself from the margins of mainstream society, it is also a space of intellectual exchange in which practitioners and consumers continuously negotiate a definitive expression of the culture. Anderson’s imagined community is a potentially class-specific enterprise in that a population’s literacy remains a delimiting factor in its capacity for solidarity, as the community’s existence and expansion are reliant specifically upon

the interpretation of the written word and upon the spread of print capitalism. Hip\_hop, without question, demands its own degree of *cultural* literacy, but this is a sort of knowledge not predicated on access to any institution of formal education—it is a literacy that is thus more fluidly attained, a readership more easily cultivated.

Prominently displayed in the Brooklyn Museum exhibit was the February 8, 1999, issue of *Time* magazine, the cover of which features the multicolored title “Hip-Hop Nation” overlaying the face of emcee/singer Lauryn Hill. Lauryn’s appearance on the cover of this periodical is especially significant because the corresponding article is a celebration of what *Time* calls hip\_hop’s *twenty*-year history of influence on American culture. Also, and perhaps more importantly, Lauryn’s face is featured here as opposed to that of Kool Herc, Crazy Legs, Grandmaster Flash, or any number of old-school, older male hip\_hop pioneers. Through print technology, then ten-time Grammy nominee Lauryn Hill—a decidedly mainstream artist—is positioned as the chief representative of the hip\_hop nation and its legacy before a decidedly mainstream and international readership. So, here we are urged to return to the questions of who sets the definitive parameters of a particular culture and of who chooses the representatives of this culture. Hip\_hop can be historicized in any number of ways: It can be located within a continuum of black cultural movements including the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. It can be traced, as by Amiri Baraka (writing as LeRoi Jones), through an evolution of African American musical production, with the blues, jazz, and R&B as its predecessors.<sup>4</sup> Or it can be mapped diasporically as a point of convergence for African polyrhythms, Brazilian capoeira, and Jamaican sound systems. Whether continuist, evolutionist, or diasporacist in approach, each historiographical method of reading is dependent upon a particular emphasis on race, nationality, expressive form, or another critical paradigm, to maintain its logical viability. The “Hip-Hop Nation” article itself includes a product-based timeline which measures the development of the culture (or more precisely of its music) beginning with the Sugar Hill Gang’s 1979 release of “Rapper’s Delight” and extending through Lauryn’s success at the 1999 Grammys, with each historical marker corresponding to a major American media event.<sup>5</sup> Again, we are encouraged toward an inquiry into cultural authority, this time with the questions of who is responsible for these editorial decisions and why these editors are invested in this particular turn of logic.

Regarding to the *Time* magazine article and the BMA exhibit, a further question might be posed concerning the physical and cognitive space in which hip\_hop heads become readers (or patrons) of these images of themselves and to what degree their critiques of these ideas are actually allowed to influence what is shown.<sup>6</sup> In response to a tradition of nationalist discourse dominated by historicist methodology, cultural theorist Homi Bhabha proposes a sort of “double-writing” in the narration of nation by which a cultural liminality is manifest in the function of the people both as the written historical *objects* of a nationalist pedagogy and as the writerly *subjects* by which this nationalism is “thought” and signified. Of this ambivalence in national definition he writes at length:

It is precisely in reading between these borderlines of the nation-space that we can see how the ‘people’ come to be constructed within a range of discourses as a double narrative movement. The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic.

They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference where the claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address. We then have a contested cultural territory where the people must be thought in a double-time; the people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event; the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process. The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*. (297)

Consider, here, the different ways in which we are able to *think* a hip\_hop nation. We might, for instance, trace its *history* from Jamaican youth Clive Campbell's migration to the Bronx in 1967, or from November 14, 1974, what the Universal Zulu Nation has designated as the official birthdate of hip\_hop culture. We could view its lived *practice* through the anonymous eyes of a fourteen-year-old aspiring emcee who, though she reads *The Source* regularly, has never witnessed b-boying live and knows little about the evolution of hip\_hop prior to 1993. Still, it is through the sometimes uncomfortable and often unacknowledged interdependence of pedagogy and performance—a continuous re-coordination of originary points inside a contested historicism, juxtaposed with a fervent reaffirmation of the culture in the invention of new slang and styles of dress—that conceptual boundaries are chiasmatically informed and pressed. The technique of sampling in hip\_hop music production illustrates the tension that lies between these two approaches to cultural definition. Popular critic Nelson George suggests that the post-soul music generation who spawned what is now recognized as hip\_hop aesthetic may be the first generation of African American youth to truly experience cultural nostalgia (xi). But this nostalgia is skewed significantly by trend and perspective as a deejay gleans snippets of previously documented media—such as music, film, and television commercials—and integrates them into new compositions. Artists are lauded not only for their creative selection of materials from the past but also for their technical proficiency; these threads of cultural history are hidden skillfully within the fabric of the expressive present. A deejay's level of originality is determined not by the newness of the parts but by the innovative manner in which he or she is able to parlay these parts into a cohesive, aesthetically challenging whole. By this process, memory is refigured—often beyond immediate recognition—in its conveyance and interpretation, and it is in this area of ambivalence that meaning is revealed. In the friction between historicity and temporality, as the interrelated pedagogical and performative aspects of the culture push and pull against one another, a cohesive yet continuously shifting narrative of a hip\_hop nation is formulated.

### “We Are Hip\_Hop”: Articulating a People’s Manifesto

Borne out in subaltern spaces, hip\_hop springs, initially, from the imagination of a working-class urban youth and is constituted of four original elements—emceeing, deejaying, b-boying, and graffiti writing—along with their numerous derivatives.<sup>7</sup> As we come to understand hip\_hop as a cultural text, we are able to locate rap as the most widely recognizable discursive mechanism by which the culture’s aesthetic is conveyed.<sup>8</sup> This expressive form serves as the major disseminating vessel—characteristically lyrical and frequently narrative—by which everything from popular vocabulary to clothing styles can be created, articulated, measured, altered, commodified, and appropriated for consumption by an increasingly global public. What does it mean that rap, though a largely written genre, is performed audibly—and in some sense visibly—for its audience rather than read in quiet solitude? In the area of “homogeneous, empty time,” the cultural community of hip\_hop is being enunciated in the minds of producers and consumers connected by a collective body of vernacular and verse.

But, here, I am more specifically interested in the conversation happening *between* the rhymes. Standardized by De La Soul with their *3 Feet High and Rising* (1989), the hip\_hop “skit” is a parenthetical segue by which an artist attempts to construct a cultural image around and between the musical tracks on his or her album.<sup>9</sup> On his 1999 album *Beneath the Surface*, Wu-Tang Clan member GZA/Genius includes a sketch that suggests not only the social and commercial resonance of his own work but also the global prevalence of hip\_hop culture in general. Titled simply “Skit #1,” the segment, whose dialogue is delivered by alternating male and female voices, is designed as a futuristic product advertisement. The announcers state:

You no longer have to stand in front of me to feel my presence, to reach out and touch me, to offer not only words of support but a comforting hand. Live my experiences from one thousand miles away. Feel sand pour out of your hands on the beach in Hawai’i from a subway station in New York. Share my pain, my joy, my triumphs, and failures. You don’t have to be there to be here. Seven Senses advanced cellular phone network will connect you in every way—verbally, mentally, spiritually, and physically. (Track 4)

Implicit in the GZA skit are the ways in which the hip\_hop cultural product—characterized metaphorically as a new-age communications system—transcends geographical boundaries, as well as calendrical time, through a network of shared cognitive awareness and emotional empathy, across a vast area of temporal space. Still, here I am thinking more specifically of what I call the hip\_hop *manifesto*, a more obvious and substantive statement concerning the nature and direction of the culture and its practice. Appearing often at the beginning of an album as an introductory track, the manifesto is a rhetorical space in which an emcee (or sometimes a deejay) does not rhyme but rather *speaks* at length to an audience of imagined listeners, imparting what is represented as a shared principle of cultural practice.

Brooklyn emcee Mos Def in “Fear Not of Man,” from his 1999 album *Black on Both Sides*, articulates hip\_hop as a cultural entity that is directly reflective of the condition and aims of the population that participates in its development.<sup>10</sup> And he defines this entity in resistance to external forces that would endeavor to devalue or to otherwise restrict its continued subsistence. Following an Islamic prayer, over a percussive track laced sparsely with live instrumentation, Mos Def relates:

That was for Brooklyn. Ha, ha. We get it every time. Shout out to all of my crew—east, west, north, south, on the Continent, Europe, all abroad, international. A lot of things goin’ on, y’all. Twenty-first century is comin’; twentieth century almost done. A lot of things have changed; a lot of things have not—mainly us. We gon’ get it together, right? I believe that. Listen, people be askin’ me all the time, “Yo, Mos, what’s gettin’ ready to happen with hip\_hop?” I tell ‘em, “You know what’s gon’ happen with hip\_hop? Whatever’s happenin’ with us. If we smoked out, hip\_hop is gon’ be smoked out. If we doin’ alright, hip\_hop is gon’ be doin’ alright.” People talk about hip\_hop like it’s some giant livin’ in the hillside, comin’ down to visit the townspeople. We *are* hip\_hop. Me, you, everybody—we *are* hip\_hop. So hip\_hop is goin’ where we goin’. So the next time you ask yourself where hip\_hop is goin’, ask yourself, “Where am I goin’? How am I doin’?” And you’ll get a clear idea. So if hip\_hop is about the people and hip\_hop won’t get better until the people get better, then how do people get better? Well, from my understanding, people get better when they start to understand that they are valuable. And they not valuable because they got a whole lot of money or ‘cause somebody think they sexy, but they valuable ‘cause they been created by God. And God makes you valuable. And whether or not you recognize that value is one thing. You got a lot of societies and governments tryin’ to *be* God, wishing that they *were* God. They want to create satellites and cameras everywhere and make you think they got the all-seeing eye. I guess the Last Poets wasn’t too far off when they said that certain people got a God complex. I believe it’s true. I don’t get phased out by none of that . . . none of the helicopters, the TV screens, the newscasters, the satellite dishes. They just wishin’. They can’t never really do that. When they tell me to fear they law, when they tell me to try to have some fret in my heart behind the things that they do, this is what think in my mind. And this is what I say to them, and this is what I’m saying to you. Check it. (Track 1)

As Mos Def’s speech branches off into rhyme, his imagined listener is left with the implications that hip\_hop culture is presently in a negative state of affairs (“We gon’ get it together, right?”) and that this same culture rests currently on the brink of transformation (“What’s gettin’ ready to happen with hip\_hop?”). Even as his idea is loosely tied to millennialist prophecy, he suggests a liminality of culture and a potential for amelioration that is reliant upon a temporal definition of hip\_hop nation. Mos Def emphasizes hip\_hop’s tangible fluidity in a manner parallel to Bhabha’s celebration of “the scraps, patches, and rags of daily life” that become so integral to the reaffirmation of cultural identity. “We *are*

hip\_hop," Mos states, "Me, you, everybody—we *are* hip\_hop." But is "everybody" really *everybody*? Mos Def's hip\_hop is reflective of, and dependent upon, the condition of "the people" ("Hip\_hop won't get better until the people get better"), but as this emcee begins to discuss the culture in terms of nationalist self-preservation, it comes clear that the "we" who are going to "get it together" are, if nothing else, a body distinct from the legislators, law enforcement officers, and television journalists of the United States.

Feminist critic Janet Lyon describes the political manifesto as a mechanism by which a cultural minority establishes a base of opposition to a dominant ideology by creating an indeterminate rhetorical constituency of "we the people" and binding them through a "linguistic contract" against forces of hegemony. Stylistically, the manifesto is characterized by an "eschewal of rhetorical ornament" (which, in the case of hip\_hop music, would mean no rhyming) and an "unobstructed rhetorical clarity" by which the author is able "to channel self-adjudging political truths" (13–14). With an authority couched in the assumed self-evidence of these truths, the manifesto's author speaks from a space of marginality in which the oppositional claim of "the people" becomes the articulation of resistance. Lyon states that

The power of the people's voice [. . .] is produced and deployed in the manifesto's use of the pronoun "we." Indeed, especially as manifesto-like forms gain wide intelligibility during the French Revolution, "we" becomes not only the nomenclature of a speaking group, but also a rhetorical device to evoke audiences, and to mark the distance in ideological ground between those created audiences and their scripted oppressor. With the proliferating discourses of radicalism in the eighteenth century, the discursive terrain in the manifesto between "we" and "you" or between "we" and "they" becomes increasingly uninhabitable: "we" (i.e., the signatories of or consenters to the manifesto) occupy a public position of high moral ground (even if only in the subjunctive mood), in part by being rhetorically and semantically opposed in a Manichean fashion to "they," the blind opponents, who act as a textual repository for corruption or vice. The manifesto's creation of new audiences occurs, in other words, around an identification with virtue (in one or another of its many encryptions) and its oppression by hegemonic forces. (24)

Like Bennett, Lyon also addresses the emergence of a distinctive bourgeois public sphere. Her emphasis, however, is not on this particular social sector but rather on the area inhabited by the presumably marginalized plebian masses who comprise one part of the potential audience of the same manifesto in which the bourgeoisie are positioned so often as the antagonistic "you" or "they." Of this potential audience, the plebian public sphere holds the position of the "we" for whom the manifesto serves as a representative text. And it is its pronominal indeterminacy by which the manifesto as a genre—much like the cultural text of hip\_hop—is able to render a cognitive segue between the readership (literal or otherwise) of the plebian and the bourgeois public spheres. The political manifesto, not unlike an emcee's verse, is written as though it might be spoken aloud before a public audience; it is rhetorically designed to reach and to galvanize even those generally considered illiterate. And in the rhetoric of hip\_hop lyricism, we are dealing not only with



an audience that is imagined but also with what Lyon calls a “claim to multivocality,” by which the work of one or few authors is cast from a speaking position of indefinite physical dimensions and amplified by its own ambivalent character (26). The mutivocality suggested in the manifesto form is displayed quite literally in the group-chant hooks common to rap compositions (particularly those written and performed by East Coast crews) and in the sonic resonance of rhymes delivered (and especially completed) in unison. Of course, this particular manifestation of rhetorical devices contributes also to the stereotypical impression of hip\_hop performance as a horde of young, unintelligent black men all yelling unintelligibly at the top of their lungs. Cultural historian Tricia Rose, in her seminal *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), comments on the tendency of hip\_hop heads to associate themselves in local crews or posses “as a source of alternative identity formation and social status” in postindustrial communities that lack more formal institutions of support and recreation (34). The expressive cogency of these sometimes elaborate and overlapping systems of empowerment is affirmed and magnified conceptually by a multivocality rooted in an assumed authority of representation through which community is pronounced.

Mos Def theorizes a performative space drawn directly and organically from the daily experience of his constituency. He positions his potential audience, “the people” of the hip\_hop nation, squarely against an anonymous agenda of government and media antagonism. The members of Mos Def’s hip\_hop community are identified intuitively as those who struggle against oppression, and the emcee makes a certain rhetorical distinction between “the people” (“we”) and the “societies and governments” (“they”) who would control and threaten the wellbeing of the former. “The people,” to whom Mos himself belongs and whom he continues to address directly, become associated with the societal margins—those who have been excluded and subjugated and who operate outside and contrary to Lyon’s “dominant ideology.” Mos assumes a moral high ground based on a (predominantly Muslim) religiosity and a commitment to the spiritual betterment of society’s masses. The poor and the oppressed are equated with the righteous as the valuation of hip\_hop is based on its relationship to God and on the capacity of “the people” to recognize God within themselves. The enemy here is “they” who would attempt to monitor and to hinder the activities of the struggling people and who would advocate a value system based on material status. Throughout his manifesto, Mos dialogues directly with his rhetorical constituency in order to rally them to constructive action.

Conceived and organized by the RZA, the Wu-Tang Clan is a collective of emcees and producers who hail primarily from the Staten Island borough of New York. On “Intro” from the 1997 album *Wu-Tang Forever*, the RZA offers a manifesto in which the hip\_hop community is still defined temporally (and perhaps more literally through its performance), but with more specific hints toward a cultural historicity, toward a pedagogy of something stationary, a standard to be upheld. And where Mos Def makes a statement against *external* forces of opposition, the RZA suggests an *internal* struggle happening within a nationalist paradigm. Like Mos, he also addresses his assumed constituency directly, but he alternates between a conversation with this audience and an angry confrontation of those whom he defines as the people’s opposition. Backed by a minimalist, percussionless track, the RZA states emphatically:

Yo, I'm s . . . Yo, one, two, one, two. Yo, live in effect. You got the King Ruler Zig-Zag-Zig Allah—commonly known to y'all as the RZA. Yo, before we go on to side 2 or side B of this double CD, I'm sayin', I wanna give y'all a little announcement, man. For the last year it's been a lot of music comin' out; the shit been weak, youknowwhatimsayin. A lot of niggas try to take hip\_hop and make that shit R&B—rap and bullshit, youknowwhatimsayin—or make that shit funk. Fuck dat. This is emceeing right here; this is hip\_hop. . . . Wu-Tang gon' bring it to you in the purest form. I got the GZA on my side, Killah Priest, Sons of Man, Royal Fam, Killarmy, Gravediggas, Twelve O'Clock. Yo, we wanna let y'all niggas know somethin', man. To my people all across the world—Japan, Europe, youknowwhatimsayin, Canada, knowwhatimean, Austria, Germany, Sweden—yo, this is true hip\_hop you listenin' to right here, in the purest form. This ain't no R&B with a wack nigga takin' a loop, re-loopin' that shit, thinkin' it's gon' be the sound of the culture, youknowwhatimsayin. (All that player bullshit.) I'm sayin', all that player dressin' up . . . Act like this some kinda fashion show, man. Youknowwhatimsayin, this is hip\_hop right here. Youknowwhatimsayin, this is lyrics, emceeing. Hey yo, and to y'all niggas who think you gon' become an emcee overnight, youknowwhatimsayin, you better snap out that fuckin' dream, man. It takes years for this. You Cat-in-the-Hat-ass rappers, you Doctor Seuss, Mother Goose, simple-minded . . . (Stop runnin' up on niggas wit' all that wack shit.) Word up, man. (Talkin' 'bout you emceein'.) You ain't no emcee. Niggas ain't made for this, youknowwhatimsayin. This shit was "*Only Built 4 Cuban Linx*." We told y'all niggas back then, and now everybody wanna change their muthafuckin name. Youknowwhatimsayin? We come out with a style, and everybody wanna imitate our style. And all you producers out there, youknowwhatimsayin, it's all good to show love to a nigga, but stop bitin' my shit, youknowwhatimsayin. Come from your own heart wit' this shit. And all y'all emcees, stop bitin' from my niggas. We told y'all niggas on the fuckin' *Cuban Link* album, "Don't bite our shit." Y'all niggas keep bitin'. Yo, I'ma tell y'all somethin', man; it's time for the Wu revolution right here. So all my niggas across the world, raise a muthafuckin fist in the air, and get ready for the triumph 'cause the Gods is here to take over this shit. Word up. Peace. (Disc 2, Track 1)<sup>11</sup>

The RZA is didactic in his adherence to an essentialist notion of genuine hip\_hop culture. While Mos Def approaches hip\_hop as a homogeneous yet multifaceted entity that lives in the daily condition of its community members, the RZA defines it as a cultural practice that can be stratified in a hierarchy of expressive purity. Rather than hip\_hop being influenced and determined entirely by the condition of "the people," the community in the RZA's manifesto is charged with the responsibility of properly representing (performing) the culture. The RZA emphasizes the exclusive nature of "true" hip\_hop expression, a cultural standard attained through time and energy devoted to the fortification of a specific aesthetic discipline.

The Wu-Tang Clan, which made its major debut in 1993 with *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, has released four albums as a group (not including various "best of" compi-

lations) and several solo projects under the names of its nine original members whose individual efforts each include features and cameos by an assortment of Wu-Tang affiliates and whose production work is supervised primarily by the RZA. Though the RZA's "Intro" prioritizes the performative aspect of culture building, the artist also alludes heavily to his group's own historicity ("We told y'all niggas back then") when he references Wu member Raekwon's 1995 album *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx*. The context of this citation lies among the RZA's assertions about the Wu-Tang Clan's productive longevity and their capacity to achieve a pure medium through cultivation over years. The moral high ground in this manifesto is founded in the author's declared originality of ideas and in his uncompromising commitment to a particular aesthetic, a creative process distinct from that of funk or any other expressive genre. In a manner heavily influenced by Five-Percenter religious philosophy (in which the righteous five percent, equipped with knowledge of self, are charged to protect the uncivilized eighty-five percent of the earth's population from corruption by the wicked ten percent who would lead them into damnation), the RZA positions himself and the Wu-Tang Clan as representatives of the masses of hip\_hop heads.<sup>12</sup> The "you" in this conversation are the perpetrators (the false prophets) who would misrepresent the hip\_hop nation in their work and habit. Though somewhat abstruse, the RZA's standard demands textual innovation beyond simplistic rhyme choices and tedious musical arrangements. It requires a willingness on the part of otherwise mediocre artists to challenge themselves stylistically, to experiment with the substance of the medium, and to do so without intentionally imitating the previous work of the Wu-Tang Clan ("Don't bite our shit") or of anyone else, so as to generate a truly unadulterated "sound of the culture." Like Mos Def, the RZA implies an urgent need for the improvement (if not the salvation) of hip\_hop. And while the "purest form" of conveyance may remain exclusive, "my people" are all over the world. The RZA's approach to hip\_hop culture speaks to a differentiation of expressive styles within a larger sphere of performance.

### **"I Am Hip-Hop": Resituating Nationalist Community**

In a culture built on competition and braggadocio and on claims of authenticity, hip\_hop practitioners necessarily and tactically assume the agency of identification. Def Jam Records and Phat Farm clothing line founder Russell Simmons spread his political wings in support of Hillary Clinton in her 2000 New York senatorial campaign and of several other (Democratic Party) candidates whose platforms seemed to serve the best interest of the American hip\_hop community. Released that same year in conjunction with the ongoing "Rap the Vote" project, Simmons's advertisements for his 360hiphop.com web venture make a pointed critique about what does or does not qualify as an acceptable representation of hip\_hop thought and aesthetic. Part of an effort to get more young people out to the polls, one controversial ad features three stylish twenty-somethings—an Asian male in a jean jacket and fisherman's hat, a chic white woman stepping out of a luxury automobile, and a muscular black man sitting on a stoop, wrists adorned with shiny jewelry—along with the caption "I Am Hip-Hop." Next to this is a picture of a scowling former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani highlighted with the words "I Am Not Hip-Hop." Besides lampooning

a public figure who has already sustained a number of blows to his integrity on various hip\_hop tracks, the ad makes a unifying statement about the physical, moral, and political character of the hip\_hop community by situating Giuliani as the cultural other.<sup>13</sup> Another question of cultural alterity is the extent to which the politically conservative Giuliani, who has been cast so often as the epitome of the systemic opposition that the hip\_hop community must work to overcome, has thus contributed to this same community's self-definition and perceived solidarity. Still, something of which to remain aware and to which Simmons's advertisement, with its models of various ethnic backgrounds, would seem to allude is, as Bhabha might anticipate, the reality of cultural differences *within* this hip\_hop nation-text. In a manner that could be called conflictively essentialist, individual emcees and other heads participate in an intellectual project in which various—and sometimes contradictory—definitions of hip\_hop culture are theorized and reworked.

As we consider the remarkable malleability of cultural text, we are reminded here of political philosopher Ernest Renan's greatly influential lecture of 1882. In "Qu'est qu'une nation?" Renan outlines the importance of a people's will—"the wish of nations"—as the consolidating factor in nation formation (20). Though Renan does not specify shared language as a criterion for nationhood, he does concede its value in facilitating the exchange of like ideas, and he gestures toward what Anderson would later discuss as "its capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect *particular solidarities*" (133). On this process of cohesion and expansion Anderson elaborates, "[I]t shows that from the start the nation was conceived in language, not in blood, and that one could be 'invited into' the imagined community. Thus today, even the most insular nations accept the principle of naturalization [. . .] no matter how difficult a practice they make it" (145). The RZA's purist approach to hip\_hop community building seems to imply that any individual could acquire a certain degree of cultural fluency if he or she were willing to put forth the necessary effort. Mos Def's more democratic approach to hip\_hop nationalism suggests that anyone could choose to be a part of the "we" by subscribing to the ideals of its constituents or perhaps simply by subscribing to its cultural product. Former U.S. Vice President Al Gore, during the 2000 presidential race, offered his public endorsement of Mos Def's *Black on Both Sides* in an obvious effort to garner support from young voters. That same year, Russell Simmons offered his endorsement of Clinton, thus describing—or certainly *encouraging*—a particular relationship between hip\_hop heads and the American political system. The popular accessibility of hip\_hop culture makes for the inevitability of variations in interpretation and public expression. The liminality through which the nation is written—through which the people write *themselves*—is complicated further by the evidence of cultural difference within this same nation, as articulated in the voice of the expressive minority. Bhabha cautions:

Cultural difference must not be understood as the free play of polarities and pluralities in the homogeneous empty time of the national community. It addresses the jarring of meanings and values generated in-between the variety and diversity associated with cultural plenitude; it represents the process of cultural interpretation formed in the perplexity of living, in the disjunctive, liminal space of national society that I have tried to trace. (312)

Mos Def and the RZA define the hip\_hop community in ways that overlap in some places and conflict in others. But they share a vested interest in the global advancement of the culture. In "Fear Not of Man," Mos Def begins his manifesto with a pointed and significant shoutout to Brooklyn, establishing his affiliation with and allegiance to a specific geographic and cultural space. In his next very deliberate breath, he expands his text and his virtual crew to include heads in various regions of the globe, including Africa and Europe. Similarly, the RZA offers a pointed salutation to heads and supporters in Japan, Canada, Germany, and Sweden, among other sundry places. Despite their opposite philosophical leanings and local fidelities, these otherwise contrary thinkers are accorded in their recognition of and accentuation of the determinately cosmopolitan nature of hip\_hop culture.<sup>14</sup>

The Harlem Renaissance, arguably grounded in an aestheticization of the folk, is one of the most easily referenced sites for those interested in diagramming the periodic consolidation of black cosmopolitanist intellectualism and vernacular expression in the United States. For this reason it is useful to examine the parallels between the Renaissance and hip\_hop. Alain Locke's axial text *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (1925) is a collection of poetry and prose arranged with a strong underlying suggestion toward an increasingly necessary global consciousness for African American leadership, marked by a bold hypothesis about black cultural production as a manifestation of American nationalism and as a justification for sociopolitical equity in United States citizenship. Locke, in his foreword, outlines the cultural movement and presents a manifesto in which he positions African Americans rhetorically as a social and intellectual vanguard of colored peoples across the earth. He explains vehemently:

The New Negro must be seen in the perspective of a New World, and especially of New America. Europe seething in a dozen centers with emergent nationalities, Palestine full of a nascent Judaism—these are no more alive with the progressive forces of our era than the quickened centers of the lives of black folk. America seeking a new spiritual expansion and artistic maturity, trying to found an American literature, a national art, and a national music implies a Negro-American culture seeking the same satisfactions and objectives. (xxv–xxvi)

While the artists, scholars, and entrepreneurs of the Renaissance are being imagined into a body capable of portraying and improving the lives of blacks in the United States, they are being conceptualized also as an exemplary rally point for the subaltern masses everywhere. Literary critic Houston Baker, Jr., in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), argues for the nationalist implications of the 1920s enterprise. "Indeed," he states, "the world projected by Locke's collection is a nation comprised of self-consciously aspiring individuals who view their efforts as coextensive with global strivings for self-determination and national cultural expression" (74). Locke's work links the Harlem Renaissance to the coextensive "resurgence of a people" occurring in Europe, Asia, and Latin America, and it implicitly situates this global uprising as derivative of and eventually dependent upon what is happening in the U.S. (xxvii).<sup>15</sup>

Discussions regarding the relative success or failure of the Harlem Renaissance routinely neglect its impact as a cosmopolitanist enterprise for which Harlem is specified as

a primary production center and “race capital,” but whose range of influence is by no means limited to this tight geographic vicinity (Locke 7). The “New Negro Renaissance” does seem a more appropriate title in that it is less restrictive if not more mindful of the self-consciously *international* scope of what Baker calls “a unified community of national interests set in direct opposition to the general economic, political, and theological tenets of a racist land” (77). This productive community and that of hip\_hop culture are continuous in the sense that they have each had to wrestle—pressing and breaking at different points—with their reception by a critical mainstream and with an uncomfortable connection to the tradition of white patronage by which they have been alternately sustained and stifled. Due in part to a paradoxical relationship to the notion of Americanness, hip\_hop practitioners inside and outside the United States have—as had the cultural workers of the Renaissance—been required to interrogate the purpose of their art and to question whom this art is meant to serve. Black cultural movements have been invested generally in the valorized representation—and occasionally the romanticization—of the working-class masses and in the legitimization of vernacular text. Where they vary is in the particular thrust of this representation and in the representation’s intended recipients. For instance, the Black Arts Movement, by representing “the people” to themselves, was intended to organize blacks specifically as a nationalist body distinct from the American cultural mainstream. Contrarily, the Renaissance can be read as a reintroduction of the Negro into mainstream society as a newly active participant in the culture of American citizenship.

Langston Hughes critiques the assumption of some African Americans that the favorable reception of black cultural products by white audiences—for whom “the Negro was in vogue” in the 1920s—should spawn a positive shift in the relations of blacks and whites on a broader sociopolitical scale. In his autobiographical *The Big Sea* (1940), he reflects, “I don’t know what made any Negroes think that—except that they were mostly intellectuals doing the thinking. The ordinary Negroes hadn’t heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn’t raised their wages any” (228). Hughes criticizes the Renaissance intellectuals for failing to attend to the practical concerns of the common folk whom they often portray in their work, but whom they rarely address directly. As much as the literature and other art of this movement is *about* “the people,” it is less often *of* or *for* the people being represented. As an intellectual project, hip\_hop enjoys the distinction of having transcended much in the way of the systemic stratification of its producers and consumers. More than any other movement initiated in the cultural margins of the United States, its products have been commodified across boundaries of race, class, and nationality. This is perhaps an issue of marketable media, but it is more likely a sign of hip\_hop’s other unprecedented distinction of having been so overtly and aggressively driven by the industry of its production and mainstream dissemination. What happens when that which was formerly recognized as a product of the margins is (perhaps for this very reason) consumed by the center, when the characteristic elements of American culture and hip\_hop culture become, to a new extent, one in the same? To what extent and to what end does a cultural text like the Harlem Renaissance or hip\_hop serve as a mutable and volatile vessel for the contest of political agenda?

### Inside Out: Why Semantics Matter

In the tradition of Western intellectualism, emceeing holds an interesting position as a (largely) written yet still *orally* disseminated cultural form. Cultural criticism is, by definition, interdisciplinary, and so is the process of culture formation. The path of cultural narrative is one that crosses media and that is highly conditional, being influenced by, and frequently redirected in response to, internal and external circumstances. One might argue that an emcee like Mos Def displays essentializing tendencies in his rhetorically created constituency because he assumes a homogeneity both of intention and of interpretation. Postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak suggests the notion of a strategic, positivist essentialism by which subaltern subjects make deliberate, definitive statements in order to situate themselves politically within the framework of a dominant cultural body (205). However, this sort of political strategizing is equally evident in the critical work that takes place *outside* the primary area of hip\_hop cultural production. In their attempts to appropriate and to refigure text in ways that would best benefit their own intellectual or commercial ends, popular critics, academic institutions, and multinational corporations are hampering what could otherwise be a much more productive contribution to a conversation about community formation through cultural exchange. As hip\_hop becomes a depository for critical, political, and commercial imperatives, we are left instead with fissures and barriers where none need actually exist.

Black cultural critic Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) has been employed of late as a critical segue both into and between African American and postcolonial studies. Locating the Atlantic Ocean as a metaphor for the system of cultural exchange among Europe, the Caribbean, and the United States, Gilroy staunchly repudiates what would seem to be exclusionary practices and applications of cultural text, including that of hip\_hop. Whether the widening accessibility of this text precludes the sort of absolutist tendencies that Gilroy would describe (borrowing from Werner Sollors) as "cultural insiderism," we are made party to his sensitive appeal for the acknowledgment of black British contributions to diasporic interchange and growth (3). He contends:

The hybridity which is formally intrinsic to hip hop has not been able to prevent that style from being used as an especially potent sign and symbol of racial authenticity. It is significant that when this happens the term "hip hop" is forsaken in favour of the alternative term "rap," preferred precisely because it is more ethnically marked by African-American influences than the other. (107)

Gilroy might also agree that in discussions of government-mandated music censorship or of post-performance catastrophes, a majority of media agencies are likely to apply the term "rap" so as to designate the probable ethnicity of the alleged perpetrators. But if we are to understand this distinction as viable, then we must also accept that the conscious selection of one appellative over the other depends on the particular agenda of the selector. Sometimes "hip\_hop" is chosen instead of or in coincidence with "rap" to the detriment of a more culturally diverse perspective—specifically because the former seems less ra-

cially marked as black or seems otherwise more “universal” a category. Importantly, this semantic decision implies an erroneous conflation of rap and hip\_hop, suggesting that the notions are freely interchangeable, with no respect to the broader, more holistic cultural significance of the latter. One could argue, as Gilroy does, that the term “rap” does carry a degree of cultural weight that would conjure a specifically African American imaginary, but this same reductionist thinking would equate rap music with gunplay, drug trafficking, and sexual assault. Regardless, there remains little evidence of any conscious deliberation on the part of artists to describe their work as “rap” rather than “hip\_hop” as a purposeful statement of American nationalism. This is a delineation perpetrated more often by critics of popular media and it implies a patriotic sentiment that is largely unapparent in the actual work of these hip\_hop practitioners. Even at their most regionally biased, few hip\_hop artists have ever denied the culture’s inherent compositional and historical hybridity. For example, Kool Herc, a Caribbean immigrant who is, by most accounts, the originator of hip\_hop culture, remains a legendary figure amongst a younger generation of artists, who have, in fact, expended much more creative energy on their criticism of the United States and its inequities than on a commemoration of any American Dream. There are few places in the primary text of African American hip\_hop where one could identify the pointed ethnic absolutism upon which Gilroy insists.

A quick review of popular and scholarly criticism on hip\_hop reveals that Gilroy’s proposition of 1993 is still greatly manifest in more recent studies in practical construing. For instance, at the 1999 MTV Music Video Awards, honors were given in both the categories of “Best Hip-Hop Video” and of “Best Rap Video.” In this case the nominees for “Best Hip-Hop Video” included Lauryn Hill, TLC, Busta Rhymes, and the Beastie Boys (the winner). Meanwhile, the “Best Rap Video” nominations were given to DMX, Nas, 2Pac, and Jay-Z (the winner). This is a sophisticated maneuver for a network that, prior to the introduction of *Yo! MTV Raps* in 1988, was reluctant to air any hip\_hop videos (not to mention videos by people of color) at all.<sup>16</sup> One might argue that the allocation of awards in two similar categories frees up space for the inclusion of artists like TLC (and like Sisqo at the 2000 Awards) whose compositions—with respect to its production methods, lyrical themes, and aesthetic leanings—would fit comfortably into the genre of “hip\_hop” though they may actually contain no rap at all. The area of “hip\_hop R&B,” for example, made popular by Jodeci and Mary J. Blige in the early 1990s, has expanded such that it might seem logical to create classificatory space for artists like Blackstreet and 112, whose work displays a strong hip\_hop influence but is less blatant in its occasional rap interludes. Such loose categorization might also allow room for the rise in the mid-1990s of several “rock-rap” bands such as Korn and Limp Bizkit, whose sound is “alternative” in that so much of it consists of rap lyrics delivered over heavy metal instrumentation accentuated occasionally with a deejay’s scratching. But the MTV Music Video Awards is not true to this logic of differentiation, because so many of the videos being nominated in the “hip-hop” category—such as those of Busta Rhymes in 1999 and Juvenile in 2000—would still be recognized unmistakably as “rap.” The distinction in this case begins to seem more arbitrary, and the most that one could clearly determine is that the nominees in the rap category are those—such as Nas—who seem to be more identifiably “ethnic” or more qualitatively “street” (and who have thus received less regular airplay on MTV); the nominees in the hip\_hop category are those—such as Q-Tip—who seem to have garnered



more popular (mainstream capitalist) acclaim and who could be said to appeal to a larger section of MTV's predominantly white American audience. But this logic begs another question: what successful mainstream artist these days has *not* demonstrated the influence of hip\_hop aestheticism to some recognizable degree? Since the cancellation of *Yo! MTV Raps* in 1995, hip\_hop videos have become so thoroughly integrated into MTV's regular programming sequence that a specialized rap segment is hardly necessary, and this conspicuous shift speaks not only to the evolving interests of the network's traditionally rock-oriented audience but also to hip\_hop's increased permeation of American (and thus global) popular culture in general. Incidentally, at the 1999 MTV Music Video Awards, Lauryn Hill's "Doo Wop (That Thing)," while it did not take the prize in the "hip-hop" category, did go on to beat out videos in every musical genre for the most coveted award of the entire event, "Best Video of the Year."

Based on an aesthetic package's perceived acceptability by and accessibility to a quantitatively "universal" (read: record-buying white American) audience, networks like MTV and BET make classificatory distinctions that can have a tremendous bearing on public reception and corporate sponsorship of a particular artist or group. Allowing for more critical leeway in an area where the majority of the cultural producers are people of color, an ostensibly flexible "hip\_hop" normalizes the favoritism shown to mainstream artists who have garnered attention through predominantly white consumerism rather than through the black popular appreciation by which choices in white hip\_hop consumption are constantly being influenced. But outside their tendency toward popular and scholarly misappropriation, there is a very certain distinction to be made between hip\_hop and rap—not a distinction determined by the manipulation of racial, ethnic, and commercial particularities but, rather, a difference that reflects emceeing's situation as one of several constitutive elements of hip\_hop culture. Though emceeing is necessarily a form of hip\_hop expression, hip\_hop culture is not necessarily conveyed in the form of rap. Gilroy's discussion, though flawed, does demonstrate some awareness of other interrelated cultural elements, particularly in his mention of "break dance" as evidence of Afro-Diasporic linkages (102). But even were we to allow him the assumption of a "rap"-versus-"hip\_hop" conversation limited to musical production alone, his critique still disregards the much more complex and nuanced considerations (e.g., the classification of deejayed instrumentals) involved in the question of terminology. Such conceptually and factually flawed approaches as those of Gilroy and MTV—whether occasioned through conflation, separation, or other misinterpretation—inevitably dislocate emceeing from its position within a cultural foundation of interdependent elements, which undermines its significance as a primary discursive mode and fails to acknowledge the totality of its ramifications within a hip\_hop rubric.

### Who Is "Us"?: Constructing a User-Friendly Hip\_Hop

Were we to accept the idea of a fifth constitutive element of hip\_hop practice, this component would arguably be the large body of cultural criticism—periodicals, fan mail, video documentaries, academic work, et cetera—by which the evolution of the culture

has been and continues to be undeniably informed.<sup>17</sup> Doubly important is that we allow for a certain fluidity in our definitions of hip\_hop culture, where so often our attempts at specificity result in a rather unhealthy confinement. For example, the content and themes of the *Hip-Hop Nation* exhibit at the BMA are overwhelmingly American and predominantly East Coast-oriented. Rose, in her scholarly work, and George, in a more popular format, each emphasize the importance of specific locality in hip\_hop expression. Rose makes an interesting point about the tendency of artists in music videos to accentuate their relationships to particular neighborhoods and selected surroundings. Of the relationship between locality and community she writes:

Many hip-hop fans, artists, musicians, and dancers continue to belong to an elaborate system of crews or posses. The crew, a local source of identity, group affiliation, and support system appears repeatedly in all of my interviews and virtually all rap lyrics and cassette dedications, music video performances, and media interviews with artists. Identity in hip-hop is deeply rooted in the specific, the local experience, and one's attachment to and status in a local group or alternative family. These crews are new kinds of families forged with intercultural bonds that, like the social formation of gangs, provide insulation and support in a complex and unyielding environment and may serve as the basis for new social movements. (34)

Traditionally, heads have been empowered through their common connections to soil and blood, both tangible and metaphorical. Still, though the hip\_hop community has been depicted often as a cohesive nationalist entity, its nationhood is at best a shaky postulation in that a consistent definition of the parameters of this community and the specific criteria for the constitution of its supposed citizenship remain missing. Hip\_hop might be, at this point, better understood as a site of convergence of many highly variegated communities, and its history, a text being written from an array of different perspectives and conceptual localities. Particularly in the last few years, more hip\_hop practitioners have shown tendencies toward a conscious cosmopolitanism, redefining the potential readership to acknowledge hip\_hop's multigenerational, multinational, multilingual character, and further indicating some of the significant ways in which nationhood has been taken for granted.

Founded in 1998 by four young African American males, FUBU is one of a still rapidly increasing number of hip\_hop-inspired clothing lines to have been launched successfully in the last decade. With rapper LL Cool J as its major spokesperson, the black-owned company, whose name is an acronym for For Us By Us, is a venture on the part of hip\_hop heads ("Us") to capitalize on the gross commodification of the culture by marketing apparel of their own design to a specific constituency of urban, predominantly African American, youth ("Us"). However, as is obvious (and as is to no apparent dismay of the owners), the consumer base for FUBU and for other brands, such as Wu-Wear and Rocawear, now extends far beyond African Americans to encompass a steady clientele of various racial (including white), ethnic, and national identities. Once more, the attributes of the cultural margins are, for better or for worse, assimilated into those of the ever-broadening center. And again, as with the imagined community of simultaneous listeners implied in the

manifesto's indeterminate "we," we are challenged to ask, "Who, in reality, is 'Us'?" Critics and practitioners would do well to remain cognizant of this proclivity toward conceptual and contextual slippage in hip\_hop discourse, and we might strive to replicate this expansionism so as to elevate the scholarship in this area above rudimentary, sometimes misguided, analyses. We might consider the extent to which what is happening here with hip\_hop models what is happening in cultural studies generally.

In whose critical jurisdiction does the discussion of hip\_hop and nation lie? Does the construction of hip\_hop as an essentially African American cultural space necessarily deny the hybrid reality of the text and the range of disparate influences that have contributed to its development thus far, and would such an interpretation serve to limit the critical attention that the text might otherwise receive were it not entrenched in the history of systemic oppression and physical protest to which African American studies is so conspicuously tied? Does the free enlistment of cross-disciplinary methodologies in the reading of hip\_hop as more generally accessible a dialogue counter the proliferation of exclusionary trends by presenting the possibility of a more "user friendly" text, or does it simply create a means to justify the often conspicuous misappropriation of the culture and its expressive products? Ultimately, we must maintain the presence of mind to recognize the manner in which the relationship between hip\_hop culture and the critical *study* of hip\_hop culture is played out in the designation of discipline and field. As a discursive project, hip\_hop facilitates a perpetual liminality in which and *by* which the boundaries of community and of cultural history are continuously stipulated and redefined. And the time for speaking of a single, homogeneous hip\_hop nation may have passed.

#### NOTES

1. The exhibit ran from September 22 to December 31, 2000, at the BMA before moving on to the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, California.
2. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962, 1989).
3. My "problematic" here does not mean "entirely bad." I intend simply that hip\_hop culture is complicated by a broad array sometimes opposing definitions and that we might be careful about when, how, and by whom they are applied.
4. See LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed from It* (New York: Quill, 1963).
5. See Sugar Hill Gang, "Rapper's Delight," *Rapper's Delight: The Best of Sugar Hill Gang* (Rhino Records, 1979, 1996) and Lauryn Hill, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (Ruffhouse Records, 1998).
6. Murray Forman has also gestured toward a critique of the questionable efficacy of a hip\_hop nationalism using the *Hip-Hop Nation* exhibit as a point of departure. See Forman, Murray, "No Sleep 'Til Brooklyn," *American Quarterly*, 54:1 (March 2002): 101–127.
7. As a subaltern project, hip\_hop has been about the work of repurposing found objects, applying cut-and-paste-methodology, and transforming public space in radical ways. Graffiti writers and b-boys convert subway tunnels into art galleries and sidewalks into dance studios. Emcees challenge the communicative capacity of everyday language through rap as deejays speculate upon the functionality of sound technology through experiments in cutting and scratching. These nontraditional intellectuals sample elements of their own material environments and erstwhile abandoned histories, rearranging them to produce an alternative system of knowledge and cultural expression.
8. For the purposes of this discussion, I have chosen to use the term "rap" interchangeably with "emceeing." Though the distinction between the two is arguable, many heads, over the past decade especially, have reclaimed the nominative "emcee" as a specific critique of the association of the term "rapper" with hip\_hop's history of appropriation and exploitation by marketing conglomerates.

- Similarly, many former “breakdancers” have redefined themselves publicly as “b-boys” to signal the grounding of their work in a holistic hip\_hop culture.
9. See De La Soul, *3 Feet High and Rising* (Tommy Boy Music, 1989).
  10. I refer to Mos Def purposefully as a “Brooklyn emcee” specifically because of his frequent and deliberate allusions to this locality. Despite his cosmopolitan and sometimes Afrocentric leanings, Mos retains Brooklyn as a geographic and cultural axis for hip\_hop.
  11. Though “nigga,” especially when applied in the plural, is not necessarily gender specific, it would be safe to infer that, when the RZA is speaking to rival emcees and producers, his imagined listener on this track is gendered male. This draws question to the RZA’s conception of hip\_hop community in general.
  12. Also called the Nation of Gods and Earths, the Five-Percent Nation is an offshoot of the Nation of Islam. Founded in the United States in 1964, the organization’s theology consists of a series of often encrypted “lessons” circulated by word of mouth and from hand to hand, primarily among urban youth. A number of hip\_hop artists—including the Wu-Tang Clan, Mobb Deep, Gang Starr, Busta Rhymes, Digable Planets, Poor Righteous Teachers, and others—are subscribers to Five Percenter philosophy and are known to incorporate its references in their work.
  13. Simmons had a subsequent conflict with Giuliani, purportedly driven by the mayor’s response to these disparaging advertisements. Simmons had organized a Rap the Vote press conference to be held on the steps of New York’s city hall in May of 2000, but the gathering was abruptly cancelled by Giuliani, who determined that Rap the Vote’s affiliation with 360hiphop.com violated ordinances pertaining to corporate events held on public property. The mayor also accused Simmons of purposely applying too late to receive a permit for the event in order that the resulting controversy would make Giuliani appear to be vengeful and unreasonable. Simmons has since expanded his political endeavors. He teamed with Ben Chavis to organize the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network and made a good showing registering young voters toward the 2004 presidential election. Sean Combs and other major figures in the entertainment industry have invested in similar projects, as have the less star-studded organizers of the National Hip-Hop Political Convention.
  14. Compare, say, the adamant localism of Bronx native and self-proclaimed arbiter of all things hip\_hop, emcee KRS-One, to the supposed anti-particularism of Australian rap critic Tony Mitchell. Even as these thinkers differ in their positions vis-à-vis “real” or “original” hip\_hop culture, neither would deny the clear breadth of its global mediation and influence.
  15. Locke, xxvii.
  16. *Yo! MTV Raps* began as a weekend show hosted by the once ubiquitous “Fab 5” Freddy Braithwaite and, with its growth in popularity, soon began airing six days a week. Since the demise of this show in 1995, MTV has made several attempts at replacing it with such hip\_hop-oriented programs as the less successful *Direct Effects* and *The Lyricist Lounge Show*.
  17. Afrika Bambaataa and other affiliates of the Universal Zulu Nation have named this fifth element “Knowledge.”

#### WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 1983. London: Verso, 1991.
- Baker, Jr., Houston. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.
- Bennett, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Bhabha, Homi K. “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation.” Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- De La Soul. *3 Feet High and Rising*. Tommy Boy Music, 1989.
- Forman, Murray. “No Sleep ‘Til Brooklyn.” *American Quarterly*, 54.1 (March 2002): 101–127.
- George, Nelson. *Hip Hop America*. New York: Penguin, 1998.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.
- GZA/Genius. “Skit #1.” *Beneath the Surface*. MCA Records, 1999.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. 1962. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989.
- Hill, Lauryn. *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. Ruffhouse Records, 1998.
- Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1940.
- Jones, LeRoi. *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed from It*. New York: Quill, 1963.

- Locke, Alain, ed. *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Touchstone, 1925, 1997.
- Lyon, Janet. *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999.
- Mos Def. "Fear Not of Man." *Black on Both Sides*. Rawkus Records, 1999.
- Sugar Hill Gang, "Rapper's Delight," *Rapper's Delight: The Best of Sugar Hill Gang*. Rhino Records, 1979, 1996.
- Renan, Ernest. "Qu'est qu'une nation?" Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1994.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. In *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1987.
- Wu-Tang Clan. "Intro." *Wu-Tang Forever*. Loud Records, 1997.