

Abstract

One Love:

Collective Consciousness in Rap and Poetry of the Hip-Hop Generation

by

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This study aims to offer an understanding of hip-hop culture through which three concepts are elucidated: (1) the existence and dimensions of a collective consciousness within rap and poetry of the hip-hop generation (Allison Joseph, A. Van Jordan, Terrance Hayes, Major Jackson, Taylor Mali, and Kevin Coval); (2) a poetics of rap—to parallel the influence seen/suggested among the selected poets; and (3) an analysis of the manner(s) in which the poetry of these more serious, academic artists reflects an influence of hip-hop culture. My thesis suggests that these poets are indeed influenced by the culture in which they grew up, and in their verse, this influence can be seen through linguistic playfulness, *sonic density*, layered meaning and usage through form and content, and the connection to a larger cultural, collective consciousness fed by specific social bodies. Poetic analysis, as well as studies of vernacular and oral traditions, has allowed me to explore these concepts and theories from a wider spectrum, and with regard to the work of the poets, an original perspective. Providing a deeper understanding of artists, their identities, places, and dreams within their work, this study begins to offer some insight into notions of the ways in which individuals might participate in *cultural conservation*.



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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the artists whose work has meant so much to me; word is born.

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## **One Love: Collective Consciousness in Rap and Poetry of the Hip-Hop Generation**

### **Liner Notes**

It is both interesting and disconcerting that rapping and deejaying, hip hop's musical components, can utilize elements of poetic technique and form—occasionally incorporating poetic imagery, as well—in creating meaningful artistic compositions that are more than entertainment and still be dismissed as irrelevant, dangerous, or silly. Whereas [Jeff] Chang sees the positive developments of the hip-hop generation, suggesting,

... it's worth repeating: hip-hop is one of the big ideas of this generation, a grand expression of our collective creative powers. ... the culture has turned over again, leaving the universe with a whole lot of new matter to deal with. (Chang x-xi)

Cornel West, a product of the civil rights movement, although praising some aspects of hip-hop culture, mainly sees its darker side:

Hip-hop culture is based in part on the desire to create an artistic expression of rage. It is conceived and conducted by a group of young black Americans rebelling against their marginalization, their invisibility that only became worse during the Reagan and Bush years. ... They are living in culture void of hope ... [West 1993, *Prophetic Reflections* 17]. (Grassian 10)

Of course (with almost all commerce driven heavily by commercial appeal, profits, and other capitalistic behavior that often undermine creativity and honest artistic effort), the music industry gives home to a plethora of rappers whose work falls into one, or multiple, of the three drivers of commerce (or in others not mentioned here). This situation, however, is analogous with any demanding art-form that is appreciated only by specific communities within a capitalist environment: those interested in creating are capable of doing so in differing degrees, and thus there are many more bad examples than good; this sort of scenario doesn't stop us from exploring other art forms for veritable "diamonds in the rough," and that willingness to be open to possibilities within multicultural experience(s) should not cease at the threshold of rap. It

would simply be too difficult to believe hip hop music, now widely considered a cultural art-form, can be as popular and empowering as it has become and *not* have had an effect on more serious contemporary poetry—especially for poets born to the “Hip Hop Generation” (a reformulation/subset of “Generation X”) and after, poets who grew/grow up with rap not only as popular music but also (regarding sample-based hip hop and lyricism) a direct link to the past as a people’s rhythmic history.

The space of hip-hop, as with poetry, has a sort of DuBoisian “double-consciousness” to it, existing in public spaces just as it does in the interior. With respect to education and the motivations to learn, instructors with a developed knowledge of the aesthetics and poetics of rap may well find the utilization of hip-hop culture a reliable method/ground through which to engage students; the relationship must be a reciprocal one however: educators should utilize aspects of another’s culture to help them “enter the conversations” of academic discourse, with the dual aim of also providing the tools students need to critique their culture and identity for deeper understanding and appreciation. This work, then, is an effort to (a) provide some basic cultural understanding to my readers, (b) analyze rap poetics with intent to display examples one may draw upon for comparison with regard to locating more teaching/study material, and (c) an exploration of how the work of selected poets and rappers of the hip-hop generation displays an influence of hip-hop culture, as well as a collective social, political, and cultural consciousness. In vernacular/oral traditions, textual layering (emotionally and intellectually) is often where remembrance or homage to “roots” (history, culture) can be found, and by the same token, these textual, visual, auditory, and emotional layers make poetry particularly well equipped for connecting with others. I aim to offer readers confidence and understanding, as well as an interest to undertake further cultural study independently, seeking to create more interesting

methods of interacting with and engaging students pedagogically.

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As with Generation X, there is no exact time range for which the hip hop generation is defined. For instance,

[Mark Anthony] Neal's post-soul generation consists of African Americans born between 1963 and 1978; Kitwana's hip-hop generation spans 1965-1984, although he suggests, 'Those at the end of the civil rights/black power generation [Gil Scott Heron, for instance] were essentially the ones who gave birth to the hip hop movement that came to define the hip-hop generation, even though they are not technically hip-hop generationers. ... This is a generation that not only did not have to experience segregation first hand but also saw what seemed to be milestones in African American History. ... He [Neal] also suggests that members of the hip-hop generation are not aware of or do not acknowledge the debt that they owe to the civil rights generation for these advances but are rather divorced from the nostalgia associated with those successes. (Grassian 8-9)

Shawn A. Ginwright, however, claims hip hop to be an "urban youth aesthetic" which includes not only rap music but also clothing, language, and art. He also maintains that "hip-hop culture is defined by 'urban youth experience,' which has become synonymous (fairly or unfairly) with poverty and violence" (9). One of the reasons for any perceived lack of political engagement and relative cultural homogeneity in contemporary times may be because of media and corporate control over that genre of the music industry, if not others. The commercial stranglehold on the art isn't all the generation faces in the uphill battle to be understood, it does however complicate such intention(s); being understood may not seem like a high priority for an art-form that not only often aims to intimidate, but also to conceal identity behind persona, and expression through coded language packaged in borrowed, reformulated organizations. Indeed, "[t]o understand hip hop as a cultural movement we must explore the roots and the reasons for its explicit nature. Rap often specifically intends to offend polite sensibilities. After all, it is an art form born on the street corner ..." and it constantly borrows and pays homage to the vernacular arts born from slavery (Bradley 86). The music and its content exist in a tension between its outward expression

to the public and its internal messages to specific communities or the individual. Although I share many of the culture's interests, I find myself at odds with some of the values expressed therein at times; "it is essential to remember," suggests Nelson George, "that the values that underpin so much hip hop—materialism, brand consciousness, gun iconography, anti-intellectualism—are very much by-products of the larger American Culture" (xiii).

Popular culture constantly reinforces the connections between realism and poverty or ghetto life. In fact, Michael Eric Dyson provides some evidence for this, saying "this creates 'ghettocentrists' who hold that the ghetto, the inner city, the local black neighborhood, is the source, the locus classicus, of authentic black identity and supplies important standards, norms, habits, traits, and behavior for the black community" (Grassian 12). Elaborating on this, Daniel Grassian points out that

At the same time, popular culture (movies, television, music, and other media forms) often presents African Americans in roles in which they seem to exclusively want money and material products, whether it is in MTV shows such as "Pimp My Ride" or "Crips" or movies such as *All About the Benjamins* (2002). [And] If not stereotype[d] as materially obsessed, then they [are] often stereotype[d] as violent.... (12)

Some play with these preconceived notions, but many play into them, and this often emphatic presentation by the media is subversively damaging to the communities to which it is exhibited, narrowly framing the social construction of hip-hop culture. The rappers and poets to be considered in this work, in the same fashion as those artists of the Black Arts Movement, play with stereotypes, perception, and social inequalities, among other issues. Gwendolyn Pough believes and has remarked that "[r]appers, with their bold use of language and dress, also use image and spectacle as their initial entry into the public sphere" (28), moving toward the notion that "[a]fter a legacy of slavery and being labeled three-fifths human, Blacks had to create a spectacle that allowed them to be seen as respectable citizens" (29). This would be one way of

explaining/defending the profanity and violence displayed in hip-hop music—as a necessary tactic in gaining the attention needed to prove oneself, though it is uncertain how making these types of spectacles aided them in garnering the respect they desired from other beings. Regarding this, however, Perry states in her critical text, that

Hip hop music manifests a commitment to otherness. It centralizes a realm of black existence and yet commits to the otherness of that location with respect to the larger society. ... we find a simultaneous movement of social critique and a celebration of the status quo. (47)

Although this notion has heavily permeated popular culture, this is something some rappers and the writers of the hip-hop generation undertake in content/context in order to battle commonly perpetuated racial/ethnic stereotypes, whether positive or otherwise. Touching on this idea of having/trying to make a spectacle in order to move into what Ellison calls “seen territory,” Perry further says,

The historic construction of blackness in opposition to whiteness, in which blackness is demonized, has become part of the art form’s consciousness. Whereas previous generation of black Americans utilized various means to establish a self-definition that negated the construction of blackness as demonic or depraved, many members of the hip hop generation have chosen instead to appropriate and exploit those constructions as metaphoric tools for expressing power. (47-48)

A good example of this can be seen through rapper Ice Cube’s persona; though often documenting the harsh realities of urban life in the mid to late 80s, living in one of the country’s most dangerous municipalities (Compton, [Southern ] California), Ice Cube’s lyrics promote the image of an African-American who has grown into a hardened criminal capable of extreme violence and sexual prowess; what’s more, he insinuates that he is this way as a result of how society treats him.

Of course empowerment depends on a larger level of powerlessness. And certainly that larger powerlessness in society is reflected in the economic politics of the music industry. ... [in any case] The black community generally does not perceive these acts as those of self-hating traitors, in the way it might the acts of black people adopting other

stereotypical postures. Rather, these young men may even be seen as champions of a particular kind of black empowerment. (Perry 47-48)

What the music industry has done, says critic Daniel Grassian, “is to frame [through hip-hop music] the ‘authentic’ Black American not as a complex, educated, or even creative individual, but as a ‘real nigga’ who has ducked bullets, worked a triple beam, and done at least one bid in prison” (13).

Such a narrow framing and presentation of hip-hop culture and its youth, however, has been detrimental, spawning a rift between the hip-hop generation and its baby boomer parents. In addition, through increasing commercialization, the ideas and emotions of hip-hop have caused many of its cultural representatives to fall prey to materialism, becoming less-representative of/for the community. Such restrictions, through such rigid economic control, suggest that “corporate entities [the powers that be, more or less] have no vested interest in seeing rap artists advance themselves creatively or intellectually” (Grassian 13). This wouldn’t be such an issue if the artists themselves didn’t care about their personal development, but I would like to proceed under the assumption that because these artists appear interested in history/heritage, content, and unique presentations of such things, that they are indeed concerned with their development as creative, social role models. The problem with this is not inherently materialism; it is that (a) such a pre-determined presentation of cultural material, in this case hip-hop music, has created in many youth some skewed version of the American dream: material equals success equals respect as an equal, which, unfortunately, is not the case that often, and (b), that materialism for the hip-hop generation tends to be individual, not collective. Many seek only personal wealth and respect and do not necessarily view the improvement of the community’s status as an ideal for which they should concern themselves. The concerns of those who are conscious of their roles as cultural ambassadors recognize that “[t]his attitude ... can lead to apathy and a lack of concern

for others” (Grassian 11).

This is the sort of behavior that garners criticism toward hip-hop generationers from civil rights generationers, such as the highly-respected black comedian Bill Cosby, who made headlines in the mid-2000s claiming that things would get better for African Americans if they tried harder and didn’t wear their pants so low. Citing [Bakari] Kitwana’s<sup>1</sup> response to criticism from Mark Anthony Neal: “For hip-hop generationers, it is difficult to find instances where baby boomers in mainstream leadership are collectively making a difference” in the lives of the youth today (9), Grassian goes on to quote Kevin Powell’s comments from 1997:

From my generation’s perspective, we believe that many in the civil rights generation are living in an illusionary world, and are foolishly holding on to the nostalgia and memories of an era long gone. That’s why there is such a high level of mistrust and miscommunication between the two generations. (9)

It is an especially complex period to be American (even a global citizen); prejudice, discrimination, and racism are now often quite subtle, unclear, and difficult to discern, thus, harming those affected, perhaps continuously, due to ignorance—whether through denial, timidity to stand up for oneself, or just in being unable to determine if what they’re going through just isn’t a “rough patch” in their lives. “The civil rights generation,” says Grassian, “did not have to encounter much subtlety, at least not in terms of their fight against prejudice, discrimination, and racism” (6). He goes on to say, “The fact of the matter is that only a small minority of African Americans ever achieve major success, let alone get a good-paying job. ... The Civil Rights & Black power movement,” as claimed by Ras Baraka, a Newark, New Jersey city official, “created so many African American leaders and Black middle class persons having access to power, yet the overwhelming majority of people in [the] community have not benefited...” (13). They eventually may, however, so long as the culture continues fighting for a

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<sup>1</sup> Author of the stem text *The Hip Hop Generation* (2002).

voice to speak and say to the majority, “I am,” while also asking/telling its own, “Remember?” “True hip-hop has nothing to do with the mainstream. . . . Hip-hop is the voice of a people. And it was also there to make one feel good, better about oneself, but not to the extreme of being really narcissistic. It was always about community” (Chang 324). Community is not something unfamiliar to poetry, either, and drawing upon this relationship, Marc Bamuthi Joseph, a national slam poetry champion, has this to say regarding hip-hop culture:

[It] is said to have changed young people’s relationship to language and put their literary referents in a stream of authors whose modern era probably begins with the publication of Ginsburg’s “Howl.” *Howl* gives us the Beats, and from the Beat Era comes Amiri Baraka, who sits on the edge of the Black Arts Movement with Sonia Sanchez, Etheridge Knight, and Nikki Giovanni. These authors opened the public consciousness unto the nationalism of the Watts Prophets, the Last Poets, and Gil Scott Heron. . . . All these writers exemplify an urban, musical poetic that has prevailed since at least the Harlem Renaissance, but never has been more globally impactful than inside hip-hop culture. (Joseph 12-13)

If this doesn’t illustrate the clear and definite need for material educators can use in engaging students with opportunities to enter the academy and challenges for their own reflection with ends toward a deeper understanding of oneself and one’s community, I’m not sure what can. Material and discourse of this nature will allow those culturally conscious to begin fighting the systemic effects of capitalism on the art-form by engaging its audience and facilitating proper contexts for understandings that might otherwise be taken for granted or missed entirely. It should be remembered that,

Like the rest of Black America, the world of Hip Hop is not a monolith, yet all too often [it] is only represented by young Black males with gold teeth, wearing baggy pants and shouting obscenities, and libidinous young Black women shakin’ their asses. What the music industry has done through rap music is to frame the “authentic” Black American not as a complex, educated, or even creative individual, but as a “real nigga” who has ducked bullets, worked a triple beam, and done at least one bid in prison. This image, along with that of scantily clad women, is then transmitted worldwide as a testament of who Black Americans are. This means that corporate entities have no vested interest in seeing that rap artists advance themselves creatively or intellectually. (Bynoe 2004, 149)

Current scholarship involving hip hop has explored rap’s use of poetic techniques but has only



recently started to examine the art-form aesthetically and analytically with the informed mindset one brings to poetry and visual art, *further signifying rapping as legitimate poetry in certain instances*. Hip-hop culture as a whole has generally been the focus of examination, otherwise its component modes of expression (emceeing, deejaying, graffiti artistry, and break dancing) have been separately considered for analysis in various ways, but usually offering critiques with regard to larger themes/issues, such as violence, gender, (in)equality, et al. And though much has been published in the last decade concerning the poetics of rap, I have encountered few examples that illustrate its rare but full and moving, poetic potential, diminishing the overall effectiveness of the rhetorical work(s). With regard to the academic end of the “social poetic practice spectrum,” little academic discourse exists regarding the presence and influence of hip hop within contemporary poetry; the only text I have found considering poetry of the hip-hop generation is Daniel Grassian’s text, *Writing the Future of Black America: Literature of the Hip-Hop Generation*, and though he does an admirable job starting the conversation, the poetry of the generation was considered only in one chapter which featured only two poets. The discussion presented there is thoughtful and respectable, but too narrow to do justice to the idea of what *hip-hop poetry* might be.

Responding to these weaknesses within academic discourse, better poetic rap examples should more easily promote the academic study of the art-form (and perhaps begin to creatively challenge performing artists); addressing the lack of cultural-analytical exploration into hip-hop’s influence on the work of its generation’s poets, I first intend to address rap’s poetic essence—drawing examples from the compositions of selected rappers (Nas, Lupe Fiasco, eLZhi, Andre 3000, Common, Eminem, and various others)—to offer samples of poetic rap not present in current scholarship that more effectively illuminate rap as a current manifestation of poetry to

music—a tradition harking back to the performances of poetry to jazz, and long before. By presenting rap poetics in ways that parallel how hip-hop music elements are present in the poetics of the selected poets, this initial examination should also aid elucidation of the claim that hip-hop influences are exhibited throughout these poets' bodies of work—and that, by extension, should be present in the work of other poets/artists of the generation. “Textuality bear[s] a strained relationship [with orality]” (*Prophets 2*). It is this relationship intrinsically tying the two art-forms together (especially through the historical roles of the bard and griot) and through which acculturation the analysis of hip hop's influence/presence in poetry can begin; for this project, selected work from several contemporary poets of the Hip-Hop Generation (Terrance Hayes, Major Jackson, Taylor Mali, A. Van Jordan, Kevin Coval, and Allison Joseph) has been used to demonstrate hip-hop's influence on contemporary and emerging artists, and also to underscore its cultural significance. Fully exploring hip-hop and poetry through similarities via form, content (style, wordplay, subject matter, poetic turn, sampling [“artistic appropriation”]), imagery, rhythm, and musicality (syntax, caesura, rhyme, assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia, sibilance, etc.) will likely be helpful to poetry teachers, as well as to their students, providing materials to engage their readers in the ways in which they understand and experience the world, and as a gateway to other kinds of poetics. Such endeavors on the part of an instructor can expand existing modes of linguistic/rhetorical literacy as well as thoughtfully encouraging deeper understandings of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as more of a language than just a dialect; research suggests promoting notions of bilingualism and code switching that praise students' linguistic capacities instead of punishing them for using their primary modes of discourse. Regarding the ever-changing state of language, and emerging generations, Nancy Wilson (in 2008) remarked on literacy and hip-hop culture saying, “this does not mean that

Standard American English (SAE) does not continue to hold its privileged status (though no longer the lingua franca of the United States) ... [it] still privileges elite discourses, or put more bluntly, discourses that reflect and sustain white hegemony” (539). Nevertheless, “our students have a wealth of knowledge about the world in which they live. Our pedagogies must advance accordingly” (Richardson xviii).

### Side A

Gail Hilson Woldu argues that by 1997, “[h]ip-hop and its musical vehicle, rap, have become ubiquitous on college campuses in the United States,” citing a fluid, dynamic audience for which “hip-hop’s influence transcends boundaries of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Black students, white students, affluent and needy students, female students and male students are drawn to hip-hop culture and its deliberately confrontational music” (65). Similarly, as AnJeanette Alexander-Smith noted in 2004:

Hip-hop music is one of the cornerstones of today’s popular culture. Hip-hop music’s influence has convinced the media and lexicographers to include its vocabulary and music in news broadcasts, advertisements, and dictionaries.... the language of hip-hop becomes part of their [students’/fans’] primary discourse, their ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing. (58)

Further, she asserts that “Hip-hop music and ... poetry support culturally relevant pedagogy ... [and that] Sociopolitical consciousness and cultural competence deal with designing instruction to educate students about critical issues that influence their lives ... us[ing] significant materials to encourage cultural pride” (59). Greg Tate, serving on a hip hop discussion panel (transcript titled “Got Next”), says,

If you’re talking about African American culture, sound and music is the glue. Hip-hop, as we understand it as an idiom, it already is hip-hop theatre. It already is a visual art. It already is cinema. ... It is a visual medium, it is a performative medium, it is the medium through which people who don’t really exist within the institutions of power can act as

self-authorizing forces. I'm not just talking about hip-hop; I'm talking about Black music in general. (Tate 45)

“Negro music,” Amiri Baraka explains in his critical text, *Black Music*, “is essentially the expression of an attitude, or a collection of attitudes, about the world, and only secondarily an attitude about the way music is made” (17), going on to say, “this music cannot be completely understood (in critical terms) without some attention to the attitudes which produced it” (19). Although originally printed in 1959, and referring to the black cultural art of jazz, undoubtedly the same arguments and claims can be made of hip-hop music. The most current musical manifestation of black arts, rap is “like all poetry, defined by the art of the line. ... [and] gave voice to a group hardly heard before by America at large, certainly never in their own, often profane, always assertive words” (Bradley xi-xiv). When rappers “represent” appropriately, it “is not the blended corporate doublespeak of 'keeping it real'...but the confirmation of his participation in the poetic legacy of urban realism, from Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg, and Gwendolyn Brooks to the New York School's Frank O'Hara to the Black Arts Movement's Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni” (Mansbach and Coval 247).

Utilizing the various poetic elements at their disposal, rappers can give substance to unique combinations of cultural and intellectual influence(s), producing instances within the music at large that move to engage social spaces in a manner identical to poetry's modes of communication and its associated historical values—noted by distinguished poetry scholar/professor Charles Bernstein in an interview from 2000 as “allow[ing] those who are not given a voice in the dominant media...[and often] it's destructive, it's sarcastic, it's demeaning, it's undermining, it's ugly, it's unpleasant, unaccommodating, incomprehensible. And beloved, at the same time” (in Cummings 18-19). Hip-hop music “nourishes,” says Perry, “by offering community membership that entails a body of cultural knowledge, yet it also nourishes by

offering a counter-hegemonic authority and subjectivity to the force of white supremacy in American culture in the form of the MC” (44).

By the mid-eighties, hip hop/rap music and the art of rapping had been defining culture and influencing multitudes for nearly a decade, entering into what many consider its “golden age” (1985-1992<sup>2</sup>)—this period marks the entrance of the art form into “mainstream culture” (1993- ). At one time, rapping only served to keep audiences engaged and energized at parties, passing time between tracks played on turntables by DJs; the MC<sup>3</sup> has, in the four decades or so of existence they’ve enjoyed, come to be one of society’s most prominent celebrities, and in a few cases, one of the most underrated and/or undervalued poets to whom contemporary society listens. And although the music is no longer associated with the images of B-Boys, break-dancing, or laceless Adidas sneakers, it remains heavily influenced by poverty, gang violence, drug abuse, pursuit(s) of power and fame, jazz, and blues, among other things, as it has continued to evolve<sup>4</sup>; the rapper (as often as the poet, historically), in the twenty-first century, may be one of society’s last true rebels: having (a) the ability to vocally and indirectly through writing (lyrics, liner notes, website(s), blog(s), etc.) address a large portion of the public and (b) the tendency to not shy away from controversial issues, with varying degrees of tact. What rap is becoming and the direction it’s taking, in a more long-term sense, is difficult to say; what it once was and where it has gone in order to arrive at what it is today can be readily viewed—still, no matter its form, the influence of hip hop and the art of rapping, socially, cannot be completely

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<sup>2</sup> As with the birth range of the hip hop generation, this particular era of the music, too, exists in a disputable range. This range is given by Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois in their *Anthology of Rap*.

<sup>3</sup> Initials standing for “Mic[rophone] Controller;” sometimes, “Master of Ceremonies.”

<sup>4</sup> “Conceiving of style as the product of inherited rules and individual invention connects rap with jazz and the blues, those other dominant forms of African-American musical expression that rely upon both formula and improvisation. All are products of the vernacular process, the artistic impulse to combine the invented and the borrowed, the created and the close at hand. The word *vernacular* comes from the Greek *verna*, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “a slave born of his master’s house.” This [...] has profound implications for African-American expressive culture, the only artistic tradition born in slavery.” [See E.N. 12] (Bradley, *Book of Rhymes* 125)

measured.

Though it remains tense, the relationship between hip hop/rap music and academic institutions (society at large, as well) has greatly improved; college administrations now offer classes that concern various pop-cultural art-forms, and campuses are frequently visited by artists to put on shows for students, just as poets and writers visit and lecture. Indeed, in recent years, several famous poets have paused to comment on what rap is capable of doing, socially, with language. Former U.S. Poet Laureate, Billy Collins, for instance, has said that “some readers of poetry wonder where the rhymes went. One answer is, they left the ends of the lines and went inside the poem. Rhyme also strongly reemerges in rap. The like sounds that used to be the engine of English poetry drive and power these energetic lyrics” (Bradley and DuBois, *Anthology of Rap*). Rap has also been praised by Poet Laureate Seamus Heaney; having the support of both popular and academically respected poets must surely make some question its relation to the art of poetry (perhaps, even its social relevance). This section will preface the textual (and sonic) examination of rap as one might take to the critical analysis of poetry and visual art; further, this is not an effort to legitimize rapping as an art-form, the cultural significance of hip hop/rap music, or perform any sort of cultural “rescue mission”—it is my opinion that hip-hop is not, as Nas once proclaimed, dead, but that it is slowly disseminating among wider commercialized culture and no longer as directly bolstering community and roots. Cultural conservation, then, will be key to locating and exhibiting the family history of a culture, so to speak. This is an effort to examine the possibility of contemporary rap verse being considered (via cogent, modern ideas/theories) a form of contemporary poetry worth cultural study, using selected work of selected rappers (see page 9) for examples; this examination also lends itself to the opportunity for composing a *twenty-first century definition for poetry*. These

examples are expected to be of use in the classroom for student activity, and though no specific activity ideas are to be henceforth presented, it should not be difficult to use the given samples to find others, or to incorporate rap poetry examples into existing poetry pedagogies.

The Russian Formalists figured that the *dominanta* of poetry—what makes poetry poetry—is that it is written in lines (Scully 129). This definition is nearly the most basic that can be found, accounting only for the structural difference of poetry (as opposed to fiction, etc.), and thus, a more specific definition is needed. *Poetry*, as defined by the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, is

an instance of *verbal art*, a text set in verse, bound speech. More generally, a poem conveys heightened forms of perception, experience, meaning, or consciousness ... [and, that, without being both *verbal and artful*] texts become “poetic” only in looser, more general ... senses. (939) [emphasis mine]

The idea of a *verbal art* with other textual elements is significant here; the idea that poetry is only “set in verse, bound speech,” is problematic however, since free verse is not necessarily metered, and since in many contemporary poetics—even in Whitman—bound is neither relevant nor accurate.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* defines *prose* (non-poetic speech) as “[t]he ordinary form of written or spoken language, **without** metrical structure” [emphasis mine], and it defines *verse* as “a succession of words arranged according to natural or recognized rules of prosody [this is a term that can be defined multiple ways, but here, means: a poetic language system for communication] and forming a complete **metrical line**” [emphasis mine]. So far, the definitions have remained informative but unsatisfactory; although rapping utilizes rhyme in metrical lines, as poetry does, a more specific definition, still, is necessary in order to begin considering any rapper’s rhyme as anything more than *poetic* (as the *Princeton Encyclopedia* suggests).

In his book *The Art of Description*, poet Mark Doty writes that “poetry concretizes the

singular, unrepeatable moment; it hammers out of speech a form for how it feels to be oneself” (21). This way of viewing poetry is more specific than the OED definition; although it is more specific than the *Princeton Encyclopedia*’s definition, it is also more in line with its notion of conveying heightened experiences and/or consciousness. “The poem,” says James Scully in *Line Break*, “is produced in the reader’s enactment of a poetic text—which, no less than the production of a dramatic text, is played out here, now, where we live.” The theory to build on, here, is the same theory Former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky relies upon in his guide to *The Sounds of Poetry*, that

...poetry is a vocal, which is to say bodily, art. The medium of poetry is a human body...In this sense, poetry is just as physical or bodily an art as dancing ... Other conceptions of poetry might include flamboyantly expressive vocal delivery, accompanied by impressive physical appearance, by the poet or a performer; or the typographical, graphic appearance of the words in itself, apart from the indication of sound. (8)

Because “the reader’s breath and hearing embody the poet’s words, this makes the art physical, intimate, vocal, and individual...in poetry, the medium is the audience’s body.” In this sense, if considered alone, hip hop and rap music may go further than contemporary poetry in facilitating audience interaction with the piece(s) of art; music has always had the power to move listeners into energetic performance, transforming each singular experience to something meaningful and/or fulfilling—and it can do so consistently.

In order to efficiently and effectively study the poetic essence of hip-hop music, it will prove necessary to approach the selected work first from a structural and sonic exploration, and second, with content analysis and contextualization.

### **Structure and Musicality**

“Rap is poetry’s greatest throwback to rhythm,” says Adam Bradley in his *Book of*



*Rhymes*; in his text, he offers a good theoretical construct in which to anchor an examination of rap poetics when he says,

Among the many things that distinguish hip-hop lyricism from literary poetry, rap's dual rhythmic voice is the most essential. Rap makes audible a rhythmic relationship that is only theoretical in conventional verse. In literary poetry, the difference between meter and rhythm is the difference between ideal and actual rhythms of a given poetic line. *Poetic meter*, in other words, is structured rhythm; it defines the ideal pattern of a given sequence of stressed and unstressed (also known as accented and unaccented) syllables. To quote Paul Fussell, meter is 'what results when the natural rhythmical movements of colloquial speech are heightened, organized, and regulated so that pattern ... emerges from the relative phonetic haphazard of ordinary utterance.' (8)

Poetry has a rhythm that is created through syntax and punctuation; rap, however, utilizes "punctuation" in the form of pauses (caesuras) and syllabic emphasis through pronunciation and voice modulation(s). Literary poets concern themselves more with "implied beats; the song lyricist, on the other hand, must contend with audible rhythms in the language of their lines" (Bradley 31).

Regarding music's *contagious nature*, rap should be considered as having a compounded (or extended) "reach" to audiences through the co-existence and cooperation of a track's rhythm and a rapper's vocal/lyrical rhythm. Rhyme, in poetries of the past, served in great measure to aid the ease of memorizing pieces (either for personal and/or public recitation and/or sharing), and also in providing certain limitations (varying with form) to, in different ways, force poets to work on providing poetic works adequately composed in idea and image, as succinctly and powerfully as possible. In a similar manner, the social limitations imposed on the verse(s) a rapper might construct seem to be in place to maintain a certain standard of excellence, so to speak, for what is "published;" although, unlike contemporary poetry which as Billy Collins pointed out as rather devoid of obvious rhymes, rap verses do tend to derive their energies from the motion and meshing of rhythms and syllabic patterns (both vocal and textual) primarily

facilitated through rhyme. Here, then, is a distinct difference that should be noted, between hip-hop music and other musical genres, in relation to poetry:

In rhythm, rap's relationship to lyric poetry most distinguishes itself from that of other pop music genres. This is not a distinction of kind, but rather degree. Rock music and soul music and country and western music all, like rap, relate to poetry through rhythm. It is what music and poetry share in common. Poetry on the page has no melody or harmony; it is pure rhythm. (Bradley 31)

Skilled emcees know the weight and power of the words they choose, both rhythmically and in their meaning(s), and the most effective rap poetry balances these two dimensions with the underlying beat setting tone and aiding decisions of pace.

“Exceptional MCs, like skilled literary poets,” Bradley suggests, “balance sound with sense in their rhymes” (55). As seen (see page 39) in Lupe's song (“Dumb It Down”) chorus, he uses his content to address the current social shortcomings of commercial hip-hop music; sonically, each of his verses are patterned similarly; in his first verse he says,

I'm **fearless**, now **hear this**, I'm **earless**  
 And I'm **peerless**, which means I'm eyeless  
 Which means I'm **tearless**, which means my iris  
 Resides where my **ears is**, which means I'm blinded

His second verse begins much like the first:

And I'm **mouthless**, which means I'm **soundless**  
 Now as far as the hearing, I've **found it**  
 It was as far as the **distance** from an earring to the **ground is**

and his third moves in similar fashion, still, saying,

And I'm **brainless** which means I'm headless like Ichabod **Crane is**  
 Or foreplayless sex is, which makes me **saneless**  
 With no neck left to hang a **chain with**  
 Which makes me necklace-less like a necklace theft

He employs a lyrical dexterity in his verses illustrating the exact sort of complexities his chorus addresses sardonically, from the side of those who have “dumbed it down.” Lupe relies on

multisyllabic rhymes (indicated by bolded or unlined font) to “render the kind of abstract rhymes that flout the warnings of his hook,” says Bradley, who says of these rhyme patterns that “[c]ompared to conventional monosyllabic rhymes, multis not only provide a broader range of possible complimentary words, but also achieve a sonic effect of speed [variability] and virtuosity” (60). With regard to the manner in which Lupe employs multisyllabic rhyme and the relation to his hook’s content, multisyllabic rhyme can be “associated with more complex and thus potentially less-commercial lyricism” (60).

Paralleling the evolution of poetry, purists have been dismissive of rap’s practice of employing partial or slant rhyme ... suggesting a lack of discipline or originality on the part of the artist. Adam Bradley says of this that “[s]uch criticisms [...] ignore the fact that oral poetry has always been more liberal than written verse when it comes to what constitutes rhyme” (59); and further, contemporary poetry almost privileges slant rhyme over exact rhyme. Enjambment in rap music—breaking syntactical phrases at line ends for narration and flow exhibits principles affecting/manipulating the pacing, tone, and energy within a rhyme the same way a poet must consider such movement(s) when constructing literary verse. “Line breaks define energy,” says James Scully; they can be considered a tool for letting air out, redistributing rhythm, shifting the weight of a word or phrase, or even resetting the relationship of an audience to the tone or content of a poem (127).

The rapper eLZhi [pronounced “el-zigh”] uses a plethora of rhyme in creating a dynamic flow on his 2008 song “Deep;” from the start, he wastes little time in getting rhymes out while still proffering images to help his audience see his subject matter—in this case, how “deep” he can get. His first verse displays his self-presentation over a sparse percussion beat, using a low-thudded bass beat to seemingly underscore the song title/idea; sampling a jazz horn progression

from Marlena Shaw's "California Soul" through various sections of the song, the overall effect is one of a blurred feeling, as if one were underwater and hearing sound. The constant dampened beat and horn sample produces sound that covers high and low frequencies of sound, opening the middle frequencies, a space through which his lyrics project. He spits,

I'm the **bell ringer, shell slinger**  
 Hidin' bodies 'till the **smell lingers**  
 Until they *pale* as Renee **Zellweger**, when *El* **sting ya**  
 You feelin' like the **Braille finger** searchin' for the line

His first verse ends displaying his abilities to change his flow, heavily loading his lines with rhymes:

I murk grins and **kill grills**, my **steel peels**  
 Then I **peel wheels** then **skill feels** like it **heals ills**  
 Like **Benadryl pills**, the hottest artist **will feels chills**  
 When I drop gems that *play* out like fans when you peep  
 These rhymes *ain't* cheap, oh yeah, I gets deep

In his second verse, he again displays his rhythmic acrobatics, also utilizing enjambment and a greater variety of multisyllabic rhyme patterns [bolded and underlined] to add to his lyrical dynamic:

Yeah, I gets **deeper than that**  
Once I blow your mind, you're not **keepin' your hat**  
 I bomb the scene, killin' off your **rhyme regime**  
**You taken back** like a time machine, my **dime is clean**  
My flow is hydro, **cannabis, Sativa**  
Also known as Chronic weed, and **again this reefer**  
Watch it blow, my nuts hang a couple crotches low  
 And fuck fifteen minutes nigga my watch is slow

I have emphasized the different rhyme patterns by bolding and underlining them; in these examples, eLZhi displays his ability to alter rhythm and flow: the beginning of his first verse highlights his rhyme placement at the ends of lines primarily, extending their sound length over a recurring four syllables; he changes flow and rhyme patterns switching to a repetitive line-

overload of two syllable, short vowel rhymes, which quickens his delivery and rhythm over the still steady backbeat. The sample from his second verse displays a slightly more complex rhyme pattern as his content declares his “deepening,” lacing his verse with recurring four- and three-syllable rhymes.

Concerning multisyllabic sound rhyme and enjambment, Nas, one of the most poetic rappers of hip-hop culture, utilizes poetics in many more ways than these, but a good example of his ability to rhyme, enjamb, and build images can be seen in his song “Stillmatic (Intro),” from 2001’s *Stillmatic*:

‘Ay yo, the **brother**’s “*Stillmatic*”  
 I crawled up out of that grave, wipin’ **the dirt**, cleanin’ **my shirt**  
 They thought I’d make **another** “*Illmatic*”  
 But it’s always forward I’m movin’  
Never backwards, stupid, here’s another *classic*:  
 C-notes is **fallin’ from the sky**, by now the **credits roll**  
 They’re **starrin’ Nas, executive poet**, produced, directed by  
 The Kid slash Escobar; narration describes  
 The lives of lost tribes in the ghetto tryin’ to survive  
 The feature opens with this young black child, fingers scratched  
 Cigarette burns on the sofa, turnin’ the TV down  
 While Mary Jane Girls, 45’s playin’ soft in the background  
 Food from C-Town’s, mornings was hash browns  
 Stepped **over** dopefiends walkin’ out the **door**, all of us **poor**

Through the large variety of slant rhymes delivered by Nas in this verse sample, the images depicted of a childhood are dreamily placed in a sequence that suggests nostalgia for one’s past, and displays a cataloguing of how he grew up. Nas slant rhymes “movin’” with “stupid,” “child” with “down,” and in lines 5-6 of the sample, although no clear rhyme exists when first examined visually, there is rhyme predominantly through a similarity in sound patterns. In his book, Adam Bradley claims that

While perfect rhymes satisfy our rhyming mind, slant rhymes tease us a little, denying us the satisfaction of completion. The result is often a creative tension. Literary verse from the nineteenth century until today has witnessed the rise of slant rhyme from an

occasional variation of form to a form in itself. (58-59)

In recent years, literary poetry has seemingly neglected rhyme or, if not neglected, absorbed it more fully into the conversational tone of ordinary speech, eschewing discernable patterns of end rhymes for subtler arrangements of internal ones—and while this is true with poets of the hip-hop generation as well, their poetry exhibits a good of rhyme internally; often slanted (though absolute rhyme is certainly utilized), in many cases it is multisyllabic—a technique learned through exposure to rap and its indebtedness to oral traditions.

Regarding sonic structure and lines, it should be noted that rap lines are not metrical as are literary poetry's; they still have measure, however. The meter of literary verse corresponds to the ideal beat that rap lyrics are projected over, and just as poetic meter can be broken/deviated from, the lyrical rhythms of a rap can be adjusted while still remaining inside the beat. Because rap is a vernacular art, born of the creative combination of the inherited and the invented, the claim can be made that

As a practical matter of poetics, however, rap is most directly connected to the Western poetic tradition of the ballad and other metrical forms. To say that rap takes its form from Western sources is not, however, to whitewash its identity. Since its birth, rap has been a defiantly black form. Just as the early jazz musicians commandeered European marching band instruments like the saxophone and the trumpet and bent their sounds to fit the demands of a new expression, so, too, have African American rap artists transformed the very poetic forms they've inherited. (Bradley 24)

In accentual meter, only the stressed syllables count, and in rap the same holds true: a line may have as many unstressed syllables as it likes without compromising rhythm or movement. Adam Bradley points to rap veteran Busta Rhymes as a prime example of rap's metrical variations, having “developed a style that relies heavily upon both strong accents on syllables and expansion and contraction of syllable count” (25). Among his many virtuosic performances, his 2001 song “Gimme Some More” features a lyrical delivery that utilizes multiple forms of sound repetition

and rhyme in a sequence of tongue-tying speed.

**Flash** with a **rash** gimme my **cash** flickin' my **ash**  
**Runnin'** with my **money**, son, go **out** with a **blast**  
**Do** what you **wanna**, niggas **cuttin'** the **corner**  
 You fuckin' **up** the **article**, go ahead and **meet** the **reporter**

“Not surprisingly,” says Bradley, “Busta lends the greatest emphasis to the most important words in each line: the words that rhyme ... and the verbs .... The stressed words help to constitute the rhythm of the line...” (26). Accentual stress is not the same thing as vocal inflection, however, and one of the techniques at a rapper’s disposal is his or her ability to bend words in syllabic sound or pronunciation so they fit in with rhyme; one example of this can be seen in the “Stillmatic (Intro)” section by Nas, where, toward the end, he audibly pushes the words (...young black) *child* and (...turning the TV) *down* into slant-rhyme. Further, as exemplified in Baraka’s text, melodic diversity in African music(s) is not solely based on accent, nor does it come “only in the actual arrangements of notes but in the singer’s vocal interpretation (“blueing” the notes, for instance). ... In African languages the meaning of a word can be changed simply by altering the *pitch* of the word, or changing its stress ...” (*Blues People* 26).

If we try to read a rhyme in the same way we would a literary verse—that is, with our minds attuned to the metrical clues imbedded in the lines themselves—we are likely only to approximate the MC’s actual performance; rappers, far more frequently than literary poets, accentuate unusual syllables in their verses. ... [Because an emcee] knows that we will likely only hear his rhymes in the particular context of [their song(s)]—as opposed to a literary poet who would compose their lines with a regular meter in mind—his lyrics need not carry the burden of representing that meter. On a practical level, this means that the range of [the emcee’s] rhythmic freedom is potentially broader than [a literary poet’s], which must stay closer to [the] chosen meter so [the] reader never loses the beat. (Bradley 34-35).

Exemplifying an instance of slant rhyme and rhythm varying in pitch, tone, and timbre is

Eminem’s 1998 song “Just Don’t Give a Fuck,” in the first verse, over a dampened beat (which opens almost the entire vocal range of sound for him to use) he says,

Admit it, fuck it, while we comin' out in the **open**  
 I'm doin' acid, crack, smack, (**coke, and**) (**smokin'**) **dope then**  
 My name is Marshall Mathers, I'm an alcoholic (Hi Marshall)  
 I have a disease and they don't know what to call it  
 Better hide your wallet cause I'm comin' up quick to **strip yo' cash**  
 Bought a ticket to your concert just to come and **whip yo' ass**

Looking at both mono- and polysyllabic slant-rhymes (segments emphasized in bold and underlined), there is a higher degree of rhyme and rhythm variability in slanted polysyllabic rhyme, seen (lines 3, 4, and 5 of the example) in Eminem's rhyming of "alcoholic," "what to call it," and "hide your wallet." Another example of slanted-rhyme and lyrical-vocal freedom can be seen in Andre 3000's (of Outkast) verse in their 1998 song "Da Art of Storytelling Part 2"

(*Aquemini*):

'Baby, did you hear that?' 'Yeah, baby, I **heard it, too**'  
 Look out the window, golly, the sky is **electric blue**  
 Mama Earth is dying and crying because of you  
 Rainin' cats and jackals, all shackles disintegrate to residue  
 Silly mortals haven't a clue as to what the fuck is **going on**  
 I'm on the **telephone** dialing the **Dungeon** ('Hello?')  
 This Dre, bring the MP and the SP  
 Meet me at the center of the earth and travel carefully

With an up-beat tempo, fuzzed out vocals, and chaotic, higher frequencies, scratching, and multiple distortion layers, the music creates a heightened feeling of concern or anxiety; their song takes love-and-lust tales (from "Da Art of Storytelling Part 1 on the same album) and applies to an account of the Biblical apocalypse. The slanted rhymes [bolded] help pattern the verse's rhythm amid lines of thirteen syllables and few pauses.

Sampling electronic music—an accordion loop from a Daedelus (electronic music DJ) track—rapper Madvillain (an alternative emcee title of MF Doom) creates a musical space for lyrics that offers an audience a good groove, but no simple way to imagine a flow; his complex patterns and odd imagery mix well in the sonic vacancy with his contracting and expanding



syllabic lines and creative slant-rhymes [again highlighted].

Livin' off borrowed time, the **clock ticks faster**  
 That'd be the hour they **knock the slick blaster**  
 Dick Dastardly and Muttley with sick laughter  
 A gun fight and they come to cut the mixmaster  
**I-C-E cold, | nice to be old**  
 Y2G stee | **twice to threefold**  
 He sold scrolls, | *lo an be-hold*  
 Know who's the illest ever like the greatest *story told*  
 Keep your glory, gold, and glitter  
 For half, half of his niggas'll take him out the picture

All smaller elements of the poetic line, including the line itself, go into creating a verse's form—a highly charged word with regard to art and aesthetics. “To regard form, not as a shape, an object or technique, but as a ‘charge’, with all its headlong, economic, even judicial connotations, is to release it from stasis. Form does not stay still; in many senses, it ‘charges’” (Leighton 24). Indeed, in the most effective rap and poetry, the form moves the audience in a fashion that underscores the emotive imagery and other emphasis in content. In her text on the history of the word “Form,” Angela Leighton asks the question, “what is outside or what is inside a form?;” this inquiry perfectly captures the way in which the word is looked to as “both a container and a deflector. ... Form, then, is the distribution of space caused by edging one thing against another, so that each calls attention to the other. ... the word form [in literature] might involve a choice of at least three things: the shape of the text on the page, the shape of its sounds in the air, and the matter of which it speaks” (16). Regarding the shape of the text on the page in terms of rhyme scheme and rhythm, rap can be analyzed poetically here, as well, as it utilizes different literary verse structural forms in varying cases.

Training in traditional music forms is not required here [for the rapper]. To *use* (rather than *create*) traditional forms, the rapper does not have to learn how to play blues or jazz, but only how to use the technology to insert it into the montage. Further, the heterogeneous sound ideal's particular technological manifestation in hip hop creates an internal dramatic contrast. As “trickster music,” it inserts itself into the traditional by

borrowing and reconfiguring texts in service to the authority and artistry of MC and DJ.  
(*Prophets* 31)

The “trickster consciousness is passed down from African American oral traditions; tricksters such as Brer Rabbit and Dolemite represent a perceived superiority of intelligence and cleverness over brute force. The qualities are greatly appreciated in hip-hop just as they were/are in jazz, and in rap and although violence recurs thematically, the desire for appreciation or shock from an audience has always driven these oral traditions and their artists in musicality as well as content, whether expressing original feeling or sampling history/heritage. Rappers and poets alike borrow from poetic form. Although virtually all rap verses are born into a Lyrical format—verses that exhibit content and tone of a personal and emotional nature—they may also be presented in a Skelemonic, Dramatic, Cento, Free, or Elegy form.

These can be considered again when studying lyrical content, and in fact, considered so broadly, they are more often understood in definition by what they contain. Dramatic (narrative) verse, for instance, tells a story [see: Pete Rock and C.L. Smooth’s song “T.R.O.Y.”, Nas’s song “Rewind”, and Eminem’s “Brain Damage”], whereas an Elegy, one of the oldest poetic forms, expresses sadness or pain in experiencing death [see: Eminem’s song “Kim” (a sort of elegy on the death of their relationship), Tupac’s “Dear Mama,” and The Roots’s song “Tip the Scale,” from their 2012 album *Undun*, for examples]. Cento form, from Latin meaning “patchwork,” is a poem made entirely from pieces of other poems by other author’s (footnotes/liner notes credit the work); many rap songs borrow not only lyrically from other rappers’ famous (or non-famous) lines, but also from different songs and musics in creating the track’s tonal collage, and even in the appropriation of blues structures or jazz-like improvisations. Certainly T.S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland” is elegiac in tone, but it’s also a patchworking together of large dissonant body of sampled cultures and literatures, giving it a different dimension and personality as a text.

Skeletoic form is composed of short lines that are about 3-6 words in length; each line rhymes with the next and rhymes are continued as long as the poet likes. This creates a fast pace that is also called “tumbling verse.” Many rap songs have this feeling even though their lines maybe much longer than 6 words; an example of this form of verse can be seen in L.L. Cool J’s song “Mama Said Knock You Out,” where his lines tumble through saying, “ ... Listen to the bass go BOOM / Explosion, overpowering / Over the competition, I’m towering / ...”. Free verse in rap has not been widely explored yet, and to my knowledge, it might well look like Slam and spoken word poetries; Adam Bradley, too, notes that “free verse rap, rap that does not rhyme at all, is rare, if not nonexistent” (50). This is also not to confuse free verse poetry with the concept of “freestyle”—more or less, the live instantaneous creation of rap or poetry, given the space and/or a beat. “Most MCs,” he says, “tend to underscore the connection rather than the division between freestyling and writing rhymes. ‘When you write a rhyme it arrives in the form of a freestyle anyway,’ observes Guru” (177). The improvisational aesthetic of hip-hop nodding to jazz and blues can be seen through the use of freestyling, however, and though free verse rap may not exist in any treatable manner, free verse poetry still produces a rhythm and movement that carries through the piece tonally complimenting content; in rap, on tracks, “even outside of parties, open mics, and concerts, the audience and artists [maintain] the dynamic relationship of freestyle sessions” (*Prophets* 73), always targeting a delivery that won’t seem cliché, without sentiment, or undeserving of the presentation it receives.

In any case, Adam Bradley “would contend that the question of lyrical content almost always comes second to the more immediate concern of sound. ... That doesn’t mean that content can’t be the most powerful part of a rhyme; often it is. But it is not the first thing to consider, and it’s rarely the indispensable part” (32). I agree with Bradley, but with the additional

clause that for rap to be considered an instance of poetry, it absolutely must take content seriously—perhaps so much so as to not even create without an attempt to show rather than tell. A poetic text is indeed a verbal construct, that, “as [Roman] Jakobson intuited, displays an overload of sound games and word play; but it cannot be reduced to such articulations” (Lagayette 15). Further, rap music is deeply infused with rhyme, rhythm, and wordplay, but these elements only, from a critical standpoint, are not enough yet to begin considering rap lyricism as anything more than poetic.

### **Content**

As, noted by critic Mark Anthony Neal in “Memory Lane,” his essay regarding the rapper Nasir Jones:

The Queensbridge projects—which the elder Jones [jazz musician Olu Dara] refers to as ‘Little Africa’—were part of a generation of federally subsidized housing projects that offered a ‘moving on up’ alternative to the dusty tenement housing that was part of the lore of the immigrant experience in New York City. As many of these projects were being erected, there was a critical influx of migrants from the South, as well as immigrants from South America and the Caribbean, creating the context for a rich exchange of culture—the literal sounds and smells in the hallways of twenty-story high-rises. This particular gumbo [as Dara calls affectionately terms it]—the embryonic musings of the thing we now call hip-hop—was the product of the spaces and places shared by African Americans and a generation of immigrants from both the Spanish- and English-speaking Caribbean. (119)

Because it is a product of the community, “hip-hop cherishes engaged discourse within the community” (*Prophets* 7). This sort of discourse goes to achieve what Ellison considered to a moment of communion between the artist and their audience; Ellison believes, “the primary social function of the novel [and I would include hip-hop here] is that seizing from the flux and flow of our daily lives those abiding patterns of experience which ... help to form our sense of reality, and from which emerge our sense of humanity and our conception of human value”

(698). Further, in the same text, Perry states that “musical composition, and musical forms in general, have identities rooted in the community. ... [thus] While the individual artist and the individual composition provide compelling subject for analysis, the validity of [an] analysis in part depends on knowledge of the community from which it emerges” (9). Such statements continue to validate Amiri Baraka’s foundational claim regarding cultural criticism of Black music. Perry argues that music is never compositionally pure, even as it exists within a culture and identifiably within a community (11). While I find it interesting to pursue and discuss the different sources that influence a community’s arts, e.g., musical composition/poetry, I believe that the understanding of the composition’s relationship with the community and individual is of much greater importance. In this sense, the poets to be considered later compose work that tries to push an audience’s understanding not only of the content being used, but also of its influences, i.e., the composition’s history/disposition, so to speak. Poets of the hip-hop generation and rappers that are considered to be “conscious” present their audiences with art that is thoughtful, relevant in time, and layered in meaning and influence which encourages a search to understand the layers, in turn, leading them into a greater knowledge of their people’s history.

“Nas,” as pointed out by Adilifu Nama, “admonishes his hip-hop peers about the importance of memory, echo[ing] many members of the civil rights generation who have also critiqued the hip-hop generation for forgetting and therefore being unable to appreciate and uphold the legacy and struggle and sacrifice by the civil rights generation” (23). One instance of this can be seen in “Carry On Tradition,” a song from his 2006 album [announcing his controversial claim] *Hip Hop is Dead*. His first verse describes what he sees as the “original” hip-hoppers expressions of angst toward the newer generation’s ignorance of their roots.

Some rap pioneers be them crackheads  
When they speak, you see missin’ teeth

Silver chain with a silver piece  
 Niggas your grandfather's age  
 They pants still hangin' down they legs

Nas moves through the verse, claiming that “deep-rooted through slavery, self-hatred” and being (as a cultural community) “on some low level shit” keeps them from realizing success as a community; stressing the need to understand their people’s history, he ends his first verse with an attempt to push the audience to nostalgia while remarking on the current state of his culture, saying, “it’s fucked up, it all started from two turntables” (*Hip Hop is Dead*, 2006, “Carry On Tradition”). In the second verse, he challenges the mainstream rappers he finds toxic.

Now some of these new rappers got their caps flipped backwards  
 With their fingers intertwined in some gang-sign madness  
 I got an exam, let's see if y'all pass it  
 Let's see who can quote a Daddy Kane line the fastest  
 Some of you new rappers, I don't understand your code

The utilization of the call-response trope places the audience in a position of being interrogated by the rapper as he quizzes the perceived “wack” artists; his nostalgia might could be mistaken for a senior member of an artistic community longing for the days of his youth, but if that were his intention, there are many other creative ways to be nostalgic. I believe his generational hostility to be somewhat similar to that of the civil rights generation toward their hip-hop children—a singular irony, but the motive remains the same: remembering and understanding the past, and being critical (as opposed to naïve) of current social, political, economic, and cultural circumstances is paramount in making progress on any plane of humanity.

Unfortunately, as Daniel Grassian notes, “it is much more difficult to find any current popular hip-hop artists or songs that deal with race; rather, they tend to focus on materialism, partying, and sexuality” (7). While the rappers considered here are well-known and highly respected, they are not currently commercially popular; in the instances in which they have

achieved widespread fame, their notoriety has come more from the catchiness of their music than from the strength of their language even though their work is deeply poetic. Nas is not alone in castigating the newer rap stars and rap's commercialization. Chicago hip-hop artist Lupe Fiasco has also released material criticizing the shortcomings of commercialized rap. In "Dumb It Down," from his 2007 album *The Cool*, he raps about the lack of intellectual engagement present in popular rap, saying in the song's chorus,

You goin' over niggas' heads Lu (Dumb it down)  
 They tellin' me that they don't feel you (Dumb it down)  
 We ain't graduate from school nigga (Dumb it down)  
 Them big words ain't cool nigga (Dumb it down)  
 ... You'll sell more records if you (Dumb it down)

Utilizing the Call-and-Response trope common to African American music (elucidated by Henry Louis Gates Jr.) in the chorus, Lupe accesses black musical traditions to involve audience "through discursive intertextuality—the literary and musical relationships between different pieces of music, between artists and audiences. [Black music scholar] Sam Floyd, writes, "Call Response, the master trope, the musical trope of tropes, implies the presence within it of Signifyin(g) figures (calls) and Signifyin(g) revisions (responses in various guises) that can be on or the other, depending on their context" (*Prophets* 33-34). In fact, in *Prophets of the Hood*, Perry claims that

Rap music fits within the call-response trope in a number of critical ways. First, the intertextuality of black musical texts lies at the heart of rap on both an oral and musical level. Hip hop's great dependence on the music of earlier generation[s], the music artists often recall from their youth, combined with the reconfigurations of that music and its offering back to the general public, constitutes a kind of conversation with the black musical tradition. (34).

This intertextuality makes itself known immediately, permeating the music and content of the hip-hop generation's art. Rap can utilize the call-response trope to create a space of awareness or consciousness about the state of a listener's reality, whether political, spiritual, social, etc. Saul

Williams, a noted rapper and slam poet, accesses this space when he chooses to question his reader in a verse from his book of poems, *The Dead Emcee Scrolls* [emphasis mine]:

Your Intellect is disfiguring your soul.  
 Your being's not whole. Check your flagpole:  
 stars and stripes. Your astrology's imprisoned  
 by your concept of white. *What's your  
 plan for spiritual health?* Calling reality unreal.  
 Your line of thought is tangled ... (Miller 150)

The content of the sample is clearly directing its audience to become aware of themselves, inviting them to consider what they think they know. Call-response can be utilized through the appropriation of the blues lyric structure, popularized in literary poetry by Langston Hughes. His poem, "Blues at Dawn"

uses the classic blues form to order the verse. There is little to say about this poem except that it has the best qualities of the blues: the concrete, straightforward language, the incremental repetition. Like [James Weldon] Johnson's use of the sermon, Hughes's use of the blues as poetic model enables him to break from dialect, to maintain a sense of the syntax, vocabulary, imagery, metaphors, and expressive caricature. ... Indeed, many of Hughes's poems are not to be taken as the author's voice in confessional revelations but as interesting, individuated personalities speaking. (Jones 24).

This use of blues form comes directly out of the vernacular process Adam Bradley describes with regard to style:

Conceiving of style as the product of inherited rules and individual invention connects rap with jazz and the blues, those other dominant forms of expression that rely upon both formula and improvisation. All are products of the vernacular process, the artistic impulse to combine the invented and the borrowed .... The word *vernacular* comes from the Greek *verna*, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as 'a slave born of his master's house.' This is no mere etymological footnote; it has profound implications for the African-American expressive culture, the only artistic tradition born in slavery. (125)

As the most recent manifestation in this musically-artistic tradition, rap is built upon the shared, collective experiences of African-Americans, giving their expression the power to conjure both feeling *and* history.

Consider the way Nas converses with the past through his father's modes of expression



(blues and jazz), first utilizing the blues lyric form for a chorus, lyrical improvisation through the rap verses, and imagery recalling the history of their people. “The theme of ‘Bridging the Gap’ (from Nas’s double disc recording *Street’s Disciple*) centers on lyrics made famous by Muddy Waters in his song ‘Mannish Boy’(‘Now when I was a young boy / At the age of five / My mother said I’d be / The greatest man alive’)” (Neal 122). In “Bridging the Gap,” Olu Dara riffs on this well-known sonic pattern, saying instead,

See I come from Mississippi  
 I was young and runnin’ wild  
 Ended up in New York, where I had my first child  
 I named the boy Nasir, all the boys called him Nas  
 I told him as a youngster, he’ll be the greatest man alive

Nas uses his father’s choral claims to pay homage to his [Olu Dara’s] music, highlighting the role of music in their relationship as one important for helping remember their history and their love for one another. Nas raps,

... , my Pop told my be your own boss  
 Keep integrity at every cost, and his home was Natchez, Mississippi  
 Did it like Miles and Dizzy, now we gettin’ busy  
 Bridging the Gap from blues, to jazz, to rap  
 The history of music on this track  
 Born in the game, discovered my father’s music  
 Like Prince searchin’ through boxes of Purple Rain

Another layered signification exists here, displayed in the last line of the sample; referring to “a scene in the film *Purple Rain*, where Prince’s character ‘the Kid,’ discovers sheet music to songs that his father had written. ... ‘the Kid’s’ discovery provides another context for him to better understand his father as an artist and ultimately as a man” (Neal 122-123). The scene also signifies in a different way: to the hip-hop generation familiar with the idea of “digging in the crates.” Mark Anthony Neal points out here, that

as Joe Schloss suggests in his book *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*, ‘digging in the crates,’ ‘the process of acquiring rare, usually out-of-print, vinyl records

for sampling purposes' has become a highly developed skill.' ... there are DJs, MCs, and producers who found useful hip-hop beats in the record collections of their parents. For some of these artists, sampling is as much an opportunity to recover and recontextualize the past, including their own relationship with their parents, as it is an act furthering the art, particularly when the musical past is connected to intimate relationships. (123)

Rap's identity reaffirms its connection with the ancestral traditions through which poetry and community emerge and are sustained. Further illustrating the use of the call-response trope through sampling for the creation of intertextual music: in creating the beat for Nas's 1994 song "N.Y. State of Mind," one of the samples DJ Premier uses is "Flight Time"<sup>5</sup>, a Donald Byrd jazz cut that meshes well in sonic theme; Byrd's track begins with the sound of an airplane taking off, and though we don't hear this part of the record in the sample used, its absence in Premier's second track for Nas's *Illmatic* provides a kind of haunting beginning. Without that sound, Premier's use of "Flight Time" could be understood to imply an inability to flee, to escape the New York on which Nas is about to meditate. Creating a further heightened sense of claustrophobia is a brooding sample of Joe Chambers's "Mind Rain"<sup>6</sup> builds tension through eerie piano stabs. Nas's initial statement on the track—"Straight out the fuckin' dungeons of rap"—is a direct quote from N.W.A.'s Ice Cube and his body of well-known work; having had a large part in putting hip-hop "on the map" through controversially violent and socially conscious lyricism in the late-80s, this sampling of a respected MC places the rapper on a plane of equality—it's the equivalent of literary name-dropping. Nas's "'N.Y. State of Mind' sounds more like a eulogy" (38), notes Sohail Daulatzai, who goes on to say,

with *Illmatic*, Nas married sound with geography [both physical and emotional—something literary poetry does when effective], making [the album] in essence a sonic map. ... Nas's use of geography as the primary framing device for [the album] suggests that like himself and so many others, poverty, segregation, and project living are deeply imprinted upon the experiences of black and brown communities. (41)

<sup>5</sup> The opening track to Donald Byrd's 1972 album, *Black Byrd*.

<sup>6</sup> From Chambers's album *Double Exposure*, released in 1977.

Three other examples of the layering of intergenerational dialogue through the use of traditional music-form can be seen in Nas's songs "The World is Yours" and "Life's a Bitch" (both from 1994), as well as in The Roots's 1995 song "Essaywhuman?!?!?!."

The first of the three is built upon three verses that are incredibly rich in sociopolitical worldview, yet they revolve and resolve themselves around a chorus and a simple by traditional blues stanza (located at the end of verse one)—again signifyin(g) through the call-response trope:

I'm out for presidents to represent me (Say what?)  
 I'm out for presidents to represent me (Say what?)  
 I'm out for dead presidents to represent me.

The trope is again used in the song's chorus with a call and response of, "Whose world is this? / (The world is yours, the world is yours) / It's mine, it's mine, it's mine" (repeated twice). In the chorus and blues form stanza, the audience is involved the same as Nas in the dialogue, and with regard to the blues lyric repetition, call-response, and resolution answer, James Braxton Peterson says,

The form of these lines mimics typical blues lines of verse that repeat themselves in lines 1 and 2 and then ultimately resolve in line 3, a repeated line with a slight signifying difference.

The signifying difference here (the distinction between presidents and *dead* presidents) captures the cultural tension between hip-hop artists who are continuously challenged by an American Dream type of success ... and an audience within hip-hop culture that desires its own economic success but occasionally connects economic empowerment to political representation. The suggestion that Nas is "out for" presidential representation expresses the political frustration of millions of black and brown urban folk who are struggling with the burden of the civil rights legacy in an era of confused electoral voting systems and political leaders who exhibit open disregard for the hip-hop generation.... (82-83)

The utilization of the blues lyric form provides the perfect framework for such a politically charged statement to demand/beg the redress "say what?" before clarification to hope of financial representation, allowing the audience to deduce "why not political representation?"

Regarding the second of the three examples, Nas's debut album *Illmatic* features his father at the end of the third track playing a jazz trumpet solo rooting the song in jazz, providing cultural depth through a sonic memory signal to any who would recognize the muted trumpet tones as a sort of signature of Miles's approval; in fact, Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. notes in his essay and analysis of the song:

In a musical environment that was rich in intragenre dialogue, this piece does not disappoint. Nas's father, Olu Dara, plays a plaintive, poignant solo on muted trumpet, providing a sonic link to work by the late Miles Davis in the 1980s. This intergenerational dialogue between father and son is but one in the recording—we also hear in between jazz, hip-hop, and R&B [the track being based upon a sample of The Gap Band's song "Yearning for Your Love"], and between two aspects of the protagonist's consciousness. Dialogue is fundamental to appreciating sample-based hip-hop. Listener competence—based on personal experience—always determines how clearly one will hear the conversation. (71-72)

This internal dialogue present/built into texts has always played some role in what an audience can uncover in meaning. Blake, for instance, often referenced the Bible and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and though a reader may understand some of his verse, knowing the location from which an author's ideas and arguments are derived can be crucial in understanding the conversation doesn't merely end with this text, but continues elsewhere; in some cases, the samples are used to play against the ideas or feelings presented in the original text, in others, though, arguments are bolstered. Cultural depth feeds the collective consciousness.

The last example of the three, "Essaywhuman?!?!?!" by The Roots crew on their 1995 LP *Do You Want More?!?!?!?*, provides an exceptional illustration of the call-response trope and jazz music tradition, spending almost the entire song improvising through beatboxing between written lyrics, allowing the different ensemble instruments to respond trying to mimic the vocal dynamics. The connection with jazz is strengthened through the MC's (Black Thought) ability to pattern his beatboxing to sound like scatting, the way famous jazz musicians have improvised

tonally through emotion, eschewing real words for the power of their sound alone.

Artistic appropriation and the call-response trope, among others, lends depth and soul to a work, mends them together. Imani Perry notes thoughtfully on this point,

To make something good in hip hop means in part to effectively employ the call-response trope on several levels, and, just as important, to know what is good requires a sophisticated ... understanding of the symbolic references and cultural history from which the music derives. ... As [Sam] Floyd argues, ‘The execution of Call-Response tropes opens up the symbolic field, where reside the long-standing sublimated conflicts, taboos, and myths of personal and group emotional experience and our relationships to them. ...’ (*Prophets* 36-37)

Mark Anthony Neal has said that “hip-hop [via sampling] has long occasioned opportunities for intergenerational conversation and intervention. But there are larger claims to be made with regard to hip-hop sampling in terms of its ability to sustain and revitalize, musically and spiritually, the eroding publics ...” (124). That sort of cultural conservation significantly depends upon these kinds of creative ingenuity through the vernacular process(es), as well as the content—the heart of such presentation.

Rap “generally retain[s] much of [its] resonance and meaning when isolated from [its] music,” say Andrew Dubois and Adam Bradley, who go on to say, “This is because so much of rap’s meaning is and even its sound are embedded in the language. Reading rap lyrics, one comes to understand a rap song not simply as music, but also as a lyric poem, or what William Carlos Williams called a ‘small machine of words.’ ... When a rap lyric appears on the page, aspects like rhyme schemes [traditional form appropriation] and enjambment suddenly become apparent” (xxxv). In *Book of Rhymes*, Bradley argues that “all rappers are poets; whether they are good poets or bad poets is the only question” (193), and thus, moving to consider content, it should be fruitful to ground the literary analysis of rap verse with regard to content through an overview of what literary critics and poets consider poetry capable.

In stepping up to meet the challenges of “criticizing life” (Arnold) and “getting the world right” (Stevens), poets (the good ones, anyway) have always relied upon sound and structure (form, rhyme, and rhythm), but poems are *carried to completion* by vivid imagery and sensational appeal, echoing Valery’s definition of poetic sensation as a “sensation of universes” and the *Princeton Encyclopedia*’s definitional notion of *heightened consciousness* (Valery 1363). An image, according to Ezra Pound, “is that which represents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time [and] it is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation” (Doty 51). Considered earlier, poet Mark Doty characterized poetry as elucidating “how it feels to be oneself;” from a bit more of a removed standpoint, however, it should be considered that *textual gestures* are assumptions about the way a work will function in the world, which is precisely its functioning as a poem. A piece of versified writing is not a poem but an aging, historically weathered and weathering occasion for one (Sully 17).

Far from being just ways to make meaning seem more attractive, figurative speech itself means, and means intensely; it is one of the primary tools both poet and rapper have for conveying and sifting through textures of experience in search of meaning or shared interests/passions. Imagery has adjusted to changing cultural outlooks. The medieval view of art was rooted in morality, and its descriptions of the world never forgot that the smallest thing must also serve God's purposes. However, moving toward and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, interest has shifted to the images themselves, which are an inescapable part of language and, therefore, a way of interrogating and elucidating the world. Beginning to view image creation and emotional rendering as paramount for any piece of structured verse to be considered *successful as verse*, European poet Jean Wahl wrote, “[p]erhaps we could say that the poetry is our only manner of

giving hues and vibrations to the silence by which the poem is followed and enveloped”—a statement already beginning to inspire and invoke image, color, and feeling, a statement that would also be said to be “poetic” (41). And, “for an art form like rap that emerged from the socio-political underground as the voice of young black and brown Americans,” Bradley says, “the cultural energy of the vernacular has proved nothing short of revolutionary” (126).

Charles Johnson writes of poetry, “[i]n words we find the living presence of others, ... language is not—nor has it ever been—a neutral medium for expressing things, but rather ... intersubjectivity and cross cultural experience are already embodied in the most microscopic datum of speech” (38). Rap becomes, then, a modern poetic tradition that combines artistic appropriation, poetic technique, ethnic/sociopolitico-history, and imagery to elicit emotional connection and understanding. “Hip-hop, like its bebop predecessor, was about creating community right where you were and adopting a standard of validation based exclusively on black peers, not on what outside critics had to say or what white societal norms dictated” (Nama 19). In best scenarios, the rapper steps forward into the shoes of a public intellectual.

Consider the images and ideas put forth by Nas in the final verse of his 1999 song “Ghetto Prisoners,” from the album *I Am...*:

... ; the truth is  
 Time waits for none of you, in fact  
 He can't wait for the date to snatch the ground right from under you  
 Small visions of better life if cheddar was right  
 Lurk in the minds of young ones ahead of they time  
 Trapped in the slums, beggin' for nothin' but takin'  
 Headed for nothin' but the state pen, where they cousins be waitin'  
 Judges is not relatin' to pleas; guns bustin' where the kids play  
 Ricochet off lamp poles and leave damp holes  
 In bystanders; get cancelled, D.O.A.  
 Around the way where we from  
 Hope the future reduce the rate of those buried young

Moving through the harsh realities of life not only for minorities, Nas describes a picture of the

current state of which he sees the country and its many politically neglected. He again utilizes the call-response trope when he asks his audience questions for them to consider deeply, for not only are there three separate instances of this (once per verse), the more important two of the three fall at the end of their respective verses, suggesting the author wants to end his moment starting his audience's movement into considering what has been presented. In the first verse, his question calls materialism versus spirituality into scrutiny, asking, “[when] confused, who’s to be praised? / The mighty dollar or almighty Allah?” while his second verse comes to close around the more metaphysical inquiry of, “Satan jigs the planet, not to get too religious, but / Who decides when and if your life is finished?” Similarly, Nas chooses to close his third verse around a directly philosophical call to arms for his ghetto prisoners (and one more obliquely so for his other audiences).

...  
 Life is every man's kingdom, a dyin' man's past  
 And a newborn's first time to be here at last  
 And [he] shouldn't have to grow up fast, and suffer our pain  
 Hustlin' harder than the generations before he came  
 Goin' through the same bullshit as our fathers  
*Readin' history, but who's the authors?...*

This sort of pontification rings genuine in tone through his closing on a kind of prayer for his people, asking them to “never lose faith; through the years just get smarter” before the song's hook returns to receive a slight variation, the track fading away to the repetition of “ghetto prisoners—get up, wake up, rise.”

Music critic Marc Lamont Hill of *PopMatters*, remarking on lyricism and delivery, has stated that

Nas's complex rhyme patterns, clever word play, and impressive vocab took the art [of rapping] to previously unprecedented heights. Building on the pioneering work of Kool G Rap, Big Daddy Kane, and Rakim, [many of his] tracks demonstrate a [high] level of technical precision and rhetorical dexterity. (Hill *Illmatic*)



In addition to his praised linguistic abilities (which will be clear in coming examples), Nas has, on many occasions, used rhetorical devices to aid his creation of image and feeling, and his promotion of social thought from unique angles. Many literary poets have used this sort of extended metaphor, and students could be asked to either try constructing their own allegory or locate others within rap. For examples in the classroom, consider Nas's use of allegory in the verse he delivers for his 1999 song "Last Words:"

I'm a prison cell, six by nine  
 Livin' hell, stone wall, metal bars for the gods in jail  
 My nickname the can, the slammer, the big house  
 I'm the place many fear cause there's no way out  
 I take the sun away, put misery instead  
 When you with me, most folks consider you dead  
 ... I make it hotter in the summer, colder in the winter  
 If the court parole ya, then another con enters  
 No remorse for your tears I seen 'em too often  
 When you cry I make you feel alive inside a coffin ...

Utilizing Keats's idea of "negative capability," Nas delivers a thoughtful message from the perspective of a cell—presumably to provide the audience with a different view than the typical rapper's treatment of imprisonment and institutionalized racism within the justice system. In a song about the last words of a man facing jailtime, Nashawn, the verbal co-star, takes the typical approach from first-person perspective, in a lyrical format, and concerning the overall notion that one "Better slide before you get bodied [killed/murdered]...." Nasir, however, decides to frame a picture of the struggle of an inmate (or multiple) trying to cope on the inside, but from a removed and emotionless point-of-view. This sort of poetic maneuver allows him the freedom to address the issues of inequality within the justice system, the emotional stress of the convict, and the chance to offer an uplifting ideal for his audience (captives) to consider (Change ya life, that's if you get a chance to get out / cause only you and I know what suffering's about...).

Utilizing allegory and metaphor in another way, but this time, twelve years after “I Gave You Power<sup>7</sup>” (1996), Nas wrote and released “Project Roach” on his 2008 album, *Untitled*. His use of the poetic techniques in this song are particularly noteworthy not just because of the interesting angle from which he approaches, but also because this unique approach offsets the severity of his tone and the seriousness of the topic—in this way (disguising criticism of culture through allegory) he is following the same path(s) that had to be taken by many famous writers past, especially those who were outwardly critical of the authoritarian rule they were living under. This sort of piece could be invaluable in creating a dialogue between texts and students from the standpoint of poetic technique as well as being quite political in nature. In the song, he writes about being a roach from the perspective of a roach, drawing a commonality between a commonplace fear/dislike of roaches and any social uneasiness of (in this case) the word “nigger” and associations of it as being descriptive of a “type” of person [he uses a sample of Eban Thomas (of the group *The Last Poets*<sup>8</sup>) saying, “It is absolutely silly, and unproductive, to have a funeral for the word “nigger,” when the actions continue... We need to have a movement to resurrect brothers and sisters, not a funeral for niggers”]:

Yo, I’m creepy and crawlin,’ in your sink and your toilet  
 I be drinking from your spit, anything cause I’m more or less  
 an insect with four legs; people come in, I fake dead;  
 correction: I got eight legs. Climbin’ on top of yo’ plate, bed,  
 wherever I smell food; it could be jail food,  
 stale food that’s molded, a roach is what I am, fool,  
 the ghetto is my land, fool. I’mma never be able to  
 fly like a bumblebee—try not to be underneath  
 your sneaker, pitiful creature... [punctuation added]

Other artists are certainly capable of such poetic creativity, even if it is not displayed as

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<sup>7</sup> A song on the 1996 album *It was Written* in which Nas writes from the perspective of a gun being used—its metaphor can be extended to parallel the feelings of being used socially or artistically by rappers and/or African-Americans in general.

<sup>8</sup> The Last Poets is a group of poets and musicians who arose from the late 1960s African American civil rights movement's black nationalist thread. Their name is taken from a poem by the South African revolutionary poet Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, who believed he was in the last era of poetry before guns would take over.

often. With regard to a love of the hip-hop culture, many artists have written about “the game,” some affectionately, others with bitterness. Common, for example, composed the song “I Used to Love H.E.R.” as an extended metaphor for the art of hip-hop, released in 1994 on his album *Resurrection*. As a narrative it’s divided into three stanzas (verses), and only at the end is “H.E.R.” identity revealed. His delivery is smooth and the beat for his lyrics nods to the early-days of grittier, turntable break-beats.

I met this girl when I was ten years old  
 And what I loved most, she had so much soul  
 She was old school when I was just a shorty  
 Never knew throughout my life she would be there for me  
 On the regular; not a church girl, she was secular  
 Not about the money, no studs was mic checkin’ her  
 But I respected her, she hit me in the heart ...

Outside of these more complex devices, the narrative has been a powerful method of illustrating consciousness within the music; N.W.A. MC Ice Cube’s narrative “It was a Good Day” is a solid example of this: a story of a day for him in which cops don’t bother him from premature judgment, he goes about his day as a normal citizen, although he still highlights the instances in which we can deduce how he’s used to being treated.—The video for the song ends with him arriving home at the end of the day as police, SWAT, and choppers surround and then enter his home, slowly and intensely building the image of what his real life is like, providing the audience with the sense that the narrative just witnessed was only a dream—this is only directly clear in Cube’s video, though the audio contains the siren surge at its end.

The need/desire to escape reality is certainly prevalent among many literatures and cultures, and this is especially true for the hip-hop generation—the same as it has been for African Americans in years past. Throughout rap music, themes of urban alienation highlight a deeper sense of nihilism among many up and coming youth which pushes them to sometimes

imagine their way out. Outkast, for example, the Atlanta rap duo of Andre 3000 and Big Boi, come from outer space, as dictated through their personas—this is not unlike the quirky belief of jazz musician Sun Ra, who religiously believed that when he was playing his music to his full expressive potential, that he was transported to Saturn. As a metaphor for escape in hip-hop music itself, as well as in the history of the people, eLZhi’s 2011 song “Memory Lane,” inspired by the Nas song of the same title, looks to memory lane as a literal place to go inside yourself in order to get away for a while.

I’m tryin’ to get to memory lane  
 But wonder should I take the train of thought  
 Or hop on a mental plane  
 I don’t stray far, but this a place you can’t get to in your car  
 Travel, standin’ still, it’s bizarre; but there you are  
 Like you never left, back in junior high with your report card  
 Tryin’ to make a B out the letter F  
 Maybe that was me around the time that my brother was six  
 Before I got my first job and my mother was sick ...

The lyrics of the song are vividly and the emotionally potent; eLZhi creates a fictional place for himself, taking the audience there (creating a fictional place in them, in turn, for reflection) and provides depth into his person. The piece is intimate in multiple ways, and it’s endearing with regard to the idea of the come-up: the knowledge that this is what the artist suffered and yet he found the strength to grow and stand tall in his own way. Poetry, too, expresses the moment in this sort of intimacy, taking the reader to a place that someone else has been, to a place where the two might better understand and live with one another; students should be challenged to use critical thinking skills to interpret other cultural art-work(s) in order to more effectively interact as a part of the community.

The poetic imagery of Nas and other rappers extends beyond the use of poetic technique and form; in general, the content of rappers, no matter how conscious or well-intentioned, do

often ground the experience of the African-American in urban decay, surrounded by drugs, broken homes, gang violence, and police brutality. Not that these aren't or haven't been legitimate issues, but that in many cases (e.g. commercialization) the portrayal isn't open to counter-views, nor are many attempting to stress/push toward cultural progress. Although Nas's song "Rewind" from *Stillmatic* (2001) is a prime example of his poetic novelty, constructing an "inverted narrative chronology" (Bradley 158) in rhyme, it is only a narrative of violence:

Listen up gangstas and honeys with ya' hair done,  
 pull up a chair hon' and put it in the air, son,  
 dog, whatever they call you, god, just listen.  
 I spit a story backwards, it starts at the ending:  
 The bullet goes back in the gun,  
 the bullet hole's closin' this chest of a nigga,  
 now he back to square one,  
 screaming, "Shoot don't please!"  
 I put the fifth back on my hip,  
 it's like a VCR rewindin' a hit.  
 He put his hands back on his bitch,  
 my caravan doors open up,  
 I jumped back in the van and closed it shut.  
 Goin' reverse, slowly prepared,  
 my nigga Jungle utters out somethin' crazy like, "Go he there."  
 Sittin' in back of this chair, we hittin' the roach,  
 the smoke goes back in the blunt, the blunt gets bigger in growth;  
 Jungle unrolls it, puts his weed back in the jar;  
 the blunt turns back into a cigar ... [punctuation added]

In places, this rhyme nears free verse, but only in terms of rhyme, of course, since, being adhered to an audible backbone (so to speak) has the potential to drastically affect the metric structures of a rapper's verse(s); outside of this "limitation," in this and many other instances, Nas breaks free from the predominant form of lyric verse, and into narrative verse for storytelling. His lyrical work on *Illmatic*'s "One Love" (1994), an epistolary in which the author writes an incarcerated friend, displays his smooth sense of storytelling, but highlighting the relationships between loved ones, African-Americans and the prison system, unfortunate familial aspects, and the narrator's

own struggle to keep from becoming violent from situational desperation. The verse creates a narrative with distinct characters, movement, and resolution:

[from Verse One]

What up, kid? I know shit is rough doing your bid;  
 when the cops came, you should'a slid to my crib,  
 [but] fuck it, black, no time for looking back, it's done.  
 Plus, congratulations, you know, you got a son;  
 I heard he looks like ya, why don't your lady write ya? ...

[from Verse Two]

Dear Born, you'll be out soon, stay strong.  
 Out in New York the same shit is going on:  
 the crack-head's stalking, loud-mouths is talking—  
 hold, check out the story yesterday [I heard] when I was walking ...

Seen in just a few lines, Nas demonstrates his ability to evoke a lot with few words: we can discern the relationships between characters and there is background given to their behavior(s) and situations. Seen here and in the previous examples, Nas's rhymes demonstrate enjambment (a poetic element absent to a great deal of rap—most of which is characteristically structured such that thoughts or wordplay resolve on end rhymes) which aids the pacing of his speech and authoritative tone; in both free- and metrically-configured verse, enjambment helps to create rhythm by creating space and caesuras that work out pacing and flow in conjunction with the line breaks.

Students and instructors alike should understand, the tension created in the music—a tension profoundly similar to the kinds found in a poem's problem—for the listener is “a tension of ideology and art. ... the ideology present in the art [rap] frequently responds to the complicated politics of race in America,” says Perry, going on to say,

Emcees often tell us that they are simply transmitting the ‘truth’ or reality of living in poor urban communities. But realist movements in art of any sort are always decisive periods in which choices of how to represent truth or reality are made. Hip hop realism is filled with metaphors and metonyms of existence that trouble listeners or commentators from a wide range of political, social, and intellectual perspectives. (40)

Although many MCs do not express sentiments in their lyrics that are socially or culturally destructive, Perry believe that dismissing those who do as not indicative of true artistic expression or as not valuable for thoughtful critical analysis is not productive (42). Thus it is here that the poets of the hip-hop generation enter: utilizing the vernacular process(es), paying homage to their history, searching for identity and belonging, and most important, utilizing hip-hop's cultural influence(s) to combat the destructive images and representations constantly reinforced by the music industry.

### Side B

“Literary generations differ,” claims Gayl Jones in her groundbreaking text, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature*, that “in their approach, though each generation and individual within it are in concert regarding their interest in problems of African American identity and self-definition in the New World, and the questions of language, art, reality, morality, and human value” (2-3). Concerning hip hop's cultural influence on the art of poetry, of course, the obvious hybrids are Slam and Spoken Word poetries; born of hip hop influence, as noted by AnJeanette Alexander-Smith in 2004,

[t]he hip hop culture has also given birth to spoken work poetry. Coffeehouses and college campuses serve as outlets of creative expression as poets perform their poetry for diverse audiences. *Spoken word poetry uses the cadence and direct language of hip-hop music to uplift the critical consciousness of those who listen to it.* The performance resembles rapping. Poets use intonation, gestures, and sometimes background music to accentuate their poetry (59, emphasis mine).

Although I admire and think highly of those forms of expression, they will not be considered here because I think the connection between hip hop music and Slam/Spoken word is clearly established. Furthermore, of the poets considered, both Kevin Coval and Taylor Mali perform

spoken word; however, their slam/spoken word pieces have been (perhaps unfairly) left out in order to show how their “more serious” verse still displays a hip hop influence.

An exploration into how the work of Terrance Hayes, A. Van Jordan, Allison Joseph, Major Jackson, Taylor Mali, Patricia Smith, and Kevin Coval exhibits this cultural influence, as well as how such influences are treated/utilized, seems significant in understanding present intertextualities in their verse, the same way layers of influence and meaning exist within hip hop’s music (and as a larger cultural aesthetic). It will begin to facilitate, in process, a larger comprehension of the attitudes (ways of knowing and being) of the artist; I proceed assuming/positing that what Amiri Baraka has said about Negro music can and should be applied to art of poetry, especially poetry (or other art) under the influence of hip hop—understanding that the work of these writers is an “expression of an attitude, or a collection of attitudes, about the world,” and only secondarily an attitude about the way poetry is made. Essentially, this portion will be explored under the belief that to value the poetry of these emerging poets without understanding the culture(s) and attitude(s) through/for which they are influenced, is to view and evaluate the works in an incomplete fashion, and it undermines the true merit of the poets and what they choose to represent.

“By creating a variety of styles, images, imaginative flexibility through dramatic shifts, sharp juxtapositions and thematic improvisations, special patterns of sound or rhythms, multivalent meanings...the African American poets gain the wherewithal to experiment with traditional structure,” something that is of paramount importance when seeking to express oneself and faced with only the forms of Western traditions for utilization (Jones 27). For, as Ishmael Reed notes in his introduction to *19 Necromancers from Now*:

... the inability of some students to “understand” works written by Afro-American authors is traceable to an inability to understand the American experience as rooted in



slang, dialect, vernacular, argot, and all the other putdown terms the faculty uses for those who have the gall to deviate from the tried and proper way of English.

Slang and colloquial speech have rarely been so creative. It is as if the common man (or his anonymous spokesman) would in his speech assert his humanity against the powers that be.... (in Jones 11)

It wasn't until the turn of the nineteenth century that the appropriation of elements from oral traditions began to thrive in their use within imaginative literature. Indeed, "From 1773, when Phillis Wheatley published her book of poetry (and became the first African American to do so), to the nineteenth-century slave narrative novels of William Wells Brown and Martin Delany, African American writers worked in strict adherence to Western literacy forms..." (Jones 2). Not every form of literature offers its audience the knowledge of its influence by its folklores, much less often does it validate the artistic use of them. All forms of artistic expression, however, (music and literature especially) are rooted in orality—vocalizations are necessary to interact and explain feeling effectively. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, for example, are clear in their utilizations of different sorts of oral-textual forms. Cervantes's *Don Quixote* displays this patchwork/pastiche quality as well, such that Gayl Jones refers to it as a "composite novel" (3) and goes on to exemplify the Spanish poet Fredrico Garcia Lorca, who also adapted influential oral resources. "Besides such popular imagery in his poetry, Lorca also made use of the Spanish *romance* (ballad) and the *cante jondo* ("deep song") or sung lyric" (4). Whatever its form, "poetry must spread beyond the classroom and reach people where they live" (Eleveld xiii).

The cultural transitions necessary for oral traditions to become so densely assimilated into the Western literary canon have not been easy, nor have they been completed; "...one of the great problems of orality as spoken voice in literature:," Jones says, "it sounds too easy...not complicated enough. As a result it is easily dismissed (especially by rival traditions) as literature of little artistic effort or consequence. Because one can so easily hear the prose, because it

sounds too natural, because it suggests the voice so authentically, it seems ‘artless’” (6). In accessing different oralities and adapting it for their purposes, artists form and exhibit a connection with the past, while adding to the tradition themselves. Poet Robert Karimi, in a piece titled “how I found my inner DJ,” philosophically waxes, that, “...consciousness allows us to understand that we—our self, our culture—are a moment in time, our worlds are both abstract and literal at the same time, and the creation of the self is constantly flowing and stopping. We don’t throw away the past—we transform it. Past, present, future converge inside us” (Karimi 230). The collective conscience of a community should also be accounted for. Considering this communal sensitivity, Guthrie Ramsey Jr. posits that music and other forms of cultural expression “function as reservoirs in which cultural memories reside. These memories allow social identities to be knowable, teachable, and learnable” (Neal 123). Again, this textual and contextual layering is precisely why this sort of analysis is necessary in illuminating hip hop in contemporary poetry—noting immediately that this layering is directly similar to the collage/pastiche art of hip hop music (i.e. emceeing and deejaying). Frequently combining “aesthetics with social motive,” artists, e.g., rapper and poets, create art that “almost always conjoins humanity and society; thus ‘kinetic art,’” a term used by Gayl Jones (2). Recalling Baraka’s urge for an understanding of disposition with regard to abilities in fully comprehending and appreciating African American art-forms, Jones, too, suggests,

it is important to place African American writers into context and contours of *American language* and literature, to consider and understand that American English and (standard) American literature as well are modified by oral traditions, and that American literature came into its own when it consciously recognized, employed, and explored the techniques of American orality and landscape [Twain, Hemingway, and Salinger, for example] as distinct from the European models. (8)

Indeed, “poets of the hip-hop generation,” as noted by Daniel Grassian, “tend to blend the academic and the colloquial as well as the popular/low culture with academic/high culture and

accounts of inner-city/street-life with academic/suburban life” (134). With folklore’s extreme prevalence in literature, it’s a wonder more people aren’t more aware of it. However, “Even with the recognition of the importance of oral traditions and techniques in resolving the problems of aesthetic identity, a tension continues to exist between the oral and literary modes. ... Such tension becomes problematic when it affects critical reception” (Jones 10).

Touching on a similar point, Adam Mansbach remarks on the difficulties facing hip-hop music’s oral influence when he says,

ultimately, the notion of literary hip-hop aesthetics begs the question of form versus content. ... the jazz literature of Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, or Yusef Komunyaakaa does not have to take jazz as its subject ... rather, they share techniques with the music. ... Their genius was not in writing *about* jazz but in *writing jazz*. In some ways, the mark of success for a [work displaying hip-hop aesthetics] will be when one that isn’t about hip-hop is understood as beholden to the aesthetics of the culture (Mansbach 95).

Oliver Wang, in “Trapped in Between the Lines: The Aesthetics of Hip-Hop Journalism,”

obliquely addresses the same issue, but with a different perspective in saying,

... over the past few years, there’s been a decline in the number of people identifying as “hip-hop writers.” This isn’t out of lack of solidarity; rather, it’s a reflection of the maturation of the profession. As a newer generation begins to emerge, both see the label of “hip-hop writer” as limiting and pigeonholing. (Wang 173).

Thus, the questions to which such issues come: “what does it mean to *write hip-hop*?” and “can the cultural influence of hip-hop be more easily preserved, remembered, and transmitted through the literatures of those who grew up with the culture? In tackling the former, it is hoped, perhaps, the latter will become more effectively considered.

In any case, “in its best form, hip hop is also a form of social criticism and can serve as a cultural bridge” (Grassian 9). These bridges can be crossed properly with the right material; the work of these poets, just as the work of the rappers (examined on Side A), are the consequence of influences on their desire for personal expression. The work considered here can be useful when

engaging student interests culturally. On this point, Nancy Wilson quotes Kermit Campbell's *Gettin' Our Groove On*, saying that AAVE users occupy what Mary Louise Pratt has termed *contact zones*, "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power." "Campbell argues," she claims, "that teachers should incorporate storytelling, oral expression, and experiments in transculturation (elements of the "literate arts of the contact zone") ... in order to "critically engage students ..." (Wilson 542). These sections are meant to begin moving toward the confidence and understanding needed to take the steps necessary for promoting a student's motivation to learn, understanding of his or herself, their world, their history, and their love of music and poetry. Thus, here as before, it will be prudent to examine this cultural influence/presence as it helps inform the work of the selected poets in sub-sections.

### **Structure and Musicality**

The influence of hip hop on contemporary poets through sound, rhyme, and rhythm can also be elucidated, I believe, by thinking about connections in *sonic density* (a term I have created to describe the effects observed in my work, and one to which we shall return). As mentioned earlier [and considered briefly on Side A], when it comes to Jazz Poetry, the poets didn't have to write about jazz, they *wrote* jazz: "The jazz musician evokes a mood and weaves a tale, as does the poet" (Anderson 2). "Jazz becomes [then] an attitude, a way in which one defies conformity and creates new ways of presenting oneself to the world" (7), not unlike the way hip-hop culture took to applying different fashions at hand to create unique displays of character; this sentiment again serves to re-emphasize Amiri Baraka's claims about the manner in which Black music should be approached to understand it, sonically and structurally:

Poetry that is informed by a jazz aesthetic attempts the same gesture. The poet is the soloist, providing a testimonial that employs a different medium but achieves a similar sense of audience intimacy whether the text is read aloud [or not] . . . . The various ideas that inform a poet's individual jazz-influenced poetics often break from the constraints of traditionally structured verse. In jazz poetry, the tonal quality of the individual word is given special emphasis, and the manner in which the word is placed within the text is integral to how the entire poem sounds. Since sound is such a crucial element, the listener or critic is often unable to adequately articulate the ethereal connection between tone and meaning. (Anderson 7-8)

Anderson goes on to suggest that “the spatial relationship between words, what is silent or unsaid, is equally important. Thus, the poet straddles his or her role as musician and writer” (8).

This relationship emphasizes an “auditory binary” that has a great similarity to Ellison’s metaphors for being: the “seen and unseen territory” (Jones 22). This apparent parallel stretches back to the tension between oral traditions and literature:

The dialect mode in the African American poetic tradition will need to be stretched and bent to move into the interior landscape and discover the true complexities of the African American voice in a manner similar to Walt Whitman’s handling of the European American voice in poetry: “Desirous of writing a poem that engaged experience in a way that was both inclusive and democratic, Whitman abandoned meter and rhyme in favor of more fluid and capacious kinds of parallelism; and he abandoned the distinction between vernacular expressions. . . . Bridged then with oral tradition(s) through perceptual modes, “African-American [poetry] attains the blending of possibility found in Whitman . . . as [their characters/speakers] enter seen and scene territory.” (22)

Sense follows sound in poetry, as in rap. “I suspect that the freshest ideas and most engaging poems most often don’t come from *ideas* at all,” observes the poet Ted Kooser of literary verse. “Ideas are orderly, rational, and to some degree logical. They come clothed in complete sentences, like, ‘Overpopulation is the cause of all the problems in the world.’ Instead, poems are triggered by catchy twists of language, or little glimpses of life, both of which are plentiful in hip hop verse, and in fact, keen interest in language and what and how it means combines with rap’s linguistic playfulness in the work of hip-hop generation poets. Such playfulness, as illustrated in Kevin Coval’s poem “pieces of shalom” where he says, “. . . at recess we regret,” and later in the

same piece, "... and i don't know // Hebrew / but did learn / hip-hop" (3). Taylor Mali, another white poet and educator, writes poetry that is playful, draws upon oralities, and provokes thought through a focus on either the language of love or the love of language. His lyrical playfulness is exhibited through his use of rhyme, sometimes in scheme, and others seemingly at whim.

Exemplifying his loose tongue (not profane, without reason), his poem "Virgin Ears"—published in his 2009 collection *The Last Time As We Are*—considers students of his that want to hear more of his "adult" poems, and in teasing them, saying, "... 'you're not old enough to hear them.' / And then, just to see them writhe, I add, / 'Because I use words you've never heard before'" (75). As the poem travels along, Mali initiates the call-response trope through asking, "You think you know what it means to be dirty?," and carries through the dialogue playfully, reciting to his students poetic lines like, "Have you ever blown the petals off someone's dandelion? / Do you know about chirping the chocolate chip nookie? / ..." (75). The playfulness exhibited is one defying linguistic rigidity, either in sound or meaning.

These poets also display rhetoric the somewhat mirrors a rapper's battle lyrics: in Major Jackson's poem "Bereft," he claims, "... I'm the one leaping / like a dolphin catching treats" (*Holding Company* 49), and in Terrance Hayes's poem, "The Blue Terrance," Hayes states that he "kept [his] head up to keep the blood off / [his] sneakers" (*Wind in a Box* 65-66). This sort of playfulness moves to interact in the poetic line syllabically in creating unified sound patterns that mimic the syntactical segmentations which provide rap with its rhythm, shifting flow and movement from line to line; in some cases the rhythm may shift and change often and abruptly in places, tumbling throughout, as is the case with many short lined poems (William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," for instance ). Major Jackson's poems involving Sun Ra, however, display his unique control over rhythm and movement; in "Leaving Saturn: Sun Ra &

His Year 2000 Myth Science Arkestra at Grendel’s Lair Cabaret, 1986,” the rhythm of his work carries through in a slow swing—although the lines are short syllabically, they are patterned together and punctuated such that the movement is very controlled, while still feeling free:

Skyrocketed—  
 My eyes dilate old  
 Copper pennies.  
 Effortlessly, I play  
 \*  
 Manifesto of the One  
 Stringed Harp. Only  
 This time I’m washed  
 Ashore, shipwrecked  
 \*  
 In Birmingham.  
 My black porcelain  
 Fingers, my sole  
 Possession. ... (48)

Based on the manner in which rappers create verses, usually in syllabic patterns, these contemporary poets seem to possess a cadence syntactically that, though they may be working within certain metrical and formal limitations, gives their verse a groove based on a loose observance of what Mary Oliver calls *Syllabic Verse*—more or less an adherence to stanzaic syllable patterns through each verse: “Because of the strictness of the syllable-count, and the inevitable variety of stress pattern, syllabic verse creates a music that is highly regular and at the same time filled with engaging counterpoint” (Oliver 65). This regimented rhythmicity becomes more of a groove when applied with hexametric lines to slow movement for feeling, as with Major Jackson’s poems in his collection,  *Holding Company* , as well as various other poems found in his body of work. His playfully titled poems “Anthrodome” and “Exquisite Minutes,” from that collection, exhibit the hip-hop vernacular in the slant-rhyme of the second title and the complete origination of the first as a word.

In considering the idea of a groove or rhythm through the poetry of these hip-hop

generationers, the division/patterning of syllables and sounds alike within each line was analyzed with regard to what should be thought of as *sonic density*—that sound can be carried across syllabic segmentations moving into the poem’s content on a rhythm that becomes nearly audible with the consistent tonal instances. In “Anthrodome,” Major Jackson’s poetic lines divide syllabically such that each segment that carries to the end of a line and over, falls into an equal segmentation or one comparable:

She was light as a shadow. I wanted  
to know her better than the rest  
before me. I promised her neither miracles  
or hallucinations and mixtaped all  
my ecstasies starting first with Sembene.  
Out of my mouth came the wind  
of my birth. Out of my hands poured unteachable  
rain. Seeing nothing but inappropriate sentinels,  
products of major antagonisms from a far off century,  
we said *Good-bye* to our once born emptiness. (27)

These lines seem to best divide into syllabic segments of:

7 3  
5 3  
3 4 5  
6 4  
4 6/7  
4 3  
3 4 1 4  
1 4 9  
10 7  
4 7

The repetition of these syllable segments nods to Mary Oliver’s described *Syllabic Verse*, which would seem to reason—if the poets of the hip-hop generation are indeed influenced by hip-hop music, as evidenced in their work, I believe this would certainly be one method for visualizing its manifestations. These segmentations are based aesthetically (as closely as possible) around the pauses amid the strings of syllabic sounds in a line, and this could highlight an interesting



method of engaging students in the metrics and sonics of the craft of poetry—activities could be fashioned to create work that imitates these sorts of patterns and wordplay, or students could be asked to consider and compare/contrast how metric lines seem to be subject to a force of sound stronger than pronounced stress.

Amiri Baraka has said that "Form is determined by the nature of matter ... Using, or implementing, an idea or a concept is not necessarily imitation and, of course, the converse is true; imitation is not necessarily use" (*Black Music* 84-85). He also says, however, that "the roots, blues and bop, are emotion. The *technique*, the ideas, the way of handling the emotion" (84-85); and elsewhere in the text, he calls form and content "mutually expressive of the whole. ... [and] In Black music, both identify place and direction." (211).

Bebop proved that so called "changes," i.e., the repeated occurrence of certain chords basic to the melodic and harmonic structure of a tune, are almost arbitrary. That is, that they need not be *stated*, and that since certain chords infer certain improvisatory uses of them, why not improvise on what the chords infer rather than playing the inference itself. (*Black Music* 90)

Regarding the blurry classifications of what defines "jazz poetry," in his critical text exploring four innovators of the jazz impulse in serious poetry, T. J. Anderson quotes cultural critic Sascha Feinstein's explanation that

some writers feel passionately that a jazz poem must in some way emulate the rhythmic pulse of the music; others claim that "jazziness" is an arbitrary term at best and that allusions to jazz musicians might be the only sure way to know whether the poem has been influenced by jazz. Proponents of the first approach criticize the other, particularly the work by West Coast writers and performance artists, for not substantiating the poetry as strong verse. Those in the other camp, however, strongly criticize narrative presentation for avoiding the essence of jazz—or, to use a more colloquial phrase, for being square. (4)

This situation is analogous to the ways in which these poets write about blues and jazz. They may appropriate the blues lyric format (A. Van Jordan's "Cheatin' Woman Blues Haiku" from his

collection *Rise* [39])—this use of the Blues (Lyric), to Baraka, is for "the deepest expression of memory. Experience re/feeling. It is the racial memory" (*Black Music* 207)—they may create their own forms to use from popular culture (Terrance Hayes's handfuls of poem based on a newspaper's weekly word jumble puzzle: "a gram of &'s" [from his 2006 collection *Hip Logic*]), or they may utilize existing forms in new ways entirely: A. Van Jordan's "from," for instance, found in his collection *Macnolia*, artistically appropriates the form of a dictionary definition:

**from** (→) I. Starting at (a particular place or time): As in, John was *from* Chicago, but he played guitar straight *from* the Delta; he wore a blue suit *from* Robert Hall's; his hair smelled like coconut; ... 2. Out of: He pulled a knot of bills *from* his pocket, paid the man and we went upstairs. 3. Not near or in contact with: He smoked the weed, but, surprisingly, he kept it *from* me. ... (27)

His use of such a unique "form" for a poem provides heightened imagery and ultimately a small portion of a much larger narrative.

An interesting note about the work of these poets: they may appropriate forms for creative use, or they may write of jazz cats (A. Van Jordan's "Vapors of Sidney Bechet", Major Jackson's "Don Pullen at the Zanzibar Blue Jazz Cafe"), bluesmen (Terrance Hayes's "For Paul Robeson" [famed singer of Negro spirituals]), or happening spots (Terrance Hayes's "emcee" or A. Van Jordan's "Jookin"). These pieces, however, are not written to convey anguish, nor to imitate the sounds or rhythms of jazz music/musicians—when these poets consider music, which heavily permeates their work, their main interests seem to be in communicating an understanding of emotion. Terrance Hayes's poem "Blues Procession," for instance, in containing a memory of/for his "Uncle Bubba," he recalls

They'd found my uncle's car bundled  
In the arms of a tree;

The gin bottle & windshield cracked,  
The flesh like moss clinging to his body ... (*Hip Logic* 80)

Using a blues lyric form of refrain and indirect call-response (inviting the audience to consider their own comprehensions within the confines of this fragmented narrative, he says,

I did not know the detours of grief.  
I did not know the detours from grief. (80)

The poem bolsters the idea of it as a blues expression, but moves in whole to ask if he (and the audience in turn) might understand how to grieve, how to escape grief, and perhaps obliquely, how to live according to this reflective knowledge; indeed, the poem ends in a contemplative image of the poet's mother after the accident, grieving, but as dangerously as his uncle:

I watched her curse untangling the hose  
Noosed around her feet. I watched suds

Slide down the glass like storm clouds  
Bound to wreck her somewhere in the week. (80)

Whether it's A. Van Jordan's "Kind of Blue," Terrance Hayes's "The Blue Bowie" or "The Blue Etheridge," or Allison Joseph's "Music Appreciation," the goal of these poets, it seems, is to elicit the significance of music to them, but doing so through frames of racial, social, and political identities; this is illustrated directly through the end of "Music Appreciation" in her collection *Imitations of Life* (2003):

... But we would have missed the fury  
of Lombardi, one skinny, wiry flame of a man  
determined to save us from the primitive  
percussion of rock and rap, the beat  
we swore we couldn't live without. (60)

"Hip-hop," says Adilifu Nama, "like its bebop predecessor, was about creating community right where you were and adopting a standard of validation based exclusively on black peers, not on what outside critics had to say or what white societal norms dictated" (Nama 19). The very name

bebop (according to Amiri Baraka) "comes from an onomatopoeic attempt to reproduce the new rhythms that had endangered this music; hence, *bebop*, and with that rebop. ... Rhythmic diversity and freedom were the really valuable legacies" (87-88). Indeed, poet Kevin Coval, speaking of the emergence of hip hop in poetic verse, "style, technique, and craft merge with collage/pastiche, braggadocio, stark portrait painting from the margins, frenetic, funny wordplay, and the rupture of linear storytelling schemes. These become tropes in a burgeoning school of American letters that's moving toward an aesthetics of hip-hop poetics, or a hip-hop poetica, if you will" (Mansbach and Coval 253)

### **Content**

The art of the hip-hop generation, exemplified by the work of the poets considered here, defy expectations and demands placed on emerging artists, especially African Americans, insisting they can write about whatever they choose regardless of race or class. Daniel Grassian notes succinctly, that

The issues of racial authenticity and racial progress (or lack thereof) are central to the many hip-hop generation writers, whereas they tend to be lesser or nonexistent issues in the writings of white Generation X writers such as David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers [or Jonathan Franzen] .... As with Generation X writers, hip-hop generation writers sometimes use experimental, modernistic, and postmodernistic techniques in their fiction and poetry, but their work is also reminiscent of the traditional, emotionally affecting fiction and poetry of realist and naturalistic writers. However, the literature written by the hip-hop generation displays little evidence of the literary allusions of an Ishmael Reed or the historical revisionism of Toni Morrison or Charles Johnson. Still, there is great intellectual merit .... (5)

With regard to content, the poets of the hip-hop generation utilize their poetic moment to question inequalities (gender, sexual, racial, educational, cultural, et al.), highlight faulty social assumptions (such as what the "normal" African-American experience is, contrary to what rap posits) , and create a piece of art that is layered with integrity, history, emotion, and reality.

Poet/Professor Allison Joseph, for example, presents, in certain poems like “Good Humor” from her 1997 collection, *Soul Train*—named after the popular television variety show lasting from 1970 until 2005 that showcased music and styles of the hip hop/post-soul era, an image of urban life, that displays not violence and fear, but community and warm memory; her first two lines begin typical of imagery presented in rap: “In our neighborhood of run-down houses, / of abandoned lots and corner groceries” (9). The poem turns, however, countering expectation to continue into a dismal urban narrative:

nothing tasted better than ice cream’s  
sweet delight: the delicate peaks  
and swirls of vanilla soft-serve,  
cold chill of Italian ices (9)

Daniel Grassian points out, “certainly, eating ice cream purchased from an ice-cream truck is not specific to the inner city; it is more associated with the predominantly white suburbs...[which] is exactly Joseph’s point: to demonstrate the commonalities between communities” (Grassian, 135). This depiction is quite unlike the imagery Nas provides of the urban landscape (in his song “N.Y. State of Mind,” for example), and even though he does not glorify violence or other relevant social issues, the placement of that image in the forefront of his content (in this and multiple other songs) presents a decidedly different childhood than that depicted by Joseph. Nas, however gritty, ultimately emerges from his environment promoting a positive outlook on life throughout his discography, with a mind always socially conscious. The presentation of street life as Allison Joseph presents it, though, moves to counter predominant African-American stereotypes that have been perpetuated by the commercialization of rap and the associated images/worldviews, such as the common belief that blacks from cities have all grown up in a ghetto riddled with drug violence and broken families; she presents a possible power *both* poetry and rap possess within modes of acculturation.

With regard to violence, racism, and stereotypes, A. Van Jordan's poem "Notes from a Southpaw" (from his collection *Rise*) creates a scenario in which his character is confronted by blatant racism; in the bar, no one reacts negatively and his friend even urges him to just be. The protagonist eventually catches the man off-guard and physically injures him; of course, the audience is aware of his man's right to retaliate and may even strongly desire this action, but when the option has been chosen, the poet presents an ending reflection in two questions (accessing the call-response trope to interact both with characters and audience):

**Question:** What will he learn from this beating?  
that I haven't learned from all of my losses?

And when the police get here, tell me,  
how do I make them understand all of this? (12)

Jordan utilizes space here in a manner that mimics rap in syllabic segmentation, and provides resolution to the piece leading into silence promoting a feeling of personal contemplation around the events contained in the verse.

Although his poetry collections have shifted toward a more focused interest in language and the ways we understand one another as humans, Terrance Hayes's first collection, *Muscular Music*, contains an exploration of identity "first and foremost ... , indicating that he believes one of the main issues facing contemporary, especially younger African-Americans is how to best define themselves, whether or not to do so racially, and, if so, to what extent" (Grassian 149). In certain poems, "the speaker does not care that other people do not really understand him, because he does not really care to understand himself, being satiated by the comforts and pleasures of consumer culture and by the chimera that racial equality exists" (150). Addressing, in this way, the problems commercialized hip-hop music have perpetuated or further complicated, Hayes (like the others) tries in different ways to circumvent the individuality of materialist youth back

toward the collective consciousness of the community as the way to begin better understanding “who you are,” as opposed to relying mostly if not entirely on property and material indicators of “success.”

The study of language and its effects on people is critical in changing that world. Words and our understandings of them construct our realities; they have powerful effects on real people. “Rap music is a contemporary stage for the theatre of the powerless” (Rose 101). Engaging students in multicultural studies and meeting them on their own ground, linguistically as well as dialogically, can prove paramount in pushing them to understand the world around them. The content of these poets can be explored by students as in- or out-of-class activities to located influences of hip-hop culture through language used, wordplay, analogy, simile, metaphor uses, forms, and relations to sampling; the selected poets all draw in some way on images and other media meaningfully related to hip hop culture. [P]oets of the hip hop generation,” says Grassian, “tend to blend the academic and the colloquial as well as popular/low culture with academic/high culture and accounts of inner-city/street life with academic/suburban life” (134). “Powerful, alternative formal possibilities are now key genres of public discourse,” Geoffrey Sirc claims, “and kids understand them” (“Virtual Urbanism” 14), and to reiterate, if, as teachers, we are indeed interested in our students’ welfare: “our students have a wealth of knowledge about the world in which they live. Our pedagogies must advance accordingly” (Richardson xviii).

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