Lorien R. Hunter

Talking Across the Tables: A Conversation with Dr. Mark V. Campbell

On Friday, April 12, 2013, Dr. Mark V. Campbell, a.k.a. DJ Grumps, gave a multimedia performance lecture titled "Turning the Tables 2.0" in the sunny outdoor courtyard of the Institute for Multimedia Literacy at the University of Southern California. Held on the eve of the 7th Annual ZdC Graduate Student Conference, this lecture was an Afrosonic exploration of the theories of Sylvia Wynter, Rinaldo Walcott, and the late Edouard Glissant, through which Campbell sought to both articulate and demonstrate an "other/ed" kind of human being. The performance featured two turntables, a mixer and Serato software, and encouraged audience members to reimagine human life as a series of interconnections whose relationality serves as a basis of ethical and moral behavior towards one another in a mutually interdependent existence. The following is an edited conversation between Dr. Campbell and conference co-chair Lorien R. Hunter, in which both reflect on the performance lecture itself and discuss how Campbell's work merges popular culture and the academy.

Hunter: Can you briefly explain the main goals of your lecture "Turning the Tables 2.0"?

Campbell: Turning the Tables 2.0 was an attempt to bring remixology and Sylvia Wynter's ideas around the new human together in a way that made the new humanist theory accessible. My goal was to force people to think seriously about Afrosonic culture and the tools and techniques that it has given birth to, such as remixing, controllerism and turntablism. I combined these techniques into a performance lecture that repositioned the turntable as not just an instrument, but as *instrumental* to rethinking through the sonic how we might arrive at a different notion of the human.

Hunter: Which specific ideas surrounding the new human did you focus on in this project? Can you explain Wynter's theories for those readers who are less familiar with her work?

Campbell: My performance lecture was focused on exploring notions of relationality the sonic amplifies in our everyday lives.[1] Specifically, I moved through several songs and interview snippets that attempted to show how the subversive creativity of DJ culture might be useful to exploring a mode of human relations

Dr. Mark Campbell, a.k.a. DJ Grumps, in performance at the "Turning the Tables 2.0" event

that moves past contemporary Western human fetishes of overconsumption and capital accumulation. I chose very specific songs from artists such as Mos Def, Shabba Ranks, K'naan, M.I.A. and others that can be read and played in an intertextual fashion. For example, I used a dub remix of Mos Def's "Beef" and employed my sampler and cue points to stress one line of the track that destabilizes the ways "beef" is imagined in hip-hop cultures. The Max Tannone remix album of Mos Def a capellas over dub instrumentals speaks volumes of the imaginative interculture, DIY possibilities of a relational mode of being. I extended Max Tannone's relational intervention to then bring controllerist notions in conversation with the *Mos Dub* album by utilizing my sampler and cuepoints to amplify the moments of the track that intervene on the normalized discourses of North American hip-hop.

Hunter: Would you also talk a little bit about the format of your lecture? Why did you choose to present your argument through a multimedia performance instead of what many might consider a more "standard" or "traditional" academic presentation?

Campbell: First, to describe the general format of the lecture to the reader, it was a mixture of written words and pre-recorded clips from interviews that were uploaded onto my laptop and then controlled by the turntables using a serato. I moved between written words, and a performance of songs, layered with quotes from some of my theoretical underpinnings including Sylvia Wynter, Rinaldo Walcott and Edouard Glissant. My performance of the sonic piece was used to demonstrate what I said in the written portion, and then I would continue to move back and forth between the two, interrupting the academic performance with a performance of sonic innovation.

As far as the structure, the lecture was divided into three sections. In section one I began with Kanye West's "Good Morning," and then I had these

vignettes where I spoke about Afrosonic innovation across five different locations including Peru, Columbia, New York, Trinidad and St. Croix. The idea was to highlight the ways in which Afrodiasporic bodies innovatively take up music making or sound using non-traditional elements, meaning objects not recognized in the West as musical instruments before these bodies engaged them as instruments. So in Trinidad they are using the steel pan, in St. Croix they are using spoons and discarded mufflers, in New York they are using turntables, and in Peru they are using animal bones. The idea was to demonstrate how different Afrodiasporic bodies innovatively position themselves to create sonic subjectivities using these non-traditional things.

My point in using the Kanye sample, which said "I guess this is my dissertation homie/this shit is basic," was to jolt the normalcy of scholarship in academia through what is supposed to be pop culture/entertainment. So by using that sample I open that up and say that this performance really is my dissertation. I had to write something else, but I am performing this because it is actually my relationship to the ideas in my dissertation that come through sound. These are the ideas that I have experienced through sonic subjectivities, through being on the turntables and thinking about what happens if I do this or that? If I scratch this, or beat juggle that? So it was my own non-traditional relationship with the turntables and scholarship that made me think about all of these ideas around Afrosonic subjectivity, innovation and black bodies.

In section two I then went on to perform a selection of songs dealing with remix culture and mash-ups, and I dropped Rinaldo Walcott's quote on the postmodern, which I'm paraphrasing here as "if you are looking for the postmodern you'll find it in black musics everywhere,"[2] and which was meant to get people to think more critically about the innovations that these sounds were making. All of the songs I chose were deliberate because they were either really big songs occurring within specific sonic moments where there was a great deal of innovation, or they were part of pop culture but were also embedded with significant examples of sonic innovation. For example, I opened the section with "The Israelites" by Desmond Dekker, which was a huge song in Jamaica in 1969 when remixing and mash-ups were one of the primary innovations occurring within Jamaican sound system culture. Then I went on to a remix of Mos Def's song "Beef" from this album called *Mos Dub*, which is a whole bunch of Mos Def songs remixed with reggae and dub beats. There the idea was to look at American hip-hop through that remix lens of dub and think about how some of the hip-hop motifs are altered in that remixable moment. So when African American hip-hop is mashed up with Jamaican reggae music, what comes out of it?

In the third section of the performance, which I never fully completed, the idea there was to highlight tracks that were soca/reggae mash-ups or hip-hop/soca mash-ups. The goal was to move through some of soca's earlier remix moments with hip-hop and reggae and then dip into some of the contemporary ragga soca and electro-soca from 2013. I found myself in awe at the Trinidad Carnival this year as I could hear very pervasive electric dance

music influences such as high synthes and dynamic beat drops in the midst of Bunji Garlin's biggest road marches of 2013. Section three is definitely going to be a part of 3.0 in early 2014.

Hunter: What were some of the challenges and/or benefits you encountered with this non-traditional format?

Campbell: The primary challenge was that I was working in two different modalities. When I was on the turntables I was always thinking in relation—to the song that was playing, to the song I wanted to play next, and to how people in the audience were reacting to the song being played. I was also trying to remember what the reaction was to that song the last time I played it in that kind of mix. At that same time, I was also thinking through a number of discourses and tropes because I was forcing myself to give an academic paper. I deliberately say academic paper here because I am thinking of the ways in which there are some foundational pieces to an academic performance that I had to ensure I enacted. I had to ensure my theoretical frame and the scholars I am indebted to were clear and upfront, etc. As a result, it was really challenging to come out of the mix and go read something and then go back into the mix because the rhythm was off, the flow was off, in terms of how I was moving through texts, mediums and ideas.

The benefit of this format—and this speaks to your question about why I chose to present my ideas in this way—was that I was able to mash-up two different spheres of thought, combining remixing, which many people think of as solely a form of entertainment or an artistic form, with some deeply theoretical, highly abstract theories of humanism. As a result, this forced people to look at their everyday interactions with Afrosonic culture in a more critical way, and also hopefully encouraged people to not be timid in their attempts to dig into that really difficult theory through non-traditional means via some of the things that they do every day.

Hunter: How did these challenges and benefits help shape the style and content of your lecture?

Campbell: With regards to style, I think it depends on how the style was perceived. To me, the style felt innovative, and not entirely comfortable. But if it had felt comfortable then it probably wouldn't have been an intervention in any kind of meaningful way. As for the content, I can tell you that there is probably a good 25 minutes of stuff I didn't play because I was waiting on a couple cues from the audience to see if my argument was sinking in. I didn't want to move super quickly through a bunch of things, so I actually extended some loops and kept playing certain quotes and phrases.

Hunter: Why do you think that a certain level of discomfort was important to your lecture?

Campbell: I come from a school of thought that values difficult knowledge. I am certified as a high school teacher and the greatest thing I took away from my teaching

experiences is that if it was easy, more likely than not there was very little learning taking place. In our uber-automated and comfortable world, I enjoy pushing myself into *un*comfortable—in manageable ways, of course!

Hunter: Do you bring this attempt to disrupt the norm into other aspects of your work? We haven't really discussed any of your other projects yet, so perhaps maybe you could start by speaking a little about your website, Nortsidehiphop. ca, and how it connects academia with popular culture.

Campbell: Sure. Northsidehiphop.ca is an online archive that attempts to catalog Canadian hip-hop culture and history. And because it is completely digital, it is meant to be disruptive on two fronts. First, it challenges the colonial archive, which used problematic methods of data collection to document and unfortunately oppress colonized populations. In contrast, the content on Northsidehiphop.ca is completely digital, and doesn't have any stolen items that are misnamed or archived out of context. Second, the fact that it is digital also means that it is free and accessible to everyone. And it also means that items can be easily updated, eliminated, or created quite quickly. Plus it is participatory. So other individuals can also create content, or freely give or scan things to put up on the website. As a result, it is not a singular historian that is omnipotent and knows all. Northsidehiphop.ca has a different trajectory—one that is really not coming out of Western Enlightenment at all. It has more of a ground-up community sensibility that says, "Let's all do this together." I can't know and I do not wish to know all or dominate all knowledge in this field. Instead, I think it is important to document Canadian hip-hop cultures for our kids in ways that are accessible to them, so that they are not sitting in a library somewhere or in my basement or whatever.

Hunter: I noticed that the archive is also foregrounded in one of your other projects

Dr. Mark Campbell in conversation with Dr. Shana Redmond

– the T-Dot Pioneers exhibit series.[3] One of the arguments you make in this exhibit is that hip-hop *is* an archival practice.[4] First, would you please describe this exhibition for the reader, and then, would you also once again explain how it merges the academic (archives) and the popular (hip-hop)?

Campbell: T-Dot Pioneers was a trilogy of exhibitions that explored the history and culture of Toronto's hip-hop community, while also gesturing to the institutional and artistic elements of the culture. The exhibits primarily collected and displayed materials that many of us took for granted during the 1980s and 1990s, such as street zines, mixtapes and cassettes of radio shows. So from 2010-2013 the exhibitions basically created a series of conversations about how we think about the pioneers of Toronto's hip-hop scene, how we understand legacy and how we negotiate (or not) with social institutions.

The final exhibition held this year, *T-Dot Pioneers 3.0: The Future Must Be Replenished*, was really examining the aesthetic legacy of hip-hop and exploring how we might understand the impact of the culture beyond sales figures and news stories. So for example, dudes are rocking cameos again, and the tight pants or the tapered pants have also come back in. It's like 1988 all over again, but only the freshest elements of hip-hop culture survive. Emcees will quote great emcees, turntablists will perform routines of great performances, and they will respect the ancestors/architects in those ways. The reason why I think hip-hop is an archive is because, like any popular music—but more so in hip-hop, every generation of hip-hop embodies all of the social elements and social contexts that made that music possible within the lyrics, within the styling.

Hunter: I think this is a really important point you are making, because often times the academic will engage an aspect of popular culture to theorize it and in doing so "make it" scholarly or academic. They are seen as bringing it into the academy and finding meaning or creating value out of it. But what you are saying is that there is already academic work—in this case the practice of archiving cultural history—being done by or within popular culture and completely outside of the academy. And I guess maybe that is just an observation, but I think it is really important because you are openly acknowledging that it is not you the scholar that is making popular culture academic, but that it already *is* academic – that this relationship already exists free from what we do in the Ivory Tower.

Campbell: Yes, I think sometimes academia just lends the right language, so that people can better see or understand what already is. While I wouldn't say hip-hop is already "academic," I would say there are ways in which it can be understood from a scholarly perspective that do not necessarily involve theoretical frameworks, literature reviews or specific "citational practices."

Hunter: On that note, is there anything that you think popular culture in general or hip-hop in particular could bring to the academy?

Campbell: I would love to see analyses of hip-hop culture (not just rap) really disrupt the

academy and help it become more interdisciplinary, because I think some of the rigidity around the disciplines is really making scholarship worse. I try to think more holistically. I just think that far too often scholars are able to tell us all about this one thing but at the same time they have missed an entire sphere of that topic because they thought that reading novels was not part of what sociologists do or what historians do – I am exaggerating the point here, of course. And I think that people need to just let go a little bit and look at it all the way around. So if you are studying hip-hop, then include the visual artists, the DJs, and the b-boys and b-girls. They are all part of these things. Where you speak across these boundaries it might help you arrive at a new place. And it is really why I did the performance lecture in the way I did. I wanted to challenge myself to get to a new space, where we could think about the relationship between not just humans and their sonic innovations but even my relationship between academia and hip-hop and trying to find a certain sense of illumination.

Hunter: Absolutely! I think that sums up the connection between your lecture and the larger theme of the conference perfectly. Thank you so much.

Lorien R. Hunter is an Annenberg Fellow, a 2013-2014 Research Enhancement Fellow and a Ph.D. Candidate in the School of Cinematic Arts' Critical Studies program at the University of Southern California. Her research interests center on issues of race, identity, popular culture, new media, Africa and diaspora. Her dissertation is a comparative study of the African Diaspora as it is practiced and conceptualized through African hip hop websites. Her most recent projects include an investigation of the structural qualities of hip hop to diasporic group identity formation, and a book chapter titled "'Brining Ghana to the World': Remixing Popular Culture on OMG! Ghana," which argues that the production of the popular news and entertainment website OMG! Ghana offers an important alternative to Western constructions of Africa.

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Notes

1 For example, please see Clyde Woods, "'Sittin' on Top of the World': The Challenges of Blues and Hip-hop Geography," *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, edited by Katherine McKittrick & Clyde Woods (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007); or also see Louis Chude-Sokei, "Post-Nationalist Geographies: Rasta, Ragga, and Reinventing Africa," *African Arts* 27 (1994): 80-96.

2 The exact quote was from an interview Campbell conducted with Walcott in early 2013, in which Walcott said, "If there is something to postmodernity, what are the places that we might find it in black cultures? Rap music becomes one of those places." Rinaldo Walcott, interviewed by Mark V. Campbell, Toronto, Canada, 2013.

3 For more detailed information on the 2010 and 2011 T-Dot Pioneers exhibits, please visit www.northsidehiphop.ca.

4 As the opening sentence on the T-Dot Pioneers 3.0: *The Future Must Be Replenished* website reads, "Completing the trilogy, T-Dot Pioneers 3.0: T*he Future Must be Replenished*, radically envisions how the historical archive might reside within the very aesthetic innovations that make hip-hop culture always fresh." "T-Dot Pioneers 3.0: the future must be replenished | SOHO LOBBY GALLERY," http://soholobbygallery.com/about/t-dot-pioneer