The making of ka-knowledge: Digital aurality

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Abstract

This article asks that rhetoric and composition add to its concerns with visuality an interest in the role aurality plays in digital composing. Working initially with observations Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan made in the early 1960s regarding a new physics of sounding out, this article explores how hip-hop updates both theorists’ concerns with the contemporary notion of droppin’ science. Because droppin’ science suggests the displacement of knowledge production with ka-knowledge, new understandings of sounding out are needed in order to understand how ka-knowledge functions. The article works to map out and develop a theory of digital-based aurality called ka-knowledge.

Keywords: Aurality; Digital; Knowledge; Pedagogy; Sounding out; Voice

1. Introduction

In his 1962 collection of essays The Barbarian Within, Walter Ong (1962) highlighted the role sound plays in an emerging technological apparatus of the mid-20th century: “[A] new age is upon us, and its shift from sight-emphasis to increased sound-exploration spans this entire area from the diffusion of the word to the exploration of one’s surroundings” (p. 225). The 20th century witnessed the invention of electronic musical instruments, the development of the phonograph, the rapid growth of radio, the invention of television, and the rise of the transistor, all components of an electronic-based aural culture that puts information in front of us in rapid and profound ways. This accelerated pace of information distribution, Ong claimed, leads to a heightened need and sense of exploration, whether or not that exploration be in terms of inquisitiveness, details, or sudden exposure to the novel and unique. Yet, in an age typically marked more by its attention to the visual (television, film, computing) than the aural, the importance Ong attributed to sound might surprise. Why the aural and not, as many contemporary rhetoric and composition teachers have noticed, visual rhetoric?

help students better understand how images persuade on their own terms and in the context of multimodal texts, and to help students make more rhetorically informed decisions as they compose visual genres” (p. 3). Mary E. Hocks and Michelle R. Kendrick (2003) wrote in the introduction to their collection on visual culture, *Eloquent Images*, “The relationships among word and image, verbal texts and visual texts, ‘visual culture’ and ‘print culture’ are interpenetrating, dialogic relationships” (p. 1). For the last few years in rhetoric and composition, our technological concerns have, as these writers noted, been mostly with visual-based composing practices; therefore, one would expect visuality to be a dominant issue in digital writing. Yet even with that point understood, I still find Ong’s position regarding aurality alluring. Why sound in place of the more dominant, and prominent, image? What is the benefit in focusing on sound?

It was Ong’s teacher, Marshall McLuhan, who also stressed the role aurality plays in the age of new media. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, *McLuhan* (1962) described the “new physics” shaping contemporary rhetoric:

> It is our enormous backlog of literate and mechanistic technology that renders us so helpless and inept in handling the new electric technology. The new physics is an auditory domain and long-literate society is not at home in the new physics, nor will it ever be. (p. 37)

The increased proliferation of sound, McLuhan contended, is overwhelming in ways print isn’t: “Today, as electricity creates conditions of extreme interdependence on a global scale, we move swiftly again into an auditory world of simultaneous events and overall awareness” (*McLuhan*, 1962, p. 40). Even though print brought the event to the reader in ways oral communication could not accomplish, sound as affected by electronic culture, McLuhan noted, expands this transferal even more. Sound intensifies awareness. Technology, as Ong also stated, accelerates that intensification, forcing us to hear more than one event at once. These overlaps of events become understood as new relationships and, thus, new forms of knowing.

McLuhan and Ong link knowledge acquisition to the question of sound. To know or to learn involves how one positions ideas through the “nonliterate” approach of sound, not how one generates ideas through literate (and sight directed) methods such as testing, observation, or control of variables. In this sense, McLuhan’s “new physics” is not a literate practice (i.e., it is not empirical science or proof of learning) but rather something outside of how literacy, or even knowledge, has been traditionally familiarized. “Knowledge,” Jean François Lyotard (1979) wrote, “in general cannot be reduced to science or even to learning.” In the technological age, Lyotard explained, the nature of knowledge shifts away from those terms associated with empirical learning, those areas of knowledge production that can be purely studied, tested, and evaluated for the purpose of determining a truth.

> But what is meant by the term knowledge is not only a set of denotative statements, far from it. It also includes notions of “know how,” “knowing how to live,” “how to listen”, etc. Knowledge, then, is a question of competence that goes beyond the simple determination and application of the criterion of truth. (p. 18; second emphasis added)

Lyotard’s contention that knowing involves “listening” echoes the aurality of McLuhan’s “new physics.” To listen is not to seek out a truth; it is to engage with the process of knowing as opposed to just the known; however, that process is redefined through technological innovation.
New physics suggests a new media approach to knowledge acquisition distinct from what literate science offers. What McLuhan named new physics, hip-hop has since dubbed droppin’ science. Droppin’ science means to rhyme (usually in a unique way) in order to rhetorically engage with the aural dimensions of discourse. Rhyming, like McLuhan’s new physics, is meant to evoke new types of discursive relationships, to generate new kinds of knowing processes. Droppin’ science’s nonliterate status (as McLuhan might say) might be attributed to the ways it disrupts the conventions of print culture (linearity, syllogistic reasoning) in favor of rhyming. Droppin’ science is meant to lead to a new “wisdom” often rhetorically shaped as a physics or general science practice. In “My Melody,” Rakim (1987) rapped:

That’s what I’m saying, I drop science like a scientist
My melody’s in a code, the very next episode
Has the mic often distortin’, ready to explode

And The Beastie Boys (1989) highlighted droppin’ science in the song “The Sounds of Science.”

Well I be dropping the new science
And kicking the new ka-knowledge
MC to a degree that you can’t get in College!

That The Beasties tie droppin’ science to higher education intrigues me. In particular, I am interested because the Ong essay I began with is subtitled: “Teaching, Communications and Technological Culture.” Ong’s quest was to understand why teachers feel “a great deal of restlessness” in light of the new demands technology acquisition poses for education, notably the role aurality plays in pedagogy (1962, p. 221). How is droppin’ science indicative of the need for a new pedagogical apparatus, a new method of knowledge acquisition and production? How is it indicative of the need for the invention of a pedagogy that promotes the new “ka-knowledge” as opposed to the so-called old methods of knowledge acquisition and production inherited from a print-oriented tradition Ong called the “Renaissance public” (1962, p. 224)?

My interest is in mapping out the “ka-knowledge” necessary for a digital writing whose logic stems from aurality. Thus, my move is both theoretical and pedagogical: How to imagine the pedagogical possibility of an aurally motivated writing? How to work within the framework of “ka-knowledge” as opposed to traditional literacy conventions? By that, I don’t mean asking students to sing or to write about songs. Instead, I want to examine the logic of aurality, how its features contribute to a type of digital writing essential to new media work. I begin, however, without a clear answer as to what that contribution might entail. In that sense, I am working from Ong and McLuhan’s understandings of aurality as “the sounding out” principle of digital writing. McLuhan wrote, “Where a visual space is an organized continuum of a uniformed connected kind, the ear world is a world of simultaneous relationships” (1967, p. 111). My ear world is listening for the relationships among texts and ideas that will show me a response to my question. How can I sound out a theory of sound? What better place to listen than hip-hop? Hip-hop’s rhetorical structuring via sampling, mixing, and remixing constructs complex
aural-based relationships among disparate texts. And because hip-hop functions as a digital method of composing (via sampler and computer) it can serve as a place to invent a digital writing practice based on aurality. Accordingly, to listen is to begin the process of invention. I’m listening for a method. That listening begins with Ong’s attention to voice.

2. Voice

The rhetorical feature of aurality, Ong (1962) wrote, stems from the importance of voice:

It is through awareness of the paramount role of voice in human activity that students of English or of any other language today must seek to understand the reactivation of the oral-aural element in human culture. Voice is coming into its own as never before. But the ways it is doing so, and the elements in our culture which favor voice as well as those which militate against it, are complex in the extreme. (p. 229)

In DJ culture, voice plays a dominant role. The MC serves as the leading voice who calls out to both the audience as well as to any other member of his crew. Often these call outs are to state one’s status, to make known one’s name, to explicate one’s proficiency, or to demonstrate some degree of legitimacy. The Wu-Tang Clan’s (1993) “Method Man,” for instance, includes a lengthy role call of each member’s name, foregrounding the role each voice plays in the group as well as the role each voice will play within Method Man’s composition.

From the slums of Shaolin, Wu-Tang Clan strikes again
The RZA, the GZA, Ol Dirty Bastard, Inspectah Deck, Raekwon the Chef
U-God, Ghost Face Killer and the Method Man
M-E-T, H-O-D, MAN
M-E-T, H-O-D, MAN
M-E-T, H-O-D, MAN
M-E-T, H-O-D, MAN

Hey, you, get off my cloud
You don’t know me and you don’t know my style
Who be getting’ flam when they come to a jam?
Here I am, here I am, the Method Man.

In writing studies, voice, too, holds a traditional role as that undefined sound one searches for in order to be authentic. “Find your true voice,” the generic instruction goes. “Voice,” Andrea Lunsford (2002) wrote in her textbook, The St. Martin’s Handbook, “tells whether the subject is acting (he questions us) or being acted upon (he is questioned)” (p. 631). Lunsford distinguishes for young writers the discrepancies between active and passive voice. But such definitions of voice can also be conflated with mood, feeling, or attitude; being active or passive can equate the kinds of moods and attitudes one’s voice generates. “Different moods,” Lunsford wrote, “are used to express a fact, opinion, or inquiry (indicative mood); a command or request (imperative mood); or a wish, suggestion, requirement, or condition contrary to fact (subjunctive mood)” (p. 633). To enact any of these situations, one must have voice. It’s a claim popularized by Peter Elbow (1981). In Writing with Power, Elbow defined voice via a metaphor:
For the power I am seeking, some people use words like *authenticity* or *authority*. Many people call it sincerity, but I think that’s misleading because this power can be present when the writing is not really sincere and absent when the writing is sincere. I like to call this power *juice*. I’m trying to get at something mysterious and hard to define. “Juice” combines the qualities of *magic potion*, *mother’s milk*, and *electricity*. (p. 286)

In hip-hop (an electric form of writing), “Juicy” is a song by the late Notorious B.I.G. (1994) whose introductory monologue begins with a nod to education: “Yeah, this album is dedicated to all the teachers that told me I’d never amount to nothing.” With that (active) dismissal of the public educational system, B.I.G. drops his own vision (i.e., voice or mood) of what it means to succeed.

> I made the change from a common thief  
> To up close and personal with Robin Leach  
> And I’m far from cheap, I smoke skunk with my peeps all day  
> Spread love, it’s the Brooklyn way  
> The Moet and Alize keep me pissy  
> Girls used to diss me  
> Now they write letters ’cause they miss me  
> I never thought it could happen, this rappin’ stuff  
> I was too used to packin’ gats and stuff  
> Now homies play me close like butter played toast  
> From the Mississippi down to the East Coast.

While Elbow’s sense of juice conforms to traditional literacy notions of power and enablement, B.I.G.’s “Juicy” appears as the voicing of something else—the voice that rejects a pedagogical structure whose context for literacy depends, more or less, on what Harvey Graff (1979) named the literacy myth: the idea that literate knowledge (Lunsford’s “indicative mood” or Elbow’s “power of voice”) is necessary for financial or any kind of life success. B.I.G., who “smoke[s] skunk with [his] peeps all day,” is boastfully making another kind of point.

The boastful voice B.I.G. “finds” is that of rejection: rejection of the values placed upon literacy acquisition, rejection of what Deborah Brandt (2001) called a resource. She said, “To treat literacy as a resource is to appreciate the lengths that families and individuals will go to secure (or resecure) literacy for themselves or their children” (p. 5). Literacy as a resource demands mastery of skills and language. It demands knowledge and usage of print-based conventions related to writing and interpretation. But B.I.G.’s understanding of literacy is quite different; its technological motivation (via the mixing board and sampler) is opposed to the notion of a resource or even a mastery of a resource. “Now homies play me close like butter played toast” is the voice of someone who has found this commonplace of the resource inadequate. Graff’s “literacy myth” might be understood, in this context, as the myth of knowledge mastery. “My success,” B.I.G. seems to say, “came from somewhere else than educational mastery.” There is an additional dimension to B.I.G.’s rejection, however. Within this rejection of conventional literacy (i.e., literacy found in the school structure) and its “in your face” style is the simultaneous preference for another kind of literacy, an aural literacy of sounding out. Rather than master the conventions of literacy (to know a subject’s rules or body of content), B.I.G. sounds out names and ideas he has accumulated over the years (gats,
East Coast, Robin Leach). This gesture of sounding out helps me begin to figure out what ka-knowledge entails.

B.I.G. rejects the typographic culture instituted in the public school system (e.g., areas of study as separate, print assessment, hierarchies of achievement) in favor of a literacy of sounding out based on rhyming and referencing. These sounding outs are associations—“Robin Leach,” “The Brooklyn Way,” “Moet and Alize”—that function as cultural markers B.I.G. draws upon to form a statement. They generate his voice. But as literacy, they do not completely reflect the tradition of print culture or the expertise model that print-based instruction typically demands: grasp of topic sentences, command of punctuation, ability to work within paragraph structures, ability to construct a linear argument. These “principles of continuity, uniformity, and repeatability derived from print technology,” McLuhan (1964) said, “have, in England and America, permeated every phase of communal life” (p. 262). He continued:

Stress on literacy is a distinguishing mark of areas that are striving to initiate that process of standardization that leads to the visual organization of work and space. Without psychic transformation of the inner life into segmented visual terms by literacy, there cannot be the economic “take-off” that insures a continual movement of augmented change of goods and services. (p. 262)

McLuhan’s statement, in essence, embodies much of Deborah Brandt’s argument regarding perceived economic success and literacy acquisition. Expertise in literate skills equates ability in the economic sphere. But those writers, like B.I.G., who aren’t striving for the visual, but rather the aural, seem to work around the economic issues in favor of purely rhetorical ones. Economics may eventually be a pay off (like becoming a successful rapper), but it does not motivate or culminate the ability to engage in sounding out. “Saying that people are literate,” DJ Spooky (Paul Miller) wrote,

means that they have read widely enough to reference texts, to put them in a conceptual framework. They are capable of creating an overview. This kind of literacy exists in the musical arena, too. The more you have heard, the easier it is to find links and to recognize quotations. To specialize in either music or literature you need months, years of reading or listening to music. (2004b, p. 57)

I want to expand Spooky’s comments to include the rhetorical moves B.I.G. fashions, for in his own vision of literacy we hear the specialization Spooky described. This specialization is not just within a specific category (“music” or “literature”), nor a visual category (“here is how I see myself now that I am literate; here is how I visualize my literacy position”), but instead it is in the ability to weave together a variety of markers, experiences, texts, sounds, ideas, and so on, in complex ways as an alternative to print literacy. This specialization is not necessarily linear or syllogistic; it does not necessarily lead to a complete knowledge of a given subject; it may or may not prove anything. Instead, it is the ability to sound out. That sounding out is the announcement of one’s self (the projection of voice as in the Wu-Tang intros and the attitude of B.I.G.’s rhymes) and in the weaving that B.I.G. initially teaches. That sounding out, I note, indicates a different kind of voice for digital writing. Before I can identify that voice, I first have to figure out, and describe in more detail, the practice of sounding out.
3. Rhapsody

Ong (1982) called sounding out the rhetorical practice of rhapsodizing. Notably, he places it at the center of Homeric poetry and the Greek rhetorical tradition: “The meaning of the Greek term ‘rhapsodize,’ rapsoidien, ‘to stitch song together’ (rhaptein, to stitch, oide, song) became ominous: Homer stitched together prefabricated parts. Instead of a creator, you had an assembly line worker” (p. 22). While I am interested in the rhapsody as digital writing, I imagine this practice not as assembly line thinking (equal parts in the system, unified final product) but as assemblage (like B.I.G.’s associations). The Homeric poet was not a writer who strived for the same product each time the performance occurred. Variations in the stitching led to variations in rhetorical output. Thematically, there may have been clichés or common threads of discussion (law, the people) that narratives were organized around, but the choice of what to include often differed. The voice of the Homeric poet is that of assemblage; what to fill into the narrative depended on what was available for inclusion (latest events, local culture, known personalities, etc.). Knowledge, delivered via oral means, is the result of assemblage. This aural/oral writer, Eric Havelock (1986) noted, “must build his own semi-connected discourse out of disconnected bits and pieces contained in oral discourse” (p. 102). These bits and pieces might include whatever the topic at hand is, or they might not. The rhapsodizer’s “decision is compositional (rather than ideological), or perhaps we should say recompositional” (Havelock, 1986, p. 102).

When DJ Spooky (2004b) wrote “DJ-ing is writing, writing is DJ-ing” (p. 57), I imagine the DJ writer engaging in this kind of assemblage, of rhapsodizing her work out of a variety of texts. But since voice is connected to the aural/oral sense of composing, we might begin to ask, then, what happens to the personal (or personal voice) in this process? Ong, in particular, demythologized the idealized, brilliant poet of Greek tradition by noting how rhapsodizing emerged out of a process of appropriation and not authorial presence (1982, p. 21). Does the DJ as digital writer eliminate the voice treasured in so much of our pedagogical literature? Doesn’t all this stitching de-personalize writing, making it nothing more than a collection of snippets and fragments put together any which way? Ong noted that in the aural culture of technological emergence, the personal is made all that much more relevant to expression.

Heightening the oral-aural element in a culture does much more than merely de-emphasize vision. It subtly heightens the personalist element in a culture. For the plenary development of sound, the human voice, is a manifestation of the person. Even more than it is a manifestation of an understanding of objects, speech is a calling of one person to another, of an interior to an interior. (1962, pp. 225–226)

What I notice, however, is that this emphasis on personal voice does not resemble the trope of the personal circulated in expressivist pedagogy or often attributed to such web platforms as weblogs or live journal entries, which are often viewed as mere diaries or places of personal revelation. Instead, this emphasis more closely resembles the rhapsodic mentality of stitching, stitching together texts by oneself. Both in the process of assemblage and in the relationship between the writer and the chosen texts to assemble, the personal element of rhetoric materializes.
In *Rhythm Science*, DJ Spooky enacted this assemblage by bringing together personal stories, theory, musical taste, literary review, technology interests, and other items as an exploration of digital culture. But Spooky did so not to limit DJing to musical production or discussion of musical production; instead he attributed this kind of writing as generalizable for digital writing because of how it fashions a text rhetorically linked to the writer. He described this process as something that sounds very much like Ong’s rhapsodizing, only it pushes rhapsodizing further by making it an issue of identity as much as about composition.

A deep sense of fragmentation occurs in the mind of a DJ. When I came to DJ-ing, my surroundings—the dense spectrum of media grounded in advanced capitalism—seemed to have already constructed so many of my aspirations and desires for me; I felt like my nerves extended to all of these images, sounds and other people—that all of them were extensions of myself, just as I was an extension of them. (Miller, 2004b, p. 21)

The result of this stitching (described aptly in McLuhanist terms of bodily extension) is a new type of knowledge where the personal and the multiple events/ideas/moments engaged by the personal (i.e., voice) come together. Not quite autobiography, not quite technological reflection, not quite cultural critique, not quite argument, it is somehow a bit of all the above and something else. This combination of actions foregrounds the personal in dramatic fashion, positioning the act of sounding out as something more pronounced than just having voice. This combination of actions through rhapsodizing is indicative of the ka-knowledge of digital writing I am uncovering. In digital culture, the process of interweaving composition and identity, of becoming an extension of one’s own writing, of assembling various genres of discourse, has come to be known not as the stitch, but the mix. “In the mix,” DJ Spooky (2004a) wrote, “creator and remixer are woven together in the syncretic space of the text of samples and other sonic material” (p. 351). In the mix, we generate ka-knowledge.

4. The mix

The power of digital writing can be located in the logic of the mix. Although the mix is not limited to music, it is easily identified in much of hip-hop and DJ compilations, which, in turn, serve as models for digital writing overall. On the albums *Carpal Tunnel Syndrome* (2000) and *Some of My Best Friends are DJs* (2003), Kid Koala (Eric San) demonstrated that logic is a stringing together of spoken voice recordings, found sounds, traffic horns, sampled big band and jazz, skratching, and other sounds. Koala’s CDs echo Spooky’s (2004b) remark that in the mix “the selection of sound becomes narrative” (p. 85). The linear narrative we have grown accustomed to as writers and readers, and which has never fully been deconstructed through traditional hypertext scholarship’s dependence on “paths,”¹ is transformed into the mix as a series of assembled moments or events (a reminder of McLuhan and Ong’s interests in aurality). In place of “which path to follow”—as hypertext fiction (and some hypertext

¹ For more on the notion of the narrative-based “path” in hypertext scholarship, see Jay David Bolter’s (1991) *Writing Space*.
criticism) asks readers and writers to consider—in the mix we have simultaneous sounding outs of places. In place of paths, there is sound. In place of the grand narrative gesture of “this is what happened” or “this is what X means,” which critical analysis of new media often requires, in the mix we get patches and samples of associations voiced as multiple moments. In the mix, the question is no longer what happened or what does this mean, but rather what do we hear?

By way of example, let me explain what I hear in two songs from Koala’s CDs. On “Fender Bender” (2000), Koala crafted associations by stringing together voices, car horns, scratching, a repetitive musical refrain, and someone giving directions (“left” ‘up” “right” “down”). “Are you sure you want to play bridge,” a mixed-in voice asks, “or you got another one of those fancy sound effects records you want to show off?” On “Stompin’ at the Savoi” (Koala, 2003), a mixed-in voice states, “I’ve got space, you’ve got space, everybody’s got space.” The associations Koala strung together are reworkings of space (topos) as sound. Another mixed-in voice on the same composition puts this reworking into a droppin’ science framework and declares, “I’m a scientist of sound.” A scientist of sound indicates the voice that has gone beyond topos (or literate) conceptions of empowerment or authorial representation, opting instead for beyond-literate notions of assemblage and juxtaposition, of showing off the sounds one finds and discovers through such combinations. With these mixed-in voices in Koala’s writings, I hear the sense of “juice” found in Notorious B.I.G.’s rant against literacy, and I hear the allusive feature of ka-knowledge missing in much of my discussion so far (but suggested through B.I.G.’s work and the Wu-Tang intros): showing off (i.e., playing one’s “fancy” sounds). What is often forgotten in discussions of hip-hop and DJing is the rhetorical gesture of showing off, a move essential for enacting the mix in the first place. This showing off is not a gesture to demonstrate expertise nor is it egotistical. Instead, it is an aggressive move to include as wide a variety of material as possible. To stitch together various sounds and moments that an audience might not initially associate as worth juxtaposing, writers have to be arrogant about what they are familiar with and how they will use that information. Even if a writer’s knowledge of the samples is scant or merely sampled, it is not important; the showing off is in the dare to mix these items in the first place (A car horn? An instructional record? A big band recording? How can these go together?). The mix is not a place for causal placement of found objects or sounds; it is a place to foreground effects and responses to all kinds of combinations and events. Ka-knowledge reflects that foregrounding. Showing off is its voice.

In that sense, ka-knowledge differs from some conventional concepts of knowledge acquisition we have come to accept as the end result of writing (i.e., “writing to learn”) or as necessary for generating a specific vision of culture and society. “What is the restorative experience, tonic, or ethos of the contemporary knowledge worker?” Alan Liu (2004) asked in the conclusion to his lament on technology and idea creation, The Laws of Cool, “What is the life-informing or governing attitude that literariness—poetic, fictional, hypertextual, or multimedia—must now seek to inform well if it is to help repair the tone of contemporary life?” (p. 383). Restoration of topos-bound ideas (citizenship, literacy, values), however, is not the focus of ka-knowledge. If anything, ka-knowledge may allow writers to break with such ideas or positions. “Knowledge,” Michel Foucault (1972) wrote, involves the “set of rules for arranging statements in series, an obligatory set of schemata of dependence, of order, and of successions, in which
the recurring elements that may have value as concepts were distributed” (p. 37). Foucault’s notion of archaeology—one of the most challenging reconceptualizations of what constitutes knowledge—develops an alternative system toward how knowledge might be reordered and represented in our time, a period which is no longer a mark of “tradition, of tracing a line, but one of division” (p. 5). In his alternative system of archeology, Foucault emphasizes knowledge as moments of division, of disruption, of breaks in historical lineage. These breaks are not meant to unveil undisclosed secrets or revelations (they are not liberatory or empowering; they will not restore “the tone of contemporary life”); instead, they function as “nothing more than a rewriting,” “a regulated transformation of what has already been written” (p. 140). In the rewriting, there is an alternative knowledge which any totalizing system that depends on continuity or convention (like literacy) neglects.

Rewriting is the logic of the mix. In this rewriting or remixing that I have identified as a component of ka-knowledge, Foucault’s archeological breaks are hip-hop’s “breaks.” The break is the basic element of DJing that distinguishes movement from one sound to another. Breaks are samples, disrupting how we document ideas in that the breaks suggest a discontinuity in narrative progression. Foucault’s (1972) “questioning of the document” (p. 6) resides in the tradition of print culture: written texts are documents. In turn, documents are fixed places of knowledge. Sounding out reflects digital culture’s expansion of such terms so that the break is not just a disruptive document or a rewriting of a document but a rhetorical move that allows writers to question the overall fixed nature of any given document, including their own voiced positions. The break is not fixed. It is always changing and moving depending on how a writer sounds out.

“The break intensifies the rhythmic flow it cuts into,” Kodwo Eshun (1999) wrote, “turning rhythm into a series of peaks and drops” (p. 16). Breaks are not, then, a “breaking off,” but rather a rhetorical rise and fall in a given text’s construction based on sample choice and placement. They, therefore, work within a logic quite different from fixidity. Through this movement, breaks reflect the sense of showing off I have drawn attention to. To engage the break, one “shows off,” switching from sample to sample, daring to put together unlikely combinations encountered in a variety of experiences. It is a move metaphorically captured in the scratching and turntablist exploits of legendary DJs such as Grandmaster Flash but rhetorically relevant to digital writing as a willingness to demonstrate ka-knowledge. Whereas Foucault’s disruptions are meant to upset cultural totalities, the break disrupts any sense of knowledge as totality. The pedagogical implications of this move, therefore, are substantial.

5. The making of ka-knowledge

The thoughts I present here are traces of a digital writing whose framework is aurality. In the Roots’ (1999) “Double Trouble” Mos Def rapped:

My vocals got texture, you just texturized
I’m nicer than your writtens even when I’m improvised.

The role sounding out plays in the making of ka-knowledge is the digital texturization of ideas (the sampling process of mixing). The narratives we typically associate as literacy or
writing are those that, at a meta-level, depend on a nondigital method of organizing ideas. To name a practice as being one of literacy has traditionally meant to depend on a fixed narrative: Learn these skills, perform these tasks, become this kind of person, and then you are literate. In the media age, that narrative no longer functions properly. “Literacy’s role changes with time, place, and circumstance,” Graff (1979) argued (p. 3). Clinging to conventions without recognition of cultural and communicative developments makes a past understanding of literacy “less than useful” (p. 3). An aural-based literacy whose foundation is in digital culture cannot make claims for literacy at the meta-level the same way print-conventions have dictated because the aural is constantly sounding out (i.e., mixing a variety of positions and claims, none of which achieve totality). The writer who sounds out identifies with the mixing and remixing of ideas sampled and juxtaposed (as DJ Spooky noted) and becomes something other than literate. Sounding out as digital writing, then, is not literacy. It is, however, a fluid method of meaning-making.

At the meta-level, the concept of knowledge as literacy depends on the very print-oriented concept of topos: a fixed place of meaning. Sometimes that fixed meaning adds a prefix of “techno” or “visual,” but the meaning of how knowledge relates to literacy still remains the same. What I have been trying to uncover here, however, has not been a system of knowledge, but one of ka-knowledge. Because of its dependence on sounding out, ka-knowledge is not topos based. To enact or practice ka-knowledge as digital writing, our narratives of literacy acquisition can no longer be topos based. They must become sounding outs. Sounding out is practical (how I write) as well as institutional (how I define writing) as well as theoretical (the terms that generate this kind of writing). My exploration and discovery of sounding out reflects this process. I sounded out the terms that gave rise to my understanding of this kind of writing (sound, voice, mix) through the mix (rewriting) of multiple moments and events (Ong, textbook instruction, literacy theory, Elbow, B.I.G., Kid Koala, digital writing). I did not turn to a musical instrument to do so, nor did I outline a computer-based assignment or series of assignments that embody this kind of writing, as these moves would entail being instrumental.

To think of adapting courses to present trends by exploiting as gadgets the spectacularly evident new media—radio, television, tape recordings, intercom—is to a certain extent to miss the point. These new media are not just new efficient gadgets. They are part of a shift which is inexorably affecting our very notion of what communication itself is (Ong, 1962, p. 227).

I began by asking what a digital writing, whose logic stems from aurality, might look like. I have found an answer by working through the tenets of the object I proposed to study (i.e., I have demonstrated to some extent, ka-knowledge). To enact a theory and pedagogy of the aural (i.e., sounding out), we also are inventing new forms of knowledge acquisition, forms traditional studies of literacy cannot accommodate. Ka-knowledge as digital knowledge is a mixing, a usage of a variety of ideas, events, moments, and texts for the mix and the subsequent identity of “being mixed,” not for the demonstration of expertise (a fixed, topos-bound concept). On the Web, we have begun to see the sounding out principle of ka-knowledge on, among other places, weblogs. Those weblogs that opt not to narrate daily events or solely personal experience (a typical usage of the weblog) and instead juxtapose images, ideas, quotations, anecdotes, hyperlinks, news stories, and other such items are demonstrating the
rhetorical effect of sounding out I learned from hip-hop, but which I must make clear is
generalizable to digital writing overall. “Webloggers are geek DJs,” Johndan Johnson-Eilola
(2005) wrote in a brief summary of weblog potential (p. 134). That sense of geek DJing is seen
in some of the Web’s more ambitious weblogging, the sites where writers dare to show off (i.e.,
find) combinations through their interactions with multiple, often conflicting and unrelated,
experiences.

<http://www.boingboing.net> is one of the best examples of this process in weblogs; its
daily links of found items, news, oddities, digital discussion, and commentary encapsulates
much of the rhetorical features I have outlined here. As its subtitle declares, BoingBoing is
“a directory of wonderful things” enacted in how the editors sound out disparate information.
That sense of “wonderful” is the sense of juicy that B.I.G. teaches, and it is the sense of
showing off Kid Koala demonstrates. On any given day, readers of BoingBoing (and its writers)
might engage with IP law, technology nostalgia, current events, advertisements in vintage
magazines, odd commercial items, street signs in Japan, Flickr collections of forgotten images,
new books, and the list goes on. These kinds of items are the “surroundings” (to rephrase
Ong’s notion of the surrounding I began with) we encounter in digital culture. They are
the unconnected, odd, provocative, informative, and personal moments that circulate in our
vocabularies. The navigation of these items, from a writer and reader perspective, involves
“listening” for their connections, as Lyotard contended. We listen for the voices emerging
out of these juxtapositions. We listen to how these voices “show off” the eclectic nature of
idea formation; and we consider how we, too, might do such writing (as a list, as a series
of entries, or as some other form of digital display not yet considered). Unlike a generic
composition perspective that asks students “to blog,” or unlike a good deal of the academic
blogging that settles on argumentative positionings or daily narrative, sounding out—which
sites like BoingBoing generate—teaches us how to listen to and write with our surroundings.
Many other weblogs, too, operate in this fashion.2 Still, despite its application in digital venues
like hip-hop or the Web, we have yet to see sounding out’s principles enacted in writing studies
and writing pedagogy.

What makes ka-knowledge valuable to any type of writing pedagogy concerned with tech-
nology and communication is how it moves attention away from the dominant topos-themes
of knowledge acquisition in terms of power (either empowerment or resistance to power struc-
tures) or the still prevalent topos concept of literacy. Ka-knowledge is the digital rhetorical
practice of assemblage. Whether it is used for empowering the subject or forging a political
or cultural position or acquiring financial stability and professional success is not relevant
(though any one of these points may occur). What is important is the recognition of a dif-
ferent method of forming ideas and presenting such ideas. The location of ka-knowledge in
the digital writing of hip-hop demonstrates a model worthy of adoption in the computers
and writing-based classroom or program. “Only through language,” James Berlin (2003) argued,
“do we know and act upon the conditions of our experience” (p. 89). With Berlin’s popular-

2 Which blogs embody sounding out is not really all that important, but I list a few such examples:
often resist this kind of writing is indicative of a lack of engagement with sounding out in the profession.
ized point, the time has come for the additional term of media to be included; in particular, we must now consider the aural logic of digitality that sounding out generates in new media. It is not just through language that we fashion experience and knowledge, but through all media.

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References

Koala, Kid. (2003). Some of my best friends are DJs. Ninja Tune.

**Further reading**