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Mic Check – Finding Hip Hop’s Place in the Literary Milieu

by

Victorio W. Reyes

A Dissertation

Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York

In Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

College of Arts and Sciences

The Department of English

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Abstract

The study of Hip Hop poetics has been slowly gaining momentum as an area for scholarly inquiry. Accordingly, *Mic Check* rests on one critical assumption: Hip Hop is the most significant American form of poetry ever invented. To back up this claim, this project investigates Hip Hop lyricism from five critical angles: tradition, form, tone, medium, and practice. I argue that music's foundational position in African American literature clarifies Hip Hop's experiments with language, which operate within and extend an ongoing, centuries-old *tradition* of linguistic, rhythmic, and poetic experimentation. Comprehension of the longstanding literary/oral territory from which Hip Hop is born compels an analysis of the art's formal characteristics. I argue that these formal traits of Hip Hop poetics bear more structural semblance to earlier British and American forms than they do to those of contemporary and modern poetry. *Form* is thus a new (yet old) vehicle for advancing African American literary exploration. However, form alone cannot carry the weight of a poetic genre; this is where theme and specifically argumentative positioning become essential to understanding Hip Hop poetics. I assert that the "politics of abandonment" (as conceptualized by Jeff Chang), through which the social apparatuses of the American state systematically neglected the urban poor, gave birth to an oppositional poetics within the Hip Hop form. Foregrounding the *tone* of oppositionality in Hip Hop allows me to productively account for problematic themes—violence, misogyny, etc.—in the genre's corpus, rather than sidestepping these concerns. Additionally, as a multi-disciplinary artistic movement, Hip Hop cannot be confined to one *medium*, and it often incorporates several at once. I argue that Hip Hop's blurring of medium—especially orature and literature—inevitably brings its poetry to the page. This movement from the mic to the page exemplifies the circular relationship between the oral and the scribal in the African American literary tradition.

These critical interventions set the stage for me to explore all of these themes via the creative/critical *practice* of poetics. I engage Hip Hop on the page in my own poetry to demonstrate how my critical discussions play out in the creation of an art product. This creative intervention—combined with my critical discussions of tradition, form, tone, and medium—compels us to consider what lies ahead for Hip Hop poetics and for poetry as a whole.

Dedication

In memory of my parents, Felix Reyes Jr. and Dr. Roberta Williams.

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Introduction

Mic Check: Towards a Hip Hop Literary Criticism

Tribute

It was more than forty years ago when the inimitable Barbara Smith wrote her “Towards a Black Feminist Literary Criticism.” In the essay, Smith wrote:

I do not know where to begin. Long before I tried to write this I felt that I was attempting something unprecedented, something dangerous merely by writing about Black women writers from a feminist perspective and about Black lesbian writers from any perspective at all. These things have not been done. (118)

Admittedly, it is difficult for the scholar from a younger generation to appreciate a world where writers like Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler are not viewed as scions of American literature. Yet, Barbara Smith came to literary awareness at a time when the great Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was out of print, a concept that, while intellectually comprehensible, is materially unfathomable to today’s younger scholars. Having grown up in a world where Hurston’s status as a great American novelist has been established, it would be fallacy for me to pretend to fully appreciate what it might have been like to grow up in a world where her work could not be found on bookstore shelves. For this reason, I align my project with Barbara Smith, not as an attempt to claim that I can fully appreciate the stakes of her project, charting a path for Black feminist criticism where no route previously existed; rather, I am asserting that just as there was no Black feminist criticism to refer to when she was writing, the framework for Hip Hop literary criticism thus far is criminally underdeveloped and therefore my project attempts to break new ground.

While Barbara Smith's "Towards a Black Feminist Literary Criticism" came to be in a time when there had been literally no formalized attempt to offer such a critical conception, in the case of Hip Hop literary criticism, the project has been undertaken by some scholars. However, when Smith opined that "it seems overwhelming to break such a massive silence," I empathize because the discourse regarding Hip Hop literary criticism is so finite in comparison to the seemingly infinite bounds of Hip Hop's lyrical corpus. For this reason, my project attempts the lofty goal of filling this void, as best as one project can. I do not mean to imply that the work of previous scholars is somehow deficient; rather, I'm arguing that the landscape of Hip Hop verse is so vast that an attempt to fully encapsulate its reach as a literary genre is fundamentally impossible for one scholar to accomplish. Instead, my project attempts to synthesize the current discourse regarding Hip Hop poetics by engaging the critical conversations that have already taken place and build on these discussions by introducing new theoretical conceptions to the conversation, with the aim of establishing a future framework for scholarly investigations of Hip Hop poetics.

Hip Hop and Poetry?

As I discuss more than once in this dissertation, there are some people who question whether Hip Hop should be considered poetry. Some feel that it simply is a performed art and is therefore in a different category than the written art of poetry. Others feel that Hip Hop is an impressive artistic creation in its own right and stands little to gain by being recognized as poetry. While I confront these arguments on their merits, my reasons for considering Hip Hop as a form of poetry rests on the simple fact that most rappers throughout Hip Hop's history, and especially its pioneers, have seen themselves as poets.

Lil Wayne (aka Weezy) once told a reporter who asked if he writes poetry, “No. I don’t do poetry. I’m not into poetry. This interview is with a rapper” (“Lil Wayne Says”). From this quote, one might assume that rappers find it offensive to be considered poets. But the history of Hip Hop verses tells a different story. In chapter 2, I discuss the song, “Poetry” by Boogie Down Productions, where KRS-One declares, “I am a poet” (*Criminal Minded*). Some might think that KRS is an outlier, but he is certainly not. Nas also considers himself a poet, declaring “my poetry’s deep” (“It Ain’t Hard”). And Rakim asks the audience members to “sip your juice and watch a smooth poet” (“My Melody”). While MC Lyte informs us that we, “betta know it, when ya dealing with the poet” (MC Lyte “I Can’t”), Special Ed raps “sense condensed into the form of poem” (Special Ed “Got it Made”). Canibus goes as far as declaring himself the “Poet Laureate of his time” (“Poet Laureate II”). While Weezy may not think of himself as a poet, his sentiments are not reflective of all rappers’ opinions. If legendary rappers like Rakim, MC Lyte, and several others see themselves as poets, who are we to not to take them at their word? And therefore, why should we not study them as the poets they are?

Critical Assumption and Propositions

It is important to make clear that this project rests on one critical assumption: *Hip Hop is the most significant American poetic form ever invented*. While I go to great lengths to defend this statement, I maintain that the fact is frankly inarguable. I make this assertion for several reasons. First, Hip Hop, by any marker, is a clearly defined form of oral poetry, and as such, is disseminated in a clearly recognizable and replicable pattern. Second, as a world-wide phenomenon, Hip Hop is one of the most widely travelled and easily recognizable American cultural productions in existence. Conversely, the world of literary poetry has become siloed into

a more academic realm with a somewhat limited audience. As a popular art form, Hip Hop has simply been exposed to more people than any other contemporary American poetic form and, thanks to globalization, has no doubt been distributed more widely than any earlier American forms as well. A simple connecting of the dots, that Hip Hop is a form of poetry and more popular than any previous or current American poetic form, helps to make clear that Hip Hop is America's most famous and most impactful form of poetry.

To advance my contention that Hip Hop is America's most significant poetic form, this project consists of five chapters, each dedicated to one of the five following angles: tradition, form, tone, medium, and practice. Below is a summary of the five critical propositions covered in these chapters:

1. **Tradition:** *Hip Hop lyrics represent the culmination of a centuries long experiment with language in African American discourse.* Hip Hop, like many African American art forms, uses African American Vernacular English as its primary lyrical vehicle. Further, there is also a long tradition of blending music with text in African American cultural production. The relationship between the vernacular, musicality, and lyrical content allies Hip Hop with the African American literary tradition as well as the larger realm of African American cultural expression.
2. **Form:** *The most significant characteristic of its poetry, Hip Hop's formalism empowers Hip Hop poetics to be a communal undertaking.* While the majority of American poetry since the birth of Modernism has moved away from formal poetics, Hip Hop embraces form with more certainty than any widely disseminated contemporary poetic form. Form allows Hip Hop lyricists to establish kinship because the thing that weds all of Hip Hop's

rhymers to each other is their chosen poetic form. For this reason, the form serves as a communal platform for Hip Hop practitioners to make a name for themselves.

3. ***Tone:*** *The tone of oppositionality is the second most significant characteristic of Hip Hop verse.* Just as the sonnet is inextricably linked to romance and as the haiku is typically associated with nature, the Hip Hop verse is oppositional. When the audience hears a Hip Hop verse, the audience expects the poem's speaker to annunciate opposition towards another force. The roots of oppositionality can be found in the political circumstances of Hip Hop's creators. However, oppositionality also helps us account for problematic themes in Hip Hop discourse, specifically themes of misogyny commonly associated with the genre, because the tone of a Hip Hop verse serves as a critical frame for understanding the craft-based functions of oppositionality. To demonstrate this relationship between craft and opposition, I argue that Hip Hop's oppositionality provides a mechanism for women emcees to articulate feminist poetics in the Black feminist tradition articulated by Barbara Smith.
4. ***Medium:*** *Because Hip Hop is an interdisciplinary artistic movement, its poetry lives in different mediums.* The performative nature of Hip Hop and contemporary spoken word poetry reflects the shared ancestry of these two popular verse forms. Furthermore, the heritage of Hip Hop and spoken word manifests itself in contemporary written poetry. Accordingly, closer examination reveals that Hip Hop, in addition to being an orally performed art form, also functions as text. Hip Hop's ability to move across mediums demonstrates that it will continue to influence the poetry of the page well into the future.
5. ***Practice:*** *Hip Hop has a home on the page in the practice of contemporary poetry.* If—as I argue—Hip Hop is America's most significant form of poetry, then it is logical to

conclude that this form would impact the poetry of the page. I explore this possibility via the poetics of practice. While this project is primarily a critical undertaking, I expand the critical discussions of the project by also visiting the questions of tradition, form, tone, and medium within my own creative practice. Since the theoretical and historical ground of my project is varied, I approach my creative component accordingly through three differing modes of poetic expression. I utilize the erasure form, the sonnet crown, and prose poetics to provide different registers for this endeavor. The result is that I demonstrate, in practice, some of the ways in which Hip Hop may continue to impact the poetry of tomorrow.

Literature on the Subject

This project uses the model of the extended literature review. Accordingly, the important literature relating to the various angles of this project are discussed within the pertinent chapters relating to a specific area. However, because this project sits narrowly within the frame of Hip Hop poetics, I have taken the time to do a very brief literature review of some of the book-length projects on Hip Hop poetics, since these are the most comparable undertakings to the one that I am attempting here. The texts below are also discussed at length throughout this dissertation but are introduced here in hopes of framing the stakes of my project.

Adam Bradley's *Book of Rhymes* is the most widely recognized comprehensive study of Hip Hop poetics. For this reason, it will be an integral part of my discussions on Hip Hop. Bradley goes to great lengths to establish Hip Hop as a poetic genre, arguing that: "Rap is public art, and rappers are perhaps our greatest public poets, extending a tradition of lyricism that spans continents and stretches back thousands of years" (A. Bradley xiii). Because of the foundational

argumentation advanced by Bradley, some of the heavy lifting has been done, making my project a little less unwieldy. Still, because Bradley takes on the genre as whole, there are inevitably holes in his work that need filling. In this regard, I can extend his project towards the establishment of Hip Hop as a definitive contemporary genre of poetry. Bradley faced criticism for his work because some implied he was too concerned with establishing Hip Hop's rightful place in the field of poetry and that perhaps he was "trading up" in order to sanitize the genre into a nobler field for entry into the academic world (Sanneh, "Word"). I discuss these arguments at length, and, while I argue that much of this critique is unfounded, I also contend that Bradley could have established a more robust connection between Hip Hop and its antecedents in the African American oral and literary traditions. Having done so, he might have more effectively shielded his project from such criticism.

In the Heart of the Beat—The Poetry of Rap by Alexis Pate is a curious example of a study in Hip Hop poetics, curious only because it is not widely recognized. While Bradley's *Book of Rhymes* is the far more cited work (at a ratio of 5 to 1 on Google Scholar), I have found that Pate's work is the more compelling treatment of Hip Hop poetics. For one, unlike Bradley, Pate does not shy away from addressing Hip Hop's problematic themes. While Bradley offers one-offs like: "Feminists women hit the dance floor when the rhythm is right, misogynist lyrics be damned (A. Bradley 4)," Pate takes the time to cite important Hip Hop feminist authors such as Gwendolyn Pough or Tricia Rose as he poses the question: "How do we evaluate...rap/poetry, particularly its attempt to oppose the mainstream, when a significant portion of those creating in this art form spend so much time...demonizing each other?" (62). That said, his treatment could have been more extensive. I would argue that for the purpose of understanding Hip Hop poetics, a discussion of misogyny will be more effective when the subject is approached from a craft-

based perspective, a perspective that can and should be buttressed by the critical perspectives of Hip Hop feminist authors who themselves were not necessarily focused on Hip Hop's poetics per se. Still, Pate's willingness to address sociopolitical concerns within the genre, coupled with a focus on Hip Hop's structure (an effort that is not quite as thorough as Bradley's) makes his work an excellent marker for continuing a conversation on Hip Hop's place in the literary world. Finally, I find Pate's conception of oppositionality to be one of the most important theoretical tools for exploring the themes of Hip Hop poetics. Pate points out that "no matter what phase of development of hip hop you examine, there has always been a sense of oppositionality at its core" (25). Oppositionality, in my estimation functions as Hip Hop's tone and serves as a critical underpinning of the Hip Hop form.

Perhaps due to the timing of their publications, *In the Heart* in 2010 and *Book of Rhymes* in 2009, neither work references the other. The result of this unfortunate coincidence is the two most significant book length explorations of Hip Hop poetics are not conversant with each other, nor does one build on the work of the other. Furthermore, there are very few subsequent studies that treat the two works together. Two relatively obscure examples are "'It may be verifyin that thy wit is thin': Interpreting Older Scots Flyting through Hip Hop Aesthetics" by Caitlin Flynn and Christy Mitchell and "'Let the Rhythm Hit 'Em': Hip Hop, Prosody, and Meaning" by Alessandro Porca. Both articles make minimal mention of Bradley and Pate in reference to each other. The scarcity of treatment of these two foundational studies of Hip Hop poetics reveals a vast void in the scholarship. This provides an opening for my work to extend the project of both books by engaging them in conversation with each other while also allowing for me to set my work apart by establishing new critical perspectives, avenues that will be built in part from the interpolation of these two texts.

Unlike the previous two books, David Caplan's *Rhyme's Challenge* does not attempt to take on the entire project of categorizing Hip Hop as a poetic form; rather, its focus is situating Hip Hop's poetry within that of contemporary rhyming culture. Still this maneuver by Caplan proves fruitful for the connections I make in this project. Hip Hop, as both Caplan and Bradley acknowledge, departs from contemporary verse because it embraces rhyme: "Hip Hop defines rhyme as essential to the art, contemporary American poetry and literary criticism typically see rhyme as optional, if not unappealing" (*Rhyme's Challenge* 4). By establishing Hip Hop's inheritance of rhyming culture, Caplan addresses some technical aspects of Hip Hop's poetic project, allowing me to build on this work and then focus on the connections that I am most concerned with, namely the tradition of African American literature and Hip Hop's place in it. Also, the connections to Early Modern poetry that I am interested in (connections that Bradley also makes but insufficiently so) will be much easier to make by building on Caplan's arguments about Hip Hop emcees and their use of rhyme: "With particular intensity, their accomplishments challenge the notion of rhyme as old fashioned. Committed to the technique, hip-hop artists reclaim certain effects from the longer history of English-language verse..." (*Rhyme's Challenge* 23). While I intend to cover new terrain, my project will benefit from the grounding provided by the work of Caplan alongside the works of Bradley and Pate.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research project. In many ways the project can be viewed as a genre analysis, as I analyze the genre of Hip Hop from various angles. However, at each angle, I employ another layer of specific analysis to the texts in question. In chapter 1, for example, I engage in a historiographic analysis of the texts and rhetorical practices that serve as the roots of

Hip Hop poetics. In chapter 2, I engage in a formal analysis of Hip Hop's structure and theorize about the impacts of its form. In chapter 3, I apply narrative analysis to a series of Hip Hop texts in order to examine the relationship between the socio-economic conditions of the genre's community at its birth and the craft-based decisions behind its contemporary narratives. For chapter 4, I engage in a comparative analysis of the interrelated poetics of Hip Hop and contemporary spoken word poetry, and then analyze the ways these dynamics influence poetry on the page. Finally, in chapter 5, I apply the poetics of practice by attempting to synthesize my research into a creative cultural product that both reflects and informs the various methodological discourses of the previous four chapters.

Project Scope

It is important to note that the primary focus of this project is a study of the poetics of Hip Hop. As such, this project is grounded in poetic analysis. At the same time, this project extends across multiple fields and disciplines, which is especially true because of the interdisciplinary nature of Hip Hop. As a result, this project touches on a wide range of areas, including linguistics, anthropology, music composition, philosophy, rhetoric, literary theory, cultural studies, theater studies, feminist theory, and urban planning. While the project at times makes forays into those areas, the project does not claim to cover the discourse between those fields and Hip Hop in a comprehensive way. Rather, my engagement with other disciplines serves to buttress a comprehensive study of Hip Hop's poetics. Accordingly, if a relevant area was not addressed in this project or if a pertinent text in an area has been overlooked in my discussions, these omissions should be viewed as part of the fact that this project stays grounded in its primary objective – the poetic analysis of Hip Hop – and should not be considered

reflective of any conclusions on my part of the value of a particular point of investigation outside of poetics.

The Roman historian, Dan-El Padilla Peralta once wrote, “for a dark-skinned child of the Dominican Diaspora who spent his formative years in Harlem, it was both captivating and empowering to detect the pulse of Greco-Roman antiquity in hip-hop. In the heat of that collision new worlds were born” (Peralta, "From Damocles"). Peralta touches on the vast horizon of Hip Hop discourse, a discourse which reaches across the wide pantheon of academic inquiry. Hip Hop is an interdisciplinary artistic movement whose art reaches across many mediums, a factor I discuss at length in this project and particularly in chapter 4. Accordingly, the emerging field of Hip Hop studies engages all disciplines of Hip Hop’s creative enterprises, including graphic arts, dance, music, poetry, and fashion. However, Hip Hop studies reach beyond the disciplines of the arts into a wide range of fields, due to the broad cultural impact of Hip Hop. As such, texts in Hip Hop studies, in addition to covering Greco-Roman antiquity as Peralta noted, encompass a stunning range of disciplines, which include the various areas that I have already mentioned as well as many others, such as criminal justice, sociology, education, Afrikana studies, Latinx studies, gender and sexuality studies, and even biology. My project by its nature must be also considered as part of the field of Hip Hop studies but only claims to cover a small piece of this wide matrix of investigation.

Because this dissertation contributes to the larger discourse of Hip Hop studies, throughout the project, I have prioritized discussions of texts written by important figures in this emerging area of scholarly inquiry. As a result, this project engages with the works of Hip Hop scholars such as Jeff Chang, Tricia Rose, Joan Morgan, Elaine Richardson, and Imani Perry, in addition to figures like Bradley and Pate. However, it would be impossible to cover all of the

work of the various important figures in Hip Hop studies. The following is a list of scholars in the area of Hip Hop studies, whose work does not get significant discussion in this project but should be viewed as resources for any scholars wishing to make further inquiries into studies of Hip Hop: Vershawn Ashanti-Young, Kermit Campbell, A.D. Carson, Bakari Kitwana, Todd D. Snyder, Ruth Nicole Brown, Reiland Rabaka, Gwendolyn Pough, H. Samy Alim, Marceliana Morgan, Kyra Gaunt, and Marc Anthony Neal. While this list is not intended to serve as a complete list of the important scholars in Hip Hop studies, it is a formidable group of authors whose works are vital contributions to the discourse of this burgeoning field of study.

Lastly, one potentially perceived shortcoming of this project could be the lack of international perspective that is covered in this dissertation. With the exception of one brief discussion of the West Indian influence in Hip Hop and how this relationship overlaps with dub poetry in England, the bounds of this project's borders remain firmly within the United States. This was done for two reasons. First, my investigation of Hip Hop is as an American poetic form; as a result, my focus is on its heritage, impact, and status within the confines of American poetry. Of course, I also argue that Hip Hop is highly influential, and therefore, we can surmise that its reach goes far beyond the borders of the nation where it was born. However, the second reason I avoid engaging with the international aspects of Hip Hop poetics is out of respect for the sheer magnitude of such an undertaking. A dissertation that wished to effectively tackle the topic of Hip Hop as an international poetry phenomenon would have to be an entire project on its own. I maintain that it would be impossible to attempt to both account for Hip Hop's place within the literary tradition of American poetry and, simultaneously, productively account for its relationships to the poetic traditions across the globe. Because so few comprehensive investigations of Hip Hop's poetics have taken place, the scholar concerned with this area has to

cover new ground, making limitations in scope necessary to refine such projects within reasonable bounds. For a scholar who wishes to investigate Hip Hop in an international context, a good starting place would be the following books: *Hip-Hop & the Global Imprint of a Black Cultural Form*, *Build: The Power of Hip Hop Diplomacy in a Divided World*, *La Verdad An International Dialogue on Hip Hop Latinidades*, *Close to the Edge: In Search of the Global Hip Hop Generation*, *Flip the Script: European Hip Hop and The Politics of Postcoloniality*, *Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture*, and *Hip-Hop(e): The Cultural Practice and Critical Pedagogy of International Hip-Hop (Adolescent Cultures, School, and Society)*. Again, this list is not intended to be comprehensive, rather it could serve as an excellent primer for anyone wishing to contextualize Hip Hop's poetry, or any other area of Hip Hop discourse, within an international context.

Notes on Style

In general, the project follows MLA Style, which is the convention for my area of study, but there a couple of style choices I have made that deserve mention. First is the issue of spelling and capitalization of the word Hip Hop. Hip Hop appears in print in other forms: hip hop, hip-hop, or Hip-Hop. I have chosen Hip Hop for one simple reason. When I attended a KRS-One concert many years ago, he explained quite clearly that, according to him, there was only one way to spell it: Hip Hop. I agree that it should be capitalized because it refers to, as this text later explores, a culture as well as a genre. Furthermore, the way KRS chooses to spell the name of the culture he helped create is, in my estimation, the most aesthetically pleasing option. What is style in scholarly writing, if not an attempt at standardizing writing into an aesthetically comfortable and readable format.

In addition to the capitalization of Hip Hop, I have made the choice to capitalize the word Black in this project when referring to people or the culture. This capitalization choice seems more commonplace but has not, in my understanding, become standard in most style guides. I agree with scholar Lori L. Tharps, when she says “Black should always be written with a Capital B. We are indeed a people, a race, a tribe. It’s only correct” (“The Case for Black”). One of the reasons this choice is important is because many scholars use the terms Black American and African American interchangeably, as do I in this project. Black American then is not an informal way of describing the culture, rather it can be a coequal synonym with the phrase African American and should be capitalized as such.

Finally, an especially unique issue I have confronted in this project is the formatting of aliases in the works cited page, as well as within in-text citations. Simply put, I have chosen to format pseudonyms like Big Daddy Kane in the last name position in the work cited page, rather than as “Kane, Big Daddy” or “Hardy, Antonio.” This decision is based on the fact that rap artists are often commonly known by their aliases. The purpose of formatting works cited with last names first is to make entries easily findable. I would argue that it will be much easier to locate “Jay-Z” than it would be to find “Z, Jay” or “Carter, Sean.” That said, in the case of a rapper like Kendrick Lamar, his rap name comes from his “government” name (the name that appears on government issued ID). In this instance, I list him as “Lamar, Kendrick” on the works cited page. Another instance is the case of Elease Jack who performed under the name The Real Roxanne, as did her successor, Adelaida Martinez. Since I want to differentiate between these two Roxannes, I have then chosen Jack’s legal name for that particular entry, formatting it under the surname, first. Over time, I hope that my chosen way of formatting Hip Hop aliases becomes

the standard. Regardless, I have made each of my style choices in full consideration of the objectives of academic writing style and now offer clarification to my readers.

Getting Started

Ultimately this project is one person's attempt to take on the task of placing Hip Hop within an arc of American literary production and within the domain of the African American literary tradition. At most, this project hopes to build a small platform for others who wish to engage in academic inquiries of this phenomenon of contemporary American poetry. At the least, this project will provide a lively discussion of Hip Hop's place within the American poetry tradition and will point towards future areas where its impact may continue to be felt. As with all projects, this one will be what it will be. It is time to get started.

Chapter 1

Hip Hop's Literary Tradition

Introduction

Literary movements spring from previous literary traditions, sometimes as continuations of preceding schools of literary thought or, perhaps just as likely, in opposition to earlier movements. The modernist wrote, in part, in response to the Romantic poets of the previous century, while the Beat Poets probably would not have existed if not for the Harlem Renaissance. In essence, literary traditions spring from other literary traditions. T. S. Elliot speaks to this fact in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent":

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. (4–5)

Lupe Fiasco puts this concept another way: "Takes a long time to happen so fast / And realize your future is somebody else's past" ("Old School"). With Elliot and Lupe in mind, I maintain that a useful analysis of a poetic form would first address its prefatory tradition(s). What would an analysis of the Romantic sonnets be without a discussion of William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, or Petrarca? Similarly, no analysis of Hip Hop's poetry would be complete without some discussion of the Blues, the dozens (a lyrical game of rhyming and insults that is most commonly recognizable in *your mama* jokes), or the long practice of linguistic innovation found in African American discourse, from the days of slavery until now.

While the relationship between the artist and his predecessors described by Elliot is important to understanding a poetic form, this formula presents a problem for scholars who wish to analyze Hip Hop within a literary tradition. Specifically, a notion of tradition where a poet grapples directly with the poetry of her forebears brings immediate complication to the project of establishing Hip Hop's lineage within the African American literary tradition. How can a scholar place Hip Hop within a literary tradition when we know that, just as was the case for the Blues and the dozens, Hip Hop formed outside of, or even in spite of, established literary traditions? This perplexing question presents a formidable stumbling block for the scholar who tries to place Hip Hop within a specific literary heritage. And yet, that is the primary objective of this chapter. If I make the case that Hip Hop, in addition to being an exceedingly successful musical genre, is also the signature American poetic form, then it stands to reason that it should be contextualized within previous literary generations.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. may offer mediation to the conundrum of establishing Hip Hop's literary tradition when he speaks to the roots of African American literature: "the vernacular tradition's relation to a formal literary tradition is that of a parallel discursive universe." In other words, the tradition of experimentation with English found in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) operates alongside but separately from formal literature, which can help explain how Hip Hop, an art steeped in AAVE, has evolved as a form of literature in some ways outside of traditional literary production. Gates further asserts that ultimately "the vernacular informs and becomes the foundation for formal black literature" (*The Signifying Monkey* xxii). While the vernacular begins as a separate phenomenon from the African American literary tradition, it ultimately becomes not only a part of this tradition but transforms it so comprehensively that the two phenomena become inextricably linked. Similarly, over the course of this project, I will

demonstrate that the development of Hip Hop operates discursively with literature and under comparable terms.

Gates Jr. creates an important frame when he discusses the relationship between the vernacular and literary traditions, which helps us to understand how Hip Hop continues the project of African American literature by extending a centuries-long tradition of experimentation with the English language. The evolution of the vernacular, AAVE, into the bedrock of Black literature mirrors Hip Hop's ascendancy into what I argue is the most significant American poetic form of the late twentieth century. While Hip Hop's rise materializes independent of the accepted literary establishment, its ascendance does not take place entirely outside of the world of traditional poetics. Despite being viewed as outside the literary tradition, I argue that Hip Hop ultimately becomes the foundational poetic form for the Black community, as well as the nation, and accomplishes this feat via the currency bought by its marriage with the Black speech found in the vernacular. Essentially, I am arguing that Hip Hop, thanks in large part to the vernacular tradition, becomes the literature of its community and therefore extends the discursive relationship between the vernacular and the Black literary tradition.

This project takes the position that Hip Hop is an American poetic form, first and foremost an African American poetic form. This is not to say that Hip Hop is exclusively an American phenomenon or a Black American one, rather, by calling Hip Hop an African American literary form, we are acknowledging that Hip Hop was born in the United States, and, further, that its birth would not have been possible without the rich tradition of African American expressive culture long established in the United States at the time of Hip Hop's inception. I will make the case in this chapter that Hip Hop emerges as an oral literature, armed with what scholar

Stephen Henderson describes as the two most important historical sources for Black American poetry: Black speech and Black music (30).

Throughout this chapter, I will seek to establish Hip Hop's place within the African American literary tradition, guided by a strong belief that Hip Hop is the most consequential contemporary American poetic form. To lay out my reasoning, I have organized the chapter into five sections, divided further into subsections. I will first contend that Hip Hop is a contemporary manifestation on *a continuum of cultural expression* by engaging the work of African American literary theorists, in particular Gates Jr's theory of signification, to highlight the persistent duality between written and performed arts within Black American expressive artistic production. These theoretical discussions help lay the groundwork to make the case that Hip Hop's poetics continue an African American cultural expressive tradition by relying on Black speech and music. I will then discuss the *oral/scribal binary* (phonocentrism vs. textualism) which has been debated by scholars and philosophers in relation to human communication. Similar grounds can be found in discussions of Hip Hop's poetry. Consequently, arguments regarding Hip Hop's function as poetry inevitably fall within the binary between the oral and scribal. I will assert that these arguments can be addressed by the acknowledgement that Hip Hop is indisputably a form of oral literature and, as is the case with most poetic literature, cannot be neatly separated from its oral form. A discussion of orality in Hip Hop poetics will prepare me to delve into the next section on *Black speech*, which has served as a guidepost for much of African American literature. Here, the work of literary critics as well as linguists, in particular Geneva Smitherman, helps us understand how vernacular has evolved in Black American culture and informed the artistic production of African Americans. Hip Hop then emerges as a manifestation of this tradition. Subsequently, I will be able to discuss how Hip Hop inherits its creative interplay with Black

speech from its lyrical progenitor, the dozens. I will further these discussions by examining how the relationship between *music and verse* helps bridge the gap between textual and oral literatures in the African American tradition. I will demonstrate this relationship by examining samples of music in poetic verse from the ballad and the sonnet, which will help set the table for the next chapter's discussions of form. Finally, I will consider the discussions of tradition in Black American poetics in relation to Hip Hop, helping to show how Hip Hop's emergence as an oral literature helps us reframe the Black American *literary tradition*. I will further explain how a clear understanding of this relationship in African American discourse helps us respond to the complications of placing Hip Hop within a literary tradition, when we know in many ways it has developed outside of traditional literary discourse.

While Hip Hop is known popularly as a musical genre, Hip Hop lyrics are also poems, making the genre a form of literature. Calling Hip Hop a form of literature helps illustrate its continuation of the Black American community's centuries long experiments with the English language. The main argument advanced in this chapter is that Hip Hop, as a form of poetry, is a contemporary American literary form. Additionally, its emergence as a literary form materializes because of the symbiosis between oral and literary culture, expressed through music and poetic verse, that have long been part of African American cultural productions. This symbiosis becomes possible because of the linguistic evolution of African American Vernacular English. Under these terms, the contemporary evolutionary outgrowth of centuries of poetic and linguistic experimentation allows Hip Hop to be seen properly within its historical legacy. The impact of this new frame for viewing Hip Hop as a form of literature—specifically as a form of poetry—helps to not only clarify Hip Hop's place within its cultural heritage, but also places it within its rightful place as a truly American poetic phenomenon.

A Continuum of Cultural Expression

W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the first theorists to analyze the impacts of Black American artistic expression, explained that African American cultural production was responsible for the first truly American artistic products:

And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands today not simply as the sole American music but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas...it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people. (117)

Poet and composer, James Weldon Johnson cosigns Du Bois's assertions that Black Americans are responsible for the first authentically American artistic phenomena: "The Negro has already proved the possession of these powers by being the creator of the only things artistic that have yet sprung from American soil and been universally acknowledged as distinctive American products" (6). In the spirit of these assertions of Johnson and Du Bois, I maintain that Hip Hop builds on a long legacy of African American cultural production to become the first distinctive and widely recognized American poetic form, a form which blends written and performative arts.

Signifyin(g)

In *The Signifying Monkey—A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, Gates Jr. offers the concept of "Signifyin(g)" as an umbrella under which reside numerous Black "rhetorical tropes" including "testifying...rapping, playing the dozens and so on." Gates uses this concept of "Signifyin(g)" as a theoretical prism, through which we can understand the lyrical play found in the vernacular tradition. He asserts that Signifyin(g) has "its origins in slavery,"

but in contemporary times “is a part of our adolescent education.” He further states that “Signifyin(g) epitomizes all of the rhetorical play in the black vernacular. Its self-consciously open rhetorical status, then, functions as a kind of writing wherein rhetoric is the writing of speech, or oral discourse” (*The Signifying Monkey* 51–53). With “rapping” as one example of the oral discourse of Signifyin(g)—another one, the dozens, which will be discussed later in this chapter—we can see how Hip Hop’s rhetorical moves rewrite the English language with the vernacular. Hip Hop texts then, based in orality, operate as a form of literature, even if these texts are primarily associated with performance rather than the written arts.

To see Gates’s points in action, let us examine three examples of Signifyin(g) from these three versions of “The Signifying Monkey,” an oral folktale that served as the founding premise for Gates’ theory of “Signifyin(g).” While the tale has its roots in the African trickster tales, like the Brer Rabbit stories, it was passed on via the oral tradition from generation to generation and appears in African American popular music across many decades (Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* 4). The first version of “Signifying Monkey” discussed here was recorded in 1947 by Willie Dixon and is one of the older versions of this tale that is available to us:

Said the Monkey to the Lion on a bright summer day
There's a big bad cat living down the way
He talked about your folks in a heck of a way
a lot of other things I'm afraid to say. (Dixon, "Signifying Monkey")

And two plus decades later, comedian Rudy Ray Moore, also known as Dolemite, offered his version of the tale:

Said, "Oh Mr. Lion there's a big, bad muthafucka coming your way...
...Said, "Baby, he talked about your people in a helluva way

He talked about your people ‘til my hair turned gray (Ray Moore, “Signifying Monkey”)
In the selection from Dixon the “big bad cat” is the same character as Moore’s “big, bad muthafucka.” They both are referring to a big bad elephant, who is the third character in this story about the monkey and the lion. Some four decades after Dixon’s version, Schoolly D offered his take.

Novelist David Foster Wallace—not known as a scholar of Hip Hop but who wrote an early book on Hip Hop which borrowed its title from Schoolly D’s track—explained that “Schoolly D, the original Signifying Rapper, looms irresistibly from the pages of rap fanzines” and his influence was so large that most rappers were consumed with the mission “to be the next Schoolly D” (Costello and Wallace 7). One of the rapper’s most well-known tracks is his spin on the old tale of the signifying monkey, titled “Signifying Rapper.” In Schoolly D’s version, the lion is replaced by the pimp and the monkey replaced by the rapper:

The rapper said, mister pimp, mister pimp I got something to say

There's this mean, big bad faggot comin your way

He talk about you so bad, turn my hair gray (Schoolly D, “Signifying Rapper”)

As for the elephant, he’s replaced in this version by the derogatory term *f-----*. Interestingly, the elephant is the most innocent and the toughest character in the Signifying Monkey story. One wonders if Schoolly D was trying to make a statement by framing the gay character in his story this way. Regardless, these lyrics represent the type of sometimes problematic oppositional poetics found in Hip Hop that require nuanced analysis, a project I take on more thoroughly in the third chapter.

Ultimately, these three versions of this old tale display how performative poetic language persists over an arc of time in Black American expressive culture. The story of “The Signifying

Monkey” reveals a direct through-line between the poetics of the Blues and the lyrics of Hip Hop today. The fact that the work of Rudy Ray Moore serves as a bridge in this instance is not surprising, as he has often been credited with being a forerunner of Hip Hop (Chow, “Rappers Reflect”). The lyrics are all recognized as performances. However, when we read the lyrics of these three examples, the textual relationship between projects of performed poetics is evident, a phenomenon which Gates Jr. describes as “writing...oral discourse” (*The Signifying Monkey* 53).

Music and the Vernacular

The duality between literary and performed arts is analyzed in the work of another scion of African American literary criticism, scholar Houston Baker. Baker envisions appropriate African American literary criticism through what he calls a “Blues Matrix.” Baker explains that “Afro-American literary criticism” will only be effective when properly grounded in “adequate theories of Afro-American expressive culture” (Baker, *Blues Ideology* 66). The Blues then, for Baker, serves as an appropriate Black American expressive phenomenon from which critical analysis of Black American literary production can be properly executed. Within Baker’s theoretical framework, Hip Hop would presumably also fit into his notion of an adequately Black “expressive culture” as a descendant of the Blues, which I discuss later in this chapter, and therefore can be an appropriate vehicle, if properly utilized, for contemporary Black literary criticism.

Together, in Baker and Gates Jr., we find that the vernacular and music serve as the two most essential phenomena for understanding Black literature. In my estimation, Hip Hop combines these two phenomena into a contemporary synthesis, one which even outpaces the Blues in terms of circulation and mainstream recognition. Hip Hop ultimately arises as the

contemporary manifestation of linguistic experimentation within the African American community that has evolved over centuries, and we find the synthesis of music and vernacular in its lyrics, its poetry.

My project then aspires to advance previous theories in Black American literary criticism by situating Hip Hop within the concepts of vernacular and musical traditions. On this note, I enlist scholar Stephen Henderson, who explicitly argues that Black poetry "structurally speaking... is most distinctly Black, [when] it derives its form from two sources, Black speech and Black music" (Henderson 30-31). Hip Hop lyrics are also thoroughly infused with these two sources described by Henderson, and, therefore, emerges as a new manifestation on a continuum in Black American poetics, a phenomenon which has its roots in the first American artistic products that Du Bois and Johnson noted.

I will illustrate that Hip Hop's relationship to Black music and speech helps establish it as a contemporary school of poetry within the African American literary tradition. Consequently, Hip Hop is becoming a significant movement in American literature, on par with the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. Like these previous movements, Hip Hop is a multi-disciplinary artistic enterprise, literary art being only one of its components. Still, the poetry of Hip Hop is far reaching, and its significance will only continue to grow. Therefore, locating Hip Hop's poetry within its proper tradition will help us see it within the larger context of its community's legacy of artistic production.

The Oral/Scribal Binary

The dichotomy between orality and literacy is unproductively divisive. Scholar Walter Ong seems to echo my concerns about this dichotomy by acknowledging that "L'écriture [the

written word] and orality are both ‘privileged’” (166). Ong suggests that each form of communication comes with its own advantages and, presumably, its own deficiencies. Because Hip Hop straddles a somewhat false border between oral and literary culture, it does not need to be situated exclusively in either province, the oral or the written. Hip Hop’s ability to extend into both worlds demonstrates the somewhat illusory fallacy of the boundaries between the two forms of communication. And yet, while I feel that these boundaries may be unproductive, it would be irresponsible for me not to acknowledge some of the reasons these boundaries exist.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. himself in “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes,” his introductory essay to the volume he edited titled *“Race,” Writing, And Difference* states, “writing, many Europeans argued, stood alone among the fine arts as the most salient repository of ‘genius,’ the visible sign of reason itself. In this subordinate role, however, writing, although secondary to reason, is nevertheless the *medium* of reason’s expression” (*“Race,” Writing*, 9). The fact that writing was privileged by European culture to such a high degree clarifies that the prevailing Western view was that illiterate cultures were less evolved. The racial stratification between literacy and illiteracy in the United States becomes even more compounded when you consider that many states during slavery had laws that forbade the teaching of writing to slaves:

In 1830 a provision of the Louisiana slave code stated “that all persons who shall teach...any slave in this state to read or write, shall be imprisoned not less than one or more than 12 months.” North Carolina also forbade teaching or giving books to slaves in an 1830 law, since such teaching “has a tendency to excite dissatisfaction...” Virginia provided penalties for whites who assembled with Negroes to teach reading or writing... (Cornelius 32)

While Western culture may have promulgated the idea that Black cultures were less evolved because many African societies did not use the written word, a more sinister motivation is revealed by the imposition of laws banning the literacy of Africans held in bondage in the United States. These laws make clear that literacy was seen as a potentially liberatory mechanism for enslaved people.

While I maintain that, for good reason, the boundaries between the oral and the written should be de-emphasized, we can't ignore the primary reasons the divisions between these modes of communication have existed in the first place. Literacy has been used as a mechanism for maintaining the racial stratification in this country; therefore, it is presumable that the delineations between oral, performed art, and literary art share some connections with this sordid history. However, as I will demonstrate, Black Americans have used literacy as a liberatory tool via poetry, and I will argue Hip Hop deserves recognition as part of this tradition. While I discuss written aspects of Hip Hop in chapter 4, for this chapter, a clear understanding of Hip Hop's oral art will help us understand how it becomes a significant form of contemporary poetry. To fully appreciate the oral art of Hip Hop, we must first understand the oral/scribal binary more clearly.

When Ong addresses the oral/scribal binary, he speaks to the debates between what has been labeled phonocentrists (those who privilege orality) and the textualists (those who privilege the written word). Ong makes note of philosopher Jacques Derrida who suggests that phonocentrists actively undermine the possibilities of the written word with strict views that elevate oral expression above the written word. Reflexively, from my vantage point and within this dichotomy, I should feel compelled to make a phonocentric argument in favor of Hip Hop, which is, as I will explain in a little bit, a form of oral literature. However, as Ong explains "we

cannot do away with texts, which shape our thought processes, but we can understand their weaknesses" (166). While texts are valuable, more importantly, they can also inform orality, which was Derrida's point; the term *LOL* stands as one piece of evidence to prove his point, a term which came about as an abbreviation for *laugh out loud* but has come to mean simply that something is funny and is now also used in spoken language. Regardless, a textualist argument might privilege text to the point that it becomes inaccessible. Offering a not-so-subtle criticism of Derrida, Ong explains, "without textualism, orality cannot even be identified; without orality, textualism is rather opaque and playing with it can be a form of occultism, elaborate obfuscation—which can be endlessly titillating, even at those times when it is not especially informative" (166). And so, within the oral/scrabal binary, I choose to use orality as a means of explaining the phenomenon of Hip Hop; however, as I will argue in chapter 4, I don't think Hip Hop's literariness can be reduced to its orality.

I maintain, in the spirit of Ong, that we do not need to privilege orality over literacy, and I certainly would not entertain the reverse argument. For me, I think there is a difference between primacy and supremacy. The primacy of spoken language seems indisputable. The written word then is a derivative of speech. Accordingly, oral poetry is the first poetry from which literary poetry derives. This does not mean that we need to argue that oral poetry is somehow superior to literary poetry. Further, the converse argument that the spoken word is somehow supreme over the written word undermines the beauty that can be found in the symbiosis between orality and literacy. Later, I will argue that Hip Hop represents a close to ideal example of the beauty to be found between orality and literacy. But for now, I think it will be useful to discuss how the tension found in the oral/scrabal binary emanates in part from a lack of understanding that Hip Hop is categorically a form of oral literature.

Oral Literature

Scholar Ruth Finnegan explains that "oral poetry essentially circulates by oral rather than written means; in contrast to written poetry, its distribution, composition or performance are by word of mouth and not through reliance on the written or printed word" (16). Hip Hop, of course, fits squarely within Finnegan's definition of oral poetry. Finnegan further explains that oral poetry "is a form of 'oral literature' –the wider term which also includes oral prose" (16). Unlike, say, a speech by Barack Obama or a fiction podcast, which are examples of oral prose, Hip Hop is written in poetic verse, making it clearly oral poetry.

The primary means by which the oral poetry of Hip Hop is disseminated is via performance, as Finnegan notes, "text alone cannot constitute the oral poem" (28). The history of the distribution of Hip Hop verse illustrates how audiences received Hip Hop's poetry as an oral form. It was almost exclusively accessible via live performance in the late '70s and early '80s, transitioned to vinyl and tape through much of the '80s, then to video via MTV in the latter part of the decade, and to Compact Disc by the early '90s. In the early 2000s there was the Mp3 and today there are platforms such as YouTube, Soundcloud, Apple Music, and Spotify. Through each of these mediums of dissemination across five decades, Hip Hop has stubbornly remained oral poetry. While I explain later that Hip Hop is also disseminated in textual form via lyrics databases, Hip Hop has always been primarily recognized as an oral art form. The orality of Hip Hop could be the reason some have shied away from labeling it as poetry, even though, as Finnegan illustrates, poetry and literature can be disseminated as oral art forms. In fact, the oral poem precedes the written form.

Performance vs Poetry?

One of the reasons that the oral/scribal binary comes into play when discussing Hip Hop is because its poetry is centered in performance, which is why it can be labeled a form of oral literature. Hip Hop's marriage with performance pushes against a more textual vision of poetry. For some, studies of Hip Hop should be centered in its relationship to performance. For others, Hip Hop's relationship to performance disqualifies it as a literary art. I'll argue that the basis of these arguments is the false dichotomy between oral and literary art and that the two opposing poles in this paradigm can be broken apart by a fuller perspective of Hip Hop's place within the African American literary tradition. Still, these poles persist and will not be brought closer without confronting the issues which keep these camps disconnected.

On one side of the argument is the phonocentric perspective that seeks to guard Hip Hop from being associated with the literary arts. Critic Kelefa Sanneh—in his review of Jay-Z's memoir, *Decoded*, which contains printed versions of the rapper's lyrics—writes "sure, he's a poet—and, while we're at it, a singer and percussionist, too. But why should any of these titles be more impressive than 'rapper'?" (Sanneh, "Word"). Sanneh, taking a phonocentrist position, alludes to the idea that the focus on Hip Hop as poetry downplays the audible aspects of Jay-Z's artistry, while the term *rapper* is more actively inclusive of the performative nature of Hip Hop lyricism. I would agree with Sanneh if I subscribed to the belief that artistic production should be separated between the poles of oral and literary arts; however, I maintain that poetry is both an oral and written art. The term *poet* refers to a practitioner of either the written or oral forms of the art. The term *rapper* should not, by any means, be considered less "impressive" than the term *poet*, but a clearer understanding of poetry reveals that the term *rapper* essentially means a poet whose genre is Hip Hop. In this conception of Hip Hop poetics, the term *rapper* is similar to the

term *sonneteer*, which indicates the bard's genre of poetry. Just as orality and literary art can be symbiotic, so are the terms *poet* and *rapper*.

I will come back to Sanneh at the end of this chapter, but for now it is important to look at the other pole in this debate: the textualist argument against categorizing Hip Hop as poetry. When asked if Hip Hop should be considered poetry, poet Robert Pinsky responded by saying "for me a crucial thing about poetry... is that it is written for anybody's voice in a culture in which we worship performance." Here Pinsky is suggesting that Hip Hop is composed and geared towards performance which, while possibly compelling, is fundamentally different than poetry which was meant for the reader's voice. Pinsky goes on to say: "I do make a distinction between the art of the performer and the art of the poet. I don't write poetry readings. If I give one, I try not to be boring, but I write poems. I write with my voice for your voice" (Pinsky, "Is Hip-Hop"). Despite Pinsky being one of contemporary poetry's most decorated poets—earning such honors as United States Poet Laureate and the PEN/Voelcker Award for Poetry—his argument stands on a flimsy foundation, flying in the face of the majority of poetry's history where there was no distinction between poet and performer, and negating the notion that there is such a thing as oral poetry. Regardless, Pinsky's insistence on a textual argument demonstrates how entrenched the debates regarding orality and literacy in poetry can be (Pinsky, "Is Hip-Hop").

Inherent in the phonocentric/textualist debate, as I have laid it out, are issues of race and class. Presumably, Sanneh defends the term *rapper* because it is associated with artists, like Jay-Z, who hail from poor Black communities. The term *poet*, on the other hand, has become associated with a more educated academic sphere, a world that is presumably whiter than the housing projects which produced many important Hip Hop artists, including Jay-Z. Still, I

maintain that a clearer understanding of oral culture and oral literature helps to clarify that the terms associated with a certain type of traditional academic poetry is not at all reflective of what poetry has been over its history. The oral poet is no less a poet, and inevitably, the oral poet's compelling work is often written down.

Discussions on the distinctions between oral and written culture, as medievalist Mark C. Amodio notes, have for some time "tended to be rather polarized, with oralists and non-oralists alike accepting that orality and literacy were opposing" (1). Of course, as Amodio goes on to argue, orality and literacy are not entirely separate beasts. Amodio cautions us not to accept the dichotomy within the "Darwinian terms" of the discourse regarding orality and literacy, the idea of "literacy and the written word's supplanting of the spoken word." This Darwinian dialectic that presupposes written poetry has somehow supplanted the spoken form is absurd; however, I think, in the rush to defend oral culture from such arguments of textual supremacy, we might be inclined to buy into the rigid bifurcation between orality and literacy. As Amodio cautions, this binary is unproductive. These two modes of communication cannot be so neatly separated because they are interrelated. Hip Hop blurs the space between the oral and written verse and this cross-medium blurring is one of the most compelling attributes of the genre. Accordingly, Hip Hop serves as an excellent example of why we need not buy into the polarized binary between the oral and scribal because Hip Hop continues the tradition in Black speech of language modification, which ultimately materializes in both textual and oral productions.

The Poetics of Black Speech

Zora Neale Hurston explains in her "Characteristics of Negro Expression" that Black Americans have "made over a great part of the tongue" and have had this "revision accepted by

the ruling class" (832). Perhaps in no arena has her statement proven truer than in Hip Hop. Many scholars have demonstrated that Black Americans have worked diligently at modifying, rethinking, and remolding English. The best sources of these experiments can be found in the artistic productions of Black America. Respectively, Hip Hop's place in literature can be codified by a clear understanding of the long tradition of molding English to meet the needs of African Americans, a project taken on by poets of every era in African American history.

It was James Baldwin who said, "people evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances" (780). Hip Hop, in my estimation, is the literal manifestation of this effort by the African American community to control its circumstances by rewriting the American English corpus, a phenomenon often referred to as the vernacular tradition or more precisely as AAVE. Such a project of linguistic revision, regardless of whether the revisions are spoken or written initially, is inevitably circulated in the form of written artifacts, as was the case with the Blues and as is the case today with Hip Hop. It is these artifacts, the verses we find on lyrics databases, that represent Hip Hop's contributions to the world of literature. However, to fully appreciate these cultural products we must first understand the circumstances that brought this poetic phenomenon into existence.

As a form of oral literature, it makes sense that Hip Hop's primary currency would be the vernacular tradition found in AAVE; African American linguist Geneva Smitherman, one of the people responsible for the current academic consensus that AAVE is itself a language, wrote, "The Africanization of U.S. English has been passed on from one generation to the next. This generational continuity provides a common thread across the span of time, even as each new group stamps its own linguistic imprint on the Game" (3). Smitherman states further that "the roots of African American speech lie in the counter language, the resistance discourse, that was

created as a communication system unintelligible to speakers of the dominant master class" (3). Smitherman's work, along with that of many other linguists, helped to demonstrate that Black speech effectively establishes its own language, today referred to as AAVE. Such an evolution in Black speech—from the earliest experiments with English attempted by the first slaves brought to this country—into what is now considered an independent language demonstrates the resistance discourse at play in the rich tradition of African American linguistic history. Hip Hop expands this "resistance discourse" by not only utilizing AAVE but by also by becoming a foundational part of this language system. As Elaine Richardson explains, "Hip Hop Discourse is a genre system of AAVE/Black Discourse" (10). As a genre system within AAVE, Hip Hop becomes an inextricable aspect of Black discourse. When artists articulate resistance within the Hip Hop form, they are also expanding the reach of AAVE as a resistance discourse. Furthermore, due to its wide reach, Hip Hop assumes a level of power to shape official modes of language that was not previously available to the earlier generations of African American artists.

Ebonics

In *Word from the Mother, Language and African Americans*, Smitherman offers a glossary with a list of common Black American sayings or words. To illustrate the relationship between Black speech and Hip Hop it will be fruitful to examine the work of another African American thinker who developed a glossary of Black American speech, Big L. The rapper whose life was taken at the young age of twenty-four was, and is considered, one of the most influential rappers in the genre's history, despite his relatively short career.

In the last track to be released in his lifetime "Ebonics," Big L takes on the topic of Black speech directly. The term "Ebonics" is a colloquial synonym for African American Vernacular English. Consider these opening lines as he aims to "break this slang shit down":

Check it, my weed smoke is my lye

A ki of coke is a pie

When I'm lifted, I'm high

With new clothes on, I'm fly

Cars is whips and sneakers is kicks

Money is chips, movies is flicks

In the selection above, Big L is providing a dynamic glossary by including translations from Standard American English into AAVE, with sneakers/kicks and movies/flicks. However, the dynamism of the vernacular comes into play when he also updates slang terminology like ki for coke and lifted for high. This maneuver is important because Big L echoes Smitherman's assertion that Black speech is intentionally "unintelligible" to "the dominant master class." This desire for the language to be indecipherable requires constant revision, meaning that as slang becomes recognizable, it needs to be rewritten. Big L's project confirms Smitherman's explanations of the ways in which the African American community continually revises their use of the English language and demonstrates Hip Hop's inheritance of this project of linguistic revision.

On the one hand, lexiconic verses like this one by Big L would not be considered the norm of Hip Hop rhymes. On the other, "Ebonics" fits in a long tradition of Hip Hop verses written as educational guides, including Boogie Down Productions' "Poetry," Immortal Technique's "Peruvian Cocaine," and The Notorious B.I.G.'s "The Ten Crack Commandments."

Big L, by using this glossary format for "Ebonics," shows the breadth and flexibility of Black American speech. He does so with the language of romance with "If your girl is fine, she's a dime," and fashion with "jewelry is shine." He highlights the language of violence saying, "bleedin' is leakin'" or "to guerrilla mean to use physical force." He also shows descriptions of communication, "a cell phone's a celly," as well as the verbiage of the drug trade, "an ounce of coke is a onion." For Big L, his personal mastery of Black speech is part of a larger, community discourse, a means of communication that covers wide ground and serves as a source of pride for him and other members of this discourse community.

While Big L's lyrics clearly demonstrate an unequivocal appreciation for his community's expressive communication, equally as important to his project is the pressing political question of Black speech. When "Ebonics" was recorded, it was less than two years after a controversial ruling by the Oakland California Unified School District Board titled "The Oakland Ebonics Resolution." This policy which passed in December 1996 recognized that Ebonics (known today as African American Vernacular English) was the main language for most of the African American students within the district and that, therefore, the district should implement practices to utilize Ebonics in educating its African American students (Smitherman 12). This ruling was met with harsh criticism from several well-known African Americans. Jesse Jackson proclaimed, "I understand the attempt to reach out to these children, but this is an unacceptable surrender, borderlining on disgrace." Jackson continued that "It's teaching down to our children...They cannot get a job at NBC or CBS or ABC unless they can master this language...and I'll tell you they can master it if they are challenged to do so" (Woo and Curtius, "Oakland School"). Geneva Smitherman—who at this point was a veteran of these discussions as she was a primary witness

in a landmark case in Ann Arbor, Michigan some twenty years before—was so frustrated that she felt compelled to "just throw up my hands and say 'Ain't we been he befo?'" (12).

The controversy over Ebonics went beyond comments made by political figures like Jackson. One of the most celebrated African American poets and writers of the late twentieth century would weigh in as well. Maya Angelou opined that "the very idea that African American language is a language separate and apart is very threatening, because it can encourage young men and women not to learn standard English" (Woo and Curtius, "Oakland School"). It's interesting that Angelou used the word *threatening*, though she presumably meant to use the word for different reasons than the criticisms typically associated with Black speech. Instead, she no doubt found it threatening that Black students would not be encouraged to develop fluency in Standard American English. Regardless, her critique clearly articulated a vision where AAVE is a tongue that is, and presumably should be, subordinate to the standard tongue of the dominant class.

Commentaries like those from Angelou and Jackson, frustrated Smitherman as she noted that "both Angelou and Jackson are masters of the Black Word" (Smitherman 130). By pointing to the mastery of Black words demonstrated by figures like Jackson and Angelou, Smitherman exposes the hypocrisy of making a living by trafficking in Black speech but then not validating its power as an independent, valuable mode of communication. Smitherman suggests that Jackson and Angelou, along with many other Black thinkers, are undermining African American cultural expression by not recognizing the community's language as a coequal partner to Standard American English, reaffirming its station as a subordinate tongue. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that at the heart of Jackson and Angelou's concerns is an awareness of the power differential between speakers of Standard American English versus those who

primarily speak AAVE. Jackson and Angelou are certainly aware that doors are regularly closed to people because of the negative associations against AAVE. Regardless, many linguists have confirmed the fact that AAVE's differences with Standard American English "result from rule-governed...systematic processes, not from ad-hoc lapses from standard English" (Collins 204). Ultimately, the linguistic scholars' recognition of AAVE as an independent language confirms that Black Americans have transformed English into a unique resistance discourse.

Big L was no doubt conscious of the mainstream arguments over Ebonics, as the term became popularized in the Oakland Court case (Collins 202–03). Big L echoes Smitherman when he explains the many levels on which African American Vernacular English works. In this regard, Big L inserts himself into the arguments between academics and critics, and, consequently, demonstrates Hip Hop's power as a force for critical discourse. Big L sides with the work of African American linguists like Smitherman who spent decades trying to validate the ways in which AAVE functions as an independent language, even if it shares linguistic relation to English. For Big L, it would seem such an argument cuts to the heart of his work as an artist because he understands the vast corpus of words available within his community's tongue and also comprehends how his street language is different from but also related to Standard American English. Furthermore, Big L makes it clear that this language operates in opposition to mainstream authority, when he states that he "speak(s) with criminal slang / That's just the way that I talk, yo." By categorizing Black speech as criminal, Big L would seem to be affirming the concerns of Jackson and Angelou. However, Big L is actually establishing Ebonics as a language pitted in resistance against the dominant discourse. He sets his own terms which suggest a position that the Hip Hop artist should take in these debates: "Uh, I know you like the way I'm freaking it / I talk with slang and I'ma never stop speaking it." In this instance, like it or not, Big

L's unapologetic insistence on using Black speech makes clear that it is here to stay, regardless of whom it makes uncomfortable.

Big L's "Ebonics" is ultimately an exercise in translation, where he showcases the wide range of discourse within AAVE. With this project, Big L helps illustrate the linguistic complexity of African American Vernacular English. His translations of the Black English corpus help showcase the reasons why AAVE should be considered an independent language. In this regard, Big L proves to be an intellectual interlocutor with Smitherman and other linguists by exemplifying their findings via his artistic practice. Furthermore, since Big L's work is in no way an outlier regarding Hip Hop's infusion with Black speech, "Ebonics" confirms Hip Hop's role as a contemporary vehicle for AAVE and illustrates how Hip Hop's cultural products serve as textual artifacts of a constantly revised resistance discourse.

Black Speech in Poetry

Big L's spirited defense of Black speech demonstrates the resonance and importance of language to the community that speaks it. Rather than seeing the use of AAVE as a surrender, as the Reverend Jackson said it was, for Big L, and most Hip Hop emcees, Black speech represents an abundant linguistic territory of arable ground, where the artist can harvest dynamic expressions for crafting artistic productions. Not surprisingly, poets for generations have found similarly productive terrain in the corpus of Black speech.

In his groundbreaking work, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech & Black Music as Poetic References*, Stephen Henderson explains the value of Black speech in Black American poetics: "But the most important source is the living speech of the Black Community, both urban and rural, which forms as it were, a kind of continuum of Blackness"

(32). While Black speech acts as a vital source for Black American poetics, Henderson explains that views on this relationship have not always been favorable. As if speaking to concerns regarding Black speech expressed by Jackson and Angelou, Henderson acknowledges that there has often been a critical apprehension towards this speech, noting that "perhaps the fear of Black speech in poetry comes from a too vivid recollection of the Dunbar School and the 'minstrel' tradition which preceded it" (32). The long history of Black speech being portrayed as a curious commodity, in the case of the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, or as a source of childish amusement, in the tradition of minstrelsy, has contributed to a potentially negative association with Black speech in poetry. However, Henderson, echoing Geneva Smitherman's characterizations of Black speech as an intentionally illegible tongue of resistance, explains that "poets use Black speech forms consciously because they know that Black people—the mass of us—do not talk like white people" (33). Henderson confirms the differences in Black American speech and the "standard" speech attributed to white America. Ultimately, Henderson asserts that this speech of resistance becomes the underpinning of contemporary Black poetry in the 1960s and '70s. We can extend these inferences to Hip Hop's poetry because, as Big L exemplifies, the presence of AAVE in Hip Hop, as a resistance discourse in opposition to standard language, is foundational to the genre's identity.

One of the poems that Henderson chooses for his collection exemplifies the role of Black speech in poetry and reveals an intrinsic connection between Hip Hop and the poetics which preceded it. Henderson explains that:

The chief difference between poetry of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black poetry of the sixties comes in the full exploration and appropriation of the street experience and the formulation of an aesthetic and an ideology based in part upon it. This is no mere literary

gesture, as some would have us believe; and for that I have included Rap Brown's poem (xii).

The poem, "Rap's Poem," was originally published in *Die Nigger Die!*, the memoir by Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, formerly known as H. Rap Brown (25–27). The piece is an example of street poetry and the game known as *the dozens*, considered by many to be the literary progenitor of rap. However, it is important to note that Al-Amin was also a famous activist in the 1960s because of his work alongside Stokely Carmichael with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). As with Carmichael, Al-Amin's politics became more radical which led to his joining the Black Panther party. His influential role in the Black Power movement is important because this movement was inextricably linked to its cultural counterpart, the Black Arts Movement, whose integral relationship to Hip Hop will be addressed more specifically in the fourth chapter.

In Al-Amin's poem we find the lyrical cadence and controversial language that would become the hallmark of Hip Hop verse:

Man, you must don't know who I am.

I'm the sweet peter jeeter the womb beater

The baby maker the cradle shaker

The deerslayer the buckbinder the woman finder

Known from the Gold Coast to the rocky shores of Maine

Rap is my name and love is my game (Henderson and Al-Amin 187).

Not coincidentally named "Rap," Al-Amin presages the emergence of Hip Hop with its oppositional positioning, problematic misogynistic rhetoric, and its unabashed embrace of Black speech. Henderson wasn't the only one who recognized the resonance of Al-Amin's rap style.

Gates Jr. argues that Al-Amin is “a master of Black vernacular rhetorical games and their attendant rhetorical strategies.” Gates continues that “Brown’s understanding of Signifyin(g) is unsurpassed by that of any scholar” (*Signifying Monkey* 72). For Gates and Henderson, it is clear that Al-Amin’s use of Black speech within a poetic composition helps to situate this poem securely within the tradition of Black American poetry.

While Al-Amin’s poem exemplifies both Black speech in poetry and the poetics which preceded Hip Hop, his work also had a more specific connection with the style which would come to share his name. Adam Bradley details this connection between Al-Amin and Hip Hop when he explains that:

Rap Brown’s influence is even more apparent in hip hop’s first commercial hit, “Rapper’s Delight” ...The Sugar Hill Gang echoes Brown’s precise language. In the original, Rap rhymes, “Yes, I’m hemp the demp the women’s pimp / Women fight for my delight.” Years later, Big Bank Hank rhymes, “Yes, I’m imp the gimp, the ladies’ pimp / The women fight for my delight” (A. Bradley 183)

Big Bank Hank who was known for “borrowing” large parts of his verses, borrowed this particular phrase from Rahiem of the Furious Five. Scholar Keesha M. Middlemass explains that Rahiem got the phrase from Al-Amin, literally: “The original lyrics came from H. Rap Brown, who was incarcerated with Rahiem’s brother in Attica” (220). Rahiem himself explains, “that lyric actually comes from a guy called H. Rap Brown. He was incarcerated with one of my older brothers and he gave my older brother a book that he wrote to give to me. It had that lyric in it, and he told me to be inspired. So that's how it came about” (Rahiem, “OTL”). This event, the passing down of lyrics from a vocal member of the Black Power movement down to the first

recognized Hip Hop track, helps establish the lineage of Hip Hop verse and its early relationship to Black speech.

As was the case with the examples presented earlier with “The Signifying Monkey” and its offshoots, we find Al-Amin’s lyrics, originally performed as part of the oral tradition, passed down to a new generation of artists. However, in this instance, Al-Amin’s poetry moved from the oral tradition, when he performed the lyrics on the street, into textual form in his memoir *Die Nigger Die!*, and back to the performed world of early rap, which would ultimately be immortalized again on Hip Hop’s first record. Such movement between the oral and written worlds highlights the dynamic symbioses between orality and literacy present in Hip Hop and further illustrates how Hip Hop operates on a continuum of Black speech and poetics.

The Dozens

We can see Stephen Henderson's inclusion of Al-Amin in his collection of "New Black Poetry" as a nod to the political project found in much of this new poetry and an indication of how the role of Black speech was only increasing as an important currency for artistic productions during the ‘60s and ‘70s. As Henderson put it, "for the first time in this nation’s history, the Black man was putting his oppressors in the *political dozens*" (xiii). It's crucial to understand that Al-Amin's "Rap" was an example of the game the dozens, as Henderson notes, simply produced in written form.

Elijah Wald explains that there is no simple definition of the dozens because “clearly the dozens meant different things in different situations...One person’s bitter insult was another’s comic masterpiece, and what one observer interpreted as predatory bullying another might interpret as the fascinating survival of an ancient African tradition” (15). It’s not surprising that

the dozens have been seen as the forebear of Hip Hop given that Hip Hop is also viewed by some as highly offensive and by others as highly sophisticated art. And while there may not be a neat definition for the dozens, it has been known as a verbal game, one which often included rhyme and is generally seen as the lyrical forerunner to Hip Hop verse.

Bradley, while also acknowledging that Brown's work was an example of the dozens, actually undermines the lineage of Brown's verse with Hip Hop, though perhaps not intentionally: "Of course, it is facile simply to draw a straight line between verbal expressions like the dozens and the toasts and rap. Rap is also music; it relies upon a rhythmic, and often a harmonic and melodic, relation to song" (A. Bradley 183). Bradley emphasizes that Hip Hop's heritage is more complex than drawing a simple line to the dozens. I suspect that Bradley is sensitive to the arguments regarding the downplaying of Hip Hop as a musical form, as if anticipating Kelefa Sanneh's critique which privileges the title *singer* and *percussionist* over poet. Maybe Bradley felt that by drawing too firm a connection between the dozens and Hip Hop he would be minimizing the genre's connections to other forms of African American cultural production, such as R&B and Funk. Personally, I'd argue that Hip Hop, as evidenced by Al-Amin's lyrics, clearly continues the oral tradition of the dozens and drawing that line is simply accurate.

Elijah Wald, author of *The dozens: A History of Rap's Mama*, discusses the history of the verbal, oral art form. This game and manner of discourse, most widely recognized in the form of *Your mama* jokes, is credited by many as the lyrical forebear of Hip Hop. The connection between Hip Hop and the dozens is hard to dispute once one analyzes the typically raucous lyrics and tendency towards rhyme associated with the game, like those we saw from Al-Amin. Wald explains:

But if the dozens expresses some profound truths about the African American experience, it is also rooted in ancient, universal responses to the complications of interacting with our fellow humans. It may not be a pretty tradition, but neither is it simple, and, love it or hate it, it is inextricably part of our history and culture. (Wald 17)

Here Wald illustrates the nuanced complexities that we also encounter when analyzing Hip Hop, the fact that the works can be offensive doesn't negate the equally true fact that the works of Hip Hop are often both reflective of its community's circumstances and layered with complex lyrical constructions. In short, Hip Hop is controversial but intricate, as is the dozens.

Regarding the roots of the dozens, Wald suggests that the term emerged in the early 1900s. "Most researchers assume the term reaches back to the nineteenth century, but there is no solid evidence of an insult game, rhyme, or song being called the dozens before the 1910s" (Wald 19). However, we can infer from Henry Louis Gates Jr. that the dozens represent an evolution of Signifyin(g), which had its "roots in slavery" (*Signifying* 99). We can surmise that the dozens, as one example of Signifyin(g) according to Gates, extends this Black rhetorical project because it becomes "perhaps the best known mode of Signification" (*Signifying* 99). Perhaps then, Hip Hop serves to extend this project even further by incorporating the oral literary tradition of the dozens into a musical project, in similar fashion as the Blues did, which ultimately empowers Hip Hop to serve as a platform for the showcasing and dissemination of Black speech.

If Hip Hop continues the dozens' extension of Signifyin(g) and the Black oral tradition, such a project would not have been possible if not for the widespread reach of the dozens as a phenomenon of oral literature. Wald confirms the role of the dozens in the Black community, saying it "was part of the linguistic code of Black America, and like so much African American

culture, outsiders often encountered it in connection with music" (4). The dozens, like Hip Hop, are a form of oral literature and we again find that this oral literature blends with and connects to music.

In much the way that Al-Amin's lyrics were passed down, the dozens were shared by artists and performers across generations. For example, Wald shows that lyrics from a song called "The Dirty Dozen," which Jelly Roll Morton heard in 1908, spread to many artists including Huddy "Leadbelly" Ledbetter and George "Little Hat" Jones (Wald 31–33). In the case of Leadbelly's version, titled "Kansas City Papa," we find a locus of artistic production which represents the Blues, the dozens, and the early roots of Hip Hop:

The polecat climbing : up a 'simmon tree
The funniest thing : that I ever did see
You keep on talking : till you make me think
You daddy was a bulldog : your mammy was a mink
You keep on talking : till you make me mad
I tell you about the troubles : that your sister had (Taft 166)

The rhymed couplets and the audacious lyrics presage the formality of Hip Hop verse and the ways Black speech has informed African American artistic production. A similar example can be found in an early Hip Hop recording of the dozens by a group called Wuf Ticket (Keyes 217):

You like to put me down, but not to my face
So I thinks about time I put you in your place
You see I'm so slick, I got so much style
I can out-rap you by a country mile
So just sit down son, and watch my smoke

Check out my style and take some notes (Wuf Ticket, " "Ya Mama")

Like the examples of "The Signifying Monkey" discussed earlier, these two examples illustrate how the oral literature of Hip Hop has deep roots, going back at least a century and further. Also, we find in both examples that Black speech is fundamental to lyrical arrangement. These arrangements demonstrate how lyrical poetics can serve as accompaniments for musical compositions.

The musicality of the dozens coupled with its saturation with Black speech exemplifies the circular relationship between poetry in music that is so central to the African American poetic tradition, and these two components of the dozens highlight how it functioned as Black poetry in the truest sense of Henderson's conception of it. Furthermore, the grounding of the dozens in Black speech illustrates how it becomes the forebear of Hip Hop because the musicality that undergirds the oral verses of the dozens becomes fully realized as lyrics in the Hip Hop genre.

Musicality in Verse—A Two-Way Street

While earlier in this chapter I discussed the influence of Black speech in the Black American poetic tradition, equally important to the tradition is the presence of music within the verses of Black American bards. One poet who shows this in his work, Tyehimba Jess, also speaks to the overall relationship between music and literature in the Black American literary tradition. In an interview on The Book Show by WAMC radio, Jess discusses this relationship: "There's a connection in African American literature to the music...The music was our literature before we were allowed to read and write...without the pain of death.., so it's deeply infused in the African American literary tradition...[in] many ways...those two traditions can merge and

run in the same river” (Jess, *The Book Show* #1529, “The Book Show”). Jess speaks to Stephen Henderson’s insistence on the importance of musicality in poetic verse, a topic which I return to in chapter 2. By assigning co-equal importance to music and Black speech in the tradition of Black American poetics, Henderson establishes the two most essential sources for the verses of this poetic tradition, a connection that Jess also speaks to. Clearly, to Jess and Henderson, the symbioses between music and poetry is intrinsic to Black American poetic verse.

To fully understand the relationship between music and Black American poetic verse, it will be instructive to examine the ways musicality has manifested itself in the poetic practice of African American poets. While I will discuss the connection between musical and poetic forms more thoroughly in the next chapter, in this section I highlight musicality in two forms that are not necessarily recognized as Black American forms because each of them predates European colonization of the Americas. The ballad and the sonnet epitomize historical notions of traditional Anglophonic verse, but also are vehicles for the musicality of poetry. Accordingly, these forms have been utilized, reframed, and repurposed by African American poetic artisans and infused with musicality to serve the aims of Black American cultural expression. To emphasize how African American poets have always utilized traditional forms as mechanisms for exhibiting musicality and emphasizing Black speech, I will first discuss African American experimentations with the ballad and then, a little more extensively, the sonnet.

The Ballad and The Blues

The ballad is a Western traditional form that is intrinsically connected to a vital Black American mode of expression, the Blues. David Caplan calls the Blues “a more personal form of the ballad.” This form that influenced the Blues gained special prominence in England just

before the American Revolution thanks to Thomas Percy and became even more popularized the following century by Francis James Child (*Poetic Form* 43–47). The ballad has all the trappings of traditional formal poetry, yet it served as a blueprint for the Blues, no doubt in part because of the form's oral nature.

The ballad, as an example of European traditional formalism, might have come under criticism from the proudly Black politics of the Black Arts Movement which worked to upend traditional notions of poetry. However, a key figure of the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka, who was quite critical of Western poetic forms, acknowledged the ancestry of the ballad in the Blues. For example, Baraka was harshly critical of the formal poetics of Phyllis Wheatley, the first recognized African American poet, calling her work "pleasant imitations of eighteenth-century English poetry" and labeling her poems as "ludicrous departures from the huge black voices that splintered southern nights with their hollers, chants, arwhoolies, and ballits" (Baraka, "The Myth of Negro Literature" 106). One can presume that the "chants" and "ballits" Baraka refers to represent an early example of the blending of vernacular with musicality in Black American expressive culture.

Baraka revisits this idea of the "ballits" as a source of authentic black expression in another essay entitled "Slave and Post Slave." It would seem surprising that Baraka, a Blues poet who rejected traditional European formal poetics, would highlight an established Western form like the ballad as having kinship with the Blues, except Baraka clearly acknowledges the relationship between the Blues and its lineage in Western form:

The Negro's music lost a great many of the more superficial forms it had borrowed from the white man, and the forms that we recognize as the blues began to appear. There were still black 'ballit' singers who sang songs that used centuries-old classical Anglo-Saxon

ballad forms and spirituals that were pure "lifts" from Protestant hymnals. But in a few years after the Emancipation, the shouts, hollers, yells, spirituals, and ballits began to take shape as blues. (Baraka, "Slave and Post Slave" 59)

In these notes from Baraka, we can already find his defense of the Blues, in that, according to him, Black people, after first adopting western traditional forms, ultimately "lost" these forms that were inherited from white people. However, in the process of this argument, Baraka also clearly acknowledges that the Blues shares direct kinship with the ballad, and by extension, the Western traditional form.

The fact that African Americans co-opted this traditional form and made it their own, in my estimation, complicates a notion presented by Henry Louis Gates Jr. regarding the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. "Dunbar...admits the defeat of his attempt to register his authentic black voice in the tradition of Western poetry" (*Signifying Monkey* 115). Gates Jr's Dunbar example suggests that Black Americans can only operate in conflict with traditional Western forms. Perhaps even going against his own philosophies of Black expression (Baker 73), Baraka's explanation of the origins of the Blues proves that African Americans can develop authentically Black structures via experimentation with traditional Western formal poetic practice.

Imani Perry, a professor of African American Studies at Princeton University, agrees with my assertion that a rigid bifurcation between Western formalism and Black American vernacular expression cannot accurately account for the types of cultural productions developed by and celebrated by African Americans. For example, she notes that the song known today as the Black National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" was "initially imagined by James [Weldon Johnson] as a poem" (Perry, *May We Forever* 6). The poet, James Weldon Johnson, and his brother, set this poem to music. The song which certainly does not use vernacular speech

like the Blues or Hip Hop, is familiar to Black American households around the country, illustrating that formal artistic constructions are still resonant in the community. Perry continues to debunk the false boundary between formal and vernacular-centered creative practice in African American cultural production:

By asserting the cross-class and multigenre and style collage of black formalist rituals, I...am disagreeing with a good deal of African American studies criticism. A distinction has sometimes been made by such critics that treats art (or behaviors) deemed vernacular or “folk” as the only truly authentic forms of black expression, while the classical (e.g., European concert music) is simply seen as a mimicry of European cultural forms. That distinction is largely erroneous. (*May We Forever* 11)

Perry suggests that the lines between classical/formal artistic production and folk/vernacular production are more blurred than scholars are willing to acknowledge. Illustrating the inadequacy of such a distinction, in the following sections we will see examples of Black American poetry that engage traditional Western poetic practice, while also utilizing vernacular speech and music in ways that attest to the long tradition in African American cultural production of repurposing form to serve the artistic objectives of the community.

Langston Hughes, Blues Poet

Perhaps no writer serves as a more appropriate exemplar of the relationship between the Blues and poetic practice and the experimentation with the Western poetic tradition than Langston Hughes. Amiri Baraka underwrites this idea by declaring that Hughes himself is quite simply “what we mean when we talk about African American poetry” (Baraka, “Post-Racial”). The consistent presence of the vernacular tradition of Black speech within Hughes’ writing

illustrates how he achieves an authentic Black voice within his poetics. However, it is not as if Hughes' incorporation of the Blues and Black speech into literary poetry was universally celebrated initially.

For some, Hughes' poetic experimentations were in fact anathema to the craft of traditional poetry. In his review of Langston Hughes' *The Weary Blues*, Countee Cullen, an ardent poetic formalist, writes:

The revival meeting excites me, cooling and flushing me with the alternate chills and fevers of emotion; so do these poems. But when the storm is over, I wonder if the quiet way of communing is not more spiritual for the God-seeking heart; and in the light of reflection I wonder if jazz poems really belong to that dignified company, that select and austere circle of high literary expression which we call poetry. (Cullen 38)

It might be at this precise moment between Hughes and Cullen that a clear demarcation between Western formal poetics and vernacular was codified in African American literary criticism. Langston Hughes becomes the torchbearer of musicality and the vernacular in poetry, while Cullen seems to foreshadow Robert Pinsky's delineation between the art of the poet and the art of the performer.

Hughes' poems from *The Weary Blues* are in no way the first embrace of vernacular or musicality in African American poetry, but they do represent a paragon of this core relationship. According to Stephen Henderson, "the blues as a literary form was developed and refined by Langston Hughes" (*Blues Ideology* 50). Houston Baker concurs with this characterization when he writes that "Hughes may be more comprehensible within the framework of Afro-American verbal and musical performance than within the borrowed framework of written inscriptions of cultural metaphor" (96). Baker here echoes Kelefa Sanneh's phonocentric contentions regarding

the poetry of Jay-Z, while Cullen's critiques of Hughes speak to the textualist contentions of Robert Pinsky. Within the work of Hughes, we find more ground for the arguments between the phonocentric and textual ends of the oral/scrabal binary. While a formalist like Cullen was skeptical of Hughes' work, it's clear that to many, including Baker and Baraka, Hughes was a poet of vernacular Black speech, and his musical verse beamed an unmistakably Black voice.

Perhaps the tension involved within the dichotomy discussed earlier between phonocentrism and textualism, represented by the arguments of Kelefa Sanneh and Robert Pinsky, has its roots in a concept that Baker calls "literary integrationism." Baker explains that many Black American literary critics advocated for "the vanishing of Afro-American expression qua Afro-American expression" before the arrival of the Black Arts movement (71). This "integrationism holds that structurally peculiar forms are trapped in evolutionary backwater" (70). Cullen's critiques of Hughes's poetry, that his work may not achieve the level of "high literary expression," would certainly fit within the concept of literary integrationism described by Baker. By imposing a ceiling on the achievements of Hughes' work, Cullen's arguments embody a charge brought by Baker that such integrationist proponents insist that "black writers. . . construct expressive products in ways that make them acceptable in the sight of those who mold a 'single standard of criticism'" (Baker 71). It would seem, for Baker, Hughes' work emerges as an antidote to the literary integrationist principles advocated by Cullen.

Black American Sonnets

If, in one reading of the African American literary tradition, Hughes' work is synonymous with the concept of Black poetry, his work also serves as an intersection between formal poetic practice and the presence of musicality in African American verse. I argue that

instead of viewing Western form as something African Americans sometimes work within, as the relationship between the Blues and the ballad demonstrates, Black artists often repurpose form to meet their artistic needs. To explain this notion, I point to an idea advanced by poet Nathaniel Mackey, which upends the notion of language being simply imposed on Black people. Mackey instead maintains that the English language has been "broken into" by Black Americans (272). I extend Mackey's idea of breaking into language to the poet who breaks into form. Once we have seen how Black artists, like Hughes, break into form, we can then see how form serves as a mechanism for Hip Hop artists to break into poetic practice outside of traditional literary culture.

One form that has been consistently "broken into" by African American writers, including Hughes, is perhaps the most famous fixed form in English poetry, the sonnet. Across three centuries, the sonnet form has attracted African American writers as a structure for poetic expression and experimentation. From the sonnets of Cordelia Ray to those of Claude McKay to those of Patricia Smith, time and again African American poets have sought out this form as an opportunity to engage the constraints of the structure. The sonnet has been in use in the English language "since the mid-sixteenth century" and is probably "the best known" British form of poetry (Caplan, *Poetic Form* 70; Fussell 126). The sonnet first found a home in Italy several centuries earlier and, as a result, represents the epitome of European poetic formalism. Accordingly, the use of poetic form by Black American poets could bring accusations of literary integrationism. However, despite such a potential association with the sonnet and traditional formal poetics, Black American poets continue to "break into" the sonnet.

Hughes' reputation as a Blues poet makes his sonnets a good starting point for an examination of African Americans' use of the sonnet form. Timo Müller writes that Hughes' "vernacular sonnets provided a generative matrix for the Afro-modernist project" (254). There's

no doubt that one of the reasons Müller depicts these vernacular sonnets as "modernist" is because they break from the traditional sonnets in several ways. The formal shifts that develop from the Modernist break from traditional poetic practice are discussed thoroughly in chapter 2. However, Hughes' sequence of sonnets (or un-sonnets) is an important example of how modernist writers broke from but also broke into traditional forms. This point is emphasized in the title of the sequence, *Seven Moments of Love, an Un-Sonnet Sequence in Blues* from his poetry collection, *Shakespeare in Harlem*. The title represents a sort of breaking into traditional poetic practice, but also an attempt to elevate the poetic practice of the Blues. Also, in true Hip Hop fashion, the collection's title serves to honor the famous sonneteer and "OG" in the game, William Shakespeare.

Hughes departs from the sonnet form in ways that go beyond the minor deviations occasionally employed by traditional sonneteers. Hughes' sonnets, or un-sonnets, break from the form to the point that it becomes highly debatable if some of the poems are sonnets at all. This maneuver is like that of a celebrated modernist poet, Robert Duncan, whose sonnets – written a quarter of a century after those of Hughes – similarly challenge the form (Duncan 3). While Hughes' poems reflect a modernist approach, contesting the traditional form, of equal interest are the ways in which these poems operate in harmony with that form.

In the second sonnet of the *Seven Moments* sequence, "Supper Time," Hughes keeps the fourteen-line arrangement of the sonnet but varies his syllable count per line. Still, Hughes vacillates between nine, ten, and eleven syllable lines, suggesting that he is dancing very close to the standard sonnet (ten syllables per line) with a purpose in mind. Another indicator of Hughes's desire to approximate the form in these un-sonnets can be found with sonnets 1, 3, and 4. These sonnets vary in the number of lines per poem, between thirteen and fifteen lines, again

hovering around the standard form—fourteen lines. In both syllable count and poem line length, Hughes stays strikingly close to the form, denoting his interest in acknowledging the form while actively breaking from it (Hughes 217–20). In other words, Hughes breaks into the form and makes it his own.

Hughes' innovative sonnets disrupted the form, a break from the traditional sonnets of his Harlem Renaissance peers Claude McKay and Countee Cullen. However, some more recent African American sonneteers have stayed closer to form. While the sonnets of Terrance Hayes and Natasha Trethewey read almost like free verse sonnets, in particular for their freedom from rhyme, the sonnets of poets like Patricia Smith pay close attention to traditional form while demonstrating the bounce and verve of musical influence:

The Temps, all swerve and pivot, conjured schemes
that had us skipping school, made us forget
how mamas schooled us hard against the threat
of five-part harmony and sharkskin seams. (P. P. Smith 101)

In this opening quatrain from her sonnet crown *Motown Crown*, Smith embraces the rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan version of the sonnet form. Smith captures the music of Motown and deploys the poetics of Black speech. She clearly doesn't find the template of the sonnet as limiting. Here, and throughout the sequence, Smith demonstrates the continuous blending of song and Black speech with poetry in African American verse, exemplifying Henderson's notion of Black speech and music as integral to the Black American poetic project and demonstrating kinship with the experiments in rhyme and form found in Hip Hop.

Another contemporary sonneteer, Pulitzer Prize winning poet Tyehimba Jess, executes a similar embrace of music and Black speech in his crown of sonnets, *Sonnets for Blind Tom*. Jess

executes his sonnets holding close to form, though not as much as Smith, while also preserving a Blues aesthetic similar to that of Hughes. His use of musicality in poetry reaches its height when Jess writes in the voice of Tom himself in the sonnet "Blind Tom plays on...":

Who am I to deny this world? This gift
of music storming through me? It howls out
my fingers when I reach into God's mouth
of piano, grabbin' fistfuls of sun with
each song... (Jess, "Sonnet Crown for Blind Tom")

Jess replicates the Blues "holler" that Baraka spoke of that "howls out...grabbin' fistfuls of sun." Despite Jess' commitment to musicality as the driving aesthetic for this sonnet, he still stays close to form. The only departure here is that he opens with a Petrarchan quatrain ABBA but then moves to the Shakespearean rhyme scheme for the next two quatrains. Jess isn't breaking form here as much as he is remixing it. Still, his reliance on traditional form does not impede the Blues aesthetic in the verse, that "wave of notes in the dark / gospel of the universe." Form, repetition, and rhyme all coalesce in the poem and are then mixed by Jess with African American vernacular and Blues sensibility. The result is another example of an African American poet appropriating a Western form—in this case the sonnet form—and demonstrating the power of musicality and orality in poetic verse. Jess shows, like Smith and Hughes, that form can provide a template for Black American poetry and that the rules of form don't necessarily restrict African American cultural expression.

For well over a century, African American poets have shown an affinity for the sonnet. Such blending of form with Black speech and Black music helps us understand the connection between form and Hip Hop poetics. However, first, I'll let another notable poet who admires the

form, Jay-Z, advance my argument. He addresses the issue of form and the intersections between Hip Hop and the sonnet in his memoir and selected volume of poetry, *DECODED*:

Sonnets have a set structure but also a limited subject matter... Taking on such a familiar subject and writing about it in a set structure forced sonnet writers to find every nook and cranny in the subject and challenged them to invent new language for saying old things... When we take the most familiar subject in... rap—why I’m dope—and frame it within the sixteen-bar structure of a rap verse... more than anything it’s a test of creativity. (Jay-Z 26)

Jay-Z’s analysis of the sonnet reveals the basis for form in poetry. When Jay-Z discusses the structure of a sonnet, he is highlighting the underlying skeleton that the poet uses to build her work from, fourteen lines in the sonnet and sixteen bars for the Hip Hop verse. When he points out the need to invent new language within these frameworks, he asserts that the constraint of form functions as inspiration towards creativity.

Black American sonneteers take the sources most associated with Black American poetics, Black speech and music, and deploy them within the traditional, structural framework of a sonnet, just as the emcee combines Black speech and music within a Hip Hop verse. Black literary and oral poetics both find, within the constraints of form, an effective location for constructing cultural products. Stephen Henderson explains that “an attempt should be made in which the continuity and the wholeness of the Black poetic tradition in the United States are suggested. That tradition exists on two main levels, the written and the oral, which sometimes converge” (3). This convergence represents a two-way street between the oral and the scribal, with music as the conduit and Black speech as the poetry’s vehicle.

Reframing the Black Literary Tradition

With Henderson in mind, it seems an analysis of the Black literary tradition which attempts to incorporate Hip Hop as a vital, contemporary continuation of this tradition would do so on the grounds of music and poetry. Music and poetics have operated and will continue, for the foreseeable future, to operate synergistically in Black American artistic production, a two-way street between oral and scribal cultures. Such a recognition combines the Blues; the dozens; the lyrics of Hip Hop emcees; the poetics of Hughes, Smith, Jess, and several others; into one elastic continuum of oral/scribal expressions that are wholeheartedly devoted to Black speech and music. Ben Glaser provides evidence for such a vision of Hip Hop within the long-standing relationship between rhythm, song, and literature in the African American community:

The notion of rhythm and song as an organic ground for racial community has been viewed positively (and even as a necessity) from W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) to critical writings of the 1920s (Zora Neale Hurston's and Langston Hughes's, especially) ...and contemporary critical work on poetry and musical genres, particularly hip-hop. (Glaser 418)

Glaser helps illuminate the fact that Hip Hop continues generations-old experiments with song and the written word in African American discourse.

In the spirit of these ongoing poetic experiments, in the early '90s, two activist poets from the Hip Hop generation, Ras Baraka and Kevin Powell developed a project aimed at establishing the contemporary continuation for the Black American literary tradition which accounted for Hip Hop's place within this continuum. The anthology *In the Tradition: An Anthology of Young Black Writers* represents one of the first times an effort was made to address the relationship between Hip Hop culture and the African American literary tradition. Powell and

Baraka, the son of literary giant Amiri Baraka, make clear that the art of the Hip Hop generation represents a continuation "of artistic, political, spiritual and psychological struggle," and evolves from political movements as well as literary movements from "the echoes of the Harlem Renaissance...(to) the Black Arts Movement." What the editors describe as a "Black Conscious Movement" is intrinsically connected to Hip Hop culture which serves as their "generation's contribution to the legacy of great Black music." However, this movement – as was the case of previous Black American artistic movements – is a multi-disciplinary phenomenon of "poetry and fiction and art and music" (Powell and R. Baraka 14).

While the works published in the anthology are poems and prose pieces that were intentionally written for the page, a significant characteristic of many of these works is an unabashed embrace of Hip Hop's place in literature. One poem by scholar Jabari Asim captures the relation between Hip Hop and its musical antecedents and poetry's place in this relationship:

the light of true poetic expression,
breaking the back of systematic oppression
liberatin language, demandin attention
helpin hip hop to another dimension
jazz & rap combustible conflation (Powell and Baraka 55)

These lines by Asim echo the objectives of the collection's editors to represent Hip Hop's influence on a new generation's artistic practices and place it within a larger arc of cultural production. Further, the lines of Asim's work stand as an example of the type of rhyming couplets first found in the Blues, the dozens, and eventually Hip Hop, which demonstrates the continuum of Black speech and music that together have composed much of the Black American literary tradition.

Nearly thirty years after this effort by Baraka and Powell, Hip Hop's place in the literary tradition of African America has yet to be fully established, despite several subsequent efforts at capturing Hip Hop's literary qualities. It seems surprising with the rise of Hip Hop studies that we have yet to find a full, coherent accounting of Hip Hop's place in the African American literary tradition. While, as scholar Derik Smith notes, "many scholars have sought the poetic origins of hip-hop, tracing them into the BAM [Black Arts Movement]" (D. Smith 213), these treatments can't be sufficient when we know that Hip Hop operates on a much larger continuum of African American cultural production. I expand on the connections with Black Arts Movement in chapter 4, but in this chapter, studies of Langston Hughes and the Blues display through the threads of Black speech and music that Hip Hop reaches much further back than its most recent poetic antecedent.

Further, by showing how the works of Tyehimba Jess, like Hip Hop, help continue the tradition of Hughes and the Blues, I've spoken to a complication that Smith denotes: "a much smaller number of scholars have offered glancing assessments of the relation between blackademic poetry and hip-hop texts." Smith continues to explain that it might be appropriate to think "of poet-professors and MCs in tandem, as cousins in the diverse and fragmenting family of contemporary black poetics" (213). By situating these two lanes of Black American poetry within a longer arced continuum, I've begun the project that Smith calls for and intend to expand on it in the forthcoming chapters.

Still, the earlier arguments of the oral/scribal binary persist, particularly that of Kelefa Sanneh's challenge that some literary critics desire to "elevate" the rapper to the status of poet. For Sanneh, this project of calling Hip Hop poetry is essentially a contemporary attempt at the type of literary integrationism described by Baker. He says as much:

when Jay-Z insists that his lyrics should be heard—read—as poetry, or when Bradley and [Andrew] DuBois produce an anthology designed to win for rappers the status of poets. They are, all of them, trading cachet, and their eagerness to make this trade suggests that they are trading up—that hip-hop, despite its success, still aches for respect and recognition. It stands to reason, then, that as the genre’s place in the cultural firmament grows more secure its advocates will grow less envious of poetry’s allegedly exalted status. (Sanneh, "Word")

While Sanneh’s suggestion that we scholars of Hip Hop poetics are “trading up” is harsh, it’s not as if his argument is without merit. After all, we know that Hip Hop has evolved outside traditional literary circles. What, then, is the purpose of locating Hip Hop within a tradition it never attempted to claim? First, as exemplified in the connection between Al-Amin’s work, it’s untrue that Hip Hop never tried to claim a literary heritage. Second, when speaking about the exalted status of “poetry,” Sanneh overlooks the circumstance that there is vast difference between the established literary canon and the poetic projects of Black Americans. Henry Louis Gates Jr. addresses this point, writing that, “I believe black writers...turn to the vernacular...to ground one’s literary practice outside of the Western tradition. Whereas black writers most certainly revise texts in the Western tradition, they often seek to do so ‘authentically,’ with a black difference, a compelling sense of difference based on the black vernacular” (*Signifying* xxii). Accordingly, as Hip Hop emerges as a contemporary form of literature, its materialization outside of traditional literary poetry circles is not so much an indictment of all poetry but, still, clearly represents a manifestation outside of preconceived, often academic notions of what poetry is. When viewed this way, Hip Hop merely extends the great tradition of Black American

poets who have sought to use Western traditional poetic practice but rewrite these forms with a “Black difference” – differences that are most informed by Black speech and music.

To ignore Hip Hop’s continuation of the Black American literary tradition is to unnecessarily cut it off from a part of its own story. After all, Hip Hop is a multi-disciplinary artistic movement. By discussing the poetry of the movement, we don’t undermine its many other aspects; rather, we better appreciate the wider breadth of those aspects, including music, dance, graphic arts, and, yes, poetry.

The primary reason critics shudder at discussions of Hip Hop poetics is a failure to capture the multi-disciplinary approach to artistic production that has always been present in African American creative expression. A clearer picture helps us see that Hip Hop, as an American poetic form, continues a long project of African American literary expression which has always shared relationship with other artistic spheres, in particular music. I maintain that Hip Hop is the most significant American poetic form of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and perhaps ever, making it all the more vital to account for its place within its respective tradition. Further, I argue that finding Hip Hop’s place within the greater literary tradition empowers scholars to finally stop discussing the merits of whether Hip Hop is literature. Instead, scholars of Hip Hop poetics can turn their focus to the characteristics of this poetic form, its social significance, and the implications of the work to the field of literature and to society at large.

Derik Smith addresses the emergence of scholarly discussions of Hip Hop poetics and offers a question that speaks to why Hip Hop poetics deserves further scholarly investigation. Smith asks, “if rap is poetry and MCs are poets, a primary scholarly question would have to be:

Has human culture ever been more deeply steeped in verse?" (213). As this chapter and this entire project indicate, the answer to Smith's question is simple: No, it has not.

Chapter 2

How Many Bars You Got? Form as Collective Practice

Introduction

A full appreciation of Hip Hop poetics requires understanding of Hip Hop's form, a fact that might be truer for this genre than for any other province of contemporary poetry. In chapter 1, I argued that Hip Hop operates as an extension to the art productions of African American music and literature, continuing the melding of these two worlds. Understanding its form leads to a better understanding of the connection between music and literature in Hip Hop. Poetic forms, like the ballad as one example, have historically operated as lyrics of poetry as well as lyrics for song because formulaic poetics speak back to the earliest roots of poetry. More than much of the poetry of the twentieth century, Hip Hop embraces form and, in essence, is a wholly formalist genre of poetry. By formalist, I mean that the genre's practitioners are committed to produce work within a single (even if sometimes elastic), predetermined form. The sonneteer and the haiku maker establish kinship with their fellow craftspeople by working within the same form as others, such is the case with the poets of Hip Hop.

In this chapter, I will examine how form functions as the axis for Hip Hop verse, the point from which all Hip Hop poets operate within or around. This chapter will be divided into four sections with appropriate subsections, designed to further our understanding of form's function in Hip Hop. First, I will provide a background on the role of *form in poetry* and how the critical conversations regarding it have evolved over time. I will then give a brief overview of the movement from formal verse towards free verse in contemporary poetry to help explain how and why these conversations on form have evolved since the dawn of Modernism. Second, I will

discuss the relationship between *musicality and Hip Hop verse* by focusing on the relationship between musical verse structure and poetic verse structure. I will then offer a case study to illustrate the relationship between musicality and formal poetic verse in Hip Hop by demonstrating how the production *Hamilton: An American Musical* appropriates the formal verse poetics of Hip Hop and reintroduces poetic drama to the contemporary theater by employing formal verse poetics in the same manner as did William Shakespeare. Having shown formal verse poetics in action in Hip Hop verse, I will then pivot to discuss the important *elements of form* in Hip Hop: constraint, structure, rhyme, and rhythm. It is these core elements that establish a Hip Hop verse, and it is these principles that all emcees negotiate when crafting their art products, which I will illustrate by using examples from Jean Grae, Mos Def, and others. Finally, I will offer a *theory of form* in Hip Hop, synthesizing my discussions of form and its relation to Hip Hop to provide a rationale for the “function” of form in Hip Hop, shedding new light on this profoundly impactful artistic genre. I will ultimately argue that a deeper analysis of Hip Hop’s use of form helps illuminate how Hip Hop re-establishes collectivism in poetry, a move that effectively undoes some of the movement towards individualism in poetry from the dawn of the twentieth century.

Form in Poetry

Classical Conceptions of Form

Thinking of form, I am reminded of a common phrase I often hear (especially in advertisements), “when form meets function.” I suspect most people understand that phrase on a cursory level, but I doubt many seriously consider the definition of form when it passes through their ears. However, conceptions of form have been discussed in the Western tradition for

millennia. Plato helped define the concept of form as an ideal, a shape that determines how we compare something to another of its kind. For example, when we see a dog, we have in our mind a conception of what a dog is, and we decide if a particular furry, four-legged creature approximates our formal understanding of *dog*. If not, perhaps the creature is a cat or a bear, a fact we would determine based on our image (form) of what a cat or bear might be. However, Plato's interpretation is a bit more complicated. Plato suggests that there is an ideal image that exists beyond the thing: "There turn out, then, to be these three kinds of couches: one that *is* in nature, which we would say, I suppose, a god produced...And then one that the carpenter produced...And one that the painter produced..." (279). In this dialogue from Plato's *Republic*, writing as the voice of Socrates claims that there is a divine version of a form; this version is the ideal form. Essentially, God has created an ideal form, even for, say, a couch, and then the craftsperson makes an imperfect replica of this form. From here, the painter by painting a chair on a canvas makes an even less perfect replica or "imitation" of the ideal form. With this concept of imitation in mind, Plato, in the voice of Socrates, castigates poets as mere imitators, saying "The maker of the phantom, the imitator, we say, understands nothing of what is but rather of what looks like it *is*" (284).

One can imagine legendary rapper Big Daddy Kane vehemently disagreeing with Plato's suggestion that Kane, as a poet, is somehow not a creator; while at the same time, Kane might sympathize with the notion that others' works are poor copies of his rhymes, which are the real thing:

The creator, conductor of poetry

Et cetera, et cetera, it ain't easy being me

I speak clearly so you can understand

Put words together like Letter Man

Now that's dictation, proceeding to my innovation

Not like the other emcees that are an imitation

Or an animation, a cartoon to me ("Ain't No Half-Steppin'")

For Kane, the imitators are not great poets like him. The imitators are less skilled emcees whose works are cartoon-like versions of his own creations or, as Plato might say, phantoms of the original. While Plato may be dissing poets and Kane is uplifting greats like himself, from their musings, we can begin to understand how form allows the audience to approximate an understanding of an artistic project.

The most famous student from Plato's academy, Aristotle, offered a more material explanation of what form is: "as the bronze is to the statue...the matter or the formless object prior to receiving a form is that which has a form" (177). In the Aristotelian sense, form is something that contains matter. Skin cells, blood, hair, etc., are the matter which come together in the body, with the body being the form. Philosopher Saint Thomas Aquinas builds on Aristotle's conception of form by contending that essence is the combination of matter and form together:

Form and matter are known... But it cannot be said that one of these alone should be called the essence of the thing. That matter alone is not the essence of the thing is clear, because the thing is knowable through its essence... However, the form of a thing alone cannot be said to be its essence either... it is clear that the essence of a thing is what its definition signifies. But the definition of things of nature contains not only form, but matter as well...It is clear, therefore, that essence comprises both matter and form. (229)

For Aquinas, Plato, and Aristotle, form helps explain the mysteries of how we understand the human existence. If we take the material and mystical functions of form characterized by these traditional philosophers and then apply these understandings to the production of art, we can begin to see the ways form affects our reception of it. If an art product such as a poem or painting is “knowable through its essence,” perhaps the way we are impacted by that poem or painting comes from our appreciation of its essence – the feeling we derive from it or our understanding of what the art product means after we have consumed it.

If an audience is brought to tears by the performance of a ballerina, it could be that the audience has grasped the essence of the art product that the dancer has created. However, the audience would never get to that point of appreciation without form. This is why prima ballerina Misty Copeland explains that form is about finding “that center-balance when your feet are on the ground” (Copeland, “Tips for Hyperextension”). If Copeland cannot find her “center-balance,” the audience cannot appreciate her performance and will therefore miss the essence of what she is trying to accomplish with that performance. From Plato to Copeland to a commercial about office furniture, we find that form helps us understand the essence of the thing. It is with these various understandings of form in mind that I approach the concept of form in Hip Hop.

Conversations on Form

In many ways, a discussion of form in Hip Hop could, and perhaps should, be straightforward. Form, after all, is the template employed in the genre. Simply discussing the template, however, would overlook the numerous arguments surrounding form that have taken place in literary scholarship over several decades. Due to perceived political meanings of form, many of these dialogues have been quite contentious.

In 2000, the *Modern Language Quarterly* (MLQ) dedicated an entire issue to the topic of form and, in the process, opened a conversation for scholars to reconsider form heading into a new millennium. Various essays in this issue suggest a certain level of near trauma among academics discussing form. Heather Dubrow captures this sense of tension when she writes, “In the current critical climate, many scholars are far more comfortable detailing their sexual histories in print than confessing to an interest in literary form” (Hunter et al. 59). Ellen Rooney notes that the tensions involved in academic discourse of form result from the fact that “myriad constituencies have rallied in recent years in defense or defiance of the figure of form; even in what appear to be allied camps, the definitions, justifications, and hopes linked to the fortunes of formalism are often at odds” (Hunter et al. 17). Some of these arguments have caused confusion because the various camps could not seem to agree on the fundamental positions related to the different poles of the disagreement. Rooney continues, “But the champions and the denigrators of form hold significantly different assumptions about what counts as a formal analysis and about the benefits (or dangers) that flow from the reemergence of formalism” (Hunter et al. 19). Dubrow clarifies the political nature of these dialogues: “Academics committed to radical cultural critique variously (but usually not simultaneously) study form to reveal how it hides a conservative agenda or, alternatively, how it reflects and even encourages social change” (Hunter et al. 66). This idea of competing political camps aids in understanding not only the academic debates regarding form, but also the evolution of form in modern and contemporary poetry.

Particularly important in the academic discourse on form are the charges that scholarly focus on formalism is conservative or even worse fascist. Virgil Nemoianu sarcastically sums up the spirit behind these arguments in that same issue of MLQ:

Aesthetic formalism is a seedbed of reactionary forces; it is the source of pernicious ideologies and indeed of the politics of traditionalism and fascism. It is a cunningly devised mask behind which malignant forces prepare hideous stratagems to stunt the collective happiness and luminous progress of humanity. Are we not entitled, then, to declare that form and meaning are fascist? (42)

Scholar J. Paul Hunter, also writing in the *MLQ*, underwrites the sentiments of Nemoianu, noting “the tendency, still prevalent despite the theoretical and historical sophistication of recent versions of formalism, to regard formal work as somehow reactionary and politically or ideologically suspect” (Hunter et al. 110). If it is “politically suspect” and “reactionary” to center the role of form in literary discourse, what could it mean for discussing form in a genre like Hip Hop, having made its name as an oppositional, anti-establishment force generated by poor working-class Black and Brown people?

Thankfully, arguments in favor of formalism have resisted the idea that the study is in some way conservative or fascist. Returning to Ellen Rooney: “Form is an obvious feature of every literary text... a new formalism...must insist that form is also a feature of every [other kind of] text; even formlessness is in some special sense a case of form” (Hunter et al. 33). Rooney notes here that all texts have form, which is true. However, as I have noted before, formalism is particularly noteworthy in Hip Hop because all of Hip Hop’s poets are working within the same form. Perhaps, the aversion towards formalism expressed in scholarly discourse has resulted in the unintended consequence of students and scholars missing the fact that a significant cultural force in the lives of many students is also significant form of poetry. Hunter lends credence to this argument when he writes, “The legacy of the generation old...revulsion against formalism means...that the teaching of elemental prosodic skills has almost disappeared

from the curriculum, leaving students with less knowledge than they need (and now want) to address basic formal questions in an informed and practiced way” (Hunter et al. 110). Despite the fact that, as Rooney notes, all literature has a form, contemporary scholarship’s move away from formalism has resulted in classrooms where students no longer learn the basics of formalism. One could make the argument that more term papers might have been written over the past several decades on Hip Hop’s form had student’s been made more aware of how form works in poetry. In turn, more seminar papers, theses, and dissertations would undoubtedly have been written on Hip Hop’s form, which is why, as Hip Hop’s role as a poetic form becomes more regularly studied in academia, an overdue accounting of formalism in Hip Hop is so pressing at this juncture.

An inquiry into form in Hip Hop, on the one hand, reflects a timeless desire for understanding the aesthetic structures of artistic production, while also opening new ground for continued disagreements on the battlefield of formalism. Speaking to the interminable nature of conflicts regarding the study of formalism, Nemoianu depicts these discussions in historical context:

In sum, both the emergence of and the attraction for aesthetic form are continuous presences in literary and cultural history. The unyielding hostility to them is equally permanent: only its justification varies over the centuries: it may be religious, philosophical, ideological, socioeconomic, or otherwise. Almost inevitably, students of literature are obliged to choose one side or the other. (Hunter et al. 57)

Nemoianu suggests that discussions of formalism will always, ultimately, lead to factionalism. It would be foolhardy to presume such tribal scholarly arguments could not also appear in an analysis of Hip Hop’s form, a matter explored later in this chapter. For now, however, it will be

important to more specifically articulate how tensions regarding formalism helped set the stage for the emergence of a new, adamantly formal poetics known as Hip Hop.

Background—Free Verse vs Formal Verse

To understand why Hip Hop's use of a predetermined template is considered a novel approach in contemporary poetry, it helps to first understand the difference between formal verse (or fixed verse) poetry and free verse poetry. Early in my poetry and Hip Hop classes, I often ask my poetry students if Hip Hop is free verse poetry or formal verse poetry. Before taking my class, most of my students do not have a strong grasp of poetic form and likely could not explain the difference between free verse and formal verse. Additionally, many students, when unsure of an answer, are reluctant to respond to a question for fear of getting it wrong. Yet, when I ask the question *is Hip Hop formal verse or free verse?*, almost every student of mine confidently answers the question: *Hip Hop is free verse*. Why are my students so confident on this issue? I believe that, even if my students can't fully understand the meaning of free verse, they have unconsciously internalized an association between free verse and ideas of free thinking and unencumbered artistic expression. Formal verse, on the other hand, is stuffy and old, which explains why scholar Meredith Martin asks, "why do most contemporary poets think that metrical poems are conservative or 'old fashioned?'" (1). Somehow, this same sentiment has trickled down to my students who are mostly fans of Hip Hop and would not want to associate it with "old-fashioned" poetry. Examining the beginning of poetry's move towards free verse will help to shed light on the source for my students' misunderstandings of Hip Hop's form.

According to American Poet, Robert Hass, free verse comes from the French, "verse libre." "Free verse doesn't have a set rule about the number and position of stressed and

unstressed syllables” explains Hass (115–17). To fully appreciate the roots of free verse, it is important to note that the movement from formal verse to free verse starts perhaps with the earlier movement towards blank verse. Hass explains that “poets writing free verse had to have gotten their idea of what constitutes a stanza from somewhere, and my hunch is they got it from blank verse” (115). Hass draws a corollary between free verse and blank verse. Blank verse, which we know from Shakespeare’s plays and epic poems or from John Milton’s works like *Paradise Lost*, is a metered poetry, which, therefore, still operates within a formal template, albeit, without rhyming.

The movement from metered rhyme poetry to metered unrhymed poetry was likely a first step in poetry’s movement towards free verse. American founding father Thomas Jefferson in his “Thoughts on Prosody” prophesizes contemporary poetry’s movement away from rhyme: “What proves the excellence of blank verse is that the taste lasts longer than that for rhyme. The fondness for the jingle leaves us with that for the rattles and baubles of childhood...” (619). Accordingly, it was one of Jefferson’s countrymen, born six years before Jefferson’s death, who ultimately would usher in the birth of the free verse movement.

Perhaps the most notable person in the development of free verse is the poet Walt Whitman, who is often called the father of free verse (Reynolds 314). In *Leaves of Grass*, the immortal epic poem “Song of Myself,” he writes:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume, you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,

I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass. (Whitman 22)

Whitman's line breaks alone show how he is clearly breaking from rigid forms, eschewing the near matching line lengths of formal poems like the sonnet. Also, Whitman makes clear that his poems won't be driven by rhyme, as this opening sequence has no end rhyme. Due to his forceful breaks from formal verse, Whitman becomes the first well-known free verse poet and helps to establish what becomes known as the American literary tradition. In other words, prior to Whitman, while there had been poets in the United States such as Anne Bradstreet, Phillis Wheatley, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, there hadn't been a concept one would describe as the American literary tradition until Whitman. Such a tradition starts to crystallize under Whitman, along with prose writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. The books these luminaries wrote between 1850-55 stand out as some of the most foundational texts of the American literary tradition according to F.O. Matthiessen: "You might search all the rest of American literature without being able to collect a group of books equal to these in imaginative vitality" (vii). While contemporary scholars would likely argue with Matthiessen's narrow conception of great American literature, his recognition of Whitman as one of the traditionally accepted foundational American literary figures helps illustrate why Whitman's work established the flourishing of free verse poetry in the twentieth century.

Scholar Derek Attridge notes that "Whitman broke with metrical form altogether—a revolutionary step which in the twentieth century Pound, Elliot, and Williams, and others confirmed and developed" (167). Specifically, Elliot, Pound, and Hilga Doolittle (HG) established a school of thought that strongly advocated for a movement towards the full embrace of free verse in poetry, a movement they labeled the Imagist movement. Speaking on Modernist

poetry like the Imagists, scholar Meredith Martin explains the generally accepted scholarly narrative regarding the evolution of poetry into free verse:

In content but more importantly in form, the movements associated with the experimental avant-garde in the period before, during, and after the First World War changed the course of contemporary Anglophone poetry, loosening the ‘shackles of meter,’ the ticktock of its regular metronome, unleashing freedom of expression and experimentation, while creating new polyphonic, polyglossial, polyrhythmic poems. (3)

While Martin cautions that there is more to the story than what we have been told, she establishes that Modernism was credited with ushering in the era of free verse poetry. After Imagism, the hallmark of Modernist poetry became the embrace of free verse poetics. And while Imagism was primarily a European invention, American poets from William Carlos Williams to Robert Duncan to Amiri Baraka to Sonia Sanchez would go on to embrace free verse poetics.

The tension between formalism and free verse also reared its head in the development of African American poetics. Harlem Renaissance poets like Claude McKay and Countee Cullen worked in form, but others, as the Imagists did, chose to break away from traditional forms. Langston Hughes, while experimenting in various forms, wrote mostly in free verse. While I wrote extensively about his work in chapter 1, it is important to note again that Hughes’ embrace of free verse, experiments with Blues forms, breaking of forms, and novel use of rhyme outside of predetermined form all helped prepare for the free verse poems of the New York School, The Beat Poets, and The Black Arts movement. As a result of these various developments from works of Whitman to Hughes and in between, by the 1960s, most celebrated poetry written in the United States was written in free verse.

Feminist poets writing in the late '60s and early '70s like Ntozake Shange, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich (a recovered formalist) all wrote poems in free verse. Less overtly political poets like Rita Dove, a writer who is credited as the progenitor of much of contemporary African American poetry, also wrote in mostly free verse (Gordinier, "The Dark Room Collective"). By the 1980s, free verse poetry became the established norm in poetic practice. Poet and critic Dana Gioia in his famous essay "Notes on the New Formalism" said as much when he exclaimed that "free verse, the creation of an older literary revolution, is now the long established, ruling orthodoxy." Gioia became part of a new school of poets labeled the New Formalists. While the New Formalists themselves, notably Timothy Steele and Annie Finch, urged for a return to formalist poetics, this movement built slowly to the point where today there are many established contemporary poets who write in traditional form, a fact that I addressed in chapter 1 in my evaluation of the African American sonnet. However, while the New Formalists were pushing back against the orthodoxy of free verse, a school of poetics was growing outside of the traditionally recognized literary sphere – a school that also embraced formal poetics. However, unlike the New Formalists, Hip Hop emcees did not choose form as a way of being in conversation with earlier traditional, academically celebrated poetic forms. Rather, the poets of Hip Hop chose formal poetics because of the intertwined relationship between music, lyric, and speech within African American Vernacular discourse.

Orality and Musicality in Hip Hop Verse

Orality and Poetic Form

As I just noted, one contemporary poetic movement that grappled with questions of form in Modern poetry was a small group of literary poets labeled the New Formalists. Poetry critic

Robert McPhillips in his book *The New Formalism* mentions that he became familiar with the movement at an MLA panel in 1986 where he notes an argument between poetics scholar John Hollander and Dana Gioia:

One of the highlights of that panel was a debate between Hollander and Gioia on whether poetry was initially an oral or a written art. Oddly—considering he takes the opposite position in his handbook on poetics, *Rhymes Reason*—Hollander argued for the latter, Gioia the former...I heard on that occasion...a tenet of the New Formalism often articulated by Gioia: that poetry was first and foremost an oral form and rhyme and meter central elements of oral poetry; that these virtues were considered outmoded by a generation of free-verse poets; and that these were poetic virtues that—along with narrative—Gioia and others of his generation saw as vital elements necessary to be restored to poetry if it hoped to reestablish something resembling the mainstream audience still enjoyed by serious writers of fiction...(x)

According to McPhillips, the New Formalists viewed poetry's movement away from formal verse poetics as a movement away from orality, which in their view was the bedrock of poetry. Further, the New Formalists believed that the movement away from formal verse led to the shrinking of poetry's contemporary audience.

As I discussed in chapter 1, the intersection between the oral and the scribal is where we find the role of form in Hip Hop. "What the formal resemblance reminds us is that poetic form grows out of the natural habits of speech" (A. Bradley 21). Adam Bradley highlights the intersection of music, poetics, and orality that we find in Hip Hop as connections that are also found in all of poetry. As a form of oral literature, Hip Hop is concerned with rhythm and rhyme which in Gioia and Bradley's estimation are the same reasons that, traditionally, poetics have

been concerned with the elements of form. Hollander's arguments in favor of poetry as a written art seem absurd for a poet as versed in traditional forms as he is, which might be why he apparently abandoned that view in his own treatise on form. That said, Hollander's arguments about the primacy of the written word, as I noted in chapter 1, have been made time and again.

Poetic Verse and Musicality

A better understanding of poetry's roots in orality emerges when examining poetry's relationship to music. While I considered the relationship between music and poetry in chapter 1 regarding the relationship between musical and poetic verse, in this chapter we will analyze the relationship between poetry and music in a broader sense, specifically examining the historical kinship between musical verse structure and poetic verse structure. As Thomas Jefferson noted, "the poet...has studied the human ear. He has discovered that in any rhythmical composition the ear is pleased...which it may divide the composition into parts, as a piece of music is divided into bars" (614). The notion that there is a clear distinction between poetry and music betrays the history of poetry and its direct relationship to song.

Regarding the relationship between music and poetic verse, Julia P. Dabney writes at the turn of the twentieth century that "in the beginning, out of mists of Time, hand in hand, came those twin sisters of Art, Music and Verse. Man, in the exuberant infancy of the race, instinctively danced, and as he danced he sang...Thus was the birth of literature in music" (1). Scholar C.H. Wang cosigns this romance between poetic verse and music when discussing the *Shih Shing*, the earliest extant poems known to human history. Wang explains "that the *Shih Shing* lyrics originated in music is unquestionable" (2). Wang and Dabney's assertions regarding

the earliest connections music and poetry also relate to poetry in England. Scholar Michael McKie noted this about the arrival of the troubadours in England:

The earliest and hence most influential model was that of the troubadours, known in England from the end of the twelfth century, when Henry...and his sons brought troubadour poets to England. The troubadours seem to have adapted the rhymed stanzaic forms of the later sequences to vernacular poetry, and the invention of new and more intricate rhyme schemes was a primary concern...Their verse was composed for song, although, for the first time, poetic form was more important than musical form, and sometimes melodies were composed after verbal composition. (828)

For the overwhelming majority of its existence, poetry has been viewed as an oral literature. Poetry was written with a consideration for rhythm, typically for song, so the relationship between poetry and song cannot and should not be neatly separated.

For a time, the portability of the written word carried value because previously, for millennia, poetry was primarily disseminated and learned via oral performance. Today, however, technology is restoring the accessibility of orality in poetry. The portability of video and audio media have made oral, performed poetry just as accessible as the written forms. So, perhaps the supremacy of poetry in written form (if there ever was such a moment) might remain short lived in the arc of human history. This is not to imply that poetry and Hip Hop lack a function in written form, which will be addressed more thoroughly in chapter 4. Simply, orality and musicality are inextricably linked in poetry, which is why these elements come together so seamlessly in Hip Hop verse.

Hip Hop as Formal Verse

While essential to Hip Hop, form does not serve the same function for a lot of contemporary poetry. If I were to provide a random group of people with Phillip Levine's "The Way Down" alongside Patricia Smith's "What We Pray Toward" and then Adrienne Rich's "21 Love Poems" and finally T.S. Elliot's "Lovesong of J Alfred Prufrock," I wonder how the average reader might make connections between the work of these four poets. Most people, I presume, would recognize each piece as a work of poetry. A typical reader would note how Smith's "Pray Toward" functions as a series as do Rich's poems. And a very astute observer might wonder if Elliot's use of questions functions towards similar aims as Rich, or how each poet's line breaks help create a sense of motion that allows the poems to fall down the page, in each instance setting the reader up for a powerful ending.

These poems, to the average reader, do not have an easily apparent singular thread that binds them, even though they are at least somewhat representative of the poetics of modern and contemporary America. However, I will argue that even the most uninitiated citizen, if they have lived in the United States for some extended period during the last forty years, will recognize a Hip Hop verse almost instantly, even if the verse were to be recited a capella. While "The Way Down," "21 Love Poems," "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock," and "What We Pray Toward" each belong to the genre of poetry, none are written in the exact same form, even if we can note formal relationships shared within the group.

Hip Hop, on the other hand, is typically composed in a single recognizable form. And so, as discussed earlier with the examples of Thomas Aquinas and Misty Copeland, if matter—lyrics or lines of verse—combine with form to make the art product's essence, then the Hip Hop poem shares a major component of its essence with all other such poems. The power of kinship is what underlies the role of form in Hip Hop poetics.

Regarding Hip Hop's form, Adam Bradley writes that "Written or freestyled, rap has a poetic structure that can be reproduced, a deliberate form an MC creates for each rhyme that differentiates it, if only in small ways, from every other rhyme ever conceived" (xi). The repeatable structure of Hip Hop sets it apart from much of contemporary poetry. David Caplan affirms the points made by Bradley about form, writing that "Poetic form structures language into a reproducible pattern" (Caplan, *Poetic Form* 3). The replicable nature of form allows us to recognize Hip Hop when we listen to it. Paul Fussell notes that "structure involves the larger elements of form which ally the poem with a tradition or with history or with a wider world of recurring shapes" (Fussell 109). Hip Hop develops its own tradition by allying itself to a particular form. Form serves as a template that allows an artist to both demonstrate kinship with the work of other artists within a tradition and distinguish herself by innovating within said template.

Hamilton: An American Musical – A Case Study

One space where musicality, orality, and formal poetics in Hip Hop can be found is in the groundbreaking theatrical production *Hamilton: An American Musical*. I noted earlier that the New Formalists suggested that the movement towards free verse and away from form resulted in a limited audience for contemporary poetry. As I will explain, *Hamilton* is a signature example of Hip Hop's formal verse in action. Therefore, perhaps *Hamilton*'s success proves the New Formalists right, as the musical stands as one example among many of how Hip Hop's embrace of formalism is able to reach a wide audience.

Contemporary audiences have been reintroduced to the influential founding father, Alexander Hamilton, through *Hamilton: An American Musical* written by Lin-Manuel Miranda.

As patrons have become introduced to, or reconnected with, one of the American Revolution's central figures, they are also being reintroduced to the poetics of formal verse. Take for example the opening quatrain of the musical, which bears striking structural similarities with the formal verse poetry of a previous era:

How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a

Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten

Spot in the Caribbean by Providence, impoverished, in squalor

Grow up to be a hero and a scholar? (Miranda, *Hamilton Original Broadway Recording*)

Miranda's quatrain deploys end rhyme, a common practice in formal poetic verse, by using rhyming couplet in an AABB pattern common to Hip Hop. For Miranda, formal verse presents a comfortable, tradition-tested prism for reframing the role of history to the contemporary moment within a poetic drama, echoing back to some of the most significant historical dramas of the Western Tradition.

Once we see Miranda's *Hamilton* within the prism of its poetics and the formal poetics of Hip Hop verse, we can clarify the reason why his project seems revolutionary (double meaning intended). Because many people fail to recognize Hip Hop as formal poetry, *Hamilton* and its use of Hip Hop poetics seems out of place within the theater. In actuality, *Hamilton* continues a long, if somewhat lost, tradition of using poetry as a vehicle for dialogue in a theatrical performance, and the musical's unprecedented success demonstrates how much resonance formal verse poetics still have for contemporary audiences. As Jonathan Culler notes in his book *Theory of the Lyric*, "the unexpected rise of rap...and its enormous persisting popularity among the young of all social strata, suggests a hunger for rhythmic language" (173). This "hunger" that Culler speaks of is the young audience's unexpected desire for formal verse. Notes like Culler's

also illustrate how the study of Hip Hop poetics has helped reinvigorate critical conversations regarding formal verse poetry among scholars. *Hamilton* arrives at this moment in scholarly discourse, and we find that some of the main topics of the scholarly conversations on Hip Hop poetics can be found within the lines of Miranda's work: meter, Anglo-Saxon prosody, and the art of rhyme. *Hamilton*, then, functions as a useful case study for understanding Hip Hop poetics because the musical is a clear example of the persistence of formal verse, as the endurance of such verse suggests that audiences "hunger" for this type of poetics.

If we think of Hip Hop within the context of historical poetic drama, we can see how the opening lines of *Hamilton* set up the impending drama in ways similar to these from William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*:

Hence! home, you idle creatures get you home:

Is this a holiday? what! know you not,

Being mechanical, you ought not walk

Upon a labouring day without the sign (Shakespeare, 1.1. 1-4)

Just as Flavius' rebuke of the commoners foretells the forthcoming conflicts for Julius Caesar, Burr's lines in the opening presage his ultimate clash with Alexander Hamilton. Much like Shakespeare with Julius Caesar, Miranda is telling a dramatized version of history but doing so, as Shakespeare did, in a recognizable poetic form. As scholar James Shapiro noted regarding the musical, "It was the closest I've ever felt to experiencing what I imagine it must have been like to have attended an early performance of, say, *Richard III*, on the Elizabethan stage" (qtd. in Lewis, "Hamilton: How Lin-Manuel").

Regarding the two poet/dramatists in question, artistic director of The Public Theater Oskar Eustis approaches the function of formal poetic verse in drama when he explains:

I have more than once compared Lin to Shakespeare...Lin...is doing exactly what Shakespeare was doing with his history plays...he's taking the voice of the common people, elevating it to poetry...In Shakespeare's case: iambic pentameter, In Lin's case rap, rhyme, Hip Hop...And that is something that nobody has done as effectively as Lin since Shakespeare. (qtd. in Miranda, *Lin-Manuel Miranda, Shakespeare, and Hip Hop*)

Eustis explicitly acknowledges a connection between Hip Hop and Shakespearean poetry; however, he does not fully explain the degree to which these poetic traditions are similar. Saying that Shakespeare and Miranda use the theater as a means for elevating history to poetry falls short of fully capturing the similarities between their projects: both writers use formal verse poetry to execute these historical dramas, and it's this formal kinship that, perhaps more than any other characteristic, connects the two.

To understand how Miranda navigated a project similar to Shakespeare's in form and style, it is instructive to consider the words of the Hip Hop artist Akala, founder of the Hip Hop Shakespeare Company. Regarding the connections between Shakespearean verse and Hip Hop, Akala says in his TEDx Talk that "one of the things they of course share is rhythm, the iambic pentameter, dad UM dad UM dad UM. Five sets, two beats. It's actually a wonderful rhythm to use in Hip Hop music" ("Hip-Hop & Shakespeare?"). Akala then shows how iambic pentameter fits synergistically into a Hip Hop beat, performing Sonnet 18 by William Shakespeare over two different beats at different tempos:

"Now as you can see it sits right there in the rhythm, it's right, in the pocket...This rhythm, iambic pentameter, even though being a such a simple rhythm, it's intrinsic to so many forms of music...We've found that this rhythm really acted as a mnemonic device

for young people to remember the lyrics...as a way to understand some of what is being said, the rhythm helps us understand it, it helps us communicate feeling.”

(Akala, “Hip-Hop & Shakespeare?”)

Miranda clearly shares Akala’s appreciation for the functions of iambic pentameter as a mechanism to communicate rhythm and, ultimately, “feeling,” as *Hamilton* often slips into iambic rhythm in an apparent nod to the use of such verse in the theater: “How does a bastard, orphan, son” etc. Miranda also directly alludes to the similarities between his work and Shakespeare in the musical: “They think me Macbeth” (Miranda, Act II, 5). These parallels between the work of Shakespeare and that of *Hamilton*’s author Lin-Manuel Miranda serve as one example that can be demonstrated again and again to help us to understand the similarities between earlier formal verse and Hip Hop.

Trying to capture the role of Hip Hop and *Hamilton* in redefining the musical, critic Ben Brantley writes that “‘Hamilton’ is making its own resonant history by changing the language of musicals (“Review: ‘Hamilton’”).” While it is perhaps true that, musically, *Hamilton* is revolutionizing musical theater, the poetic form of *Hamilton* is written in a similar style to the tradition of British formal verse, a tradition that has a long history in the theater. This recognition that Hip Hop, and by extension *Hamilton*, is written in formal poetic verse complicates Brantley’s explication of how the musical realizes its aesthetic power: “It does so by insisting that the forms of song most frequently heard on pop radio stations in recent years—rap, hip-hop, R&B ballads—have both the narrative force and the emotional interiority to propel a hefty musical about long-dead white men whose solemn faces glower from the green bills in our wallets” (“Review: Hamilton”). Brantley is noting the musical’s consistent use of contemporary African American Vernacular discourse as found in “rap” and “R&B ballads” and is suggesting

that such discourse has not been typically associated with Colonial America or the theater, giving the musical a somewhat incongruous feel. This dissonance caused by the marriage of Hip Hop and the story of “long-dead white men,” according to playwright John Guare, “was such an odd thing... but it was done with such elegance and care and control and madness” (qtd. in Mead, “All About”). The idea that *Hamilton*’s success springs from an “odd thing” feeds into the prevailing critical presumption that the production revolutionizes contemporary musicals by the weaving of three disparate spaces: Hip Hop, Colonial America, and the theater—creating a sense of elegant “madness.” However, if *Hamilton*’s triumphs are achieved by Miranda’s wedding of apparently discordant spaces, this unanticipated synthesis is realized by an acknowledgement of a common thread shared between these three worlds: the poetics of formal verse. The “care and control” in manipulating this unifying thread helps to mask the fact that Miranda connects disparate spaces via their commonalities, not out of a spontaneous concoction of unrelated, yet beautiful “madness.”

I argue that one of the primary reasons that *Hamilton* is perceived as compelling or “odd” is its use of poetry. As a musical, *Hamilton* of course uses many musical forms (e.g., Jazz), but its critical acclaim comes largely from its use of Hip Hop as a mechanism for conveying dialogue. Using poetry this way sets *Hamilton* apart from the contemporary musical. As James Fenton noted, the idea of using poetry for narrative in the theater is not new at all, “Considering the wealth of poetic drama that has come down to us from the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, it is surprising that so little of any value has been added since” (Fenton 122). Even if poetic drama has fallen out of favor in recent history, the historical use of poetry as dialogue in the theater is a concept Lin-Miranda clearly recognizes. Miranda uses Hip Hop as an opportunity to reintroduce formal poetic verse to the theater, a maneuver that may appear odd to some, but is

one that builds on a long tradition of such drama. Perhaps, the only thing odd about the musical is the failure of critics to recognize Hip Hop as formal verse poetry, which makes it ideally situated for the theater. In this sense, we can also see *Hamilton* the musical as a canvas for understanding an important critical issue: the scholarly discourse regarding the status of Hip Hop as a poetic form. In this regard, *Hamilton* serves as a blueprint for the cases some scholars have made regarding the formalism of Hip Hop's poetry, which can help us see the value of form to the projects of Hip Hop verse.

The Elements of Form

Four Components

While *Hamilton: An American Musical* may prove to be an excellent example of formalism in Hip Hop poetics, it is important to clarify the attributes of Hip Hop's form that are shared across its corpus—from atypical Hip Hop spaces like the musical *Hamilton*, to the underground Hip Hop clubs across the globe, to the biggest hits of American music. As we discussed in chapter 1, Jay-Z illustrated the connections between the sonnet form and Hip Hop verse, but he also illustrated a powerful element of formal poetic verse: the concept of constraint. When Jay-Z describes as “a test of creativity” the act of innovating within a predetermined form, he is referring to constraint (26). Constraint—along with rhyme, structure, and rhythm—make up what I'm calling the four essential elements to Hip Hop's form. As I noted earlier, my students viewed free-verse as experimental and unbound. Formal verse then, if viewed conversely, would function as shackles for the art object, a limiting force. What my students had not yet understood are the ways in which form functions as a tool for innovation for the artist. Form provides an

opportunity for an artist to demonstrate kinship with other artists of a genre, while also offering a chance for the emcee to distinguish herself by innovating within the form.

When we hear a Hip Hop rhyme, we may not realize it, but we expect rhyming couplets with end-stopped lines, four strong stresses per line, and sixteen bars or lines per verse. While not every verse has sixteen bars, many are written in this manner. And while not every line has four strong beats, most do. And not every line is end-stopped, but the vast majority are. And while there are a handful of rare exceptions where Hip Hop verses don't rhyme, those exceptions represent a negligible sample size in comparison to the corpus of Hip Hop verses. Much like the sonnet or haiku, Hip Hop verse is written in a predetermined form.

In this section I will explain and analyze the four elements of Hip Hop form. First, I will illustrate how the power of constraint is the ultimate reason for form's usefulness in the development of Hip Hop poetics. As Adam Bradley puts it, distinguishing oneself within constraint allows the skilled emcee to come across as "completely unburdened by the potentially ponderous weight of this intricate structure" (63). I then discuss this intricate structure of Hip Hop's form, which is caused by constraint. Structure is the template within which a verse is created, establishing the larger apparatus of the form. Understanding the formal structure leads into the most recognizable aspect of Hip Hop's form: the power of rhyme. Rhyme, which is the hallmark of Hip Hop verse, functions within the form to allow emcees to establish a relationship to each other's work. Equally important to rhyme in Hip Hop verse is rhythm. Acknowledging that rhythm is vital to Hip Hop, most people would understandably focus on the beat, the musical underpinning of Hip Hop verse, but lyrics also function with a somewhat predetermined rhythm that guides the artist in the creation of a verse. I will demonstrate how these four key components

of Hip Hop verse serve as the underpinnings of the genre's poetics which helps to establish Hip Hop as its own signature poetic form.

Constraint

What is the reason that Hip Hop operates within a pre-determined form? "Formal constraints," Bradley explains. Wasn't the constraint of form the thing that Walt Whitman and Ezra Pound were rebelling against? Isn't the repressiveness of constraint the reason free verse was initiated, to break the poetic chains so to speak? Well, yes but for Hip Hop poets, constraint has proven to be a template for creative liberation. "For MCs, rhyme, along with the beat, provides the necessary formal constraints on their potentially unfettered poetic freedom," writes Bradley (55). Bradley oversimplifies the constraints for the emcee, failing to address the constraints of end stops, verse length, and poetic rhythm. However, the underlying points he makes are no less true regarding the power of constraint in Hip Hop. Bradley continues by enlisting the Nobel Prize winning poet Derek Walcott, explaining that artists find "freedom" in "limits." Bradley then expands on the impact of constraint:

How do you say what you want to say but in a way that maintains that necessary association of sound that your listeners expect? Exceptional MCs, like skilled literary poets, balance sound with sense in their rhymes.

Run of the mill rappers often find themselves overwhelmed by rhymes' dual challenges of sound and sense. (Bradley 55)

Bradley situates sound and sense as bookends to be negotiated within the constraints of formal verse. In the quest to innovate within constraint, the emcee, as Bradley points out, needs to enlist tools beyond rhyme including alliteration, consonance, and assonance. The emcee as a poet must

dig in the toolshed for more tools to continue to compose fresh rhymes, but she has been brought to this opportunity via constraint. The “freedom” constraint provides her is the space to seek out new, and old methods for innovating.

There are countless examples of constraint in action in Hip Hop, which help illustrate how emcees distinguish themselves within the template of the genre’s form. One example I’ll present is a verse from André 3000 from the Hip Hop group Outkast:

It's the return of the gangsta thanks ta'
Them niggas that's on that blow
That run up in yo' crib which contains
Your lady and an 8 month old
Child to raise plus you true blue 'bout this music but
They do not want to hear it because they'd
Rather be bouncin' and shootin' and killin' and bouncin'
And shit get down (“Return of the G”)

A quick examination of the lines above shows a relaxed use of rhyme in this verse, but I will address rhyme deviation in Hip Hop shortly. For now, I am interested in another move that André executes. While it is common for emcees to break the pattern of end-stopped lines in Hip Hop, André makes a regular habit of pushing against the pattern. The literary device that he is using is called enjambment, a device in the literary toolshed that André deploys to great effect. Many of the lines in this selection are enjambed, but the effect is particularly pronounced in lines three through six. André’s use of enjambment might remind the reader of William Shakespeare’s sonnet number 116:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments. Love is not love

That alters when it alteration finds

Or bends with the remover to remove (Shakespeare 1750)

If we look at the enjambed lines of these two poets side by side, we can get a feel for the effect they achieve:

Your lady and an 8-month-old

Child...

Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit...

We see how the enjambed lines fall into one another, creating a different rhythmic pace. Both André 3000 and Shakespeare find an opportunity to push against the constraint of the poetic form but still execute works that remain somewhat in harmony with their established forms.

What makes the examples of enjambment profitable is the audience's expectation of a particular auditory affect. When these poets break from the end-stopped line, this maneuver highlights their works. However, these gestures only stand out because of the predictability of form. Both poets have written hundreds of end-stopped lines of poetic verse, so the audience presumes their lines will stick to form, making their periodic breaks from it even more potent.

While constraint is clearly a useful tool for the poet, one might wonder why, on a more theoretical level, constraint is so valuable. One intriguing theory comes from the field of linguistics, a theory known as Optimality Theory (OT):

Constraints are intrinsically in CONFLICT, hence every logically possible output of any grammar will necessarily violate at least some constraints. Grammars must be able to regulate conflicts between universal constraints, in order to select the 'most harmonic' or 'optimal' output form. (Kager 3)

In short, the theory suggests that the grammar of a particular language possesses an endless sea of possibilities, and the language itself finds form within constraints, or rules which bounce against each other to produce an “optimal output.” With this in mind, what makes the enjambment used by André 3000 and William Shakespeare effective is that their violations of constraint remain harmonic. If they moved too far from formal poetics, then their work might not sound harmonic and, therefore, might not be associated with the forms that are working. In other words, their breaks from form could be considered optimal because they remain harmonic within the established constraints. We humans have an innate sense of constraint, and poetry accentuates certain constraints as a means for creating a smooth, satisfactory composition. Within these confines, Hip Hop poets like André 3000 have embraced the challenges of constraint and ultimately found fertile ground for creative expression.

Structure

Having discussed the background of formal verse and the power of constraint; we can now begin to analyze the structure of Hip Hop verse. “She’s got bars” is a common refrain I hear from my students when they hear a poem or rap that they like. In their conception, “to spit bars” is not simply to compose lines of Hip Hop, but to do so effectively and in an entertaining fashion. The acknowledgement that *bars* – the measurement of a line in music and Hip Hop – are markers for determining an emcee’s skill is telling. It seems that my students’ focus on *bars* is at least an unconscious acknowledgement of the importance of form for the Hip Hop artist.

When someone says, “She’s got bars,” they aren’t quite saying, “She’s got form.” However, to say someone has *bars*, we are saying that this person has composed good lines. The rapper Eve highlights this in her track “Blow Ya Mind”: “Huh, sixteen’s mine, create my own

lines / Love for my wordplay that's hard to find.” Eve acknowledges the role of structural composition in her lyricism. She points out the significance of the sixteen-bar structure as a marker of Hip Hop verse. The structure is the space that she uses to showcase her “own lines” and her “wordplay that’s hard to find.” Adam Bradley explains that “one line, in other words, is what an MC can deliver in a single musical measure—one poetic line equals one musical bar. So, when an MC spits sixteen bars, we should understand this as sixteen lines of rap verse” (xx). Bradley establishes that sixteen lines make a rap verse, Eve acknowledges this and claims ownership over the form: “sixteen’s mine.”

When someone says Hip Hop verses are written in sixteen bars, it does not mean that every verse is sixteen bars. Adam Krims explains that “as in much popular (and other) music, measure groupings of four are often a norm in rap. In other words, the length of verses...in a given song will, most likely, be organized in four-measure cycles and groupings evenly divisible by four” (52–53) In other words, the root of a Hip Hop verse is four bars or lines. Krims goes on to explain that a “higher level” of organization is “sixteen bar units (i.e., four four-bar units).” It’s this higher level of structure which is commonly viewed as the standard verse. The sixteen-bar structure comes about in Hip Hop probably because it’s commonly used in other genres of popular music, which Rock and Roll inherited from The Blues (Stoia 195). The sixteen-bar structure has been common in song for some time, having previously corresponded to dances like the pavane and the volta (Ward 41, 75). However, a verse can be written in four, eight, or thirty-two bars and still fit within the conventions of Hip Hop verse. Musically, these four-bar segments fit over a more fixed structure of the beat. Musicologist Kyle Adams explains that “the music, which usually consists of two to four bars that repeat throughout the song, forms the fixed rhythmic layer. The lyrics, whose rhythm naturally changes from line to line, form the variable

layer” (3). The beat is composed in two to four bar segments that repeat. The verse, which is usually sixteen bars, is written over that repeating beat.

From Adam Bradley to Jay-Z to Eve, artists and scholars attest to the functionality of the sixteen-bar structure in Hip Hop. The function of this structure is to give a rapper a clear form to compose lyrics. Bradley explains this when he discusses narrative in Hip Hop:

A rapper who spits a series of disconnected couplets is generally considered less skillful than one who can develop multiple facets of a particular theme or idea. In its most evolved form, this takes the shape of narrative—rap storytelling. It could also mean sixteen bars on your lyrical skill or your opponent’s weakness. It could mean an abstract idea refracted through a series of images and figurative constructions. Regardless of the specifics, rap audiences expect a sense of cohesion and wholeness from a rhyme. (201)

The stories of a rap verse are executed within the form. This formal template makes storytelling actionable for Hip Hop poets—whether it is a narrative about a day in the life, a surrealist rant, or a rhyme about the “wackness” of a rival emcee. For Hip Hop emcees, the structure is the foundation from which they distinguish themselves. As Alexis Pate noted: “The language, the images, and their meaning rely on some system of organization, or structure, to bring them together and make a complete rap/poem” (108). The bars that the Hip Hop aficionado celebrates are the first recognized unit within Hip Hop’s formal structure. This structure has been, and continues to be, the foundational arrangement for Hip Hop verse.

To demonstrate how the sixteen-bar structure works in Hip Hop verse, I will offer one example from Kendrick Lamar from his acclaimed track “The Blacker the Berry the Sweeter the Juice.”

I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2015

Once I finish this, witnesses will convey just what I mean
I mean, it's evident that I'm irrelevant to society
That's what you're tellin' me, penitentiary would only hire me
Curse me 'til I'm dead, church me with your fake prophesizing
That I'ma be just another slave in my head
Institutionalized manipulation and lies
Reciprocation of freedom only live in your eyes
You hate me don't you? I know you hate me just as much
as you hate yourself. Jealous of my wisdom and cards I dealt
Watchin' me as I pull up, fill up my tank, then peel out
Muscle cars like pull ups, show you what these big wheels 'bout, ah
Black and successful, this black man meant to be special
Katzkins on my radar, bitch, how can I help you?
How can I tell you I'm making a killin'?
You made me a killer, emancipation of a real nigga (Lamar)

In these lines, Kendrick confronts white supremacy with bold lyrics. The speaker's voice in this verse belies an intense interiority, opening by calling himself the "biggest hypocrite," suggesting that he carries a slave mentality imposed on him by the apparatus of systemic racism. The penitentiary and the institutionalization represent this systemic oppression the speaker faces. However, the speaker's voice pivots to a more rebellious, if nihilistic, mood, sporting "muscle cars" with "big wheels." Now the speaker shifts further to a more empowering voice, celebrating the "Black man" as special before shifting to a more fatalistic tone by claiming that white supremacy has turned this speaker into a killer. It is not until the next verse where we find out

why the speaker sees himself as a hypocrite: “So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street / When gang-banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me?” (“The Blacker the Berry”). Locating the speaker’s hypocrisy within the context of Trayvon Martin’s killing speaks to a larger tension between the discourse regarding intra-communal violence in the Black community and the killing of Black people by police or other citizens in the name of “self-defense.” However, Kendrick arrives at the revelation via the shifting tonal narrative within the confines of the sixteen-bar structure.

In Kendrick’s verse we find a defiant speaker challenging white supremacy but also a vulnerable voice who has been wronged by a system of racism, yet this speaker is also introspective enough to admit his own hypocrisy. This layered narrative is easily told by Kendrick within the constraint of the sixteen-bar structure. If the constraint of the form limits Kendrick’s expression, it’s hard to tell. His story in this section is told within sixteen bars of end-stopped rhyming couplets. Despite these narrow parameters Kendrick has to work from, he is able to offer a wide-ranging voice speaking directly to important issues facing contemporary society and the Black community in particular.

Rhyme

While it is clear that the structural form of Hip Hop is foundational to its poetry, the element that truly defines a Hip Hop verse is rhyme. “Rap’s reliance on rhyme distinguishes it from almost every other form of contemporary music and from most contemporary literary poetry,” notes Adam Bradley. It’s this insistence on rhyme that serves as the basis of Hip Hop verse, a connection point from where its inheritance of formal verse poetry can’t be denied. Bradley continues that contemporary poetry “eschews” rhyme, while “rap celebrates it” (Bradley

51). Rhyme enables Hip Hop to situate itself as a unique poetic form at the intersection between literary tradition and revolutions. David Caplan expands on this idea: “Hip Hop usefully challenges a host of entrenched positions in contemporary poetry, poetry criticism, and poetics. With particular intensity, their accomplishments challenge the notion of rhyme as old fashioned” (*Rhymes Challenge* 23). By disrupting the notion that rhyme is somehow “old-school,” Hip Hop develops a new expression of poetics while employing the traditional modes of poetic composition.

Bradley dedicates an entire chapter to the practice of rhyme in the genre in his book *The Rhyme Book—The Poetics of Hip Hop*. Bradley rightly intuites that future studies of Hip Hop poetics will always need to address the subject of rhyme. He walks us through an introductory course, explaining that Hip Hop is written in couplets, uses mono-syllabic and multi-syllabic rhyme, is committed to end rhyme but often employs internal rhyme, and regularly uses slant (or near) rhyme. Hip Hop’s utilization of these components of rhyme (as well as others) is the foundation from where we can begin to understand Hip Hop poetics. The intricacies of rhyme within Hip Hop could construct an entire field of poetics study on its own, one where students can learn all of the various rhyme modes in the poetry tradition, solely from witnessing their use in Hip Hop (Bradley 49–84).

One rhymers who is not a household name but is one of the most prolific emcees of all time is the rapper Jean Grae. She is both a legend in the underground of Hip Hop but also widely recognized by some of Hip Hop’s best-selling rappers. Regarding Grae’s work, scholar Shanté Paradigm Smalls explains:

Jean Grae is an important figure in hip hop, popular culture, and music culture for many reasons: Her perpetual underground/underdog status, which has earned her fans ranging

from her idol, rapper-mogul Jay-Z, to backpacker nerd rappers and rap purists, to young queer and straight women who admire her vulnerability, coarse humor, and phenomenal talent. (Paradigm Smalls 86–87)

Grae, the daughter of jazz musicians, challenges conceptions of masculinity and agency in Hip Hop by offering comedic but macabre verses, often using more shocking language than her male peers.

Grae’s “coarse humor” is executed within her application of rhyme. Grae’s mastery of rhyme allows her to convey her shocking statements within the template of the Hip Hop form. One example can be found in this selection from her track “Haters Anthem”:

I'm that bright like Steven Hawking's computer chair
Asked out a teacher on a Sadie Hawkin's dare
Parallax you, see the future in my sleep
I'll battle rap you until your gullet starts to leak
Gnash your teeth and smash you then bind your feet
Thrash holes in your dome snatch your soul and retreat
Mad Max-ish the prose so dope it's fantastic
Now fold up your dough before you get yo ass kicked (Grae)

While Grae’s lyrical content pushes boundaries, her formalism mixed with her macabre sensibility serves as one example of the range of rhyme in Hip Hop.

In the example provided above, we have eight lines of poetry composed with the end stopped, end rhymed lines that are typical of Hip Hop verse. However, there is nothing basic about Grae’s rhyme style. The first two lines from the example interchange between internal and end rhyme, but this arrangement sets up a four-line sequence which completely shifts the pace of

the verse. In lines three and four, Grae continues the pattern of internal rhyme followed by end rhyme of the lines. However, Grae capitalizes on internal rhyme by interchanging the rhyme sounds from lines three and four, doubling the rhyme sounds in line five. To fully appreciate Jean Grae's maneuvers it will be useful to consider this colorful visualization:

I'm that bright like Steven **Hawking's** computer **chair**
Asked out a teacher on a Sadie **Hawkin's** **dare**
Parall**ax you**, see the future in my **sleep**
I'll battle **rap you** until your gullet starts to **leak**
Gnash your teeth and **smash you** then bind your **feet**
Thrash **holes** in your **dome** **snatch your soul** and **retreat**
Mad **Max-ish** the **prose so dope** it's fantastic
Now fold up your **dough** before you get **yo ass kicked** (Grae, "Hater's Anthem")

Grae's doubling in line five gives way to a new internal rhyme sound for line six followed by a return to the internal rhyme sound of lines three through five and ending with the same end rhyme of those previous lines. Scholar H. Samy Alim describes this use of multiple internal rhymes as compound internal rhyme; "a compound internal rhyme can be described as a poetic construction where an internal rhyme is embedded within another internal rhyme" (145). Grae's use of compound internal rhyme concludes in line seven, culminating in three straight syllables of internal rhyme with "prose so dope." Here, Grae nods to her lyrical prowess by acknowledging that she is engaged in a literary process of "prose" writing. While I'd argue that her lines are more verse than prose, it's clear that Grae recognizes that she is not only a vocalist but also a literary artist.

As a literary artist, Grae recognizes that rhyme is one of her most important tools, evidenced by her use of chain rhyme and internal rhyme above. Chain rhyme has become an essential characteristic of many Hip Hop verses. The increased use of chain rhyme represents an evolution in the genre whose early works were primarily focused on end rhyme. While it has not been used as often in other poetic forms as it has been in Hip Hop, chain rhyme has been part of the English rhyming tradition for some time, as Adam Bradley explains:

Chain rhyme is a technique whereby a poet carries a single rhyme over a succession of lines. The effect is often incantatory, lulling the listener into an almost trancelike state. Rhyme takes on a kind of rhythmic function here, underscoring specific patterns of sound to achieve its desired effect. While chain rhyming is now common in rap, rap was certainly not the first genre to use it. We can trace chain rhyming at least as far back as the fifteenth-century English poet John Skelton... (75)

Writing in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, Skelton deployed rhyme in his verses with more abundance and dexterity than most of his counterparts. His doubling and tripling of rhyme sounds in chains shares striking similarity to the verses we find in Hip Hop today. When asked about rhyme in poetry, Allen Ginsberg in 1989 noted the similarities between Skelton's Skeltonic verse and Hip Hop verse: "The model for me is jazz rhyme, blues, rap rhyme but the classical model is John Skelton. If you think of it in terms of rhyme and improvisation you'll find that Skeltonics and rap are very similar" (39). Much like Jean Grae, Skelton uses chains of rhyme sounds. Consider these lines from Skelton's poem "A Ballad of the Scottysyshe Kyne," which have been marked for their rhyme sounds:

Kynge Jamy, Jomy your joye is all go.

Ye summoned our kynge. Why dyde ye so?

To you no thyng it dyde acorde
To sommom our kyng your soverayne lorde.
A kyng a sommer it is wonder;
Knowe ye not salte and suger asonder? (113)

Skelton's use of internal chain rhyme in lines 1-5 gives way to a new internal rhyme in the fifth line, which sets up the end rhyme of lines 5 and 6. While we can see how Skelton deployed rhyme in a similar fashion to artists like Jean Grae, his work has not been recognized with the same level of attention as other significant English poets. This fact caused scholar Stanley Fish to ask in 1965, "why does he write a poetry so different and unclassifiable that criticism seems only to distort it?" (35). While his rhymes may have seemed unclassifiable in 1965, his rhymes seem less unusual today, when we consider Hip Hop as a poetic form. Not only did Skelton rhyme in ways that are comparable to the rhymes of Hip Hop artists, but he also engaged in similar types of wordplay, braggadocio, and oppositionality. A poet like Skelton may continue to get more attention as Hip Hop continues to be studied as a poetic form because he used some of the styles that have now become popularized by Hip Hop. In this regard, Hip Hop not only rewrites contemporary poetry but also revises our notion of the historical canon.

While Skelton's use of rhyme may have seemed out of the ordinary, Hip Hop's poets are known first and foremost for their deployment of rhyme. Rhyme is such a recognizable aspect of Hip Hop simply because every single Hip Hop verse uses it. The knowledgeable devil's advocate might say something like: *What about Kool Keith? He has verses where he doesn't rhyme?* This is a fair point, but this is a circumstance where the exception proves the rule. Consider these six lines from his song "Blue Flowers" written in the voice of Kool Keith's alter ego Dr Octagon:

Holding bags on down right from the hospital
It's a patient that's worth to keep the germs off the turf
Cybernetic microscopes and metal antidotes
Two telescopes that magnify size of a roach
Three computers, the cup of coffee planted with my hand and
Astroplanet detached, turn on rear foggers (Kool Keith)

Kool Keith creates a contemporary version of blank verse in the passage above. It works, of course, because rhythmically and structurally, the verse is arranged as a typical Hip Hop verse; the ear therefore expects rhyme. When it doesn't hear the rhyme, the verse sticks out. However, closer examination of the rhyme in this verse reveals that there is more at play here. Kool Keith is using internal rhyme as way of avoiding the end rhyme which we typically associate with Hip Hop verse. Kool Keith's innovations are exactly the type of modifications that poets have made to form for centuries, not entirely dissimilar to the way Langston Hughes varied from the sonnet while still connecting with the form, which we discussed in chapter 1. In the case of Kool Keith, his exception to standard formal practice ultimately proves the rule. Of the tens of thousands of Hip Hop verses ever written, there are only a handful of verses written without end rhyme as a fundamental component. This example from Kool Keith helps demonstrate that Hip Hop is a form of rhymed verse poetry, a new addition to the long tradition of rhymed poetics.

Rhythm: Flow and Meter

Another statement that people commonly say when praising an emcee is "He's got flow." In some ways, this has the same meaning as "She's got bars." In both instances, a person is acknowledging the skill of a particular artist and demonstrating an appreciation for the artist's

craftsmanship. However, as noted earlier, bars refer to lines. But what exactly is flow? An emcee traffics in words, first and foremost. These words are arranged in bars or lines. But those alone can't create flow. Flow is the manner in which these words are presented to us in performance. In his essay titled "Lyrics and Flow in Rap Music" in the *Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, Oliver Kautny explains "that many MCs need more words per minute than an average singer of a pop song." The lyrical density of Hip Hop tracks comes from "their specific rhythmical approach to lyrics, using the vowels and consonants to form a mostly rapid and rhythmical highly organized flow of syllables" (101). This flow of syllables is organized within Hip Hop's form but is presented to us via performance. As a result, one might think that the concept of flow might confirm the point from Robert Pinsky that I presented in chapter 1, regarding his preference to separate the art of the performer and the art of the writer. However, I maintain that lyrical composition is a vital component of flow.

For an example of flow and poetic rhythm in Hip Hop, consider the work of the rapper Yassin Bey also known as Mos Def. If the flow of a Hip Hop verse only had value in a performed setting, the emcee's flow would not come through when the verse is presented in textual form. In some instances, this may be true, as some emcees use vocals to accentuate verses to such a degree that lyrical transcriptions of these efforts cannot capture the artist's effect. However, in the case of Mos Def, as with most rappers, we find that the opening quatrain below has a legible poetic rhythm, or a "nice flow:"

It's real yo but still yo, it's love here

And it's felt by anybody that come here

Out of towners take the train, plane and bus here

Must be something that they really want here (Mos Def, "Brooklyn")

Mos Def accomplishes this flow using internal rhyme, multi-syllabic rhyme, and monorhyme.

The end-stopped identical rhyme is a device of note in Hip Hop because emcees will often use this maneuver to achieve a similar effect to what we find in the Arabic poetic form the ghazal.

Consider this opening pair of couplets from Agha Shahid Ali:

What will suffice for a true-love knot? Even the rain?

But he has bought grief's lottery, bought even the rain.

“Our glosses / wanting in the world”—“Can you remember?”

Anyone!—“when we thought / the poets taught” even the rain? (“Even the Rain”)

If we consider the repetition of *here* and the repetition of *rain* in these two poems, we can see the authors have similar aims. The end-stopped repetition for both poets establishes the primary theme and location for each poem: *here* being Brooklyn – Mos Def’s hometown and rain, which Ali gives reverence to because he sees it as a familiar place as well. Just as one need not hear Ali perform his poem out loud to hear the rhythm of his poem, we do not need to hear Mos Def deliver his lines to appreciate his lyrical cadence.

In the next quatrain of this verse, Mos Def exemplifies the textual capacity for Hip Hop flow, while making a subtle commentary about gentrification:

One year as a resident, deeper sentiment

They shout out "Go Brooklyn", they representing it

Sitting on their front stoop sipping Guinnesses

Using native dialect in they sentences (Mos Def, “Brooklyn”)

In four short lines, Mos Def addresses the nuances of gentrification, noting that newcomers feel the agency to claim Brooklyn and do so while incorporating Black vernacular into their own

versions of English. Perhaps most interestingly, Mos Def doesn't simply condemn these gentrifiers because he suggests that Brooklyn's greatness wins over its newcomers.

Of course, Mos Def doesn't accomplish his narrative in paragraphs of prose; instead, he chooses Hip Hop verse as his platform for social commentary. The chief highlight of his verse in these lines is the tri-syllabic internal and end rhyme, as in *resident* and *sentiment*. Equally impressive is his use of disyllabic rhyme, *sitting* and *sipping*, while continuing the tri-syllabic rhyme pattern with *Guinnesses* and *sentences*. While multi-syllabic rhyme is important to this verse, what is equally productive is the metrical rhythm at play accompanying the use of rhyme. For example, consider these two phrases: *sitting on* and *sipping Guinnesses*. As I just noted, the first two syllables of each selection form perfect di-syllabic internal rhymes. However, the syllables *on* and *Guin* operate as near rhyme, which allows him to gesture to the tri-syllabic rhymes that are the foundation for this quatrain. This works because *sitting on* and *sipping Guin*—match up syllabically and accentually. Therefore, these units aurally approximate the rhyming sounds of *resident* and *sentiment*. Even though the former two units share only one rhyme sound with the latter two, the middle syllable, all four units share the same number of syllables and are accented in the same places. These metrics found in Mos Def's lines are what we will call Hip Hop prosody, which represents the textual aspect of Hip Hop's flow.

For now, it's important to clarify that the lines above from Mos Def utilize rhyme, syllables, and accents to establish a lyrical cadence. The cadence is perceptible in textual form. It would be impossible even for someone unfamiliar with Hip Hop to not hear the rhythm of these lines. For these reasons, we can conclude that Hip Hop's flow derives much of its sonic value from the textual construction of lyrics by emcees.

For centuries, poetry was written in pre-determined forms with predetermined rhythms, such as iambic pentameter or anapestic tetrameter. These rhythms are referred to in poetry criticism as prosody. While Hip Hop's rhythm is more elastic than those rhythms just mentioned, Hip Hop also typically operates within a typical rhythmic pattern. Bradley explains that "rather than resembling the dominant contemporary form of free verse—or even the freeform structure of its hip hop cousin, spoken word, or slam poetry—rap bears a stronger affinity to some of poetry's oldest forms, such as the strong stress meter of Beowulf and the ballad stanzas of the bardic past" (A. Bradley xv). Derek Attridge details the poetic rhythm of Hip Hop verse in his book *Poetic Rhythm, An Introduction*. He explains that Hip Hop verses typically use the same pre-determined rhythms that were common in Anglo-Saxon poetry. He demonstrates how Hip Hop uses the strong stress meter that was famous in Old and Middle English poetry.

On the subject of Anglo-Saxon verse, Attridge asks, "what happens if the four-beat line is allowed ... to use offbeats freely?" Attridge explains how prosody can function outside the strictness of accentual syllabic meter and, in so doing, contradicts the presumption that such an endeavor would "result (in)...verse with little feeling of being metrical at all" (87-88). In Attridge's characterizations of strong stress meter, we may find a space for understanding the poetic rhythm of Hip Hop:

Like Old English verse, rap lyrics are written to be performed to an accompaniment that emphasizes the metrical structure of the verse. The two forms have essentially the same metrical structure: lines with four stressed beats (falling naturally into two half lines of two beats each), separated by other syllables that may vary in number and may include other stressed syllables. (Attridge 90)

Attridge establishes the form of Hip Hop within the tradition of Old and Middle English strong stress meter. Most Hip Hop verses punctuate each line with four strong stresses, just as was the case with Anglo-Saxon poetry. No doubt the reason for this is that the pattern created by the strong stresses has a song-like quality.

To get an idea of the way strong stresses verses have a song-like feel, it will be instructive to visit a classic nursery rhyme, “Peter Piper.” To illustrate this rhythmic relationship between nursery rhymes and Hip Hop, I will also consider a song by Run-DMC, “Peter Piper,” a track which I will also discuss in chapter 3. “Peter Piper” is a track in which Run-DMC shows the relationship between the rhymed verse of traditional nursery rhymes and Hip Hop. Below is the first line of Run D.M.C.’s track and the first line from the work it derives from:

now **PETer PIPer** picked **PEPpers**, but Run rapped **RHYMES**

(Run-DMC, "Peter Piper")

PETer PIPer picked a **PECK** of pickled **PEPpers**

Note the four major stressed syllable unites per line are in bolded caps. Much of Hip Hop verse is written in this manner or prosody. Here we can see the connection between Hip Hop and Anglo-Saxon verse that Attridge speaks about. Unlike the more restrictive meters like iambic pentameter, the poet of strong stress meter is not restricted by the number of syllables in combination with the number of stresses per line. Instead, the poet simply commits to execute four strong stresses per line. The result is a prosody that has a clear, repetitive, and replicable pattern, making prosody a key component to the flow of the emcee and an integral component to Hip Hop’s form. Run-DMC is showing how their work operates within a rhymed tradition that shares structural similarities with the verse of nursery rhymes; however, the example above,

along with those from Mos Def, demonstrate that these similarities go beyond rhyme to the rhythmic arrangement of lyrics.

Conclusions on the Elements of Form

The arrangement of words in a Hip Hop verse within in the genre's form help to establish lyrical rhythm. This is why it is rather easy to write a Hip Hop rhyme (note, I did not say it was easy to write a good one.) For example, I'll never forget, though I have tried, the time when my stepmom, aunt, and father decided to write a rap about their house cats. The existence of this rap to twelve-year-old me was profoundly embarrassing. In fact, I was certain that had anyone—other than my family and me—heard this art object, I would have died instantly. Not to say that my father, quite the salsa dancer and a former doo-wopper from the corners of the South Bronx, had no rhythm. But none of my family members had the social currency or appropriate contemporary musical experience to execute a quality, non-embarrassing rap, a fact that they no doubt understood, which made the exercise even more fun for them.

Around the same time, I remember watching the famous Crash Test Dummy PSA. These two dummies rap: "We've got one thing to say, and you know we're not wrong / When you go for a ride, put your safety belt on" ("1988 Vince and Larry"). Adam Bradley confirms this phenomenon of less than skilled poets producing Hip Hop verses: "unfortunately, wack rhymes are everywhere, thanks to hip hop's rampant commercialization. Rap sells everything from cars to breakfast cereals" (28). The easily replicable nature of a Hip Hop rhyme is due to its clearly recognizable form, a fact that commercial enterprises have tried to exploit. "It is the basic form of rap/poetry that assures McDonald's, General Mills, or Pepsi-Cola that it can be easily appropriated for commercial purposes," explains Alexis Pate (113). Due to the accessibility of audio and video technology and platforms for sharing the products of these technologies, today,

one could spend a week straight on YouTube watching families rap about Christmas jammies, comedians rap about boats, and an ocean of untalented emcees showing that they “got no bars.”

While the fact that Hip Hop is an easily replicable form makes it easy for anyone to write a Hip Hop verse, this accessibility provides the opportunity for an artist to distinguish his work. If you can make this form original, you have succeeded in writing a successful verse. Volumes of sonnets have been written by established poets, aspiring ones, and students of literature, but few sonnets can reach the recognition of Shakespeare’s “Sonnet #18,” Elizabeth Barret Browning’s “Sonnet #42,” or Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die.” Similarly, anyone can rap sixteen lines of strong-stressed, rhymed Hip Hop verse, but not everyone can create Biggie Smalls’ “Ready to Die,” Nas’ “Illmatic,” or Nicki Minaj’s “Did it on Em.” Rappers demonstrate kinship with each other by using the same form, while also distinguishing themselves by creating their own signature styles within said form.

A Theory of Hip Hop Form

Form Doing Work

I have demonstrated here how form operates in Hip Hop. I did so by first explaining the ways in which formalism has shifted in the evolution of contemporary poetry and argued that Hip Hop, because of these shifts, has been able to use form in a traditional manner but come across as new and fresh. I went on to illustrate how form becomes crucial in poetry at the nexus between music and poetics. The interrelationship between song and poetic verse, notably in *Hamilton: An American Musical* as just one example, signifies an important function for form as a template for making a poem audible, recognizable, and understandable. From here, I outlined the essential elements of form: constraint, structure, rhyme, and rhythm. Hip Hop poets have all

made their names within the constraint of the Hip Hop form, a challenge that proves liberating for the skilled craftsman. The beauty of the constraint is that it provides a reason for the structure of a verse to exist. I explained how the result is a specific structural form in Hip Hop. Then within this structure, I explained that the constraint of rhyme becomes the axis around which the artist innovates his or her work and the way that the audience understands a poet's skill based on her ability to execute effective rhyme patterns. Finally, I discussed "flow and rhythm," which we call Hip Hop prosody. The use of prosody—the strategic deployment of accents and syllables with rhyme patterned lines—offers infinite opportunity for the artist to create recognizable but unique art products.

Earlier in this chapter, in my analysis of discussions on form, I outlined how literary scholars grappled with the tensions of the academic discourse regarding form. These scholars clearly held a desire to move past old conflicts. Ellen Rooney encapsulates this desire, noting:

Literature or any particular canon can be conceived as a subset of the category of form, so that one might analyze the form of the canon of seventeenth-century poetry or of the neoslave narrative or explore the concept of "literary form" or the "popular" itself as a historically specific and shifting structure, which is of course not the same thing as suggesting that it does not "really" exist. (Hunter, et al. 35)

There are ways to read deeper into a form, but these readings can only become possible if we acknowledge that form exists. By acknowledging form, we can develop insightful readings into the meanings that result from the application of form. Rooney continues: "This means not reading form 'for its own sake' (a nonsensical formula) but acknowledging the work that form does in every imaginable text: literary, cultural, social, material" (Hunter et al. 36). This idea that

form is “doing work” is compelling and can help us understand more clearly how form operates in Hip Hop.

Most emcees were not busy reading the theories of form or aware of the academic battles between various schools of literary studies, nor were they cognizant of the tension between free verse and traditional formal verse in the field of poetry; they were busy making art that spoke to their communities. This does not mean, however, that the artists of Hip Hop were not engaged in a theoretical practice. The poets of Hip Hop, as will be discussed in the next chapter, emerged as oppositional voices in a community that suffered from a post-civil-rights, governmentally-sanctioned, systematic program of abandonment. In response, these artists went searching within their existing traditions for a way to amplify their own voices. The result was the development of a poetic form that could construct a platform for their concerns, expand the reach of their collective voice, and provide a pathway for economic progress. As imperfect as any of their efforts may have been, their successes demonstrate the power of poetry, the power of art, and the ability to use form to amplify a previously ignored voice.

I have recapped this chapter’s progression to propose a theory for the function of Hip Hop form: The artist wants to differentiate her work from others, while form provides an organism that an artist operates within. The organism then grows as each artist chooses to practice within a particular form. As the organism grows, the form itself achieves acclaim, providing more space for more artists to showcase their talents. In other words, poetic form can promote collectivity. Hip Hop’s form ultimately makes space for artists to share in the fellowship of a particular artistic practice. This practice extends deeper into these artists’ communities because the members of these communities who may not be poets themselves are, nonetheless, connected to the works’ goals and subject matter. In Hip Hop, the artists of the South Bronx and,

later, the rappers of Queensbridge, the gangsta rappers of the west coast, the emcees of the Dirty South, and the emcees of Nigeria all share a common connection via the Hip Hop form. Form has helped connect youth across the African Diaspora in ways that simply did not exist before Hip Hop. These connections demonstrate poetic form's potential for promoting collectivism.

To further my theory, I will offer two more stories from the development of poetics. The first will require revisiting the birth of free verse in English poetry. Richard Aldington, one of free verse's early champions, made his claims clear in an early issue of *The Egoist*. *The Egoist*, appropriately subtitled *An Individualist Review*, was a journal that helped advance Modernism in literature, with free verse poetry as a key element of its development. Just like my students that I discussed earlier, Aldington felt that free verse provided, as its name indicates, freedom:

“Because above all things the artist must be free—free in his intelligence, in his life, and in his art. To say that the artist should be free does not mean that he should work without standards; it means that he should create his own standards” (Aldington 351). The writer shouldn't be stuck working within rigid structures. The poet can have standards, but ultimately the poet should be creating her own standards. Such prescriptions for art seem appropriate; after all, isn't the artist supposed to create liberating art and wouldn't the artist be held back by vigorously prescribed, predetermined forms? Free verse was the antidote to this dilemma and helped to free poets to pursue new avenues of poetic practice, pathways that were previously unimaginable. However, Aldington also illustrates the heart of this project as well as potential pitfalls: “Free verse might easily become as much of a shibboleth as academic verse. At present it is largely treated as an inexcusable affectation; I demand that it receive as much or more attention than academic verse on the ground that its use is, at present, a sign of individuality” (351). Individuality was at the heart of the poetic projects of Modernism as manifested in free verse. Poets at the birth of

Modernism felt it was vital to establish individualistic styles. Of course, individualism is quite the opposite of collectivism, but we can find the pitfalls of free verse in Aldington's quote above. He points out that "free verse might easily become as much of a shibboleth as academic verse" (351). By academic verse, we can presume Aldington refers to formal verse poetry that would have been celebrated in academia at the time. The idea that free verse could one day become outmoded is important. Aldington is citing the significance for an individualistic art form at the time he is writing in. He is hyper aware that such an individualistic undertaking might become unnecessary at another time, under different circumstances. Some might argue that today free verse has become a 'shibboleth' and that poetry has been ripe for a new, less individualistic poetics.

To illustrate how Hip Hop can be a collective poetic form, let me offer a story involving one of the genre's most famed acts, Boogie Down Productions (BDP). Since the genre's inception, artists have always known they were working with poetry; BDP's work serves as a prime example of this awareness. One of Hip Hop's preeminent torchbearers KRS-ONE—whose name stands for Knowledge Reign Supreme (over nearly every) One—is the co-founder of the immortal BDP. His partner was the late Scott La Rock. A decade before the shooting deaths of 2Pac and Biggie Smalls, La Rock was murdered, the first member of Hip Hop royalty to meet such a fate. BDP with KRS and La Rock had just successfully launched their debut album, *Criminal Minded*, a few months before La Rock's death. *XXL Magazine* chronicled the following events that took place exactly one day after his murder:

The very next day, KRS, D-Nice, Red Alert and the rest of the BDP family took the stage at MSG. They stood silently for a moment. The crowd seemed unsure how to react. Then a huge photograph of Scott was lowered from the ceiling. The stadium

exploded and the crew launched into a stirring version of “Poetry”—a shared moment of hip-hop healing. (Callahan-Bever 168)

The “Poetry” the article is referring to is the title of the first track from BDP’s debut album *Criminal Minded* (KRS-One). The crowd at Madison Square Garden seemed to share a religious experience, collectively mourning to the incantations of poetry, accompanied by a musical beat. For BDP and the early emcees of the South Bronx, Hip Hop was a matter of life and death. While death came to some of Hip Hop’s practitioners like Scott La Rock, life without the expressive platform of Hip Hop would also be a type of death. And life with this form of poetry provided the opportunity of new possibilities. At the heart of this story is the need for a collective art form that can uplift a struggling community, heal a mourning people, and point a way forward. Hip Hop as a new poetic form made these possibilities a reality.

The first Hip Hop artists were not seen as poets by the wider world, even though they saw themselves that way. The result was that Hip Hop artists were able to create a form and develop ways of innovating within it, out of sight from academics, critics, and more traditional poets who may have been busy debating the merits of New Formalism. At the birth of Modernism, poets like the Imagists craved an individualistic way of approaching poetry. At the birth of Hip Hop, a struggling community in the Bronx was desperately looking for a way to lift their voices collectively. Because poetry had been remade by the projects of Modernism, Hip Hop was free to experiment in traditional modes of poetic practice, rhyme, and rhythm, without carrying the burden of poetry’s many debates. The unfettered experimentation with form allowed the poets of Hip Hop to refine their practice within their own communities. Over time, enough artists had created compelling work that these artists were able to establish their own poetic tradition. This was only possible because form allowed this initially voiceless group to share replicable patterns

of poetry with members of their communities. These patterns could be easily adopted by others, refined, and improved. At the heart of this practice is form. Form was a vehicle for these poets to announce themselves to the world.

I started this chapter mentioning the common phrase “when form meets function.” I would like to end by bringing another common saying, “there is strength in numbers.” The function of form is to produce replicable patterns. In the case of Hip Hop, the result has been large numbers of artists producing products in the same recognizable form. The form itself has helped these artists to elevate themselves as the larger form gained more prominence. The strength in numbers here refers not only to the many poets who write Hip Hop verses, but also to the many audience members, both casual and serious, who appreciate the form and are invested in its projects. As artists both demonstrated kinship with each other and distinguished themselves from one another within Hip Hop’s form, they created a poetic tradition grounded in a particular form. The promise of collectivity, in my estimation, is what ultimately allows the Hip Hop form to thrive. One artist can be ignored, but an ocean of them cannot.

Scholar Geert Hofstede explains that “issues of collectivism versus individualism carry strong moral overtones. Many Americans see the individualism in their culture as a major reason for their greatness” (210). At the turn of the century—as the American project was beginning to blossom and as its literature was making its name on the world stage—modern artists would seek out a poetic practice that highlights the individualism so vital to the American ethos. Conversely, Hofstede explains that collectivism has a long tradition in other nations such as China and, as a result, in these cultures “Collectivism does not mean a negation of the individual’s well-being or interest; it is implicitly assumed that maintaining the group’s well-being is the best guarantee for the individual” (212). Just as collectivism was valued in Chinese culture, one could see how

collectivism may have carried more resonance for a group of individuals living in the United States who had been abandoned by the individualism of the American project. Under these circumstances, one could see how a group of poets might reach to a form that promoted a collective identity.

Just as the break from form promoted individualism at the birth of modernism during the turn of the twentieth century, form provided a platform for Hip Hop artists to establish a collective voice as the same century was coming to a close. The young artists of the Bronx, and later the entire diaspora, found strength in numbers and found that the Hip Hop form could be the best mechanism for an individual's success, but this acclaim was achieved by the collective kinship of form. Form allowed Hip Hop's artists to have a collective voice.

Outro

Regarding form, Caroline Levine explains that "Form can be generalizing and abstract, or highly particular (as in the form of this thing is what makes it what it is, and if it were reorganized it would not be the same thing)" (2). The primary proposition I've made in this chapter speaks to the parenthetical point Levine made above: the form of Hip Hop is what makes it Hip Hop. It's the form that allows us to recognize a Hip Hop track when we hear it, yet, as I will show in chapter 4, Hip Hop cannot be reduced to form quite that simply. However, the fact that I will later demonstrate that there can be elasticity to Hip Hop poetics doesn't undermine the primary point of this chapter: form is the thing that has made us come to know Hip Hop as Hip Hop. Any expansion of Hip Hop's poetics beyond its clearly established form can only be possible because of the broad platform that Hip Hop has provided its artists, the platform that enabled its practitioners to make this genre America poetry's most widely disseminated poetic

form. Without Hip Hop's wide reach, there would not be a new generation of poetries interested in stretching the bounds of this form.

Chapter 3

Step Off! Understanding Oppositional Tone in Hip Hop Poetics

Introduction

The first record I ever owned was *Rapper's Delight*, so I remember recorded Hip Hop at its earliest stages. And while I was a big fan of the Sugarhill Gang, the first emcee that truly stood out to me was The Real Roxanne, “the lady devastator.” My friends and I would huddle around every Saturday morning to hear her on the local college radio station, WHRH (the only station that played Hip Hop in Binghamton, NY at the time). Her work was fresh and energetic. Lines like “I don’t like your rap; ‘cause your rap is dead” entranced me and my friends (Jack, “The Real”). We knew this wasn’t the typical stuff we heard on the radio. Of course, we didn’t realize that we were listening to feminist/clap back Hip Hop, as she deftly took on three male rappers from the UTFO crew. My ten-year-old self could not comprehend the implied gender politics in her lyrics. I simply thought she was challenging this group of dudes and did so effectively. Furthermore, I had not yet learned that her song was the third in a series of tracks that would become known as the ‘Roxanne Wars’ or that she, Elise Jack, wasn’t the woman I came to know as The Real Roxanne, Adelaida Martinez, because Jack was quickly replaced after the initial recording of “The Real Roxanne.” I also did not know that she was indirectly challenging another woman, Roxanne Shanté. I would learn all of this later. For the time being, I just knew her rap was fierce, and I wanted to hear more.

I think the position that Roxanne took—a challenger ready for all comers, male or female—was what I found so enticing about her music. Her rap was oppositional. Scholar Alexis Pate writes, “but most importantly, no matter what phase of development of hip hop you

examine, there has always been a sense of oppositionality at its core” (25). Pate suggests that a fundamental part of the creative project of Hip Hop is an almost compulsory obligation towards an oppositional poetics. In his book *Hoodlums: Black Villains and Social Bandits in American Life*, William Van Deburg cosigns this idea of Hip Hop’s oppositionality, writing that rappers are “organic intellectuals...well attuned to the requisites of oppositional politics” (204). Scholar Imani Perry also confirms the power of oppositionality in Hip Hop: “At its best, it is compelling art and culture. It is at once the most lucrative and culturally oppositional musical force in the United States” (*Prophets* 2). Perry extends the reach of oppositionality in Hip Hop by labeling it the most dissentient “force” in the nation, locating Hip Hop’s influence beyond its own cultural sphere. Tricia Rose—who in 1993 became the first scholar in the nation to write a dissertation on Hip Hop (Lee, “Class With”)—speaks to the reasons why oppositionality permeates Hip Hop discourse. Rose clarifies the ways even Hip Hop verse that is recognized as apolitical serves a political function, as rappers position themselves against forces of suppression: “Confining the definition of the cultural politics of rap to lyrical content addresses only the most obvious explicit facet of the politics of Black cultural expression...[which] requires ignoring the complex web of institutional policing to which all rappers are subject” (“Fear” “Fear of a Black Planet”: Rap Music and Black Cultural Politics in the 1990s” 276). Oppositionality in Hip Hop exists as a response to “institutional policing,” a condition that, according to Rose, no rapper can escape.

The assertions of Pate, Van Deburg, Perry, and Rose indicate that The Real Roxanne was demonstrating Hip Hop’s inherent oppositionality, a feminist clapback written in response to a myriad of powerful forces. My friends and I were drawn in by the inherent rebelliousness of her oppositional lyrics. Accordingly, “The Real Roxanne” is one of many tracks that confirm oppositionality’s central presence in Hip Hop. Locating oppositionality as an essential

undercurrent in Hip Hop verse will have some profound implications for the study of its poetics. The sonnet form would seem incomplete without romance as would the limerick without jest. Similarly, tone reveals that Hip Hop is not merely a poetic form, but it is a form of oppositional poetics.

While many scholars have examined violence and misogyny in Hip Hop, including Rose, Joan Morgan, Marc Anthony Neal, and many others, in the much narrower scholarly discourse of Hip Hop poetics, the issue only gets brief mention from most scholars, with Pate being an exception. He acknowledges that “the presence of...language meant to objectify and oppress women ought to be a factor in evaluating the quality of a rap/poem” (Pate 61). David Caplan barely acknowledges sexism at all, and Adam Bradley while touching on it, often only makes cursory attempts to address the issue without confronting it in any significant way. Discussions of Hip Hop poetics could have more value if introduced within a larger conversation confronting violence and problematic images in Hip Hop. Tone and oppositionality provide the critical lens to make such an investigation more productive.

Hip Hop’s embrace of oppositionalism helps us understand the manifestations of violence often found in the genre’s lyrics, which I discuss in many examples in this chapter. Tricia Rose explains that concerns regarding violent lyrical content may lead to misguided outcomes: “So, what may appear to be genuine concern over violence in entertainment winds up stigmatizing some expressions (rap music) and the groups with which they are associated (black youth)” (*The Hip Hop Wars* 35-36). Rose summarizes the pitfalls associated with many critiques of Hip Hop discourse. Most interestingly, she makes clear that some critics end up “stigmatizing” youth from the same communities who started Hip Hop. This revelation shouldn’t be fundamentally surprising; a poetics of opposition naturally invites conflict and, to a certain degree, welcomes it.

However, implicating the youth that formed or grew up under Hip Hop serves to extend the institutional marginalization of these same young people who created the genre as means for vocalizing opposition against the forces of their suppression. Perhaps, conversely, other scholars evade discussing violence in Hip Hop for fear of re-stigmatizing Black and brown youth. Furthermore, it seems that the stigmatization Rose refers to also reflects an overall lack of critical understanding within mainstream and academic analyses regarding the origins of Hip Hop's poetics of opposition.

Instead of re-marginalizing the youth who invented Hip Hop, I will maintain in this chapter that the tone of opposition, found in virtually all Hip Hop lyrics, helps clarify the intentions of the genre's first poets by situating Hip Hop's wide spectrum of themes—from feminist political manifestos to misogynistic gangsta rhymes—within a narrow tonal range. This somewhat limited sphere of positioning found in Hip Hop explains how the poetics of opposition, in addition to rhyme, serve as a unifying characteristic that links disparate and sometimes conflicting perspectives in Hip Hop discourse. By focusing on the role of tone, this chapter provides an intervention intended to clarify the reasons why seemingly opposing camps find a home within the confines of Hip Hop verse.

To demonstrate the role of oppositional tone in Hip Hop, this chapter is broken into three sections, each with subsections. First, I discuss *tone and oppositionality* by explaining that oppositionality, as a type of tone, can be understood by examining how tone operates in poetry. To illustrate this point, I use the critic Reuben Brower's conception of tone as a prism to demonstrate tone's function in poetry. I also illustrate how persona, the speaker in a typical Hip Hop verse, becomes the vehicle for tone. This helps me explain how oppositionality, particularly as it is described by Alexis Pate, becomes the primary tone for Hip Hop verse and, also, serves as

a mediator for rhyme. In the next section, I discuss the *socio-political roots of Hip Hop's oppositionality* by locating Hip Hop's oppositionality in Hip Hop's birthplace, the South Bronx. Borrowing Jeff Chang's notion of the "politics of abandonment" that established the conditions of the Bronx at the time of Hip Hop's conception, I articulate that oppositionality becomes the mechanism by which young Black and brown youth are able to establish a platform in opposition to a political apparatus which has abandoned them. To further illustrate the political discourse in Hip Hop, I discuss the *outlaw* as one prominent persona in the genre, which illustrates the oppositional positioning of Hip Hop poetics in action. For the final section, I pivot to a discussion of *gender politics and oppositionality*. In this section I examine how Hip Hop has at times become a poetics of misogyny. At the same time, I also highlight that Hip Hop has always been a platform for feminist clapback in response to sexism. Building on this discussion, I illustrate the ways Hip Hop's oppositionality has been used to combat heterosexism and machismo. In each of these discussions, it becomes apparent that oppositionality is a hallmark of Hip Hop verse, nearly as recognizable and essential as its other core characteristics like rhyme.

There can be no clear understanding of Hip Hop poetics, without a proper accounting for oppositionality in Hip Hop lyricism. Accordingly, tone serves as the prism through which we can appropriately appreciate the oppositional nature of Hip Hop verse.

Tone and Oppositionality

Tone in Poetry

I argue in this chapter that oppositionality manifests itself in a nearly universal application of an oppositional tone in Hip Hop lyrics, and that a deeper understanding of tone's presence in Hip Hop will help account for the range of themes in the genre's poetics. For

example, I will demonstrate how tone can help scholars and critics identify the origins of problematic lyrics in Hip Hop verse and how, contrapuntally, oppositionality enables feminist clapback Hip Hop to emerge as a counter force to misogynist narratives. By clarifying the consistent positioning found within Hip Hop, a grounded understanding of its tone can empower scholars to appropriately hold problematic lyricists accountable without further castigating the community which produced the art form as a tool for empowerment.

To properly illustrate the implications of tone in Hip Hop poetics, it is important to first clarify what I mean by tone. Tone is the way the poet/emcee articulates her poetry and the way in which the audience receives that message. Regarding tone in poetry, critic Ruben Brower writes: “By tone I refer to: (1) the implied social relationship of the speaker to his auditor and (2) the manner he adopts in addressing his auditor” (213). Brower, as a recognized member of the New Criticism school of thought, certainly used his conception of tone as a prism for literary criticism in a different way than I do. One of his students, the famed literary theorist Paul de Man had this to say about Brower and his pedagogical practices: “Students...were asked, in other words, to begin by reading texts closely as texts and not to move at once into the general context of human experience or history” (22). De Man’s synopsis of Brower’s thinking fits with the conventional understanding of the New Critical approach, whose adherents wished to divorce the author from her work. I can see the value in such a process; it is not as if a piece of art (a composition, a Hip Hop track) does not have an identity outside that of its creator or of the societal conditions within which it is formed. However, the context is vitally important for understanding the larger context from which an art product is born.

When I discuss tone in this chapter, the spirit behind my understanding is more closely aligned with the notion conceived by Sianne Ngai. Ngai writes: “It should be clear that by ‘tone’

I mean less the dramatic ‘attitude’ adumbrated by the New Critics than a global and hyper-relational concept of telling that encompasses attitude: a literary text’s affective bearing, orientation, or ‘set toward’ its audience and world” (43). Ngai’s view of tone as “hyper-relational” encompasses my belief that the tone of Hip Hop comes to being and continues to exist because of Hip Hop’s relationship to society at large, a relation that has often been oppositional. Namely, as I will discuss later, the economic circumstances of the Bronx gave rise to the oppositional tone of Hip Hop as a mechanism for resistance. Divorcing the analysis of Hip Hop lyrics from these circumstances limits our understanding of Hip Hop’s poetic project. It would be misguided to suggest, however, that the “dramatic attitude” of Hip Hop is not also important for understanding its cultural art products. Consequently, I still find Brower’s explanations to be useful because he clearly articulates the dramatic effects of the artist’s use of tone in a poem, and, as I will explain momentarily, Hip Hop verse is a dramatic production. Brower’s explanation of tone’s dramatic function in poetry, along with Ngai’s more expansive view of tone and its relationship to “its audience and world,” will serve as the theoretical frame through which I discuss oppositionality in this chapter.

Persona and Tone

One of the reasons that I have chosen the speaker/auditor binary as the prism for analyzing oppositionality in Hip Hop is the dramatic nature of its verse. Fundamentally, most Hip Hop performers use a persona (alias or moniker) to act as a speaker in verses. However, because of the importance of authenticity in Hip Hop, there is an implied understanding that a rapper’s work, though there are exceptions, is autobiographical, or at least semi-autobiographical. Scholar Mickey Hess explains this phenomenon, “when O’Shea Jackson

performs as Ice Cube, the experiences Ice Cube reports are accepted as Jackson's" (Hess 298). We can assume, then, if Biggie Smalls rapped about Bed-Stuy, but he was actually from Des Moines, his work would seem less credible and authentic. At the same time, the audience may not quibble with the fact that he actually grew up in a decent sized apartment, not a "one room shack," as he famously claimed, because the audience accepts that the rapper's personal experience may not match exactly, word for word, with the articulations of his persona. Thus, persona in Hip Hop allows the emcee to tell her own story, while also engaging in myth making.

The poetic license found in persona provides the speaker with a certain elasticity and range in subject matter. For Special Ed, persona allowed him to own "boutiques from France to the USA" and "a treaty with Tahiti" ("I Got it Made"). For the The Lady of Rage, persona allowed her to inhabit a fierce, take-no-prisoners attitude while working alongside the biggest rappers at the height of gangsta rap's male dominated emergence. And for the master of Hip Hop, the late MF Doom, persona not only empowered him to wear a literal iron mask at every performance, but also presented an opportunity to explore a multiplicity of personas via multiple aliases. Doom, in the spirit of Fernando Pessoa and his many heteronyms, performed under numerous monikers, inhabiting a range of personas, including King Geedorah and Viktor Vaughn (Hsu, "The Wondrous"). Essentially, Hip Hop's persona poetics embody and extend the concept of biomythography created by Audre Lorde (Daniell 12). Biography and mythmaking converge in the work of Doom, Special Ed, and The Lady of Rage, as well as for many other rappers, through the mechanism of persona. Ultimately, persona provides a space for dramatic expression and a vehicle for Hip Hop's oppositionality.

While packaging oppositionality in Hip Hop verse, the role of persona also explains the ways that Hip Hop engages problematic themes. Elaine Richardson illustrates the way persona helps explain the problematic images often found in Hip Hop:

Rap performances, like all expressive forms, must be considered in relation to beliefs, values, mores, and complex ideologies that underlie the street apparel, hard body imagery, and the sometimes seeming celebration of misogyny, thuggishness, and larger-than-life personas narrated in the music. One way to look at the celebration of gangsta practices, thuggishness, rampant materialism, and seeming disrespect for law and mainstream values in Hip Hop is in relation to Black vernacular folk epic story and song tradition. (13)

We can see from these points noted by Richardson that Hip Hop's oppositionality also connects with the larger tradition of rhetorical practices in African American expression that I discussed in chapter 1. Persona, then, connects Hip Hop with a longer tradition of storytelling and rhetorical play. Accordingly, persona conveys oppositionality in Hip Hop verse and serves as the artists' vehicle for extending the tradition of linguistic interplay found in African American discourse.

Unfortunately, this chapter does not examine the many complexities of persona in Hip Hop. Such an undertaking would require a chapter in itself or, perhaps, an entire dissertation. However, persona will still be discussed throughout this chapter. Whether we are talking about concept of the outlaw or the lens of feminist clapback, oppositionality is consistently conveyed in Hip Hop verse via persona. While Hip Hop's tendency towards oppositionality manifests as a form of socio-political positioning against an array of powerful forces, persona helps illustrate the ways in which this undertaking is also a dramatic one. Being aware of the dramatic attitude of

persona allows us to more effectively understand the ways oppositional tone materializes in Hip Hop verse.

Tone and Oppositionality

Using Brower's definition of tone as a starting point, particularly the relationship he conceptualizes between the speaker and the auditor, tone will function as the prism through which I interpret Hip Hop's tendency towards oppositionality. If we allow then for Brower's definition of tone to serve as a prism for interpreting Alexis Pate's conception of oppositionality in Hip Hop, we may approach some fundamental implications for the poetic projects of Hip Hop lyricism. Pate declares that a tone of opposition is a fundamental component of Hip Hop verse. A cursory glance at Hip Hop's most well-known verses reveals that, while perhaps not all, the vast majority of Hip Hop compositions are oppositional, making this tone a hallmark of the genre. Tone, then, can serve as a craft-based critical lens for interpreting Hip Hop thematics, in particular those that people often find offensive. Instead of sidestepping problematic themes in the name of establishing Hip Hop as poetry, Hip Hop's craft-based decisions, via the application of tone, provide us with the mechanisms for understanding these themes within a larger context. Such an undertaking will account for issues of misogyny and violence in the genre, rather than exonerating or sidestepping them, as most treatments of Hip Hop poetics (Pate's standing as the exception) avoid these issues to focus instead simply on poetics. Foregrounding tone in the critical discourse on Hip Hop poetics allows for a craft-based analysis of the content choices of the emcee and the craft of Hip Hop lyricism; this intervention enables us to confront Hip Hop's problematic themes without stigmatizing the community that created the genre and the spirit behind this extraordinary invention. While many scholars—Tricia Rose, Marc Anthony Neal,

and Joan Morgan to name a few—have deftly discussed the nuances of Hip Hop’s problematic themes without vilifying the community which produced it, these scholars’ investigations are not primarily focused on Hip Hop as a poetic form, rather as an overall cultural phenomenon. As a poet, I have chosen, in my analysis, to tackle problematic aspects of Hip Hop as well, buoyed by the work of the above-mentioned scholars, but my focus is on Hip Hop’s function as a poetic form and how problematic themes come to find home in this form.

To fully appreciate the way tone functions in Hip Hop, it is necessary to examine examples of it at work in Hip Hop tracks. I will discuss several examples in this chapter, including Run-DMC’s “Peter Piper,” PE’s “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos,” N.W.A. “Bitches Iz Bitches,” the aforementioned Real Roxanne’s self-titled track, Nicki Minaj’s “Want Some More,” Young M.A’s “Eat,” June Jordan’s “Owed to Eminem,” and Chris Rivers’ “Fear of My Crown.” I will argue that these examples of Hip Hop share one commonality: the poetics of opposition. And in the end, these examples will demonstrate the function of tone in Hip Hop, and, therefore, they will help establish the lens through which we can conceive of the genre’s poetic projects and thematic articulations.

Before analyzing Hip Hop’s oppositional tone in action, it will first be instructive to further establish the source of Hip Hop’s oppositional tone. There are obvious sources for Hip Hop’s oppositionality such as its inheritances from the dozens, the Black Arts Movement, and the Blues, discussed in chapters one and four. However, if Hip Hop inherited an oppositional tone from the dozens, Black Arts, and other African American cultural phenomena, there must be a reason why this tone crystallized in Hip Hop as one of its primary hallmarks. I will argue that the tone of oppositionality in Hip Hop has two somewhat disparate functions in Hip Hop that make it an essential component of its poetics. First and foremost, Hip Hop’s oppositional tone,

this manner of speaking from its core, has its roots in Chang's "politics of abandonment," a concept that I explore fully later in this chapter. In this instance, tone serves as a cry to be heard against these politics of abandonment. Such socioeconomic factors in the role of tone are not particularly surprising. However, an equally important function of tone in Hip Hop is to act as a counterbalance for rhyme, so that Hip Hop verses don't fall prey to some of rhyme's pitfalls, in particular the contemporary's audience's skepticism of it. In my conception, tone serves both a socio-political purpose and a craft-based function.

Oppositionality as Mediator for Rhyme

In this chapter I argue that oppositionality serves two distinct functions in Hip Hop verse. While I will contend that Jeff Chang's conception of "a politics of abandonment" helps establish a source for Hip Hop's tone, as socio-political utterance, there is also a functional, craft-based role for this tone, as a mediator for rhyme. While rhyme is discussed at length in chapter 2, I will revisit a couple of points about it here to illustrate how tone acts as a counterbalance to rhyme in Hip Hop.

David Caplan notes how contemporary American poets "typically see rhyme as optional, if not unappealing," but as we know, "Hip Hop possesses a specific confidence in rhyme" (*Rhymes Challenge* 4). As I discussed in chapter 2, the commitment to rhyme provides a constraint for the emcee. However, I am suggesting that oppositionality emerges as a guard against the pitfalls associated with rhyming poetry, the widely held belief that rhyme "cannot bear the pressure of contemporary reality" (*Rhymes Challenge* 5). And so, if rhyme is the religion to the Hip Hop emcee, it's possible that tone is her sacrament. The Hip Hop emcee finds a power within rhyme that allows for infinite exploration, one that is hinged around a constraint.

To negotiate the absolute obligation to rhyme, the emcee enlists tone as a mechanism from which to amplify rhyme while also not falling prey to the common traps associated with it, the belief that in rhymed poetry “there’s such a high potential for disaster” (Mishan, “Only Rhyme”). An oppositional tone, then, functions as the basis from which the emcee explores the constraint of rhyme, while asserting her work as fresh and contemporary.

If we take one, somewhat light example to start with, “Peter Piper,” we can see clearly how tone counterbalances rhyme. Jonah Katz points out that the rhyme patterns of “Peter Piper” represent the old-school flow of the 1980s. However, he also refers to the track as “an up-tempo classic that was considered risqué at the time” (103). His note that the track was risqué points to the oppositionality inherent in the lyrics. In this example, we find the oppositional tone of Hip Hop serving early on as a mediator for rhyme. Hip Hop’s first super famous group, Run-DMC, explores rhyme as a tool and grapples with rhyme’s relationship to the contemporary audience’s conceptions of it:

Now Peter Piper picked peppers but Run rocked rhymes

Humpty Dumpty fell down that's his hard time

Jack B. Nimble was nimble and he was quick

But Jam Master cut faster, Jack's on Jay's dick (Run-DMC, “Peter Piper”)

Run-DMC invokes the nursery rhyme as a device for establishing a combative tone. In the process, however, they also allude to a relationship between some aspects of Hip Hop rhyme and the nursery rhyme genre. Run-DMC seems to acknowledge that the nursery rhyme was the contemporary audience’s primary association with rhyme, invoking familiar characters: Peter Piper, Humpty Dumpty, and Jack B. Nimble. Through this comparison, the group establishes that

both genres operate as rhymed poetic forms within a shared tradition. However, once we find “Jack’s on Jay’s dick,” it’s clear that these rhymed poems have different thematic objectives.

Here it will be useful to invoke Brower’s conception of the social relationship between speaker and auditor. There might be three social relationships here that establish the tone of this piece, with Run-DMC as the speakers and the following auditors: the general audience, the potential rival, and the nursery rhyme tradition. We could argue for a fourth auditor, society in general, but that addressee will be discussed more thoroughly later. It is these three social relationships that establish the centrality of tone in this rhyme. The speaker challenges the potential rival at all times, and in this instance, appropriates the nursery rhyme to use Jack B. Nimble as a stand-in for the potential rival—a stand-in who wishes to have the DJ skills of Jam Master Jay. Using a nursery rhyme character as a target serves as a way to complicate oppositionality beyond the simple binary of emcee versus rival. In the case of the audience as auditor, they are given notice that rhyme is a vehicle for establishing authority. These are clearly *not* the night-time rhymes our mothers used to read us before bed.

In relationship to rhyme, these articulations of tone in “Peter Piper” exemplify how tone acts as mediator for rhyme. Rhyme, one of the emcee’s constraints discussed in chapter 2, can be further innovated from within, empowered by tone. In chapter 2, we discussed the writings of scholars Adam Bradley and David Caplan regarding rhyme in Hip Hop. It will be instructive to revisit those musings here to better appreciate how oppositionality functions as a mediator for rhyme. Caplan writes:

Committed to the technique, hip hop artists reclaim...the longer history of English-language verse, which the most prestigious forms of print-based poetry have largely discarded. In this respect, they challenge prevalent notions of “poetry” ...They also

remind attentive listeners how innovation works: how it mixes historical reclamation and contemporary discoveries until they become nearly indistinguishable. (Caplan, *Rhymes Challenge* 24)

Through the lens of Caplan's argument, we can understand Run-DMC's historical reclamation of rhyme culture because Hip Hop's oppositional tone empowers the group to make "contemporary discoveries," establishing rhyme as a mechanism for asserting artistic supremacy. Adam Bradley adds to Caplan's assertion that Hip Hop is engaged in a reclamation of rhyme: "Rap celebrates rhyme like nothing else, hearkening back to a time when literary poetry still unabashedly embraced the simple pleasure of and musicality of verse. Rap rhymes so much...it is now the largest and richest contemporary archive of rhymed words" (A. Bradley 51-52). (The rise of Hip Hop lyrics databases backs up this claim, which I discuss in the next chapter.) If Bradley is correct that Hip Hop is the "largest contemporary archive" of rhyme, then perhaps Hip Hop has been able to reclaim rhyme via the mechanism of oppositionality, the rebellious aesthetic making rhyme intriguing to a contemporary audience whose primary associations with rhyme were the nursery rhymes that were read to them as kids.

Oppositionality mediates rhyme and allows Hip Hop to recover the use of rhyme in contemporary poetic practice. When we fully appreciate this interdependent relationship, then tone becomes another constraint—in addition to those discussed in chapter 2—that the emcee must navigate because the audience not only expects a Hip Hop verse to rhyme and stick close to form, but also to carry an oppositional tone. Of course, as previously mentioned, the ability to innovate within a constraint, to stretch limits, can be empowering for poets.

As noted in the first two chapters, it is not as if the sonneteers of days past did not find new ways of discussing love within their chosen form. On the other hand, in the case of the

limerick and its reputation for naughtiness, we find proof of how a limited tonal range, for better or worse, can restrict the audience's preconceived expectations of a poetic form (Stephenson 171). Much as wittiness and/or impropriety have become inextricably linked with the limerick, oppositionality is equally as foundational to the Hip Hop form. In regard to Hip Hop, due to the contemporary audience's limited relationship to rhyme and its general skepticism of it, the tone of oppositionality empowers Hip Hop to assert a level of authority over rhyme. The tone of opposition then acts as the instrument for broadcasting Hip Hop's faith in rhyme and its armor against a skeptical or unfamiliar audience, allowing the constraint of tone to also be liberating.

The Socio-Political Roots of Hip Hop's Oppositionality

Responding to the 'The Politics of Abandonment'

While the tone of oppositionality serves a craft-based function that mediates rhyme, further understanding of Hip Hop's oppositional poetics requires a clear analysis of the source for its tonal positioning. I argue that the primary source for oppositionality in Hip Hop is a notion that Jeff Chang describes as a "politics of abandonment" in Hip Hop's birthplace, the northern, urban landscape of the South Bronx. The desertion that Chang describes helps explain why the entire mode of Hip Hop, since its inception, has been, at its heart, oppositional. The systematic desertion of the people in the South Bronx was a continuation of centuries of systematic, racist oppression and marginalization imposed by governmental authorities of the United States on its own citizens. However, this tradition of legally sanctioned marginalization crystallized in a specific way in the Bronx, and the response to it was Hip Hop.

Jeff Chang's groundbreaking history of Hip Hop culture, *Can't Stop Won't Stop—A History of the Hip Hop Generation*, chronicles the history behind the making and development

of Hip Hop, as well as the circumstances that led to its creation. Chang's chapter, "Necropolis," discusses the conditions in the Bronx that gave birth to the genre. The chapter establishes the political terms under which the Bronx became the space where Hip Hop was born. In a sense, Chang's project for this chapter is as much about urban planning as it is about any other field: "It began with a master plan designed in 1929 by the New York Regional Plan Association. The business interests...wanted to transform Manhattan into a center of wealth, connected directly to the suburbs through an encircling network of highways carved through the heart of neighborhoods in the outer boroughs" (Chang 12). This plan then sets the stage for the comprehensive political and social abandonment of the Bronx, brought on by the powerful operative and city planner Robert Moses. The unintended consequence of Moses' plan was that it created a cultural voice to be filled by those left behind. Hip Hop emerges, then, as an artistic movement and poetry of the people in an apocalyptic urban landscape, a landscape where work was scarce:

Here was the new math: the South Bronx had lost 600,000 manufacturing jobs...average per capita income dropped to \$2,430...40 percent of the nationwide average. The official youth unemployment rate hit 60 percent...in some neighborhoods the true number was closer to 80 percent. If blues culture had developed under the conditions of oppressive, forced labor, hip-hop culture would arise from the conditions of no work. (Chang 13)

Considering these conditions of no work, it's not surprising that a poetics born from these circumstances might have a chip on its shoulder, adopting an oppositional tone from day one. Or as Mos Def put it: "Beef isn't what Jay said to Nas. / Beef is when working folks can't find jobs" ("Beef Lyrics" "Beef").

Chang spells out the ways in which this politics of abandonment did not merely result from out of touch politicians failing to recognize the needs of the urban Black and Latinx community of the Bronx; rather, this politic was one of intentional, calculated neglect. This negligence was famously called *benign neglect* in reference to a confidential memo from Democratic Senator Daniel Moynihan advocating for the intentional and willful dereliction of support for urban Black and Latinx communities (Chang 14). The result of various local, state, and federal policies was a burned-out cityscape in New York City's northernmost borough, allowing circumstances where landlords found it more profitable and acceptable to burn their buildings and collect insurance rather than rent from community residents. In short, as Chang puts it: "fire paid" (13). And it was this politic that led Howard Cosell to proclaim in a live telecast of game 2 of the 1977 World Series: "Ladies and gentlemen...the Bronx is burning!" (qtd. in Chang 10).

With the Bronx burning, the politics of abandonment fed into a need for young Black and Latinx people to find a forum for expression. Alexis Pate explains how politics led to the adoption of opposition within Hip Hop discourse:

Hip hop...continued to adopt an oppositional stance toward everything and anything which reflected the world that dominated its proponents. Although hip hop was born from any number of cultural, social, and economic factors that were present at the time, underlying all of them was the existence of an instinctive and shrewd desire on the part of poor black and Latino boys to express themselves. (Pate 27)

Perhaps this most basic idea—Black and Latinx children wanting to express themselves in the midst of socio-economic abandonment—functions as the need for a tone of opposition to combat the feeling that their very presence was "opposed" by the city and nation in which they lived.

Within this framework we can see Hip Hop poetics serving as an opportunity, perhaps the only outlet, for Black and brown youth to express opposition towards a society that has deserted them. Accordingly, such oppositional expression would then be appealing to artists from other cities, and eventually other nations, who experienced analogous forms of marginalization.

The Outlaw and Oppositionality

Accepting oppositionality at its core, Hip Hop can be more accurately seen for its efforts of resistance, as it clearly opposes more powerful political forces which had abandoned the young people who created the genre. Here Imani Perry's notion of *the outlaw* as a character of resistance may be instructive: "Hip Hop embraces the outlaw. Outlaw status is conferred only metaphorically through lawbreaking, but on a deeper, more symbolic level, it is achieved through a position of resistance" (*Prophets* 102). The outlaw is a major persona we find throughout Hip Hop history. In fact, it is the concept of the outlaw that binds disparate rappers from Eazy E to Chuck D and the underground, feminist rapper Cihuatl Ce. Each of these rappers is in some ways an outlaw. While not always political, as an outsider, the outlaw still becomes a figure of resistance. Imani Perry's assertion that the outlaw persona is inherently a figure of resistance furthers the role of oppositionality in Hip Hop. Oppositionality enables the rapper to claim the status of rebel by giving the artist license to claim this persona. Considering Chang's politics of abandonment, the first emcees arrived to Hip Hop with hopes of finding a forum for expression, and, in the process, created Hip Hop as a form of rebellion, with the outlaw serving as a symbol of that rebellion. Once this initial aspiration to create a platform was realized, Hip Hop poetics retained the politics of resistance that formed in its birth, and the outlaw persona continued to play a major role in the retention of Hip Hop's initial oppositionality.

When discussing the politics of resistance in Hip Hop, there is no rap group more appropriate to consider than Public Enemy (PE). The group's name alone brashly announces their intention to project themselves as outlaws. The group's primary lyricist, Chuck D, who famously called Hip Hop the "Black CNN," made his name as an outlaw type of figure in Hip Hop, perhaps one of the first nationally recognized outlaw artists in the genre (qtd. in Mahoney, "Black CNN"). However, Chuck D's renegade persona was not like the ones that would later become associated with Hip Hop, like those of The Notorious B.I.G. or 50 Cent. Known for their political Hip Hop, PE came to be recognized as one of the signature political outfits in Hip Hop, a distinction that the group still holds to this day. Chuck D's peer KRS-ONE puts it like this: "Because of the existence of PE in the development of our culture it can never be said that Hip Hop was exclusively about bitches, hoes, pimps, and thugs" (Chuck D, *Rap Revolutionary* iii). For Chuck D and PE, the oppositional nature of Hip Hop provided a compelling canvass to air political grievances, a fundamentally different project than that of the rappers who just rhymed about "bitches and hoes."

If we take PE's "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos" as one example of oppositionality, we can see how this tone makes space for a full articulation of resistance against the political establishment. PE's "Black Steel" is an Attica inspired call to arms against mass incarceration, some twenty years before Michelle Alexander's celebrated book *The New Jim Crow – Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*. Through "Black Steel," PE depicted the prison system as an extension of chattel slavery and a location to rebel against. The tone of oppositionality requires no special skills for one to recognize in the following lines from "Black Steel":

This is what it takes for peace

So I just took the piece

Black for Black inside time to cut the leash

Freedom to get out to the ghetto, no sell out

6 C-Os we got we ought to put their head out (Chuck D, "Black Steel")

The content of these lines removes any worry that rhyming culture will be associated with nursery rhymes. PE's Chuck D situates himself as a prisoner (outlaw) and leader of a prison riot (a movement of resistance). The speaker establishes a coherent justification for using violence against the apparatus of the carceral state within a framework of resistance against abandonment: "Here in a land that never gave a damn / about a brother like me in a cell." In this case, the abandonment is the isolation experienced inside of prison walls. The auditor is the speaker's audience, but this relationship is negotiated via the speaker's opposition towards another auditor, the prison system: the figures of the prison guards, warden, etc. The audience has one choice as to how to respond; they must pick a side to sympathize with. This rigid bifurcation serves to increase the intensity of oppositionality as a device. However, there is another important relationship here, as the speaker is ultimately addressing this political system beyond the prison itself, "in a land that never gave a damn." The tone expressed in this track would seem to be the full realization of an opposition to abandonment, the outlaw advocating for resistance in both a specific sense in the prison and in a more general sense towards society at large.

If we consider the following quote from record executive Ruben Rodriguez, we find that PE's poetics of opposition was not necessarily alienating a white audience at the time: "What's happening with PE is unbelievable. The album is selling across the board to all demographics and nationalities" (qtd. in Derry 409). Perhaps, then, the song's auditors began to sympathize with the political struggles that PE was articulating. Some of those auditors were likely white

suburban listeners. As Hip Hop in general would go on to do, PE alters the grounds of oppositionality. The art form, born from a politics of abandonment, was now inspiring the children of those who originally abandoned the Black community of the South Bronx to join that same opposition. Now young people of all races, but especially young white people in the suburbs, were sympathizing with issues of Black resistance. White kids on Long Island, also the home of Chuck D, in Westchester County, and Greenwich, Connecticut became willing to cosign PE's calls for rebellion. Such an idea speaks to the appeal of oppositionality and its effectiveness as a device for engaging an audience.

Corporations would have seemingly been in a bind in dealing with Public Enemy. After all, record companies want to sell records, and PE was moving product. However, would media companies really want to market these revolutionary politics? "Artist freedoms are actually constrained and channeled by media corporations; claims about freedom of speech are made to defend the bottom line, not artists' rights to speak freely," explains Tricia Rose (*Hip Hop Wars* 155). Here, Tricia Rose touches on the role of corporations in influencing the narratives of Hip Hop. If we consider "Black Steel," and the ways in which it advocates violence as a means of resisting oppression and abandonment, one can see how a recording industry might steer its product away from such articulations. However, the presence of controversial material in Hip Hop did not compel the record industry to promote less violent material. On the contrary, it led to the promotion of differently violent material. Perhaps the poetics of opposition—if opposition is a fault line which makes Hip Hop appealing—served as the fulcrum point around which record companies manipulated Hip Hop's oppositional lyricism, coercing it away from being politically oppositional and towards a different type of opposition.

While it's clear that Chuck D's Hip Hop persona embodies the notion of the outlaw as described by Imani Perry, it is not as if all critics accept Perry's notion that Hip Hop always operates from a "position of resistance." When discussing politically conscious rappers, critic John McWhorter writes: "From the way these rappers are talked about and written about, you would think that hip-hop includes an array of gurus of penetrating sociopolitical insight, poised to guide us to the mountaintop at last if only more people would buy their albums" (48). McWhorter also discusses the concept of oppositionality in Hip Hop by half-heartedly agreeing with Van Deburg's ideas on the matter: "Oppositional is everything, with feasibility on the back burner...Being confrontational is the foundational element in the music. Therefore, the politics of rap must be, as Van Deburg notes, oppositional" (48). From McWhorter's perspective, oppositionality—while accurately a part of the Hip Hop project—is ultimately a limiting agent, in that it prevents Hip Hop from pursuing practical aims. Hip Hop's supposed lack of practicality comes into question, when McWhorter also questions the outlaw motif by asking: "Is KRS-ONE interested in philanthropic grassroots and government funded organizations getting black men off the streets and into office jobs? (22). Here, McWhorter problematizes Chang's conception of the politics of abandonment and his idea that the conditions of "no work" functioned as a foundational force in Hip Hop's birth. After all, at the end of the day, does the outlaw only want to get his people a bunch of desk jobs? (McWhorter 22). Despite that fact that KRS is probably fine with the government helping fund desk jobs for his people, McWhorter suggests that the aim of oppositionality is simply to say, "screw authority," which "is not a recipe for political change" (23).

In general, McWhorter mostly seems to enjoy throwing cold water on those of us who find Hip Hop as a liberating art form. However, in fairness to McWhorter, he does compel us to

ask ourselves: Can we see Hip Hop artists as resistance figures when their work endorses harm within their communities?

Gender Politics and Oppositionality

A Poetics of Misogyny

A burning trash can is thrown over a guard rail, into the tunnel that exits the Joe Louis Arena in Detroit. Burning paper, metal objects fly down into the tunnel as a legion of police beat up Ice Cube, EAZY E, Dr Dre, and the rest of the N.W.A. crew. Anyone who saw the movie *Straight Outta Compton* remembers this captivating scene which depicts the stakes involved in the oppositional poetics of Hip Hop (Gray). However, the dramatized event never happened, at least not the way it was depicted. As many have suggested, the purpose of the scene was to portray N.W.A. “as First Amendment champions standing up to bullying cops” (Nicholson, "9 Truths"). In the actual story, they are arrested in a hotel lobby after the police wait for them to come down from their rooms, and they aren't beaten or charged. This clarification is not meant to imply that the artists of N.W.A. were not familiar with police harassment. The truth is their concert was cancelled after they played the song “Fuck Da Police,” and N.W.A.’s lyrics clearly represented the members’ personal experiences with police harassment. However, it is relevant to consider that the scene in the movie contributed to a revisionist history of the group’s position in Hip Hop’s legacy. Their song was clearly oppositional and political in that it addressed a state sanctioned political body, the police. That police in Detroit would cancel a concert featuring poets from L.A. vocalizing their anger about other cops speaks to the power of oppositionality in Hip Hop. N.W.A. drew people’s attention. Still, history remembers that N.W.A. was known

more for a different type of oppositionality in their lyrics. Unlike the poetics of PE, which never included rants about “bitches and hoes,” N.W.A. made such misogynistic material mainstream.

Ice Cube, who is credited with writing many of NWA’s early lyrics, spoke to *The Rolling Stone* in 2015: “If you’re a ho, you probably don’t like us...I never understood why an upstanding lady would even think we’re talking about her” (“N.W.A Tell All”). Ice Cube demonstrates that his opinions did not change much from when he and his fellow N.W.A. members recorded a song called “A Bitch Iz a Bitch” in 1989. The song’s outro addresses this same question above and clearly answers it: “Now ask yourself are they talking about you? / Are you that funky, dirty, money-hungry, scandalous, stuck-up, hair piece contact wearing bitch? / Yep, you probably are.” In those lines, as well as Ice Cube’s later reflections, we find the weak defense of the song’s speaker as to why the song should not be offensive to its auditors. Echoing his future self, Ice Cube in the track said: “Now the title bitch don't apply to all women” (Ice Cube and N.W.A., “Bitch”) This same defense would be employed by another rapper, Jeru the Damaja, years later in his song, “Da Bichez”: “I'm not talking about the queens but (what?) the bitches” (Jeru The Damaja). In these arguments we find two auditors with different issues to negotiate. On the one hand, female auditors are being asked to ascribe themselves into a category; meanwhile, male auditors have to confront the issue of deciding whether to cosign the lyrics by actively, or tacitly, supporting this divisive parallel.

Even if auditors of N.W.A.’s “Bitch” were to entertain the feeble defense regarding the difference between a “bitch” and an “upstanding lady,” the argument itself proves untenable as it is almost instantly undermined in the song: “But all women have a little bitch in 'em.” If all women have “a little bitch in ‘em” how could Ice Cube say every woman should not be offended? The fallacy of Ice Cube’s defense is made evident once the true consequences of the

misogynist language in the song become realized: “slam her ass in a ditch.” Ultimately, it becomes clear that being a “bitch,” which according to Ice Cube is every woman at some point, means to be deserving of male violence and mistreatment. Ice Cube furthers this idea when he says: “I once knew a bitch who got slapped / 'Cause she played me like she was all that.” There is no safe space for women in these lines, as, according to N.W.A. woman can be justifiably attacked by male violence. These reactionary poetics of opposition become a poetics of gender oppression.

In *The Hip Hop Wars*, published in 2008, Tricia Rose summarizes how harmful sexist lyrics function in Hip Hop as a commercial product: “Clearly, the issue isn’t if hip hop—as it has evolved in the commercial arena over the past dozen years or so—promotes sexist and demeaning images of black women as its bread-and-butter product” (114). We can see here how the poetics of opposition—that were once successful commodities as lyrics of resistance, like those of PE—became transformed into a catalogue of “demeaning images of black women.” The poetics of resistance were now a poetics of misogyny, set in opposition to Black women. Rose indicates that these poetics of misogyny were not a phenomenon created by Hip Hop culture: “Hip hop does not break from the fundamental logic of mainstream masculinity so much as convey it with excess, bravado, and extra insult” (119). This point from Rose speaks to the fact that, in general, Hip Hop merely articulated an already ingrained conception of masculinity and gender division existing in American culture. Furthermore, we can also surmise from her analysis that the recording industry, which had a long history of sexism, played a major role in promoting these new, heavily misogynistic poetics of Hip Hop.

Examples of the profound sexism of the recording industry outside of Hip Hop abound in the catalogue of memories recalled by women in the industry over many decades. In an article about the '70s female rock group, The Runaways, Jason Cherkis writes:

To get ahead in the music business of the mid-'70s...meant convincing a man you were worth it. If you wanted to get your band signed, a man had to approve the deal. If you wanted to cut a record, a man had to agree to produce it. Chances are, a man would decide whether to play your album's first single on the radio and whether you got booked to play it live. ("The Lost Girls")

When we connect the inherent sexism in the music industry with the Rose's argument that the commodification of Black women was the "bread and butter" of commercial Hip Hop, we see that a sexist recording industry found a way to capitalize on the appeal of Hip Hop's poetics of opposition by promoting reactionary, misogynistic Hip Hop lyrics. Instead of marketing the commercially successful, radically political rhymes of PE, which preceded the more gangsta material of N.W.A., record companies just started marketing a poetics of opposition whose target was not a racist power structure. Record companies were, undoubtedly, a part of this racist power structure due to a long history of exploiting Black musicians for profits. However, the music of N.W.A. preserved the angry, rebellious tone of PE without threatening the record companies themselves. N.W.A. had no problem attacking the disposable lives of Black women, who had also endured the politics of abandonment that gave birth to Hip Hop but would now feel abandoned further by Black men in Hip Hop. As Rose explained, "even some black women who have been listening to hip hop since its early years feel betrayed by the hip hop of today" (*Hip Hop Wars* 126).

Unlike the earlier poetry born in the Bronx, these new, reactionary oppositional poetics upheld the patriarchal status quo; consequently, oppositionality, rather than empowering an already marginalized community, helped divide it further. The earliest projects of Hip Hop challenged the political establishment that sought to marginalize the voices of Black and brown youth. However, in later iterations of Hip Hop, we find that sometimes oppositional poetics can be aimed at other marginalized people. Such a predicament challenges the value of oppositionalism in Hip Hop. If it can be co-opted so easily, perhaps this cooptation speaks to the limitations of oppositionality as a liberatory tool.

Unsurprisingly, Black women and women of color come to the rescue and demonstrate the continued value of oppositional poetics in Hip Hop, especially as a tool for clapback.

Feminist Clapback

While I've discussed the ways oppositionality has served as both a tool for empowering young people as well as a caustic force which divides a community, now, I offer a surprising corollary to the misogyny found in many lyrics, like those of N.W.A. The poetry of the famed, feminist poet June Jordan would seem like the first choice for a discussion of Hip Hop, but in her poem "Owed to Eminem," Jordan composed a battle rhyme by taking the named rapper to task for his misogynistic and sexist lyrics. Eminem in some ways continued the legacy of N.W.A. having been produced by one of its most famous members, Dr Dre. Like N.W.A., Eminem has also been known for sexist lyrics, and yet, he still became one of the most celebrated emcees of all time. One of the signature songs to bring him acclaim was a track to his mother, "Cleanin Out My Closet." His song stood in strong contrast to the work of another heir to N.W.A.'s legacy, Dre's former labelmate 2Pac Shakur. 2Pac's "Dear Mama" was a heartfelt, painfully honest

tribute to this mother and former member of the Black Panther Party, Afeni Shakur. While Pac balanced lines of criticism with lines of love, “Even as a crack fiend, Mama / You always was a Black queen, Mama (“Dear Mama”),” Eminem offered rebuke after rebuke: “I’m a make you look so ridiculous now” (“Cleanin”).

Dissing one’s own mama on a Hip Hop track was new ground, and it seems it was a bridge too far for June Jordan. She was unwilling to let this transgression slip by while “critics stay mum.” Jordan voices her distaste for “...that bunk / about tying who up like a punk in the / back of the trunk / or that dope about mothers and wives / give you worse than a funeral hearse.” Boldly, Jordan establishes this conversation on the level of poetics. She makes clear that she will confront Eminem on his territory—his form—recognizing that each of them is a poet. “If you mess with my jam / I’ll kill you I will” (616). Her “jam” being poetry of course, Jordan is reclaiming the poetics of Hip Hop from a space where women and gay people are targets of Hip Hop’s oppositional posture: “I’m the bitch come to take you / I’m the faggot to fake you.” In the spirit of Public Enemy, Jordan establishes herself as an outlaw via her chosen persona “Slim Lady”:

But nobody’s dumb
enough to believe that you grieve
because folks
can’t conceive that you more than a
moron
or why would you whore on
the hole in your sole? (616)

Via her new persona, she will rescue this poetic form from the artists who have chosen to misuse it. What is clear is that, while working in the Hip Hop form, Jordan is conscious of tone. While she of course pays important attention to rhyme, slant rhyme, multisyllabic rhyme, and chain rhyme, Jordan also recognizes that for her poem to function as Hip Hop it must adopt a tone of oppositionality. Its auditor, most directly, is Eminem himself, as the speaker situates herself in opposition to him. The audience of course also functions as auditor, in some ways having to also pick sides. But implicit in this poem is another auditor, the aspiring rapper. The rapper, perhaps as poet first, might come across Jordan's rebuke and be put on alert that rappers like Eminem, via their violent homophobia and misogyny, are disrespecting that art form and its poetics. As macho rappers continue to abandon women by demeaning them in Hip Hop verses, fundamentally, Hip Hop sets itself up in opposition to the principles of feminism. Conversely, tone becomes a mechanism which allows Jordan to appropriate the Hip Hop form effectively, with the goal of, in part, revising Hip Hop discourse and writing over it with a queer Black feminist lens.

The violence and misogyny that Hip Hop is often recognized for are extensions of Hip Hop's oppositional tone. June Jordan illustrates this by seamlessly repurposing Hip Hop's misogynistic discourse towards opposite, antithetical aims to those of its misogynistic rappers. If we view more problematic Hip Hop as simply a continuation of the genre's fundamental orientation towards opposition, one that has been co-opted by the record industry over the work of other popular and more specifically political acts like PE, we can recognize ways in which the most problematic images of violence within Hip Hop come into existence. It is not that Hip Hop's community loves violence and/or has a predisposition to it; rather, its poetics of opposition make room for a vast range of oppositional utterances, misogynistic ones being only

one sector of these propositions. Tone then offers a craft-based explanation for both the reasons for the rise of problematic material in Hip Hop and, as Jordan demonstrates, a way out of such contradictory subject matter for the artist who wishes to craft a different thematic perspective within the genre's oppositional poetics.

A lot of Hip Hop lyrics are sexist, violent, misogynistic, and homophobic. These issues have been discussed at length in the media and in academic discourse. And to some degree, because the ground has been covered, it is probably more instructive to discuss the impact that women emcees have had on the genre, rather than the impact that sexist men and male rappers have had on women. Joan Morgan, in her essay "Hip Hop Feminist," seems to agree with this assertion: "Just once, I didn't want to have to talk about 'the brothers'...or 'the patriarchy'...I wanted a feminism that would allow me to explore who we are as women" ("Hip Hop Feminist" 47). This note from Morgan illustrates a harmful side effect of conversations of gender in Hip Hop that are centered on male sexism: the erasure of women's contributions as a counterpoint against this sexism.

Women from the birth of Hip Hop have always used the art form as a space for self-expression, especially expression that has been used to call out sexism. For example, The Real Roxanne's self-titled track was one of the earliest Hip Hop hits and is also an early example of a female rapper utilizing the poetry of Hip Hop to combat sexist paradigms. As noted in the beginning of the chapter, in the "The Real Roxanne" the rapper takes on the entire UTFO crew, a then up-and-coming group of male rappers who had written a song disparaging a fictional female character named Roxanne. "The Real" reaches its peak during the following lines directed at a male emcee named Educated Rapper:

Your nose is always runny
You look like Bugs Bunny
All your raps are old, ancient as a mummy...
...Educated Rapper you ain't nothing but a dummy
You try to be chummy, all you play is gin rummy
I bet makin love to you must really be crummy (Jack "The Real")

The Real's relentless onslaught reaches a fever pitch at this moment in her verse. She arrives at this point through carefully crafted poetics. By employing a disyllabic rhyme for ten consecutive lines, coupled with periodic internal rhyme, she rains down a merciless flurry via the continued repetition of end rhyme. Her execution allows her to establish her position in Hip Hop while daring male emcees to question her skills. Her auditors are the men from UTFO, but also any man who would attempt to challenge her. For The Real, the oppositional poetics of Hip Hop provide profitable ground for exercising her voice to challenge sexism, fight back, and establish herself in the genre.

This moment of feminist Hip Hop rhetoric is not a unique one in Hip Hop history. Women from M.C. Lyte to The Lady of Rage to Nicki Minaj have utilized the form of Hip Hop to confront sexism and notions of male superiority within the genre. In the case of Nicki Minaj, her challenge to sexism is often directed at the male dominance of the industry. She illustrated her feelings on the industry with the following tweet: "In any field, women must work TWICE as hard to even get HALF the respect her male counterparts get" (Minaj, "In any field"). In the track "Want Some More" she releases some of that frustration. She attempts to demonstrate her place among male rappers and implies that the industry does not pay enough attention to her accomplishments:

Who had Eminem on the first album?

Who had Kanye saying, "She a problem"?

Who the fuck came in the game, made her own column?

Who made Lil Wayne give 'em five million? ("Want Some")

As The Real Roxanne did in the earlier example, Minaj uses disyllabic rhyme in this quatrain.

However, the way she really communicates her aims is through the use of anaphora. These anaphoric rhetorical questions repeat the subject *who*. In these lines, we find how the literary devices used in Hip Hop poetics interact with oppositionality in order for the speaker to advance her argument to her auditors. She further accentuates oppositionality in this rhyme by removing her name from the subject position. The auditor knows that the *who* Minaj is speaking of is herself. This maneuver allows her to highlight the erasure of her accomplishments, and by extension, the ways in which the male dominated industry suppresses women's craft.

Simultaneously, though, she still makes clear that she can utilize the oppositional poetics of Hip Hop as grounds for challenging these circumstances. Her work then serves as a counterexample to the work of N.W.A. While oppositionality in Hip Hop poetics can and often has been a force for oppressing women, these oppositional poetics can, and always have been, repurposed by women to challenge their own oppression.

We can take the examples of The Real Roxanne and Nicki Minaj as opportunities to illustrate one of the primary components of sexism in Hip Hop: the idea that many people connected to the genre do not recognize the work, the powerful poetry, of the many women who have contributed to the genre's corpus. Despite a legacy of sexism in Hip Hop lyrics, women emcees have embraced the form as a mechanism for reimagining Hip Hop since the genre's inception. In this regard, feminist Hip Hop poetics seem to share the same function as Audre

Lorde assigned to the role of poetry for women: “In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real” (3). It is through the study of the craft of women emcees that we access the many impressive ways women have “made real” a different conception of the genre, one that overturns many prevailing notions of Hip Hop discourse. Studying, examining, and highlighting the feminist works of Hip Hop help to reveal the dialogic power of these contributions. Poetics becomes the space where we assist in making the statements real again.

Oppositionality Reversing Heterosexism and Machismo

Considering a possible shift in the type of tone that Hip Hop might project in the future, another useful example to examine is the work of Young M.A. The Puerto Rican and Jamaican emcee, by way of Virginia and Brooklyn, took the rap game by storm with intense, violent, gangsta lyrics. Consider the following lines:

All that pain and that suffer

She ain’t just have us natural, the doctors they had to cut her (I love you ma)

C section but what a blessing

Who would’ve guessed that the next best is

Nobody expected, me a she

Nigga, accept it I’m here (Young M.A, "EAT")

In this segment, Young M.A pivots from discussing the circumstances of her birth to establishing herself as the new best emcee. However, she establishes her ascendance as a reversal: “Nobody expected, me a she.” Young M.A confirms quickly that she is addressing a very specific auditor,

the emcee who would be unwilling to accept a female rapper as a legitimate inheritor of Hip Hop's throne. Continuing, M.A raps:

I swear to God I ain't scared of these niggas

Damn, I must really put fear in these niggas

Because they call me a dyke, a faggot, a gay bitch

I ain't shit, that hate shit, that hatred, goddamn

That just make them look less of a man, fam ("EAT")

Using identical rhyme, broken rhyme, and internal rhyme, she accomplishes some similar objectives as Jordan's Black feminist rhyme. Young M.A challenges the same auditors as Jordan. However, she does so differently, by more clearly associating herself within the tradition of violent, gangsta Hip Hop. Thirty years after N.W.A. hit the scene, she confronts a now established tradition of misogynist Hip Hop rhymes within a tradition that considers women to be objects—not potential fellow rappers—and one that makes no room for homosexuality. Young M.A reverses this notion by recasting the macho male rapper as her target, and in the process making him a victim of his own game. She does so by capturing the macho male rapper's ground, a fact she illustrates on another track called "Bleed": "I'm a thoroughbred nigga wit an attitude." In this track Young M.A asserts herself within the tradition of N.W.A. by borrowing the acronym that makes the group's name. On the other hand, M.A also released an EP titled "Herstory," aligning herself with the term coined by the '70s feminist movement. The result of this unpredictable synthesis in her work is an unprecedented and contradictory amalgamation between gangsta rap and feminism.

For Young M.A, the tone of opposition serves as a springboard for her to revise the conception of who has authority to rhyme about certain subjects. At the same time, her

intervention is limited. While subverting the patriarchal notions of male supremacy, she also continues a tendency towards objectifying women: “They just mad cause I beat the pussy like bam bam / Because I’m making these bitches twerk on a handstand.” In this process, Young M.A establishes that the queer female rapper now has agency to objectify women as sexual objects. While cosigning this tradition of sexist exploitation of women’s bodies, her work still explodes predetermined rules of authority in Hip Hop, making room for the queer masculine Black female rapper as antagonist of the traditional macho male persona. In this regard, Young M.A becomes another type of outlaw, one whose primary enemy and auditor is the tradition of homophobic, patriarchal Hip Hop.

Young M.A uses violent imagery in opposition to a force of oppression, the exclusionary practices of male rappers that would try to deny space to female rappers. However, unlike PE, her enemy isn’t a clear institution like the prison system; rather her target is the sexist male rapper himself. Still, there is a larger force that helped to create these circumstances of sexism and homophobia beyond the control of the violent macho rappers. In this regard, the opposition in Young M. A’s poetry addresses a larger auditor of society and the political establishment, echoing the aims of Hip Hop’s creators who challenged the politics of abandonment.

The poetics of opposition opens space for confronting preconceived conceptions of authority in Hip Hop. Related to this is a final example from the work of Chris Rivers, son of the late Christopher Lee Carlos Rios, aka Big Pun. In his track “Fear of My Crown,” Rivers appears to challenge his father’s legacy. “I look into my past and I can barely force a smile / The common misconceptions that parents afford a child” This song about domestic violence echoes the circumstances of Rivers’ own childhood. Mother, Liza Rios heroically revealed that she was a constant victim of violence at the hands of her partner Big Pun. Rivers takes the poetics of

opposition in a new direction, confronting machismo by challenging his own father and, in the process, making his own name: “It’s you that we should trust to protect us and make us proud / I just try to be the man that you presented to me / Not the man that you showed your friends and you pretended to be” (Rivers, “Fear”). It is important to note that Rivers has stated that this song was not about his father, however the parallels are impossible to ignore: “I’m looking at mami’s eyes and say ‘I kill’ em if I could’ / But I’m too damn weak and small.” Rivers said nearly the same thing on the *The Combat Jack Show* in an appearance alongside his mother where they addressed the domestic violence of the famed father: “I used to tell mommy, if I got big enough, I’d kill him” (Rivers, “Liza Rios”). Rivers’ experience as a survivor shaped his poetics. The oppositionality of Hip Hop provided Rivers an opportunity to confront his father’s abuse, but also to make space for Rivers himself: “Shout out to the children who has overcame these challenges / Prayers to the kids who couldn’t cope and broke they bandages” (“Fear”). By aligning himself with children who have survived domestic violence, Rivers situates himself as the speaker addressing them as his auditors. The rest of the audience then must confront where their sympathies lie, with the legend or with his son and wife. “Shout out to the mothers that tried to hold it steady had a / Sprained wrist and black eyes and still would make spaghetti.” Rivers further aligns his poetry with his mother. In this regard, his work echoes that of female rappers who used the oppositional poetics of Hip Hop to combat sexism and male violence. Finally, Rivers emerges with the assertion, “I’m standing with my chin way higher than it should be,” establishing himself as an emcee now, living, and one to pay attention to (“Fear”). In another essay by Joan Morgan, she wrote that “rap music is essential to the struggle against sexism because it takes us straight to the battlefield” (“Fly-Girls” 153). This statement proves true for Rivers, as Hip Hop’s oppositional poetics allow him space to confront his father’s abuse. This

abuse left Rivers abandoned, but the oppositional poetics of Hip Hop gave him a platform to reclaim the space he lost due to his father's violence and neglect. This example serves as one more way that oppositionality in Hip Hop gives a voice to marginalized, disempowered people.

Final Thoughts on Tone

Poet Friedrich Hölderlin, regarding tone, writes: "The natural tone, which is particularly proper to the epic, is already recognizable in its outward appearance. One passage of Homer allows one to say what can be said of this tone in general. As indeed in a good poem, one period of speech can represent the entire work" (Hölderlin 42). Hölderlin's conception of tone in poetry neatly allows us to clarify tone's function in Hip Hop. From Hölderlin's perspective, it could be argued that opposition in one Hip Hop rhyme "represents the entire work" of Hip Hop. Not to say that sexist, misogynist rhyme, content wise, represents all of Hip Hop, but a tendency towards opposition does. It is opposition which binds most Hip Hop rhymes together. Aside from rhyme, opposition is the other indispensable adhesive that unifies the genre's corpus. Just as "Peter Piper," "Black Steel," "Owed to Eminem," and "Eat" all share opposition as a central defining characteristic of each poem, these poems all share these tonal characteristics with the rhymes of N.W.A. Oppositionality has descended from the politics of abandonment of the South Bronx in the 1970s and early '80s. This desire for opposition has its roots in earlier forms of expression discussed in chapter 1: the poetry of the Black Arts Movement, the Blues, and the dozens. In this regard, Hip Hop is continuing a tradition of Black and brown expression. However, this form centers itself in a poetics of opposition. And it is Hip Hop's tendency towards opposition which explains how record companies have exploited the genre by marketing

one dimensional narratives that share gestures of oppositionality but do not reflect the wider range of thematics found in the Hip Hop's entire corpus.

Despite the recording industry's marketing of a narrow range of oppositional poetics in Hip Hop, oppositionality provides a way forward for artists who wish to honor its tradition of opposition but also want to avoid mainstream tendencies towards misogyny. Furthermore, as is the case in the work of newer artists like Chance the Rapper, an understanding of oppositionality in Hip Hop can empower the emcee to strategically avoid opposition altogether, although it's an uncommon maneuver. Such experimentation with Hip Hop's tendencies may take on increasing significance going forward. Regardless, a clearer understanding of tone in Hip Hop provides a critical lens for confronting Hip Hop's problematic themes without "stigmatizing" the youth who created the art form, re-sentencing them to a future politics of abandonment. Instead, we can uplift their craft, while also holding their fellow artists accountable.

Chapter 4

Medium: From the Page to the Stage, From the Stage to the Page

Introduction

In chapter 2, I proposed that Hip Hop's repurposing of formal poetics has been a collectivist project. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how Hip Hop's formal collectivism interfaces with Hip Hop's blurring of medium, adding another layer to the development of Hip Hop poetics. While I have argued throughout this project that Hip Hop poetics have not been studied enough, on the other hand, the genre of Hip Hop has been studied across a diverse array of academic fields, even if its poetry has not received sufficient scholarly treatment. Perhaps one of the reasons why Hip Hop has been studied across a large range of disciplines could be that the art of Hip Hop also spreads across many mediums. For this reason, one can find academic studies of Hip Hop in the arts of dance, fine arts, film, and music. As I have been insisting, the written art of Hip Hop requires more attention, and under proper investigation, it is not surprising to find that the genre's written art moves fluidly between different mediums including live performances, recorded audio, the lyrics database, and the handheld poetry manuscript.

One academic who recognized the need for academic scholarship to account for Hip Hop early on was the legendary Houston Baker, who published one of the first academic treatments of Hip Hop in his work *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* in 1993. Baker discusses how he asked a group of graduate students studying African American women writers, for their opinion regarding "What...will be the poetry for the next society." And quite certainly, this group 'responded 'rap'' (*Black Studies, Rap* 95). Baker began to see both the value of Hip Hop as a poetic form and how its hybrid nature would help redefine the poetry of the future:

Terms that emerged included: public, performative, audible, theatrical, communal, intrasensory, postmodern, oral, memorable, and intertextual...My students...believe the function of poetry belongs in our era to a telecommunal, popular space in which a global audience interacts with performative artists. A link between music and performance—specifically popular music and performance—seems determinative in their definition of the current and future function of poetry. (*Black Studies, Rap* 94)

Ultimately, my project maintains, as Baker's students did, that 'rap' and Hip Hop have produced the poetry which defines our times. Further, as I made clear in chapter 1, this genre of poetry has become the first truly American poetic form. As such, we will see that Hip Hop has influenced the poetics of the page and will continue to do so for decades to come, even though Hip Hop's journey to the page starts in performance.

As I noted in chapter 1, Hip Hop, as a form of oral literature, descends from the dozens and, further back, the tradition of the Blues. I have made clear, Hip Hop's relationship to Black speech and music situates the genre as a contemporary manifestation of a centuries-long tradition of linguistic innovation in African American discourse. Further, I have argued that Hip Hop's poetic innovations help establish it as the first great American poetic form. And, while I argued that Hip Hop's tradition is mostly found in the oral practices of African American discourse, I have also maintained that the interwoven relationship between literary and musical practices help to place Hip Hop with the larger African American literary tradition. Fundamentally, the oppositional poetry of Hip Hop then descends from the political circumstances of its people. However, I haven't yet fully delineated the lyrical roots of these poetics of opposition. While I have already demonstrated how Hip Hop was born within a politics of abandonment in the South Bronx during the '70s, further examination reveals that Hip Hop is also born, in part, directly

from the poetry communities of New York city. Further examination reveals that the poetry of Hip Hop descends in part from the performed poetry of the Black Arts movements and the Nuyorican poetry movement, the latter of which helps pave the way for Hip Hop to find its way to the page.

At its heart, Hip Hop is a performed poetry and descends from previous schools of performance poetics. These schools of poetry, while also countercultural, were more clearly associated with the genre of poetry. Accordingly, those poetry schools were also associated with literary art. Additionally, Hip Hop has also evolved alongside a contemporary performance poetry, commonly referred to as *spoken word* whose roots can also be found in the Black Arts and Nuyorican movements. Contemporary spoken word is sometimes referred to imprecisely as slam, but slam is not a genre in its own right; rather it is just a type of competition where participants perform spoken word poetry. While for some time spoken word poetry operated outside of traditional literary circles, over time its artists have become some of the most celebrated literary figures of the day. Spoken word's ascension in the literary sphere parallels Hip Hop's emergence on the page. We can appreciate how this phenomenon comes to be by first acknowledging Hip Hop's interwoven relationship with other schools of performed poetry, starting from Hip Hop's birth through its evolution across four decades.

The conceit of this chapter is that Hip Hop, in addition to being a performed oral literature, is a textual art. For the purpose of this chapter, I break Hip Hop texts into two categories. First are the texts which engage Hip Hop on the page. These texts, closely associated with spoken word poetry, are often free-verse poems or poems written in more traditional forms such as sonnets or haikus. These poems are not, for the most, part mimicking the formal specificity of Hip Hop; rather, they borrow from elements of Hip Hop form along with other

elements of style and discourse found in Hip Hop. The other texts I will discuss are the Hip Hop tracks themselves which are originally created for a performance, but are then transcribed and distributed to audiences, first in album liner notes, later in lyrics databases, and finally in anthologies and selected volumes published by major publishing houses.

This chapter will be broken into four sections, broken into further subsections. First, I will discuss the *roots of performance poetics* in Hip Hop by first examining the connection between DJ toasting and dub poetry, and then by paying particular attention to one of Hip Hop's key poetry progenitors, the Black Arts Movement (BAM). I will illustrate how the expressive, performative nature of the BAM carved a path for the poetry of Hip Hop by establishing that poetry was meant to be performed. In the next section, I will then discuss another important poetry school by analyzing the *Nuyorican influence* on Hip Hop, which helped foster Hip Hop's relationship to contemporary spoken word and the publishing of works within these related traditions. I describe how Hip Hop and contemporary spoken word function as popular verse and operate outside a concept Charles Bernstein describes as "official verse culture." I go on to show how the popular verse forms of contemporary spoken word and Hip Hop developed alongside one another, into the '90s and beyond. This relationship then sets the stage for the first movements of Hip Hop to the page. My next two sections move away from the performance aspects of Hip Hop and focus specifically on the poetics of Hip Hop on the page. I first discuss at length the emergence of Hip Hop poetics in written poetry collections. I illustrate this growth by showing a representative catalogue of the various projects that have been published to date. The breadth of these *BreakBeat poetics*—which I dub as a nod to a series of anthologies that exemplify the poetics—further suggest that these new developments in literary poetry will have a lasting effect on the poetry of tomorrow. I will define what I meant by BreakBeat poetics

towards the end of the chapter, but I humbly ask the reader to allow me to show these poetics in action before defining them. For now, I will say that BreakBeat poetics are more complicated than simple transcription of the Hip Hop form on the page. Lastly, I will discuss transcription in relation to how the lyric's database creates a new forum for *Hip Hop lyricism* to be consumed: how the originally performed poem, the mass-produced Hip Hop rhyme, becomes a written artifact for the Hip Hop audience to appreciate as text. The rise in significance of such databases disrupts the idea that Hip Hop's poetry only operates in performance; the genre's textual identity is another manner in which audiences come to appreciate lyricism.

Ultimately, in this chapter I want to conclude that the poetic form known as Hip Hop has always shared close relation to more clearly established poetry movements, that its emergence as a poetic form will have a lasting impact on poetry written for the page, and that the rhymes of Hip Hop's most skilled craftspeople will continue to have a life as written cultural products for audiences well into the future. These developments will no doubt continue to involve performance, but the textuality of current and future Hip Hop poetry will remain a lasting part of the genre's legacy.

Performance Roots of Hip Hop

In the introduction of this project, I stated that Hip Hop is an Afro-Diasporic literature. On the other hand, the focus of this project is primarily focused on situating Hip Hop within the African American literary tradition. For this reason, a sizable portion of this section is focused on the Black Arts Movement. However, it would be impossible to discuss the performance roots of Hip Hop without at least some mention of the Caribbean influence on Hip Hop performance, which helps make clear the Afro-Diasporic reach of Hip Hop's poetry. For this reason, the

discussion in this chapter expands this project to account for the Afro-Diasporic influence in the birth of Hip Hop's poetry. While the next section discusses the Nuyorican influence on Hip Hop, this section starts with a brief discussion on the West Indian roots of Hip Hop before analyzing Hip Hop's roots in the Black Arts movement.

Caribbean Roots

Despite Hip Hop being an international phenomenon, this project is almost exclusively focused on analyzing the genre as an American cultural production. The main reason for this, as I noted, is quite simply the vast areas of inquiry to be covered when discussing Hip Hop in the international context. All of this said, it would be impossible to discuss the birth of Hip Hop's performance poetics without any discussion of the West Indian influence on Hip Hop's performance. In chapter 1, I detailed how Hip Hop's lyrical progenitor was the game called the dozens. However, the dozens found a home in Hip Hop because vocals were introduced first through the Jamaican art of toasting.

Throughout this project I have referred to the poets of Hip Hop as emcees, as the term has been used synonymously with the word rapper. As Hip Hop evolved, the emcee became the performer of Hip Hop alongside the DJ. In that configuration, the emcee was the poet and the DJ the master of the musical underpinning of Hip Hop. When Hip Hop was born, however, the emcee and the DJ were one in the same, and the roots of this came from Jamaican music. Michael Veal explains this development in Jamaican music: "By the mid-1960s, the first generation of sound system operators turned record producers were increasingly devoting time to their production activities, and their roles at dances were filled by resident dee-jays, the most loquacious of whom began to "toast" (that is, rap) over the music to excite the crowd" (Veal 55).

The DJs continued to toast over the microphone during live performances as Jamaican music evolved into dub music. Jeff Chang explains how the development of Dub music gave birth to the break beat:

Dub's birth was accidental, its spread was fueled by economics, and it would become a diagram for hip-hop music. A space had been pried open for the break, for possibility. And, quickly, noise came up from the streets to fill the space—yard-centric toasts, sufferer moans, analog echoes—the sounds of people's histories, dub histories, versions not represented in the official version.” (Chang 30).

As Jamaican dance music now involved DJs playing instrumental tracks and toasting to the crowd with improvised vocals over the underlying musical rhythms, dub laid the foundation for Hip Hop's emergence by setting the stage for the creation of the break beat. Raquel Z. Rivera explains that the “break-beat music provided an antidote to the perceived rhythmic blandness of disco, where the percussive break either was just one more element in the song or was masked or even altogether eliminated” (Rivera 56). The break beat would become the musical underpinning of Hip Hop, and not surprisingly, it was a Jamaican DJ who would create the break beat, and, in so doing, helped give birth to Hip Hop.

The story of how Kool Herc created Hip Hop in a rec center in the South Bronx has been told many times. Along with Herc himself, Jeff Chang explains the story in depth in *Can't Stop Won't Stop* (67-84). The story is even immortalized in an award-winning children's book, *When the Beat Was Born: DJ Kool Herc and the Creation of Hip Hop* (Hill). What is also important to note is that most figures from the time credit Herc with laying the groundwork for Hip Hop, including the legendary Rakim, who is discussed later in this chapter. According to Rakim, “everyone learned the sonic power of the break from DJ Kool Herc, a Jamaican immigrant from

the South Bronx who started spinning parties in the rec room of the building where he lived” (10). Herc brought the musical styles he had learned in Jamaica and brought them to the South Bronx. Rivera explains, “Kool DJ Herc, a Jamaican who came to New York in 1967 as a twelve-year-old is credited with popularizing the use of powerful Jamaican sound systems and toasting. Toasting is one of the precursors of MCing and consists of speaking and rhyming in witty and syncopated ways over records” (Rivera 56). Regarding Herc’s prominence in the early Hip Hop music scene, Chang explains that “by 1976, Herc was the number one draw in the Bronx” (*Can’t Stop* 82). Armed with the break beat that Herc himself created from the DJ styles he had observed in his homeland of Jamaica, he brought toasting and the break beat together, which becomes the recipe for Hip Hop. In terms of Hip Hop’s poetry, toasting would ultimately evolve lyrically, thanks in part to the influence of the spoken word poetry of the Black Arts Movement, into what is now contemporary Hip Hop verse.

Dub Poetry

Before I transition from a discussion of the Jamaican influence on Hip Hop, I want to offer one example of dub poetry to illustrate the breadth of the West Indian influence on contemporary Hip Hop poetics. As I have noted, this project has been located exclusively within the United States, locating Hip Hop as an American art form. Momentarily, though, I will turn my attention to England as way of showing how Hip Hop poetics share relation to a larger, Afro-diasporic project. Dub poetry was born from the Creole languages of the West Indies, and as Dick Hebdige explains, the same developments we found in chapter 1 regarding African American Vernacular English were also found in the Creole of the islands:

Subsequently, the language developed its own vocabulary, syntax and grammar; but it remains essentially a shadow-language fulfilling in a more exaggerated and dramatic way those requirements, which, under normal circumstances, are satisfied by regional working-class accents and group argot...language is used as a particularly effective means of resisting assimilation and preventing infiltration by members of the dominant groups.

(Hebdige 136)

This language of resistance became the underpinning of reggae music and travelled from Jamaica to the West Indian communities of England, in the same fashion that African American Vernacular English as a resistance language became the linguistic foundation for Hip Hop in the United States. Dick Hebdige explains that in England, “rastas, twice removed from the mythical homeland, yearned in unison for an end to ‘sufferation’ as giggling white girls danced to the reggae. The cult of Ras Tafari appealed at least as strongly to the black youth of Great Britain as it did to their cousins in Jamaica” (Hebdige 151). Not surprisingly, some members of this new generation would become poets.

Later in this chapter, I extensively explore the ways Hip Hop makes its way to the page. Similarly, we find dub poetry develops as a form of poetry, and the poetics on the page are eerily similar to what I refer to as BreakBeat poetry in contemporary American verse. Consider these lines from famous dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson:

brothers an sisters rocking

a dread beat pulsing fire burning

chocolate hour an darkness creeping night

black veiled night is weeping

electric lights consoling night (L. K. Johnson 3)

While the influence of Jamaican music in these lines is unmistakable, we find a similar attention to rhyme and rhythm as we find in Hip Hop poetics on the page. Johnson hybridizes music and poetry in these lines in similar ways as African Americans have done with the American song tradition and poetics. Another example of musicality in verse from Johnson can be found in these lines:

all tensed up

in di bubble an di bounce

and di leap an di weight-drop

it is di beat of di heart

this pulsing of blood

that is a bubblin bass (Johnson 12)

Johnson, like Kool Herc, was born in Jamaica. And, also like Herc, Johnson brought the musical influences of Jamaica into his art and helped popularize a new art form in a different nation.

Johnson's dub poetry, which he continues to perform to this day, has been published in print for four decades and predates contemporary Hip Hop poetics on the page. However, his attention to musical rhythm and vernacular speech echoes the ways Hip Hop comes to the page in contemporary poetry.

The whole of Hip Hop poetics is a poetry that is born in performance and continues to live there but also exists in textual form, which echoes and refracts the energy and rhythm of its performed state. Whether we are talking about the Blues poems of Langston Hughes, the dub

poetry of Johnson, or the Breakbeat poets of today, we find that there continues to be cross-pollination between performance and the written word in Afro-Diasporic poetics. This artistic symbiosis across mediums of poetry continues to be fruitful and appears poised to remain so, long into the future.

The Black Arts Movement

While Kool Herc helped make Hip Hop possible by creating the break beat and combining it with toasting, Herc was not as well known for his lyrical style as many of the artists who would come after him. One artist of note in this regard is DJ Hollywood. As I stated before, when Hip Hop was born, its first rappers were DJs who would toast over the break beat. And perhaps the first of these DJs to be recognized for his lyrical prowess was DJ Hollywood. Kurtis Blow, one of the more famous rappers from the early days, recognizes DJ Hollywood as the first rhythmic rapper. Record executive Russell Simmons takes the point a step further by referring to DJ Hollywood as the reason "a rap record had to be made" (Wheeler, "The Foundation").

The emergence of DJ Hollywood is important because it shows that the evolution of Hip Hop lyricism was never far from poetry. Hollywood himself confirms the role of poetry in the development of his lyricism, citing The Last Poets and others as his primary influences:

they had people [who] rapped before me—syncopated and unsyncopated. I can't take nothin' away from people like Oscar Brown Jr., Pigmeat Markham, the Last Poets, Gil Scott Heron, the Watts Prophets, Rudy Ray Moore, I used to listen to all of 'em. I can't take nothin' from none of 'em... but none of 'em was doin' what I was doin' with the turntables and a mic. (Wheeler, "The Foundation")

Hip Hop is a type of formal verse poetry. DJ Hollywood as the first rhythmic rapper is one of the people who helped craft the form of Hip Hop by taking the poetic styles of his influences and then performing this poetry in rhymed couplets alongside the fixed arrangement of the beat.

Among Hollywood's influences is not only poets. For example, we see mention of Rudy Ray Moore, whose "Signifying Monkey" is discussed in chapter 1. But the presence of Moore and other comedians alongside radical poets reaffirms that, at the core of DJ Hollywood's developing poetry, was the rhetorical practices—rooted in the vernacular tradition—that have since been at play in African American cultural production for the better part of two centuries. DJ Hollywood's reference to the Last Poets and Gil Scot-Heron, the man commonly referred to as the godfather of Hip Hop because of the way he blended poetry over music (Sharrock, "Gil Scot-Heron"), demonstrates that poetry was a part of the popular culture at the time of rap's birth.

Groups like The Last Poets were directly born from The Black Arts Movement (BAM). Founding member, Obiodun Oyewole attributes his work to the influence of BAM's founder, Amiri Baraka: "Amiri Baraka was my mentor. I learned a great deal from him. He was the first person I ever saw perform liberation poetry. He was the one who laid the foundation for the Last Poets to exist" (Oyewole et al. XIII). Oyewole doesn't simply credit Baraka as a mentor but claims that Baraka was responsible for the existence of The Last Poets, and this was because of Baraka's performance of poetry. DJ Hollywood lists The Last Poets as one of his primary influences, and The Last Poets were influenced by Baraka and the Black Arts Movement. Here we find a through-line of poetry from BAM to Hip Hop.

One of the reasons that Baraka was so influential was almost certainly because of the public nature of the Black Arts Movement's performances. Lorenzo Thomas explains that "with

self-anointed missionary fervor, Black Arts poets extended the venues for their performances beyond storefront theaters to neighborhood community centers, church basements, taverns, and to the streets” (Bernstein and Thomas 309). While these events took place across the country, the home base of BAM was in Harlem. Baraka and several others established the short-lived Black Arts Repertory Theater School (BARTS) just forty blocks south from the rec room where Kool Herc invented the break beat. The public nature of BAM’s poetry readings and performances foreshadowed the public presentations of early Hip Hop in rec centers and public parks. The rich tradition of the performance poetry in New York City that preceded Hip Hop played an instrumental role in the development of its Hip Hop poetics. No genre of poetry comes into being without having an antecedent. The connection with Black Arts demonstrates at least one of the strands of the tradition from which Hip Hop sprang.

As an artistic movement that was grounded in public performance, it is not surprising to know that BAM was also deeply concerned with vernacular of the streets. As Stephen Henderson explained, "The chief difference between poetry of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black poetry of the sixties comes in the full exploration and appropriation of the street experience and the formulation of an aesthetic and an ideology based in part upon it" (xiii). The embrace of the “street experience” and the corresponding language of the street by The Black Arts Movement add an important layer to its relationship to Hip Hop. Derik Smith expands on this idea, explaining, "its basic aesthetic relation to BAM poetics is unmistakable. The poetries of both movements are bound by their common accentuation, and implicit celebration of black urban vernacular" (214). Geneva Smitherman gives amen to these connections, writing that "Rap...of the 1980s...made us flash back to the Black Arts street poetry of the 1960s/70s" (82). Further Marvin J. Gladney pointed out that “hip-hop culture has remained true to many of the

convictions and aesthetic criteria that evolved out of the Black Arts Movement of the '60s, including calls for social relevance, originality, and a focused dedication to produce art that challenges American mainstream artistic expression” (Gladney 291). Both BAM and Hip Hop have embraced street culture and language as mechanisms for advancing artistic expression.

While scholars have made these connections, it is not only academics who have spoken to the relationship between BAM and Hip Hop. We can find discussion of these relationships amongst Hip Hop’s early pioneers. Afrikaa Bambaataa, one of the most significant pioneers of Hip Hop, speaks to the clear and indisputable relationship between Hip Hop and The Black Arts Movement, saying “rap was always there...there was the poetry rap of Gil Scott-Heron, The Last Poets, The Watts Prophets, Sonia Sanchez.” While Bambaataa’s legacy has justifiably been revised due to serious allegations of sexual abuse, no one would argue that he was not there when Hip Hop was born or that he is not an authority on the poetic influences that shaped the genre. Citing similar influences as those cited by DJ Hollywood, Bambaataa also adds the name of a key figure, Sonia Sanchez.

Sanchez was one of BAM’s earliest members and her poetry embraced the street aesthetic and political force that was so central to the movement. As one of its earliest members, she was also aware of the ways in which Hip Hop had been influenced by their work. Regarding the connections between BAM and Hip Hop, she wrote:

...our generation of poets of Black Arts poets began to show poets how to read.

These new poets, these hip-hop poets heard the sound and picked it up. And they did the same thing we did with poetry and sound, they did the sound, the pace, the pace of sound, the swiftness of sound, the discordant way of looking at the world of sound, the color of sound, the beat of sound, but above all it was that fast beat. (Sanchez xv)

The fact that this quote comes from the anthology, *Bum Rush the Page*, a *def poetry jam* is not surprising, as the anthology sought to highlight the connections between poetry and Hip Hop by providing space for the textual reproduction of Hip Hop poetics. Before *Bum Rush the Page*, there was another influential anthology that paved the way for Hip Hop's emergence on the page.

Nuyorican Soul, From the Ashes of the Lower East Side

Popular Verse

Regarding the relationship between Hip Hop and spoken word poetry, Tyler Hoffman explains that “perhaps to overcome the charge of trendiness, contemporary artists of the rap-meets-poetry scene have constructed for themselves a family tree, one with many arcing branches” (199). Accordingly, the poetry that was born from its relationship with rap, which I will call *BreakBeat poetry*, owes a debt to this arcing family tree:

Just once before I die
I want to climb up on a
tenement sky
to dream my lungs out till
I cry
then scatter my ashes thru
the Lower East Side. (4)

Is it possible that Miguel Piñero knew how much he would change the world with those lines above? One can only guess, but I will argue that Piñero did not simply help define a neighborhood and place a stamp on a vital artistic movement, but his work ultimately helped

bridge the gap between works that were recognized as poetry and those that were seen as Hip Hop, and he did so as Hip Hop was just being born.

The rhyme and rhythm are unmistakable in Piñero's signature poem. His work reflects the attention to rhythm found in the Nuyorican movement, a school of poetry that has some overlap with the Black Arts Movement but reaches its height several years after the height of BAM. What made the Nuyorican poets particularly visible was the creation of the Nuyorican Poets Café which provided a home to not only Nuyorican poets, but also to many of the poets from the various corners of New York City, former Black Arts figures as well as others. Urayoán Noel explains the nature of these politics here:

The alternative institutional politics of the Nuyorican Poets Café can also be considered in the context of the New American Poetries of the postwar era...the Cafe in its early days was frequented by writers such as (William S.) Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Ntozake Shange, and Amiri Baraka, all of whom remained Café collaborators, performers, and supporters... (Noel 43)

The creation of the café helped to solidify the Nuyorican movement within the larger poetry movements of New York City, and to a certain degree, helped carry the baton forward for radical poetry by providing a counter-institutional arena for it.

At the same time, Puerto Ricans are also in the Bronx helping to create Hip Hop. While I've explored Hip Hop in the context of the African American tradition, Puerto Ricans have been involved in Hip Hop since its inception. Raquel Z. Rivera explains that "Puerto Ricans were, for the most part, welcome and active participants in hip hop, even during the early times, they had to step lightly on hip hop's cultural ground, particularly when it came to MCing and DJing" (Rivera 59). Rivera confirms the early Puerto Rican influence on Hip Hop, while also

acknowledging the presence of an underlying tension suggesting an unclear role for Puerto Ricans in a Black American art form:

Rhyming and DJing were from the beginning more ethno-racially identified with African Americans and closed to perceived outsiders by virtue of their reliance on dexterity in the English Language. Thus they were most easily traceable to the African American oral traditions...Hip hop's musical dimension seems to have been premised on an Afro-diasporic urbanity, where, although the participation of young people of Caribbean ancestry was pivotal, this music was often narrowly identified solely with African Americans. (Rivera 61)

While Puerto Ricans were involved in Hip Hop since its inception, the genre was viewed widely as an African American phenomenon.

Conversely, the Puerto Rican presence in the New York City poetry community was becoming solidified because the Café provided a home base for this community's artistic expression: "The café began in 1973 as a series of informal readings in Algarín's apartment and found a permanent home in 1974 at 505 East 6th Street between Avenues A and B" (Noel 42). By providing a home to poets, the café helped democratize poetry, epitomized by the concept of the "Open Room." Noel explains that "the informality of poetry performance epitomizes the Café's tradition of The Open Room, which continues to this day, where anyone present is welcome to read one poem." The Nuyorican's founding poets including Piñero, Pedro Pietri, and Sandra Maria Estevez would read alongside various figures of the New York City poetry scene but also alongside a first-time poet gathering the courage to read a piece aloud. The democratic nature of this poetry reading echoes the public presentations of Hip Hop at the time. In both instances, artists used poetry as a means for both expressing themselves and making space for others.

So here I am, look at me
I stand proud as you can see
pleased to be from the Lower East
a street fighting man
a problem of this land
I am the Philosopher of the Criminal Mind
a dweller of prison time (5)

In the lines above, Piñero captures the outsider nature that embodied the Nuyorican spirit and the same transgressive energy that would be found in Hip Hop. For Piñero, rhyme is not a tool of old dead white poets, rather it's an opportunity for a former "dweller of prison time" to have a voice, in a similar way that rhyme provided an opening for the youth of the South Bronx. In this regard, we can see both Nuyorican poetry and Hip Hop as spaces that exist outside of a concept Charles Bernstein refers to as "official verse culture," the institutions and publishing houses that are recognized as the homes for poetry (*Content's Dream*, 248).

Poetry that exists outside of official verse culture can be considered popular verse. Susan Somers-Willett explains:

Popular verse is marginal, that is it exists outside the dominant center of poetry's production, criticism, and reception, which is often located within academic culture.

Popular verse in performance also engages in a larger tension with dominant culture, one often located in or embodied by the American white middle class. (Somers-Willett 40)

Both Hip Hop and the spoken word poetry from the Nuyorican are forms of popular verse, and it is this shared status which ultimately brought these worlds back together, thanks to the Nuyorican influence, and it would be the words of Piñero that would kickstart this happening.

A Physical Home for Hip Hop and Poetry

so please when I die...
don't take me far away
keep me nearby
take my ashes and scatter them throughout
the Lower East Side... (Piñero 5)

Miguel Piñero would get his wish after he passed away on June 17, 1988:

So the procession left the yard on the west side of the Café and began its voyage through the Lower East side in concurrence with the configuration that the poem had laid out...I would scatter the ashes and people would say ‘Who’s that, who goes there?’... ‘It’s Miky Piñero’...The response was outstanding...Piñero was having the burial of his dreams, his poem breathing, moving and bonding people. By the time we reached Avenue D the procession was huge. (Algarín and Holman 7)

Founder of the Nuyorican Poetry Café, Miguel Algarín, retells the story of the scattering of his dear friend’s ashes. In his retelling we find the body returning to the streets and poetry as the vehicle and incantation for making this event possible. Poetry becomes its most public and accessible in this moment, being brought back to the streets and to the people. “It was at this poignant and lively memorial that Algarín and [Bob] Holman realized that it was time to reopen the Nuyorican Poets Café” (Aptowicz 23). Closed for six years at this point, the café was resurrected in the spirit of one of its founding voices.

This new iteration of the café would now expand its reach as it would become the spiritual home for a new generation of voices. As I noted earlier, people often refer to spoken word poetry as *slam*. This is due to the popularity of the poetry slam competitions in which

spoken word artists compete. The first poetry slam was started in Chicago by a man name Mark Kelly Smith, but the competition was popularized on the stages of the Nuyorican:

The fact that many newcomers to the poetry slam assume that it originated at the Nuyorican Poets Café—a venue that began as a safe space for urban Puerto Rican underclass poets and now is home to a number of urban African American poets of many classes working in the hip-hop idiom—Is indicative of the widespread public image of slam having originated in nonwhite or hip-hop culture. (Somers-Willet 97)

This point from Somers-Willet highlights that spoken word poetry, particularly that from the Nuyorican, became a home for the Hip Hop generation. Aptowicz cosigns this sentiment and furthers that the rise of gangsta rap becomes one of the reasons this new generation of poets needed a home:

After all, the poetry slam grew in popularity just as “gangsta rap” took over the airwaves. Gangsta rap—with its ultra-violent bravado and in-your-face realism—left little room for the positive MCs...The poetry slam became a home for these wayward rappers, and the journey that hip-hop and the poetry slam began together eventually changed how New York City defined poetry. (9)

A new generation of poets was coming up and, due to the lack of access to venues for rappers who were interested in messages outside of the gangsta persona, these poets were in need of home. For many of them, that home became the Nuyorican Poets Café. Record executive Bill Adler who, along with Bob Holman, helped create the short-lived Nuyo Records, explained that “the Nuyorican...was the spiritual home to the rap-meets-poetry scene.” (Adler qtd. in Aptowicz 111). While I have argued extensively that Hip Hop is poetry, its connection to traditional poetry has often been overlooked. On the other hand, spoken word poetry, while also not always part of

official verse culture, has been generally viewed as poetry. Somers-Willet echoes this point, “although arguments have been made for rap as heavily rhymed and metrical verse, spoken word has a more direct association with poetry in the minds of popular audiences” (Somers Willet 100). By creating this home, the stage was set for the re-merging of Hip Hop and poetry and the emergence of this poetry on the page.

A Home for Hip Hop on the Page

Perhaps the first single-authored collection of poetry in the genre that I call BreakBeat poetry was Paul Beatty’s *Big Bank Take Little Bank*. The book came to be as a deal created by Bob Holman in conjunction with the Nuyorican Poets Café as a prize for the first Nuyorican Grand Slam (Aptowicz 51). At the time, Beatty was a talented spoken word artist who won the competition and the publication prize. Today, Beatty is known as a novelist—famous for his biting satire in novels like *White Boy Shuffle* and *The Sellout*, the latter of which made Beatty the first American writer to win the Man Booker Prize. While Beatty may be a highly celebrated fiction writer, he cut his teeth as a writer by publishing two collections of poetry, *Big Bank* and later *Joker Joker Deuce Deuce*, thanks to the start he got at the Nuyorican.

Big Bank Take Little Bank possibly references Ice Cube’s “No Vaseline,” when Cube said, “I couldn’t stop you from getting ganked / Now let’s play big-bank-take-little-bank” (“No Vaseline”). There is also an important figure in Hip Hop history, Big Bank Hank who is famous for performing on the first ever recorded rap album, *Rapper’s Delight*. The phrase “big bank take little bank” also became re-popularized to contemporary audiences when the rappers YG and 2Chains spit it as the hook to the track “Big Bank” (YG, “Big Bank”). While YG’s version was created for the studio, we find Hip Hop jumping from the page in Beatty’s version:

sssssssoundcheck
onetwo onetwo
my boy elroy
suicidal drumtech in full effect
son of jane
and george jetson
miscegeny creation of hanna barbaric
claymation science (Beatty 22)

We can see Beatty's penchant for satire here in his poetry. However, what we also find in his work is that the discourse of Hip Hop found a comfortable home on the page, as we can hear his application of internal rhyme over an imaginary drumbeat. The Nuyorican movement paved the way for contemporary spoken word to make the transition to the page by publishing this book, but there would be an even more important book on the horizon.

After publishing *Big Bank* under its own imprint, Algarín and Holman published *Aloud*, *Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café* with a large publishing house, Henry Holt and Co. The result is one of the most impactful poetry anthologies in contemporary times: "When the book was published in August 1994, the tremendously positive reaction it received—both by critics and the general public—was astonishing and humbling... The book went on to be selected by the New York Public Library as a "Best Book for High School Students" and won the 1994 American Book Award" (91). Aptowicz explains that not only did the anthology receive critical acclaim, but it also changed how people read poetry: "the poetry found in *Aloud* was vibrant, urban and practically begged to be read out loud. The poems didn't laze about on the page; the poems challenged readers, inviting them into worlds to which they might never before and may

never again have access” (92). As the poetry came alive, audiences began to learn that poetry and Hip Hop could live together and do so on the page without compromising the vocal energy at the heart of these new school poetics, in short, BreakBeat poetry was born.

Consider these lines from the anthology, by the poet ninety 9:

HERE I LIE ON MY HOT BED
IN THE AGE OF THE JIM HAT
FORCED TO SETTLE DOWN
WITH ONE BROTHER
AS MY FINGER TIPS
ROLL DOWN THE SARAN RAP
SO HIS SAP DOESN'T SEEP

(Algarín and Holman 454)

The energy and rhyme of Hip Hop jumps of the page in these lines, in the spirit of the anthology's title *Aloud*. Ninety 9 happens to be the poet who wrote the poems for the film *Poetic Justice*, which featured Janet Jackson and 2Pac Shakur and served as another shining moment in Hip Hop and poetry's marriage to each other. This marriage would not have been possible if not for the poems that were created by this new generation who could hear the break beat in their heads while writing their own poems. As ninety 9 told Hip Hop journalist Dream Hampton, “Rakim was *my* Angelou” (Hampton 22). This new generation of poets drew inspiration from the poets whose work they were most familiar with, the poets of Hip Hop.

The famous author Sapphire—who wrote the bestselling *Push*, which would become the basis for the film *Precious*—is featured in the anthology with a haunting poem about the Central Park Jogger:

“Let’s get a female jogger! I shout
into the twilight
looking at middle-class thighs
pumping past me,
cadres of bitches
who deserve to die (272)

These lines are particularly haunting because we now know that the young men who the poem’s speaker is supposed to represent were innocent. Perhaps these lines of Hip Hop poetics on the page serve as a reminder of the complicated nature of oppositional themes in Hip Hop texts, which I discussed at length in chapter 3.

At the same time, not all reflections of inner-city violence in this collection miss the mark. “Please Don’t Take My Air Jordans,” originally published in *Bomb Magazine* in 1993, by Reggie Gaines, responds to the stories from the time of kids being killed for their sneakers, a phenomenon that still happens at the time of this writing (Collier, “35 Years”) (Telander “Senseless”).

took off fast but didn’t get far
i fired (POW) he fell between two parked cars
he was coughin/cryin/blood dripped on the street
and i snatched them air jordans off his feet

(Gaines, “Please Don’t”)

For Gaines, it seems that Hip Hop could be repurposed to confront the same violence that the music is often accused of exacerbating. Gaines would go on to write the lyrics for the musical, *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* and bring Hip Hop’s poetry to the Broadway stage almost

two decades before *Hamilton, An American Musical*, which I discussed at length in chapter 2 because of how it moves Hip Hop into a different arena. Similarly, whether it's the poetry of the page or the theater, Gaines effectively helped Hip Hop flow across mediums.

Gaines, Beatty, Sapphire, and ninety 9 are all Black American poets, not Nuyoricans. The Café which was started by the Nuyorican community became a home to many Black poets who were searching for a venue for their work. This is not to imply that the Nuyorican was no longer creating a platform for Puerto Rican writers. One writer of note is Wille Perdomo, whose book *Where a Nickel Costs a Dime* was published two years after *Aloud*. His poem "Nigger-Reecan Blues" appears in the anthology, and he also performed it on Russell Simmons' *Def Poetry Jam*:

I'm a Spic!

I'm a Nigger!

Spic! Spic! No different than a Nigger!

Neglected, rejected, oppressed and depressed

From banana boats to tenements (113)

These lines in many ways speak to the cross-pollination of Black and brown voices from the Nuyorican, but it also echoes the poems of Amiri Baraka and Miguel Piñero. It also speaks to the birth of Hip Hop and how the intercommunal relationships between Black and Puerto Rican youth were born from a shared experience of degradation.

The Nuyorican continued to give a platform to poets like Perdomo and others after the publication of *Aloud*. Many people may have become familiar with Saul William's "Amethyst Rocks" in the movie *Slam*: "I'm that brotha on the corner slingin amethyst rocks, drinking forties of Mother Earth's private nectar stock, dodging cops." This poem first appeared in his book *The Seventh Octave*, which was published by Black Moore Press, the publication firm started by

Jessica Care Moore. Moore is another legend in the genre, whose poem “Hip Hop Cheerleader” was also made famous on *Def Poetry Jam*. Both Moore and Williams got their starts on the Nuyorican Slam Team and were featured in the film *Slam Nation* along with Patricia Smith, who also appears in *Aloud*.

One thing Perdomo, Smith, and Moore have in common is their appearance in another anthology together: *The BreakBeat Poets, New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop*.

The BreakBeat Poets: Hip Hop for the Page

I have argued throughout this project that Hip Hop is the most significant wholly American poetic form. It is not surprising that this form would make its way from the performance space to the medium of the page in some fashion. This movement to the page was facilitated in part by the movement of contemporary spoken word poetry to the literary sphere in the ‘90s, facilitated in part by the Nuyorican Poets Café. Once celebrated performance poets like Patricia Smith, Saul Williams, Jessica Care Moore, and countless others began publishing their works in written form. However, when we talk about Hip Hop poetics in literary poetry, we are not necessarily talking about the Hip Hop form being transcribed on the page, rather we are talking about the aesthetics, cultural signifiers, and discourse of Hip Hop making its way to the page. Most literary poems that engage Hip Hop do not simply replicate its form on the page, although many will appropriate the form for strategic moments within a poem. As I have noted, form is one of the key markers that enables emcees to demonstrate artistic kinship with each other. In the case of Hip Hop poetics in the literary world, however, there is a broad range of engagement with Hip Hop, which could make it challenging to establish a coherent framework for what constitutes Hip Hop poetry on the page. As I’ll discuss at the end of this chapter, the

Hip Hop form does make it to the page, in the case of Hip Hop's pioneers codifying their works in books, but it's also true that, over time, more and more poems that were written with the page in mind have also actively engaged with Hip Hop.

One of the ways to track the developments of Hip Hop poetics on the page, or BreakBeat poetry as I'm calling it, is via the numerous anthologies which have documented it. One of the first was the book *In the Tradition*, which was discussed in chapter 1. As I just noted above, *Aloud: Voices From the Nuyorican Poet's Café* was another influential anthology, perhaps the most significant in terms of announcing the marriage between poetry and Hip Hop to the world. These two anthologies from the '90s were followed later in the decade by *Listen Up! An Anthology of Spoken Word*, and in the early 2000s by *bumrush the page—a def poetry jam*, which I briefly noted earlier in this chapter as well, and *The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip Hop, and the Poetry for a New Generation*. These newer generation collections further embraced the dual relationship between Hip Hop and spoken word. Now established for some time, the poetics of Hip Hop and spoken word began to crystallize in more recent collections like *Chorus—A Literary Mixtape, It Was Written—Poetry Inspired by Hip Hop*, and *The BreakBeat Poets—New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop*, from which I chose the name for this new type of poetry. Newer collections keep emerging including several follow up editions of *The Break Beat Poets*, *The End of Chiraq – A Literary Mixtape*, and *Turn it Up—Music in Poetry From Jazz to Hip-Hop*. All of these collections have shown that there is a home for Hip Hop on the page and have foreshadowed its future influence on literary poetics.

What these collections share in common is that they contain the work of poets who are willing to engage Hip Hop poetics on the page. The number of poets who engage with this type of work is now legion enough to establish a tradition, one I will argue should be called

BreakBeat poetry. I will try a painfully brief attempt to account for many of these poets, while paying specific attention to a select group of them. The works of these artists represents three decades of Hip Hop poetics on the page. I will then argue that these poets' work along with that of many others illustrate that Hip Hop will continue to find space on the page of literary works in the years to come and, quite possibly, for generations to come. Before proceeding further, it will first be instructive to understand the stakes of this conversation.

A Canon of Hip Hop Poetics?

In a cipher for the Poetry Foundation, Latasha N. Nevada Diggs, one of the more recognized poets of the Hip Hop generation, facilitated a series of conversations titled "DWYCK: a Cipher on Hip Hop poetics." The title, presumably borrowed from a track by Gang Starr of the same name, means "Do what you can kid," which I presume means that the group she has assembled is not claiming agency over the discourse on Hip Hop poetics. Instead, we can surmise that this cipher she has assembled is just doing what they can to add something to the conversation. Diggs likely chose the term *cipher* to speak to the role of the cipher in Hip Hop, a freestyle space where emcees perform their work with each other and build a collective voice in the process, and, as I noted in chapter 2, this collective voice is achieved via the shared form of Hip Hop poetics. For this cipher, Diggs gathers an impressive group of poets and performers: the founder of Anti-Pop Consortium, High Priest aka Kyle Austin; Douglas Kearney, whose work appears in many of the anthologies mentioned above, Hanifa Walidah a poet who was also a member of the group the Brooklyn Funk Essentials; Yolanda Wisher, who was selected as Philadelphia's third poet laureate; and Patrick Rosal, another celebrated poet who has won many awards for his writing.

In these free-flowing conversations, the artists grapple with issues in Hip Hop poetics. A pertinent conversation they approach is the question of what a canon of Hip Hop poetics would look like. Diggs presents this question to the group, “there is a canon of rap lyrics agreed upon by academics and the street. In fact, it is quite likely that academics take their cues from the street as to what constitutes greatness. That said there doesn’t appear to be a ‘classics’ one can refer to for hip-hop poetry. Is this a fair assumption?” (For the record, I’d argue that Reg e Gaines’s “Please Don’t Take My Air Jordans” would certainly fit the bill of a classic in the genre.) Rather than discussing the works that would be included in such a canon, instead they discuss what the criteria for such a grouping would be and whether the establishment of one should even be attempted in the first place. Kearney gets at this concern, “and the discourse—yes discourse—around this canon creates and articulates notions of a poetics. As such, a theoretical model of what one can do to achieve canonization.” It seems that the hesitancy regarding the establishment of a canon of Hip Hop poetics comes from a desire to avoid being prescriptive and therefore limiting in scope but also an acknowledgment that canons themselves can be problematic. High Priest clarifies, “the terms Hip Hop Poetics is ‘PR’ talk and I don’t know anyone who would define themselves in that way, so to create a formal canon, we first have to collectively label it—From my own subjective standpoint, the said canon would consist of artists of the period and the things that inspired them.” It seems a canon for Hip Hop poetics could be assembled but it’s something that to a degree is determined by the artists of the genre and period (Diggs et al, "DWYCK").

While I would also hesitate to establish a canon for Hip Hop poetics, I do feel as though, in the years since this cipher was convened in 2013, the number of published texts in Hip Hop poetics have swollen, so much so that we can begin to productively discuss the shared

characteristics between these newer texts, while also considering the texts that were published earlier as well. Consequently, for the purpose of this project, I'm going to label these poets of Hip Hop poetics on the page, the BreakBeat poets. As I said earlier, I chose the term BreakBeat as a shoutout to the *BreakBeat Poets New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop* but also as an acknowledgement of the ambitious objectives of the conveners of this anthology. This collection, which I will discuss momentarily, was the first of a series of books published by Haymarket Press. While the first one is the only one to be dedicated exclusively to Hip Hop, the subsequent issues in the series all contain works that engage Hip Hop poetics. While we don't have to establish a canon per se, by naming this new phenomenon in American poetry, we can begin to learn what's at stake in this poetry by analyzing the shared characteristics between the pieces in this tradition.

Leaders of the New School: The BreakBeat Poets

I will attempt to define what I mean by BreakBeat poets shortly. However, I would like to first clarify that, when I discuss BreakBeat poets, I am not referring to poets like Gil Scott Heron or H. Rapp Brown, who also clearly engage in Hip Hop poetics, rather I'm referring to the heirs of their legacy. Works like "Rapp's Rap," which I discussed at length in chapter 1, share one distinct difference from works that we would associate with Hip Hop poetics today; the literary poetry of the past thirty years that engages Hip Hop does so fully aware that it is in conversation with a specific, established musical genre and cultural phenomenon. Earlier works were engaged in a tradition of rhetorical practice which is part of a long tradition, but the genre of Hip Hop had yet to be born. These newer artists engage directly with the phenomenon and therefore are invested in the larger social conversations that Hip Hop is also engaged in. With the break beat in

their heads, these new poets have written to and for the poetry of their times, that is, Hip Hop, hence the name BreakBeat poets.

As we discussed earlier, spoken word gained a wider audience in the '90s, reaffirming its relationship to Hip Hop. At this same time is when the work of up and coming spoken word artists was making its way to the page. Just as the previous generation of spoken word artists from the '70s, the Nuyorican and Black Arts schools, published poetry collections, so too would these new-school artists. We discussed the poems of Saul Williams, Paul Beatty, and Jessica Care Moore, and it's clear that these newer artists and their peers were also part of the Hip Hop generation. When they brought their performed poems to the page, they also brought Hip Hop to the page, giving birth to the BreakBeat poets.

When I say that I am labeling this new group of poets BreakBeat poets, I do so because the editors of *The BreakBeat Poets, New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop* very much saw the project as defining of an era:

american [*Sic*] poetry is growing in popularity because of hip-hop poetics, the public performances and widely diverse strategies of publishing poems: YouTube, mixtapes, chapbooks, constant gigs, readings, tours, crews, television shows, popular documentaries, school assemblies, slams, open mics, and online journals are all avenues to publish poems broadly. (Coval et al. xx)

These words from one of the editors, Kevin Coval, establish that Hip Hop helped make poetry more accessible because of the performative nature of the poetry which it created and that which it inspired. The editors understand that just as Hip Hop has transformed society, it has also transformed the world of poetry. However, because Hip Hop is a poetic form in its own right, its

impact on poetry has been specifically poignant because today's poets engage their poetry influences, who are Hip Hop artists, in conversation on the page.

"Hip-Hop made poetry an everyday thing," Coval explains. "Hip-Hop made poetry relevant. It was no longer this dreadful, dead-white-male-centered, highly dull piece to sleep through in English class. It was very much alive and in our Walkmen and notebooks" (xviii). The lines in the anthology prove Coval's point true. These two lines by Jamila Woods from the collection are neither dull nor white-male-centered: "My Daddy's forehead is so big, we don't need a dining room table...Tyra Banks burst into tears when she seen my Daddy's forehead" (Coval et al. 265). Woods' finds on the page an opportunity to reverse the dozens from the gendered *your mama* jokes and simultaneously confront a challenging relationship to a father. In this sense, poetry is an opportunity for processing wounds. As Coval explained it, Hip Hop transformed poetics, making it not just more accessible but also more public, and therefore more shared. Joshua Bennet is also able to use BreakBeat poetry to confront his relationship to his father. "I either claim the South Bronx by maternal bloodline (a tactic commonly known as the Boogie Down Bandwagon Maneuver) ...Yonkers sounds like a rare breed of pest...I am my father's son. I cannot claim what I do not love" (Coval et al. 220). Hip Hop does for poetry what it did for its youth community in the South Bronx, where it was created. Hip Hop gives voice, and more importantly, provides a platform. For Bennett and Woods, it provides a platform for confronting our fathers but also a space where our experiences are shared with others.

We can surmise, then, that the BreakBeat poets are transforming American poetry, via the poetics of Hip Hop, and Coval says as much: "The BreakBeat Poets and hip-hop culture are saving american [*Sic*] poetry" (xvii). In the case of Lemon Anderson, he engages the project of

saving poetry by making references that only the Hip Hop audience will understand, which extends poetry's readership by bringing in new readers:

Where Dead Prez

Will be in charge

Of the people's army of the United States

Latifah will be the first lady

Ladies first

And what do you know

Eric B. will be President. (Coval et al. 130)

In the process of engaging new readers, Anderson also imagines a new world in the image of Hip Hop culture. While BreakBeat poetics helps reframe the future for Anderson, for Fatimah Asghar, BreakBeat poetry provides a space for reclaiming power. She challenges the canon in an inter-galactic sense with these lines:

& the other planets? I fucked their orbits

I shook the sky. Chaos like a motherfucker.

Today, I broke your solar system.

Oops. My bad. (Coval et al. 244)

Viewed collectively, these poems represent a mixtape of Hip Hop sensibility, filled with introspection, bravado, and hopefulness.

Coval also ascribes that same lineage to the BreakBeats that I have in this chapter, "an extension of the Black Arts, a continuation of the Nuyorican crew on the Lower East Side" (xvii). These poets have taken on a bold project, the saving of American poetry, and are doing so

on the shoulders of the Black Arts and Nuyorican movements. To do so could not simply mean parroting their forebears. Woods echoes Baraka but also revises his flow: “Poems are bullshit unless they are eyeglasses, honey tea with lemon” (Coval et al. 261). Poems in this instance aren’t merely the male bravado of Baraka’s cadence. They are “in my fist in the alley just in case,” armor against patriarchy (261). And Danez Smith mediates between Amiri Baraka and James Baldwin while declaring to white America that “I am giving the stars their right names. & this life, this new story & history you cannot own...This, if only this one, is ours” (Coval et al. 259). History is confronted, elevated, and reframed in these BreakBeat poems.

A BreakBeat poet according to Coval is a poet who is “influenced by the break. The break down, polyrhythmic, funky sections of records extended by Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash” (xvii). The beat is brought to the page, like these rhyming couplets from Kristiana Colón: “This is for the marching bands and girls at quinceñeras / The skater and the writers whose moms are eloteras” (Coval et al. 212). Or, for another example, consider the following haiku, one of twenty-four dedicated to Biggie Smalls by Chinaka Hodge:

well, we scour the sky
we mourn tough, recite harder
chant you live again (Coval et al. 202)

While Hodge gently, defiantly mourns with the break beat in those lines, Tara Betts chooses anaphora instead of rhyme in the following lines, but still finds harmony with the break:

If you be the needle
I be the LP.
If you be the buffed wall,
I be the Krylon.

If you be the backspin,

I be the break.

If you be the head nod,

I be the bassline. (Coval et al. 108)

According to Coval, “Hip-Hop BreakBeat poetics is the desire to see and be seen...as is a tag on a street sign (xxi),” or as Betts puts it: If you be Sharpie, / then I be tag” (108). This visual analogy is vital. Because one might argue that the goal of lots of poetry is to be seen, but by invoking the tag, aka graffiti, Coval and Betts suggest that the BreakBeat poets don’t merely want to be seen but want to be seen in a specific way.

The tag represents not simply a desire to be seen but a desire to be seen via a transgressive act because, for marginalized communities, sometimes there is no other way to be seen. Transgressive like the way Franny Choi rearranges Lil’ Wayne’s “Pussy Monster” by ending with four lines straight of: “pussy, pussy, pussy, pussy, pussy, pussy, pussy, pussy...” (Coval et al. 245). Transgressive like these introspective questions from the Black Jewish poet, Aaron Samuels: “Said he loves countin’s stacks / is that black? / jewish?” (Coval et al. 253). Self-reflectively transgressive like this stanza from José Olivarez: I loved white girls / as much as I hated / being lonely and Mexican. (Coval et al. 232). Or, painfully transgressive and open to interpretation, like these closing lines from Morgan Parker: “I’m on that grown woman shit before I break / the bottle’s neck I pour a little out: you are fallen” (Coval et al. 219). These poems demonstrate a desire to be seen but on their own terms.

Defining BreakBeat Poetry

To define BreakBeat poetry more closely, it will be instructive to analyze a few points from another of the collection's editors, Nate Marshall. In the collection, Marshall writes an essay entitled, a *Blueprint for BreakBeat Writing*. Marshall provides seven coherent points that he describes as "not perfect, but...intended to gesture toward the foundational ethics that I've observed in my generation of makers born directly into hip-hop." While all of his points are important, three seem particularly valuable for understanding what BreakBeat poetry is. First is "the necessity for poems to live in multiple media." This makes poetry more accessible and visible to audiences, but also more accessible to artists. This access leads to the next point about BreakBeat poetry providing a "democratic cypher" which discourages the "privileging (of) high intellectual or artistic pedigree," that all means of creating and disseminating poetry are "valid until proven wack." This democratization puts the teenaged poet who posts a rhyme on Instagram on equal footing with the MFA holding poet who wins an enviable award. One of the benefits of democratization of poetry as it allows for another point from Marshall, "we believe in art that invites, acknowledges, and celebrates the voices of poor people and other disenfranchised people." In this important regard, the BreakBeat poets continue the legacy form Hip Hop's birth to provide a voice to poor, marginalized peoples (329).

The lines of *The BreakBeat Poets, New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop* are filled with poems from writers who have earned advanced degrees in the study of poetry. However, these poets know that by choosing Hip Hop as a vehicle for their writing, they are in some way opening themselves up to criticism, as all their works could be "proven wack." This means that these poets aren't simply making space for their own words, rather they are making space for their teenaged selves, who were not guaranteed to make it to college.

As Coval notes, “Hip Hop is participatory, radically democratic culture” (xviii). The BreakBeat poets have chosen a democratic poetics, the type of poetics that make it possible for Amanda Gorman to read the inaugural poem for Joe Biden’s inauguration. Kathleen M. Alley noted that Gorman’s “poem is an incredible example of spoken word poetry – a form of poetry that is rooted in oral traditions and performance...[and] encompasses elements of rap, hip-hop, storytelling, theater and more” (“Amanda Gorman’s Poetry”). Spoken word poetry via its relationship to Hip Hop and its roots in the oral tradition brought Amanda Gorman to one of the biggest platforms imaginable. This is not entirely surprising because the ethos of Hip Hop is about making space and making a platform; the bigger the platform, the more room there is for others. In this way, it’s true then that the BreakBeats are saving poetry, just as Hip Hop has saved these BreakBeat poets by giving them a different way to look at poetry. The result is that audiences now have a new way to look at American poetry.

I have delayed in providing my definition of BreakBeat poetry to first allow room to display the power of the poetry. As noted above, Marshall essentially tells us that BreakBeat poets create an accessible, democratic cipher for uplifting the voices of oppressed people. With this in mind, I assert that BreakBeat poetry is poetry that hears the break beat and, in some way, brings that beat to the page. Further, BreakBeat poetry is transgressive; it announces itself and it doesn’t care if, in the process, it is breaking rules; in fact, it hopes it is breaking rules. BreakBeat poetry fights for the democratization of poetry and uses a wide range of mediums to provide a platform to a broad range of artists, most from marginalized communities. In short, BreakBeat poetry is democratically oriented, transgressive poetry that prioritizes marginalized voices and brings the break beat to the page.

While I offered a sampling of the poems from *The BreakBeat Poets, New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop* in my discussion above, I would like to offer a brief accounting of some of the single authored texts that have helped to establish the tradition of BreakBeat poetry. I suggested before that the first single-authored poetry collection of what we can now call BreakBeat poetry may have been Paul Beatty's *Big Bank Take Little Bank*. Since the 2000s there has been an enormous amount of single-authored collections published. The following is an attempt to produce a representative list of these texts, though I'm sure many deserving works have been omitted.

Further Reading

A foundational text of BreakBeat poetry would certainly be Terrance Hayes *Hip Logic*; while much of his work fits this milieu, his first collection, published in 2002, set the stage for this influx of Hip Hop inspired poetry. Most of John Murillo's work could be called BreakBeat, but *Up Jump the Boogie* stands as one of his shining examples. Adrian Matejka's *Mixology* is another, which helped pave the way for his successful writing career. Some of these texts are more experimental like Latasha N. Nevada Diggs' *Twerk*; I remember my students weren't grasping how much this book was infused with Hip Hop, until I read them her poem "Have You Forgotten Any Personal Property" out loud. Speaking of experimental there's Douglas Kearney's *Black Automaton* and his many other works. Erica Dawson engages the epic form in her book *When Rap Spoke Straight to God*. Most of Hanif Abdurraqib's work could be called BreakBeat poetry, but his first collection *The Crown Ain't Worth Much* is a particularly stunning example. Other poets explore Hip Hop in more traditional forms, like Chinaka Hodge who wrote couplets for 2Pac in addition to her haikus for Biggie Smalls, in her book *Dated Emcees*.

Stephen Cramer also engages Hip Hop in traditional form in *From the Hip*. Not surprisingly, Cramer is not the only white American to engage Hip Hop in the world of literary poetry. There's Michael Cirreli's *Lobster with Ol' Dirty Bastard* and Sarah Blake's homage to Kanye, aptly titled *Mr. West*, which received mixed reviews (DuBois, "Mr. West"). There's also Michael Mlekoday's *The Dead Eat Everything*. The truth is that Hip Hop's reach goes well beyond communities of color, and, more than likely, we will see several more authors from every racial background engage with Hip Hop on the page.

Of course, many poets are also emcees. Two such poets, Jamaal May and Nate Marshall, produced written poetry while also recording and performing music. May's *Hum* was an impressively lyrical offering for this genre. Marshall's *Finna* is a deeply personal but astutely grounded tribute to his life experience and his city of Chicago. As I mentioned before, Marshall is also one of the editors of *The BreakBeat Poets, New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop*, so his contributions to this new poetic school go beyond his role as one of its artists.

The list of poets whose work could be categorized as BreakBeat is overwhelming. There's Mahogany Brown's *Swag*, José Olivarez's *Citizen Illegal*, Jonathan Moody's *Olympic Butter Gold*, Tracie Morris's *Rhyme Scheme* (which I will discuss momentarily), Tara Bett's *Arc and Hue*, Marcus Wicker's *Silencer*, Joshua Bennet's *The Sobbing School*, Morgan Parker's *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyonce*, Angel Nafis's *BlackGirl Mansion*, Danez Smith's *Homie*, Fatima Asghar's *If They Came For Us*, and Aziza Barnes' *i be, but i ain't*. Several additional poets and works could be added to this list, not to mention that most of the poets I have noted have multiple books which in some way could fit under the milieu of BreakBeat poetry.

The poets I have listed have published these books in traditional poetry publishing venues, but many poets have written poetry books outside of the literary mainstream. One such example is the book *Climbing Poetree*, the self-titled book written by the performance duo of the same name. There are also poets who are transforming the world of Young Adult Fiction by reframing the epic as a verse-novel, such as Mahogany Browne again with *Chlorine Sky*. Two poets of note in this vein are Kwame Alexander with *Rebound* and Elizabeth Acevedo with *Poet X*. Acevedo tells a semi-autobiographical story of a young poet who is part of the contemporary world of spoken word poetry that has been discussed in this chapter.

What's important to see with this phenomenon is that, as the poetry within the BreakBeat tradition continues to grow, it may become the dominant style in contemporary literary publishing because the underlying influence of BreakBeat poetry is Hip Hop. In other words, Hip Hop culture is poised to permeate the world of contemporary poetry because it is the one of the chief sources of poetic inspiration for an entire generation of poets. Such a phenomenon not only advances the legacy and reach of Hip Hop, but also demonstrates that Hip Hop's poetry is exceptionally influential to the development of contemporary poetics. Furthermore, this phenomenon advances my suggestions that Hip Hop will continue to influence poetry on the page for the years to come.

However, there is one more way that Hip Hop's poetry will impact the page.

Back to the Page (or Screen): The Rise of the Lyrics Database

Performativity: Tracie Morris, Rakim, and Performed Poetry

I have made clear that this project is focused overwhelmingly on poetic analysis of Hip Hop. However, it is important to discuss the broader field of performance studies in context of

Hip Hop's performance poetics. As I have made clear, Hip Hop is an oral literature, whose poetics evolved within the art of performance. The textuality of Hip Hop derives from performance, hence the need to situate its poetics within the discourse of performance studies. Performance studies, related to theater studies, has become connected with the theoretical concept known as performativity (Loxley 139). Performativity is concerned with a wide range of elements of human communication, that the basic "utterance" of a sentence shares relationship to a performance. The words being the description and the performance of those words being the action (Loxley 7-8).

Performativity was first conceived by philosopher J. L. Austin and then expanded on by an array of theorists, Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida standing as two notable examples. While in chapter 1 I discuss Derrida's philosophies on linguistics, which related directly to his theories on performativity, the project does not devote much attention to the wider discourse of performativity. However, the specific, contemporary interface between performativity and performance studies is an area that is of particular concern because some of its theorists are also concerned with the subjects of performance in Hip Hop specifically.

One of the ways in which performance studies relates to Hip Hop is via the area of sound poetry. One might think that Hip Hop is a form of sound poetry, as it is concerned with both sonics and poetics, however, Hip Hop falls under the larger umbrella of sound-text poetry:

Sound-text is the more encompassing term, referring to any experimentation with language that focuses on the sound substance of words, but that doesn't necessarily exclude signification or meaning-at times it actually plays one aspect off the other. Sound poetry, as I refer to it here, is a sub-group of sound-text which operates through a denial of signification toward an ideal of the unification of expression and indication.

In short, sound-text poetry is any poetry that experiments with sound and poetry, such as Hip Hop, while sound poetry is poetry that attempts to harmonize vocals with sound, described above as the denial of signification. As discussed in chapter 1, Hip Hop's roots are in the great tradition of signification in African American discourse. The lyrics of a Hip Hop track exist separately from the music in the sense that they are intended to be an intelligible layer to the musical composition. However, I mention sound poetry because one artist who can help bridge many of the areas discussed in this chapter is the poet and scholar, Tracie Morris, who among many other things is a sound poet.

Tracie Morris is a celebrated spoken word artist and writer who earned her MFA in poetry and a PhD in performance studies, and is another poet appearing in the anthology *Aloud, Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe*. Regarding her work, Christine Hume explains that Morris's "poetry's musical influences run deep, though in style, technique, and attitude, rap has cleared a definitive space for the spoken-word culture on which Morris cut her teeth" (Hume 415). Much of Morris's published poetry exemplifies the BreakBeat poetry which I have discussed at length in this chapter, like these six lines from her book *Rhyme Scheme*:

...between Arizona, Los Angeles
at 35,000 feet, uses a blush brush

adds color to planes and folds
coral lipstick, peach and gold

butterfly earrings, jacket's the shade

of old fashioned beige phones... (*Rhyme Scheme* 62)

While the Hip Hop cadence is clear in these lines, revealing a connection with both the BreakBeat poets and contemporary spoken word poetry, Morris's work, much like Hip Hop itself, blurs the boundaries of mediums. Her work, according to Hume, exists "between easy definitions and within a wealth of osmotically integrated sources, Morris's new work swims in the wide ocean of sound poetry" (Hume 416). Morris, this poet in the Hip Hop tradition and from the contemporary spoken word movement, also performs poetry that attempts to move away from signification, and embraces the harmony of vocalic sound and instrumental sound:

By inhabiting and improvising within one sentence, Morris releases the physicality of words, plays with sonic associations, and funnels the referential residue of language into more visceral, more estranging and ethical functions. Familiar speech sets in motion something close to glossolalia by way of accent, slur, stutter, backtracking, striation, and telescoping tempo. (Hume 417)

While such performed poetry might seem far afield from the performance poetics of Hip Hop, instead nestled into a more Avant Garde domain, Morris in many ways embodies and recaptures the spontaneity of Hip Hop by bringing her poetry back to the spontaneous performative location, similar to the one where Hip Hop was born, when DJs grabbed microphones and improvised from the top of their domes.

While Morris's sound poetry illustrates the overlap between various areas of performance poetry, she also explains Hip Hop's performance poetics from a theoretical perspective. In her groundbreaking essay, "Rakim's Performativity," Morris engages the work of one of Hip Hop's most celebrated rappers, Rakim. Morris illustrates the public nature of Hip Hop by showing how its movements across mediums was born from an improvised public performance sphere:

What happened between around 1975, the underground swelling of something in the air and that thing on wax, that radio sound that engraved the end of the decade? Those scratches that evoke old school reel-to-reel (first wheels of steel)/78 record fidelity? The yokels who knew that sound from block parties, improvised ciphers and boom boxes on the stoop or the bleachers of school, heard that sound go up, up away... We sensed something syn(c)/aesthetically was going on, expanding. “Blowing up.”

(Morris, “Rakim’s Performativity” 50–51)

This “Blowing up” happened thanks to rappers like Rakim whose work helped to elevate the genre. In his memoir, *Sweat the Technique*, Rakim speaks to this moment in the birth of Hip Hop: “They didn’t call it hip-hop or rap back then, but it was already a lot more than just sound” (10). Rakim is one of the people who made Hip Hop more than just sound, in fact, according to Morris he made the genre interdisciplinary: “Rakim underscores particular community dynamics and contextualizes them in the cultural affirmation of Black studies, jazz, and aspects of post–Malcolm X Black religiosity” (Morris, “Rakim’s Performativity” 50). Morris explains how Rakim’s artistic expressions move across fields of inquiry within the cultural dynamics of the genre, but ultimately, he does so largely because of his mastery of poetics.

In addition to a wide-ranging discussion on Rakim, we find at the heart of her inquiries into his work Rakim’s skill at poetry: “The use of internal rhyme in Rakim’s work reframes the concept of resolution through the duality of the couplet” (Morris, “Rakim’s Performativity” 55). Rakim’s poetic application of internal rhyme truly alters the pace of Hip Hop discourse and transforms the trajectory of its poetics. As Morris explains, “Rakim affected the speed at which people heard text in Hip Hop” (60). And so, we find at the juncture of public art, performance,

and musicality in Hip Hop, poetics plays a vital role in shaping the developing public perception of the genre.

The work of Tracie Morris as well as her analysis of performativity in Rakim's work help to demonstrate the ways in which poetics interface with performance, especially in the context of performance studies. As Charles Bernstein notes in his book *Close Listening, Poetry and the Performed Word*:

By considering examples of "total" performance in other cultures, performance theorists have reoriented the discussion of the relation of theater, audience, and text. While much of the discussion of post modern performance art has been focused on this and related contexts, there has been considerably less focus on the implications for poetry performances. (Bernstein and Thomas 5)

It is clear from this note by Bernstein and the above discussions of Morris that there is much more to be studied relating to the performative nature of Hip Hop. It is also clear, though, that poetics will remain an important element in any such inquiries. One area where these inquiries will be particularly illuminating is the lyrics database: an under-appreciated medium vital to the dissemination of Hip Hop's art.

OHHLA-The Lyrics Database as Poetry Archive

The thrust of this chapter is that one of the most intriguing aspects to Hip Hop discourse is the ability of the genre to move across mediums. This fluidity is particularly poignant in its poetry. Hip Hop's poetry could only be found in live performances at first. These were then codified on Vinyl, which gave way to tapes, which gave way to CDs, which gave way to MP3s, which now gives way to YouTube streams. The poetry itself, though, also moves from the liner-

notes on albums, to the lyrics database, to anthologies and collections. I imagine the poets in future generations, ones who are primarily concerned with the written word, will continue to bring it back to the page, as have the writers previously discussed here. It is Hip Hop's fluidity that allows it to operate across mediums.

Many people are familiar with lyrics databases. It often is used to answer contentious arguments or confusion about a given song lyric. Today, lyrics databases contain more than just song lyrics, like Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* or Euripides' *Medea*. The most famous of these sites is Genius.com. Some may forget however, that Genius got its start as Rap Genius. The original aim of Rap Genius was simply to transcribe as many Hip Hop lyrics as possible, but they were not the first to try this. Regina Bradley in her essay, "Getting Off at the 13th Floor: Rap Genius and Archiving 21st Century Black Cultural Memory," noted that "the formal work of documenting hip hop's poetry—rap lyrics—takes place in lyrical archives like OHHLA (Original Hip Hop Lyric Archive) and the lyric annotation site Rap Genius" (R. Bradley 88).

OHHLA is one of the oldest continually active websites on the internet, having started in 1992. This history is important because it disrupts the notion that Hip Hop lyrics don't have function outside of performance. Matt Labash in his harsh critique of *The Anthology of Rap*, a book I will discuss shortly, opines, "lousy song lyrics often make for great songs. But when the music stops, and the lyrics are robbed of their delivery vehicle and forced to stand out in the light of day by their lonesome, they just look like bad poetry" (Labash, "Hip Hop Goes to Harvard"). And while this may or may not be true of many Hip Hop lyrics, that issue is sort of beside the point. Whether or not some of the poetry in Hip Hop is subjectively good or bad doesn't change the fact that people seek out Hip Hop texts in written form. OHHLA's persistence as an archive of Hip Hop's poetry proves that there is a draw to the text of Hip Hop's popular verse. Regina

Bradley explains that “when OHHLA was established in 1992 it was situated between the popularity of the gangsta rap genre and growing animosity towards rap as a social-cultural deviant. OHHLA’s initial premise is grounded in the need to recognize rap as an art form” (R. Bradley 90). While some may disagree with the value of Hip Hop’s poetry, OHHLA provided a home for it, and people since the dawn of the internet have sought it out.

Rap Genius built on the work of OHHLA with an updated design reflective of the twenty-first century internet in contrast with OHHLA’s ‘90s chic internet look. Another interpretation would be that Rap Genius “bit” their entire idea from the OHHLA site. Regardless, Rap Genius made a business of sharing Hip Hop lyrics with the world, who was interested and eager to visit these lyrics. While Genius.com is now home to the complete works of William Shakespeare and the complete works of Taylor Swift, its original birth as an archive for Hip Hop’s poetry proved to be a fruitful enterprise because the lyrics generated traffic, suggesting that people were uniquely interested in the lyrical content of Hip Hop.

There is one crucial element of Genius.com that sets it apart from many previous lyrics sites, OHHLA included:

Rap Genius extends OHHLA’s model of lyrical archiving by encouraging users to provide social-cultural context to the lyrics via annotations...However, OHHLA’s genesis and documentation of hip hop parallels early stages of the Internet’s popularity. Rap Genius’s founding reflects hip hop, the Internet, and the Web’s maturation as a site of popular culture and race and identity politics. (R Bradley 90)

As I have discussed at length in this chapter, Hip Hop at its inception was a democratic platform for artists to share their work in publicly accessible spaces. Rap Genius extended this project of democratization by allowing those who view rap lyrics to also offer annotations. These

annotations provide a discussion platform for the members of the Hip Hop community to discuss the meaning of various references in particular tracks. While only certain people will make accounts and offer annotations, many others will peruse the lyrics and read these annotations and the conversations they spurn. Regina Bradley explains, “Situating online hip hop lyrical archives as digital jukeboxes is useful in working through the construction of digital hip hop poetics. Their heavy reliance on crowdsourced transcription and interpretation doubly repurpose hip hop lyrics as public sites of personal and collective remembrance” (R. Bradley 89).

Another unique and democratizing element of lyrics on Genius.com is the presence of many artists themselves, who offer verified commentary on their own lyrics. Current stars like Kendrick Lamar, timeless figures like Snoop Dogg, OG legends like Rakim, and underground luminaries such as Jean Grae all have verified accounts on Genius.com. At Hip Hop’s birth, people could come to a party in a rec room and hear the poetry from their favorite performer. Today, in addition to being able to view these performers on YouTube, fans can go to Genius.com and read the artist’s explanations of their own lyrics.

Some people might be tempted to dismiss the interactions in the somewhat public space of Genius.com as mere extensions of the artificial worlds created by social media, where surface level interactions are commonplace. Such a presumption would be understandable, although to some degree it assumes that Genius.com visitors arrive solely for the purpose of engaging with pop culture. Rather than make a value judgement on the consumption of popular culture, however, there clearly is a unique appeal to Hip Hop lyrics. A quick comparison between the Billboard top artists of the 2010s and the traffic to specific songs on Genius reveals that Hip Hop lyrics are far more popular than other pop music lyrics. Billboard’s number 2 artist of the 2010s, Taylor Swift’s top song on Genius.com “Cardigan” has 2.3 million views (“Taylor Swift Artist

Page”). Eminem, the number 16 artist on Billboard’s list, has 17.1 million views for “Rap God” (“Eminem Artist Page”) and before this comparison is dismissed due to Eminem’s having a longer career than Taylor, Kendrick Lamar’s “Humble” has 10.9 million views (“Kendrick Lamar Artist Page”), (“Top Artists - Decade-End”).

Some artists like Beyoncé—who inexplicably is ranked number 23 on Billboard’s artists of the 2010s—have higher views because their work lives in both the worlds of Hip Hop and pop music. Still, Beyoncé’s most trafficked song on Genius is “Drunk in Love” with 8.2 million views (“Beyoncé Artist Page”). Conversely, Cardi B’s “WAP” has 15.6 million views (“Cardi B Artist Page”). While there is some variability from artist to artist, there is no doubt that Hip Hop lyrics are disproportionately more popular than other music lyrics (“Top Artists - Decade-End”).

Accordingly, these lyrics have begun to move from the digital environment of the web to the pages of print.

Bringing it to the Page

In 1999, *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* was published, and it featured many of the writers we have discussed in this chapter, including Sapphire, Amiri Baraka, Pedro Pietri, Patricia Smith, Reg E. Gaines, Tracie Morris, Miquel Algarín, Miquel Piñero, and Sonia Sanchez. Many other countercultural poets appear in the anthology as well, such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Walt Whitman. Additionally, many figures not typically associated with poetry appear in the pages of this collection, like Patti Smith, Che Guevara, and Assata Shakur. Among this group of figures added to the list was none other than 2Pac Shakur (Kaufman vii–xxi).

His poem “In the Event of My Demise” would appear in his own poetry collection, *The Rose That Grew From Concrete*, published the same year. With this collection the world learned that 2Pac saw himself as a poet in addition to being a rapper. You can hear the break beat in his work, as in these lines from his poem “Sometimes I Cry”:

Sometimes when I’m alone

I cry because I’m on my own

The tears I cry R bitter and warm

They flow with life but take no form (Shakur, *The Rose* 7)

2Pac’s musings on sorrow in relation to form echo some of my opening discussions on form in chapter 2. However, the rhythm and commitment to rhyme in these lines reveal an inner break beat in his poems. The poems in *The Rose* on a whole would fit more within the category of BreakBeat poetry rather than standard Hip Hop verse because many of the lines break from standard Hip Hop rhyme schemes, like the poem “No-Win,” which approximates the Shakespearean Sonnet rhyme scheme, as is apparent in the closing sestet:

not my choice 2 be so blunt

but you must fight fire with flame

I allowed myself 2 run once

and was haunted by the shame

if I must kill I will and if I must do it again

I would but the situation is a no-win (143)

While 2Pac’s ten-line poem is not a sonnet, as it is missing a quatrain, his appropriation of the Shakespearean rhyme scheme is apparent, particularly evidenced by his closing couplet which

speaks to the double-edged sword of the violence that he sees in his community. For 2Pac, poetry outside of the Hip Hop form is a related practice to the prosody that would make him famous.

While the poems in *The Rose that Grew From Concrete* are not mere transcriptions of Hip Hop lyrics, 2Pac cleared the way for more poetry of others to appear in print. While the *Outlaw Bible of Poetry of American Poetry* included 2Pac, Ishmael Reed in his *From Totems to Hip-Hop* includes 2Pac alongside poets from Langston Hughes to Vachel Lindsay to H.D. Among this diverse group of poets, Reed also includes the Hip Hop group, Dead Prez with their track “Police State,” which in many ways prophesied the cries to “defund the police” that swept the nation in 2020. Queen Latifah, Jay-Z, and Nas among others are featured in the third edition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. The more that Hip Hop is viewed within the tradition of poetry, the more this publishing trend will continue.

The first published compilation of Hip Hop lyrics was probably *Rap: The Lyrics*, released in 1992—which came to be in response to the issue of censorship, a major issue in Hip Hop at the time (Stanley v–vi). That project was followed by *Hip-Hop & Rap: Complete Lyrics for 175 Songs* in 2003, which makes the argument that rap “when stripped to its core it is essentially nothing more than an incredibly raw form of poetry” (Spence D iii). But the first collection to attempt to publish lyrics under the explicit guise of creating a poetry anthology was *The Anthology of Rap* edited by Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois. This book was “the first anthology of lyrics representing rap’s recorded history from the late 1970s to the present [2010, when the collection was published]” (xxix). The anthology covered Hip Hop across four decades and contains works from most of the significant emcees over that time period. The anthology attempted to show that in “reading rap lyrics, one comes to understand a rap song not simply as a music, but also as a lyric poem” (xxxv).

While DuBois and Adam Bradley may have hoped to make audiences appreciate Hip Hop as lyric poetry, it is not as if their anthology was received without criticism. I mentioned Matt Labash's review of the anthology before, but this quote is worth repeating in only that it shows how ignorant some critiques can be: "90% of rap lyrics fall into a formula that can be distilled as the Four B's: bullets, bitches, bling and braggadocio— often all four bells are rung in the same song" ("Hip Hop Goes to Harvard"). I discussed critiques of themes in Hip Hop at length in chapter 3, but this one in particular makes an unintentionally important point. One of the reasons lyrics are valuable is because they provide an archive. In the case of Hip Hop, a quick examination of the archives of Hip Hop lyrics, like Genius, reveal that it would be near impossible for anyone, let alone Mr. Labash, to confidently speak about the content in 90% of Hip Hop's corpus. Many songs cover the four b's, but there are many more sets of lyrics out there to be read. And these lyrics cover the pain of losing a loved one, the isolation of spending time in prison, the love for a mother despite a complicated relationship, the anger of growing up hungry, the fear of mortality, the journey that results in a missing wallet, the challenge of rhyming the entire alphabet, and on and on, and on and on.

The accuracy of lyrics themselves can also be a source of contention regarding the transcribing and publishing of Hip Hop rhymes. In another review, Paul Devlin addressed the issue of *The Anthology of Rap*'s many errors:

Transcription of rap lyrics is excruciatingly difficult, due to speed of delivery, slang, purposeful mispronunciation, and the problem of the beat sometimes momentarily drowning out or obscuring the lyrics... This is why so many Web sites devoted to the endeavor have (and have always had) horrendous mistakes and one reason why DuBois

and Bradley's book was badly needed. Alas, too often it makes mistakes of its own.

(“Fact-Check”)

The critique of errors in the transcriptions is certainly a valid one, and Devlin goes to some lengths to point out some unforgivable transcription errors. Yet, the anthology's existence brought Devlin to point out these errors and correct the record, which helps in correcting similar errors found in lyrics databases. Regardless, the accuracy of transcriptions will continue to be an issue, but the process will be refined over time as the sharing of lyrics via lyrics databases and anthologies continues to grow.

One place where lyrics have found a home, and where we can presume they are accurate, is in the various books published by the authors themselves. In an earlier chapter, I discussed Jay-Z's *Decoded*, a memoir that contains lyrics from some of his most famous songs along with analysis from the artist himself. Rakim's *Sweat the Technique* is a similar project. Then there's *Chuck D, Lyrics of a Rap Revolutionary*, a book which follows the complete works model. This one in particular seems to be the type of project that will be repeated as the scions of the genre continue to age. What all three of these projects have in common is that the artists don't mind having their words printed on the page. It's clear that they see their art as existing across mediums and recognize the printed page as yet another proper place for their artistry to reside.

Outro

In his essay, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” scholar and social theorist Stuart Hall attempts to mediate our understanding of two poles of cultural discourse—the pull of the dominant culture's attempt to manipulate popular culture and popular culture's resistance to this attempted manipulation:

I think there is a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle, by the dominant culture constantly to disorganize and reorganize popular culture; to enclose and confine its definitions and forms within a more inclusive range of dominant forms. There are points of resistance; there are also moments of supersession. This is the dialectic of cultural struggle. In our times, it goes on continuously, in the complex lines of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation, which make the field of culture a sort of constant battlefield.

In many ways I believe that Hip Hop functions as this battlefield that Hall describes. How much is Hip Hop a force of resistance and how much has it been coopted by the powers that be to serve the aims of the powerful? Well, the fact that after forty years Hip Hop is still viewed as a force of resistance speaks to both the nature of resistance at the heart of the genre's birth and its power as a tool for young people to find a voice. We can't debate the fact that the dominant culture has sought to appropriate Hip Hop for the business of making profits and has privileged the pursuit of those profits over the needs of the community from where Hip Hop was born. However, we also cannot pretend that Hip Hop, as an artistic tool of resistance, has continued to serve as a platform for young people of color to shout poetry in the studio, at the club, and on the page. And so, to some degree Hip Hop sits at the crux of "the dialectic of cultural struggle," as a popularly recognized art form of the people and also as a for-profit tool of mass production controlled by major corporations.

As I stated in the introduction, and as I have argued throughout the paper, Hip Hop is the most significant American poetic form ever invented. If a poetic form can be as popular as Hip Hop, then Hip Hop's poetry is situated in the crosshairs of the constantly shifting dialectical pull between the forces of resistance and manipulation. Considering this dialectic, perhaps some

people fear that by viewing Hip Hop as poetry we are trying to serve the dominant cultures needs to make Hip Hop fit within its own preferred cultural forms. While I am empathetic to those concerns, I counter that Hip Hop has always been poetry and that its function as poetry has been one of its major appeals. In fact, it constantly returns to its poetry, in my estimation, because at the heart of Hip Hop is a poetics of resistance. We can hear this resistance in our headphones, and we can hear it at a live concert, but we also can read this resistance in lyrics databases and hear it on the page because poets write it on the page. Ultimately, I am convinced that poets will continue to bring Hip Hop onto the page, to live performances, and to other mediums long into the future.

Chapter 5

Crown Me *An American Hip Hop Rhyme*

Track Listing

1. Intro
2. Crown Me
3. You are 14
4. erasu*RE*mix 2000
5. Crown Me
6. You are 18
7. You're 5
8. erasu*RE*mix 1981
9. Crown Me
10. erasu*RE*mix 1994
11. Another night
12. Crown Me
13. Why are you standing
14. Crown Me
15. erasu*RE*mix 1993
16. Crown Me
17. The tape player is cued
18. erasu*RE*mix 1984
19. Your mom is
20. Crown Me
21. You're going through
22. erasu*RE*mix 2002, 1995
23. Crown Me
24. erasu*RE*mix 2001
25. You are 21
26. erasu*RE*mix 1989
27. Your school
28. Crown Me
29. Outro
30. Notes

Intro/Statement of Poetics/Trigger

You are 45. You're a poet. You've written a thing about life and Hip Hop. Of course, you know that Hip Hop isn't *real life*, but you also know that Hip Hop *is* life. Are you Hip Hop? Is it possible for someone to be Hip Hop only sometimes? Either way, you here. If cats don't like how you switch registers that's on them. But, if someone doesn't want to read some heavy shit, you have to respect people's boundaries. Other people have been messed with and may not want to be reminded of that. On the same note, if people don't want to read about a man reconciling his youthful misogyny, while highlighting some of the worst moments in Hip Hop lyricism, you gotta respect that too. Hopefully, people get that you're just tryna work through some stuff. 'Cause you got kids now, and you want to be better for them. Regardless, this is what you have to share. So share it.

Crown Me

2.

Check. Mic check. One, two. One, two, check. Clear throat:
My rhymes descend from some way back griots
with complex themes, soliloquies, designed
to mesmerize. The candle wick ignite
these ancient rites get passed across the globe,
parts unknown. Lo and behold, back in the fold,
retell the paradox untold. This here
verse foretold the second coming. This here
the resurrection, new from old. Remind
these fake emcees that my lines is blind
like the sun is cold. My medicine be
for healin' the world and your spirit be
transformed by that old school redux. Retold
ta excavate lost lives. Reborn. Pause: Time!

You are 14. You have a blue, silk shirt. It's new, so you don't have to worry about the wrinkles, or the shrinking. You will put on your acne medication in hopes that the zits won't look too bad. You'll pick at them, of course, disregarding your father's advice: "If you pop your zits, you'll get craters like this...At least I don't look like Olmos," he'd say. You don't look like Olmos either, but you have craters just like your dad, but not yet. You're still 14, and you have plans. You'll smoke cheebah for the first time tonight, but only after you swear your friends to secrecy. You might drink some MD 20/20. I know, your stomach hurts just thinking about it today. But you know that all of this is just prep for *Images*, an under 18 dance club, your main destination. You'll hope to hook up. You won't. You'll drink several Sprites and one orange juice. And of course, you'll dance to Rob Base. You will dance harder than you've ever danced, so hard that you'll barely register that you're not very good at it. The DJ will play this track like three times, and on the last one, you will have learned enough lyrics to half rhyme along:

Bro', I got an *Ee-GO!*

Yo, talkin' to me?

No. Oh.

And by now everyone else knows enough lyrics to do the same, in unison:

'Cause I'm cool, calm just *like a breeze*

Rock the mic with the help of *Eeeeeee-Z Rock!*

On the set, *the music plays*

Only cuts the records *that I say!*¹

Rarely is everything all right with the world. Consider tonight the exception.

erasu*RE*mix

2000

After Big L²

[Verse 1]

Check it:

weed smoke/my lye	ki of coke/a pie	cars/whips	sneakers/kicks	money/chips
movies/flicks	cribs/homes	cigarettes/bones	a radio/a box	razor
blade/ox	fat diamonds/rocks	jakes/cops	got robbed/got stuck	got shot/got
bucked	got double-crossed/got fucked	got punched/got snuffed		

You like the slang/talk
and I'ma never stop.

[Verse 2]

a wolf/ a crook	Mobb Deep/“Shook”	felony/F	got killed/got left	got the
dragon/got bad breath	max/relax	guns/gats	condoms/hats	food/grub
victim/mark	ticker/heart	apartment/pad	old man/dad	studio/lab
heated/mad				

You like the slang/talk
and I'ma never stop.

[Verse 3]

champagne/bubbly	a deuce/honey that's ugly	girl is fine/she a dime	jewelry/shine
in love/you blind	face card/100 dollar bill	long stare/a grill	sneaking to a
girl/creepin	beggin/bummin	nuttin/cummin	taking orders/sonnin
hotel/telly	cell phone/celly	jealous/jelly	food box/belly
show off/floss			an L/a loss

You like the slang/talk
and I'ma never stop.

Crown Me

3.

Pause time, rebirth
old rhymes, got you
some platinum,
you feelin' that?
revise—new draft
without a mic,
it's plus—subtract
so quaint, like a
detox—relax,
don't mess with the
relapse, reclaim
form lost, respond,
archetype restored
the product, heard?

lost lives, excavate lost
folk imagining' that
written raps'll give us dap
reinvent, pick the scab,
*in the lab, pen and pad,*³
a rhyme grab? It's on, game,
abacus—do the math,
amethyst bubble bath,
easy rock—reassess
anarchist anapests,
overthrow, role reprised,
prototype is off track,
now we gotta restock
word, re-tale, get it back!

You are 18 now. Just turned it. You're at a bonfire in the woods because this is the type of thing you do when one grows up in Binghamton. You're wearing a Bob Marley, tie-dye shirt: red, yellow, Black, and green of course. You are drinking Milwaukee's Best, colloquially known as The Beast. To this day, you are convinced that your friends and you came up with the beer's *nom de guerre*. You will laugh and joke about various topics that you won't remember as the fire cackles. You aren't sure how exactly, but, somehow, this dialogue will pour into one of your "friends" channeling the Trix cereal commercial and casting you as the rabbit, sort of. "Silly nigger, Trix are for kids." This friend is Lebanese. You remember this today. You also remember hearing the phrase "sand nigger" float around and are fairly certain it must have come his way at some point. None of this is in your mind now, of course. You are too angry. Too betrayed. Too shocked. Too not shocked at all. You will puff your chest and act like you're going to beat his ass. You'll do it in a way that suggests seriousness but offers minimal resistance towards your other "friends" who hold you back. The beer will fog your memory, trim the edges of the harshness, you'll practically forget by morning. By next week, it will be as if it didn't happen. By next year, you'll hope you've grown enough to never find yourself in such a situation again; you haven't.

You're 5, or is it 4? You're in an apartment on Vestal Ave, Binghamton, NY. What's wrong with growing up in Binghamton? Well, yeah, a lot of things, and this day is no different. You are playing with kids. They're your friends. Right? Do you remember their names? You know their mom of course; she's your babysitter. Where is she? Out at the store? The oldest of these kids will bring you to a bedroom. Her uncle is gonna watch you. Do you remember what the room looks like? Can you place the color of the walls? Can you visualize the finish on the door trim? Or, is his circumcised dick the only thing you can picture? Yes, this *is* that type of poem.

You remember him to this day. How could you not? He's the same man who told you that your dirty feet were “nigger feet.”

The next time your feet got dirty, you told your mom: “Look! My feet are nigger feet.”

You can confirm—for those whose only experience is watching that scene in *A Christmas Story*—that having your mouth washed out with soap is in fact an actual thing. But you know that this poem is about more than hate filled language and arcane forms of discipline.

I'm sorry. I know. Yes, you forgot for like 10 years, or was it 11? I suppose it's not the kind of thing that would come up in your convos in the schoolyard. You prolly never felt compelled to tell your friends that you learned how to give a blowjob when you were 4. Or was it 5?

1981

After Afrika Bambaataa⁴

Get funky?
Zulu Nation—get funky?
Taste the funk,
get on down.
Bambaataa's funky!
Chase your dreams
up out your body.
Socialize your soul.

It's a dream.

Come play,
you scream.
We know
house of funk,
head for disco.

The D.J.
takes you
(poof),
get bump.

Rock rock don't stop.
Rock rock don't stop.

Emphasize ego
People say: "live."
Shucks,
no.
Play is free.
Be,
you be.

Rock rock don't stop.
Rock rock don't stop.

You're hot,
nature's children
on Mother Earth,

our rock.
Time has come,
you got soul.
Are you ready?
Hump bump get bump,
let's go.

Twist and turn,
body slide.
You got body,
bounce,
pounce.
Rock it,
don't stop it.
Don't stop
tickin',
tockin',
around the clock.

Keep rockin' and shockin'.
Don't stop it. (Crowd repeats)
Hit me. (Crowd repeats)
Pow Wow. (Crowd repeats)
Force.

You rock it.
It's the century!
Such a melody!
Our world,
a land of
master jam.
Chase your dreams
up out your body.
Socialize your soul.

It's a dream.

Rock it (Crowd repeats)
Shock it (Crowd repeats)
Everybody say (Crowd
repeats)
Planet Rock (Crowd repeats)
The sure shot (Crowd
repeats)
Planet Rock (Crowd repeats)
The sure shot (Crowd
repeats)

Twist and turn
your body.
You got body,
bounce,
pounce.
Hit me,
taste the funk.
Just hit me.
Bambaataa's so funky!

Rate the message,
boys.
Get on it.
Feel the groove.
Ya know,
be cool.
Boogie.
Go down,
low,
to the ground

Everybody,
don't stop it!
Don't stop!
Don't stop it...
(Crowd repeats)

Crown Me

8.

Native son, rock rhymes: Harlem to Rome,
a Beat to the beat, yank lines out the bag.
This shit sacred, fuckin up the matrix,
rhyme, bullet proof chest, Kevlar vest: steel, lead, chrome.
Twelfth revision or freestyle—top o' dome,
Ink drops on cheek, my bad, teardrops on pad.
Make the faithless put me on they playlist,
killin' this Native Tongue blessed microphone.

Spittin' my writtens so fast you missed it.
Lookin for the cream, shine, and platinum
listin'. Deep breath, meditate, and holla!
Harmony twisted, so quick you wished it
was like *dreams deferred*,⁵ so you could catch 'em.
Fist raised, repeat the name: Rakim Allah.

1994

*After Biggie*⁶

[Verse 1]

—azine (x /)
—ousine (x /)

my wall (x /)
—ley Marl (x /)

tape popped (/ /)
—vate Stock (x /)

—berjack (x /)
to match (x /)

duh-ha (x /)
this far (x /)

rhyme tight (/ /)
World Trade (/ /)

winner (/ x)
dinner (/ x)

Capri (/ x)
Starski (/ x)

I would (x /)
same hood (/ /)
all good (x /)

~~nigger~~ (/ x)
nigga (x / , / x, or / /)

[Verse 2]

—mon thief (x /)
—bin Leach (x /)

all day (x /)
—lyn way (x /)

diss me (/ x)
miss me (/ x)

—pin' stuff (x /)
and stuff (x /)

play toast (/ /)
East Coast (/ /)

for weeks (x /)
Smalls speak (/ /)

—out fear (/ /)
girl's ear (/ /)

the pool (x /)
high school (/ /)

—derstood (x /)
all good (x /)

nigga (x / , / x, or / /)

[Verse 3]

—nesis (x /)
—ture this (x /)

sofa (/ x)
chauffa (/ x)

G's flat (/ /)
—les that (x /)

lounging (/ x)
housing (/ x)

room shack (/ /)
her back (x /)

of course (x /)
The Source (x /)

dissed us (/ x)
missed us (/ x)

worst days (/ /)
thirstay (/ /)

I live (x /)
—itive (x /)

nigga (x / , / x, or / /)

Another night, same basement. You're still the president and you still smoke mad trees. Wait, you didn't call it trees yet, you called it weed or herb or something. Cheebah! No, that was like seven years ago. Ganja; that's its name. Accordingly, you're high but tired. Time to head back to the dorm. A girl you know asks for a ride, as does another. No, this is not that kind of poem! However, something will happen in that car. Your friend stops the Marley tape and turns the radio dial to Hot 97. Or maybe it was BLS? A song you've never heard before by an artist you've never heard of: "Ladies, rub your t@##!%\$ if you love Hip Hop!"⁷ You're blushing as your lady friends belt these words at the top of their lungs. You're not aware that you're being introduced to genius. You have not learned that genius is *notorious* for presenting itself inartfully. The windows are rolled down, the sunroof is open. And while this is not that type of poem, this *is* a little like a Curtis Mayfield song.

Crown Me

1.

Cash rules everything around me. Fuckin' trochees! *Dollar dollar bill*⁸ dude. Cold cash, full blast, gotta get it so bad. Money, sweet, delectable, honey. Gotta feed my seeds please. Won't ya help me? Tight squeeze. In a bind, got alkali mixed rhymes like gold from stone, shit's rough, it's drone on drone. So bone cold, all alone an' I remember windy streets talk, hungry walks, feet beat the pavement: *Bleak December*⁹ afternoons! Stop, rollback, clears throat, sales pitch: I've got special sets of rhymes, get five for ninety-nine, sense. Cop an extra set fo' just one month's rent. Got that? One two, one two, mic check, MIC CHECK!

Why are you standing outside a liquor store? You're only fourteen years old. Well, you've figured out that if you find a homeless guy who scraped change together to get some liquor, you can offer him money to buy you something. Supply and demand. No. It's not supply and demand, but you're not in college yet, so you wouldn't understand. It's called mutual aid.

FYI, tonight is not a MD 20/20 night. Thank God, right? You're going to a school dance. Only Black Velvet will do.

Don't worry, you won't even remember the taste of the whiskey. This moment is all you will remember of the evening. In the morning, you'll wake up in the hospital with catheter inside you. Catheter? You've never heard this word before, but you'll never forget it.

Crown Me

4.

Product get retail. Ya heard? Spread the word.
Knowledge Reign Supreme,¹⁰ so fresh and so clean.¹¹
Haters gotta hate, just 'cause they got served
some clean, tight verses, press record, pristine
mic verses, satisfaction guaranteed.
For hire like Spenser. Warranty? Lifetime.
Rhymes you can trust, value. Coupons? No need.
My rhymes preferred. Versus name brand rhymes,
nine outta ten choose mine. Test, double blind.
Results undisputed, give me the throne.
'Cause even the outlier changed his mind.
My tools refined: pen, pad, microphone.
I'm worldwide, my destiny manifest,
coast to coast from the BX to Wild West.

erasuREmix

1993

After Snoop, Nate, Kurupt, and Warren G¹²

[Intro:]

Jack-off: Dick, balls. To the ladies, from guys. Bow. Wow. DJ Dick slaps fat ass with fat dick.

[Verse One]

Last night, I had respect; I take it back: Your pussy, my balls. Next time I'm horny, I'll break you. Open your mouth. I never met a girl

I love.

[Verse Two]

Gave a fuck? Bitch, I'd be broke, never have smoke. Bitch, you hoochie groupie.

No love.

Hoes, the pussy's mines, then I'm through. She ain't nuthin, a bitch to me. Bitches ain't shit;

I don't pay attention.

Beeeitch!

[Hook]

It ain't fun (repeat 4X)

[Verse Three]

Guess who? Fat dick. Your motherfuckin mouth: Hoes, niggaz. Cuz bitches: Voodoo.
I advise no trust. Silly me

to love

a bitch. The sun rotates, game grows bigger; Bitches wanna fuck.

This nigga
above.

It ain't fun,
cause I

don't love.

[Verse Four]

Whoa!
Inhale,
exhale,
my flow.

One: money.

Two: bitches.

Three: ready.

Four: switches.

My Chevy.
Bitches and bitches.
Back up bitch;
I'm struggling.
Start jugglin nuts in your mouth.
It's me: Nigga with clout.

Whoo!

[Hook]

It ain't fun (repeat 4X)

Crown Me

5.

I'm wild, from the Boogie Down to the west coast. But would things be different if that plane didn't take me west? Would *Com Sense* still love me?¹³ Imagine I never said: *it ain't no fun without the homies*. Picture my lyrics as more than *Paper Thin*¹⁴ scribbles. What if my rhymebook still unfolded, like cardboard boxes covering the street, while we danced till the break of dawn, *night sky, read with promise*?¹⁵ Imagine I could go back, just me and my heteronyms. Would they call me Track 1 off *Criminal Minded*?¹⁶ Or just *Overseer – Officer, Off – I – sah*?¹⁷ Spittin' rhymes in the Native Guard.

The tape player is cued up. It's 9 AM Saturday morning. You're 10. You're listening to WHRW, the college radio station. The *only* station in Binghamton that plays Hip Hop. You mean Rap. It's not called Hip Hop yet, but, since your first record was *Rapper's Delight*,¹⁸ we can let this error slide. You're not trying to record the whole damn show though. You're just tryna get one song.

And the DJ says: *next up is The Real Roxanne!*

Press down.

You got it!

1984

*After The Real Roxanne*¹⁹

[Intro]

I give guys no rap.

[Verse 1]

Your ego?
Shattered.

The devastator, hotter than Grenada, is who I be, but you ain't this.

M.C., *you*?
Learn kung fu.

Your girls?
Scabs.

I got rhyme. Ya girls need a leash.

You touchin' *me*?
Crazy.

The Real.

[Verse 2]

You full o' shit. Your I.Q.?
1.2.

Your rap?
Dead.

Your nose?
Runny, like Bugs Bunny.

Your raps?
Old. Ancient. Mummy.

Your house?
Scummy.

Clothes?
Bummy.

Your money?
Ain't nothing, dummy.

Makin love? To *you*?
Crummy.

Your rap?
Weak, customary.

Your face?
Scary, a rap cemetery.

You're a boy. Not a man. Girls laugh.

[Verse 3]

Can't fool me.
Hood.
Crook.
Liar.
Thief.

Listen up! Your voice sounds whack!

The Real.

[Outro]

You guys can't make me feel.

Your mom is a feminist.

You're drunk. You've graduated high school. You're in a car with a girl. Again, no. It's not like that. She's a cheerleader. Smart. Valedictorian. She's not into you. No matter, you have decided that it might be fun if you try out an exercise that you've heard your peers engage in. You begin to tell her what a terrible a person she is, though you have no reason to think she is in fact a terrible person, as she's done nothing to you. You actually have nothing against her, except maybe the fact that she's not into you, but honestly, you're not introspective enough to even begin to unpack this detail because you're 18. Instead, you just try to make clear to her that she is a horrible person in every aspect you can think of. You can't go into specifics because you're too drunk to remember any of this. You only know it happened because you were told the next morning by another friend who was also in the car.

You now have two sons in high school.

Crown Me

6.

Officer? Native Guard? Y'all spittin lies.
I can't with these fakers, got no time for
indecisive, wishy-washy emcees
with emo rhymes. It's like they don't know where
I've been or what I've seen. As if I got
to 'splain myself to cats that don't know how
to make me whole. And that's why this time
this rhyme is about *you*! Imitators,
tryna make they name with a pen and pad,
pen in hand, tryna be like me. Carbon
copy but sloppy. Sloppily spreadin
my name, tryna get accolades, pimpin
my game, writin this rhyme! But you ain't me.
The difference? When I spit: No regrets.

You're going through old photo albums with your two teenage sons, 13 and 15. And there it is. A picture of you, basically the same age as them. You're shirtless, passed out in a hospital bed. You have hoses coming out your nose. What your sons can't see is that you also have a catheter. You remember waking up with it like it was yesterday. Your mom has been dead for just about two decades, yet here she is making a statement with a simple photograph in an album, like a DJ playing one of your greatest hits. You're like 43 now. You will now stumble through an explanation to your sons about why you were in the hospital. You'll half tell the truth, but you don't want to give them any ideas, so you'll hold back some details.

erasuREmix

2002 1995

*After Eminem*²⁰ *After 2Pac*²¹

Ever been hated? Young me
I have wicked rhymes mama
sick motherfuckin' kid had beef
emotions deep seventeen
oceans on the streets
tempers flarin' from my mama's place
hell scared
kickin' ass I was a fool
sour as vinegar mouth big boy
breakin' rules
Trigger me I shed tears
Look at me! blame mama.
Momma?
You so ridiculous.

Stress was hell.
My mama
A fiend.
A queen.
I understand.
It ain't easy.

Momma, I hurt you.
I meant to.
I'm my closet.
(One more!)

Momma, I hurt you.
I meant to.
I'm my closet.

Love ya. (Dear Mama)
No one above ya.
Sweet lady
love ya.

I got skeletons ain't fair
back to '73, before platinum no daddy
a baby coward wasn't there
he split he passed
kiss me goodbye I didn't cry

thought I would die they say I'm heartless
 I hated he was gone
 I hung with thugs
 made mistakes sold drugs
 I'm human they showed love
I was stupid dumb
 bullets
 gun
I'da killed my life
 Welcome to
 The Show

I sell rocks
money in your mailbox
'cause you was there
'cause you cared
you work late
fix a plate
workin' miracles
but now you're alone
no way I can pay you .

Love ya. (Dear Mama)
No one above ya.
Sweet lady, love ya.

Momma, I hurt you.
 I meant to.
 I'm my closet.
 (One more!)

Momma, I hurt you.
 I meant to.
 I'm my closet.

I would diss my momma to get recognition. Pour some liquor through the drama.
 Listen mama, when I'm hopeless
 you keep me happy
this record is dissin'. you
 but even though
 in my position I act crazy
 just gotta
 try to thank
 the Lord
 witness
 your momma you made me
prescription pills no words
 bitchin'.

shit's missin'
Münchausen's Syndrome
My life was sick
till I blew up.
You made me, Ma.
Justify me, Ma.
Guess what?
You're older
it's cold
you're lonely
and phony.

What hurts me is you,
bitch! You.
Your song, mom I appreciate you
selfish bitch the love you gave could
burn for this take the pain
you make
a brighter day.
It's a struggle.
No way
I can pay you
I understand
I am dead as can be.

Momma, I hurt you. Lady, love ya.
I meant to. (Dear Mama)
I'm my closet. No one above ya.
(One more!) Sweet lady, love ya.
Momma, I hurt you. (Mama)
I meant to. Sweet lady,
I'm my closet. (Dear Mama)

Crown Me

7.

I have regrets. The difference is my name
makes room for my imperfections, like Yin
and Yang. *Nas* played you.²² I am immortal.
If you can't see me, that's shit's on you, fool.
You think I'm the one writing this poem?
Out here got you a little shook, *Mobb Deep*.²³
Just cause you spark leaf, don't mean you can leave
without pickin up yo mess. You just stressed.
The game creepin you, but you might get blessed
or play it wrong, get left. *DP* say shit's
bigger than me,²⁴ and it is. I'm before
the 12s cousin. Before I rocked mics
from L.A. to Rome. Before the sound booth,
dis native grandchild of Harlem rocked rhyme.

erasuREmix

2001

*After Missy Elliot*²⁵

[Intro]

Sawago sawago!

Hit me!

Gimme new shit!

Gimme new shit!

Gimme new shit!

[Verse 1]

Missy, the hottest.

Can't stop me.

Listen. I'm lastin.

Want me?

You with me?

Sw-sw-switch,

HOLLA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Gather round, jump
around.

[Hook]

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

Getcha getcha.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O....

Getcha getcha.

[Verse 2]

Who bitch?

You?

Me hot since

Yo-Yo.

Battle me? No.

Holla son.

Mujko here.

I come.

I'm done.

Radio shook like a gun.

[Hook]

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

Getcha getcha.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O....

Getcha getcha.

[Verse 3]

Ssh, hush.

Silence

Hah-choo

In yo' mouth.

No stopping.

Copywritten.

Don't copy sloppily.

Y'all can't know.

Feel me? Hear me?

Loud, proud,

Missy gon' play now.

Best around.

[Hook]

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

Getcha getcha.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O.

G.Y.F.O....

Getcha getcha.

[Outro]

Ichi.

You are 21. You are in a fraternity. *A fraternity?* A white fraternity. *A white fraternity?* You're the president. *THE PRESIDENT?* You are headed in the house for an annual ritual. Amazingly, you don't drink anymore. You do, however, smoke weed. No, you don't smoke blunts, you're getting ahead of yourself. And for the record, you didn't really call them blunts, you called them Ls, but that was when you were 25. You're 21 now. You roll the perfect joints with a dollar bill. You call them spliffs; they're not spliffs. But you smoke like it's your motherfuckin job. And you have long dreadlocks and listen to Peter Tosh like religion.

You're pretty high already, but you'll spark another one inside. The group is gathering around in a circle, ready to begin. And there it is. The lawn jockey. This is not your first lawn jockey, but you didn't realize they made Black ones. The last two times you'd seen this exercise, they was white. But this one is very black. Sambo black. No, this isn't an episode of *Dear White People*,²⁶ or is it? It's not a Flannery O'Connor story either.²⁷ Or is it? You look around, high as hell. You remembered your dad telling you why he didn't like weed. "That shit made me paranoid." You see white faces staring at you, cheering on the next step in this ritual. A young pledge takes a bat and smashes off the head of the lawn jockey. Everyone is amped, they looked crazy, you think you're next. You start trying to figure out where the exit is. They are looking at your head like you're next. Everyone is staring at you, or are they? You sneak up the stairs, and out the back door to safety. You will wake up in the morning and still be president.

1989

*After PE*²⁸

[Intro]

L-O-V-E FM

[Verse 1]

1989...another summer...funky drummer...

Music...heart...soul...Listen...y'all...

Swinging...singin'...whatcha gettin'...

What I know...Black...the rhythm...

We want...what we need...

Freedom...speech...Freedom...death...

Got to

Fight...power...

you say

Fight...power

[Hook]

Fight...power

Fight...power

[Verse 2]

Rhythm's designed...bounce...counts...

The rhyme's...your mind...

You've realized...pride...

Pump...stuff...make ya tough

The heart...a work of art...

Revolutionize...change

People...we...the same...

not the same...know the game

Awareness...Can't get careless

Say what...?...Beloved...business

Mental...fitness

Bum rush...you know...

Fight...power

You say

Fight...power

[Hook]

Fight...power

Fight...power

[Verse 3]

Elvis...never meant shit...racist...sucker...
Motherfuck...John Wayne
Black...proud...ready...hyped...amped
My heroes...sample...
Look back you...find rednecks...400 years...
Don't...be happy
Number one...if I say it...slap me
Let's...party...right
C'mon...got to...power...the people...
Make everybody
Fight...power

[Hook]

Fight...power
Fight...power

Your school has started this thing called the Coca-Cola Dance Party. They bring in this big screen, like movie screen big, and play music videos in the gym. Last time it was kind of poppin,' actually. They played that new New Edition track, with the dude with the deep voice. Bobby's solo now, and they played him too.

This wasn't no tender "Roni" type night though; it was more of a "My Prerogative" kind of night. *Right Ted?*²⁹ They didn't play no PE, but they did play Rakim!

Tonight is gonna be dope.

This is why you're standing outside a liquor store.

Crown Me

9.

Repeat name, fist raised like Rakim, *Paid in Full*.³⁰
I'm timeless like Egyptian hieroglyphs—
immortal, everlasting-eternal.
Cipher travel wide, *meter percussive*.³¹
Never said I was perfect. Shit, I need
Therapy like an *Owed to Eminem*.³²

Some lessons unlearned, but no greed's
preventin' me from spittin dem
rhymes made for the future, conflicted
and problematic but I'm *Stillmatic*,³³
confined but still dreamin', unrestricted.
While heads stay coppin' my rhymes like addicts.

*And yet, I still marvel*³⁴ at these blind fools,
wannabees, 'fraid ta admit that cash rules.

Outro

Special thanks to Minor Arcana Press for publishing an earlier version of many of the poems in the “Crown Me” series.³⁵ Thanks to *Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora* for publishing an earlier version of “erasuREmix 2000.”³⁶ Also, thanks to the University of Hell Press for publishing an earlier version of “erasuREmix 1981.”³⁷

Chapter 5 – Notes

1. Quoted text comes from “It Takes Two” by Rob Base and DJ EZ Rock.
2. This erasure poem uses “Ebonics” by Big L as its source text.
3. Reference to “Let Me Blow Ya Mind” by Eve.
4. This erasure poem uses “Planet Rock” by Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force as its source text.
5. Reference to “Harlem” by Langston Hughes.
6. This erasure poem uses “Juicy” by The Notorious B.I.G. as its source text.
7. Reference to the hook performed by The Notorious B.I.G. in the song “Player’s Anthem” by Junior M.A.F.I.A.
8. Reference to “C.R.E.A.M.” by Wu Tang Clan.
9. Reference to “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe.
10. Reference to KRS-One, whose moniker stands for Knowledge Reign Supreme over nearly every One.
11. Reference to “So Fresh, So Clean” by Outkast.
12. This erasure poem uses “Ain’t No Fun (If the Homies Can’t Have None)” by Snoop Dogg as its source text.
13. Reference to “I Used to Love H.E.R.” by Common
14. Reference to “Paper Thin” by MC Lyte.
15. Reference to “January 1863” by Natasha Trethewey.
16. Reference to *Criminal Minded* by Boogie Down Productions.
17. Reference to “Sound of da Police” by KRS-One.

18. Reference to “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang.
19. This erasure poems uses “The Real Roxanne” by Elisea Jack as its source text.
20. This erasure poem uses “Cleanin’ Out My Closet” by Eminem as one of its source texts.
21. This erasure poem uses “Dear Mama” by 2Pac Shakur as one of its source texts.
22. Reference to *Hip Hop is Dead* by Nas.
23. Reference to “Shook Ones” by Mobb Deep.
24. Reference to “It’s Bigger Than Hip Hop” by Dead Prez.
25. This erasure poem uses “Get Ur Freak On” by Missy Elliot as its source text.
26. Reference to Season 1, Episode 3 of the TV show *Dear White People*.
27. Reference to the short story “Artificial Nigger” by Flannery O’Connor.
28. This erasure poem uses “Fight the Power” by Public Enemy as its source text.
29. Reference to “My Prerogative” by Bobby Brown.
30. Reference to “Paid in Full” by Eric B. and Rakim.
31. Reference to a poem, “My Meter is Percussive,” by Thomas Sayers Ellis
32. Reference to a poem, “Owed to Eminem,” by June Jordan.
33. Reference to *Stillmatic* by Nas.
34. Reference to the poem, “Yet Do I Marvel,” by Countee Cullen.
35. *It Was Written: Poetry Inspired by Hip Hop*. Ed. PJ Williams and Jason McCall. Minor Arcana Press, 2016.
36. *Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora*, vol. 44.1, 2018, pp 65-66.
37. *Erase the Patriarchy*. University of Hell Press, 2020, pp 132-135.

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