

Greg Tate

Yo! Hermeneutics!
Henry Louis Gates,
Houston Baker, and
David Toop

If you can't dazzle them with your brilliance then baffle them
with your bullshit.

—Afro-American folk wisdom

In a war against symbols which have been wrongly titled,
only the letter can fight.

—Ramm-El-Zee



Word, word. Word up: Thelonious X. Thrashfunk sez, yo Greg, black people need our own Roland Barthes, man. Black deconstruction in America? I'm way ahead of the brother, or so I think when I tell him about my dream magazine: *I Signify*—*The Journal of Afro-American Semiotics*. We talking a black Barthesian variation on *Jet*, itself the forerunner of black poststructuralist activity, given its synchronic mythification and diachronic deconstruction ("Soul singer James Brown pulled up to court in Baltimore in a limousine and wearing a full-length fur coat, but convinced a federal magistrate he is too poor to pay creditors \$170,000. Brown testified that although he performs regularly, he has no money. . . . U.S. Magistrate Frederick N. Smalkin agreed. 'It appears Mr. Brown's financial and legal advisors have surrounded him with a network of corporations and trusts that serves as a moat to defend him from the incursion of creditors,' Smalkin said"), not to mention its contribution to the black tradition of the encyclopedic narrative (cf. Ellison, Reed, Delany, Clinton, and Ramm-El-Zee).

Merely conceiving a poststructuralist version of this deutero-

monic tribal scroll is enough to make me feel like a one-man Harlem Renaissance—at least until Thelonious asks if I'm hip to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., blood up at Yale (Cornell by the time you read this) who guest-edited two issues of *Black American Literature Forum* on the subject of semiotics and the signifyin' monkey. Turns out I vaguely recall hearing about an appearance the brother made at a Howard University Third World Writers' Conference a few years back. Rumor has it Gates shook up the joint talking about the relationship of structuralism to Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*: folk wanted to know what all this formalism had to do with the struggle. Now, unless I'm mistaken that was the same year Barbara Smith nearly got run outta town on a rail behind delivering a radical lesbian-feminist reading of Toni Morrison's *Sula* (one sister proclaimed Smith had ruined a beautiful book by bringing her sexual perversion into it) and the same conference where Addison Gayle went off on Ishmael Reed for not being a social realist. (Bo Schmo meets the Loup Garoo Kid live and in living color like a mother-fer-ya.)

Reason I bring all this up is Gates has now published *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, 14 ground-breaking essays by an assorted lot of literary academics—black, white, African, Afro-American, feminist, structuralist, poststructuralist. The contributor notes confirm that these furthermuckers here are off into some brand new funk. Jay Edwards, for example, is author of a forthcoming two-volume *Vernacular Architecture of French Louisiana*. Barbara Johnson, professor of romance languages and literature at Harvard, has written *Désfiguration du Langage poétique*, translated Derrida's *Dissemination*, and is working on a book about Zora Neale Hurston. Anthony Appiah, formerly of the University of Ghana and Clare College, Cambridge, now at Yale, is editing and analyzing 7000 Twi proverbs and doing a book on those aspects of philosophy of mind most relevant to the interpretation of language.

In his introductory essay, "Criticism in the Jungle," Gates rhetorically asks, "Who would deny us our complexity?" and defends rigorous formal (as opposed to polemical) readings of black texts. Which isn't to say his program lacks sociopolitical baggage: "The essays collected in *Black Literature and Literary Theory* share a concern with the nature of the figure, with the distinctively 'black'

uses of our English and French language and literature. . . . How 'black' is figuration? Given the obvious political intent of so much of our literary traditions, is it not somewhat wistful to be concerned with the intricacies of the figure? The Afro-American tradition has been figurative from its beginnings. How could it have survived otherwise? I need not here trace the elaborate modes of signification implicit in black mythic and religious traditions, in ritual rhetorical structures such as 'signifying' and 'the dozens.' Black people have always been masters of the figurative: saying one thing to mean something quite other has been basic to black survival in oppressive Western cultures. . . . 'Reading,' in this sense, was not play; it was an essential aspect of the 'literacy' training of a child. This sort of metaphorical literacy, the learning to decipher complex codes, is just about the blackest aspect of the black tradition."

And white folks thought black people only had the edge on them in primitivism; uh-huh, brothers and sisters got deconstruction racing through their veins too. Matter of fact, one of the hippest essays in the collection, James Snead's "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," gives the granddaddy of dialectics (that's Hegel, y'all) a run for his modernism, demolishing G.W.'s racist belief that European history is progressive and African history "primitive" by demonstrating that Western modernism's debts to The Continent are *conceptual* as well as formal. Roll over Picasso, tell William Rubin the news. Whole lot of signifyin' of that order goes down in this book; polysyllabic Western theories got to throwdown to the beat of polyphonous black aesthetic discourse. Says Gates: "The challenge of black literary criticism is to derive principles of literary criticism from the black tradition itself, as defined in the idiom of critical theory but also in the idiom which constitutes the 'language of blackness,' the signifyin(g) difference which makes the black tradition our very own. To borrow mindlessly, or to vulgarize, a critical theory from another tradition is to satisfy de Gaultier's definition of 'bovaryism'; but it is also to satisfy, in the black idiom, Ishmael Reed's definition of 'The Talking Android.'" Gates's notion of a black tradition built only on figurative language seems a bit text-bound and bookwormish to me, but this tropism can probably be read as a rhetorical ploy in pursuit of academic equality for the study of Afro-American literature. While we all know who

really bears the burden of proof of "civilization," survival often bids us act otherwise.

Maybe the most admirable (and subversive) thing about the essays in *BLALT* is that they explain, question, argue down, revise, signify on the theories they consort with in the interest of integrating black culture into the postmodern world. Could be black culture been there and gone, considering the Art Ensemble of Chicago and especially Miles Davis (his schizzy public statements on jazz seem to epitomize the canon-rearing and canon-razing that lie at the heart of the entire postmodern deconstruction project), but who would deny these professors their shot at contributing to the state of the race? Black culture doesn't lack for modernist and post-modernist artists, just their critical equivalents. And now that, like Spielberg's *Poltergeist*, they're here, might as well face up to the fact that there's no avoiding the recondite little suckers.

148 Although if, like every other liberal arts-damaged bibliophile I know, you bring to the semiotics enterprise more than latent hostility, you may get into this book purely on account of the lucidity these interlocutors break the shit on down with. Take, for example, Anthony Appiah's "Strictures on Structures: The Prospects for a Structuralist Poetics of African Fiction," which manages, against the odds, a droll exegesis of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss. Believe it or not, Appiah actually makes fun reading out of his deadpan definitions of Saussure's *langue* and *parole*, not to mention Chomsky's ideas about linguistic *performance* and *competence*: ". . . how is it that we are able to find in the inchoate mass of ordinary utterances which Saussure called *parole*, that abstract system of rules he called the *langue*? It is because the Chomskyan notions of *performance* and *competence* provide an answer to this question that they are often mentioned in the same breath as the *langue/parole* distinction. Chomsky's claim is that speakers have an implicit grasp of the rules of the abstract system of *langue*, which grasp constitutes *competence* and guides their actual *performance* in *parole*. Differences between what the *langue* prescribes and the raw stuff of ordinary speech are to be explained in terms of the failure of psychological processes which actually apply the rules. Analogously, we can claim that driving is governed (in Britain) by the rule 'Drive on the left in two way traffic,' while allowing that

some people drive on the right when they aren't concentrating."

Appiah is damn near sidesplitting taking Lévi-Strauss and Saussure to task for claiming that a *langue* for decoding myth structure and literary structure exists in the collective unconscious: "I think that Levi-Strauss's view is that the decoding does occur, but that it is unconscious: this is an interesting thought, for which, if I may speak for myself and the myths of Asante, there does not seem to be much evidence. . . . For a breed so given to drawing on a linguistics whose privileged status seems to derive only from the scientism of our culture and times, literary theorists seem peculiarly resistant to even the most modest form of empiricism. We can acknowledge that all theory is underdetermined by the evidence, that a flourishing undergrowth of theory can subsist on the most meagre evidential terrain and still require of ourselves that we root our theorizing in the dry earth of experience."

Signifyin' on the signifiers is a running theme of this collection, but those whose butts get signified on aren't just Hegel and the formalist frogs. Barbara Johnson's "Metaphor and Metonymy and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" makes strange bedfellows of black male activists and white feminists (both are culpable, Johnson believes, for denying black women's inner voices) in a remarkable essay that widens the significance of Jakobson's famous study on aphasia by appreciating Hurston's synthesis of public and private voices in the rendering of Janie Starks. Ostensibly, Appiah's essay is a debunking of the foremost African structuralist Sunday O. Anonzie; Houston Baker's "To Move Without Moving: Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison's Trueblood Episode" manages to be equally Oedipal albeit more genuflectively. Baker produces a dialectical parallel between trickster Trueblood's exploitation of American racial myth for personal gain and Ellison's own careerist use of same: ". . . the 'critical pronouncements' in Ellison's canon that imply his devaluing of Afro-American folklore hardly seem consistent with the meanings implicit in his Trueblood episode. Such utterances may be regarded, I believe, as public statements by Ellison 'the merchant' rather than as incisive, affective remarks by Ralph Ellison the creative genius. Trueblood's duality is, finally, also that of his creator. For Ellison knows that his work as an Afro-American artist derives from those 'economics of slavery' which

provided conditions for Afro-American folklore. . . . Joyce and Eliot taught Ellison that, if he was a skillful enough strategist and spokesman, he could market his own folklore. What is bracketed, of course, are the economics that dictated that if Ellison wished to be an *Afro-American* artist he could only turn to Afro-American folklore as a traditional, authenticating source for his art. Like his sharecropper, Ellison is wont to make 'literary value' out of socio-economic necessity."

150 In this assessment of Ellison, Baker could of course be remarking on the peculiar tautologies of slang and formal language black academics like him and Gates have to deploy to keep up a good front. I mean this is a slick game the bloods are running here, making with all the right poststructuralist references and verbiage to translate black folk's linguistic thang into some doodah dem buckra can relate to while at the same time being true to black culture's version of semiotics, namely signifyin'. Gates's closing essay, "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey" is a masterpiece of such duplicity. Through an appreciation of Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* Gates manages to viciously signify on all of black and Western discourse. (By the way, Henry, we got to figure out some other distinction besides this black and Western stuff, being as how blackness is a Western category in itself, and all that's black ain't purely African or non-Western even, semantic convenience notwithstanding. Robert Faris Thompson's notion of a Black Atlantic tradition is one solution, but you know, you start bringing bodies of water into it and folk get to signifyin' Negroes can't swim. Anthony Braxton's riff on the Trans-African tradition is another possibility but that could get confused with the antiapartheid organization. Hmm, mebbe semantic convenience will have to stand.)

Gates reads Reed's satire on all Sacred Texts as a parody of received ideas about "blackness" in the Great Black Novels of the past. He traces the incestuous intertextuality of the black literary tradition, citing Hurston's revision of Toomer and Du Bois; Ellison's of Wright, Toomer, and Du Bois; Reed's of Hurston, Wright, and Ellison. Then he pronounces them all examples of black literary signifyin'. What Gates finds in Reed's pastiche of definitively "black" texts (somewhat akin to writing the Great American Novel)

0740
151
is a highhanded version of that peculiar form of signification known to black folks as signifyin'—which to us does not imply merely decoding the symbolism of a thing but calling it out of its name and talking bad about its mama. (One of Gate's colleagues, Kimberly Benston, has coined a phrase for such literary versions of playin' the dozens as Reed's: tropes-a-dope.) In the final analysis what Gates's essay seems out to provoke is an acknowledgment of black folks' capacity to deconstruct and refashion Western culture in our own image. As proof, Gates draws on Ellison, Reed, and Richard Pryor and does some fine signifyin' of his own, taking examples from the black tradition to explicate Big Ideas—so what if he betrays a need to show off a little ed-ja-mi-ca-shun to cover his ass in the process. To wit: "Another kind of formal parody suggests a given structure precisely by failing to coincide with it—that is, suggests it by dissemblance. Repeating a form and then inverting it through a process of variation is central to jazz—a stellar example is John Coltrane's rendition of 'My Favorite Things,' compared to Julie Andrews's vapid version. Resemblance thus can be evoked cleverly by dissemblance. Aristophanes' *Frogs*, which parodies the style of both Aeschylus and Euripides . . . Lewis Carroll's double parody in *Hiawatha's* 'Photographing,' which draws upon Longfellow's rhythms to parody the convention of the family photograph, all come to mind." (Yessuh, I just snaps my fingers and dere dey is.)

I'm not the only one who has a few bones to pick with Gates—as I found out when I read Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*. You wouldn't know they had any differences at all from reading *Black Literature and Literary Theory*—where, excepting Appiah's spat with Anonzie, the critics don't signify on each other. Baker's disagreements with Gates are certainly as substantial as the Africans'. Seems that back in 1979 Gates appeared in a tome titled *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*, which sought to dictate formalist ground rules for the teaching of Afro-American writing. In his essay, Gates attacks the critics of the '60s Black Aesthetic movement. (Baker was a constituent, alongside such good brothers as Stephen Henderson, Larry Neal, and Lorenzo Thomas, whose absence from discussion in *BLALT* almost gives you the feeling Gates thinks

black literary criticism began with him and his crew. Shee, as a colleague reminded me, wouldn't be no Afro-American studies at Yale or anywhere else if it hadn't been for these Aesthetic types and the black student rebellions of the '60s.) Gates thinks you shouldn't read black texts with regard for such extraliterary concerns as race politics and culture, he argues instead for a semiotic reading of the literature, with texts seen as a closed system of signs and black folk culture, like the blues say, allotted value relative to use by black writers. In rebuttal Baker writes, "When, therefore, Gates proposes metaphysical and behavioral models that suggest the literature, or even a single text exists as a structured 'world' ('a system of signs') that can be comprehended without reference to 'social institutions,' he is misguided in his claims, appearing only vaguely aware of recent developments in literary study, symbolic anthropology, linguistics, the psychology of perception, and other related areas of inquiry. He seems, in fact, to have adopted without qualification, a theory of the literary signs . . . that presupposes a privileged status for the creative writer." Baker records that by the time Gates wrote *The Signifying Monkey: Towards a Theory of Afro-American Literature*, he'd realized his debts to the Black Aestheticians for exploring the social and vernacular resources of black literary language but that the apolitical nature of his acknowledgments betrayed "overly professional or careerist" anxieties.

Only Lord knows Baker ought to be the last one to talk about overly professional anxiety, given his own relentless use of paragraph-length quotes from Foucault, Barthes, White (Hayden, not Bukka), and the like. Not to mention treachy passages that read like so: "Rather than a rigidly personalized form, the blues offer a phylogenetic recapitulation—a nonlinear, freely associative, nonsequential meditation—of species experience. What emerges is not a filled subject but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole. The blues singer's signatory coda is always *atopic*, placeless." Besides the fact that this leaves me wondering what to do with blues verses about going to Kansas City and that Sweet Home Chicago, Baker seems to be underrating the contribution of the colorful personas (and nicknames) of the bluesmen—in pursuit, it appears, of an ontogenetic and hermeneutical *langue*

Yo! Hermeneutics! : Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker, and David Toop

for decoding black folks' blues consciousness, but what the hey, Baker actually becomes worth his weight in jargon by emphasizing the impact of economics on the blues and black literature. This emphasis in fact serves as the linchpin of Baker's formalist critical inquiries and race-man politics. His study of Richard Wright is especially provocative. Not only does it rescue Wright from the social realist stigma put on him by heirs apparent Ellison and Baldwin, it locates in his language a liberating critique of bourgeois Western literary practices (akin to Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero* project, according to Baker), which finds them impoverished when confronted with expressing black oppression and desire.

Gates's failure to select Baker's Wright essays over the one on Ellison is lamentable; apparently the author of *Shadow and Act* is deemed more worthy of membership in the Gates canon than the author of *Twelve Million Black Voices*. In this lapse Gates nearly condones the inability of the white body politic to conceive of differences between black people. On the other hand Baker seems equally nearsighted when he cites the blues (and the Southern rural form at that) as the only definitive arena for conjugating black economics and aesthetics.

Perhaps the supreme irony of black American existence is how broadly black people debate the question of cultural identity among themselves while getting branded as a cultural monolith by those who would deny us the complexity and *complexion* of a community, let alone a nation. If Afro-Americans have never settled for the racist reductions imposed upon them—from chattel slaves to cinematic stereotype to sociological myth—it's because the black collective conscious not only knew better but also knew more than enough ethnic diversity to subsume these fictions. As Amiri Baraka writes in his autobiography, we might laugh at Amos and Andy without losing sight of the fact that that aberration on the screen was not us. The line between individual identity and ethnic identification explodes the black community into factions of opposing race philosophers. Sadly enough, in these times, what sense of community there is derives more from the collective sense of a racist societal surround than from the ethnic affirmations available through black cultural communion.

Per Harold Cruse I believe there may be remedial and revolu-

tionary implications to black cultural nationalism considered as a political strategy. These derive from black culture's proven capacity to re-invent capitalism's cannibalization and commodification of revolutionary ideas. By necessity our radical aesthetic tendencies have evolved within a context where commercial exploitation and excommunication from the mainstream went hand in hand. Afro-American music provides the paradigmatic model for this analysis: consider that the four-year period when George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic Thang accrued estimated profits of \$40 million (roughly between 1975's apocalyptic *Up for the Down Stroke* and 1979's *Gloryhallastoopid: Pin the Tale on the Funky*, a synthesis of Genesis and the Big Bang Theory) was not only their most creatively fertile but one in which they could not get played on white radio. On black radio they functioned as active opposition to a form of record industry sabotage dubbed "disco"—or as I like to pun it, disCOINTELPRO, since it destroyed the self-supporting black band movement which P-Funk (jes) grew out of.

154 Obviously, the advent of hiphop can be said to have contributed even more radical acts of counterinsurgency, turning a community of passive pop consumers into one of procreative producers. (Consider the way freewheeling deejays put their signature to mixes composed from industrial materials, approximating in music Duchamp's notion of the readymade.) Hiphop's seizure of the means of reproduction has now led us to a Human Beat Box, who replicates the automated banging of the drum machine with his hamboning mouth, converting a tool of disCOINTELPRO oppression into a new form of black vernacular expression. (It can be said that when the film *Wild Style* leads us to believe Queen MC Lisa Lee of the Zulu Nation left the scene because of impregnation by rapper Lovebug Starski, reproductive rights of a whole other kind were brought into play—but these belong to another discussion.)

Gates's and Baker's advocacy of black signification echoes but does not exceed that of the Human Beat Box. Primarily because their sense of critical play operates out of a more static sense of black expression than the Fat Boys'—not to mention graffiti and hiphop theoretician Ramm-El-Zee, whose formulations on the juncture between black and Western sign systems make the extrapolations of Baker and Gates seem elementary by comparison. Asked

why he spelled Ikonoklast with a "k" when he named his practice of armored graffiti writing "Ikonoklast Panzerism" (after the tank), Zee said: "Because the letter 'c' in its formation is an incomplete cipher: 60 degrees are missing. A 'k' is a formation based on the foki of it; a certain kind of science based on the knowledge of formation mechanics . . ."

In an *Artforum* feature, Zee added: "The infinity sign with the fusion symbol (x) in its middle has been wrongly titled Christian (+) and thus it has to be assassinated or the x has to be removed. The infinity sign is a mathematical, scientific, military symbol. It is the highest symbol that we have and you know there isn't even a key on the typewriter for it. 'Ikonoklast' means symbol destroyer, it's a very, very high word militarily, because the two Ks are the only two letters that can assassinate the infinity sign, remove the X . . . I'm going to finish the war. I'm going to assassinate the infinity sign. You have the gladiators, the freestyle dancers, warring on the ground, you have the graffiti writers warring in the air or in space. You have the translators, the DJs, the MCs. The DJs make the sounds of the pistons inside the graffiti element, or the tank. Their sound is the perfect tuning of the engines, the engines in the tank that go bambambam. That is beat culture."

155 Since beat culture née hiphop derives from a more visceral rap-prochement with the tradition of black signification than that possessed by the brothers from the academy, it's not surprising streetwise semioticians would offer more thought-provoking theories than those slaving away in *Ebony Towers*. David Toop's new book *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-Hop*, works up a detailed history of the culture which produced the Fat Boys and Ramm-El-Zee, documenting rap's origins in Gulla abusive poems, Yoruba song contests, and the vocal virtuosity of those West African verbal assassins known as griots—as well as in such Afro-American language rituals as the dozens.

"The dozens contests were generally between boys and men from the ages of 16 to 26—a semi-ritualized battle of words which batted insults back and forth between the players until one or the other found the going too heavy. The insults could be a direct personal attack but were more frequently aimed at the opponent's family and in particular at his mother. According to linguist William

Labov, who studied these verbal shoot-outs in Harlem in the 1960s . . . the dozens seem to be even more specialized, referring to rhymed couplets of the form: *I don't play the dozens, the dozens ain't my game, but the way I fucked your mama is a god damn shame*. . . . The distance between talking rough with the dozens on the streets and moving it inside a roots club like Disco Fever with some beats for dancing is very small. It leads to the contradictions of Melle Mel, lyricist for the Furious Five, onstage in his ultra-macho metal warrior outfit trying to preach convincingly for an end to machismo and a beginning to peaceful co-existence."

From there Toop proceeds with a copious account of word-gaming in Afro-American music, citing Cab Calloway, "Bubbles" Whitman, Slim Gaillard, Eddie Jefferson, Babs Gonzalez, the black radio deejays of the '50s and '60s, Daddy O Daylie, Poppa Stoppa, and especially Douglas "Jocko" Henderson, the Ace from Space, whose influence on Jamaican sound system pioneer Coxsone Dodd would make possible the work of Jamaican-born Bronx immigrant Kool DJ Herc, usually credited as the father of hiphop deejaying and rapping. In between, Toop gives some play to black comics like Redd Foxx and Moms Mabley, and scores of black pop recordings with raps of one kind or another in them; from those of Barry White, Isaac Hayes, and James Brown, to others more obscure or forgotten, like Richard "Dimples" Fields's "She's Got Papers on Me" and Barbara Mason's response, "She's Got the Papers but I've Got the Man."

All of which effluvia only makes for intriguing sidebars to Toop's principal interest here, namely telling the tale of hiphop's genesis in fertile uptown environs like the Audubon Ballroom and Broadway International where Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa, the Teller and Truman of hiphop's Manhattan Project (inasmuch as they engineered and advocated war and peacetime use of the fusion funkbomb Einstein Clinton's theorems made possible) began bringing the black masses into the Information Age by performing feats of digital computation on the wheels of steel. Says deejay Flash: "Bob James was like 102 beats-per-minute to 118, so from there it was like Bob James, James Brown, Donald Byrd, Roy Ayers to John Davis and the Monster Orchestra, 'I Can't Stop,' and that's

like the ultimate you know. . . . I would like break the shit down to eighth, sixteenth notes. It amazed me sometimes."

Unfortunately, at these urban Los Alamos affairs, pure research in pursuit of critical mass-ass appeal could be overwhelmed by initiatives favoring mob rule. Toop records Flash on how the Audubon became an inhospitable environment for black technological innovation, once overtaken, like the Island of Dr. Moreau, by atavistic direct-action advocates: ". . . other b-boy groups were going in there and tearing the place up, breaking out the windows and then the news media and the cops started talking bad about it. . . . We was doing it with just us and other DJ. Other groups that didn't have the heart to go in by themselves were going in there with six or seven DJ groups. Seven or eight different sound systems—it was too confusing. This person was taking too long to turn on or this person's system was fucking up and once you've got that big mass of people you have to keep them entertained. So after a while motherfuckers was getting shot and this and that, so by the time we went back after the third time our clientele was getting kind of scared so we gave it up."

Toop historicizes hiphop culture, constantly referring it back to its antecedents in the wider black tradition: "According to Afrika Bambaataa, breaking started as a dance to James Brown's 'Get on the Good Foot.' . . . The word *break* or *breaking* is a music and dance term (as well as a proverb) that goes back a long way. Some tunes like 'Buck Dancers Lament' from early in this century featured a two-bar silence in every eight bars for the break—a quick showcase of improvised dance steps. . . . Many of the dances used in current freestyle hark back to American dances from the past. In Marshall and Jean Stearn's *Jazz Dance*, Pigeat Markham recalls the dancing of Jim Green in A. G. Allen's Mighty Minstrels tent show during the early 1920s. 'Green had a specialty I'll never forget. He'd dance awhile and then fall on the floor and spin around on his backside in time with the music.'" Elsewhere, on graffiti: "Herbert Kohl's essay 'Names, Graffiti and Culture' is an analysis of both the reasons behind graffiti and the tags used by artists in place of their legal names. Kohl noted the changes taking place in graffiti as anti-poverty programmes in the late '60s legitimized

wall writing by bringing together the youthful black and Puerto Rican artists with socially motivated painters. This sanctioned outdoor art led to more elaborate forms growing out of basic chalk or Magic Marker scribbling.”

Because Gates’s and Baker’s works betray insufficient interest in these futuristic black contemporary variants on the blues and signifying tradition, there’s a sense of cultural closure to them voided by the vertiginously metamorphic nature of Afro-American culture as recorded in Toop’s book. Leading one to concur, in the final analysis, with Afro-American folk wisdom that the half ain’t yet been told.

—1985

Ghetto in the Sky: Samuel Delany’s Black Whole

Semiotics attempts to make explicit the implicit knowledge which enables signs to have meaning, so it needs the reader not as a person but as a function: the repository of the codes which account for the intelligibility of the text. The reader becomes the name of the place where the various codes can be located: a virtual site.

—Jonathan Culler
*The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics,
Literature, Deconstruction*

Yes, this is the ghetto.

—Donny Hathaway



Everybody’s hip to what a B-boy is, right? Well, one night I’m out with my friend Pam from Los Angeles, part-time starlet and TV newswriter on leave from her slave (read: gig) with ABC News. When I relate to her that these two Negroes barreling up Sixth Avenue like to knock somebody down are called B-boys, she cracks that out in El Lay, B-boy is a Sunset Boulevard drag queen. Then she claims her B-boys are as deep into hiphop as ours. The moral of this tale is: pan across what seems to be a world of difference and you’ll find as many connections as disjunctions. This in turn leads us to the subject at hand: the science fiction of Samuel R. Delany, which for a quarter century now has explored what happens when alien world views intersect, collide, or mesh. Take *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, homeboy’s new novel (him being black and Harlem-born, mind you), in which humans share a society with an alien race known as the evelm. Scaled, six-legged, taloned, winged, and blessed