Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee, yo! I’m the E of EPMD.
—Erick Sermon of EPMD, “You’re a Customer”

You see I floats just like some helium and stings
just like Tabasco, been nice wit my skills ever since I had an Afro!
—Crazy Drayz of Das EFX, “They Want Efx”

I don’t fight clean, float like a butterfly,
stings like a scorpion ridin’ on the tip of a sick ding a ling.
—Heltah Skeltah, “The Grate Unknown”

3

Stinging Like Tabasco
Structure and Format in Hip Hop Compositions

This chapter begins with lyrical references to Muhammad Ali. Countless such references to Ali exist in hip hop. He was one of the forerunners of hip hop, with his introduction of black oral rhyming culture into the mainstream. Hip hop uses Ali’s style—whether referring to his Cassius Clay bragging or his Nation of Islam-inspired conversion into an outspoken black nationalist athlete—as a metaphor for skill and grace. Ali was one of a handful of the first black celebrity figures to bring black language styles and traditions into the public eye with dignity, self-possession, and power. He provided part of the foundation for the explosion of hip hop, an artistic variation of traditional black cultural forms, into the American popular cultural framework.

Boxing may serve as a good metaphor for hip hop anyway. Not only because both foster a diverse group of bragging personalities with aggressive styles but also because they are strategic competitions. Hip hop is poetry that shifts styles of defense and offense, moving between
grace and bull-like forward barrel ing. It dances, it leans back, and then it attacks. It uses the broadest allegory to discuss the individual moment of confrontation. In the so-called “Rumble in the Jungle,” the 1974 Muhammad Ali–George Foreman fight, Ali threatened to match Foreman’s crushing power with dance. When the actual impact of Foreman’s power became apparent, Ali responded with strategy, first surprising Foreman with an insulting right hook, then faking him out for three rounds, using up Foreman’s energy, and coming back in the final rounds with new vigor. Analogously, in 8 Mile, the film loosely based on the early days of Eminem, the climax of the movie occurs when the young rapper prevails in a battle by asserting all of his weaknesses, anticipating his opponents dissing, and thereby subverting power.

Todd Boyd speaks of the relationship between music and sport in African American culture, saying,

I remember hearing Miles Davis talk about how he structured a trumpet solo after watching a Sugar Ray Robinson boxing match. Sugar Ray was known as a master of style. You know, he would walk into the ring wearing two robes, and he’d take off the outer robe and underneath would be this white silk robe. It was all about presentation and performance. But Miles focused specifically on how Sugar Ray, in the first round of a fight, would set traps for his opponent without springing them. And then he’d come back in the second round and spring one of those traps, and the fight, of course, would be over. And Miles took that idea and applied it to his solo, so at the beginning of the solo there are all these traps set, and in the second half of the solo, he’s springing the trap. So you can flow between those two disparate forms and find that sort of inspiration. Art really does lay bare the questions, and the questions can become much more interesting than the answers sometimes. 3

Likewise, in hip hop tactical shifts occur within the style of metaphor, which is highly variable even within one song, as well as in the distinctive style an artist might have as an individual, or if he or she is part of a group, within the group. Hip hop music is a war of position, and the position one takes manifests itself in the performance or language. One of the most commonly used metaphors in this war is that of murder, one frequently employed in boxing as well. In the film depicting the 1974 Ali-Foreman fight, When We Were Kings (dir. Leon Gast, 1996), the people of Zaire, in support of Ali, chant, “Ali bimboye,” meaning “Ali,
Boxers themselves speak metaphorically of murdering opponents. In the lyrics, “Like Ali-Frazier / thriller in Manila / pinpoint, point black microphone killer am I,” Chuck D of Public Enemy is the murderer on the microphone, verbally killing competing mcs. The use of murder in hip hop varies. Narratives of gratuitous violence do exist, and they are heavily critiqued by media pundits, yet there are also rhymes in which violence stands in as a symbolic explication of skill, courage, or power, as in the following example: “Picture blood baths in elevator shafts / Like these murderous lyrics tight from genuine craft / Check the print / swear a veteran sparked the letter and / Slow movin’ mcs waitin’ for the edition.”

At times, the mc will directly refer to the symbolism, telling the audience what he or she plans to do lyrically to other mcs; at other times, the reference to skill or power comes obliquely, as in moments of role-play as Asian martial arts experts or mafiosi. The reference to the crafted or powerful violence of another, such as a mafioso, a Bruce Lee, or a boxer, often comes combined with descriptions of the artist’s skill. Heltah Skeltah rhyme:

I control the masses with metaphors that’s massive
Don’t ask of the nigga’ll bash shit like Cassius
I’m drastic when it comes to verbs I’ll be flippin’
Cause herbs just be shittin’ off the words I be kickin’
I scold you knuckleheads swore for the petty
But I told you rich niggas that heads ain’t ready
Now I mold you back into the bitch that you are
Fuckin’ with the Ruckus get bruised worse than scars.

Here, the murder metaphor stands alongside proclamations of competitive orality and superiority. It is in fact an ego assassination that takes place through the skillful dis. As in much of hip hop, here we find variations on the game of playing the dozens (an African American folk practice of competitive insult) and its competitive discourse.

Signifying, another element of black language that appears in hip hop, is distinguished in African American culture from the dozens largely for its suggestive and subtextual critique, an expression of cleverness rather than overtness. The folk expression of signifying finds articulation in the stories of the Signifying Monkey, who tells the Lion that the
Elephant has been insulting him. The furious Lion demands an apology from the Elephant, who refuses and roundly stomps him. Only then does the Lion realize his mistake of taking the Monkey’s word. So, for example, mc Lyte and Antoinette battled in the late 1990s. mc Lyte, in her song, “10% Dis,” rhymed, “Beat biter / dope style taker / tell you to your face you ain’t nothing but a faker,” a dozens-style confrontation, while Antoinette responded, “Lights out, now the party’s over / Home-girl reminds me of my dead dog rover,” using the world light as a double entendre, signaling the impending demise of her competitor, and calling her ugly without saying it directly. While the monkey’s indirect assault in the folktale comes through false gossip, Antoinette employs the homophone for hers.

Relying on Henry Louis Gates’s call for a vernacular-based literary criticism in *The Signifyin(g) Monkey*, Sam Floyd describes the meaning of Signifyin(g) when applied to the black music tradition: “Signifyin(g) is a way of saying one thing and meaning another; it is a reinterpretation, a metaphor for the revision of previous texts and figures; it is tropological thought, repetition with difference, the obscuring of meaning—all to achieve or reverse power, to improve situations, and to achieve pleasing results for the signifier.” As Nelson George says, “Recontextualizing someone else’s sounds was, after all, how hip hop started.” It is a Signifyin(g) form in its origins.

Signifyin(g) also manifests itself in the previously mentioned multiple registers of hip hop. Access to these registers constitutes a test in familiarity with the artist and, for example, his or her sociopolitical or philosophical location. Sometimes the various registers conflict, so that the first level of text may actually affirm stereotypes of black men, for example, or appear to be misogynistic. Yet a deeper register of the text may then challenge the assumptions, describe feeling locked into the stereotype, reinterprets it to the advantage of the artist, or make fun of the holder of the stereotype. When registers conflict with each other, listeners find themselves in a quandary regarding the music’s interpretation. Should it be interpreted according to the deeper registers or the most superficial, more accessible ones? Floyd writes, “Through the energizing and renewing magic of myth and ritual, there emerged from the volatile cauldron of Call-Response a music charged with meanings centuries old—meanings to which the initiated, the knowledgeable, and the culturally sensitive responded in heightened communi-
Nelson George has described his surprise at the support for 2 Live Crew, the notoriously misogynistic and exploitative Miami Bass rap group, expressed by black women students during a lecture at Spelman College in Atlanta. What the episode reveals, however, is that the female listeners clearly understood a regional cultural register that told them, “you can escape this misogynistic construction by not behaving in a certain manner” thereby possibly not identifying the misogyny with themselves, even if they perhaps should have been appalled by it.

Beyond the arena of music, the Signifyin(g) call-response trope extends to clothing styles, colloquial speech, spoken word, and the like, all in conversation with rap and rappers. George describes this in video culture: “An exciting interplay—a kind of videographic loop—developed between the consumers and performers. Performers would latch on to a new clothing style in the street. That style would be showcased in a video and the audience would then be turned on to the style, be it Run’s hat or Snoop Doggy Dogg’s braids. Within a few weeks, an outfit worn in Queens or Compton would suddenly become a national and sometimes international trend. Or the dialogue would go the other way.” The call issued from the video to a national audience response is consistently reinterpreted, modified, made local, and then made national again.

The Signifyin(g) that Gates articulated in landmark fashion in his work on the African American literary tradition is abundant in hip hop. Both the cultural tradition of Signifyin(g) that hip hop in many ways descends from, as well as the literary theoretical articulation of signification that Gates conceptualizes form part of the music. Gates quotes linguist Geneva Smitherman’s eight features of signification:

1. Indirection, circumlocution
2. Metaphorical-imagistic
3. Humorous, ironic
4. Rhythmic fluence and sound
5. Teachy but not preachy
6. Directed at person or persons usually present in the situational context
7. Punning, play on words
8. Introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected

These elements are present within the universe of the hip hop narrative, but also in the construction of the music, through deejaying, and...
as part of a musical canon. While the textuality is distinct in hip hop as it is brief, oral, and aural rather than written, and has the appearance of being entirely vernacular (a false appearance, but significant nonetheless), it does rely on some of the same tools Gates articulates. The Signifyin(g) on other texts in hip hop occurs both within the world of rap, and across black music, and even across music in general. When Dr. Dre lays lyrics of gangster destruction over mellow soul, his composition signifies on that earlier music’s interpretation of black experience and yet uses it as a vernacular for creating the contemporary meaning he articulates. When Biggie Smalls first came out, he was an East Coast signification on West Coast forms of storytelling, language, and celebrations of wealth and death. Gates describes Signifyin(g) as it appears in oral tradition:

Motivated Signifyin(g) is the sort in which the Monkey delights; it functions to redress an imbalance of power, to clear a space, rhetorically. To achieve occupancy in the desired space, the Monkey rewrites the received order by exploiting the Lion’s hubris and his inability to read the figurative other other than as the literal. Writers Signify on each other’s texts by rewriting the received textual tradition. This sort of Signifyin(g) revision serves, if successful, to create a space for the revising text. It also alters fundamentally the way we read the tradition, by defining the relation of the text at hand to the tradition. 13

Biggie’s genius as an MC was to take heed of the manner in which West Coast rap had eclipsed the East and to adopt and reinterpret the symbols of West Coast hip hop through an East Coast style. In 2003, the Queens-bred 50 Cent, whose album was released at number one, made a similar move integrating Southern and Western hip hop sensibilities into his style. In rap, the figure of the lion as having brute power, as opposed to the intellectual nuance and trickery of the monkey, might be read as white supremacy, but other readings are possible too: it might be read as the power of the trained musician, the power of the civil rights-era establishment for determining black public discourse and concerns, the perceived greater social and economic power of black women as compared to black men, all of which might be troped in text. The Signifyin(g) in rap in sophistication far exceeds a simple reference or response—it is engagement with other texts and their traditions in the midst of one’s own piece, using the former as part of the ultimate creation of the latter.
In fact, the use of the monkey in the folktale itself reminds us that rap is but a child of earlier forms.

Of the many colorful figures that appear in black vernacular tales, perhaps only Tar Baby is as enigmatic and compelling as is the oxymoron, the Signifying Monkey. The ironic reversal of a received racist image of the black as simian-like, the Signifying Monkey, he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language, is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed our trope of chiasmus, repeating and reversing simultaneously as he does in one deft discursive act.\textsuperscript{14}

Exploiting the stereotype while simultaneously expressing literary skill is one of the prominent ways of using the black literary tradition.

The complex use of the structures of language and storytelling are critical features that help to describe what hip hop does, and to begin to develop a critical eye toward its evaluation. The basic elements of figurative language abound in the form, particularly metaphor. In hip hop, metaphor allows transcendence. Its frequent use lies at the heart of artistry in hip hop. It plays on the African American male tradition of finding freedom in mobility.\textsuperscript{15} Metaphor in hip hop is about motion and transformation; its usage allows the artists to move outside of the boundaries of their communities, and even transcend the limitations of human fallibility.

Milk: Do you understand the metaphoric phrase “lyte as a rock”? It’s explaining how heavy the young lady is, you know what I’m saying, king?

Gizmo: Yes, my brother, but I would consider “lyte as a rock” a simile because of the usage of the word “as.” And now, directly from the planet of Brooklyn, MC Lyte as a rock!\textsuperscript{16}

This exchange, spoken by MC Lyte’s hip hop artist brothers the “Audio Two,” a.k.a. Milk and Gizmo, introduces her song “Lyte as a Rock.” It explains the simile in the title with the word heavy (as a rock), meaning having profound insight and wisdom. This song features a self-conscious use of figurative language, with metaphor and simile functioning as the most important nonliteral elements in the lyrics, a phenomenon found throughout hip hop lyrics.

“I’m like...” is probably one of the five most popular phrases to begin
hip hop stanzas. Metaphor and simile function in three notable ways in hip hop. First, they fulfill the obvious task of explication. The mc tells the listener about him- or herself, or whatever other subject is up for discussion, through comparison with or use of the characteristics of other objects, creatures, or entities. Second, they serve as great tools for exhortation and proclamation because through the metaphoric naming of great things, the mc proclaims his or her own greatness: “Lyte as a rock / or I should say a boulder rollin’ down your neck / poundin’ on your shoulders.”

But perhaps most important, metaphor and simile engage the imagination and expand or transform the universe in which the mc dwells. With them, the author creates a space of possibility.

Emcees often create dramatic contrast within the sphere of the rhyme between life as it exists and life as it might be, and they often juxtapose those two realities. The conclusion of Special Ed’s “I Got It Made” is reminiscent of Nikki Giovanni’s famous 1970s poem “Ego Trippin’,” as he tells his readers through example about his greatness, or rather how he “has it made.” Interspersed with tales of part ownership of Tahiti and his personal waiter bringing him potato alligator soufflé, are “My hair was growing too long so I got me a fade / and when my dishes got dirty, I got Cascade / when the weather was hot, I got a spot in the shade.” These are distinctly possible and mundane aspects of Special Ed’s daily life. The music video to accompany the song was partly shot in front of Erasmus Hall High School in Flatbush, Brooklyn, and in abandoned lots. In the video, the juxtaposition of expansive imaginative possibilities and the daily existence of the teenager in New York proves even more dramatic. During the line “I got a frog, a dog with a solid gold bone,” Special Ed smiles and holds up a dirty old bone.

It is important to note, however, that metaphor does not always express great hope or great ability. It can also serve as the expression of despair, stagnation, or destruction. Natural Bee rhymed, “Vermin I terminate verbally / I offend more niggas than the Mark Furman tapes,” manifesting a clever destructive power. The appropriation of the names of the infamous or of weaponry for stage names is a sign of power, but also a glamorization of destruction. Capone, Noreaga (after General Manuel Noriega), Smif-N-Wessun (after the gun manufacturers), and, perhaps most disturbingly, Concentration Camp are names that operate as metaphors of violent destructive capability. So in the midst of the great beauty of expression and emotion that operates through metaphor
in hip hop, there exists an ugliness (with cultural antecedents in toasts) that must be acknowledged as well. The tradition of harnessing ugliness to claim power is found in the cultural antecedents of hip hop.

As John Szwed explains, “The most likely candidate for a direct forebear of modern rap is the toast, the rhymed monologue, an African-American poetic form that typically recounts the adventures of a group of heroes who often position themselves against society either as so shrewd and powerful as to be superhuman, or so bad and nasty as to be sub-human.” Figurative language is not only used for the self-aggrandizement so popular in hip hop music but also for the sake of making interesting artistic statements. Craig Mack rhymes:

Craig Mack
1000 degrees
You’ll be on your knees
You’ll be beggin’ burning please
Brother freeze man
Undisputed deep-rooted
funk smoke that leaves your brains booted.

Hip hop is high-sensibility music. Even before music videos became popular, the use of visual images was common in the poetry of hip hop. This holistic culture, and participatory performance culture, engages multiple senses anyway, but in addition, the lyrics themselves speak of sensory diversity in describing the effects of the music. Senses are transferred and interchanged. For example, where touch would be, sound has entered, reinforcing the sense of inundation in the musical experience. Heavy D. rhymes: “With moves that sensual / three-dimensional / unquestionable lover’s a professional.” The multisensory figurative language makes reference to the fact that the music is simply the most prominent expression of a broader cultural form. In addition to the auditory, the visual and the kinetic, the variety of senses and expressions of senses, are experienced as part of hip hop culture. Renowned DJ Kid Capri has said, “I made my tapes sound like a party. No matter what it was. My tapes just made you feel like you were there while the tape was being made.”

The aesthetics of the music have demanded that the multisensory experience of live music be incorporated into the recorded composi-
tions, both poetically and in the creation of the sounds of partying. Paul Gilroy, observing such gestures, writes, “The hip hop nation has confined its loudly trumpeted enthusiasm for improvisation within strict limits. Most of the time its favored mode of reality is a virtual one in which only the illusion of spontaneity is created and the balance between rehearsed and improvised elements of the creative event shifts decisively toward the former.” Gilroy does not necessarily locate this as a criticism, but rather sees that the process impacts the performance of rap as compared to other black music forms. Certainly, one rarely finds improvisation in performances of popular artists or onstage, where the aesthetic of live performance is marketed rather than the reality. But one does find it at the local venue or party, contexts which continue to provide inspiration for recorded imitations of multisensory improvisation.

Composition

The more common use of the word composition is useful as it explains the way in which hip hop meets the African/African American “heterogeneous sound ideal.” In The Power of Black Music, Sam Floyd cites Olly Wilson in describing this musical ideal “that results from the timbral mosaic created by the interaction between the lead voice, chorus, rattle, metal gong, hand clapping, various wind or strong instruments, and drums which exists in greater or lesser degrees in almost all African ensemble music.” By and large, however, hip hop is not the music of singers or instrument players. One of the effects of desegregation in some communities and school cutbacks in others was the loss of a ritualized formal space for instrument learning and practice for many African American children, and this is part of the reason hip hop is not primarily musician’s music.

Yet I do not wish to posit rap as a music of deprived resources, suggesting that if only young African Americans had learned to play instruments, they could have made more “valuable” music. One of the genius elements of the creation of hip hop is that it has allowed a reconception of a number of ways to fit the musical ideal, and I say reconceive because, as Chuck D told me when I approached him to tell him about this book, “Ain’t nothin new under the sun,” even without traditional musical tools. Floyd writes about the ideal that “the combina-

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tion of these sounds creates a contrasting, not a blending conglomerate, resulting in a sound that is ideally suited to the rhythmic, polyphonic and tonal stratifications of African and African American music.”  

In order to do this in hip hop, instead of putting together different kinds of instruments or styles of singers to create a conglomerate, different sorts of repeated sounds and voices—some singing, some talking—are placed together, arranged, manipulated, and transformed with a heavy dependence on technology. Houston Baker described hip hop deejaying as postmodern, saying, “The high technology of advanced sound production was reclaimed by and for human ears and the human body’s innovative abilities. A hybrid sound then erupted in seemingly dead urban acoustical spaces. (By postmodern I intend the nonauthoritative collaging or archiving of sound and styles that bespeaks a deconstructive hybridity. Linearity and progress yield to a dizzying synchronicity.)”

Although he describes the collage effect as postmodern, in fact its reference to the montage of memory creates a deep historical awareness. Artistically what occurs is postmodern construction, but intellectually and emotionally, hip hop makes for a largely compositional form. Construction is at least conceptually the opposite of realism. Theodor W. Adorno posits construction in opposition to composition because while composition is the distinct putting together of elements, construction “tears the elements of reality out of primary context and transforms them to the point they are once again capable of creating a unity.”

While the constitutive elements of the music of hip hop are almost always clearly distinguishable, maintaining a compositional framework, lyrically there are artists capable within individual songs of blurring the lines of added literary elements—realist, imaginative, metaphoric—to such an extent that the listener is brought into the specific unity of that artist’s realm. Rakim has often been regarded as such an artist: “The tempo’s a trail / the stage is a cage / the mic is a third rail.”

We, as the audience, are on his train, riding to the destination of satisfaction having consumed and appreciated his rhyme. Only he, the mc, can get close enough to the site of power and potential execution, the third rail, the microphone, and use its electricity to channel its power into art. We move with him from discrete metaphors into a holistic “Rakim World.”

In the late 1990s, the Wu-Tang Clan, using themes from Asian martial arts, comic book characters, multiple names and metaphors, and symbolically representing their homes on Staten Island, constructed their
own sort of “Wu world,” complete with graphics, family trees, and atti-
tire. Construction is often the most complex sort of rhyming; it stands
next to other sorts of hip hop almost as jazz does to blues. Both are
potentially brilliant, but the brilliance of the former comes in part from
multitextuality, shape-shifting, and minute interactions put together
smoothly and seamlessly. Killah Priest rhymes:

Eat lamb with Abraham and break bread with the Son of Man
So slowly hold these hands and stretch forth from the skies
Like a rubber band begins to pop you above the land out of the
atmosphere
Don’t look back, Why? We’re almost there
Just tryin’ to prepare and adapt to the air pressure now
We stretchin’ for the mental treasure pleasure beyond measure
beyond you can’t comprehend the God or the distance
Between stars, pickin’ up quasars and signs of radars
We goin’ past any astronaut movin’ so fast in this aircraft
Everything we pass get hot from the takeoff
The blast turnin’ glass into rocks at last!
My supreme task was no longer to walk on green grass till
I become a beam of gas and travel through extreme draft
Unable to be picked up through cable
Out of there each of all manners of sky examiners heaven scanners giant
antennas and high tech space cameras.
No evidence in any cemetery or obituary
Not found in any library or encyclopedia or media
I’m in star mode!31

Where is this artist? Beyond ordinary means of research, and also be-
yond imaginations of celestial realms. He creates through his charac-
terization of physical and intellectual impact a simultaneously attractive
and elusive vision of his location. He has constructed a space where we
travel with him only through engagement with his artistry.
Deejays and Producers

I nominated my DJ the president.
—Rakim, “Eric B is President”

The MC composes the narrative, but the aesthetics of composition are heavily dependent on the DJ or producer, as well as the relationship between the MC and those individuals. The MC, true to the title master of ceremonies, has always been the front man or woman. On stage, the DJ originally spun records standing at a set of turntables behind the MC. As time went on, a number of MCs replaced partnership with a DJ by digital production. Deejays are still not to be forgotten, however, and a number of noted DJs, such as Funkmaster Flex, Kid Capri, DJ Premier, Jazzy Jeff, and Hi-Tek, have released solo albums and all along had informally sold mixed tapes, using a number of different MCs to showcase their skills. On these albums, they seamlessly mix various songs into each other, transitioning between them by matching rhythm time before switching from one record to the next. They may create new rhythms or beats between and within records, pull the record back to the same place again and again to repeat a riff or a set of words, or scratch out rhythms with the needle and play break beats repeatedly, a signature feature of early hip hop. They create what in poetry is called the purple patch, that is, a space where the rhythm is changed for dramatic purpose in order to call particular attention to the words or music at that point. New music is composed using old hip hop songs, funk, soul, ballads, easy listening, rock, and all manner of other music forms. The work of the DJ is the foundation of the particular aesthetic that has emerged within hip hop’s specific heterogeneous sound ideal. And even as the DJ becomes less prominent nowadays, in live venues one can see what ferocious, adept, and amazing an artist an excellent DJ actually is, and how easily the DJ can take attention away from the MC if he or she so chooses.

Producers can put the sounds of a door creaking or a television playing in the background, along with various other sounds of home and community, into the musical composition. An excellent producer puts together a multilayered web of sounds using rhythms, beats, and noise. And as live instrumentation becomes more popular in hip hop, as opposed to heavy sampling, producers have to put live music together with other elements in order to satisfy the aesthetic sensibilities cultivated by...
the auditory tessellations of DJs. For the most part, just playing a song, any song, with rhyming over does not prove satisfying to the hip hop head, even if it’s funky. Another digital beat, or sample—or an element from a song or a blend of those elements—have to be included because the heterogeneous aesthetic of hip hop comprises widely divergent elements and the bringing together of disparate sounds.

Within the context of a party, as opposed to a show, a DJ, whose job is not to be a composer but rather to play records, still composes. Although musically the composition is often not as complex as that of a DJ doing a show, it is still complex in terms of community. A good DJ, not just in hip hop but in other musical forms as well, responds to the crowd. Taking in its styles, professions, ages, socioeconomic class, and ethnicities, he or she discerns what will make them dance. A DJ sustains the crowd’s interest by playing the correct blend of favorites, unknowns, and the mediocre, putting on records to climax the crowd and then bring it down again gently. Some have signature orders of music styles—reggae, contemporary hip hop, old-school hip hop, R & B—in some combination that allows for smooth transition. By mixing, he (or she, but usually he) teases the crowd with a quiet taste of the next song to be played, a song it might really want to hear. Sometimes he teases the audience even further by making it the song after the next instead of the next song. In transitioning between songs, his beats are put together so they sound good in composition, but still remain recognizable as belonging to separate songs. The DJ at a party might also lead the crowd by calling for different affiliations, identities, or hometowns to be shouted out, asking for particular dances, or creating unexpected silence in order for the people to shout out the missing lines. Each part, and each good party, consists of its own composition led by the DJ and sustained by the energy of the partygoers.

**Emcees**

Make the music, make the music, make the music, with your mouth.
—Biz Markie, “Make the Music with Your Mouth Biz”

The MC blends his voice with the DJ and the audience to make the composition complete. Not simply limited to language, the MC in early hip

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hop was a musician as well. Before expensive drum machines became readily available to the average young person wanting to rhyme, beat boxing was fundamental. Producing the sounds of a drum machine with one’s mouth and tongue stands in the tradition of scatting, a style in which vocalists replicate instrument sounds. Rather than instruments, however, beat boxers replicated the sound of late-twentieth-century technology complete with multiple beats, beeps, eeks, motors, and robotlike vocal interruptions. Again, this was hip hop’s interpretation of a black music tradition. Floyd cites the “use of wordless sounds for their own value rather than for the communication of verbal meaning” in his charting of the musical continuities of black American music with African music. In the mid-eighties, several prominent MCs were also great beat boxers, such Buff Love of the Fat Boys, now deceased, Doug E. Fresh, and Biz Markie. In recorded music, beat boxing added another layer of sound to the basic beat and the MC’s speaking voice. As increased technology, more sophisticated deejaying, and production became available to the average MC who could easily buy studio time, the art of beat boxing virtually disappeared. This is a shame because beat boxers made some outrageous, funky sounds and, as testified to by a summer 1999 concert featuring old school MC Doug E. Fresh, the artful skill continued to elicit enthusiastic response long after its heyday.

The response elicited by the audience from DJs or MCs forms part of the hip hop composition. Hence Rakim’s lyrics: “To me MC means move the crowd.” Even as recorded music, rap has a live sensibility, and artists often test songs out on local audiences before recording or deciding on which songs to release. The MC’s ability to make the audience participate constitutes an essential measure of his or her success. The music offers a site of collective collaboration, and one of the central methods of collaboration in hip hop is the origin of Floyd’s Call-Response trope, the actual call and response, a popularly understood element of black music. Classic calls, repeated again and again over the years, include “Everybody say ho!” then answered by the crowd’s “Ho,” which is repeated three times, each time slightly differently, and concludes with a variation on “Somebody scream!” causing screams to rise up from the audience. Some call-and-response patterns offer directions for various parts of the crowd to say different things, according to location, gender, place of origin, or some such defining characteristic. Call and response is not limited in hip hop to verbal response but might also manifest itself.
in body movements. So when the mc says, “throw your hands in the air,” “raise the roof,” or ‘give it up,’” the motion and visual become part of the composite musical experience. To rock it, to set it off, is to create a holistic experience that engages at least three or four of the senses. Even music not intended as dance music should at least make listeners nod their heads, hence songs like the “Nod Your Head to This” or “The Head-Nodder.” However, the infectiousness of the grooves might make the audience do a little more: as Mad Skillz says in “The Head-Nodder,” “My shit’ll have hard niggas in soul train lines, bumpin’ with a big black broad named Belinda.”

Call-and-response motions include simple arm movements, as well as dances. In “Return of the Boom Bap,” one of krs-One’s choruses goes: “Bogle in the dance / Bogle in the dance,” referring to a Jamaican dance of pointed fingers, bent elbows, and undulating back and shoulders. In “Ladies Night,” Lil’ Kim says in the flow of her rhyme, “Let me see you do the bankhead,” referring to a Southern dance gone national of rapidly bouncing shoulders as the body rocks back and forth. And who among listeners of hip hop in the mid-eighties could forget the classic dance rap record put out by Joeski Love, “Pee Wee’s Dance”? “Listen up party people ‘cause the party is burnin’ / For a new dance I know you been yearnin’ / so for all you people concernin’ / the brand new dance called the Pee Wee Herman.” Inspired by the awkward gestures of the children’s actor who starred on Pee Wee’s Playhouse, Paul Rubens, the dance and the song had young hip hop heads stepping back and forth with bent knees and trembling fists.

Even outside of parties, open mics, and concerts, the audience and the artist still have a dynamic relationship in freestyle sessions. In the circle of listeners, whether it be one or ten, the listening parties lean in, heads bowed, with their bodies bobbing up and down to provide encouragement for the continuation of the flow. One or two might create a beat (with the mouth) for the freestyler, but in a larger group the majority will become part of the composition with their bodies in motion. The mc of the moment often comes within inches of the listener’s face with gestures and movements intended to further communication and keep the flow and rhythm alive. This kind of artist-audience relationship is rooted in the tradition of functional art in that it stresses community and heterogeneity of individuals in the composition. It also stands as an important democratic gesture because it identifies hip hop as a collective
everyperson’s music. Black American music existed under the threat of co-optation throughout the twentieth century. The black community’s presence within the music composition offers protection against co-optation and hierarchical commodification: anyone might emerge from the (theoretical and sometimes literal) crowd and grab the mic if he or she is smart and skilled enough.

The call-and-response theme appears in the interaction between artists as well. Part of what made Run-dmc such great hip hop lyricists was their verbal interaction. They would finish each other’s phrases, answer each other’s questions, and respond to each other’s calls. Their interaction contributed to the heterogeneous sound of the music; dmc’s voice was lower and mellower, while Run often hollered himself hoarse.

Run: Now Peter Piper picked peppers
DMC: But Run rocked rhymes
Run: Humpty Dumpty fell down
DMC: That’s his hard times
Run: Jack B.
DMC: Nimble
Run: was
DMC: Nimble
Run: and he was quick
Together: Jam master’s much faster, Jack’s on Jay’s dick.

The fictional Jack B. Nimble “on Jay’s dick” is in awe of his lightning-quick dj stylings, according to the collaborating mcs. The relationship between artists on a cut is generally speaking more about heterogeneity than harmonic sound, with some exceptions as in the group Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, who create rolling sounds with only slightly nuanced vocal differences that do not compete but blend instead.

In “Check the Rhyme,” the two mcs of A Tribe Called Quest, Q-Tip and Fife, each have solo sections preceded by a call and response, the response being given by the one who is about to have the solo.

Fife: You on point Tip?
Q-Tip: All the time Fife
Fife: You on point Tip?
Q-Tip: All the time Fife?
Fife: You on point Tip?
Q-Tip: All the time Fife
Fife: Well then play the Resurrection and give the dead some life.
Q-Tip: Okay if knowledge is the key then just show me the lock.\(^{40}\)

Erick Sermon and Parrish Smith of \textit{EPMD} (Erick and Parrish Making Dollars) conversed frequently within their rhymes. Sometimes one would personify the individuals that the other encountered in the course of a narrative, and at other times he would play the listener to the narrative, as though a friend were telling him a story, with the appropriate responses and exclamations. In their song “Who Killed Jane?”—concluding the saga of Jane, a transvestite they encounter on each album embroiled in some drama—Erick plays both the police officer and the listening friend.

E (as policeman): Sit up straight, state your name and your birth date and your whereabouts last night about eight.
P: Slow down.
E: Slow down?
P: Something’s missing, where’s my lawyer?
cop grilled me and said
E: Yo there’s your lawyer!\(^{41}\) Things’ll get rough, so don’t act tough and try to play games. You headed up north.
P: For what?
E: You know what boy, the death of Jane.
P: You must be insane with no brain sniffin’ cocaine, and if I caught a body it’d be yours and not Jane’s.
E: Oh mister toughie you wish you had a nine to bust me I’m not a child I don’t play my name ain’t Chuckie.
P: Cop got pissed, and stepped back and grabbed his blackjack, swung for my dome ducked and caught my damn back.
E (as friend): Ooh.
P: Couldn’t feel the pain.
E: Why?
P: Thinkin’ bout the payback.\(^{42}\)
Parrish narrates yet also participates in the internal dialogue between him and the cop. This transition between roles is signaled by Erick’s personification of the cop. The interaction facilitates temporal shifts between the past and present moments and brings the past moment alive.

Alternately, a number of artists might rhyme on one song without this sort of direct interaction, each separate segment having a different flavor according to the style and voice of the artist. Even then, like a girl warming her body up to the rhythm of the double Dutch ropes before jumping in, we may hear the next MC making rhythmic sounds in preparation for coming forth with his or her own rhymes. Before Lil’ Kim’s segment in “Benjamins,” she grunts “uh uh” on beat and then shouts an aggressive Jamaican patois curse word, with etymological roots in the female reproductive cycle, “What the blood clot!”

In this song, Lil’ Kim identifies herself as the only female in her Bad Boy label crew. The crew holds great importance within the performance of hip hop: it is the group of artists who constitute a clique or family within the larger musical community, yet it exceeds the individual act. Within a crew, cameos from other acts are quite common. The Boot Camp Clik, including the Cocoa Brovaz (formerly Smif-N-Wessun, who had to change their name for copyright reasons) Heltah Skeltah, and Black Moon, often make references to each other’s names and to the clique, as well as make cameo appearances in each other’s songs. Each MC in the group is distinctive, but all of them share an almost harrowing soulful sound and a plethora of metaphoric and personified violent references.

Of course, the consumer appeal of having several popular artists rhyme on one song also serves as a motivation for putting artists from various groups together. A parade of stars can prove a big moneymaker, particularly when it signals the reunion of artists formerly in conflict, like East and West Coast collaborations, or when artists from the former N.W.A. Dr. Dre and Ice Cube, worked together again, or when EPMD reunited with the album Back in Business after being broken up for five years.

Given the popularity hip hop has achieved, however, the breadth of recorded sound far exceeds the correlated live interactive space, which is part of Paul Gilroy’s observation discussed earlier about limited improvisation in hip hop. The tension created by the limited interactive worlds gives rise to the kind of suspicion and authenticity politics one
finds among hip hop audiences in young urban black communities. This community of hip hop listeners—for whom the music defines its generation, who feels it deeply and loves it, and who participates in the culture surrounding hip hop as a whole—sees its role in the composition of the mc as essential. When heads perceive that the intended audience for a cut is not lovers of hip hop, largely those of or connected to the urban black community but rather the general white population, a crossover audience, accusations of selling out come quickly. Some artists have felt this accusation to unwarranted, believing that any time they begin to make a lot of money, they are referred to as sellouts. While there may be some truth to the notion that commercial success in the mainstream puts the artist under greater scrutiny and suspicion, the success of artists like Biggie Smalls, Lauryn Hill, Wyclef Jean, or Wu-Tang, who have had crossover appeal while maintaining a committed following among hip hop heads, demonstrates that the resentment tackles more than the encroachment of capitalism. It also stems from a sense of audience betrayal, as artists who cater to the aesthetics of music, dancing, and styles of those outside the hip hop community disturb the community composition of hip hop culture.

Narrative

In addition to the internal compositional elements, the format of the stories told figure as an important feature of hip hop. These formats largely derive from black folk oral and literary traditions. The narrative is the classic form, often marked as a signature feature of the old school, although all four forms (narrative, exhortation/proclamation, description, battle) I will discuss existed in some form or another in older hip hop songs. The narrative is a yarn, and

the intention of the narrator of the Yarn is to tell outrageous stories that stretch and shatter credibility, overblown accounts about characters expressed in superlatives: the greatest liar is the hero of the yarn, or the strongest woodman, or the most cunning gambler. We listen increduously, not believing a single word, our delight based on skepticism and wondering whether the storyteller can top the last, preposterous episode he’s spun—by definition the traditional Yarn is always episodic in structure, one outrageous lie after another.43

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From Prophets of the Hood by Perry, Imani. DOI: 10.1215/9780822386155
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The narrative in hip hop is a kind of storytelling, a late-twentieth century and early-twenty-first-century extension of traditional African American folktales, the mc replacing Dolemite or Brer Rabbit. Within the story, time is traversed, and the topic might be mundane, dramatic, or comic. Oftentimes it contains elements of a morality play. krs-One’s narrative song “Love’s Gonna Getcha” explicitly warns the listener against the dangers of drug dealing through a first-person narrative of a poor young black man and his brother who is eventually murdered as a result of his pursuit and “love” for material things. At each stage of the song, the first-person character becomes more deeply entangled in the web of illegal activity, and he repeatedly asks the listener, “Now tell me what the fuck am I supposed to do?” He simultaneously warns others of this kind of life by accurately presenting the dilemmas that might lead a young man to participate in illegal activities and which then might make it extremely difficult to leave them behind. krs-One here made a meaningful social statement, particularly because it was written in the era of Nancy Reagan’s simplistic and ineffective “Just Say No” to drugs campaign. The hip hop piece employed the narrative as a kind of morality play with a political message attached.

Alternately, in a comedic narrative, “Delancey Street,” Dana Dane spins a tale about being robbed by three women. They chase him through the streets of Brooklyn until he’s cornered in a dead end and must quickly think of a way to get out of the situation. Like Superman he opens up his outer wear and “printed on my shirt just as bold and plain / I’m not the one the rapper Dana Dane / Well the girls caught the message it was plain to see / They might as well have said “Dana Dane you’re free.” All of the women begin to fawn over him, and the song concludes with them fighting for his attention as he walks away. These two narratives reflect the styles of each of the rappers. krs-One has been known for years in hip hop as the teacher of social consciousness, and he described the album which featured “Love’s Gonna Getcha” as using hip hop as a revolutionary force. Dana Dane was a comedic romantic, the lover winding up in a number of bizarre situations created by female obsession with him. He was “Cinderfella Dana Dane,” the male hip hop version of Cinderella, with Bally shoes and a Kangol hat instead of glass slippers and a ball gown. In “Nightmares,” he was a young man being chased down high school halls and in a therapist’s office by an unattractive woman, Anita the Beast.
A third narrative example may be found in Genius/gza’s dark tales of drug dealing episodes.

I’m deep down in the back streets in the heart of Medina
About to set off somethin’ more deep than a misdemeanor
Under the subway waitin’ for the train to make noise
So I blast a nigga and his boys
For what? He pushed up on the block
And made the dope sales drop like the crash in the Dow Jones stock
I had to connect across ceilings to catch more bills than more bitches
      got birth control pills
I’m on the part settin’ up a deal over blunt smoke
nigga sleepin’ on the bench they had him wired
Peep my convo, address of my condo
How I change a nigga name to John Doe
And while he set up camp
He got vamped
But the stake through his heart
I ripped his fucking lungs apart
Snake got smoked on the set
Like Brandon Lee
Blown out the frame like Pan Am flight 103.47

This story line is reminiscent of a gangster flick, complete with territory conflicts and crime setups. Genius/gza create a harrowing narrative film.

A fourth example of the narrative form can be found in Ice Cube’s “It Was a Good Day” from his Predator album. In the course of the song, Cube describes his ideal day, which includes a breakfast cooked by his mother without pork, pickup basketball, dominoes, attention from a girl he’s been trying to date since the eighth grade, sex with another girl named Kim, and watching a Lakers/Supersonics basketball game which the Lakers win. Equally important are the things absent from this day—police harassment and death in South Central Los Angeles. The music video to accompany this song comes to a dramatic conclusion. After the song ends, Ice Cube enters his home, which is surrounded by police
cars and helicopters. The oasis provided by “the good day” is over, and he again falls victim to the surveillance and abuse of the LAPD. Ice Cube rhymes as the everyday black man living in Los Angeles, but a black nationalist consciousness informs his work. It fits that identity or label by insinuating the tragic circumstances of the lives of black men into ritualized pleasurable activities to imply rather than assert a political message (although some of Ice Cube’s work is more explicitly political, and other parts of it remain explicitly apolitical). Narratives are used to entertain and educate, but also to explicate the personality and lifestyle the MC projects.

Exhortation/Proclamation

Hip hop has been characterized as bragging music because it is common for entire songs to be dedicated to proclamations about the MC’s greatness. Yet this format of proclaiming something, or exhorting an argument, is not limited to the MC alone, although that emerges as the most frequent subject. Many songs serve as advisories or encouragements for the listener to comprehend a given idea. These exhortations and proclamations are composed of sets of short exempla, brief stories, metaphors, or examples to support the general theme. Take, for example, Nas’s “It Ain’t Hard to Tell”:

It ain’t hard to tell
I excel then prevail
The mic is contacted I attract clientele
My mic check is life or death
Breathin’ a sniper’s breath
I exhale the yellow smoke of Buddha through righteous depths
Deep like the shinin’
Sparkle like a diamond sneak an Uzi on the Island in my army jacket
linin’
Hit the earth like a comet invasion
Nas is like the Afrocentric Asian
half man half amazin’
’cause in my physical I can express through song
Delete stress like Motrin
then extend strong.\textsuperscript{48}

He shifts between metaphors of elemental greatness to street hardness, exemplified by smuggling weapons into the prison on Rikers Island. LL Cool J’s song “I’m Bad,” from the \textit{Bigger and Deffer} album, offers the following set of example:

\begin{quote}
I’m like Tyson
Icin’ I’m a sole jaguar
Makin’ sure you don’t try to battle me no more
Got concrete rhymes been rappin’ for ten years
And even when I’m braggin’ I’m bein’ sincere
MCS can’t win I’ll make ‘em rust like tin
They call me jaws my hat is like a sharks fin.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

This set tells the listener that the artist has the skills of boxer Mike Tyson, then heavyweight champion and a metaphor for strength, that he rhymes alone with the predatory instincts of a wildcat, that he is established and experienced, and that despite his metaphoric bragging, he’s serious about his abilities. LL has always worn a hat, it is his signature, and he likens it to the symbol of danger that the fin was in the movie \textit{Jaws}. Each exemplum supports his contention that he is bad in the black English sense of the word meaning “good.”

While “I’m Bad” is a self-exhortation song, the next song on the cd, “Kanday,” is an exhortation about another person, a girl with whom LL is fictively involved. Here, he rhymes:

\begin{quote}
Her body’s bad
The girl’s built
Skin like silk
Wet steamy warm just like a hot cup of milk
She’s all the way live
Keeps me satisfied
I don’t go outside
I like to stay inside her
Ways are like an angel with bright white wings
\end{quote}
And I’m crazy bout the way Kanday shakes her thing. 
Wouldn’t leave her for nothing only a crazy man would
That’s why I had to tell you that I Feel Good, Whooh! 
about Kanday!50 

Kanday’s sexy attributes and her effect on the mc here become the focus of the proclamation. The subject of an exhortation might range from either positive or negative assessments of the opposite sex to the superiority of one’s neighborhood or region. Examples for the latter can be found in “Deja Vu (Uptown Baby)” by Lord Tariq and Peter Gunz, “California Love” by Tupac Shakur, “Southside: Houston, Texas” by Scarface, or the classic “South Bronx” by Boogie Down Productions, rhymed by krs-One. The song might even focus on the brand of sneakers one favors. Many people will be familiar with Run-DMC’s “My Adidas” in this vein, but there was also “Nike” by Heavy D. and the Boyz, and several mcs who made songs or references to Filas in the early to mid-1980s.51

Some exhortations/proclamations constitute theories about some sort of practice, for example, a discourse about how an mc should rhyme, or an idea about how one should operate within the world. Run-DMC combined a theory about artistic excellence with self-proclamation in the song “Perfection” from the Raising Hell album.

Run: Perfection to D is quite essential, he has to live up to his potential. 
DMC: I work real hard all day and night I get to it and do it ’cause I want it right. I got Bass 
Run: Tone 
DMC: A new 
Run: Cologne 
DMC: And then I rock a funky 
Run: Rhyme 
DMC: On the micro- 
Run: Phone32 

The components of DMC’s aspiration toward perfection include not only labor but the right sound elements, including the bass, an attention to sound quality, and funky rhymes. Among the list of accusations against hip hop as a viable art form is the criticism that the music is not “about” anything. When people voice this accusation, they are usually talking about the exhortation/proclamation form, which only loosely centers
around a general theme and allows the author, through the use of examples, to spiral into a wide diversity of formulations, metaphors, and analogies to make the point. The creative space is so expansive that the logic of the moment can be lost to the casual listener, whether that logic be an exhortation of the mc’s greatness, an expression of his or her lyrical dexterity, or some other engaged idea.

Description

Similar to narratives, descriptive rhymes often outline a particular situation, dynamic, or thing, but they lack the linear time frame the narrative form possesses. It is difficult to find descriptive rhymes that are not also somehow exhortations on wax, but freestyling, improvisational rhyming, is more often predominantly descriptive. An excellent freestyler can comment on his or her environs, what clothes people have on, the dynamics in the room, much like an excellent comedian who can make jokes about the crowd on the spot. Or the freestyler might engage in a stream of consciousness in which coherence is less important than the quality and cleverness of individual ideas (as opposed to the entire piece) and the flow of the rhyming. Take this example from Greg Nice of the duo Nice ‘N Smooth: “Greg Nice / My life’s like a fairy tale / Orca was a great big whale / I knew a fat girl who broke the scale / You won’t tell / I won’t tell.”

Greg Nice’s narrative is comprised of a string of non sequiturs, and so it sounds like the spontaneous flow of a freestyler, rather than a written song. The disjointedness has its own idiosyncratic appeal, like the bizarreness of a Lewis Carroll poem.

Battle

Rap’s competitive origins have received much discussion. In the genre’s early days, mcs and djs went up against each other in talent shows or battles, and the best was decided on by the crowd. What was earlier called breaking and boogaloo was redesignated in the 1990s as “battle dancing.” This phenomenon moved from the live party to wax and the disco or battle records of the mid- to late 1980s, sometimes to become pyramids of rhymes all in conversation with one another. The 1984 “Rox-
anne Roxanne,” by U.T.F.O. (the Untouchable Force Organization), was a song dissing a stuck-up girl. Roxanne Shante responded with “Roxanne’s Revenge,” as did another woman, who called herself the Real Roxanne, with her self-titled “Real Roxanne.” Sparky D also had some words for Roxanne, such as “Roxanne you’re through / girl Ima walk all over you,” and then came another song by U.T.F.O., “Roxanne’s a Man.”

Boogie Down Productions and the Juice Crew had a historic conflict, which began with Boogie Down Productions challenging MC Shan’s song “The Bridge” about the early days of hip hop in Queens. In response, KRS-One rhymed, in “The Bridge Is Over,” “Bronx created hip hop / Queens will only get dropped you still tellin’ lies to me / Everybody’s talkin’ ’bout the Juice Crew funny but you still tellin’ lies to me.”

His cadence mimicked the Billy Joel song “It’s Still Rock ‘n’ Roll to Me,” another song hailing musical authenticity.

The conflict in battle records supports the discursive space in hip hop, which allows the listener to make evaluations about the relative merits of songs or artists. Today one is much more likely to hear “The Bridge Is Over” than “The Bridge” because “The Bridge Is Over” was ultimately determined to be the better song and because KRS-One’s career has had much greater longevity and national prominence than MC Shan’s, although Shan, too, was a great MC.

Conflicts manufactured by corporate entities knowing that a good fight will improve sales have somewhat compromised the competitive thrust of hip hop. Nonetheless, competition is sustained to some extent, even though the competition now witnessed by audiences of recorded music often is no longer intimate to a culturally specific hip hop community as it once was. Battle records between the East and West Coasts in the mid 1990s signaled an end to battling as a demonstration and sharpening of skills, because in those days, the critical measure for the audience had more to do with one’s origins than with who was the better MC. In the postcoastal feuding world, battling records not motivated by regional affiliation or corporate manipulation have continued to appear, though in smaller numbers: 1998 witnessed a surprise attack on LL Cool J by a relative newcomer, Canibus, which the old-school rapper responded to in kind. Canibus’s song was called “2nd Round K.O.,” in reference to LL’s use of boxing metaphors and imagery. Even this example proved more personal than battle records once were. Canibus’s attack did not just focus on rhyming skills or clothes or general wackness; it attacked actions, and it made accusations of hypocrisy.

“Battle
“songs” in the post-battle era that have maintained an attention to artistic or stylistic weaknesses are usually songs aimed at a prospective or imagined competitor, rather than a specific one. The Poor Righteous Teachers’ “Da Rill Shit” may serve as an example:

Mcs try to do me
I’m not livin’ like that
Speak that wack behind my back
’Cause in my face you’ll get waxed
I’m the best ’cause I’m convinced
’Cause I ain’t been stopped yet
I’m straight from Trenton out the projects
In the Wild Wild West
If you want me come and find me
You, your posse, and your friends
Your family, your dog Toto, neighbors, lovers, and kids
Line ’em up and watch ’em fall
Faster than you’d believe . . . 36

Wise Intelligent owes a debt here to Rakim for his classic phrasing of collecting a mass of competitors who might be swept away in a single blow: “I take seven mcs put ’em in a line / I take seven more brothers that think they can rhyme / Well it’ll take seven more before I go for mine / That’s 21 mcs ate up at the same time.”37

Exhortations of power seduce listeners as much as the cleverness with which the mcs imagine the configuration of competitors. In general, the formats of the songs provide a basic framework, although the formats are intertwined and combined regularly. One might find a distinct format in each stanza, or songs in which within each sentence there is a combination of formats.

**Allegory**

Allegorical tales have tradition in African American culture. In the context of telling “big lies” the idiosyncrasy, greatness, strength, or skill of a folk hero or of oneself might find expression. Within the context of narrative songs, or as exempla in exhortatory songs, allegorical tales are
used to entertain and inform. In one of MC Lyte’s songs from her first album, “Kickin’ 4 Brooklyn,” she tells a story that sounds rather like an old Southern tale of the frightful power of a High John de Conqueror or some such character. She rhymes:

I was chillin’ in Flatbush mindin’ my own
When a girl walked up with a chrome microphone
She said Hey MC Lyte, I heard about you
So here’s the microphone let’s see what you can do
So I took the microphone and threw it to the ground
’Cause I needs no assist when it come to gettin’ down
When I started to rap, she started shake
She knew to confront me was truly a mistake
So she took the microphone off the great concrete
And before I turned around she was down the street.38

This fictional episode alerts us to Lyte’s courage and ability to compete, as well as to incite fear. The rhyme stands as an assertion of her artistic ability. The presentation does the same work as she crafts an entertaining story to make this assertion. The allegorical tale provides a format that supplements the arguments made in the song as a whole, and also supplements the metaphor or simile of an individual line.

Realism

What you think now, I think I love you, what you feel now,
I feel I need you. What you know, to be real, it’s got to be real!
—Cheryl Lynn, “To Be Real”

Following a discussion of the constructive elements and composition of hip hop, as well as the formats of hip hop storytelling, a discussion of genre is appropriate. While several genres analogous to literary genres exist in hip hop, I would like to focus on hip hop’s form of realism because it tells us something about the political, artistic, and philosophical ethos of the music. In the 1990s, the call to “keep it real” became a rallying cry in hip hop. The 1970s classic song, “To Be Real” is about genuine love, emotional authenticity, and depth, a loyalty that superfi-
 Calls to keep it real in hip hop, however, have included celebrations of the social effects of urban decay and poverty, for example, assertions of a paranoid vigilance in protecting one’s dignity, which leads to violent action or ruthless individualism à la “fuck the world / don’t ask me for shit / cause anything you do you got to work hard for it / honeys shake they hips / you don’t stop / and niggas pack the clip / keep on.” The “real” is also an authenticating device responding to the removal of rap music from the organic relationship with the communities creating it. It demands that artists maintain or use symbols asserting their allegiance to black youth populations, or subgroups within that community. The real for hip hoppers means setting the terms for allegiance. It does not disallow fiction, imaginative constructions, or hip hop’s traditional journey into myth. Rather, it is an explicitly ideological stand against selling one’s soul to the devils of capitalism or assimilation as one sells the art form and lives life. The frequent calls in the hip hop community to keep it real not only require the maintenance of an authentic black urban identity; they also constitute a theoretical space that functions as a living testimony to African American experience. As Nas says in “Represent,” “Straight up, shit is real and any day could be your last in the jungle.” Being “real” is a call to authenticity that becomes a political act. Such symbols of authenticity in hip hop are not only found in cinema verité representation of ghetto existence but also in honest portrayals that may be abstract insofar as their truths are emotional, rather than completely factual. In the spring of 1996, a comedian on an episode of the HBO comedy series *Russell Simmons Def Comedy Jam* noted that if rappers killed as many people as they claimed to, they would all be in jail, concluding with the words, “That ain’t real.” Hence, the “Real” with a capital R, constitutes a political rather than purely sociological stance that gives testimony to the emotional state resulting from the experience of poverty, blackness, and the crises of urbanity. Mobb Deep rhymes,

I keep it real
Pack steel
Like my man YG
When a fool try to play me
Wet him up
And I’m Swayze.

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From Prophets of the Hood by Perry, Imani. DOI: 10.1215/9780822386155
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In another song, the group asserts, “We livin’ this ’til the day that we die / Survival of the Fittest / Only the strong survive.” Both lyrics express the artists’ commitment to realness. While an assertion of social Darwinist aggression forms part of the Real in hip hop, it is by no means the sum total. The Real is the location where an individual remains committed to his or her community, professes that allegiance, and remains honestly and organically rooted in his or her position in the world:

My mentality is money-orientated
I’m destined to live the dream for all my peeps who never made it
’Cause yeah we were beginners in the hood as Five Percenters
But somethin’ musta got in us ’cause all of us turned to sinners
Some rest in peace, some sittin’ in San Quentin
And others such as myself we tryin’ to carry on tradition

Taking its name from a literary genre, realism in hip hop is an artistic format inextricably linked to the material conditions of black American urban communities.

Witnessing proves incredibly important in hip hop. Being present for the ills of the ghetto and watching someone go through the transformations of drug abuse, murder, poverty, and mental illness can be as traumatic as experiencing those things. Hip hop at once witnesses and then testifies to certain events, whether or not the speaker participates in them, and acts as a witness to realism in the religious sense, as someone or something bears witness to life’s hardship and difficulty. Michael Eric Dyson asks, “Did Tupac draw from his own experiences or did he raid the experiences of others to spin his haunting tales of urban woe and social neglect? If he did would he be different from any other artist whose primary obligation is to make art out of imagination, fiction, and fantasy? Stories don’t have to be real to be true. Wouldn’t Tupac have been artistically authentic in borrowing the lives, experiences, and stories of others as the grist for his powerful rap narratives?”

Hip hop music concerns itself with both the self and the we. Its consciousness is both of the ego and of the collective. While explorations and expressions of the self abound as descendents of big lies, toasts, and folk ballads from the African American oral tradition, they are not ultimately individualistic, even when referring primarily to the individual. The stories of Dolemite and Stagolee were narratives about heroic fig-
ures repeated in communities across the country. The repetition made them collective, as did their articulation of the community’s sentiments. The heroes’ ability to traverse the boundaries of society tightly bound by white supremacy and religious convention made them popular figures. In hip hop, the community sustains that tradition of self-expression, and the artistically depicted self is overwhelmingly a self the listener can identify with, either through the depictions of life it offers, through the aspirations and hopes it articulates, or through the language, clothing, and body politics of the artists, who operate as cultural signifiers. The community as an identifying and authenticating force holds huge significance, especially as artists validate themselves against claims of artifice. I have often thought that hip hop offers the first popular cultural space in the African American community that celebrates, rather than rejects as an embarrassment, one’s origins in the projects (that is, not when the projects were new and considered a step up from tenements, but the projects as they are today, the dwelling place of the underclass). References to the projects in part give testament to a certain hardness or edge, and they also assert a class-based proud identification with poor black people.

Hip hop music celebrates Me and We, as opposed to You. At various moments in hip hop, the Other is the competing mc or dj, the challenger in a fight, or white people. The Other might also emerge as a sympathetic opposite, such as the audience being seduced by the rhymes. But either way, the Other occupies a position of relative powerlessness vis-à-vis the I. The frequent exception to this rule would come in the form past-tense narratives about being dissed or hurt by a lover or a friend, but in the present confrontation of Me and You, the Me is always at an advantage, either due to knowledge, ability, or power. As the producers and djs produce the show, the mc emerges as an actor on the stage, not a supplicating performer, but a captivating one. In the composition, he or she engages the audience and gets its feedback and participation, but the mc still remains the leader, the distinguished Self among the collective heads. This is obvious to the listener of hip hop, but relevant to point out in comparison with other music forms. The importance of the Self at once stands as the perfect expression of American politico-religious identification and individualism and yet also becomes translatable into a communitarian consciousness, locating hip hop voices as metonymic black expression.
In the wake of hip hop’s meteoric rise to the top of American popular music, mass-produced hip hop maintains its “authenticity” in part by encouraging artists to live out the artistic narratives they portray. Motown was notorious for its efforts to groom and socialize its artists, and hip hop business apparently provides its own kind of grooming—to hardness, sensationalism, and scandal, all of which sell records. This “real deal” is apparently what the consumer wants. In the United States, that means the grittier, edgier, more fantastically urban. This authenticity is double-voiced, at once constituting an exploitation of racist imagery and an expression of the problems of the ghetto.

In “Village Ghetto Land,” Stevie Wonder asks, “Now some folks say we should be glad for what we have. Tell me would you be happy, livin’ in this ghetto land?” His question concerns how one would feel, and implicitly and perhaps even more profoundly, who one would be in the ghetto? What does this space create? Of course the answer is diverse—endlessly diverse—as is the collection of human beings living in poor communities of color in the United States. And yet the space art provides differs from the geography and complexity of a community. In comparison to “reality,” art suffers limitations, but it can also do things that life cannot. It can provide coherence of structure and form, it can separate out particular elements and emotions, and it can choose certain images and metaphors about the world, be they horrific or beautiful. And those choices, which operate as signs within the artistic space, define the thing or place or person signified.

At the turn of the century, American literary realists concerned themselves with depicting what was real and true about daily life. Even as they did this, artists and audiences understood that the depictions were ideologically charged and artistically crafted. Simply put, both readers and critics knew they were making choices. However, it proves comparatively difficult for listeners and critics to understand the realism in hip hop as something crafted, ideological, and resulting from artistic choices. Why? One frequent answer claims that the music’s audience is too young and unsophisticated to distinguish between entertainment and reality; another finds that critics scapegoat hip hop as opposed to other music styles because of racism or a generation gap. And both hold some truth. Yet the difficulty results from a far more convoluted dynamic than these answers can account for.

In part, the difficulty of realism in hip hop comes from the autobiographical nature of the music, and of African American folk literary cul-
ture, which entails the telling of one’s story in epic or comic terms. Artists tell about their lives, and it is the task of the critic to avoid making one-to-one correlations between the music and the artists, to avoid a venture into some strange brand of artistic determinism, even as he or she trusts the artist to tell the audience something. This task has become more difficult with the 1990s, which witnessed many hip hop artists actively requesting that their words be taken as authentic, asking their listeners to ferret out “fakes” and reject them. Nevertheless, the epic terms of the tales distinguish them as artistic productions. As Killah Priest succinctly puts it in “Fake Mcs”: “Too many mc’s in the East wanna be gangsters / Too many gangsters in the West wanna be rappers / Buncha actors / I oughta smack ya.”

The Real, or realism in hip hop as a movement, takes on two perspectives, “telling” narratives and “being” narratives, which, in terms of understanding hip hop as the production of a community and of individual artists, are mutually dependent. In “Cell Therapy,” by Goodie MOb., we hear a “telling” narrative.

My family moved in our apartment complex
The gate with a serial code was put up next
They claim that this community is so drug-free
But it don’t look that way to me
Cause I can see the young bloods hanging out at the store
24-7 junkies looking for a hit of the blow
It’s powerful
Oh you know what else they tryin’ to do
Make a curfew especially for me and you
The traces of the new world order
Time is gettin’ shorter
If we don’t get prepared people it’s gon be a slaughter
My mind won’t allow me to not be curious
My folks don’t understand so they don’t take it serious
But every now and then
I wonder if that gate was put up to keep crime out or keep our ass in

Even in a narrative context, the speaker provides an internal critique of sociological conditions and the prospects of social control through planned communities. The function of the rhyme, then, is to inform

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and enlighten, rather than simply depict. Contrast this with a “being” narrative from Nas:

Yo! They call me Nas I’m not your legal type of fella
Moët drinkin’ marijuana smokin’ street dweller
Whose always on the corner rollin’ up bless
When I dress it’s never nothin’ less than Guess
Cold be walkin’ with a bop and my hat turned back
Love committin’ sin and my friends sell crack
This nigga raps with a razor, keep it under my tongue
The school dropout, never liked that shit from day one
’Cause life ain’t shit but stress, fake niggas and crabs guts
So I guzzle my Hennessey while pullin’ on mad blunts
The brutalizer crew de-sizer accelerator
The type of nigga who be pissin’ in your elevator

Nas personifies a self-celebrating nihilist living a life of drugs, depression, and aggression. The difference between a being and a telling narrative is that between personification and third-person didactics. Songs about the lives of gangsters, for example, come in two varieties, the first-person story of a gangster, and the third-person story about gangsterism. When the audience listens to the third-person telling story, its comprehension depends on either knowing the character from the inside—through first-person narrative, the archetypes present in “being” tales—or knowing the actual lives in black urban communities.

Various character types are consistently personified in hip hop. Some we might believe as “real,” while others clearly come across as “fictional.” Listeners more readily find the drug dealer authentic than an urban guerrilla or prison escapee, to use some of the roles Ice Cube has played. This is in part attributable to the fact that hustlers and dealers commonly form integral parts of the underground economy of US cities. They are characters people can point to in communities, just like preachers, grandmothers, store owners, and crackheads. And it is frequently unclear in hip hop where art ends and life begins. The personification of the life of a thug, hustler, or dealer might become complicated by some artists’ personal involvement, past or present, with those activities.

Furthermore, the tendency to accept the Real as real has to do with the democratic nature of the art form. Hip hop is supposed to be an every-
person’s music, so when the artist takes on a familiar role, the people should be able to believe it if it is good. Keeping it real emerged as a shared community ethos and any debate over its meaning was minimal. Unfortunately, criticisms of the Real primarily challenged it with the positive-negative of music, messages, and images. The more interesting challenge, however, would concern the choices made in depictions of everyday realities and the contingent ideology that the artists promote with those choices. If violence or drug dealing constitute signature features of life in black communities, expunging these things from the music will not provide an ideal solution to the problems people have with the Real. The question is: Why is the violence of the illegal underground economy, for example, more compelling than other features of community life?

There are several answers to that question. US culture socializes the country’s residents to yearn for a particular brand of excitement and glamour in entertainment. Sensational conflict exists on television shows from the “real” Jerry Springer and Cops to crime dramas, and in countless action films with sequence after sequence of gratuitous violence. The only comparable titillation to be found in the daily life of black and poor communities exists in the intrigues of illegal activity. Furthermore, the consistent depictions of black Americans as murderers, robbers, and rapists in entertainment and news media not only incites yearnings for images of Cosby Show–like professionals and 227–like lower middle-class working people but also creates the desire to breathe life into empty stereotypes. Hip hop provides the most provocative, humane, and insightful images of the black underworld in the popular media.

Hear shots and sirens
When I fiend first they yo’ rings
Now they my rings
So give it up punk then I just
Put another jack in progress
It’s the American way
’Cause I’m the G.A.N.G.S.T.A.

In the shadow of Hollywood dynastic wealth and on what was the Western frontier, jacking or robbery of various sorts do seem to be the American way, as does conspicuous consumption, which motivates the illegal
acquisition of jewelry and other “things.” How, one asks, does this gangster pursuit qualitatively differ from that of the white gangster families who so glamorously made money off of liquor during Prohibition? Is it the ferocious black body that gives the gangster his bite?

The personifications and realist depictions in hip hop reflect this vivid concern. Such reflection occurs through (1) the exploitation of the fear of these figures extant in the black community (the artist personifies the greatest threat in the hood); or (2) the provision of a narrative that truly shows the source of those concerns; or (3) the provision of an example for listeners of what not to become. The criticisms the gangster image in hip hop faces resemble those directed at celebrated black novelist Richard Wright. Charles Johnson writes that Wright’s writing contained “a realism that gained its visceral power at the expense of portraying positive cultural features in black life—in other words, much that is affirmative and joyful in black culture is lost in the literary Lifeworld of Richard Wright.”

Another critic, in describing The Outsider, writes, “Wright creates an almost superhuman (clearly Nietzschean) black hero whose alienation and dread place him both outside of and yet very much inside modern American, that is to say Western, civilization. In contrast to (but recalling) Du Bois’ representation of double consciousness as a horrifying burden in The Souls of Black Folk, Wright’s complex image of blackness as double vision is a source of strategic power, freedom and knowledge.”

Added to the complex of factors is the dynamic that results from hip hop becoming commercially successful in the mainstream. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, artists began appearing who personified gangsters without ever having experienced that lifestyle: record companies manufactured gangsters for their sensational appeal. The co-optation of hip hop by the mainstream therefore became associated with “fake gangsterism.” Gangsterism turned into a commercial tool, sold for its gore like an action flick. Hip hop heads made efforts to weed out the commercial gangsters from the “real” ones, and so rumors of the suburban birthplaces and respectable middle-class childhoods of certain MCs surfaced as evidence of their inauthenticity, even though hip hop had been a cross-class art form for years. In order to retain a sense of authenticity and connectedness to black communities, and also for the glamour provided by celebrity, various artists began to live out the narratives of gangster lives. The list of hip hop artists arrested or imprisoned since be-
coming celebrities is extremely long and includes Snoop Dogg, Marion “Suge” Knight, Slick Rick, Biggie Smalls, Tupac Shakur, Queen Latifah, Mystikal, Busta Rhymes, Shyne, and numerous others. Further, it is no accident that as Public Enemy, a group pronouncing revolutionary ideology, became widely popular, the mainstream media began its attacks on rap, criticizing anything from 2 Live Crew’s explicit sexuality to violence and gangsterism. Virtually every hip hop artist mentioned in the mainstream news suffered transmogrification into a gangster rapper, even if he or she came from a place that didn’t have gangs per se. And, according to the news, “gangster rap” was bad. If that label did not work for particular artists, they were tagged as misogynists or sex fiends, regardless of the context of the sexuality in the music. Black voices untempered by institutions of white acceptability, and having the potential to inspire protest or at least epistemological transformation, frightened and disturbed, and were therefore demonized. And so in the 1990s, when realism became self-conscious enough as to support the phrase keeping it real, the practice of ghetto realism or thug realism facilitated the scapegoating of rap by both conservative and liberal voices.

But keeping it real encompasses more than knowing the seamier side of life in the ghetto firsthand, even as violence and thuggishness have become symbolic elements of the hood. Andrew Ross writes about the art’s authenticity, “‘representing’ involves a demonstrated loyalty to the storytelling genre itself. Genre justice, earned at the mic, determines how respect is distributed, even to the non-gangsta hardcore. The rapper’s aim is to convince an audience that his ‘shit is real,’ but this is a much more complex task than simply proving that the events he described actually happened to him.”

Like any term describing a genre or ideology, the phrase keeping it real has a range of interpretations. For some, it mainly means the rejection of sanitized Hollywood depictions of life and of conscious efforts to cross over and become accepted by white audiences. In this case, the phrase may or may not have anything to do with the content of the rhyme itself, but it will definitely concern itself with the artist’s perspective and the culturally based styles of composition. For others, the phrase refers to the retention of the artistry, craft, and sense of community that hip hop has at its best, and the rejection of the production of simplistic pop rhymes. For still others, it means telling a story of how life in the hood is, in any number of ways, for good and bad. And for others again, it means, disappointingly a glo-
rification of gunplay and the ills of the ghetto. I say disappointingly because regardless of the artistic merit of the work of a number of artists who believe to keep it real by celebrating destruction, there is a cost that results from the ideological force hip hop has with young people.

That does not mean to say that hip hop causes violence. Of the complex web of elements in play in the lives of adolescents, it seems that music would be rather low on the list of critical factors determining their behavior or values. Yet regardless of where it stands on the list, the idea that the music could cause a single act of violence or illegal activity is far from compelling. The issue is not that hip hop causes violence or whether hip hop causes violence. The United States has a violent culture compounded by devastating health and wealth disparities. The issue is that hip hop carries an ideological message about merit, human worth, and excellence, and if that message glorifies that which ails the community without any internal critique, doesn’t it then become a politically objectionable ideology to be challenged by those seeking justice and equity for black Americans? Clearly, many within the hip hop community believe the answer to that question to be yes, as many with a preference for something more complex and profound, another kind of real, attack the current notion of the Real as a jubilant and reckless gangsterism.

Attention to the exegeses of realist tales reveals textual and subtextual interpretations that may differ from straightforward gangster or hustler realism. The literal exegesis of hip hop realism elucidates and interprets the life personified or discussed in the given city or community. This literal exegesis is centered around a specific space or identity and might include regional references, as well as economic, cultural, institutional, and social elements. The subtext often offers an allegorical explanation that speaks to more universal crises, allegories either of black existence in America as caught in the tension between being Othered and marginalized and having aspirations toward the American dream or, more universal still, of a consciousness caught between selfishness and generosity, individualism and humanism. In Master P’s “Is There a Heaven for a Gangster?” the literal exegesis is the moral crisis facing a gangster who has wounded, killed, used, and abused others. The allegorical exegesis comprises the description of guilt, the quest for salvation despite sin, and the individual supplication to God for forgiveness.

Scarface, a Texas MC, specializes in a sort of descriptive realism. De
scriptive realism creates a world for the listener which includes the cars, conflicts, and love of life in a given neighborhood, a veritable cinema verité. Scarface often punctuates his descriptive realism with some argument about the conditions of the ghetto, or with musings about how one should live within that context. Take this example from the song “Don’t Testify”:

We got some niggas we been feudin’ with
Caught one of his homies with cheese and startin’ sangin’
Told the guy from interstate traffic and stuff
Offered him five of his k’s and it’s crackin’ him up
Now we dealin’ with this nigga who been talkin’ this shit
Worst thing is his real man runnin’ the brick
And all the workers on the block is kinda scared
To come workin’ cause 5-0 been here five times and not searchin’.

The ultimate lesson of the song is that the ethics of illegal activity demand silence about operations at risk of death: “You know the rules / don’t get high on your own supply and don’t testify / You know the rules / don’t testify / if you don’t you live if you do you die.”

Argumentative realism has as its purpose a critique of social conditions through description. Most MCs engage in some sort of combination of descriptive and argumentative realism, being neither overwhelmingly concerned with argument nor neglecting it. Within the context of argumentative realism, one finds warnings about the dangers of illegal activity or mistreatment of others or oneself, or warnings to those entering the community without experience there. One also finds arguments in support of movements for social justice, and, on the other hand, justifications for illegal activity based on the limited options available to residents of industry-deprived urban centers.

Naturalism as a variation on realism appears when the allegorical exegesis provided by the MC makes conflict universal and essential. Mobb Deep, who I would call a naturalist group, refrain on one of their songs, “We livin’ this till the day that we die / survival of the fittest, only the strong survive.” And on another song, listeners hear, “As time goes by / an eye for an eye / we in this together son / your beef is mine / as long as the sunshine will light up the sky / we in this together son / your beef is mine.” The essential terms are taken from social Darwinism.
and Old Testament justice, respectively. The allegorical exegesis offers a grim interpretation of life’s elements, but the literal exegesis proves even grimmer: “There’s a war going on outside no one is safe from / you could run but you can’t hide forever / from these streets that we done took / you walkin’ with your head down scared to look / . . . / My part of the town is similar to Vietnam.” The group describes a war zone in its community, and furthermore asserts itself as being “real” in terms of having been involved in violent conflict and the criminal justice system—as opposed to those who rhyme about it but do not really have the experience to back it up. Another Mobb Deep rhyme revealing the artists’ authenticity runs:

Sometimes I wish I had three different faces
I’m going to court in three places for three cases
One in Queens, Manhattan, one in Brooklyn
They way things is lookin’ Imma see Central bookings
’Cause facin’ three three-to-nines is mad time
After in concurrence for assault and two nines
I gotta maintain cause stress on the brain
Could lead to a motherfuckin’ suicide thing
Plus my probation, the ill violation
How the fuck did I get in this tight situation??

The language of the criminal law enforcement system interspersed with the anguished thoughts of a young man facing years in prison constitutes realism par excellence. The song provides a moving and captivating narrative and, according to the artists, a truthful one. It is notable that what has been chosen as the subject of the realist account is the very real problem of black male involvement with the criminal justice system. The speaker seeks to express his concerns and elicit a response and identification with the seemingly deterministic conditions of the lives of young black men. In an interlude between songs, one of the members of Mobb Deep talks about his authentic experience in the streets and critiques fake thugs, after which he has the following to say about yet another brand of MC: “And oh yeah, to all them rap-ass niggas with your half-ass rhymes / talkin’ ’bout how much you get high, how much weed you smoke and that crazy space shit that don’t even make no
sense / don’t ever speak to me when you see me / You know what I’m sayin? / Word! Imma have to get on some ol’ high school shit and start punchin’ niggas for livin / Yo, I’m finished what I had to say, y’all can continue on.”

By disparaging “that crazy space shit that don’t even make no sense,” he offers a naturalist critique of the exploration of esoteric, romantic, and otherworldly elements present in hip hop as something irrelevant, something not responsive to material concerns of black neighborhoods. But the kind of esoteric magical realism in hip hop is in fact a rather authentic reflection of an Afrocentrist, mysticist subculture in black urban centers. A brand of magical realism exists in hip hop in which the realities of daily life become interspersed with magical elements that, similar to metaphors, allow for the expression of depth or a sort of artistic and spiritual power, and also enrich the texts with an alternative aesthetic. Digable Planets, a group that appeared in the early 1990s as a sort of black alternative/Afrocentric Brooklyn trio, used insect identities and stratospheric references as symbolism for their spiritualist politics:

Voodoo Eshu Benin
Gangster lean
Where I’m from
It’s interplanetary
My insects movements vary . . .
It’s hip
What’s hip
When hip is just the norm
When planets pledge allegiance to the funk in all its forms
The braids, the fades, the prints on all the shirts
My grandmother told my mother “it’s Africa at work.”

The first two lines tie African spiritual practices to the politics of the body: the gangster lean, black coolness seen in daily life in Brooklyn (voodoo being both a Haitian and Louisianian syncretic religion, Eshu being an orisha deity symbolic of the crossroads in the Yoruba pantheon, which is syncretized with Christianity, other African religions, and Native American religions). The populace represented as planets gives a sense of infinite and grand possibility, since space is infinite, yet
the reference to oneself as an insect marks a stance of great humility as an individual in the world.

Magic realism was not limited to the heyday of short Nubian locks and mellow “conscious” MCs of the early 1990s; it has taken on a variety of forms. For example, Ice Cube’s rhymes, “Gangstas Fairytale” and “Gangstas Fairytale Too” both frame real-life interactions with fantastic fairy tale characters in magic realist fashion. Although LL Cool J’s “My Rhyme Ain’t Done” is similar in that it blends a fictional world with the “real,” it is different in that instead of placing fictional characters in a real world context as Ice Cube does, LL places his real self in a fictional world. And it becomes fantasy in the sense that fantasy, as Adorno says in *Aesthetic Theory*, presents the nonempirical as if it were empirical. LL rhymes about his encounter with the 1950s sitcom characters from the Honeymooners:

Ralph wanted me to bust a couple of rhymes
But I had my eyes on Alice’s behind
Norton came down right about that time
Lookin’ in the fridge so we could wine and dine
I said to myself I should give ‘em a taste
So I pulled the microphone out my black briefcase
Said it ain’t Bob Hope or Barry Manilow
Then I borrowed Norton’s hat ‘cause I forgot my Kangol
Ralph said I got a scheme, let me get to it, Norton my pal
I said yo don’t even do it, they were all Honeymooners and I met everyone, that story is over but my rhyme ain’t done.

LL metaphorically jumps into the television screen. He uses Ed Norton’s signature cap as a replacement for his own signature terry-cloth Kangol, and he anticipates the disastrous consequences of Ralph’s scheme, as all of Ralph’s schemes would fall apart, consistently providing the audience with cringing amusement. This literary moment, then, is at once magical realist and comedic. Comedy, like magic realism takes, on a variety of manifestations in hip hop. Realism in hip hop, while fraught with difficulties and contradictions, is important for its introduction of contemporary social issues into American popular music with unprecedented consistency and for shifting attention from the love story to more difficult questions of culture and identity.
One of the things hip hop criticism should do, in addition to providing interesting and informative analyses of the art form, is to use the creativity and ideology contained within the music to enrich the ways we think about society and the ways we create contemporary theory. The knowledge such criticism provides should not merely influence our understanding of the art itself but also our intellectual processes in general. Realism encourages a critique of the media and reflects the significant realities of social inequality.