CHALLENGING TRANSMISSIONS
DJ /RUPTURE BREAKS THE GLOBAL BEAT

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It's been pointed out on many occasions that the Spanish-sponsored "discovery" of the Americas by Christopher Columbus occurred in the same year King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella decided to expel the Jewish population from Spain. Less frequently noted is that 1492 is the year when nearly eight centuries of Muslim rule on the Iberian Peninsula officially ended. The expulsion of Muslims began soon thereafter, and continued throughout the next century. Prior to this, Muslim dominion over Spain had at one point encompassed all but the northernmost region of the country, and was part of a much larger Islamic empire that rivaled the size and might of Rome, and substantially duplicated its landmass. Beginning in the early eighth century, Spain was invaded by indigenous tribes from northwest Africa who themselves had recently been subsumed within this Islamic empire. The extent of these tribes' territorial reach and strength in Spain peaked around 1000 A.D. This presence had shrunk to the city of Granada and its immediate environs when the keys to the city were turned over on 2 January 1492 to Ferdinand and Isabella, with Columbus part of the royal retinue.

More significant than the story of kingdoms rising and falling is the relatively open and pluralistic society that existed in Spain under Muslim rule. Scholars and historians continue to vigorously debate just how harmoniously Muslims, Christians, Jews, and others lived in the Islamic Spain of al-Andalus, but there can be little doubt that to this day it's among the notable historical examples of a flourishing co-existence among substantially different ethnic and religious groups. It wasn't a state of affairs that continued under subsequent Christian regimes, as attested to by the expulsions and persecutions they enacted. This isn't to say there wasn't persecution and violence under Muslim rule (including a massacre of Jews in Granada in 1066), or disproportionate taxation and tribute structures, or constant resistance to this rule from within and without. In fact, the demise of al-Andalus resulted less from pressure applied by the northern Spanish Christian kingdoms than from political infighting and subsequent invasions by "fellow" Muslims from the south.

But such is the nature of power and hegemony. They unfold according to a dynamics of domination and resistance, and, more often than not, entail two-way negotiations between both subjugator and subjugated. Not all of al-Andalus was physically conquered by the invading tribes; those parts that weren't were brought into the kingdom through treaties. Jews and Christians occupied some of the highest advisory posts in the Muslim administration. They also partook in a transmission of Islamic intellectual culture that helped extricate Europe from the Dark Ages. Specifically, the introduction of Aristotle's texts through the al-Andalus Arab scholar Averroës invigorated European philosophy, science, medicine, and even Christianity. One of Judaism's primary mystical texts, the *Zohar*, was written in the

wake of al-Andalus. Arab lyrical poetry was a direct influence on the troubadour poets in the regions bordering Islamic Spain, and those poets in turn have served as a source of inspiration for everything from heretical religious and political traditions to Ezra Pound's version of modernism.

Arabic was one of many languages spoken in al-Andalus, and the need for constant translation between these languages may serve as the best metaphor for the syncretic culture created at the time. This notion of translation within a polycultural context is also useful for understanding the work of DJ /rupture (a.k.a. Jace Clayton) who in 2000 arrived on various underground music scenes with his rugged bootleg mix CD *Gold Teeth Thief*. The mix garnered a fair amount of attention for many reasons, not the least of which was its ability to remain committed to a post-drum'n'bass breakbeat scene while literally expanding this genre's horizons beyond beats per minutes cranked-up too fast to count and obsessives sitting at computers turning swiped samples into potential sonic drill bits. Moreover, DJ /rupture's mix reintroduced the frequently forgotten skeleton in drum'n'bass's closet: hip-hop. For DJ /rupture, this included not only alternative hip-hop (Cannibal Ox, Dead Prez, etc.), but big and gleaming mainstream hip-hop, albeit mainstream hip-hop with imaginative production styles. Also of note was *Gold Teeth Thief*'s range of expression: where it wasn't raw with scorched and splintered beats, it was raw with social and emotional content usually spit most ferociously by dancehall toasters.

All of DJ /rupture's work then and since has involved this act of translating between cultures. Until very recently, critics and theorists might have called this process hybridization or creolization, but the abrasiveness in DJ /rupture's work, its recurring disharmony, asks listeners to rethink and question these terms and their idea(l) of relatively seamless blending – and mixing. Cultural co-existence is difficult, as Muslim and later Christian Spain makes clear. Yet difference fetishized leads to ghettoization (or worse), while with difference ignored comes homogenization (imposed or not). How, then, to respect and appreciate difference – to realize that not all form and content ever come across in a translation no matter how accurate it is – while nevertheless maintaining dialogue and seeking shared connections? This is one of the most important questions DJ /rupture's work asks. It answers it mostly by leaving it as a question – not in the sense of easy ambiguities or an anything goes that ends up reaffirming the status quo, but by forcing the listener to ask anew the issue of difference each time she or he encounters difficulties in the work, difficulties DJ /rupture consciously injects.

For instance, *Gold Teeth Thief* begins with Missy Elliott's "Get Ur Freak On," which segues into the instrumental of Nas's "Oochie Wally," followed by dancehall artist Bling Dawg's "Risen to the Top." So far so good, and nothing too radically dissimilar from the mix tapes that circulate on the margins of the commercial hip-hop music industry, especially now that dancehall has crossed over into the U.S. hip-hop mainstream. But then DJ /rupture drops DJ Scud's blistering "Badman Time" into the mix, and expectations – and what the street calls "flow" – are instantly scrambled. "Badman Time" picks up on the aggressive energy of Bling Dawg, while disrupting and rechanneling it across a cultural chasm that DJ /rupture certainly wasn't the first to recognize (cf., British punk rock and later jungle's infatuation with reggae's righteous anger), but around which he creates a relation of both sympathetic proximity and near impossible difference. But this also occurs within the mainstream cuts he uses to open his mix, most famously in Missy Elliott and producer Timbaland's appropriation of Indian tablas and sitars for the beat to "Get Ur Freak On." Or the erasure of Nas's fantasy gangbang lyrics with the looped Chinese flute of the instrumental version. Or the way Bling Dawg's "makin' cheese" visions are in dialectical – or is it diametrical? – relation to the Kingston, Jamaica, tenements that are dancehall's derelict wellspring.

Ultimately, however, it's not an interpersonal ethics of difference or a formal investigation of the limits of sampling and mixing that DJ /rupture presents, but a cultural (geo-)politics. In particular, his work focuses on the role of borders and their transgression. While this concern is somewhat obviously hinted at in the border-jumping links he forges between dancehall, hip-hop, and breakbeat, it's more complexly articulated in his engagement with Middle Eastern and African music. That the latter interest may be subtler in his work doesn't mean it's any less foundational. While DJ /rupture's acclaimed release *Minesweeper Suite* (2002) further refined and shredded the three-turntable strategies of *Gold Teeth Thief*, his sampling and electronics-based work under the moniker Nettle reveals a deep involvement with Middle Eastern and African musical styles and structures. Nearly all of the songs on Nettle's *Build a Fort, Set That on Fire* (2002) begin with discernibly Arabic melodies rendered less discernible during a track's progression as cultural references both pile up and pull apart at the seams. Less beat-oriented than DJ /rupture's mixes, Nettle creates a denser layering of cross-cultural interactions that leans away from U.S. hip-hop and Jamaican dancehall and toward the intermixing of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East that has always occurred in the Mediterranean region.

Some of this is no doubt geographical: DJ /rupture-Nettle-Jace Clayton's proximity to North Africa and the Middle East while he was living in Barcelona, and Spain's long history with Africa, the Middle East, and Islam. But it's much larger than personal biography. And it's a particular form of geography. DJ /rupture's Soot Records website declares the music presented there – which includes his own – to be "a strike against geography." This shouldn't be confused with globalism as an abstraction. Rather, it's a dual strike: against the potentially universalizing discourse of globalization and against the internal and external borders-enforcing nation state. The areas DJ /rupture and Nettle's work map are ones linked through cultural transmissions, not political alliances. It's important to remember here that the nation state is a relatively recent invention. Most maps of medieval Spain contain a "frontier region" that doesn't land cleanly under the jurisdiction of either Muslim or Christian authority. Similarly, DJ /rupture's work targets national boundaries and territories without falling back on the frequently ill-defined concept of globalization and its language of one world, good or bad.

Rather, it may be more productive to think in terms of unconventional topographies and frontier regions documented as well as imagined by DJ /rupture's work. These are spaces found in the fraying interstices of imperial powers old and new. When African percussion via Islamic music intermingles with Jamaican dub, U.S. hip-hop, and a spliced recording of someone saying, "It's a little scraped up, and it has a lot of black on it," only to be shattered by a blast of manic breakbeats – as happens in "The Ballad of Jimmy Hollin (Disco Mix)" on *Build a Fort, Set That on Fire* – how does one draw a map of this? Perhaps by remixing originals that are themselves mélanges of alternative cultural traditions passed across and between families, communities, and official borders. The Arabs who conquered medieval Spain weren't Arabs, they were Berbers (Moors) from northwest Africa. Both their ethnicity and their version of Islam were considered inferior by "authentic" Middle Eastern Arabs. By proposing culture as an ongoing exchange between different social and ethnic groups, DJ /rupture upsets notions of it as uncontaminated and exclusive. One result of this debunking is an awareness of distinctions within cultures previously viewed as uniformly other.

In 2004, DJ /rupture and DJ /rupture as Nettle moved toward collaborations as a supplement to mixing and sampling. DJ /rupture's *Special Gunpowder* (2004) is a studio project featuring a variety of singers and musicians. Nettle has also played live shows with Moroccan oud, violin, and percussion accompaniment. Both *Special Gunpowder* and these concerts attempt to make concrete the theoretical aspects of previous projects. In this sense, what makes DJ /rupture's work so provocative is that it's thinking all the time, even when

a listener's body feels like dancing or whose head hurts from the sonic assault. Despite this critical edge, it's not afraid to have fun and be celebratory, as when DJ /rupture dropped an extended excerpt from J-Kwon's "Tipsy" – one of the most popular hip-hop singles of 2004 – into the heart of his second John Peel Session (18 May 2004). Reviewers of *Special Gunpowder* in particular have noted that it's less cacophonous than previous releases. Is this compromise or just the necessary negotiations non-unilateral interactions take? DJ /rupture continues to emphasize non-translatability as a component of cross-cultural communication. But who can fault him for accentuating dialogue when the authorities pursue a deadly policy of not listening?