

# Waking Up to the Sound

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## 1. Post-Civil Rights Sounds

At a recent party celebrating a friend's eighty-second birthday, his "smart" television, running the Pandora app (rather tech-savvy, this octogenarian), played Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes's "Wake Up Everybody" from the album of the same name released by Philadelphia International Records in 1975. This mid-tempo R&B classic—opening with piano glissandos, punctuated by guitar plucks and strums, and propelled by dynamic strings—displays the talents of the songwriting team of Gene McFadden and John Whitehead with Victor Carstarphen, the ingenuity of producers Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, and the powerhouse vocals of Teddy Pendergrass. The song opens by alerting listeners—of all races, presumably, women as well as men—to national and world problems: "hatred, war, and poverty." Its chorus expresses dissatisfaction with the status quo and the passive acceptance of it—"The world won't get no better / If we just let it be"—even if the song does not argue for a reworking of social, political, and economic structures. Rather than call out those in positions of power, each verse calls on a category of workers—"teachers," "doctors," "builders"—perhaps asserting the ability of those addressees and of individuals to make a difference in their local communities, the nation, and the world: "We got to change it, yeah / Just you and me." Hearing the song triggered memories of my inner-city childhood during the 1970s, including a sense of solidarity in the black community, an awareness of the challenges facing us linked to a confidence that we were all working together as best as we could to confront them.

The historical era from which "Wake Up Everybody" dates, the decade following the legislative gains of the modern civil rights movement, is significant to recent studies of US literature. In 2011,

*Rhyme's Challenge: Hip Hop, Poetry, and Contemporary Rhyming Culture.* David Caplan, Oxford University Press, 2014.

*Imagine the Sound: Experimental African American Literature after Civil Rights.* Carter Mathes, University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

*Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing.* Anthony Reed, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.

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Kenneth W. Warren argued that African-American literature was conceived as a literary tradition and a collective effort on the part of African Americans in the late-nineteenth century in order to combat racial segregation, but “with the legal demise of Jim Crow, the coherence of African American literature has been correspondingly, if sometimes imperceptibly, eroded as well” (2). Responses to Warren have been “at best lukewarm and at worst harshly critical” (Santamarina 399). In response to the claim that African-American literature is exhausted as a category following the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, Rafia Zafar contends that instead of “retiring” the category of African-American literature, we should “further contextualize, periodize, and particularize its currents in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (402). Recent literary criticism by Carter Mathes, Anthony Reed, and David Caplan performs the work that Zafar describes, implicitly and explicitly responding to Warren’s arguments as well as suggesting related questions. For example, what are the social and political movements of the post-civil rights era and our own twenty-first-century moment with which black writing is concomitant? What does the “black” in “black writing” mean, to paraphrase Stuart Hall, especially when we consider the African diaspora outside of the US as well as differentiations of economic class, gender, sexuality, and generation (for starters)? And what exactly counts as “literature” anyway, and why?

The studies under review here, particularly Mathes’s and Reed’s, also respond to Warren by representing the beginning of the post-civil rights era, from which “Wake Up Everybody” dates, and thereafter as an era of black utopianism, by which I mean the critical analysis of existing structures (social, political, economic) as well as the conceptualization of and insistence on alternatives in the cultural products of the African diaspora.<sup>1</sup> This utopianism suggests that black writers have seen the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts as milestones in US racial history but not as an endpoint. “Post-civil rights,” therefore, names an era when the struggle for black liberation continues and new calls for social change confront complacency and racist resistance to black advancement.

Furthermore, “Wake Up Everybody,” a musical expression of post-civil rights-era utopianism, suggests “sound” as a category around which a tradition of black culture coheres and as an analytical category, one that is relevant to all three of these studies. As Jonathan Sterne explains in his introduction to *The Sound Studies Reader* (2012), “Today, there is a boom in writings on sound by authors in the humanities and social sciences, whose work is distinguished by self-consciousness of its place in a larger interdisciplinary discussion of sound” “as [an] analytical point of departure or arrival” (1, 2).<sup>2</sup> Foundational texts in this field include Jacques Attali’s *Noise: The*

*Political Economy of Music* (1985) and R. Murray Shafer's *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1993). Sound studies and literary studies' reciprocal relevance is evident in the former's attention to "the auditory imagination," a concept from T. S. Eliot's *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) that identifies

the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current, and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilized mentality. (qtd. in Sterne 5)

Sound studies and African-American studies speak to each other as well. Sterne notes that "The Sorrow Songs," which concludes *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and the juxtaposition of Anglo-American poetry with musical notation for Negro spirituals that opens each of that volume's chapters demonstrate that "when W.E.B. Du Bois wanted to rethink the role of race in American life, he turned to sound as a key modality for thinking through African American culture" (2). Mathes, Reed, and Caplan also make the sonic turn, participating in a black tradition of sound studies that extends from at least as far back as Du Bois at the turn of the twentieth century to these new critical visions in the twenty-first.

## 2. Literary Sounds, Critical Visions

From reading Carter Mathes's *Imagine the Sound: Experimental African American Literature after Civil Rights* (2014), I now know that sound theory's term for the musically induced flashback I experienced is "anamnesis," which Jean-Francois Augoyard and Henry Torgue describe in *Sonic Experience* (2005) as an intersection of "sound, perception, and memory" that "plays with time, reconnecting past mental images to present consciousness, with no will other than the free activity of association" (qtd. in Mathes 173). Mathes applies sound studies to post-civil rights era African-American literature, producing an "expressive sonic-literary map of the political for black writers" (6). He builds on the work of Attali and Shafer as well as James A. Snead's "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," an influential essay that theorizes "the cut," a seemingly unmotivated return

to the beginning that accommodates ruptures or “builds ‘accidents’ into its *coverage*” (qtd. in Mathes 39). The book’s introduction considers Assata Shakur’s narration of her fateful 1973 encounter with state troopers on the New Jersey Turnpike in *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987), a text representative of a “black radical aesthetics” that is “both visual and phonic” (3). Equally important here is an understanding of the years immediately following the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts as a “period of tension and irresolution” instead of a definitive break with the history of US racism and segregation: “The sonority of her voice” reveals how Shakur’s “quest for liberation is more of an ephemeral and improvisational process than a fixed goal” (6).

For Mathes, the sonic is a conceptual field that supports formal experimentation and informs a resistance to realism as a privileged literary mode, qualities not often associated with African-American literature of the 1960s and 1970s. His first chapter details saxophonist John Coltrane’s 1967 performance of a free jazz version of “My Favorite Things” that “destabilize[ed] harmony, melody, and temporality” (38) and was characterized by “density . . . on both an acoustic and an epistemological level” (27), “what many at the time referred to as playing and existing ‘out’” (31), that is, an aesthetics “outside the range of familiarity” (51). Mathes also identifies the “imbrication of sound and politics” (31) in Coltrane’s efforts “to create an informal organization dedicated to furthering the economic and creative self-determination of black music” (30) and the pursuit of a “communal ethic” (31) that would support a “multiracial” listening community receptive to new sounds (36). This aesthetic creates “a critical and epistemological”—and, I would add, utopian—“challenge to practices of social division” (40). As he does with Shakur, Mathes presents Coltrane and his sound as a challenge to the notion of 1960s federal civil rights legislation as definitive socio-political marker:

Coltrane’s transformation of [“My Favorite Things”] from an improvisational reformatting of a tune into an impressionistic field of sound expresses the often counter-cyclical movements of historical progression, regression, and uncertainty marking the social, political, and racial transformations occurring through the transition between the Civil Rights and the post-Civil Rights era. (41)

The methodology of *Imagine the Sound*, analyzing literary engagements with music and sound in order to “conceptualize a soundscape of black freedom,” makes legible this literature’s utopianism (59). Replicating his approach to Coltrane in subsequent chapters on writers associated with the Black Arts Movement (BAM), the

cultural associate of Black Power, Mathes describes Amiri Baraka reading the poem “Black Art” accompanied by the Cecil Taylor Quintet, a jazz performance that opens up new interpretive possibilities for the poem: “We want poems that kill,” therefore, conjures “something beyond violence,” a utopian “freedom of creative destruction” (57). Mathes claims that the “disruption” associated with free jazz exists “not only in relationship to oppositional ideologies, structure, and epistemologies, but also in an ironic way, against a stagnant sense of what militant and/or separatist black nationalism might entail” (58). Of course, the reader of *Imagine the Sound* cannot hear the Baraka-Taylor performance, which, despite Mathes’s descriptions, affects the persuasiveness of such claims and suggests the usefulness of multi-media content and digital platforms for this particular analysis.

In addition to canonical figures, Mathes discusses writers whose efforts to create a soundscape of black freedom make them deserving of further scholarly attention, such as Henry Dumas. This poet and fiction writer, shot and killed at age 33 in 1968 by a New York City transit officer, was described by Baraka as an “Afro-surreal expressionist” (164) and by Toni Morrison as “an absolute genius” (310).<sup>3</sup> Dumas’s story “The Metagenesis of Sunra” demonstrates the utopianist influence of the free jazz musician and icon of Afrofuturism, Sun Ra, whose “mythic, supernatural, and extraterrestrial black identity . . . is a critical construction for questioning the foundations of historical knowledge that underline hegemonic formations of social and political hierarchies” (68). Mathes connects “Sun Ra’s commitment to charting alternate possibilities” to Dumas’s character, who “taught (people) to believe in the impossible thing” (qtd. in Mathes 73). This utopianism extends to Dumas’s “Echo Tree,” in which echoes “orchestrate the (story’s) natural soundscape” and provide conduits through which Dumas’s characters access black cultural and political traditions (86). These multi-dimensional echoes also express a Marcusean critique of late-capitalist “one-dimensionality” (qtd. in Mathes 86), “an intervention within the fabric of the establishment’s manufacturing of coerced consciousness” (87).

In his own contributions to a black freedom soundscape, Larry Neal, author of “The Black Arts Movement,” develops an interest in Herbert Marcuse along with a conviction that the BAM could change the US and fulfill a utopian “longing for a new world to come into being” (Mathes 113). Mathes demonstrates the significance of “the sensory and phenomenological registers of experience and expression” (115) in Neal’s famous essay, as in the description of a production of Baraka’s play *Slave Ship* (1970) and hearing its “continuous rush of sound” (qtd. in Mathes 116).<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the single most significant argument in Mathes’s book is that this attention to sonority revises the understanding of Neal as representative of the BAM’s rigidity. *Imagine*

*the Sound* emphasizes Neal's insistence on "'black aesthetics,' plural: a multifarious, contingent, non-delimited complex of strategies" and his wariness of the movement "falling into one bag," (qtd. in Mathes 102, 125), attitudes that accommodate intraracial difference.<sup>5</sup>

Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), a reflection on "the stagnation of black political movements in the later years of the 1970s" in which "sound operates on several levels in the narrative" (141), represents the genre of the novel—and with Shakur, women's voices—in *Imagine the Sound*. A subsequent chapter provides a study of James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man," particularly the story's representation of the Southern sheriff who confronts his memories of the sounds and silences from torturing a black activist and from witnessing a lynching as a child. Mathes is again making arguments about sound—"a modality through which Baldwin delineates the existential depths of subjection, containment, and division that mark American racial politics that must be fully understood before a vision of freedom and equality can be fully conceptualized" (161)—that connect sound to black utopianist thought and also demonstrate that "the idea of Civil Rights social transformation is perpetually challenged by the permanence of racial terror" (162). Baldwin's direction of a 1970 production of John Herbert's *Fortune and Men's Eyes* (1967) would demonstrate further the significance of sound and music to Baldwin and to black queer artistic endeavors. Unfortunately, no record exists of the sounds of the production, featuring jazz trumpeter Don Cherry's score. Mathes, therefore, describes Cherry's earlier performance with Turkish musicians in Ankara, giving the reader a sense of Baldwin's production that is only partly satisfying; Mathes, however, succeeds in demonstrating how, in *No Name in the Street* (1972), sound figures "the simultaneity of the historical past, present, and future within (Baldwin's) political consciousness," as with Dumas's echoes, and expresses Baldwin's utopian commitment "to make America what America must become" (186).

If, surprisingly, Mathes's sound study does little with poetry, the literary expression most related to song, that genre is prominent in Anthony Reed's *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (2014). Like Mathes, Reed critiques the notion that the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of the 1960s definitively closed the curtain on antiblack racism and the modern black liberation movement: "For many writers and intellectuals in the era, the change of legal status following the end of legal segregation and formal colonization fell well short of the freedom so many dreamed of and registered in the moment as requiring new political strategies to win a fuller freedom" (2). Reed focuses on more recent, conspicuously and self-consciously experimental, writings that are understood, to use Gene Jarrett's formulation, as truants rather than representatives of two

traditions: “Experimentation and race seem opposed” (3) so that both “traditional genealogies of black writing,” and “general accounts of American experimentalism” marginalize black experimental writing (208). As a corrective, *Freedom Time* identifies “a transnational archive of black experimental writing since the moment of what critics and scholars of the late 1960s called ‘the new black poetry’” in which neither modifier, “black” nor “experimental,” supplements the other (5, 9).

Reed responds directly to Warren, taking up the challenge “to develop new ways to read black writing” (15) by performing formal analyses of texts with an “attention to the typography, phonology, and other elements” (21). For example, M. NourbeSe Philip’s “Zong #1” confronts the dilemma of how to represent “the 1781 murder of 133 kidnaped and unnamed Africans who were drowned with the expectation that insurance would cover the loss of capital” in English, “given [the language’s] complicity in conjuring or cosigning the African to ‘nonbeing’” (47). Philip’s solution includes disassembling that language at the most basic level; she stretches the word “water” over four lines and punctuates language on the verge of straightforward narration with unorthodox and irregular line breaks, techniques that yield surprising “combinatory possibilities” and reveal “language itself as the subject,” as much as slavery or race (51, 52). This chapter also analyzes the “Sycorax Video Style” of Kamau Brathwaite, co-founder of the Caribbean Arts Movement in 1966. *Freedom Time* emphasizes the “graphic texture” of this form of apostrophe; reproductions of Brathwaite’s poems show how variations in justification, punctuation, capitalization, italics, etcetera matter thematically. For example, in “Dream Haiti,” “the words ‘Haitian Refugees’ are nearly illegible,” conveying “a further refusal or deferral of the epithet and . . . the ways it obscures those it refers to” (85).

This analysis of experimental graphics and typography continues in Reed’s treatment of “postlyric” poetry that contests “the ideology of the stable voice, typified by a certain critical hermeneutics of ‘the’ lyric” and attempts “to break the common sense link between poetry as personal and group expression without claiming some reified notion of the ‘universal’” (97). This poetics responds to what Jodi Melamed has labeled “neoliberal multiculturalism” (qtd. in Reed 104), as well as the “commodifi[cation] of racial difference” (103) characterizing the post-Civil Rights era, when whites may embrace “diversity” as a value and consume black cultural products even as they define themselves in opposition to the people who embody that diversity and produce that culture, and when examples of “black genius” are no longer seen as metonymic to a larger black population (124–25).

The poetics of Claudia Rankine and Douglas Kearney, for Reed, exemplify critical thinking about the lyric subject appropriate

to this historical moment. Kearney's poetry performs an interrogation and destabilization of the lyric voice in poems that look like flow-charts or diagramed sentences, with strike-throughs and multiple font styles and sizes, and that refer to hip-hop lyrics and black folk culture. According to Reed, Kearney's poetry is postlyric in that "the self" is represented as "an objectified 'IT' suspended between the poles of black exceptionality and unexceptionality" (124–25). Kearney's "The Black Automaton in de Despair ub Existence #1: Up ye mighty race!" cites both "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, an example of classic hip hop as social commentary, and the irrepressible materialism of "Can't Nobody Hold me Down," a later hip-hop track by Puff Daddy and Ma\$. The poem represents, therefore, "a shift in rap itself," from an "I" who speaks as an organic representative reporting on urban life, to an "I" who is decidedly more individualized; the postlyric "IT" represents this change, while the poem more generally expresses "despair" and a "nostalgia for the race politics and sense of racial solidarity of earlier moments," like what I felt when I heard "Wake Up Everybody" (128).

Reed's application of sound studies is most evident in a chapter entitled "Exploding Dimensions of Song," which explores "The Utopian Poetics in the Cut" in the jazz-themed writings of Nathaniel Mackey, who is also cited in Mathes's book. As with *Imagine the Sound*, utopianism is the conceptual spine running through *Freedom Time*. Reed presents black experimental writing as expressing "new thoughts and new imaginings," for "holding open a place for the unthought, for what is unassimilable to the prevailing regime of power and, most generally, its positive claims and demands" (1, 5). Reed values the kind of writing that Robert Hayden called "the art of saying the impossible" (19–20), which recalls Mathes's discussion of Sun Ra's "impossible thing." For Reed, experimental writing challenges the status quo at the level of ideas, "expanding the range of the thinkable by calling into question those ideological presuppositions that 'everybody knows'" (171). Mackey's work, for example, critically frames a "phantom objectivity," an allusion to Georg Lukács, which Reed describes as "the veil of ideology [that] effectively erases or suppresses traces of its own mediation of 'reality,' making the given world seem inevitable, alternatives unthinkable" (192). Sun Ra's music, Mackey's writing, and Reed's interpretations all engage in "speculation," Reed's name for "the necessary attempt to think beyond present conditions through making experimental connections in language and with grammar" (188). And like Mathes, Reed draws on Sneed's "Repetition" for its sense of "the cut" as a "chrono-poetic concept" challenging a linear notion of time that separates the past from the present (172). Utopianism, formal experimentalism, and the

cut converge in the notion of “outfulness,” identical to the similar jazz expression Mathes invokes, which refers most pertinently to “following a melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic logic that conflicts with prevailing aesthetic norms” (207). Much of Reed’s book can be considered, therefore, as the study of literary “outfulness.” *Freedom Time* makes the compelling argument that recent black experimental writing that may not be as conspicuously political as slave narratives or protest literature actually makes both political and aesthetic statements “in its call for thinking beyond the prevailing assumptions of the institutions that shape and limit thought in a given moment” (209).

On the topic of prevailing assumptions, consider the following one about poetry: poetry that rhymes is outdated, unsophisticated, and at best, quaint. Despite the fact that rhyme was seen as poetry’s defining, exalting element by literary figures of the past such as Swift and Swinburne, as David Caplan observes, “no knowledgeable reader of poetry holds this position today” (28). Caplan cites John Berryman’s claim that “modern poetry began with the third line” of Eliot’s “Prufrock,” which opens with a rhyming couplet “to convey a jarring force, a diminishment or destruction” (6). Daniel Albright called rhyme “a retreat, cowering before modern life,” and Lyn Hejinian says that rhyming poetry “tends to have a tiresome though sometimes laughable predictability” (qtd. in Caplan 6, 30). As its title suggests, Caplan’s *Rhyme’s Challenge* (2014) confronts such attitudes, presenting a thesis that is both provocative and convincing: contemporary poetry demonstrates a profound antipathy toward rhyme while hip hop, like the English language in general, “abounds” with rhyme and uses it for a variety of effects and purposes deserving of poetry’s attention (17). In short, Caplan presents hip hop as an exemplar of Eliot’s “auditory imagination.”

So is hip hop literary? Is “Rapper’s Delight” poetry? “The question of whether hip hop should be considered poetry generates a surprisingly intense debate,” Caplan writes (13). Mark Strand said that listening to rap was “like being blasted up against the wall,” whereas in *Book of Rhymes* (2009) Adam Bradley has insisted that “Rap is poetry, but its popularity relies in part on people not recognizing it as such” (qtd. in Caplan 14, 13). Although Caplan makes the reasonable claim that “too often critics treat the term ‘poetry’ as if it retains a stable definition across cultures, time periods, and genres,” he is less interested in taking a side than in explaining what hip hop can do for contemporary print-based poetry (14). Indeed, Bradley articulates the problem that Caplan seeks to rectify: most people do not like poetry, or perhaps more accurately, they *think* they do not like poetry though they have had little exposure to it. Caplan’s book is not a “me too”-ish grasp at some sort of prestige associated with poetry. Instead, hip hop comes bearing gifts since it “dramatically

fuses two artistic commitments: rhyme and an intense focus on the contemporary moment,” and if poetry is going to avoid being completely sidelined in contemporary US culture, it is going to have to look and sound more contemporary (7). Hip hop, Caplan claims, is the “verbal art” that is “most alert” to the English language’s perpetual expansion (136), which is accelerating due in part to digital technologies and new media; according to Jay-Z, hip hop is “about what’s current . . . what’s happening right this second” (qtd. in Caplan 7). When Robyn Creswell, the poetry editor of *The Paris Review* admits, “Most of the poems stuck in my head are rap songs,” it is hard to deny Caplan’s point (qtd. in Caplan 137). It is sound, or the trajectory between written and spoken language, that provides Caplan a way to differentiate poetry and hip hop in a nonhierarchical manner: “It is a commonplace of contemporary poetry criticism and pedagogy that to be experienced fully, print-based poetry must be read aloud. . . . [A] certain kind of hip hop lyric . . . demands nearly the opposite progression. Crafted according to the demands of musical performance, it seeks to be transcribed and considered as a silent written text” (15). This observation brings the art forms together at least as much as it distinguishes them. Another type of convergence of poetry and hip hop is “slam poetry,” a hybrid category mentioned only briefly in *Rhyme’s Challenge*.

Caplan’s approach is not exactly that of an African-American studies scholar, but he is aware of how hip hop signifies as “black”—Public Enemy’s Chuck D memorably called hip hop “the black CNN” (qtd. in Caplan 13)—even though non-blacks consume plenty of rap music and one of the most prominent rappers in recent years, Eminem, is white. For Caplan, it is not only subject matter, subject position, and politics that places hip hop in a black cultural tradition; it is also rhyme, which “has long been associated with African-American culture and its most prominent forms of artistic expression,” including folk culture (62–63). Caplan also states that although hip hop’s techniques originated with black and Latino youths in US urban centers, “rhymes cross races and travel distances,” which is in part why hip hop has become such a global phenomenon (63). There is a similarity, however, between the challenge that hip hop presents to contemporary print-based poetry and the radical reordering of aesthetics detailed in Neal’s “The Black Arts Movement,” to which the post-Civil Rights writers in Mathes’s book aspired. Caplan sets up the scope of his wide-ranging and erudite book in a chapter on how hip hop confounds “doggerel” and “major poetry” (32). Citing legendary rapper Rakim—“a thousand styles in one verse”—Caplan explains that “a single hip-hop song may contain astonishingly different kinds of rhyme” (36). Caplan also shows how Eminem’s “Seduction” elevates a variety of types of rhymes deemed substandard by literary

criticism—monosyllables, homophones, forced rhymes—to exemplars of linguistic virtuosity (100).

Aesthetics inevitably leads to ethics, however, and hip hop continues to face questions, from knowledgeable stakeholders as well as inveterate detractors, about its homophobia, sexism, glorification of violence, and promotion of a culture of conspicuous consumption. Douglas Kearney's poetry, says Reed, critically frames hip hop as "the latest preemptive mask for understanding (and pathologizing) black life even as it is praised for its fidelity to black culture" (122). The history of hip hop's thematic permutations is outside of the scope of Caplan's book, which, to its credit, avoids making claims about authenticity, "the repeated alibi for deplorable lyrics that are 'true to life'" (Reed 122). Furthermore, Caplan distinguishes his approach from that of "the first generation of hip-hop scholarship," which was grounded in the field of Cultural Studies: "Such modes of analysis rarely show detailed interest in poetic form and versification" (13).<sup>6</sup> Organized through topics like insult and seduction, *Rhyme's Challenge* is mindful of subject matter but inclines toward an intensively close reading of other formal elements. This focus on rhyme over cultural politics enables Caplan to question the claim that hip hop's Golden Age was from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. Given the diversity of lyrical styles among rappers today, Caplan can reasonably argue that "the current moment offers the richest resources and inspires the greatest accomplishment" (42). The analysis of Ice-T's "Reckless" (1984) demonstrates Caplan's rigorous formalism and expresses his opinion that more recent rappers, while influenced by such early tracks, have advanced the art form:

"Reckless" features end-stopped rhyming couplets. Fastidiously the syntax and lineation align and the song avoids multisyllabic rhymes. With a few exceptions, one- and two-syllable words dominate the song's vocabulary. When the song introduces multisyllabic end words, it rhymes with only one of the available syllables. Even as the performers assert their music's singularity, "This high-powered music is truly unique. / As The Glove cuts the rhythm to the hip-hop beat," the song carefully follows the historical moment's rather limited rhyming conventions. The next generation crafted rhymes from the possibilities that "Reckless" left unexplored. (135)

Rhyme is clearly indispensable to rapping, yet *Rhyme's Challenge* might still attend more fully to other aspects of hip-hop lyrics, as well as the greater culture. For example, Caplan rightly argues for rhyme's role in making Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" the sonic juggernaut that it is, but he also presents Blowfly's "Rap Dirty" as an antecedent text to

which Chuck D alludes through diction—both tracks feature well-placed variations of “motherfucker”—and from which he “borrowed the syntax and structure” (58); rhyme would seem, therefore, to be one of several elements at work in “Fight the Power.” Perhaps a whole other book needs to be written on rap and narrative or, to invoke Slick Rick, the art of storytelling. Whereas Mathes and Reed draw from Snead’s “Repetition,” Caplan does not. Even though loops of sound, punctuated by “the cut,” traditionally have been a key feature, backing musical tracks and the various technologies used to produce them, such as turntabling and digital sampling, are not really among this book’s concerns. The interpretations of hip-hop tracks in *Rhyme’s Challenge* are generally convincing; however, Chuck D’s dismissal of Elvis in “Fight the Power” does not make it, as Caplan contends, a critique of Paul Simon’s “Graceland,” a song about divorce rather than an ode to Presley. And it is hard to take “The Bad Touch” by the Bloodhound Gang, which rhymes “mammals” with “the Discovery Channel,” as a serious example of seductive lyricism. But it is the precision and insight of Caplan’s analyses that leave the strongest impression, along with his concluding argument that hip hop has already had an influence on a generation of print-based poets of various races, which is likely to persist as this century continues.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Waking Up to the Twenty-First Century

*Hip hop’s potential contributions to contemporary poetry mirror sound studies’ potential for contributing to how we theorize the black literary tradition in the twenty-first century.*

Hip hop’s potential contributions to contemporary poetry mirror sound studies’ potential for contributing to how we theorize the black literary tradition in the twenty-first century. Mathes, Reed, and Caplan wake up scholars to the role of sound in black literature and culture, countering Warren’s concerns about the coherence of the tradition in the post-civil rights era. Sound links black writing to the ongoing struggle for black liberation, from the double-voiced spirituals envisioning freedom and expressing the intention to achieve it described in Frederick Douglass’s nineteenth-century *Narrative*, to the hymns and gospels, the sounds of resistance as portrayed in Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man,” that inspired those who marched, protested, and registered voters during the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century.

This literary tradition speaks to the racial realities and political movements of our own times. Warren’s arguments have prompted responses that cite Michelle Alexander’s analysis of the overrepresentation of African Americans in our nation’s prisons in *The New Jim Crow* (2010), the title of which suggests that aspects of the era of racial segregation—against which, Warren claims, African-American literature was conceived as a tradition—have persisted

through the civil rights movement era into the twenty-first century.<sup>8</sup> Sadly, 2014 provided multiple further examples, such as the use of lethal force by police against unarmed black citizens, including the death of Eric Garner in Staten Island and the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson.<sup>9</sup> The rap collective known as the Wu-Tang Clan addresses these incidents as well as the protests that followed in those locations and nationwide in a track and accompanying video with the utopian title “A Better Tomorrow,” a twenty-first-century linkage of culture to politics through sound that includes a sample of “Wake Up Everybody.”<sup>10</sup> One observer has suggested that “maybe this is a moment we’re all better off listening to those marching in the streets . . . instead of those paid to use a microphone to entertain” (Turner). However, it remains to be seen what else will come from hip-hop artists listening to a distinctly new generation of activists participating in the long civil rights movement, a movement lengthened by the continued necessity to proclaim that “black lives matter,” a phrase inclusive of black women and queers of color, that is, “everybody” in the black community. The literary partner to this activism includes contemporary black poetry such as Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004), which “expose[s] the implications of what it means to speak from the seeming coherency” of the first-person pronoun (qtd. in Reed 9), identifying the exclusions enacted when the US says “We.”<sup>11</sup> Via this postlyricism, Reed writes, “the ability to make those faces, those lives, and those deaths deemed unfit to mourn—and the sense of community that has allowed Eleanor Bumpurs, Amadou Diallo, Abner Louima, Sean Bell, Troy Davis, Trayvon Martin, and too many others to be mere names whose significance we are constantly on the verge, collectively, of forgetting—is put on trial” (121). We await further words and sounds that will spur us to remember and to act with an eye toward creating a better present and future.

## Notes

1. For more on the scope of “utopianism,” see the works of Lyman Tower Sargent, which have shaped the field of Utopian Studies, especially “The Three Faces of Utopianism,” *minnesota review* 7 (1967): 222–30 and “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” *Utopian Studies* 5.1 (1994) 1–37.
2. Jennifer Stoeber, editor-in-chief of the sound studies weekly *Sounding Out!*, identifies the online journal’s “research questions” as follows: “How does listening impact the production of social difference? And vice versa? What is the relationship between sound and power? What is the role of listening in everyday life, particularly in regards to identity construction and performance? How do we understand the cultural histories of various sound media?” See “About US,” [soundstudiesblog.com](http://soundstudiesblog.com).

3. As Mathes notes (64), a special issue of *Black American Literature Forum* (1988) was dedicated to Dumas, featuring contributions from a long list of stalwarts of African-American literature and literary criticism, including Baraka, Morrison, Margaret Walker Alexander, Gwendolyn Brooks, Stephen E. Henderson, Haki Madhubuti, Larry Neal, Ishmael Reed, John A. Williams, and more.
4. The phenomenology Mathes attributes to Neal is a welcomed reappropriation of the term from its deployment as the philosophical basis for Charles Johnson's diminution of racial identity and critique of the BAM in *Being & Race: Black Writing Since 1970* (1988).
5. The Neal chapter also features an extensive quotation from Sarah Webster Fabio's "Tripping with Black Writing" in *The Black Aesthetic* (1971). According to Mathes, "Fabio's essay, in style and substance, reflects the totality rather than (the) narrowly separatist line of black aesthetic thought that Larry Neal was so instrumental in pushing forward" (112); what this passage really suggests, however, is that Fabio's own work deserves more scholarly attention. Mathes refers to Fabio and Neal as "like-minded," but a stronger link between the writers needs to be made (110).
6. *See You at the Crossroads: Hip Hop Scholarship at the Intersections* (2014) lists "Race & Ethnicity, Pedagogy, Feminism, Criminal Justice, Sociology, Law, Psychology, Education, Social Work, and Theology & Spirituality" among the "panoply of [scholarly] voices" now addressing this topic.
7. See also *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop* (2015), an anthology featuring the works of Kearney among many others.
8. See also Angela Y. Davis's work on the prison-industrial complex, including *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003) and *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons & Torture* (2005).
9. Earlier this year, both nonviolent protests and rioting followed the funeral of Freddie Gray, who died while in the custody of Baltimore City Police. Also this year, Cleveland saw protests following the acquittal of a police officer charged in the deaths of Timothy Russell and Malissa Williams, who were shot multiple times by police following a high-speed chase in 2012.
10. The Wu Tang Clan's 1997 track "Triumph" is given a full analytical treatment in Caplan's *Rhyme's Challenge*; the group is also known for the 1994 single "C.R.E.A.M." (Cash rules everything around me.), which trades utopianism for urban realism yet does not merely endorse the gritty materialism it describes. "Wake Up Everybody" was also covered by John Legend and The Roots on the album *Wake Up* (2010).
11. As its title suggests, Rankine's most recent book *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) develops the writer's postlyric poetics and her analysis of the antiblack racism that informs both microaggressions and acts of homicide.

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