

Introduction to the 2024 Edition

Rap

I didn't see hip-hop coming.

When the first edition of this book went to press in 1974, I knew the toast tradition was waning. I thought it had been displaced by things like boomboxes—portable cassette tape players with large speakers that allowed people to program their own choice of tracks, what is now called a “mixtape.” That did happen. But those same boomboxes became the musical component of one of the four key components of hip-hop culture: breakdancing. If you were going to dance in the streets, you needed music; the boomboxes provided it.¹ Rap music—which began as the chatter of disc jockeys and MCs at block parties and morphed into the chanted rhyming poetry that is now the most-listened-to genre in pop music—was another.²

1. Andrew Leach: “One Day It’ll All Make Sense”: Hip-hop and Rap Resources for Music Librarians, *Music Library Association Notes* 65, no. 1 (December 13, 2022):9–37, downloaded from JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30163606>, p. 10: “The most commonly held view . . . is that hip-hop is a cultural movement that emerged in the South Bronx in New York City during the 1970s, and MCing (rapping; MC = master of ceremonies, also mic controller) is one of its four primary elements. Hip-hop’s other three essential elements are generally considered to be graffiti art (or aerosol art, breaking (or break dancing, b-boying), and DJing (or turntalism; DJ = disc jockey), though some maintain that beat-boxing, fashion and language are also included among hip-hop’s elements. Rap music has become by far the most celebrated expression of hip-hop culture, largely as a result of it being easiest to market to a mass audience.”

2. Hugh McIntyre, “Report: Hip-Hop/R&B is the Dominant Genre in the U.S. for the First Time,” *Forbes*, July 17, 2017, online at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hughmcintyre/2017/07/17/hip-hoprb-has-now-become-the-dominant-genre-in-the-u-s-for-the-first-time/?sh=662dbc035383>, accessed 13 December 2022.

The meaning of the word *rap* has changed over time. When I was in the Marines in the 1950s, “rapping” meant sitting around and talking about whatever; another phrase we had for the same thing was “shooting the shit.” Someone might ask, “What you guys doing?” Either phrase would suffice as a response. H. Rap Brown wrote that he got his nickname because he was good at playing the Dozens and reciting toasts: “I could talk Shine and the *Titanic*, Signifying Monkey, three different ways, and Piss-Pot Peet, for two hours without stopping.”³ For him, *rap* meant running his mouth in one of those two formulaic Black street genres.

Rap as we now know it first started appearing on radio and television in the late 1970s.⁴ The first rap group to make *Billboard*’s top forty chart was the Sugarhill Gang with “Rapper’s Delight” in 1980. Rap came to differ from the toasts in two important respects. First, it was performance before an audience, rather than performance among peers. Second, was a change in the first-person singular: in toasts, with only a few exceptions, “I” is a narrated “I,” not the speaker’s (nobody thinks the “I” in “Stagolee” *is* Stagolee); in rap, “I” is the speaker’s, whether or not the subject is itself at all real. (The “I” may be the performer, or it may be the performer’s persona. The guy talking street-dude talk may, after all, go from the show in a limo to the penthouse, not back to the block.)

Toasts and Time

A variety of performance styles have fed into the wide range of materials now known as rap. Toasts—the subject of this book—established the tradition of narrative poetic recitation basic to rap. Amiri Baraka, holding a hard-back copy of *Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me*, said, “these poems are the source of rap.”⁵

I know of only one book collection of toasts that was published after this one—Dennis Wepman, Ronald B. Newman, and Murray B. Binderman’s *The Life: The Lore and Folk Poetry of the Black Hustler*.⁶ All the toasts in that

3. *Die Nigger Die: A Political Autobiography of Jamil Abdulla Al-Amin*, Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2002, reprint of H. Rap Brown, *Die Nigger Die!* Dial Press 1969.

4. Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip-Hop* (Basic Civitas Books, 2010), 6.

5. Buffalo, in my living room, May 21, 2006.

6. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976.

book “were taken down in shorthand from spontaneous recitations during the 1950s and 1960s by one of us, at that time an inmate in the prisons of New York—Sing Sing, Clinton, Attica, and Auburn.” It’s an important collection, but there are aspects of performance to which shorthand is deaf. All the toasts here, except for a few noted as “from manuscript,” are based on tape recordings.

The only previous book that had presented and attempted to deal with them was Roger D. Abrahams’s *Deep Down in the Jungle: Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*, an expansion of his 1961 University of Pennsylvania PhD thesis, published by Folklore Associates, a small academic press located in Hatboro, Pennsylvania, in 1964; a second edition appeared five years later (Chicago: Aldine, 1979).

Most of the toasts here were recorded between June 1962 and August 1970. A few were told by whites, who had learned them from Black prisoners in county jails (e.g., 8C and 25B, both 1962). A few academic articles about toasts appeared in the 1970s and 1980s in academic journals; some of them had texts that didn’t appear in Abrahams’s, Wepman’s, or my books.⁷ Some had appeared in earlier collections, often as fragments, and more often expurgated.

The record of toasts, therefore, is thin and racially tilted. Other than a few commercial performances or them, such as those by Rudy Ray Moore, most were gathered and published by white guys in a decade or two. The

7. Dennis Wepman, Ronald B. Newman and Murray B. Binderman has some of the toasts that would a year later appear in their book in “Toasts: The Black Urban Folk Poetry,” *Journal of American Folklore* 87, no. 345 (1974):208–24. Anthony M. Reynolds, “Urban Negro Toasts: A Hustler’s View from L.A.,” *Western Folklore* 33, no. 4 (October 1974): 267–300, consists of toasts “taken from just one drinking session, held on the night of April 29, 1971” (268); versions of several of them appear here. James D. Johnson, “An Instance of Toast among Southern Whites,” *Western Folklore* 40, no. 4 (October 1981): 329–37, reports on toasts written out for him in 1978 by a white student who learned them from whites in Georgia; the student had learned them twelve years earlier (330). All four toasts he prints are versions of toasts in this book: “Titanic,” “Signifying Monkey,” “Stackolee,” and “Screw Malolu” (which is a version of 42 “Flicted Arm Pete”). One of the rare later articles, John Laudun, “‘Talking Shit’ in Rayne: How Aesthetic Features Reveal Ethical Structures,” *Journal of American Folklore* 125, no. 497 (2012):304–26, is based on an interview Laudun did in 2000 with the father of one of his college students. The article contains four toasts, a short version of “Signifying Monkey” (1:15 minutes); the other three under 35 seconds. The interviewee told Laudun he learned most of them in his childhood.

period in which they were specifically documented was brief. They were and had been around far longer.

Dating

I think it unlikely that toasts about the *Titanic* would have sprung up in the 1950s or 1960s. There were poems and songs about the sinking shortly after the ship went down in 1912. But there was no way anyone could publish what goes on in the *Titanic* toasts before the 1960s. That white captain's daughter's "pussy" line would have been snapped up by the US Post Office's villainy squad.

The Stackolee songs and toast have a real antecedent. According to one report, "On Christmas Day, 1895, a local pimp named "'Stack' Lee Shelton walked into a St. Louis bar wearing pointed shoes, a box-back coat, and his soon-to-be infamous milk-white John B. Stetson hat. Stack joined his friend Billy Lyons for a drink. Their conversation settled on politics, and soon it grew hostile: Lyons was a levee hand and, like his brother-in-law—one of the richest Black men in St. Louis at the time—a supporter of the Republican Party. Stack had aligned himself with the local Black Democrats. The details of their argument aren't known, but at some point Lyons snatched the Stetson off Stack's head. Stack demanded it back, and when Lyons refused, shot him dead."⁸ The incident made its way into ballads, blues, and toasts. The earliest songs are in the first quarter of the twentieth century. I suspect the toast was created about then as well, but no one recorded or published it.

Likewise the toasts about Joe the Grinder and GI Joe: Japanese war brides were a matter of concern after World War II, but five years later, when the Korean War started, they slipped from public consciousness.

Cocaine and heroin appear in the toasts, but not crack cocaine, which first appeared in the mid-1980s. What dates the drug poems is not that cocaine and heroin are there, but that crack isn't. By crack time, hip-hop was where the versifying went.⁹

8. Joe Kloc, "The Mystery of Stack-O-Lee," *Mother Jones*, April 4, 2011, online at <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/04/stack-o-lee-stagolee-blues-murder-ballads/>, accessed December 10, 2022.

9. Miles Corwin, "Potent Form of Speed Could Be Drug of '90s," *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 1989, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-10-08-mn-334-story.html>, accessed December 15, 2022.

What we don't know about toasts is what we don't know about all folklore: what was going on before someone came along and wrote it down or recorded it?

Later Manifestations

I've already noted that toasts were a key factor in the development of rap music performance. They also informed the work of some important African American writers. The poet Etheridge Knight, for example, often spoke about how important the toasts he heard as a boy were to the poetry he wrote decades later. "When I was seven or eight years old," he said in an interview published in 1996, "I would hang around in poolrooms and listen to toasts, and later I started telling them. So, you see, I grew up telling tales such as 'Shine' and 'The Signifying Monkey.' I grew up listening to Baptist preachers—the form, for example, of Martin Luther King and the rhythm of the folk sermon. So I grew up with that. Long before I published, I was telling toasts—all the time I was in the Army, in prison and on the streets."¹⁰ The last time Etheridge and I met, not long before his death in 1991, someone overheard us talking about toasts and asked what they were. We both responded by reciting versions of "*Titanic*."

People sometimes still recite and perform toasts, but it's like people who perform classic English ballads. Such performances are at a significant remove from the original. In an article about toast performances at the 1989 Louisiana Folk Festival, Mona Lisa Samoy wrote: "Toasting is today's continuance of an oral tradition, but many contemporary toasters read their complicated and elaborate versions from a text."¹¹

Orthography and Parsing and a Troublesome Word

The second word in the phrase "a rotting apple" is a participle; "a rotten apple" is a more direct adjective. When it seems to me that words like

10. Charles H. Rowell and Etheridge Knight, "An Interview with Etheridge Knight," *Calaloo*, Autumn 19, no. 4 (1996):976.

11. "The African American Toast Tradition," *Folklife in Louisiana*, online at https://louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/creole_art_toast_tradition.html. It first appeared in print in the 1989 Louisiana Folk Festival program booklet.

that were used adjectively, I spelled them with *en* rather than the usual *in*: *motherfucken* rather than *motherfuckin'*, *cocksucken* rather than *cocksuckin'*. My late friend Gerson Legman gave me an erudite Middle English etymological reason for doing that, but the apple analogy serves just as well, and it's more current.

The line breaks, as I noted in the introduction to the first edition, are based more on way the lines were uttered than on syllables or rhymes. Some lines fall into natural phrasing and rhyming couplets, but others have one or two internal rhymes within the line. I tried to follow the sound, putting breaks where the voices did. For this edition, I altered a few of the line breaks in the first edition: they read/sound more right to me now. These were lines made for the ear, not the eye. Usually the breaks land in the same place; sometimes they don't.

52A "*Titanic*," for example, opens with a line with three rhymes: "All the old folks say the fourth a May was a hell of a day." In print, here on the page for you, should it be one line, two, three? Where should the break come? The next line is "I was in a little seaport town and the great *Titanic* was goin' down": one line with an internal rhyme or a couplet? I went with my sense of the phrasing: if there was a pause at a rhyme, it got a line break; if there wasn't, it was one line. Someone else might parse these recitations differently. The original tapes all now reside in the Library of Congress and anyone is welcome to have at them.

In the 1960s and 1970s, when I was doing folklore fieldwork, the term most researchers used for the people who provided the material we documented was *informant*. We meant it in the sense of "someone who gave the information without which this scholar wouldn't be talking or writing." Then the word became unfashionable. I'm not sure when it happened, but I remember a lot of terms floated about, like, *collaborator* (which suffered the same negative connotations *informant* had), *colleague* (which I thought patronizing and disingenuous), *consultant* (which seemed to me both patronizing and silly), *interlocutor* (which doesn't fit situations where a group of people are talking and a tape recorder is running, and which is also used for one of the characters in a minstrel show), *interviewee* (which seems appropriate only when the words occur in the process of an actual interview), and *culture bearer* (which calls to mind servants doing drudge work on a safari or someone with a big basket overflowing with fruit). My assumption when I did this work, one I think shared by most of the people who encountered it, was that the folklorist's use of the word *informant* was not at all like what villainous snitches were doing.

Many of these poems are dialogic: a lot of lines begin with “He said” or “Say.” For the eye, that can be confusing: which “he” is talking or saying? In performance, it was clear (for example, when the “he said” in 19 “Jody the Grinder” is G.I. Joe or Jody). In this edition, I’ve sometimes indicated with a bracketed name a speaker you would have known on your own from the performer’s intonation, body language, or stresses.

While working on this edition, I was more struck than the first time around by the unrhymed lines and the lines with broken meter. They almost always occur when something significant is happening. It’s as if to say, “I don’t *need* a rhyme here. I don’t *want* a rhyme here.”

Getting into Now

I thought I was done with toasts when when the first edition of this book went to press in 1974 (Harvard University Press), and then again when I prepared a sound disc insert for the first paperback edition in 2004 (Routledge). I was wrong. There were two more engagements, one lovely, the other more complex.

In 2017, New York’s Wooster Group, mounted a play based on an Elektra LP that had been released in 1965: *The B-Side: “Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons”—A Record Album Interpretation*. That LP was comprised of blues, work songs, spirituals, toasts, and a mock sermon I’d recorded in 1964. The Wooster Group play also incorporated some text from my book, *Wake Up Dead Man: Afro American Work Songs from Texas Prisons* (Harvard, 1972). The play was the idea of actor Eric Berryman; it was directed by Kate Valk. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* both cited it as one of the ten best theatrical productions of the year. It has since traveled to several American cities, and to Taiwan, Korea, the Netherlands, Germany, and most recently, in July 2022, to Barcelona. It’s still going.

One night in 2019, as Diane Christian and I were leaving the Performing Garage (the Wooster Group’s theater in lower Manhattan) and about to get into a car that would take us to JFK for a late flight back to Buffalo, Kate said, “We’re working on the other one now.”

“The other what?” I said.

“The other record and book: the toasts.”

I was delighted. But I had an immediate question: “Those are some pretty rough poems. How are you going to present it to a modern theater audience?”

“That’s what we’re working on,” Kate said.

Work on the play got held up by COVID. There was a single work-in-progress performance at Texas Performing Arts in Austin in January 2022, along with several performances of *The B-Side*. There were three work-in-progress performances at the Performing Garage in May 2022, then three weeks of “advanced showings” at the Performing Garage from August 22 to September 15, 2022.

*Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me*¹² is a two-person play, with actor and dramaturge Eric Berryman reciting toasts from the Rounder album and talking about his relationship to and with them. Sometimes he addresses the audience; sometimes he has exchanges with drummer Jharis Yokley. The play combines performances of the toasts as they might have been done back in the day, some as Eric would perform them now, some of the chatter of early hip-hop DJs, and reflections on identity in the toasts and in the world Berryman knows now.

The two years I spent working with the Wooster Group on *The B-Side* was a continual delight: ideas arose and were tried; some vaporized immediately, and others became part of the play. There was a core to it—the recording and text on which it was based—but the execution, the performance, was organic. That kind of working artistic community is hard to find. Because of COVID, I wasn’t as able to join them for similar meetings about and trial performances of *Ass*, or the discussions that followed. But thanks to Zoom, I’ve been able to take part in some discussions with Eric and Kate, and I’ve been able to see videos of most of the performances.

By the time of the for-real openings in New York in January 2024, the play very well may have morphed: Wooster is a performance company in a state of continual creation.

On July 18, 2022, I got a phone call from someone I didn’t know. He wanted to tell me about a recording recently issued by rock guitarist Jeff Beck and actor Johnny Depp, *18*, that contained eleven songs, all but two covers of other artists’ recordings.¹³ One of the two is “Sad Motherfuckin’ Parade,” credited in the original release to Depp and Beck. The lyrics of that song, my caller said, consisted entirely of words taken from the toast “Hobo

12. “Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me,” <https://thewoostergroup.org/untitled-toast>, accessed December 21, 2022.

13. “*18* (Jeff Beck and Johnny Depp album),” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/18_\(Jeff_Beck_and_Johnny_Depp_album\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/18_(Jeff_Beck_and_Johnny_Depp_album)), accessed December 21, 2022.

Ben,” which appears in this volume and in a Rounder recording with the same title released a year later. The version in the Rounder recording was the source for the text of it printed here; I’d made the recording on June 23, 1964, in Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City. My caller said the phrasings mimicked, perhaps even sampled, the lines on the Rounder recording.

The caller didn’t want to give me his name because, he said, “I work in the industry and they’d get me for this.” He also said he’d called *Rolling Stone* and had told someone there the same thing. A few days later, Jon Blistein, a *Rolling Stone* reporter, called to ask me about it. His article appeared on August 4: “Johnny Depp, Jeff Beck Accused of Stealing Lyrics from Incarcerated Man’s Poem: Depp and Beck’s ‘Sad Motherfuckin’ Parade’ appears to share numerous lines with ‘Hobo Ben,’ a toast performed by Slim Wilson and recorded by esteemed folklorist Bruce Jackson in the mid-sixties.”¹⁴

I thought it was a pretty good article. It ended with this: “‘I don’t know if this record is selling,’ Jackson says of Depp and Beck’s *18*. ‘I’ve seen some reviews that I’d be very embarrassed to have gotten had they been my album. But if it is selling, Johnny Depp is making a lot of money on it. Should it go to him, or should it go to some place that helps the people who produced this culture?’”

I’m happy to say that Johnny Depp and I, or rather our lawyers, worked this out, and we’ve come to a mutually satisfactory resolution. The credits on *18* now name Slim Wilson.

What’s in a Name?

My original title for this book was “Dance of the Freaks.” Harvard University Press was happy to do the book, but they balked at the title: someone on the staff, my editor told me, thought that potential readers might think the title referred not to a poem in the book (it’s #40), but rather to the people who created it, and would, therefore, be offended.

I responded, “If they’re worried about someone in a Brattle Street bookstore being offended by the title, what do they think will happen when that person picks it up and looks at the contents? A coronary?”

14. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/johnny-depp-jeff-beck-sue-folklorist-accused-stealing-poem-1234616347/>.

The editor said Harvard University Press wanted to publish the book, but just couldn't go with my title. I had to come up with another one. In case I couldn't, they had one that might suffice. It was something like "Heroes, Villains, and Other Characters from Black Folklore." I'd eat worms before I'd have my name on a book with a title like that.

I wrote back that if Harvard wasn't willing to do the book with my title, Yale University Press had already offered to do it. That was a total lie. I've never communicated with Yale University Press about anything other than some book manuscripts by other people that I evaluated for them.

I told my Harvard University Press editor that, as a compromise, I could go with the title "Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me." I thought they would find that so much more offensive than "Dance of the Freaks" that they'd give me "Dance of the Freaks."

What did I know? After those exchanges went back and forth, my family went on a four-day vacation, during which a Stanford White house in Buffalo we'd just put a deposit on was torched. We came back to news of the villainy at the Stanford White house and a flurry of messages from Harvard University Press saying something like, "'Dance of the Freaks' is fine with us. Whatever title you want is fine with us. We want to do this book."

By that time, I'd become comfortable with the book being titled *Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me*. I wrote Harvard University Press and said, "We're okay, let's go with this."

What really mattered to me was getting these poems in print, and getting them published by a press with an impeccable imprimatur, so readers had to take them seriously, whatever title was on the book's spine.

Words and Images

The poems in this book are, I think, as interesting as ever, but not in the same way as when the book was first published in 1974.

For starters, their power to shock has diminished significantly. Mass media is now chock-full of the nastiest part of this stuff. Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) uses the word *fuck* or one of its variants 513 times, which comes out to 3.16 times every minute. Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Big Lebowski* (1998), has 281 of them, averaging 2.40 per minute.¹⁵

15. "List of films that frequently use the word fuck," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_films_that_most_frequently_use_the_word_fuck.

The first *New York Times* use of the word *fuck* was in a 1984 book review; the second was 1997, thirteen years later—quoting Monica Lewinsky saying that Bill Clinton “helped fuck up my life.” Then it was off and on, depending on the editor. It became common after Trump was elected.¹⁶ *Shit* didn’t make it into the *New Yorker* until 1979. It’s common there now: how do you write about a rap performance without quoting a *fuck* now and then?¹⁷

That’s just words. Full-frontal nudity and gore are available on HBO, Showtime, and many other cable TV channels, often in the same movie. One of the lead characters in the first episode of HBO’s *The White Lotus* (aired July 11, 2021) held his testicles up for inspection; the fourth episode (aired August 1, 2021) showed a hotel manager performing anilingus on a waiter; the sixth episode (August 15, 2021) showed that same hotel manager defecating in a hotel guest’s suitcase, after which the guest stabs him in the heart and he bleeds out in a bathtub (there’s a close-up of the turd a few minutes later in case anyone missed it on its way out). I won’t even start on what’s available to anyone with an internet connection.

More important, attitudes about gender, ethnicity, and race have changed significantly: things that are talked and written about now were hardly noticed then (except by the victims). The first Black studies program

16. Kurt Andersen, “A Brief History of ‘Fuck’ in the New York Times. Also fucked, fucking, fuker, motherfucker, and Airbnfuckings,” *Medium*, July 13, 2021, <https://gen.medium.com/a-brief-history-of-fuck-in-the-new-york-times-993d08c31344>, accessed December 14, 2022: “First was the *Access Hollywood* tape, him saying of the show’s female co-anchor that ‘I did try and fuck her.’ Ten months later the *Times* reported that his communications director had called the White House chief of staff ‘a fucking paranoid,’ and later quoted Trump saying ‘I’m fucked’ because of Robert Mueller’s appointment as special prosecutor. Surely the gate is now permanently open. (Thanks, Trump!) Since the beginning of 2019, four dozen *Times* articles have contained *fuck*, an average of one every six weeks. Half were book excerpts, a quarter were about the president (calling John McCain ‘a fucking loser’) and his wife (saying ‘who gives a fuck about Christmas stuff’), and a quarter miscellaneous and elective—a piece by Errol Morris, a profile of a painter, a review of Amazon’s Alexa. Nor is it just *fuck*. This spring the *Times* published four *cunts* apart from book excerpts—three in an Ezra Klein interview of Rebecca Traister quoting Harvey Weinstein, the other (along with a *fuck* and a *shit*) in an essay about language. Up until 2017, according to a *Times* story, the paper had published *bullshit* only 14 times—but in the four years since then it has appeared in 69 articles.”

17. Mary Norris, “Dropping the F-Bomb,” *New Yorker*, June 20, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/dropping-the-f-bomb>, accessed December 19, 2022.

in the US was at San Francisco State University in 1968,¹⁸ long after all the toasts in *Deep Down in the Jungle*, *The Life*, and most of the toasts in this book had been collected. The first PhD program in gender studies was established in 2005.¹⁹

This would be a different book if I were doing it now. I wouldn't be able to gather the primary data the same way (if at all). I wouldn't approach it same way. It—and I—are nearly a half-century older than when this book first appeared.

The way we read, respond to, and write about texts changes over time. How could it be otherwise? The value of primary texts is that they are there, waiting for what questions we've realized in the interim they pose for us.

Questions that Remain

I'm not going to engage the questions these texts bring up now. That's for other people to do. My task with these performances that took place a half-century ago was to preserve and document them as well as I could. *Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me* is a group of texts I recorded and had some notions about back in the day. This edition is for you to make of it what you will, with what you know now that neither I nor anyone I encountered back then did, and things some people back then knew full well but couldn't say.

—March 2023/B.J.

18. "Black Studies," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_studies, accessed December 21, 2022.

19. "Gender Studies," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_studies, accessed December 20, 2022.