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# Music as symbol, music as simulacrum: postmodern, pre-modern, and modern aesthetics in subcultural popular musics

PETER MANUEL

Postmodern aesthetics has come to be recognised as a salient feature of much popular culture, including music. Urban subcultures, and especially migrant subcultures, may have inherent inclinations toward postmodern aesthetics, while at the same time retaining ties to modern and even pre-modern cultural discourses. The syncretic popular musics created by such subcultures may reflect these multiple cultural orientations by combining postmodern and more traditional characteristics. Thus, for example, punk rock and rap music can be seen to combine postmodern techniques of pastiche, bricolage and blank irony with modernist socio-political protest. Similar eclecticism can also be found in the musics of some urban migrant subcultures, whose syncretic musics, like their senses of social identity, often self-consciously juxtapose or combine ancestral homeland traditions with the most contemporary cosmopolitan styles and attitudes. Interpretations of such musics may call for a particularly nuanced appreciation of the distinct aesthetic modes which may coexist in the same work.

Most of the analytical literature on music and on contemporary aesthetics, however, has tended to fall into one of two discrete categories, in such a way that the expressive eclecticism of such forms of popular music is not adequately illuminated. One body of discussion would comprise the literature on postmodernism in general, stressing the ahistoricity, playful depthlessness, and ironic detachment of contemporary art, and in some cases portraying postmodernism as an all-pervasive condition (at least in the developed world), which effectively nullifies all senses of pre-modern and modern identity, tradition, meaning and meta-narrative; much of the work of Baudrillard and Lyotard is paradigmatic in this category. A disparate category of analysis, comprising most musicological and ethnomusicological literature, has explored more traditional forms of musical meaning, including the expressive qualities of abstract melodies, metres and the like, and the ways in which music functions as a vehicle for and expression of social identity. Whether these distinct analytical approaches are seen as contradictory or complementary, I suggest that each in its own manner has tended to neglect the complex ways in which postmodern and modern/pre-modern forms of

meaning interact and coexist in several forms of contemporary urban popular music. In this article I suggest some of the complexities that are involved in the study of such musics, focusing on one particular parameter – musical borrowing – in the context of two subcultures: hiphop and South Asian diaspora communities.

A relevant and significant work in this study is Paul Gilroy's recent book *The Black Atlantic* (1993), which offers a particularly original interpretation of the notion of modernity and the role of black diaspora culture within it. Modernity has often been identified with the Enlightenment and Euro-American bourgeois culture, in which scheme Afro-American culture would be regarded as marginal or as a pre-modern relic. But as Gilroy insightfully argues, black Atlantic culture (comprising everything from slave society to Jamaican immigrant communities in Birmingham) has constituted a central aspect of modernity. Just as Enlightenment ideology was used to legitimise slavery and the great European parliament houses were subsidised by colonial oppression, so did African diaspora culture evolve as a distinctly modern entity – Western, hybrid and creolised. Black diaspora arts – especially music – emerged as a kind of flip side to Enlightenment modernity, critiquing its hypocrisies from without and within, and using pre-modern as well as original and borrowed Western elements to create a new and dynamic expressive culture.

Gilroy's analysis is devoted primarily to a reassessment of the notion of modernity rather than postmodernity. However, several of his themes and arguments are of direct relevance to the subject of this article. First, Gilroy stresses the interaction and overlap of modern and pre-modern aesthetics in black diaspora music, showing how this overlap, and the concomitant, oft-noted racial 'doubleness' are sources of unique expressive power and vitality. Further, Gilroy offers a nuanced exploration of the sense of *dislocation*, both of diaspora communities and of music genres like reggae, that constitutes a precondition for the flowering of contemporary subcultural expressive culture in Britain and elsewhere. Gilroy also extends his discussion, however parenthetically, to the interaction of South Asian and West Indian diaspora communities in Great Britain and their syncretic musics. In this article I wish to further extend such lines of analysis, emphasising the presence and interaction of postmodern as well as modern and pre-modern aesthetics, as illustrated by subcultural musical appropriation and rearticulation.

One catalyst of the flowering of postmodernist-influenced popular musics has been the spread of the mass media and the concurrent proliferation of media codes in recent decades. While this has extended the reach of hegemonic mainstream media discourses, it has at the same time enabled local, lower-class and marginal peoples to make their voices heard as never before. Media consumers worldwide are now exposed to a bewildering array of musics from all manner of diverse cultures, subcultures and epochs. Concurrent with this development has been the growth of migrant and diaspora communities, and their own recognition – by themselves, popular culture, and the academy (e.g., Clifford 1992, Chambers 1990) – as significant subcultures in their own right, with their own art forms, distinct senses of identity, and in some cases, economic and political clout. Related to these phenomena are the emergence of crisscrossing economic, demographic and media networks, the tendency for individuals and groups to form fragmented, multiple identities, and an unprecedented degree of cultural borrowing, appropriation and syncretic cross-fertilisation. As I shall argue, the appropriations and resignifications of musics by urban subcultures themselves embody their own com-

plex and often internally contradictory senses of symbol and simulacrum.<sup>1</sup> These expressive works at once celebrate meaning and meaninglessness, play and nostalgia, pathos and *jouissance*, in a synthesis that goes much deeper than the paradigmatic dualities of 'tradition and innovation', or 'commercialism and authenticity'.

The essential features of postmodernism have been discussed in so many publications that there is no need to reiterate them at length here. We may briefly note that as a historical condition, postmodernism is related to such features as the penetration of capital, commodification and the mass media to all aspects of public and private life; the undermining of faith in religious or historical meta-narratives (teleological Marxist-Leninism, bourgeois positivism); and a new sense of the subjectivity of all human experience (engendering, among other things, a crisis of representation in scholarship). Postmodern art reflects these epistemological and material changes by its celebration of difference, its exaltation of images, surfaces and simulacra, its eclectic mixing of high and low, and its denial of historicity, moral judgmentalism and sentimentality. More specifically, these features are expressed through certain typical aesthetic devices, which have already become clichés, particularly: pastiche, especially involving the combination and juxtaposition of elements from disparate discourses and subjectivities; self-referentiality and intertextuality, calling attention to the artificiality of the medium; and blank parody, subjecting all discourse to an alternately deadpan or grotesque irony, and negating (unlike modern or pre-modern parody) any implicit perspective of healthy normality.

As mentioned above, some writers have tended to portray postmodernism as an all-encompassing condition and worldview, while others, more accurately, have recognised how it coexists and interacts with other cultural attitudinal stances (aside from Gilroy 1993, see, e.g., Eagleton 1990, pp. 466ff.). Accordingly, much of contemporary musical activity and taste can be seen as a deliberate nostalgic rejection of the postmodern condition by means of preferences for (or attempted flight into) earlier and perceived pre-commercial styles, from Mozart to Irish folk music. Postmodernism in this sense is best understood as a condition which in some way informs the developed world, and as an aesthetic mode which is by now familiar enough to be widely exploited.

While American postmodernism has been described as a condition archetypically characteristic of bourgeois baby-boomers, idiosyncratic forms of postmodern aesthetics also characterise the popular music of certain lower-class urban subcultures. Such musics generally do not exhibit the rarefied and relatively 'pure' forms of postmodernism found in the works of artists like Godard, Warhol or Cage. Accordingly, the very presence of postmodernist attitudes in subcultural expressions is in some respects paradoxical. Urban lower classes generally have little access to or interest in the élite avant-garde (not to mention poststructuralist literary criticism); they do not have the same easy familiarity with classical and popular culture that characterises today's well-rounded yuppie culture consumer, and that constitutes a precondition for so much postmodern art and humour. Nor do urban proletariats and lumpenproletariats exist in a world of post-scarcity bourgeois comfort, free to regard all historical teleologies (e.g., religion, political causes) as archaic and implausible. Rather, subcultures are often born into struggles against poverty and discrimination, in which the reconstitution of a sense of personal or collective subjectivity is not a casual pursuit, but rather an urgent task crucial to psychic survival. Moreover, subcultures, including the two discussed in this

article, often retain close ideological, genealogical and geographical ties to pre-modern cultures, whether in the form of links to third world homelands, or recent histories of poverty and rural marginalisation. Accordingly, as Gilroy has illustrated, diasporic subcultures may be inclined to retreat into pre-modern traditions and attitudes because of their association of European modernity (and, by extension, postmodernity) with discrimination and oppression.

In other respects, however, urban diaspora subcultures can have marked inclinations towards postmodern attitudes and aesthetics. Some aspects of such inclinations have been explored in greater depth elsewhere (e.g., Chambers 1987, 1990); here we may note a few salient factors. Urban subculture members, like all modern city-dwellers, are surrounded by mass media images, most of which represent the hegemonic discourse of the dominant culture. The alienation of the poor and marginal from mainstream society and its discourse naturally enhances the tendency for such individuals to regard such media content – be it advertisements, news features or melodramas aimed at bourgeois audiences – as so much duplicitous and meaningless junk. Such media discourse often can acquire subcultural significance only if scrambled and recycled in creative bricolage, as subcultures construct their own gerrymandered sense of identity out of imagerial *objets trouvés*, be they dress codes or musical styles. Punk rock subculture, as described by Hebdige (1979) and Chambers (1987), represents one classic example of this form of subcultural resignification. However, the search for and construction of social identity is not necessarily a postmodern pursuit, but rather may be a basic strategy in psychological adaptation. Uses of postmodernist aesthetics can be seen as strategies and ingredients in the construction and rearticulation of new sorts of meanings and identities, rather than as totalising ends in themselves. Such contradictions emerge more clearly in looking at specific features of subcultural musics.

### Modern and pre-modern forms of musical borrowing

The postmodernity of much contemporary musical creation and re-creation stands out most clearly in contrast to modern and pre-modern approaches to musical appropriation. As I will discuss below, postmodern elements in music can also coexist with modern and traditional elements, even within the same song, involving complex processes of code-switching on the part of the listener. Thus, while modern and pre-modern modes of making and hearing music are obviously related to particular modes of production and stages of socio-historical development, they are best understood in this context as representing attitudes which can and do coexist and interact, just as a typical baby-boomer's record collection might include Madonna, Bach, Philip Glass, Ravi Shankar, and *Voices of the [New Guinean] Rainforest*.

Within the realm of modern and pre-modern musics, it is useful to distinguish between two types of meaning, which, although never wholly discrete, differ significantly. Leonard Meyer (1956, pp. 1–3) has categorised musical meaning as either 'embodied' or 'referential'. 'Referential' meaning, or referential aspects of musical meaning, would comprise the senses in which music's significance is tied to its more overtly extra-musical associations with such entities as rituals, religion, nationalism, specific occasions, personal memories and the like. 'Embodied' meaning is more abstract, residing in such matters as the tensions and

resolutions created by the ebb and flow of melody, rhythm, harmony, timbre and their interrelationships. On certain levels, of course, all musical meaning is referential, as even the most perceivedly abstract pieces (e.g., Beethoven string quartets) depend upon and reflect stylistic aesthetic norms conditioned by social history. Nevertheless, the distinctions, with certain qualifications, remain useful, and are particularly essential in understanding musical appropriation.

Thus, for example, much musical cross-fertilisation is intended to convey referential meaning by evoking various extra-musical associations. The use of regional, folk-derived melodies in works of Dvořák, Glinka, Mussorgsky, and other nineteenth-century composers is an obvious example; while these melodies and their treatment have their own intrinsically musical (i.e., embodied) expressiveness, their usage was also intended to convey nationalistic sentiments. In the realm of contemporary popular music, similar examples abound. The flamenco guitar introduction to the Doors' 1960s song 'Spanish Caravan', for example, is clearly meant to evoke exotic images of Spain, as do the lyrics. On a more general level, it has often been argued that the entire interest in and appropriation of blues styles in early rock culture (especially groups like the Yardbirds and The Rolling Stones) was animated to a large degree by the exotic, hedonistic and countercultural extra-musical associations of blues and of Afro-American subculture in general. The contemporary market for 'world beat', from reggae to Zulu choirs, is undoubtedly invigorated by these musics' aura as somehow authentic and uncontaminated by commercialism. Thus, modern musicians as well as listeners draw in their tastes from a global pool of styles, partly in accordance with the idiosyncratic and multiple sorts of socio-musical identity they choose (see Slobin 1992, pp.44ff.).

Alternatively, musical styles and elements are often borrowed and cultivated for more abstract values, in contexts where their extra-musical, referential associations are intended to be largely irrelevant. When jazz musicians play a song in bossa nova rhythm, they may not be intending to call forth images of Brazilian beaches, but perhaps are merely providing alternatives to songs in swing rhythm. Similarly, when North Indian classical musicians borrow *rags* (modes) like *Kirwani* and *Vachaspati* from the compatible, but distinct, South Indian system, they are not trying to evoke images of the South (e.g., its palm trees, coconuts and dark women), but rather are rendering these modes purely for their 'embodied' values – their use of interesting scales which are not found in traditional North Indian music. Likewise, for the contemporary pop musician, reggae, samba and salsa rhythms may often be utilised purely for their embodied, abstract musical qualities, rather than for their referential associations; indeed, these rhythms are arrayed on the synthesizer panel like so many hues on a palette, and need not bear any particular socio-musical baggage (just the luggage tag, perhaps). Such distinctions between embodied and referential forms of musical borrowing also find parallels in the attitudes of musicians themselves; for example, I know two American guitarists who perform flamenco, one of whom is motivated by a fascination with gypsy subculture, while the other merely enjoys flamenco for its interesting tonalities and rhythms.

As with categories of embodied and referential meanings in general, it would be a mistake to over-dichotomise these forms of borrowing, as they may naturally overlap, coexist and interact in a variety of subtle and complex ways, depending on such factors as performance or media context, authorial intent, and the

listener's own background and temperament. In this article we need not get bogged down in such complexities. We should note, however, that all the aforementioned forms of appropriation are modern or pre-modern in the sense that the borrowed elements or styles are woven into the fabric of the host genres, which retain their coherence and continuity. Thus, for example, when North Indian musicians play South Indian *rags*, these rags then effectively become part of North Indian music, losing their foreign character. Similarly, the intended effect in Glinka's use of folk melodies is not that of pastiche, but of enrichment and nationalistic evocation within the contexts and general stylistic parameters of European art music. Furthermore, both embodied and referential affect constitute musical *meaning* in the sense of being emotionally expressive. These features, although perhaps obvious, stand in contrast with postmodern forms of musical borrowing, to which we may now turn.

### **Postmodernism, protest and hiphop**

In the later 1980s the group M.A.R.S.S. produced a massive hit entitled 'Pump up the Volume', which constituted a sort of hip-hop landmark in the use of sampling techniques, and also contained some quintessentially postmodernist features. The song employed more than thirty samples (digitally-reproduced excerpts from prior recordings), set over a steady disco rhythm, interspersed with a vocal refrain (itself a second-hand sample). Towards the end of the song, a passage of synthetically-altered (audibly accelerated) Arab singing is heard over the steady beat, matching the tonality and rhythm of the song. Those familiar with this song, or with others like it, should readily be able to hear that the sort of borrowing that occurs there differs from both kinds of appropriation described above. First, the Arab singing is clearly not meant to evoke images of Arabia (camels, deserts, dark-eyed women behind beaded curtains, etc.); its accelerated artificiality makes all the more clear that it is to be appreciated more as a quirky simulacrum than as any sort of resonant symbol laden with referential meaning. Secondly, unlike, say, Glinka's folk melodies, the Arab passage is not woven seamlessly into the stylistic fabric of the piece, except insofar as the entire song itself can be regarded as a pastiche. Rather, the expressive meaning of the passage's incorporation derives precisely from its audible *difference*, its clearly foreign origin, and the synthetic artificiality of its acceleration. The excerpt's overt sense of otherness prevents it from assimilating smoothly into the song's texture and generating 'embodied' meaning. In these respects, the aesthetic here is quintessentially postmodern, involving neither embodied nor referential meaning, but instead revelling in a certain sort of meaninglessness.

M.A.R.S.S.'s 'Pump up the Volume', although not a rap song, typifies the kind of postmodernist 'cut 'n' mix' collage used in hiphop accompaniments, created either by digital sampling or manual juxtaposition and combination of records by disc jockeys. While musical accompaniments to many rap songs consist of simple repeated vamps or merely drum beats, others include a variety of sampled excerpts whose usage is archetypically postmodern. Readers familiar with rap are well acquainted with such practices, which have been extensively discussed by scholars (e.g. Rose 1994, ch. 3; Wheeler 1991). Here it may suffice to point out some of the most typical techniques, which have become trademarks, if not clichés, of hiphop postmodernism, just as have video monitors in the realm of performance art. Many of the sampled riffs used in rap exhibit in one way or another their

artificiality as media-derived, mechanically-reproduced simulacra. A typical device is to use a sung or spoken passage that has obviously been digitally decelerated or accelerated, as in 'Pump up the Volume'. Often the sample consists of a guttural grunt or cry, providing an effective and inherently ironic contrast between its viscerally organic, human origin and its mechanical reproduction. Of the innumerable examples of this technique, we may mention as typical Heavy D's 'Silky', whose background repeated sample consists of a woman grunting 'unhh! – awww' over a drum beat; as if the repetition of this snippet were not artificial enough, LL Cool J, in a typical example of hip-hop intertextuality, recycles the same sample in his 'A Little Somethin', cutting off the now-familiar 'awww!' in mid-grunt. The artificiality of such alterations is particularly overt when passages in different levels of deceleration or acceleration are combined and overlaid (e.g., as in Naughty by Nature's '19 Naughty III', or Redman's 'Blow your Mind'). Such digital alterations, in classic postmodern self-referential fashion, call attention to the artificiality of the recorded medium and introduce an element of irony and *jouissance*; in their repetition and obvious synthetic nature, they can be seen as musical counterparts to the cheap, metallic sheen that Warhol spread over his multiple photographs of Marilyn Monroe and grisly car accidents. The postmodern juxtaposition and combination of elements from disparate discourses also appear in rap songs reiterating all manner of sampled sounds, from screeching tyres to flushing toilets and other examples of stray audio-technological trash. In most of these cases, the sampled passages function as simulacra, as free-floating signifiers to be enjoyed for their very meaninglessness, their obvious artificiality, in a characteristically postmodern exhilaration of surfaces.

If the musical accompaniments to rap songs often exhibit quintessential postmodernisms, rap videos present more of a mixture of aesthetic approaches. The typical hardcore rap video uses a few postmodern elements, such as juxtapositions of colour and black-and-white segments, and portrayals of the rapper lip-syncing in continually changing settings. In other respects, however, hardcore rap videos are modernist, situating their subjects not in a synthetic virtual reality, but in the specific social geography of the ghetto, with its abandoned buildings, garbage heaps and pervasive malevolence. Finally, of course, there is by far the most important element of rap – the lyrics – and here, one finds very little in the way of overt postmodernisms. It could be argued that the sentiments expressed in rap are at least obliquely postmodern in their often nihilistic denial of meta-narratives (religion, Marxism, the Civil Rights movement); instead they affirm a rage and machismo which at once protest and flaunt the existence of an evidently permanent underclass in modern society (see, e.g., Willis 1991). On the whole, however, the classic postmodern stances of arty, chic irony and campy de-signification seem antithetical to the intensity of hip-hop lyrics. Rap texts, whether macho boasts or vitriolic expressions of black anger, are worlds removed from the depersonalised utterances of Laurie Anderson ('. . . I no longer love the colour of your sweater . . .') or the consumerist absurdities blankly parodied by David Byrne ('. . . I've got to find me a city to live in . . .'). Granted that the very de-emphasis on the musical accompaniment in rap effectively liberates it to be innovative and avant-garde; yet why do these postmodern aspects not serve to deflate the urgency and immediacy of rap's verbal messages?

The answer to the paradox has to do with the way that postmodern and more traditional forms of aesthetics interact in hip-hop. As Rose (1994, ch. 3) and Wheeler (1991) have argued, rap musicians' use of pastiche, instead of negating



social reality, is grounded in the experience of black Americans; the processes of bricolage and appropriation can be seen as part of what Malcolm X called the 'incredibly difficult' process of constructing history and identity. Meanwhile, the rhythmic intensity underlying and unifying the collage represents an affirmative form of resistance by suggesting *dancing* through adversity. Further, appropriation and sampling can constitute forms of homage (e.g., to James Brown) or overt parody rather than postmodern pastiche. They similarly can be seen as representing an empowering mastery over technology, a critique of science using technology itself, an attempt to deconstruct dominant-culture discourse, and a reconstruction of oral history via neo-traditional 'signifying' (Wheeler 1991, p. 199; Chambers 1987, pp. 18–20; Gates 1988, p. 111; Rose 1994, ch. 2,3). Thus, for example, when Redman digitally mangles a news monologue about the 1992 Los Angeles riots (on 'News Break'), the effect – for this consumer – is not to trivialise the upheaval, but to comment on the artificiality of bourgeois media discourse and contrast it with the rage and desperation of black street culture.

The point that I wish to stress is that the postmodern and modernist elements in this art form, rather than being in conflict or awkward coexistence, are integrally related in a coherent expressive framework (and, most palpably, in a driving rhythmic framework). Similarly, as Rose (1994, pp. 23–4) observes in her critique of Willis, rap's postmodern elements cannot be regarded as negative contradictions which it could or should shed; rather, they are central to rap's aesthetics. Indeed, just as Gilroy and others have stressed the expressive power derived from Afro-diasporic arts' doubleness, so is rap's combination of modernist and postmodern techniques a source of unique vitality and resonance.

At the same time, the relationship between the two sensibilities is often fluid, complex and contradictory. From one perspective, it may seem that postmodern techniques are being used to express predominantly modernist themes; but on another level, the entire cycle of production and consumption is animated by a conceptual and socio-historical postmodernity. The synthesis of distinct yet interdependent aesthetic approaches parallels rap's idiosyncratic combination of orality and high technology, and the rap audience's simultaneous immersion in postmodern media culture and its intense struggle for social dignity and material survival. As Gilroy (1993, p. 58) and Rose (1994, p. 24) have argued, it also reflects the inherent contradictions in rap's attempt to critique modern society both from within and without.

### **Postmodernity and pre-modernity in South Asian diaspora music**

Migrant and border cultures have acquired an unprecedented degree of importance in the late twentieth century, in accordance with their increased size and number, their access to and use of the mass media, the enhancement of transport and communications technology, and the related ideologies of multiculturalism subsequently now entrenched in the developed world. Some migrant subcultures share features of Afro-American urban subculture, including socio-economic marginalisation and alienation, histories of colonial and neo-colonial oppression, and similar ambivalences towards mainstream media culture. Whether or not they share the oppression-bred antipathies to modernity seen by Gilroy in Afro-diasporic cultures, migrants often have their own ambivalences towards modernity, and they may have closer ties to pre-modern ancestral communities. In some

ways, diaspora communities may have even more profound inclinations towards a sense of postmodernity in art and life. Migrants thus often find themselves in the position of fashioning a new sort of eclectic social identity by a set of aesthetic, ideological and political choices and rearticulations. The mass media often play particularly significant roles in migrants' own senses of identity, in which the ancestral fatherland may be represented primarily by mass-mediated entities like recorded music. Both mainstream and fatherland media images have their own sorts of associative depth, and their own sorts of perceived shallowness and alienness. Images of the parental homeland may lack experiential referents in the migrants' own lives, while at the same time, migrants may feel alienated from the dominant culture and media discourse of their new homeland. Thus, both sets of media images may tend to be perceived as depthless simulacra. Such imagerial worlds, like global capital and the migrants themselves, can thus become in some senses deterritorialised entities, embodying in their own way some of the basic features of postmodernity. Thus, the migrant's sense of rootlessness and dislocation, the natural tendency towards artistic bricolage, and the arbitrariness of some of the socio-aesthetic choices made lend much of diaspora expression a natural affinity with and tendency toward the postmodern. Naturally, such tendencies may be particularly marked in the case of individuals who are doubly or triply diasporic, such as Indo-Caribbean migrants to North America.

At the same time, it is worth reiterating that the migrant's search for a sense of identity, like that of modernising societies in general, is not necessarily a post-modern process, but one which synthesises traditional and contemporary subjectivities in an often profoundly emotional manner. The syncretic popular musics cultivated by such communities often exhibit such contradictions with particular clarity, combining pre-modern folk elements with the latest mainstream pop styles in a self-conscious and often deliberately ironic sort of eclecticism.

We may take as representative some of the contemporary musics created by the several million people of South Asian descent currently living in the Caribbean, Great Britain, the USA and Canada. South Asian migrants have been sources for some of the most creative postmodern artworks, from Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* to Srinivasan Krishna's Toronto-based film *Masala*. An overview of the popular musics of these internally diverse communities is beyond the scope of this article. In terms of their contemporary urban popular musics, however, we may note a few particularly prominent taste cultures. Migrants of Punjabi descent constitute an especially large, dynamic, self-conscious and musically active group, whose members are spread throughout urban Great Britain and North America. (Many such Punjabis are doubly diasporic, having been dislocated by the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.) Punjabi migrants have created their own sorts of exile identity, reconciling traditions (real and 'imagined') of the pre-modern homeland with contemporary Western culture. The emergence of pop bhangra as a syncretic fusion of Punjabi folk elements and disco/rock rhythms and instrumentation, has been a fairly predictable phenomenon, currently enjoying widespread popularity in South Asia itself as well as in the diaspora (see Manuel 1993, pp. 177–83; Banerji and Baumann 1990; Bauman 1990). Pop bhangra's combination of synthesizers and *dholak* barrel drums, and the easy blending of bhangra rhythms with those of disco and reggae, thus parallel similar syncretisms in other non-Western pop musics. The coexistence of Punjabis alongside West Indians (of both African and Indian descent) in places like Birmingham and Bradford has led to

more eclectic sorts of musical cross-fertilisation. The 1980s and early 1990s have witnessed the emergence of 'bhangramuffin' substyles, synthesising Punjabi texts and folk rhythms with Jamaican reggae/dance-hall/raggamuffin declamation style, and also incorporating elements from rap and Hindi film music, and other ingredients randomly cannibalised from the global style pool. Thus, a 1992 Birmiyite cassette by Bally Sagoo boasts of its 'classic Punjabi folk songs in true ragga style', and indeed features traditional songs like 'Hey Jamalo' set to a variety of rhythms in different club mixes, together with dance-hall verses in thick Jamaican patwa. In such contexts, as Gilroy notes, reggae rhythm is easily detached from any exclusive association with Jamaica, becoming instead one more international style (Gilroy 1993, p. 82). Even thick Jamaican patwa becomes effectively deterritorialised when juxtaposed with Punjabi-language refrains for an ethnically-mixed, UK-based audience.

Enjoying considerable popularity since 1992 has been Punjabi-Birmiyite rapper Apache Indian (Steve Kapur), who has fashioned his own idiosyncratic fusion, singing, in dance-hall style, English lyrics which self-consciously mix Indian, British and Caribbean images – 'mix up the Indian with patwa', as he puts it. Kapur's lyrics are light rather than profound, and on the whole are not devoted to any particular explicit message. While it might be fruitless to over-analyse them, it is worth noting that they exhibit a relatively consistent postmodern flavour in their non-judgmental presentation of Indianness in a distinctly un-Indian musical style. Some songs deliberately juxtapose Indian traditions, for example, the arranged marriage (in a song by the same title) with contrasting Caribbean expressions (an Afro-Caribbean grunting 'Me want girl!' in guttural dance-hall style).<sup>2</sup> While Kapur's references to Indianisms occasionally border on caricature, on the whole they neither lampoon nor celebrate, but rather foreground a syncretic, depthless Indianness in a neutral media space, wherein all cultures seem like two-dimensional entities. Indeed, the concept of 'India' in Kapur's lyrics is consistently and self-consciously shallow, reduced to jumbled lists of familiar foodstuffs, personages, and stray Hindi and Punjabi phrases, garbled together with Jamaican patwa and intertextual invocations of other DJs:

Me bring a brand new style upon the island, fe the black a fe white and fe the Indian . . .  
 Now me sit down pon the version like a crab pon the sand, like the vindaloo curry and  
 me two papadum, dem a ball fe Apache Indian, me say *ek, do, tin*, me say *char, panch, chhe*  
 . . . Nuff DJ dem a have a fe dem own stylee, some a wa da dong deng some a come a  
 come follow me . . . Now me know one gal dem a call Rani, pon her forehead now she  
 have a bindi, and round she waist she have a sari, and anything she say she have fe ball  
 after me, Ragamuffin Indian Apache . . . ('Chok There')

Kapur's postmodernism is particularly overt in the associations – at once rich and depthless – of his sobriquet, made explicit by his references to dub rappers Super Cat (also known as Apache) and Apache Scratchie, Caribbean Arawaks, and, of course, Native Americans – the one sort of Indian Kapur is *not*. Finally, the 'cut 'n' mix' aesthetic spills on to the cover of his *No Reservations* CD, which is a typical postmodern collage of map fragments (India, Jamaica), rupee notes and Jamaican dollars, and old and new colour and black-and-white snapshots.

On one level, such syncretisms are quite logical developments; Kapur himself has stated that in Birmingham's 'healthy multi-racial musical scene . . . it was quite a natural thing' to start singing dance-hall, in a 'cross-style that reflects a multicultural background that most city kids like me grew up with' (in Jain 1993).

When performing for diasporic South Asian (as opposed to Afro-Caribbean) audiences, Kapur preaches Asian pride and unity. Again, such themes and eclectic syntheses are not inherently postmodern, but can be seen as modernist attempts to establish coherent and distinctive ethnic identities in the diaspora. Similarly, bhangramuffin's recycling of Punjabi folk songs may to some extent be intended to evoke nostalgic associations of the ancestral (and perhaps never-visited) homeland, while reinforcing a sense of ethnic pride. At the same time, the oddity of combining rustic folk tunes with contemporary styles like dance-hall and technopop is hardly lost on urban Punjabi migrants; when these media-derived elements are combined in a sense of pastiche and gentle blank irony, they go beyond mere syncretic acculturation, and acquire some of the features of postmodern *jouissance*. In such cases, the sound of the folk drum or the quaint plinking of the Punjabi *tumbi* lute become at once quirky simulacra as well as symbols of ethnic identity. Postmodern collage thus evolves as a natural means of reconciling present and former homeland cultures and expressing the sense of dislocation and rootlessness articulated, for example, by some bhangra musicians (see Bauman 1990, p. 91).

One finds similar sorts of eclectic musical curries in contemporary Indo-Caribbean popular music, where various mixtures of Hindi-language calypso ('chutney soca') interact with dance-hall and rap. For example, Rohit Jagessar's Trinidad-produced 'In a Dance-Hall' mixes Hindi and English lyrics, soca and reggae rhythms, dance-hall declamation, melodic snippets from Hindi film songs, *tabla* beats, hip-hop 'scratching', and lines from contemporary rap hits. The recording is at once a natural expression of the varied styles popular in the region, and at the same time a postmodern pastiche whose playful nature is particularly clear in its final moments, where the juxtaposed styles culminate in a confused babble, abruptly ending in a cacophony of breaking glass. My own informants acknowledge the sense of ironic play in such collages, and yet they do not regard their music as a postmodern joke, but rather as a significant expression of their own sense of identity. Similarly postmodern is the opening to Indo-Trinidadian Rikki Jai's 'This Roti too Big', which sets to a rock rhythm the sampled voice of a man intoning, in a heavy Asian-Indian accent, 'Name – is Ranjit Singh – Name – is Ranjit Singh – name – name – name – is Ranjit Singh . . .' ('. . . Vat I do best is to eat roti . . .'). The effect is one of postmodern blank parody, which at the same time deliberately foregrounds Jai's ethnicity. Thus, while Jagessar's collage uses postmodernist techniques to comment on and rearticulate media discourse, Jai uses them in his successful attempts to crossover to the Afro-Trinidadian market while asserting his Indianness at the same time.

## Conclusions

In the contemporary world, there remain communities and art forms which are almost exclusively pre-modern or modern. Yet increasingly, via the globalisation of media, capital and migrant networks, even the most isolated communities are forced to engage with postmodernity in some fashion. Such encounters may be seen as humorous, or in some cases they may be explosive, as in the case of the fundamentalist Islamic reaction to Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. In the developed world itself, postmodernism exists not as a totalising condition, but as one distinct (albeit increasingly pervasive) ideological, aesthetic and discursive framework which constantly interacts with tradition and 'modernity'. To some extent, these coexisting

yet distinct cultural orientations can be seen in Raymond Williams' terms as variously residual, dominant or emerging. Gilroy has shown how these orientations are inextricably intertwined both in the art forms of diasporic subcultures as well as in the constitution of modern Euro-American culture itself. And if rap, as Rose illustrates (1994, p. 19), is at once marginal and mainstream in character and influence, so is bhangramuffin extending its audience well beyond its core of British-based South Asians. Further, it is a feature of postmodern society that individuals themselves may engage in constant code-switching as they alternate between work and pleasure, as they flip television channels, and as they listen to syncretic forms of music. Moreover, as we have seen, art forms themselves may function by combining postmodern with pre-modern or modern forms of meaning (and/or meaninglessness). On one level, of course, the very coexistence of such discourses within a single art work implies postmodernity as an underlying precondition; but postmodern aesthetics, although undeniably important, may account for only part of the expressiveness of a given work of art.

A further investigation of this subject would attempt to locate articulations of such aesthetics in the words of artists and representative consumers themselves. However, the concepts involved – particularly the interactions of postmodern and modern aesthetics – are inherently intangible and recondite, and many artists are neither inclined nor able to articulate their aesthetics in the terms of the academy – hence, of course, the distinct functions of art and scholarship.<sup>3</sup> In my own extensive discussions with hiphop aficionados, I have found such sensibilities to be at least implicit in listeners' appreciation of rap's socio-political messages, and their simultaneous engrossment in and cynicism toward mainstream media discourse. Interpretations of such art forms must confront such complex and seemingly contradictory sentiments and their rearticulations in popular culture. At the same time, however, the holistic study of subcultural expressions should not reify the usage of campy *jouissance*, but situate it in the context of the very real subcultural struggles for identity and subjectivity. From such a perspective, the interdependence of postmodern and more traditional discursive realms can be seen to illustrate how subcultures communicate, compete, conflict and contrast with other cultures in the process of indigenising and resignifying transnational cultural forms. Postmodernism is at once an underlying condition and an aesthetic vehicle for this struggle.

## Endnotes

- 1 I use 'simulacrum' in the sense of a media image which has become a 'free-floating signifier' dislocated from any specific real-world referent.
- 2 This song may have added whimsical resonance (intentional or not) for black men from the West Indies, where Indian girls are often seen as desirable because of their straight ('good') hair

and Caucasian features.

- 3 Published interviews with rapper Redman, for instance, show him to be explicitly uninterested in philosophising about his music, to the point that he even denies – disingenuously, I would say – that it has any social significance.

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