

to seriously question the efficacy of various assignments in achieving the goals of the class; many of them want a to-do list.

So, yes, I agree with you that we must find a way to separate goals and techniques, and to involve everyone teaching comp in a discussion about this. I think part of the difficulty of doing this is that it is a theoretical problem—what are we doing here and why? What should we be doing here and why? What does research and theory show about the nature of writing and learning to write, and how does that impact what we even can attempt to do here? Theoretical discussions like this seem to be very difficult for people to have, as anyone who has ever taught a theory class can attest. But I also know, from teaching a theory class every year, that everyone can learn to do this, with practice and guidance. So part of my job as a WPA is to keep steering my teachers toward discussions of goals, and to expose them to the research and theory about writing so that they have some knowledge base for making a judgment about appropriate goals. Without some knowledge of the research and theory about writing, people make judgments about appropriate goals out of their assumptions about writing, and as we have been discussing, most people have serious misconceptions about the nature of writing and how people learn to write. And, as we've also discussed, many of the people teaching writing have no more training in the field of rhet/comp than those students in their classes. So the teachers need to be invited into the discipline—okay, let me say it like this—the teachers need to be invited to explore the knowledge of the field so that all of us together are then more disciplinary. We may not end up agreeing on what the goals of comp should be, but I would be a lot more comfortable about where we are going if we were all informed about the research on writing and having active and thoughtful discussions about what the goals of composition classes should be. And I'll also add that I am comfortable with having varied goals because I think we should not be relying on one writing class. If we have a vertical, comprehensive writing curriculum and many writing classes, then the goals for the various classes can and should be varied. It's hard to agree on a goal for composition because that one class gets burdened with all of our hopes and dreams and research and theory—no one class can enact all that.

David E. Kirkland is Assistant Professor of English Education, at New York University and also serves as the national advisor for the Teachers Network Leadership Institute. His research focuses broadly upon urban youth culture, African American language and literacies, and urban teacher education. He has published numerous journal articles and book chapters and has received several awards for his scholarship and service. Currently, he is writing two books: *A Search Past Silence: Exploring Literacy in the Life Young Black Men and Social Justice: From Theory to Policy* (with sj Miller). He is also co-author of the recently published *Narratives of Social Justice Teaching: How English Teachers Negotiate Theory and Practice between Preservice and Inservice Spaces*.

The Conversation

Keith Gilyard: Much of your work has to do with trying to figure out how different populations, including specifically our folks in the city, in the 'hood, are strategically using language. How do you approach the notion of rhetoric and focus on that idea in your research?

David Kirkland: First and foremost, my work looks at youth culture, specifically as it relates to African American language, literacy, and urban education. I examine the ways youth use language compellingly to speak back to structures of power as well as to carve out spaces where they can live more prosperously. I have studied language and literacy in Hip Hop and in digital communities like Facebook. In both contexts, you see youth remixing languages, styles, and arguments to make sense of the present and speak back to their past and to the powers that have prevented the possibilities of that past.

Gilyard: When you bring these ideas up, you have to anticipate a number of arguments about the value of Hip Hop as a discursive strategy. How do you respond to critics who don't see the value of Hip Hop the way you describe it, that is, as a progressive and critical rhetorical practice?

Kirkland: Well, I think we can no longer make an argument that Hip Hop isn't relevant in terms of studying rhetorical devices. A significant body of work and opinion builds a compelling case that Hip Hop has complex and sophisticated rhetorical features—from the work of H. Samy Alim to the work of people like Ernest Morell, Maisha Fisher, Elaine Richardson, Gwen Pough, and many others. There's my own work, which looks critically at a range of social theories as they intersect with Hip Hop. Even what Lil' Wayne is doing, you know—talking about “my girls can't wear dat/dat's where my stash is at”—comments on his current situation inside the Ninth Ward in New Orleans. There is an African proverb that goes like this: Until the lion has letters to write history, the story of the jungle will forever glorify the hunter. Hip Hop

gives the lion letters. It doesn't matter what the hell the lion is saying, but what's important is that the lion is recording and reporting on his or her story.

Gilyard: In some ways, this is like the conversation about African American language from the 1960s and 1970s. Like a replay. So much work had to be done to prove the language was systematic and had structure and rhetorical strategies. Seems like we have to do the same thing all over again.

Kirkland: The work still has to be done. We need to be descriptive about this literacy and map it. A lot of that has happened. But there's an issue of power, too. A lot of previous research had been done for whites. Blacks already knew that their language had a system because they used it systematically to enormous effect. Now we need scholarship that explains the way that people are transacting, persuading one another, making compelling cases to one another—both bending and using a new African American Language. We are talking about a new art of rhetoric. It would be problematic if we didn't study it in the first place and in its own right because we see with Hip Hop a revitalization. Youth and people in the city are creating languages of connection and critique and sometimes a language of accommodation. I mean we can criticize Hip Hop, but we would be missing a vital point if we fail to acknowledge the ways in which Hip Hop practitioners are creating a language that (1) belongs to them and (2) gives them a space and a way to communicate, to participate, and to be.

Gilyard: Do you make a distinction, as Cornel West does, between what he terms Prophetic Hip Hop and what we can probably just call Commercial Hip Hop? Often, when people speak of Hip Hop, they are referring exclusively to what's being released by large record companies. They generally don't know the whole universe of Hip Hop, the stuff coming out in these other spaces, these underground spaces that are sometimes progressive. There's a whole prophetic wing that we're not going hear on the radio and on the CDs from Sony and places like that.

Kirkland: Whenever we talk about Hip Hop as a singular, I think we are talking about a specific cultural movement or at least an aspect of counter culture that was created inside of urban communities. I think it's important to talk about Hip Hop, like you are doing, in pluralistic ways also. In a sense, we have Hip Hops. You're right no matter how we want to tag that. You can put any adjective you want to describe the Hip Hops, such as Prophetic Hip Hop, Conscious Hip Hop, Gangsta Hip Hop, Radical Hip Hop, whatever. That can be productive for certain kinds of analyses. But I also think that a deep structure sits at the core of Hip Hop. If Hip Hop has a deep structure, that deep structure speaks to those conditions of powerlessness that Geneva Smitherman talks about. It also speaks to the possibility of agitation. It articulates these ideas through movement, through dance, through—with rap being its verbal language—a sort of visceral hunger to be heard. It's very much the "Spoken Soul" of Claude Brown. It's Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words*. It's the sorrow songs of W. E. B. Du Bois. It's all of that wrapped up and woven into one. It's not only a prophetic voice. It's a political voice, a voice of propaganda, a voice of provocation. It's also a voice of humanity. Sometimes it's used to expose our dirty little secrets. Other times it's used to express, in its simplest form, our hearts.

Gilyard: Well, that's part of our affirming our full humanity.

Kirkland: It's part of affirming our full humanity, and all of that stuff needs to be considered. If you only consider the good aspects, if you are selective with Hip Hop; then you get a kind of Hip Hop that can be used to make arguments to all people. You know, I'm at a point where I'm willing to accept Hip Hop on its own terms, its messiness as well as its beauty.

Gilyard: That's the only way to take it, really. That's the way we take everything else.

Kirkland: That's the way we take everything else. Some people don't have to make these kinds of distinctions. When we talk about white rhetorics

and white art and white culture—and I know they get the privilege not to have to use the adjective *white* when they talkin about theirs but I'll use the adjective anyhow—we're not talking about them in their distilled forms. We're talking about ways to appreciate and celebrate those cultural productions in all their variations. For instance, in Shakespeare, we'll celebrate Othello's hands around Desdemona's neck or incest in *Hamlet*. These things make the texts full or round. They bring *humanity* to them. In Hip Hop, however, when such content is present, it's considered derogatory, a deviation from our humanity. It's like Hip Hop should only be a message of getting through struggle, getting over, a kind of positive, prophetic rhetoric. Well, if Hip Hop is prophetic, it's prophetic in the sense that it's bold enough to tell the truth.

Gilyard: That makes a lot of sense. That's the way I look at it. I guess you figure that no matter how intrusive the corporate prerogatives, a contesting voice, a contesting pulse is beating at the center of Hip Hop.

Kirkland: Yeah, I think the only way it can be commodified and co-opted is because it serves as a relevant voice for people. I think business people have noticed that it does serve as a voice for people. They have—as they always have—used this appeal to the common voice for economic ends. It has been commercialized. Yet, at its base, even in its most commercialized forms, there's something about Hip Hop that lends itself to the humanity of the popular class. So if we think about rhetoric not just as compelling people with arguments or as this science of persuasion but as the ability to make meaning of human situations, even the commodified forms of Hip Hop serve a powerful, political purpose.

Gilyard: I got you. I know you are also doing a lot of work on body inscriptions. There's a rhetoric to those as well. I guess that falls under visual rhetoric. Or we can discuss it as literacy.

Kirkland: I got into studying the body because of Hip Hop. I was studying some black kids in Detroit, just listening to them and noticing

how and where they wrote stuff down. I started looking at their bodies, one place where they were writing. The tale is that these young men were not literate, that they didn't read and write. To be honest with you, when I looked at their report cards, that single piece of "evidence" bore these points out. If you asked them to read a canonical novel, they wouldn't read it or would struggle through it. But then you look at their bodies and see that those bodies bear the bruises of stories. You see on their bodies ink and flesh. You ask them to talk about the stuff that's on their flesh. Every tattoo serves some larger story.

Gilyard: Part of a narrative.

Kirkland: Part of a narrative by which they are able to make sense of themselves if not on paper, then on flesh.

Gilyard: So their bodies were functioning like Valerio's wall. You've seen Ralph Cintron's work about the boy's wall in his room?

Kirkland: Yes, I have.

Gilyard: Valerio was using the wall in his room to tell his whole story the best way he knew how.

Kirkland: Exactly. So you got youth seizing back space to tell their stories. You see it with tagging in Hip Hop—the graffiti art. You also see it with the body. They're taking back space. The black body is a site of contestation. For black men, it's a place that's been often written upon with bruises.

Gilyard: Brands.

Kirkland: Brands, slashes. Right. Each of these things tells a story about the human condition.

Gilyard: Castration.

Kirkland: Castration, right. What you see the young men doing now is taking the tattoo needle and rewriting the story of themselves on their flesh. So that tells us something else about rhetoric, that rhetoric is not just visual and it's not just heard. It has those semiotic and symbiotic qualities, but it also has other distinctions. There are questions of where you choose to write and how you choose to write it. This is what I call a *politics of place of inscription*.

Gilyard: Right.

Kirkland: Where you choose to write offers as much to your argument as what you choose to write. So when these youths choose to write on their bodies to reclaim that space, they're making a political statement. Make no doubt about it.

Gilyard: The political geography of inscription. I think recent critical work would back you. But I'm wondering what the sense of the youths themselves is. Do they see themselves to be doing all the things that you see? Or is this just your critic's eye?

Kirkland: Yes and no. They certainly understand that they have a story. I have one young man in my study whose brother was killed. When his brother was killed, he got a tattoo with his brother's name—BOSS—inscribed on his chest. He understood that the tattoo was a memorial to his brother. It served the cultural purpose of keeping his brother's memory alive. But what he didn't understand—

Gilyard: Memory work.

Kirkland: Yeah, memory work and also coping work and other kinds of political work, too. But what I don't think he was able to get—but that I was able to get at as an outsider reading the text—was the connection between his story and his brother's story. There was a narrative that he was writing in his brother's silence. There are things that are written about black men and not written about black men. Black men die

tragically every day. Yet, in him and on him, his brother indeed lived; the bloodline continued. It's the human work of survival. You have another conversation that dehumanizes these subjects, that argues that they don't appreciate life. However, the tattoo—the embodied memorial—suggests that life is not only appreciated but memorialized and extended.

Gilyard: No question. They appreciate life.

Kirkland: Very much appreciate life.

Gilyard: Better believe that. So what do you think you'll be doing further along those lines?

Kirkland: Right now I'm doing work in what I call the Digital Underground, playing on the name of the early nineties rap group. My work in the Digital Underground continues the political work of trying to unpack urban youths' literate lives. You know, I've maintained that many more urban youth are literate than we choose to realize. And we have to describe how they're literate and understand rhetoric in ways that associate better with how these youths are literate. So I'm looking at literacies of urban youth in online social communities—*MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Second Life*, *Live Journal*—places where youth are reading and writing with verve and excitement. They're throwin' their raps up online. There's a technological component to it too, another level of sophistication.

Gilyard: Some people would argue that these kids are growing up with digital imaginations. I got that phrase from Jabari Mahiri. They may not even envision text or telling a story in the same way that an older generation might have thought about it. They readily conceive of telling stories in multimedia ways. The old way—like I'm doing with this tape cassette—is funny to them. It's sort of like when Hip Hop started. Some observers focused on the lyrics and declared that rap music was essentially urban poetry. Deejays thought that strange because they saw words as only one element of the mix and not necessarily the most important

element. They were also focused on the beat, the break, the technology. So I think a lot of youth today don't see a separation between deejaying and lyrics. It's all one presentation to them.

Kirkland: Exactly. You have these interesting intersections. And with Hip Hop, overall, it's not just the deejaying and the emceeing. It's the deejaying, the emceeing, the dancing, the movement, the posture, the mindset, the recognition, all of it. It's multi-sensual in this sense. It's multimodal too. It's multidimensional. There's also the serene quality of it. It's the feedback, the call and response from the audience. So you got this relationship between multiple modes, not just between oral and written. It's even more complex and dynamic than that. It's an oral, written, and object relationship.

Gilyard: But you know where this can lead. Folks will take it to the cognitive level in a rigid way and say, "Well, there's a cognition capability difference going on now." They'll start talking about a post-literate America as an outcome of these digital imaginations. I know you ain't going there with it. You're just looking at literacy in an expanded way. But some folks will think it's a small step from our conversation to the conclusion that there's no point in teaching these kids the whole read-and-write thing because their minds are not set up for that. To me, you can get into some murky and dangerous waters.

Kirkland: Yeah. I was talking to somebody from the *New York Times* today. She thought my arguments, you know, could go down those lines. But I'd like to take that idea to its logical conclusion and then get back to more practical lines of argumentation. If we move toward a culture that does not value print, there's a question about whether students could continue to produce the visual, multimodal quality that students are now producing. I think the students value print very much. In fact, they seek out print to manufacture language. They find it and they forge it to make new meanings. So language isn't the issue. Language will, you know, remain represented through print inside of the new literacy and the new literate.

Gilyard: You mean print will stay represented.

Kirkland: Right. Print language will remain represented in some way. The past and the present are bonded. It's just that we can't think about literacy in the same linear ways because they are seeing and receiving different aspects of language. You have an elaborated code, an elaborated text such as that you see in novels. But these students don't exist in an elaborated textual world. They exist in an abbreviated textual world that's complemented by visuals, or in a world where visuals are complemented by abbreviated texts. You can look at it either way. There's a different relationship between print and the reader today versus the relationship in the past between print and the reader. I suppose one could say the imagination is different—without the hard cognitive claims about difference—but that imagination certainly owes something to print.

Gilyard: No question. See, I would argue that there is a special relationship between the spoken language and the printed code—and between critical writing and previous critical texts—because, after all, the printed version is based on the spoken version and the critical written version is based on the read version. You cannot replicate the dynamics of these relationships outside of an engagement with printed texts. Some people might say, well, students don't need novels because they have television and movies. They can develop literacy and critical abilities that way. But where's the transfer when we ask them for well-written critiques of novels and short stories? It's not always there.

Kirkland: I agree with you to a certain extent. We need to offer students opportunities to interact with multiple kinds of text. Moreover, the deeper issue is not just the oral-written relationship. Most binaries are problematic. Let's say that we concede to an oral-written relationship. Well, there's a visual-textual relationship we can talk about, also a relationship between the physical object and the senses. We have these multi-sensual, durable, complex relationships relative to the idea of literacy. One thing we have to do is to begin to explore literacy not simply as a linguistic idea between forms and features of oral and written

language but as a relationship where visual, voice, sound, and other qualities, you know, come into play.

Gilyard: So anything that constitutes discourse, really.

Kirkland: Yeah. Anything that constitutes discourse, or as Derrida said, anything that is articulable is text.

Gilyard: This reminds me of Jim Gee's idea of discourses. He argues that we all get one discourse for free, a primary discourse; we acquire it rather than learn it. All the subsequent ones we have to pay for. That's literacy as opposed to acquisition.

Kirkland: But that's problematic because Gee is limiting us to a singular discourse.

Gilyard: Nah, he ain't saying that.

Kirkland: Well, primary means one.

Gilyard: But that's only the first one, the native tongue.

Kirkland: So he's limiting us to acquiring only one.

Gilyard: Maybe not. He's just not focusing on multiple acquisitions.

Kirkland: But it's not even just a question of multiple acquisitions. We have to address the notion of hybridity. In complex space, you're going to get a kind of generative fluidity and mixing. And that mixing is going to become something else. It's neither going to be one language or the other. It's going to be a third thing...

Gilyard: Now he gon read this, you know. (laughing)

Kirkland: That's okay.

Gilyard: You don't care? (laughing)

Kirkland: It's okay to bring up problems, and you have problems when you're limited to thinking in terms of a primary discourse when most people have various discourses that they acquire and various discourses that they learn primarily. It's complex, pluralistic, as I observe when I see people in New York City on the subway going from one community to the next. Some of them are kids acquiring multiple codes to deploy in multiple situations.

Gilyard: No question.

Kirkland: And embodying those different codes in multiple ways—on walls, bodies, parchment.

Gilyard: And nobody's teaching those codes explicitly.

Kirkland: Exactly. Yet they understand how to deploy those codes. So you get a hybrid sense of reality, a hybrid sense of self. The same thing happens when you think about print reading. Print is one of the registers, along with the visual register and other ways of reading and understanding the word and world around you. You deploy all of those understandings that you have acquired as well as all of those understandings that you have learned. Plus, in pondering this, I think we too need to shake up that notion of acquisition versus learning to see what it really means. Can you acquire and learn at the same time, and is there a relationship between acquisition and learning that's not explained by Gee in his earlier work? Of course, I do think that his earlier work is helpful; it gives us these questions.

Gilyard: You're on to a number of questions: Hip Hop, body inscriptions, digital...

Kirkland: Those are the main three I'm examining right now. Also, I have to return to the issue of power. We're moving towards a complex

understanding of language and rhetoric, the kind of understanding that is necessary. But we are not moving towards as complex an understanding of power. Foucault talks about power as being relative, and he employs terms like *relationships of power*, which is interesting at one level but diminishes the notion that some people are more powerful than others.

Gilyard: You have to read my section on Foucault.

Kirkland: All right, I have to check that out. We have to reconcile those relationships between subordination and domination. The reason we're having a conversation about Hip Hop being included inside the rhetorical conversation or tradition—having the argument that it should not be excluded—is because it's by black people who are disempowered and not valued. Multicultural education is good at a certain level. Jim Banks, a good friend of mine, does outstanding work. But it responds to a specific tradition, to the practice of excluding women and African Americans from the mainstream conversation. Because of his work, they are included now, but only in an asymmetrical, subordinate relationship to the dominant stuff. So there's that conversation about power that needs to be had, you know. Trying to explore this notion of power in an honest and more complicated way will be essential to my work.

Gilyard: How is this playing out with respect to your teaching? You teach graduate students exclusively, at least on campus, and I was wondering how they have been responding to your takes on these various issues.

Kirkland: I enjoy my students, but many of them come from backgrounds where certain hegemonic ideas haven't been challenged. Certain ideologies were never questioned or torn down. So at first I meet resistance because I challenge some of those ideas. For example, I push the notion that literacy is something dynamic and multiple. I define literacy as a possibility, a possibility to use language and other symbolic material as a tool to participate in culturally valued activities, to construct identity, culture, or to critique power.

Gilyard: That's rich enough.

Kirkland: In a sense, everybody becomes literate. But for my students, my idea of literacy seems nebulous. Since I say everybody is literate, and have a broader definition of literacy than what they have used, they take it to the conclusion that I'm not for teaching students to read. Well, that's bullshit. I'm very much for teaching students to read. But I'm also for valuing the ways that students come to class reading. In order to value the ways that students come to class reading, you first have to conclude that they read. And you have to conclude that the ways that you read may be different from the ways that they read and somehow accept the ways that they read as valid and that you are in some ways illiterate to the ways that they read. If everybody is literate, then everybody is at once also illiterate in certain ways. So the question is about building upon the literacies of individuals but also extending those literacies so that we can have less illiterate spaces and more literate spaces.

Gilyard: You're making me think about the stances that some professors take in class. They figure they are fully literate relative to the subject matter of the class. If they don't know it, by definition it's not worth knowing. Where you're coming from is a challenge to all of that, which is very good. So there's some resistance in the classroom, but I imagine you work it out over time.

Kirkland: By the third week, we done rattled so much stuff up; I done critiqued everything that they believe. Then they get frustrated because they feel like everything they believed was a lie and, you know—

Gilyard: Well, some of it was.

Kirkland: It's disheartening to them. So then comes the work of building them back up. I value their literacies in the classroom as a way of demonstrating what I'm talking about. Toward the end, we come to a consensus. I generally get fairly high evaluations from my students. So I can't be doing too much damage.

Gilyard: Right. Now I read your recent piece, enjoyed it a lot, you know, "The New English Education." I want you to say a little more about it. How do you see this New English Education playing out?

Kirkland: One reason I wrote the essay is because we're in English Education and we're still talking about things that were talked about decades ago, even a century ago. We're still talking about the ways of reading that Louise Rosenblatt wrote about in 1938.

Gilyard: *Literature as Exploration*.

Kirkland: We're back to *Literature as Exploration*; we're back to New Criticism; we're back to an exploration of the canons. Essentially, we are back to the basics. At some level I think that gives us a good foundation, a significant foundation, by which to build a New English Education. But a foundation alone does not make a house. And we need to begin to build on that foundation in order to build some kind of fortress, you know, that we can call our discipline. This is where the New English Education comes in. At its root, the New English Education simply means that the study of English needs to keep up with the times. What things like Hip Hop as seen through a postmodern black lens give us are cases to rethink English—how it has changed and how English Education may need to change also. In fact, the category English as a site of study inside of a multicultural, multilingual, pluralistic place like the United States may be unhelpful. Maybe we need something that's more pluralistic like the study of Englishes. As for the idea of canons, we do great damage to the study of our humanity and to the study of who we are when we don't incorporate new texts and all Englishes that capture our fullness.

Gilyard: Let's back up for a second because I noticed that you used that term *postmodern blackness* in the article and again here. It can be seen as an oxymoron, right? If you're talking about postmodern in the sense of fractured or indeterminate, then how can the word describe blackness, a definable, discrete notion? It's like saying blackness is something specific but it's not something specifically specific. How do you work that out?

Kirkland: I'm adopting the term postmodern blackness from bell hooks, who is looking at—and I think the word nuanced is more helpful here than fractured—nuanced identities for black people—

Gilyard: For postmodern times. So postmodernity is really the era? The idea of blackness in a postmodern era?

Kirkland: The nuanced identity speaks to the era. This is central to all of my work. Things are not static; things are changing. Not only do we have the rupture of old structures, we have extensions of meaning. We have an appropriation of old codes that are re-accented, if you will, with new forms of meaning and new kinds of meaning. Let's take *fat*, for instance. The word *fat* don't mean fat no more. One of my research participants told me I had on a phat watch. He spelled *phat*, in this way, with a "ph." I was like, "My watch not that big." He was like, "Naw, that mean your watch is the shit." I was like, "Okay, I got you."

Gilyard: (laughing) You knew better than that.

Kirkland: (laughing) I was just playing. But it's that kind of transit, that kind of change and shift that postmodern blackness, at least in the sense that bell hooks talks about it, accounts for. And that shift happens with black people in a unique way. So you don't just get postmodernism; you get postmodern blackness that speaks to the nuances of black culture, that reveals something about the conditions of not only black people but also white folk.

Gilyard: No doubt.

Kirkland: And other folk.

Gilyard: Here's a question about nuances of black culture. Is Barack Obama going to be the first Motown president or the last Motown president or the first Hip Hop president? He says he listens to Jay-Z, but he also says he mainly gets with Gladys Knight, the Temptations, you know.

Kirkland: I don't think I have been able to draw those lines clearly. I think he might be both the first Hip Hop president and the first Motown president. Maisha Fisher writes that African American literacies, diasporic literacies, are situated within traditions. She also argues that African American literacies extend those traditions. Barack is very much within these traditions, even beyond Motown to the sorrow songs. If you listen to him croon in his speeches, you'll hear the voice of Douglass as well as the voice of Ida B. Wells as well as the voices of Shirley Chisholm, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesse Jackson. You hear it all, the music, Hip Hop and Rhythm and Blues. You hear the soul of Ray Charles.

Gilyard: And there's a facial resemblance to Malcolm, but I don't say that much because I don't want people to focus on that.

Kirkland: There's dignity, a stature—

Gilyard: Don't keep comparing him to Malcolm now! No don't do that! We'll talk about it after November.

Kirkland: Okay. So my basic argument now is that he's situated within all these verbal traditions at once. This is the hybridity that we have to talk about. This is why—

Gilyard: And he's aware of it and foregrounds it. At Penn State, he came to a point in his speech where he was talking about insurance or jobs. He said something like, "You know it ain't right." Then he backtracked and explained, while the people laughed, "I want you to understand that some things are not right but this just *ain't* right." He knows that he's operating in various traditions.

Kirkland: That's right. And he extends those traditions. That's the other part. Hip Hop borrows. It is situated in the traditions of its past and it extends those traditions. So the question could be this: What is Post Hip Hop? Post Hip Hop may be Barack Obama and whatever his political movement embodies. But the immediate question is to consider how

people like Barack Obama are situated within our traditions and remain nuanced enough and open enough in our approach to see where these traditions are going. It's good to see where we come from, but it's also good to know where we're taking this. If Barack Obama is an example, I think we're taking it in powerful directions.

Gilyard: He has to make it past these pundits. There's another study in rhetoric, right? You follow the campaigns and look at television every night and are just amazed at what these educated experts pretend not to know. Toni Cade Bambara used to talk about how on some dubious occasions she would be trying to slip out of the house and her grandmother would check her and ask, "What are you pretending not to know today?" I feel like her grandmother when I watch some of these pundits, these highly intelligent folks. Legitimate arguments exist on both sides of certain cases—the Florida primary, for example—and all these brilliantly trained pundits pretend that the other side doesn't make any sense at all. They know the other side makes sense. The question is whether you can work out the paradox. Yet they don't declare the matter a paradox or that the other side has a reasonable point with which they just happen to disagree intellectually or because of political expediency. They just pretend that any opinion counter to theirs is nonsensical. And then they come with these bogus facts. Lanny Davis is good at this.

Night after night, he'll say, "I got facts. The facts show that McCain is running ahead of Obama." This is his best argument for why Democrats should choose Hillary Clinton.

But Davis' facts, the result of a poll, are a prediction about a future set of facts, an actual election outcome, which we won't know about until November. That a person can make a prediction is certainly a fact. But it's also a fact that a prediction could turn out to be incorrect. If you listen to Davis seriously, you'll go from poll straight to inauguration. Or maybe he knows that we know he can't be serious.

Kirkland: And he's only talking about one prediction or set of predictions.

Gilyard: Yeah.

Kirkland: There's another set of predictions that critiques his set of predictions.

Gilyard: Yeah. This present commentariat is just wearing me out.

Kirkland: I think another conversation that has come up during this election season is the contrast between the rhetoric of Reverend Jeremiah Wright, a rhetoric of indignation and critique that we in the black community agree with, and the rhetoric of Barack, a rhetoric of possibility and hope that some of us also agree with. At some point we have to reconcile what those two rhetorics might mean to our progress and to our future. Again, situating those two rhetorics inside of the larger maelstrom of power and thinking about what power means and how power plays—

Gilyard: King is paradigmatic for that because he spoke of the hope—that part of him gets canonized—but he also brought the critique.

Kirkland: Yeah. But these are two different figures, not just different from King but from each other. It reminds me of our comments about Hip Hop. The Hip Hop that gets promoted and glamorized, at least by academics, is the prophetic message Hip Hop, the Hip Hop of hope and a particular kind of critique. This is versus some of the Hip Hop that comes directly from the conditions of our people. If there wasn't no hoes in my community, you know, they wouldn't be talking about no hoes. And I know I'm gon get jumped on by feminists for being misogynistic, but the truth is that when you hear Weezy talking about, you know, people selling pussy in the 'hood, it's because people selling pussy in the 'hood.

Gilyard: No question. Fortunately, I ain't had to buy none. But they was definitely selling it.

Kirkland: It was there. The implication sometimes is that it's all commodification and that people are just making up stuff. Well,

probably not. You know, some of it is hyperbole, exaggeration. But for the most part those exaggerations start from a place of truth.

Gilyard: Plus it functions as memoir. In textual studies we've often made a distinction between memoir and autobiography in terms of there being different writer-reader contracts in play. As readers, we put the strict truth test on autobiography and we get mad when we get deceived. But some of it is that we are deceiving ourselves because we ought to know that those books are not anybody's absolute story. At any rate, we are not as demanding of memoir. Memoir is as much about the times and the situation as it is about you. Memoir doesn't necessarily have to be your story, but it's the story of your generation.

Kirkland: Yeah.

Gilyard: We're two black men riding around New York City. You might be driving. I can later write a memoir in which I tell the episode something like, "I was driving David around New York when we were racially profiled and stopped by the police." Now that wouldn't be technically true because you were doing the driving, but it's plausible enough. My episode would still be true to the times and the situation. And the essential fact that we were profiled and pulled over would remain. So when I relate that I was stopped DWB, Driving While Black, it could still ring true. It's true to the spirit of the times. In fact, I *have* been stopped DWB, just not with you. So in that sense the actual lyrics or raps have to get more memoir treatment than autobiography treatment. Folks criticize, "They rappin about stuff they ain't even do." Yes, at times, but they also are always talking about important things that occur. Whether they actually did it or not is only partly the story. And something is wrong anyway if you go for all of it. Some of it is just for fun. I mean, if you listen to "I Got a Story to Tell," you have to know that big ass corpulent Biggie is not lowering himself nimbly down the side of a building with a rope fashioned from bed sheets.

Kirkland: That's right.

Gilyard: That song is coming out of our badman tradition or the tradition of the tall tale. Now I admit it gets a little more complicated. For example, the only serious trouble Jay-Z has been in for years involved him stabbing a guy in the arm with a penknife because he thought the guy was bootlegging his CDs. Something like that. In any event, it's a case of Uzi rap and penknife reality. That's something to ponder. Still, if in a song, the character, mood, and sense of the times or sense of traditions are right, then the song could be good art.

Kirkland: You know the old conversations about black people and black art. Black art needs to serve the purpose of propaganda, Du Bois would say. Or Langston Hughes would say let our stuff just be. It seems that we have people saying that if it doesn't serve the positive purpose of propaganda then Hip Hop is not relevant. But my question is why does it have to serve that purpose? How come our art can't just be art? Like Langston Hughes said, we still chasing the Negro up the racial mountain. You know, it's time for us to come down and take our rightful place at the table.