Rap Music as an Extension of the Black Rhetorical Tradition: “Keepin’ it Real”

BARUTI N. KOPANO—DELAWARE STATE UNIVERSITY

Abstract

This study examines the rhetorical legacy of rap music. Beginning with the rhetorical traditions of ancient Africa, a pathway is drawn to show how enslaved Africans instituted these rhetorical traditions in a subversive manner in the New World. The coining of terms, the creation of linguistic combinations, the mastery of double entendre and other coded linguistic forms led to the formation of a “guerilla rhetoric,” which found expression in Black speech and Black music. Rap music is no exception. Most specifically, rap was created and continues to exist as a rhetoric of resistance. Though rap artists’ approaches may differ, as an art form rap music uniformly draws on and expands the Black rhetorical tradition.

For rappers, “keepin’ it real” means being true to the rich legacy of rap. For me, “keepin’ it real” means being true to the rich legacy from which rap music emanates. It is a legacy that goes beyond the verbal volleys of Muhammad Ali, the pulsating poems of The Last Poets, and the Caribbean tradition of toasting. It is a legacy that may go as far back as the griots of West Africa and the ancient societies of Egypt. Rap music belongs to a rich Black tradition of reverence for rhetoric in its written and spoken form. Thus, discussions surrounding rap music must see this art form as part of the Black rhetorical continuum, both borrowing from and expanding this tradition in its creative use of language and rhetorical styles and strategies. Most specifically, rap was created and continues to exist primarily as a young, African American (predominantly male) rhetoric of resistance primarily to issues of race. Though rap artists’ approaches differ to these issues, as an art form rap music uniformly draws on and expands the Black rhetorical tradition.

In the first chapter of Black Skin, White Masks, “The Negro and Language,” Fanon (1967) supports the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity when he writes that a “man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language” (18; See Carroll, 1956). Asante (1987) echoes Fanon’s words, for he maintains that “always the protestor must use different symbol, myths, and sounds [my emphasis] than the established order….The oppressed must gain attention and control by introducing another language, another sound [my emphasis]” (114-115). Similarly, Antonio Gramsci (1971) provides a theoretical framework that is relevant here.

Gramsci’s concept of ideological hegemony posits that ruling class alliances maintain their power by developing consent among the subordinate class. Force is used only a “final solution.” In other words, the best way to achieve control over a subordinate group is by means of cultural domination among all sectors in society. But efforts to maintain hegemony coincide with efforts to dismantle it, because cultural domination inevitably produces its opposite—cultural resistance—from the subordinate classes (Gramsci, 1971). Blacks in the African diaspora have used language and music as a form of cultural resistance. Specifically, this essay examines ways in which rap music was created and continues to be used as a form of cultural resistance. In
doing so, Blacks have used sounds different from their oppressors and often tap into a Black rhetorical and cultural tradition to effectuate this resistance. American soil, however, is not the best place to gain an understanding of Black rhetoric.

Asante’s (1986) “The Egyptian Origin of Rhetoric and Oratory” provides an understanding of rhetoric in general, Black rhetoric in particular. It was the Black Africans of ancient Egypt who expressed deep admiration and respect for the written and spoken word. In fact, as George G. M. James (1989/1956) documents in *Stolen Legacy*, the ancient Egyptians included rhetoric as part of the seven liberal arts of their curriculum, which formed the foundation for new learners. To be precise, grammar, arithmetic, rhetoric and dialectic (i.e., the quadrivium), and geometry, astronomy, and music (trivium) constituted the curriculum of ancient Egypt (135). The writing system of ancient Egypt was what the Greeks were later to call hieroglyphics, but was what the Egyptians referred to as Medew Netcher (*Mdw ntr*).1

Jacob Carruthers (1995) informs us that Medew Netcher in the narrow sense denoted the formal written language of ancient Egyptians, whereas, in a more general sense, Medew Netcher referred to human speech. For the Egyptians, speech was divine in and of itself; in other words, speech was a “gift of the creator” (40). Carruthers further helps us to understand that the ancient Egyptians differentiated between *Mdw ntr* “Medew Netcher” (God speech) and *mdw nfr*, “Medew Nefer” (Good speech), which approximate the Greek terms *theology* (divine speech) and *logos* (reasoned speech), respectively (39). Although the Egyptians appreciated the divine potential of speech, they knew that people “could choose between Good speech and not good speech, as in … *mdw dw* (evil speech), pronounced medew djew and … tff (idle chatter), pronounced tefef. Only Medew Nefer was in accord with Medew Netcher” (40). The ancient Egyptians understood that speech, like human behavior, is neither good nor bad. It is only potential.

Despite having a written communication system, orality was paramount for the people of ancient Egypt. For the Egyptians, as Asante (1986) reminds us, the “spoken word was the essential content of cultural and spiritual transmittal of values” (182). Asante claims that, in examining the ancient Egyptian text *The Book of Coming Forth by Day*, often called *The Book of the Dead*, we can find in the “canons of oratory established by the Egyptians under the tutelage of Thoth, the lord of divine speech, … the fundamental categories of oratory as contemporary as Malcolm X or Martin Luther King, Jr.” (182). For example, introductory salutations ‘to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’ and ‘in the name of Allah, the most merciful’ actually can be traced to the ‘t’elit,’ which, according to Asante (1986), was an “oratorical expression of ‘adoration of Ra who rises in the eastern skies’” (182). The purpose of such a salutation was to open a public speech.

Another important concept in Egyptian rhetoric is that speech and creation are inseparable. This concept is important in many African societies. Not only are speech and creation inseparable, but speech and action are one. In fact, these concepts are closely related. In his explanation of the divine concepts of *Sia, Hu, and Heka*, Carruthers (1995) explains that “Sia is the concept of exceptional intellectual clarity; Hu represents articulate command and Heka symbolizes extraordinary power. So indeed the mind thinks, the tongue orders and the body obeys—in that order” (45). It is “Divine Speech [that] links humanity to divinity. Human beings learn and teach through Good Speech” (Carruthers, 1995, 46).

Similar to the ancient Egyptian’s reverence for rhetoric is the importance of the spoken word (Nommo) to the Dogon people of Mali in West Africa and to others in West Africa. Nommo refers to the magical power of the word (see Jahn, 1961). Life force then becomes actualized by the power of the word. As Jahn (1961) notes, “according to African philosophy man has, by the force of his word, dominion over things. He can change them, make them work for him and command them” (135).

The African reverence for words is further exemplified in Walker’s citation of the Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. Wa Thiong’o discusses an African continental prototype of hip hop “which expresses itself in East Africa’s Gikuyu Festival,” an event in which “the best poets of the various regions would meet in the arena, like in a [hip hop] battle, and compete with words and instant compositions. These poets had even developed a form of hierographics [graffiti–writing]” (cited in Walker, 1998, 93).

Lawrence Levine (1977) offers us an important notion on the nature of culture when he insists, “culture is not a fixed condition but a process” (5). Moreover, a culture’s “toughness and resiliency” are determined chiefly “by its ability to react creatively and responsively to the realities of a new situation” (5). Enslaved Africans found themselves in the “new situation” of existence in America. Consequently, their “new situation” produced a new rhetoric, one used primarily as a form of protest.

that “song is the practice of Nommo [her italics]” (767). In fact, Davis adds that “most West African languages incorporate several of the basic structural elements of music: pitch, timbre, and timing. A word uttered at a certain pitch may have a different meaning from the same word spoken at another pitch” (767). The same concept is true for timbre and timing. Davis also notes that traditional West African music always served a social function: it was connected to every facet of community life. Beyond facilitating a “given human activity, music was always considered to be a part of the activity itself” (766-767). For the traditional West African, music was never separated as an abstract aesthetic “thing.”

For many enslaved Africans in America, not only did music serve a social function; it also became a hope for physical freedom from enslavement. Molefi Asante (1987) understands that the Black rhetorician often must use the subversive method of “guerilla rhetoric” if she/he is to be effective (116). The spoken word (Nommo) for the African American rhetorician (protest speaker) allows her/him to use “only a portion of the word resources available to all: he coins expressions, appeals to his environment for others, and creates combinations as he moves back and forth across code boundaries” (116). By using music/song in the “New World” as a social function, the enslaved African was consciously or unconsciously using music as a subversive act, as a means of “guerilla rhetoric.” Through music she/he was able to preserve her/his African roots. In the coded words of the spirituals, enslaved Africans were able to physically escape or help others to do so and thereby offer some resistance to the cruelties of European enslavement. In other words, enslaved Africans were able to use spirituals as “guerilla rhetoric” or the inevitable opposite of ideological and cultural hegemony — cultural resistance — according to the theory of Antonio Gramsci. In the social act of singing itself, enslaved Africans were able to consciously or unconsciously retain parts of their African selves and persevere in a hostile land, again using songs as guerrilla rhetoric. Rap music fits squarely in this tradition.

Rap as a music form employs some of the same elements found in African American spirituals, blues, gospel, jazz (especially be-bop), and R & B. Some of these elements include call-and-response, word creativity (punning), hyperbole, spontaneity (freestylin’), and braggadocio (see Smitherman, 1977). These are some of the same characteristics found in Black speech and in Black literature. However, as the noted African American poet, educator, and book publisher Don L. Lee (Haki R. Madhubuti) wrote in 1971, “Black music is our most advanced form of Black art” (29). Moreover, Black music is the art with the most potential to continue the Black tradition of reverence for the word (speech) as the ancient Egyptians and their concept of Mdw Ntr and the Dogon and other Africans manifested in their concept of Nommo. I agree with music historian Portia Maultsby, who notes that rap has brought “about an awareness of a legacy—an historical legacy, a musical legacy, and a cultural legacy” (cited in Herbert, 1991, 41).

In her groundbreaking book on rap, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America, Tricia Rose (1994) talks about the importance of sound (noise) to rap. Rap is often said to be noisy, loud, and jumbled. The psychologists Pasteur and Toldson (1982), in their study of the psychology of Black expressiveness, inform us that there is an “African practice of using natural sounds of objects in the environment to enhance one’s vocabulary” (231). Rap often employs this tradition by using various sounds from the environment to “enhance” the “vocabulary” of rap music. Rap’s sounds disturb many.

Another uniquely African American art form — jazz music — shared this critique in its day. Lloyd Miller and James K. Skipper, Jr. (1972) offer intriguing comments on jazz in their “Sounds of Black Protest in Avant-Garde Jazz”:

Jazz has always been a disturbing element on the American scene. To the uninitiated ear, its sounds are often strange, exotic, and unpredictable. It commits the sin of nonconformity to the norms of traditional music. In addition, to a large portion of the White community, jazz has been stereotyped as 'race music' (27).

One could just as easily substitute the word rap for jazz in the above quote. In particular, rap as rhetoric shares much in common with avant-garde jazz, or bebop to be specific. Bebop’s creation in the 1940s was African American musicians attempting to obtain “good speech” as they rebelled against an oppressive system. Bebop was cast as “radical,” “nonconformist,” and even “angry.” Bebop sounds were offered as a form of resistance to White males — sounds told by Black men to rebel against a system they perceived to be hostile. In his book Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music Frank Kofsky (1970) suggests, “one will hear in the music of John Coltrane, Eric Dolphy, Sam Rivers, John Tchicai, and especially Archie Shepp...not speech ‘in general,’ but the voice of the urban Negro ghetto” (134). He proposes that the sounds from Archie Shepp’s saxophone approximate the sounds of “Negro vocal patterns as they can be heard on the streets of Chicago,
Detroit, Philadelphia, Harlem, or wherever you choose” (134). So the musicians of bebop were trying to capture through the “noise” of instruments a sound that could tell the stories of America’s “Native Sons [and daughters],” to play off the title of Richard Wright’s 1940 novel. As Wright with pen sought to create a novel that spoke for the “Bigger Thomases” of America, Bebop musicians were picking up their horns with an attitude to speak for themselves. As Frank Kofsky (1970) concludes, the bebop artists had cast a “vote of ‘no confidence’ in Western civilization and the American Dream—...Ne- gro avant-garde intransigents, in other words, are saying through their horns, as Leroi Jones would have it, ‘Up your ass, feeble-minded ofays!!’” (131).

Bebop, as a jazz form of the 1940s, “re-established the blues as the music’s primary organizing and functional principle,” produced “prodigious improvisers,” and changed the role of the drum “from time keeping to phrase making—emphasizing, punctuating, clarifying, facilitating, and assisting in the harmonic, melodic, and textural definition of the music” (Floyd, 1995, 138). As Floyd (1995) remarks, bebop created a new “language,” one which the “uninitiated...would have to familiarize themselves, one that Signified [author’s emphasis] like no other” (138). The language of bebop was rooted in the language of everyday Black people so much so that Sidran (1980) claims that bebop saxophonist Charlie “Yardbird” “Parker’s advances were reputed to be so strongly rooted in the common language of his culture that ‘he’d play a phrase, and people might never have heard it before, but he’d start it, and the people would finish it with him, humming’...The ability of the crowd to ‘finish phrases’ with him can be explained only in terms of a common cultural conception of melody and lyricism” (103). Bebop, then, stands as an important cultural and musical creation of Black America for its use of the “common language” of everyday Black people, for its creation as a form of resistance to White America, for its use of improvisation, and for highlighting the role of the drum.

Simply stated, bebop artists made a dedication to “keep it real,” and rap musicians today continue the call to “keep it real.” Undisputedly, one of the most astute of jazz critics, Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), commented on bebop musicians’ dedication to “keepin’ it real.” There were, he tells us in his 1963 *Blues People*, “conscious attempts to remove it [bebop] from the danger of mainstream dilution or even understanding. For one thing, the young musicians began to think of themselves as serious musicians, even artists, and not performers” (188). These artists worked to keep the music “pure” and to see themselves as artists and not mere entertainers. Bebop was more than music; it was a rhetoric of verbal and nonverbal communication. Rap and the culture that it created—hip-hop—is more than music; it too is a rhetoric of verbal and nonverbal communication. The dress of the bebop artist became vogue for ‘hip’ young Americans, most of whom were adapting the dress of Dizzy Gillespie, a pioneer of bebop (190).*

And as Jones (Baraka) adds, Dizzy’s dress was simply a personalized version of fashionable dress of African American urbanites (190). Similarly, the dress of rap artists today has influenced many folks who “wanna b down” (i.e., be in vogue). When the rapper Snoop Dogg Dogg appeared on *Saturday Night Live* in 1994 wearing a grand jersey with a Tommy Hilfiger logo on it, sales jumped $93 million the following year (Duffy, 1996, 96). Acknowledging this success in 1996, Hilfiger employed rapper Spinderella (of Salt’N Pepa fame) and Quincy Jones’ daughter Kidada to help introduce his new line of women casual clothes and a floral fragrance, both called Tommy Girl (Duffy, 1996, 96). According to some reports, the loosely defined hip-hop culture, which includes hip-hop fashion, accounts for $7 billion in revenue each year (Hip Hop in a Bottle, 2000).

Bebop artists coined the term *bebop* as an onomatopoeia to describe the sounds that they had created (Jones, 1963). Ironically, the word would make it into mainstream and “by teen-agers to mean *fight*, or more specifically, a *gang fight*. The irony here, however, is that the term is used in this connection more by White teenagers...” (191). The hip-hop culture via rap is not to be outdone. The introductory paragraph of an article in the March 29, 1993 *Mediaweek* begins its discussion by noting that “many have prayed that someday fat would come into style. Well that day is here. To be precise, ‘fat’ (pronounced fat) is in style; that’s fat-speak implying that something is fat with greatness.” The article further offers that rap has given “birth to colorful phrases that creep into mainstream culture....” (Moore, 1993, 16). What I am arguing, in essence, is that, in their defiant states, both bebop and rap (hip-hop) artists create a rhetoric that is creative in the verbal and nonverbal modes. This creativity permeates society, even European American society. It has to permeate because its potency is from the same stock that produced Medew Nefert and Nommo—the Black rhetorical tradition.


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African Rap to Global Hip Hop, reminds us that in the 1930s almost one-quarter of Harlem’s residents were from the West Indies (18). In fact, two of rap music’s earliest pioneers, Kool DJ Herc and Grandmaster Flash, had a West Indian connection (Bayles, 1994; Toop, 1991; Rose, 1994). The young Jamaican immigrant “Kool DJ Herc” is important for his pioneering work in working and reworking the “percussion break,” when the single stops, the rhythm section takes over, and the flashiest dancers disport themselves on the floor” (Bayles, 1994, 342). Grandmaster Flash (the son of Barbadian immigrants) is important for the innovation of “punch phrasing.” Grandmaster Flash, quoted by Bayles (1994), explains “punch phrasing” as “taking certain parts of a record where there’s a vocal or drum slap or a horn. I would throw it out and then bring it back, keeping the other turntable playing” (343). Bayles also talks about the importance of the Jamaican art of “toasting.” Many Jamaican DJs would remove the vocal part of a song (dubbing) and substitute their own vocals there. These substituted vocals were “toasting,” a form of rap, which was really improvised poetry with the DJ often making tributes or boasting about himself. Toasts, as Bruce Jackson (1974) defines them, are “narrative poems from the Black American oral tradition” (vii). They were, Jackson (1974) continues, “dynamic events, full of sound and movement” (vii).

While Bayles makes a West African connection for the African Caribbean, she manages to omit this connection for the African American. Furthermore, when she finally arrives in America, she omits any discussion of the Black American radio tradition and its relationship to rap music, even though Black radio disc jockeys greatly influenced the Jamaican art of toasting.

Fortunately, Toop (1991) acknowledges that rap rests on a Black cultural continuum, for the subtitle of his book is African Rap to Global Hip Hop. To be precise, Toop maintains that

Rap’s forebears stretch back through disco, street funk, radio DJs, Bo Diddley, the bebop singers, Cab Calloway, Pigmeat Markham, the tap dancers and comics, The Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, Muhammad Ali, acappella and doo-wop groups, ring games, skip-ropes rhymes, prison and army songs, toasts, signifying and the dozens, all the way to the griots of Nigeria and the Gambia. No matter how far it [rap music] penetrates...its roots are still the deepest in all contemporary Afro-American music (19).

Toop (1991) clearly argues that reggae toasting was “a form of music-making that was strongly influenced by American jive-talking radio disc jockeys and MCs” (18). Much of the rich tradition of rap music can be traced to Black “personality deejays” who came into prominence in the late 1940s/early 1950s, right on the heels of the bebop revolution. Nelson George (1988) helps us to understand this rich legacy of orality in Black radio as one in which “coining phrases was an integral part of the rhythm and blues deejays” (43).

Like bebop musicians and rappers, early Black radio announcers who were “racially identifiable” (that means, sounding Black) were said to be undesirable, hard to understand, and an embarrassment. A December 1947 Ebony magazine article found that there were approximately 16 black disc jockeys out of 3,000 in the country (“Negro Disc Jockeys,” 1947). The article bragged about the racially unidentifiable voices of these black announcers. Ironically, one of the 16 announcers to receive glaringly little discussion was Al Benson. This omission becomes ironic because Al Benson would come to be known as the father of black personality disc jockeys. Benson was an embarrassment to many middle-class Blacks because, as Eddie O’Jay, a young deejay in the early fifties in Milwaukee, tells the story, “Benson killed the King’s English and I don’t know if he did it on purpose or not…. He wasn’t pretending to be white. He sounded black’” (cited in George, 1988, 42). Although Benson’s language remained undesirable to some, Benson, aka the Midnight Gambler, at his peak hosted five shows, programming about twenty hours per week bringing in nearly $100,000 a year for himself. Less than eight years after the 1947 Ebony article about Black disc jockeys, Benson’s popularity opened the market so that by 1955 there would be 500 Black personality jocks throughout the country (George, 1988, 42). Interestingly enough, some 30 plus years after Al Benson and “personality deejays,” rap music’s first record would be the 1979 Fatback Band’s “King Tim III (The Personality Jock)” Jock, of course, is short for disc jockey or radio announcer. At any rate, Nelson George’s (1988) comment on “personality deejays” is most helpful here:

A listener up on his Black history might have realized that these nighttime motor mouths were very much the inheritors of the Black oral tradition that spawned Br’er Rabbit, Mr. Mojo, and other rural tricksters created by Afro-Americans during their forced vacation in the ‘New World’ (42).

The bebop connection for these “personality deejays,” according to George (1988) is that “bebop, because of its rhythmic instinct and rebellious styles, was a verbal starting point” (42). For instance, the Bebop influence can be found in personality jock Lavada Durst, who called himself Dr. Hep Cat while a DJ at Austin, Texas’s KVET:

Jumpin’ Jills and jivin’ Cats,
Dr. Hep Cat would become so popular in Texas, including being popular among his devoted White listeners attending the University of Texas in Austin, that he published a booklet entitled *The Jives of Dr. Hep Cat*, which contained some of his on-air rhymes and a glossary of jive-talk terms for beginners (Barlow, 1999).

New York’s Jocko Henderson, whom Barlow designates “perhaps the most celebrated Black disc jockey to emerge in the 1950s,” (141) displayed his bop influence with his Hot Rod Hubert-influenced Rocket Ship show:

*Once again it’s rocket ship time.*

*And those not on board must be outta their mind.*

The rocketeers are lined up side by side, ready to take their most exciting ride.

*From earth to the moon you gotta go.*

*With your rocket ship commander—Jocko.*

*We’ll be on the moon if the fuel will last.*

*So let’s leave the earth with a big had blast.*

*Sound effect: rocket ship blasting off!*

*Way up here in the stratosphere,*

*gonna holler mighty loud and clear.*

*Eeek, tiddle-tock, Yo! This is the Jock.*

*Back on the scene,*

*with my record machine.*

*Saying oo-poppa-do,*

*How do you do?*

*Dy-no-mite!*

*Now on with the flight (cited in Barlow, 1999, 142).*

Like its predecessor, bebop, and successor, hip-hop, personality jocks “coining phrases” became part of “hip” folk’s talk. Maurice “Hot Rod” Hubert originated the “Rocket Ship Show” concept and novel phrases and terms including “Great gugga mugga shooga booga,” “Mommy’o and Daddy’o,” and “VOSA” (voice of sound terms). “Great gugga mugga shooga booga” became a part of New York slang and was even popularized in songs including “Stranded in the Jungle” by The Cadets and “Ball of Confusion” by The Temptations (see Barlow, 1999; Webb, 1996; Williams, 1998; Hubert, 1996).

The avarice structure of capitalism would rear its ugly head on Black radio as it has most aspects of Black life. In this case, Bill Drake developed a moneymaking format for pop radio that eventually seeped into Black-programmed radio. Under the Drake format, the radio format was “tightened;” what was being played was structured. In addition, announcers’ delivery style was restructured. Announcers had to play songs back to back, begin records under their voice as they introduced the songs, and follow a strict timetable as to how long they could speak. Under the Drake format, announcers kept their comments to about 8 seconds (Chapple and Garofalo, 1977, 99; see also George, 1988, 117-119). The rationale behind these changes was to centralize power as to what was being played and to play more music and have less talk so that more ad time could be sold and more commercials could be aired. The result of these changes, according to some critics, was the Drake format “reduced the role of the dj to robot” (Chapple and Garofalo, 1977, 99). As he recollects R & B’s acceptance of the Drake format and his role in its implementation, Black radio personality Gary Byrd lists two primary reasons for this acceptance (cited in George, 1988): White management’s fear of the power of the Black personality deejay (a power achieved through the spoken word (rhetoric)) and a general embarrassment of the speech (rhetoric) of the personality deejay. On both counts, then, it was the power of the Black spoken word that led to a demise of the power of the Black spoken word in Black radio.

This embarrassment of the vernacular of African American rhetoric goes back as far as protests over Paul Laurence Dunbar’s use of “Black dialect” in his poetry of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century; Hurston’s use of the Black language idiom in 1930s America; Sterling Brown’s use of the Black folk linguistic tradition in his writings of the 1930s, particularly his poems; and Langston Hughes’ varied writings from the 1920s to the 1950s that were rich in the language of the Black Everyman.

Gary Byrd and other Black radio pundits date the demise of the Black personality jock to around 1967 (cited in George, 1988, 119). But the Black rhetorical tradition would continue. It was to take another turn before it took its most visible form today in rap (hip-hop). That turn was to be found in the New Black Poetry of the late 1960s/early 1970s. As Black personality radio faded, the New Black Poetry rose.

Like its predecessor, bebop, and its later counterpart, rap, the New Black Poetry was born primarily as rhetoric of resistance. For already the New Black Poets’ literary forebears had written that “Nobody knows My Name” because I am an “Invisible Man.” In response, the New Black Poets rose to write with the rhythm of and in the spirit of James Brown’s “Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud.” These writers sought to identify themselves proudly as Black men and women, no longer Negroes, no longer colored, no longer dependent upon
White America to set the standards and to evaluate Black beauty. In the poets’ work was an adherence to James Brown’s words, which were planted deeply in the concept of Nommo. In essence, these Black men and women worked to create a Black aesthetic (Gayle, 1972). As noted linguist Geneva Smitherman (1973) highlights, “nowhere is this Aesthetic more strikingly revealed than in the language [my emphasis] of the New Black Poetry; for in creating this new linguistic form, the poets are not only tapping the reservoir of the Black Cultural Universe but doing so in the Black Idiom, (which is what makes much of this poetry difficult reading for Whites, and also lends credence to the frequent claim of Black writers that the critics of Black literature should be Black)” (260).

Though Smitherman (1973) does not specifically reference Nommo in her discussion, she connects ancient African approaches to the power of speech (Medew Nefer and Nommo) and the use of language by adding that “Black talk is never simple cocktail chit-chat, but a functional dynamic that is simultaneously a mechanism for learning about the world and a vehicle for achieving group recognition” (263). Black talk in America, then, was and is similar to ancient Egyptian Medew Nefer (Good Speech), which is the prerequisite for Medew Netcher (Divine Speech). Notice that “cocktail chit-chat” is like the Egyptian tft (idle chatter), and both are undesirable. The literature of the New Black Poets sought to embrace the oral component of Black culture. In the tradition of Medew Netcher and Nommo, in Black talk “verbal performance becomes both a means of establishing one’s reputation and a teaching/socializing force” (Smitherman, 1973, 263). In other words, speech fulfills a social function.

One of the most important functions of much of this New Black Poetry was that the writers were able to seek affirmation of their Black “selves,” and through their works encourage other Blacks to do so, too. Language was fundamental in this self-affirmation and self-assertiveness. Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinnamon (1972), editors of Black Writers of America, observe that “the young Black poets' use of Black ghetto speech is index of racial self-assertiveness—a way to use the ‘first’ of language” (662).

The writers of this period, then, were conscious to use the English language (the oppressor’s language) in a liberatory way. In other words, they created a “guerilla rhetoric,” as Asante would phrase it, or their unique form of “cultural resistance,” according to the Gramscian theory of ideological hegemony. To effectuate these ends to resistance, these Black writers called on the Black rhetorical and stylistic features of the dozens, the toast, call-response, signifying, and rhythmic pattern to help them (Smitherman, 1973). Smitherman (1973) cites Don L. Lee, who has since changed his name to Haki R. Madhubuti, and his use of the dozens and other Black rhetorical strategies in his short “tribute” to George Wallace:

wallace for president
his momma for vice-president
was scribbled
on the men’s room wall
over the toilet
where it’s supposed to be (267).

In his own book on the New Black poets, Lee (Madhubuti) (1971) notes the power of music for these new poets. He insisted that the language of the “new writers seemed to move in the direction of actual music. The poets were actually defining and legitimizing their own communicative medium….It carried its own syntax, not conventional by Western standards, and often referred to as non-communicative, obscene, profane” (33). Further in his discussion, Lee (Madhubuti) (1971) lists six common characteristics of the Black poetry of the Sixties:

1. polyrhythm—uneven, short and explosive lines
2. intensity—deep, yet simple; spiritual, yet physical
3. irony—humor, signifying/the dozens
4. sarcasm—the new comedy
5. direction—positive movement, teaching, nation-building
6. concrete subject matter—reflection of a collective and personal life style
7. musicality—the unique use of vowels and consonants with the developed rap [my italics], demanding that the poetry be read out loud (35).

Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets perhaps serve as the perfect bridge for the New Black Poets of the 1960s/1970s and rap music (hip-hop). For in Gil Scott-Heron, we find poetry with most of the characteristics of the New Black Poetry, but added are drum tracks and/or “cool” jazz riffs. The Last Poets hit the scene shortly after Heron and gave us hard, gripping words that are uniquely Black in their phrasing and style. Most importantly, though, is that the works of these artists exist primarily to resist issues of oppression, mainly class and race oppression. Thus, Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets used their rhetorical powers to criticize a society they perceived to be unjust, for the ultimate aim of building a just one. That can only be seen as “Good Speech.” Maybe even “Divine speech.”

The first rap song was recorded in 1979. Since that time rap artists have embraced certain technology, some of which has magnified rap’s role in preserving the rhetorical continuum. In particular, it is through the tech-
ologocal innovation of sampling that rap has preserved, revisited, and revamped old and familiar and/or new and forgotten Black sounds. Samplers “are computers that can digitally duplicate any existing sounds and play them back in any key or pitch, in any order, sequence and loop them endlessly” (Rose, 1994, 73). Many jazz lines and horn sounds are sampled in rap. A Tribe Called Quest’s “Excursions” is one example:

*Back in the days when I was a teenager*
*Before I had status and before I had a pager*
*You could find the Abstract listenin’ to Hip-Hop*
*My pops usto say it reminded him of Bebop*
*I said, ‘But Daddy don’t you know that things go in cycle*
*the way Bobby [Brown] is just ampin like Michael [Jackson]*
*It’s all expected*
*Things are for the lookin’*
*If you’ve got the money*
*Quest is for the bookin’* (1991, Track 1).

This song begins with a heavy jazz bass line that is sampled (the bebop connection). The Last Poets’ “Time is Running Out” (the New Black Poetry connection) is sampled and sprinkled through the song. Not only do rap artists continue the rhetorical styles of jazz (bebop) artists; they also have expanded on the sounds that the rhetoric of jazz (bebop) established. These rap sounds are often meant to be a form of protest.

The genesis of rap was one of protest. The early days of rap involved rap crews competing (they called it battling) for linguistic superiority, most often judged by a crowd. In other words, early rap had an aggressive, competitive nature to it, with the rap MC rapping and rhyming. Much of the rhyming was in the black tradition of toasting and sometimes in the tradition of the dozens. In addition, the creation of rap was in many ways a reaction to the sound of disco. Initially, disco began as an extension of Black dance music, but, according to Nelson George’s (1988) timetable it was between 1976-1980 that disco was “defunked” (153). Eurodisco invaded; it “was music with metronomelike beat—perfect for folks with no sense of rhythm—almost inflectionless vocals, and metallic sexuality that matched the high-tech, high-sex, and low passion atmosphere of the glamorous discs that appeared in every major American city” (George, 1988, 154). The funkiness (the Blackness) of disco was diluted. As disco “caught on” it started to appeal to an “upscale” clientele. The music and lyrics reflected this shift. As George (1988) phrases it, this life preferred a “celebration of hedonism and androgyny” (155; see Garofalo, 1993). Finally, the disco “movers and shakers,” according to George, “were not record executives but club deejays. Most were gay men with a singular attitude toward American culture, Black as well as White” (154; see Garofalo, 1993). Consistent with the theory of “ideological hegemony” and “cultural resistance,” on all counts then, rap was poised to resist. Rap resisted the defunking of the music (issue of race), the attention to “upscale” clientele (issues of class), and a homosexual focus (issues of sex/gender). Rap was ready to battle.

In a much more simplistic way, though, rap’s creation was one that epitomized the improvisation that marks Black cultural traditions. Early rappers’ ability to create something out of nothing is in many ways its greatest form of resistance. In many cases, without formal music training and in most cases without musical instruments, Black creativity gave way to the cultural expression that we know today as rap music. With instrumental beats, two turntables, and a mixer, the early rap MCs and disc jockeys rapped, scratched, and rhymed their ways into the world’s awareness. Today, rap stands as an international musical and cultural force that has redefined American and international music and culture. Ivy League professor Houston Baker (1993) alludes to that ubiquity by referencing an article from the New York Times on August 23, 1992, which concludes, “rap is one of the most important shapers of popular styles globally” [my emphasis] (63). The article chronicles rap’s influence in Russia, Japan, England, France, Mexico, the Ivory Coast, and other parts of the world (Baker, 1993, 63). Michael Vatikiotis (1993), writing for Far Eastern Economic Review, reports on the Malaysian rap group, 4U2C. 4U2C is described as “Malaysia’s hottest musical property” (32). Beginning with the orthographic liberties the seven teenage boys take in naming themselves (4U2C or For You To See) and culminating in the dress of these youths, the influence of black rappers in the music and in the lives of these young Malaysian rappers is evident.

Many rappers reflect their use of “guerilla rhetoric” and “cultural resistance” not only in their lyrics, but also in what they choose to name themselves. The practice of nicknaming has a long history in the African American community, as attested to by some of the names found among Black personality radio jocks: Dr. Hep Cat at Austin, Texas’s KVET; Doctor Bop in Columbus, Ohio, two Doctor Jives in New York, another one in Durham, NC, Doctor Daddy-O in New Orleans and Houston, and Dr. Deep Throat are a few examples. It is no small note to emphasize that Black men took these names during the 1950s and 1960s, when much of America was segregated and openly hostile to Blacks. Adopting the “Doctor” title and other self-asserting names was a means for Black men to resist society’s
prescriptive roles of obsequiousness and inferiority. These self-asserting disc jockey names challenged White and Black America to acknowledge Black men for their talents and expertise. One disc jockey called himself the Black Pope, for example (Barlow, 1999; Webb, 1996, Show 5). Other jockey monikers include Commander Hot Rod (Maurice Hulbert) and the Swingmaster Al Benson, again allowing Black men to present themselves as being in charge. In Black vernacular one of the most insulting titles one could bestow upon a hip urban dude was that of Bana (as in Alabama, or one who is “country” or not in vogue). Jerry Washington of Pacifica Radio’s WPF in Washington, DC expressed his self-assurance by his use of the Black rhetorical strategy of semantic inversion when he proudly dubbed himself not only a Bana, but “the Bana” because he was 180 degrees of that.

To help us study Black discourse, Asante (1987) coins the term orature, which refers to the “sum total of oral tradition … includ[ing] vocality, drumming, storytelling, praise singing, and naming” (60). Orature helps us place rap music within the continuum of black creative expressiveness or expression. It is in examining the orature of African Americans, for example, that we learn of “the empowering of the oppressed by listening to their voices” (22). One of the ways in which we can listen to the voices of the oppressors is in how they talk about themselves and how they name themselves. As Asante points out,

for the African the name becomes central to the person. If there were no name, all personal forces would be static; there would be no possibility of social intercourse, no growth, no development, and no integration into society. Naming becomes a creative act, a productive architectonic act in personal development (73).

Today, the names that many rappers choose reflect a language that is created out of a self-consciousness of oppression. As a result of this self-consciousness of oppression, as Pasteur and Toldson (1982) help us to see, “there is little innocence in Black language, not much decorativeness, and no cuteness at all” (214). The rap group Goodie Mob (Goodie die mostly over bullshit) tells us in their song “Fighting” to “take one o away, and it’ll let you know that ‘God is every man of Blackness’ ” (Goodie Mob, 1995, Track 9). The rap group Public Enemy’s power was not only in naming itself, but also in naming its songs. In doing so, Public Enemy would popularize the theories of the African American psychiatrist Dr. Frances Cress Welsing. The “Prophets of Rage” pulled the rug from under the European world and supported Dr. Welsing’s theory when it announced that White supremacy (racism) is essentially “Fear of a Black Planet,” and as a result “It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back.”

Then, too, other rappers opted to continue the Black rhetorical tradition of semantic inversion. Claiming the power over words, one group proudly crowned itself Black Sheep while our Compton, California friends took a name that some would say mimicked the general disposition of the beboppers of the 1940s. These young men from California would unashamedly announce that they were N.W.A. (Niggas with Attitudes). And for the sake of signifying’, their attitudes queried “and whatcha gonna do about it?” Other notable names include Outkast, Fugees (as in refugee), Black Thought from the group Roots, and the Lost Boyz (notice the orthographic liberty taken in the naming process).

By using the rhetorical strategy of word play, rapper Lisa Williamson adopts the stage name Sister Souljah* to link rap to Medew Netcher (God speech). Jah is a term for God or the Supreme Being. Soul refers to the essence of one’s being, the foundation of one’s existence. Soul is also a term that has been used to describe the richness of black folks in their cultural expression; there has even been a genre of music bearing the soul appellation. The name Souljah or soldier, then, reflects Williamson’s similarity to the young Black Poets of the Black Arts Movement who used the “fist of language” (Barksdale and Kinnarmon, 1972, 662) in pursuit of a just society. For this rapper, to fight is divine. Sister Souljah fights through her speech: her name then reflects divine speech. Moreover, Williamson attempts to bring gender clarity to the discussion of gender roles by letting us know that she is a Sister Souljah (Soldier).

Certainly not all rappers choose self-conscious, political names as the names Jay-Z, Notorious Big, Lil’ Kim, Big Tymers, and LL Cool J among others verify. Nevertheless, these rappers continue African American tradition of using a nickname, which “is no doubt a derivation of the practice everywhere in Africa of considering the name a distinct part of the individual” (Pasteur and Toldson, 1982, 230). James Todd Smith’s adoption of the rap name LL Cool J (Ladies love cool James) is similar to the jazz singer Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton’s adoption of “Jelly Roll,” where Jelly Roll was a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Both names accent these men’s “gift” in seducing women. Simply stated, despite taking a self-conscious, openly political stance of resistance, most rappers have been unable to escape displaying traits of the African rhetorical tradition.

Just as importantly, many rappers are beginning to understand that they are purveyors of Black rhetoric. This knowledge is important because it is in the realm of
defining themselves that rappers, particularly males, are resisting attempts from a hostile collective EuroAmerican society that would deny Black people in general, Black men in particular, any semblance of humanity. But these rappers continue to offer definitions of themselves that promise to lead to self-actualization.

Many rappers move beyond the label of rappers. Instead, many rappers are like their bebop predecessors who wanted to see themselves as “serious musicians, even artists, and not performers,” to quote Jones (1963) again (188). Many rappers, too, refuse to be stifled by limited definitions. For example, in the song “Renee,” Mr. Cheeks of The Lost Boyz, when meeting a woman whom he was interesting in courting, describes himself as a “writer,” not a rapper, musician or entertainer. Similarly, while appreciating fans who respect his ability to improvise rhymes (freestyle), the rapper Ras Kass makes it clear in an interview with Gabriel Alvarez (1996) of *Rap Pages* that he is a writer. He sees writing as therapy. Moreover, it is this dedication to the art that incited A Tribe Called Quest to devote the first song on the CD *Beats, Rhymes and Life* to chastise “Phony Rappers.” The song cleverly mixes anecdotes of various verbal challenges that the group has received from “phony rappers who do not write, phony rappers who cannot excite.” In “Phony Rappers” a Tribe member is forced to “bang his [the challenger’s] ass with a verbal assault.” The defeated challenger seeks to explain his linguistic impotence. The signifying begins:

‘I need a phillie right before I get loose’
That’s a poor excuse, Money, please
I get loose off orange juice
Preferably Minute Maid
because that’s exactly how long
it takes to write a rhyme
Hmm, so screw your nickels and your dimes
Because an MC like me be on TV don’t mean
I can’t hold my shit down in N Y C (1996, Track 1).

This rhyme is instructive in its use of signifying, a staple in African American rhetoric, but more pointed in its allusion to the capitalist (class) issues facing rap. Note that the verbal challenger is reprimanded, “because an MC be on TV don’t mean I can’t hold my shit down in N Y C.” A Tribe Called Quest is clearly articulating that despite pressures from the commodified nature of the rap business, the group remains true to rap as an art form; they “keep it real.” Moreover, A Tribe Called Quest attempts to send the message to other rappers and “wannabe” rappers that it is possible to gain money and fame and remain true to the art, using their own example to show that it is possible to obtain wealth without diluting the art.

**Conclusion**

Maultsby (cited in Herbert, 1991; see also Kitwana, 1994, 2002) reminds us that rap is a commodity. As such, it is forced to fight against forces that would dictate its agenda.

The ancient Egyptians knew that not all speech is good speech. They warned against *mdw dw* (evil speech) and *tff†* (idle chatter). Certainly, some critics challenge rap’s lyrics. Some might even argue that some of today’s rap could be classified as *mdw dw*, but my major purpose here is not to talk about the ethical nature of rap. Speech is like human nature; it is neither good nor bad. It is just possibility. In “keepin it real,” rap music has shown that it belongs to a rich Black tradition of reverence for rhetoric in its written and spoken form. Rap was created primarily as means for young African Americans (predominantly males) to speak their minds.

Some criticize rappers for using profane language; so, too, did some criticize the New Black Poets for being profane and the Black Panthers for being profane. Their retort was that society was profane, and they were only reflecting society. One of the areas where rap will face its greatest challenge is in its reputed misogyny. But once again, society is misogynistic. As Portia Maultsby (cited in Herbert, 1991) notes, if we do not like the lyrics of rap “we must first get rid of the conditions that gave rise to an attitude that produced those conditions…” (41). By holding a mirror to society, rap stands as a rhetoric of resistance primarily to issues of race but also to issues of class and sex (gender). It is within the rich Black rhetorical tradition that rap stands poised for this pursuit.

**References**


