



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

This be Urban Poetry: A Literary Approach to Rap Music
Loretto, Alexis Regina

Citation

Loretto, A. R. (2022). *This be Urban Poetry: A Literary Approach to Rap Music*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master thesis in the Leiden University Student Repository](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3463412>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

This be Urban Poetry: A Literary Approach to Rap Music

Alexis Loretto

2993155

Leiden University

MA Literary Studies, specialization English Literature and Culture

Thesis supervisor: Dr. Jessie Morgan-Owens

Second reader: Dr. Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen

21 June 2022

Contents

Introduction	1
<i>Note on Transcription</i>	4
Chapter 1. Rap is Poetry: Applying Lyric Theory to Rap	7
<i>The Ambiguous “you” in Rap</i>	10
<i>Rap as an Event to be Repeated</i>	13
<i>The Rhythmic and Ritualistic Nature of Rap</i>	17
<i>The Hyperbolic Quality of Rap</i>	21
Chapter 2. Rap is Raw: A Model for Reading Rap Music	25
<i>Poetic Authority</i>	27
<i>Interpretative Truth and the Demand for Critical Thinking</i>	30
<i>Authenticity and the Speaker’s Position</i>	33
Chapter 3. Rap is Real: A Collective Story of Life in Poverty	37
<i>Humanizing Drug Addiction</i>	39
<i>Criminality and Accountability</i>	44
<i>Evocations of Adversity and the Need for Agency</i>	47
Conclusion	51
Works Cited	54
Discography	56

Introduction

You cant learn this shit in no history book

You ready to rap motherfucker?

- D12 0:20-0:26

When considering the linguistic and formal constraints of poetry, there is a surprising level of artistic and expressive freedom within its realm. By taking rap into this privileged space, and by granting it poetic faith, one's awareness of its distinctive literary elements is heightened, and the uniqueness of its poetry and veracity of its social commentary become open for analysis. Here I set out not only to explore *why* rap incorporates, at times, provocative language or vulgar and violent content, but also to ask *how* it voices such articulations about the world so poetically, so aesthetically, and so critically. Perhaps a history book is not enough to understand the poetic proclivities and merits of rap. In this regard, a literary approach may be more effective and more fruitful.

Spanning thirty-five years, from 1982 to 2017, the selection of rap songs included in this thesis are united through their thematic and stylistic commonalities. The selection reflects themes such as drug use, criminality, violence, and the urban environment—themes which narrate conditions faced by those living in poverty. Furthermore, the unique linguistic acts and rhetorical devices inherent to lyric poetry form the foundation for the selection of particularly *poetic* rap songs. Instances of complex rhyme and rhythmic structures, unordinary speech acts, or the ritualistic dimensions of lyric poetry, for example, are illuminated to distinguish and analyze the poetic tendencies of rap. In what follows, I treat rap as a form of lyric poetry that is characterized as an expressive genre of art rooted in the impoverished urban ghetto. When reading rap, it

becomes apparent that songs are largely connected through their thematic and stylistic elements. Whether it be by lamenting over one's condition, praising the quality of oneself, or apostrophizing the reader or another entity entirely, the rap songs included here exhibit an inclination to voice poetic utterances concerning the experience of life in poverty. It is for this reason that I do not make the distinction between subgenres of rap. At their linguistic basis, rap songs are united through its similar thematic utterances and their consistent borrowing from the verse tradition. My goal in this thesis is not only to prove that rap is a form of lyric poetry, and that it can be read through the critical lens of lyric theory, but also to explore how methods of literary analysis highlight critical moments in the dialogue happening between rap music, lyric poetry, and life in poverty.

The secondary source material incorporated here pulls from both lyric theory and from hip hop studies. When selecting songs, I pulled from my personal reservoir of rap; I also used *The Anthology of Rap*, edited by Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois, which presents the reader with an extensive collection of transcribed rap songs, specifying their project as not the first of its kind, but it is “the first anthology of rap compiled with the specific intention of studying the lyrics as poetry” (xl). The songs selected adhere to the aforementioned selection process. Moreover, articles and books relating to hip hop studies predominantly wrote from sociohistorical or ethnographic perspectives, and moreover, all works deal with rap music at large rather than the language alone. For example, Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* is largely considered a foundational text in hip hop scholarship and thus it has opened the door for new contextual studies of rap. Or Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, which offers a comprehensive and detailed history of the rise of rap music within hip hop culture. For lyric theory methodology, I heavily pulled from Jonathan Culler's *Theory of*

the Lyric. I also referred to *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, a text compiled to present the most recent chapter of lyric theory as a genre. The existing literature creates an intellectual space for this literary study of rap. That is to say that on the one hand, *The Anthology of Rap* positions rap as poetry worthy of academic attention, and on the other hand, hip hop criticism positions rap within sociohistorical and ethnographic frameworks—the approach of this thesis will bridge these frameworks together within the context of lyric theory. A strictly literary study of rap is beneficial to hip hop studies and to lyric theory at large in that it comments on the dialogue happening between the two frameworks.

Moving forward, I shift the focus to hip hop, and more specifically, to rap music. Hip hop is generally characterized as a culture encompassing various artistic expressions such as dance, graffiti, deejaying and rapping. Thus it is necessary to highlight the distinction between the culture of hip hop and rap music as a component of that culture. The latter of which will lie at the center of this project. To focus solely on rap music separate from hip hop is not to disregard the culture from which it emerges, but rather to apply literary methods of analysis to what rap music undeniably foregrounds: language. When one experiences a rap song, they do so by listening to its music and by following the sung lyrics of the vocal artist. This is to say that listeners of rap music almost never begin with reading the lyrics on paper. Yet as Alexs Pate in his book *In the Heart of the Beat: The Poetry of Rap* argues, “[t]o listen effectively to rap is to be conscious of its literary components. . .to listen effectively to rap is, in fact, to ‘read’ it” (37). Although rap music is perceived as contingent upon its musical and kinetic elements, this project is interested in rap music from the perspective of an attentive solo listener—a listener who immerses herself in the lyric event and who participates in the ritualistic aspects of lyric poetry, a point to be

discussed further in Chapter 1. To a large extent, this project will work backwards to strip rap of its musical and kinetic elements in order to formally analyze the language and voice of its poetry.

Chapter 1 presents *Theory of the Lyric* as the dominant model of lyric used to establish rap as a form of lyric poetry. I work within the four parameters of lyric poetry put forward by Jonathan Culler; each parameter acts as a lens through which I analyze the poetic dimensions of rap. When reading rap within the privileged landscape of poetry, our attention is shifted to instances of intricate wordplay and captivating rhythmic structures insofar that we excuse rap's often raw and uninhibited lyrical content. In lifting rap to a distinct poetic register, what results is a more tolerant and fruitful reading of the genre. Chapter 2 presents an elementary model for reading rap in its written form. Here I will further explore the poetic landscape of rap, the position of the speaker, and the genre at large being a form of (black) urban artistic expression. Lastly, Chapter 3 investigates themes and tropes central to rap as a genre. By analyzing themes such as drug use, criminality, and the urban environment, I argue that rap can be read as a representation of life in poverty.

Note on Transcription

Although this project intends to operate with just the lyrics of rap music, it is important to note that the voice and rhythm of the selected songs have nevertheless influenced their transcriptions. As it is true that a song is first listened to, and not read, it makes sense to begin its analysis by working with the song's original form. By doing so, elements such as the voice, rhythm, pauses, and pronunciation ultimately influence the final transcription of lyrics. The original song is thus used as a template for the transcription process. Moreover, in the

transcriptions I have removed all apostrophes from contractions and slang words. Commas only remain as natural separation of clauses as to provide clarity to the reader. I have opted for this stylistic choice as to stay true to the voice of rap in its original form. In terms of content, I have not censored the language. Lastly, all of the rap artists included in this thesis are male. Although we are reading rap on the page and therefore the speaker and the rapper are not to be treated as the same person, nevertheless I will use the default pronoun “he” for clarity and consistency.

In his work that deals with the scansion of rap songs, Pate notes that “[o]ne problem . . . arises because it is difficult to obtain a printed version that is identical to the way the rap/poet wrote it. When these poems are printed, they are often presented without the poet’s final approval” (111). Many of the popular websites dedicated to providing song lyrics to the public are independently moderated and their content is edited by individual contributors, like the functioning of Wikipedia, for example. There is no official archive, mediated by the rap artists themselves, which offers a true and completely accurate account of song lyrics. And even when certain song lyrics accompany an audio clip or music video posted from the verified account of the artist, these lyrics are often not approved by the artist himself. Authenticated transcriptions of lyrics are rare, and the transcription process of converting rap to written poetry is inherently fallible; one could argue that it is due to this fallibility that an unequivocal transcription of any specific rap song is thus non-existent.

Therefore, to navigate this inherent fallibility in the attempt to convert a precise transcription of rap lyrics based on word-to-word accuracy, I relied first on my ability to listen to the selected songs and to transcribe their lyrics verbatim. The understanding of rap lyrics relies heavily on one’s knowledge and familiarity with African American vernacular, and while I am familiar with it, I do not claim to be well versed in its nuances and intricacies. Consequently, all

lyrics transcribed for this project have been cross-referenced with popular websites such as Genius, AZLyrics, and Google Lyrics. When a word is unknown, or when a discrepancy arises between the lyrics transcribed on the website(s) versus what has been transcribed by listening, careful attention is then given to that moment in the song. Ultimately the method of careful listening prevails over all else.

Chapter 1. Rap is Poetry: Applying Lyric Theory to Rap

The definition of lyric is as elusive as the definition of poetry itself. There has been and continues to be much debate in regard to what it is that defines lyric poetry, and moreover, what framework the lyric seems to be operating within. Lyric poetry—sometimes referred to as just poetry—has been examined through various critical lenses, such as structuralism, post-structuralism, and phenomenology. Each revisitation of the lyric offers something new to our ways of thinking about and interacting with lyric poetry. Some of its general definitions include instances of poetry which foreground the musicality of language, *or* which are defined in contrast to narrative, *or* which present the reader with an expression of personal feelings (Jackson and Prins 1). In an attempt to define this “moving target,” the introduction to *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* postulates that recent literary criticism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has exhibited a “general sense that the lyric is the genre of personal expression, a sense assumed whenever we talk about ‘the lyric I’” (Jackson and Prins 2). The need for such an anthology—one of which “provides an overview of the modern consolidation of lyric as a genre of critical reading”—further points to the notion that lyric poetry is evasive of any univocal definition and that lyric as a genre is newly charted territory (Jackson and Prins 7). What we can assume is that the centrality of self, whether it be of the poet or of the audience, is innate to the lyric experience.

In recognition of this multiplicity of lyric definitions, I wish to instead shift focus to the dialogue happening between lyric poetry and rap—however, to move forward in this direction, it is beneficial to first understand how lyric as a genre has come to exist and what framework of lyric theory will be used to establish rap as a form of lyric poetry. It is widely accepted that the reading of poetry as lyric emerged concretely in the twentieth century alongside the onset of

New Criticism (Jackson and Prins 14). The textbook *Understanding Poetry* by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, published in 1938, largely influenced the main ideas associated with New Criticism as a formalist movement which aimed to disregard the intentions of the author or poet and instead place focus on the words on the page. Warren and Brooks proposed an “expansion of a poetic technique. . .into a principle of reading” (Jackson and Prins 162). The introduction to *Understanding Poetry* claims that:

It is highly important to see that both the impulse and methods of poetry are rooted very deep in human experience, and that formal poetry itself represents, not a distinction from, but a specialization of, thoroughly universal habits of human thinking and feeling.

(Brooks and Warren 181-182)

Here the argument positions the form of the poem and the contents of the poem as two elements which must be identified and analyzed for the reader to successfully interpret the poem’s meaning. This hyperfocus on hermeneutics, as Jonathan Culler persuasively contends in his book *Theory of the Lyric*, draws our attention away from some of the most alluring aspects of lyric poetry. *Theory of the Lyric*, published in 2015, claims that the lyric has generic status in the Western tradition and thus the book aims to offer readers a general framework for reading and interacting with lyric poetry (Culler 1). He writes:

Since lyrics illuminate or interpret the world for us, we should be interested in what they mean. . .it would be beneficial for literary studies and for the fortunes of poetry generally if all other ways of engaging with poems were not subordinated to interpretation. (Culler 5)

Rather than centering focus on what interpretations can be pulled from a lyric poem, we should opt to analyze it in a way that recognizes the many pleasures lyric poetry has to offer. *Theory of*

the Lyric urges us to consider that what is most captivating about the lyric is the strangeness of its linguistic acts and its distinctive rhetorical strategies (“Theory of the Lyric Book Talk”). Such poetic elements are abundant in rap, and thus it is useful to explore these elements in order to identify rap’s literary merits.

Recent hip hop scholarship has been widely concerned with the social and political perspectives of rap, often overlooking its literary merits in favor of its cultural influence. It is undeniable that rap does pull from its cultural landscape, much like how all forms of art can be perceived as an expression of some human experience. In fact, the idea that rap lyrics reflect, to an extent, the culture from which they emerge is a point we will return to in Chapter 3. But rap relies heavily on its intricate use of language, and therefore it is with intention that we temporarily abandon the societal implications of its lyrics and instead concentrate on the nature of its poetics.

But the question remains: what methodological framework will allow us as readers to identify the critical interrelations between rap and the lyric? Because rap is so clearly poetic, we can approach it as a literary work that responds to the same methods of literary analysis. In his *Theory of the Lyric*, Culler points to two popular models of lyric which have been most prevalent in literary studies of the past century. The first being a concept that lyric poetry is a representation of, or mimetic of, subjective experience. And the second, which replaced the first, being a model of lyric that treats the speaker of the poem as a persona created by the poet; this “has become the dominant model in [Anglo-American] pedagogy” but this model of lyric is problematic in that it “puts readers on a prosaic, novelizing track” (Culler 2). By treating the speaker as a character, the reader must then recreate and reconstruct the character’s environment for a successful analysis or interpretation of the poem. Thus, it distracts us from such poetic

elements that are the responsibility of the poet and not of a character created by the poet (“Theory of the Lyric Book Talk”). “This model,” writes Culler, “makes the lyric into a mini-novel with a character whose motives are to be analyzed” (Culler 111). Culler suggests that we disregard this widely accepted model of reading lyric as from the perspective of a persona, and in turn he offers a theoretical framework that is more capacious and that invites discussion on what lyric poetry as a genre seems to accomplish through its unique use of language and form. *Theory of the Lyric* outlines four main parameters that are present in most all lyric poems and theorizes that these parameters function as a framework which the lyric operates within. They are as follows: (1) the enunciative apparatus signaled by triangulated address; (2) the attempt to be an event rather than a representation of an event; (3) the rhythmic and ritualistic nature of lyric; (4) the hyperbolic quality of lyric (Culler 34-38). By analyzing rap within these four parameters, I will demonstrate how rap in its written form is, at its linguistic foundation, a form of lyric poetry.

The Ambiguous “you” in Rap

Poetry exists for its readers in the same way rap exists for its listeners, and so it is almost instinctive to assume when the speaker of rap addresses “you,” they are speaking directly to the audience—while this is sometimes true, it is often the case that “you” may be someone or something else or entirely indeterminate. This structure of triangulated address, being the first of Culler’s parameters, is inherent to the lyric and to rap. Rap is always addressed to a public audience, but the form of the song itself suggests that there is nevertheless an indirect “you” present. The “you” in rap never represents each listener individually—it is always a generalized “you” even when it appears to speak directly to its audience. This structure of indirection is one of the elements that brings us into the poetic landscape of the lyric and conveys to the reader that

they are witnessing something unlike normal speech. It is only the specificity of the lyrics that will help lead us to answer who “you” may be.

In the lyric tradition, addressing other people by means of addressing “you” is most common in the Greek and Latin lyric, but it is a structure of address that is still present in modern lyric such as rap (Culler 201). For an example, consider this couplet which opens Immortal Technique’s “Industrial Revolution”:

The bling bling era was cute but its about to be done

I leave you fulla clips like the moon blockin the sun

(0:16-0:22)

The song first warns “its about to be done,” leaving the reader in anticipation of what action will result in the end of the avaricious era. The second line announces this action as the speaker claims to leave “you” full of clips. A clip is a device used to hold bullets, but in American slang the word “clip” is often used in reference to the bullet itself. The wordplay here reveals a double-meaning: “fulla clips” when read aloud sounds strikingly similar to “full eclipse.” The image of a solar eclipse, paired with the speaker’s claim to dismantle what one perceives as a collective materialistic mindset, leaves the reader with the impression that it is the speaker who will engulf the era by casting a shadow over its ideologies. The song claims that this era is corrupt, and something must be done to prevent it from continuing to exist. Furthermore, the first line begins as a personal statement, but the introduction of “you” “moves the poem from poetic reflection to invocation” (Culler 189). Here the song threatens “you”—enthusiastic members or supporters of the “bling bling era”—and places the speaker as an authority figure who invokes the audience to appeal to his or her viewpoint.

A direct address to the reader is rare in the lyric tradition, but it is quite prevalent in rap. This can in part be connected to the conversational nature of rap. Speaking language and colloquialisms are used almost exclusively. Consequently, rap at times creates the illusion of dialogue between a speaker and someone else. But as we may see, this supposed clear direction is wavering at best. This excerpt from Hopsin's "What's My Purpose", the title being a question directed at the audience, is an example of such direct address:

How can we feel fine this way?

Open up your minds today

The matrix got you young, owin a debt youll spend your life to pay

Stressed out

Assumin that youll be more happy inside your grave

(3:08-3:16)

Addressing its readers, the song commands "you" to be critical of the world, and moreover, it introduces the element of time in that it must be done *today*. The present tense is "the dominate tense of lyric," writes Culler, and the use of deixis to refer to the *now* of pronunciation is prevalent in lyric poetry (283). Each time the song refers to "you" it exhibits that it is constantly in the present. The "you" of the song exists *now* in the duration of the rap event. Furthermore, the speaker responds to an unheard utterance when he warns not to disclose any hardships or adversities: "Dont tell me about no fucking struggle lil nigga cause I know pain." As readers of poetry, we will rarely react strongly to this "poetic pretension" and rather "we accede to the poem's claim, granting it the power" (Culler 197). We as readers allow the song to make us imagine a fictive voice calling out to the speaker so that the speaker can answer the remark. This surrender to the song's demands conveys that the "you" of rap is indirect even when it appears to

be explicitly directed at the audience, and it points to Culler's second parameter being that the lyric is an event always existing in the present.

Rap as an Event to be Repeated

The second parameter highlights certain elements of the lyric—its performative nature, its disruption of narrative, and its epideictic functions—which register the song as an event that exists in a time that repeats and creates for us what *Theory of the Lyric* refers to as the effects of presence. Rap, much like lyric poetry, is often written in the simple present tense. In normal speech, it would be odd if one spoke in this poetic tense to describe a present action: “I am *walking* to the park” would be used instead of “I *walk* to the park.” As Culler points out, “In both colloquial and formal English, such action words require the progressive form. . .it is the combination of simple present and lack of temporal specification with action verbs that makes this a distinctive tense in English poetry” (288). Unlike a narrative which tells us what is happening next, lyric poetry and rap tell us what is happening now, in the duration of the lyric/rap event (“Theory of the Lyric Book Talk”). Furthermore, rap tends to call upon its audience in hopes for a response, pointing to its performative qualities and epideictic functions—think of NWA's iconic opening lines in “Fuck Tha Police”:

Fuck the police comin straight from the underground

A young nigga got it bad cause Im brown

And not the other color so police think

They have the authority to kill a minority

(0:31-0:40)

Here the song declares that the police abuse their power and target racial minorities for uncommitted crimes. The statement “fuck tha police” rallies its audience to agree and to participate in the song’s dissatisfaction and anger towards the police. What is more, it points to the performative dimension of rap’s lyrics. Rap songs are often asking us to observe the world through a new perspective, and moreover, to respond to its calls or claims in some way. “Fuck Tha Police” exhibits a dimension of performativity not often observed in ordinary speech acts. The song asks us to be critical of the police through its suggestion that the police are immoral or corrupt. Such fundamental elements of the lyric, also observed in rap, suggest that neither is directly mimetic of the poet’s subjective experience, but rather the song in its written form is an event itself to be experienced by the reader.

Rap is sometimes formed as a narrative with characters and a storyline, but these songs still contain a rhythm, beat, and chorus that pulls us out of the narrative and into the lyric present. *Theory of the Lyric* characterizes this as the domination of past by present of discourse (Culler 275). Consider “Dance with the Devil” by Immortal Technique, a song that begins:

I once knew a nigga whose real name was William
 His primary concern was making a million
 (0:21-0:26)

Immediately we identify the speaker and William, also referred to as Billy. The song is entirely in the past tense, apart from the sections of chorus. The song continues to recount Billy’s decline into selling drugs and becoming involved with a street gang.

Billy realized that these men were well guarded
 And they wanted to test him before business started
 Suggested raping a bitch to prove he was cold hearted

So now he had a choice between going back to his life

Or making money with made men up in the cife

His dreams about cars and ice made him agree

(2:41-2:57)

The speaker then tells us how Billy and the gang members capture a woman and proceed to sexually assault her. Before Billy murders her, he pulls the cloth they had earlier wrapped around her and recognizes the woman as his mother. Shocked and distraught over this realization, he commits suicide. Throughout the song, the chorus breaks the story and repeats itself twice:

Everyone tryna be trife never faced the consequences

You probably only did a month for minor offenses

Ask a nigga doing life if he had another chance

But then again theres always the wicked that knew in advance

Dance forever with the devil on a cold cell block

But thats what happens when you rape, murder and sell rock

Devils used to be gods angels that fell from the top

Theres no diversity because we're burning in the melting pot

(3:08-3:29)

The song exhibits the enunciative apparatus as it suddenly disrupts the narrative and addresses “you”—moreover, it offers an observation about the world when it claims “theres no diversity because we're burning in the melting pot.” Here we come to an understanding that Billy acts as an allegorical character meant to represent capitalism and a corrupt mindset. The song incorporates elements of storytelling in order to put into question the morality of committing crime to further advance in society, whether the motive be financial or to have authority or

otherwise. There is a general sense that we should not partake in these immoral acts because the consequences will be dire. “Narrative lyrics cast in the past tense have ways of indicating the significance of the incident narrated, so that the report of incident becomes subordinated to a meaning in the lyric present” (Culler 278). “Dance with the Devil” urges the reader to consider the actions and mindset that lead to Billy’s demise as to conclude that these actions should be avoided; and moreover, it continuously prompts the reader to consider political and cultural issues in the current world.

Rap repeatedly includes vulgarity, violence, or derogatory language, and therefore to read or treat rap as mimetic of subjective experience is problematic in that it insinuates that the poet, speaker, or their environment is inherently vulgar, violent, or offensive. Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously asserted that when encountering fantastical elements of poetry, we are able to “transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith” (270). Similarly to how one can consider the implausibility of supernatural or impossible acts in literature, and thus choose to avoid applying critical thinking to such instances, one can also have poetic faith in rap’s hostile proclivities. For example, consider this excerpt from Immortal Technique’s “The Cause of Death”:

You better watch what the fuck flies outta your mouth
 Or Imma hijack a plane and fly it into your house
 Burn your apartment with your family tied to the couch
 And slit your throat so when you scream only blood comes out
 I doubt that there could ever be a more wicked MC
 Cause aids infested child molesters arent sicker than me

I see the world for what it is beyond the white and the black

The way the government downplays historical facts

(0:28-0:52)

This is a rather extreme example, as rap more commonly includes lyrics that deal with criminal behavior or drug use or homophobic slurs as has been the case in many excerpts included thus far. But in these severe occasions of vulgarity and violence, we nevertheless have the ability to assess what value of truth should be assigned to their meanings. In granting poetic faith to rap, we can boil the language down to a general sense of anger which underlines all its hostile proclivities; and this anger is often connected to injustices the song perceives as happening in the current world. The last two lines in the above excerpt of “The Cause of Death” reveal the injustice which caused the anger in the first six lines. Additionally, Culler points out that “[t]he indeterminacy of meaning in poetry provides an experience of freedom and a release from the compulsion to signify” (304). In other words, we do not need to take poetry too seriously. Taking rap into the privileged space of lyric poetry creates a critical space to discuss these recurrent themes involving vulgarity, violence, and offensive language which otherwise would be characterized as mimetic of one’s subjective experience.

The Rhythmic and Ritualistic Nature of Rap

Moving forward, the third of Culler’s parameters focuses on the rhythmic, ritualistic, and repetitive aspects of lyric poetry—these elements are central to rap because rap relies heavily on rhythm and it invites its audience to take the role as speaker, as one does when singing along to, or consciously reading, a song. *Theory of the Lyric* points to rap in its section on rhythm: “One of the most vital manifestations of the English verse tradition today is rap. . .[it] mostly breaks with

the tradition of sung lyrics, taking rhythm rather than melody at its basis” (Culler 172). This rhythm manifests from the distinctive poetic language of rap. Moreover, rap exists to be remembered and repeated. There is a reason why we find ourselves with lines of lyric stuck replaying in our minds (known colloquially as an “earworm”). The foregrounding of rhythmic language and ritualistic aspects in rap may lead us to understanding why its lyrics continuously prove to be alluring or addictive.

This excerpt from Eminem’s “The Way I Am” exhibits rhythm and rhyme as its most prominent feature:

I sit back with this pack of Zig Zags and this bag
 Of this weed, it gives me the shit needed to be
 The most meanest MC on dis—on dis earth
 And since birth Ive been cursed with this curse to just curse
 And just blurt this berserk and bizarre shit that works
 And it sells and it helps in itself to relieve
 All this tension dispensin these sentences, gettin this
 Stress thats been eatin me recently off of this chest
 And I rest again peacefully

(0:25-0:50)

Here the use of internal rhyme compels the reader to voice the written version of the song in a way that strikingly foregrounds the musicality of language. The language is manipulated so that the sound produced from the words acts as a beat. For example, the first two lines each contain four iambic feet—this is not to be confused with iambic tetrameter which would require the

meters to be directly adjacent one another. Each iambic foot in the couplet repeats the same vocal sound, apart from the last foot in the second line.

/ɪ/ [æ] /ɪ/ [æ] /ɪ/ [æ] /ɪ/ [æ]

I sit back with this pack of Zig Zags and this bag

/ɪ/ /i:/ /ɪ/ /i:/ /ɪ/ /i:/ u: /i:/

Of this weed, it gives me the shit needed to be

We are often inclined to assume that the sound of a word inherently reflects the meaning of that same word. Word pairs such as *bright/dark* or *high/low* convincingly suggest this notion; but in discussing the contrastive value of sounds, Culler notes that they “have an effect not individually. . .but, like rhythm, through pattering which foregrounds them and either calls attention to particular words or phrases” (174). The first line voices two short vowel sounds, /ɪ/ and [æ], which creates a faster beat. As we move to the second line, the pace slows slightly with the introduction of the long vowel sound /i:/. Simultaneously, the song slows down with the mention of the word “weed.” Weed, also known as cannabis, is a psychoactive drug widely understood in popular culture to slow down one’s experience of time and to cause relaxation. Taking into consideration the druglike effects of cannabis, the shift from the short vowel to the long vowel sound accentuates “weed” in the song as something that relaxes the rhythm. The emphasis on rhythm and rhyme in “The Way I Am” is principal to the experience of the song.

Although rap in its original form voices the song for its audience, when the listener enjoys the song and deems it successful, he or she will return to it again and again until finally they voice the song with or without its original accompaniment. Rap, even in its written form, contains these rhythmic and ritualistic elements which allow it to be remembered and performed by its reader. An enticing aspect of rap lies in its encouragement to the reader to take on the role

of speaker who voices “I” and who maintains authority in the duration of the lyric event. And what is more, a reader with an inclination for the song can repeatedly experience the rap event. To highlight the memorable and ritualistic aspects of rap, consider the following excerpt from Eminem’s “Rock Bottom”:

I feel like Im walkin a tightrope
 Without a circus net
 Poppin percocet
 Imma nervous wreck
 I deserve respect
 But I work a sweat for this worthless check
 Im boutta burst this TEC at somebody to reverse this debt
 Minimum wage got my adrenaline caged
 Full of venom and rage
 Especially when Im engaged
 And my daughters down to her last diaper
 Its got my ass hyper
 I pray that god answers, maybe Ill ask nicer
 (0:21-0:41)

In instances such as these, the reader temporarily occupies the place of the speaker and voices the song, thus expanding his or her discursive repertoire (“Theory of the Lyric Book Talk”). The song tells of adversities that arise when living with scarce amounts of money and with limited resources available to progress in modern America. Here the song consistently returns to “I” as statements of observation that offer judgment regarding the conditions of poverty and,

additionally, to “draw on the present for vividness and to enrich [it’s] ritualistic dimension” (Culler 284). The song confides in the reader that the rough conditions of life are what cause one to “pop percocet”—percocet is a combination drug consisting of paracetamol and the opioid oxycodone, the latter of which results in physical dependence and can cause its user to experience withdrawal symptoms that in turn require more of the drug to feel “normal”. According to the American Psychiatric Association, “about 45 percent of people who use heroin started with an addiction to prescription opioids” (“Opioid Use Disorder”). Therefore, as the reader voices the song from the perspective of “I,” he or she can draw connections between life in poverty and drug abuse. The song allows the reader to imagine and to partake in an experience wherein he or she faces the same distress and commits the same actions. “Rock Bottom” gives us “an impression of the rightness of what we don’t understand, the sense that we control what we don’t understand. . .to which rhythm, along with other forms of repetition, energetically ministers” (Culler 185). By extending some level authority to the reader, the song evokes the ritualistic dimension of both lyric poetry and rap; and moreover, it appeals to the reader’s natural interest to understand and relate to human adversity.

The Hyperbolic Quality of Rap

Culler’s fourth and last parameter—the hyperbolic nature of lyric poetry—argues that there is an underlying hyperbolic quality to the lyric “where the effect in part derives from the contrast between the apparent triviality, the foregrounded aimlessness of miscellaneous acts or observations, and the presumption of lyric significance” (259). Hyperbole is an underlying structure of lyric as a genre. A common theme in rap is to make absurd claims about one’s capabilities or exaggerate one’s experiences through the voicing of hyperbolic statements. One

example of this can be observed in Immortal Technique's "The Prophecy" wherein the entire song includes preposterous declarations not necessarily meant to be taken literally by the reader, but rather to call on a general sense of self-doubt and to combat such doubt by drawing attention to the value of confidence. Here is an excerpt:

I might be nobody but wait till Im together like a symphony
 Resounding sound that will continue infinitely
 Angel of death punishing all those who live in infamy
 And shine so far away from you
 Youll never get a glimpse of me
 Attempts to extinguish me dont even bother me none
 Like retarded kids throwing ice cubes at the sun
 (1:20-1:37)

There is a suggestion made here that the act of being confident in one's own abilities should be central in our experience of the world. In expressing an exaggeration of abilities and actions, the song evokes feelings of self-doubt and replaces them with hyperbolic claims of excellence. Although the speaker has superhuman abilities and can use this power to project "resounding sound that will continue infinitely," there is an underlying sense of courage that propels the speaker to commit these actions. The first line asserts "I might be nobody" but immediately substitutes this thought with aimless claims that have no real significance other than to offer praise to oneself. This rhetorical strategy provokes us to accept the use of hyperbole as intentional, and it places emphasis on the speaker's confidence above all else. The last four lines of this excerpt leave the reader with an image of the speaker being far from earth, unable to be seen or reached by anyone who attempts to go searching. It is an impossible claim, but it does

offer something to the reader in the realm of feeling self-assured. Our trust in the song to interpret the world for us leads us to “go a long way in accepting obscurity, disjunction, or apparent irrelevance, on the assumption that these are deliberate and will turn out to be in some way efficacious” (Culler 260). In addition to being the purpose of this instance of hyperbole, I will argue further in Chapter 2 that this underlying sense of confidence functions as a key element of the structure of rap.

To continue, rap engages with hyperbole for comedic effect, but because rap deals heavily with themes such as crime, poverty, or violence, its instances of comedy are often “dark”—in trivializing such themes, rap consequently draws attention to the taboo of these subjects and prompts the reader to judge the song in an emotive and critical way. And as Culler writes, “poems are messages that speak of the world and ask us to consider it in a particular light” (Culler 36). Accordingly, it is up to us to determine what sort of light we think the song shines on our world. Take for instance the following couplet from Eminem’s “My Name Is”:

Well since age twelve Ive felt like Im someone else
Cause I hung my original self from the top bunk with a belt
(0:46-0:51)

The permanence of suicide is defied when the “I” speaker claims to have committed suicide at a young age but still lives *today*, in the duration of the rap event, to voice the song. Here the hyperbolic mention of suicide gives authority to the speaker to confront past traumas with ease and humor.

Furthermore, an excerpt from the third installment of Canibus’ “Poet Laureate” series acts as an example of hyperbole that engages with comedy more subtly than previous examples. It also recalls the epideictic function of lyric in its offer of praise and blame. Here is the excerpt:

Hip hop made me, hip hop praise me
 Aint nothin changed me since 1980
 Involuntary catalepsy, battle me baby
 One thousand bars nigga, zero vector systems
 Brain waves reveal high yield E&D fields
 Chew MCs like Im eatin a meal
 Normal life is not real, we are just cogs in a wheel
 We work, we hurt, we search, we feel
 (3:58-4:20)

Here the song praises hip hop for being the medium that allows rap to exist. It also offers praise to the speaker for not conforming to a system since 1980, and it praises the speaker for having the talent to be able to produce the rap for the audience. This further points to the previously discussed hyperbolic claims of confidence. In its utterance, “aint nothing changed me,” the song insinuates that there is some oppressive force that we as readers must try to avoid. The last two lines shift the hyperbolic emphasis of the song from speaker unto to the world the speaker illuminates; the earlier allusion to oppression is revealed in these lines. It is the cycle of a mundane life, of being employed, of partaking in the rituals of capitalism, of existing in a unfair world, and so on. “Many lyrics are statements with real illocutionary force,” writes Culler, “seeking to persuade listeners to take a particular view of an issue or problem” (121). The illocutionary force in this song compels us to consider the idea that our life is indeed not real and, in turn, we may imagine what a “normal” and “real” life could or would resemble. Ultimately, the song leaves us with three verbs as a sort of instruction for navigating the “unreal” life—*work, hurt, search, feel*

Chapter 2. Rap is Raw: A Model for Reading Rap Music

Now that we have established rap as a form of lyric poetry—that is, a form of poetry that ubiquitously pulls from the lyric tradition—we can begin to focus more closely on rap’s distinctive use of language and poetic form and ask what it is that makes rap, *rap*? Ingrained within rap are the many dimensions of poetry, and it is through these dimensions which rap invokes its reader to take a certain stance on the world. When we read rap in its written form, we are transported to the poetic landscape of the lyric/rap event wherein we view and judge the world from the perspective of the speaker, and furthermore, we see may self-reflect through the same critical lens provided by the song. Our expectations of rap and the meanings we attribute to its lyrics are just as important in our understanding of its poetic form as are the underlying lyrical structures which rap is operating within. In considering what it is we expect from rap song, David Foster-Wallace and Mark Costello write that:

. . .the rapper’s lyric, to succeed, must function simultaneously: as the quickest, interval-inhabiting part, the human part, of the many-gear rhythmic machine that comprises most serious raps; as a powerful, shocking, repulsive, or witty monologue, as deftness-in-motion; and as a formally clean and to-the-rhyme’s-bone-hewing arrangement of a verse. . . (106)

Here they contend that the voice of the speaker, the complex rhyming and rhythmic structure, and the expressive spectrum of lyrical content in rap are necessary elements required for a song to succeed for its audience. Foster-Wallace and Costello indirectly allude to the ritualistic dimension of lyric poetry as an element crucial to the experience of rap: it must be rhythmically pleasing, memorable, and an invitation to be voiced and repeated by the reader. Furthermore, when confronted with a song, we must ask what lyrical cues we search for in our attempt to

categorize the song into a musical genre. For rap, we certainly expect rhyme and rhythm. Perhaps we also expect the lyrics to be vehement in their style and to elicit a range of emotional responses from the reader. When considering rap as a genre, it is important to keep in mind that rap in its written form is a lyrically expressive form of poetic articulation which is often assertive in its claims and expository in its delivery.

Before moving forward with an analysis of the poetic structures of rap, I will first turn to stylistic and thematic elements of rap put forward by notable hip hop scholars and attempt to present a rudimentary history of rap as a musical genre. Hip hop scholars generally agree that rap is a form of black artistic expression which arose from hip hop culture during the 1970s in the South Bronx, New York. Pointing to Tricia Rose's groundbreaking 1994 book, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, she focuses on the connection between rap as a form of black artistic expression and (black) American culture. A foundational text in hip hop academia, Rose's work opened the door for new voices to speak on rap from academic perspectives. The book, she writes, "grounds black cultural signs and codes in black culture and examines the polyvocal languages of rap as the 'black noise' of the late twentieth century" (Rose xiv). Thus, with its many references to the urban environment and popular culture and its distinct use of language, rhythm, and rhyme, rap must belong in its own classification separate from other forms of black musical expression. By reading rap as an independent form, it will allow for a more specific analysis of the lyrical content. *The Anthology of Rap* writes that:

The rhythm-driven beats of hip-hop are more than accommodating of poetic expression; they provide the perfect sonic climate for poetically sophisticated lyrics to flourish. . .Rap lyrics generally retain much of their resonance and meaning when isolated from their

music. This is because so much of rap's meaning and even its sound are embedded in the language. (Bradley and DuBois xxxv)

Most rap songs, unlike other forms of black musical expression, foreground the intricate and witty use of language; additionally, rap songs often attract those living in impoverished inner cities because the lyrical content tends to mirror the language of, and the issues existing within, that same environment.

Rather than attempt to present a definitive model for reading all rap songs, this chapter instead sets out to explore the proclivities of rap's poetic form and to chart its unique wordplay, rituals, performativity, and emotive language. Here I have outlined three lyrical elements of rap which point to its underlying structures as a poetic form of (black) American expression: (1) rap as an expression of self-confidence; (2) rap as a form of poetic truth-telling; (3) rap as a response to the general unfairness of the world. I do not claim that this is an entirely comprehensive model for reading rap in its written form—that is to say that while many rap songs will fit into this model, it is not the case that all rap songs will fit. In what follows, I will pull from rap songs which are exemplary of rap's unique poetic tradition, and which complement the aforementioned elements of rap in its written form.

Poetic Authority

What I have called rap as an expression of self-confidence refers to the tendency of rap in its written form to make assertive statements about the quality of oneself, to be confident in its poetic abilities, and to allow the reader or listener to assume the role of speaker; a speaker who then voices these assertive utterances and experiences this poetic self-confidence. The frequency with which rap includes lines of assertive claims of one's own abilities or character is a key

underlying structure of rap as a genre. Furthermore, rap often explicitly and implicitly calls on its audience to persevere through life's many challenges—challenges which are often, but not always, rooted in the hardships of life in poverty. Since rap is so closely tied to its roots in the (black) urban environment and the black aesthetic, the boasting language of rap may point to adversities often faced by those living in the ghetto, and moreover, the need for one to maintain agency in adversity. “While the rapper’s vaunting self-praise often highlights his sexual desirability, commercial success, and property assets,” writes Richard Shusterman, “these signs of status are all presented as secondary to and derivative from his verbal power” (614-615). Although Shusterman was writing in 1991 and the reservoir of rap music available to him was much smaller, his observation that rap engages with boasting language because it exists in a certain poetic and artistic landscape valued in black culture still holds true today. In ordinary speech, we are reluctant to accept overconfidence in people’s claims about themselves because we deem it as supercilious behavior. However, in rap, our attention is meant to focus on the cleverness of its language and the uniqueness of its linguistic acts. Therefore, we accept rap’s self-confident claims because it exists in the monovocal form of poetry in which we are the speaker. In short, when we read rap on the page, the swagger of the language, rhyme, and rhythm imbue us with a sense of overwhelming confidence in both ourselves and in rap as a poetic form—and moreover, in the moment of the rap event, the reader submits to rap’s poetic authority which commands the audience’s trust and undivided attention.

In popular culture, rap is often referred to as “hype music” or music which is energizing and provokes feelings of self-confidence; this is in part due to the uplifting and gyrating musical components, but as I have discussed, the language of rap also plays an important role in its label as “hype” music. The musical composition of rap, known colloquially as its “beat,” complements

its often assertive voice—however, even when the lyrics are stripped of the beat, the language that remains still conveys a certain authoritative presence in the song. To elucidate such assertive utterances in rap, consider Kendrick Lamar’s “DNA”:

I got, I got, I got, I got

Loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA

Cocaine quarter piece, got war and peace inside my DNA

I got power, poison, pain and joy inside my DNA

I got hustle though, ambition, flow inside my DNA

(0:01-0:15)

Here the lyrics do not explicitly instruct the reader to be self-confident, but rather the song subtly references the underclass of society and presents the speaker as having risen to a place of authority through his virtues and natural talent. Moreover, the language conveys a sense of triumph in reaching this place of authority—words such as “loyalty,” “hustle,” and “ambition” evoke ideas about devotion, involvement, and determination which are virtues needed to succeed in life. Furthermore, the verb “got” is repeated eight times in this excerpt as the speaker dictates assertive claims of being diverse in character and having agency over one’s own decisions in life. In the last line, the speaker refers to “flow” as being part of one’s DNA—flow refers to rhyme schemes and rhythm. This reference to the ability to write and verbally deliver the lines offers praise to the speaker and to rap as the poetic form which allows one to succeed.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the ritualistic quality of lyric poetry is ever prevalent in rap; it is one of rap’s most characteristic features in that it allows the reader to temporarily take the place of speaker and voice the “I” of the poem. In the duration of the lyric/rap event, the reader becomes the speaker. Therefore, when a rap song is assertive and confident in its language, the

individual who voices “I” (silently or aloud) in turn engages with the song’s confidence and adopts it as his or her own. When reading a rap song that particularly includes boasting language, the speaker will voice the lyrics with the same “authority, conviction, confidence, and power” inherent to rap’s “most frequent style. . .the toast” (Rose 55). Toasting, according to Rose, is “a boastful, bragging, form of oral storytelling sometimes explicitly political and often aggressive, violent, and sexist in content” (55). Rap songs through the decades carry this tradition of toasting: Public Enemy’s “Miuzi Weighs a Ton”, NWA’s “Straight Outta Compton”, Eminem’s “The Real Slim Shady”, Kendrick Lamar’s “HUMBLE” and many, many more. When we experience a song that is exceptionally clever, confident, and powerful in its language, we repeatedly return to the song to feel again the courage and boldness it instills.

Interpretative Truth and the Demand for Critical Thinking

Ingrained in rap’s tradition is the second element I have outlined: rap as a form of poetic truth-telling, indicated whenever a rap song proclaims that it is transmitting truthful knowledge to its reader of which the reader should take seriously—“You are now about to witness the strength of street knowledge” (NWA 0:01-0:04). Rap’s pursuit in delivering certain truths about the world to its audience is most often associated with underground hip hop culture since the path to stardom through commercial success tends to devalue street knowledge and radical thought—rap is therefore pushed into “spaces that operate primarily for the reproduction of race-gender-social class advantage” (Gosa 66). However, this is not to say commercial rap does not partake in the tradition of truth-telling, as there are rap artists who have become wildly successful while maintaining their status as truth-tellers. NWA, for example, “went platinum in the early 1990s despite the fact that almost none of their songs were suitable for airplay”

(Bradley and DuBois xxxviii). The prelude to their song “Fuck tha Police” is meant to uphold the veracity of the lyrics that follow, lyrics which are accusatory, radical, and provocative in nature. It begins with Dr. Dre stating he is a judge—a character who is impartial and who observes a situation objectively—he asks Ice Cube, “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothin but the truth, so help your black ass?” to which Ice Cube replies “You goddamn right” (0:01-0:27). Rap, with its farcical stories, intelligent wordplay, and allusions to the impoverished environment of America’s ghetto, urges the reader to evaluate and judge the world as the song presents it, and moreover, how the reader perceives his or her world. By presenting the lyrical content as truth, it is then left to the audience to contemplate the validity of rap’s claims.

As I have previously argued, rap exists in the exceptional and privileged space of lyric poetry, a space which fosters elements most inherent to the rap tradition, such as signifyin(g), toasting, boasting, figurative language, hyperbole, and rhyme and rhythm. And to quote Jonathan Culler, “lyric is not a fictional discourse but disquisition about the world” (264). Thus, the element of truth-telling in rap functions as a poetic (lyric) form which allows rap to call on its audience and to ask them to be critical of the world. And in turn, rap hopes that its listeners or readers will in some way respond to its claims with either agreement or disagreement. Because rap exists socially for its audience and because it pulls so heavily from the culture of the poor, oppressed, underclass of society, its truth-telling thus attempts to unveil social issues it perceives as being suppressed and ignored by society at large. “[Rappers] role as artists and poets is inseparable from their role as insightful inquirers into reality and teachers of truth,” writes Shusterman, “particularly those aspects of reality and truth which get neglected or distorted by establishment history books and contemporary media coverage” (625-626). An example of this is

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's commercially successful and widely influential song "The Message" (1982):

A child is born with no state of mind
 Blind to the ways of mankind
 God is smiling on you but hes frowning too
 Because only god knows what youll go through
 Youll grow in the ghetto living second rate
 And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate
 (4:51-5:05)

Here the song seems to relinquish all hope for a better future when it claims "the ways of mankind" will ultimately shape the future of a black child who lives in the ghetto, who cannot escape it, and who will grow to hate it. *The Anthology of Rap* characterizes this song as a "dystopian series of urban vignettes that remains one of the most affecting raps ever recorded" (Bradley and DuBois 65). The language used is roundly candid, sincere in its emotion, and confident in its convictions. Although "The Message" declares with certainty that it knows what the future holds, the title of the song and its poetic elements speak instead to the timelessness of poetry. Rap, like poetry, is meant to be repeated, recited, and recalled by its audience. Therefore, when a song engages in truth-telling, it positions the speaker as the truth-teller and persuades him or her to consider the world through a new lens. "The Message" evokes an image of a hopeless child, a feeling of sadness ("frowning") and a feeling of anger ("deep hate"). By presenting the truth alongside these images and feelings, the song does *not* relinquish its hope for a brighter and progressive future, but rather it strives to *inspire* those who will come along to voice the song to possibly recognize these issues and call for social change.

Furthermore, the “truth” that is delivered can be brought into contemporary social spaces and treated as relevant despite its temporal or spatial differences. Other rap artists have titled their songs “The Message” (Nas in 1996, Dr. Dre in 1999, and Immortal Technique in 2003 with his having a slight variation, “The Message & The Money”). Each of these songs follow the same tradition of delivering truth, and each song deals with themes of violence, criminality, and the urban environment.

Authenticity and the Speaker’s Position

The third element of rap which I have called rap as a response to the general unfairness of the world is quite broad in its claim, but the language of rap often imbues us with a sense of sorrow, anger, or desire for social change; and moreover, rap almost exclusively positions the speaker as in opposition with his or her environment. Because rap contemplates social issues related to poverty, race, and class through its epideictic function of offering praise or blame or articulation of value, we as readers of rap’s written form should analyze its poetic inclinations to better understand how rap responds to what it perceives as unfairness in the world. In short, rap is critical of a world that subjugates and oppresses people and therefore its lyrics are often emotional, indignant, and contentious in nature. Using W.E.B DuBois explication of traditional African American sorrow songs—a term coined by DuBois, the sorrow song expresses suffering, mourning, and unjust treatment of enslaved African Americans—Joseph Winters argues that there is a dynamic happening between sorrow songs and hip hop, especially in relation to both genres having lyrics which reflect a mournful yearning for a better world (9-11). Tupac’s songs, songs which often offer “insight into the emotional chasms of prejudice and inequality” and which underscore themes of mourning and lament, seem to respond to what one perceives as

injustices of the world (Bradely and DuBois 512). For example, consider this couplet from the song “Changes”:

Im tired of being poor and even worse Im black

My stomach hurts so Im lookin for a purse to snatch

(0:21-0:25)

In the first line, the word “tired” signifies irritation and impatience directed at life in poverty. Furthermore, the speaker states that, in this condition, it is “worse” to be black and poor combined. The second line introduces an action: the speaker sets out to commit theft due to an upset stomach. Here the song evokes a sense of frustration and despair. Moreover, it positions the speaker and his environment as two separate entities that are in opposition with one another; this is a crucial point in understanding how rap responds to the unfairness of the world. Rap songs are almost always voiced from a perspective that sees itself as in opposition to its environment and therefore we as readers are invited to see ourselves in opposition to our environment, to be critical of our world, and to hope for a better future.

“Changes” laments over the state of the world, a world wherein being black and poor offers one minimal hope for a better future. The song blames the products of poverty and systematic racial inequality for crimes committed by those living within the constructs of such unfair conditions. Also, it is a mere stomachache (which could be due to hunger, lack of medication, or otherwise) which compels the speaker into criminal behavior, further extending blame to societal structures within the impoverished urban environment. The song continues with the following lines:

Cops give a damn about a negro

Pull the trigger, kill a nigga, hes a hero

Give the crack to the kids, who the hell cares

One less hungry mouth on the welfare

(0:26-0:34)

Here the song condemns police brutality and declares that the world disregards issues faced by those living in the underbelly of society. The repeating lines of the chorus (“Thats just the way it is / Things will never be the same”) mourns over a certain idealized past wherein things may have been different; however, in the lyric present, social and racial issues exist and the speaker of the poem voices the song from a perspective that is critical of such issues. Thus, the song devalues a society which permits mistreatment of poorer classes and which engenders suffering in the (black) urban environment, and, at the same time, it allows the speaker to voice these condemnations and therefore diversify his or her existing outlook on life in the ghetto.

To continue with the topic of voice and authority in rap, I would like to shift attention to Candice M. Jenkins’ claim that a rapper’s voice “stands in metonymically for his point of view, his literal and figurative *position* in/on the world, as well as his ability to speak to and for his audience” (5). Here she emphasizes the rapper’s voice as a medium through which he articulates authority, and furthermore, the importance of language, perspective, environment, and the limitations of poetry in rap music. Although Jenkins focuses on “the singular lyrical and narrative power accorded to the rapper’s voice,” and this thesis rather focuses solely on rap in its written form, nevertheless her accentuation on how rap exists *literarily* in the urban landscape of the ghetto gives insight into how rap responds to the unfairness of the world through its special consideration of language. For example, Immortal Technique’s song “Revolutionary” foregrounds the importance of voice and poetry in rap. Here is an excerpt:

Ill put your best disciple on academic probation

Fuck the litigation, fuck the best rapper nominations

And fuck the president, I voted for assassination

(2:25-2:32)

Here the use of internal rhyme and rhyming multisyllabic words demonstrates the speaker's verbal prowess and positions this power as central to the experience of the song. As with many rap songs, it would be difficult to read the lyrics on paper without participating in the unique sonic qualities of its poetry. Moreover, the repetition of the negative expressive "fuck" conveys a sense that the speaker should be assertive in his or her voicing of the song. Therefore, I argue that rap is *not* a reflection of violence or vulgarity which exists in the impoverished urban environment, but rather it is an expression of a more general feeling of anger or sorrow in response to what one perceives as an unfair world.

Chapter 3. Rap is Real: A Collective Story of Life in Poverty

Using Jonathan Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* I have argued in Chapter 1 that to read rap as mimetic of subjective experience is problematic in that it fails to accurately explain themes such as violence, vulgarity, or criminality—themes which are central to rap as a genre. To assume that rap lyrics reflect aggression or indecency inherent to the culture from which they emerge is to ignore that rap lyrics are mediated through the many dimensions of poetry. On the other hand, it is equally precarious to read rap in its written form as completely detached from its cultural landscape or from the subjective experiences of the rapper. The three elements of rap I put forward in Chapter 2—rap as an expression of self-confidence, rap as a form of poetic truth-telling, and rap as a response to the general unfairness of the world—are not only expressive of rap as a genre, but they are also almost always bound to the experience of life in poverty. Indeed, if the voice of rap lacks knowledge about life in the (black) ghetto or is unfamiliar with the struggles associated with life in poverty, one may be unwilling to accept it as *rap* at all.

Vanilla Ice, for example, was controversial in that he attempted to “validate his success with stories about his close ties to black poor neighborhoods, publicly sporting his battle scars from the black inner city,” but as Tricia Rose points out, he was actually a “middle-class kid from Dallas, TX” (11). Alternatively, Eminem, who is the only white rapper featured in this thesis, is also “one of the few white MCs to gain both popular success and respect among his peers” (Bradley and DuBois 611). The widespread acceptance of Eminem was in part due to his exceptional skills as a lyricist and his stylistic influence on rap music (Bradley and DuBois 561). But what is more, Eminem's authentic tales of life in poverty, his positive association with other popular black artists (such as Dr. Dre and Nas), and his purposeful omission of “the N-word” in songs also point to why he was accepted among other black rappers and his (black) audience.

Therefore, rap in its written form reflects a combination of the triangulated, ritualistic, hyperbolic dimensions of lyric poetry and the sincere, authentic, emotional expressions of life in poverty.

To continue, Heather Dubrow writes in her discussion on lyric forms that “Not only should definitions and descriptions be historically specific; the variety lyric manifests even within a single historical period. . . offers further caveats about generalizations” (127). To read lyric poetry as a contained entity without placing it within its respective historical lens or examining its diction, according to Dubrow, will only permit more generalizations while, at the same time, deterring “accurate” readings of the poetry. For rap, we can confidently assert that a song is contingent upon the musicality of its language. Without language that rhymes, or at the very least is rhythmic, one may be reluctant to classify it as rap. Despite the fact that rap must be musically inclined, the lyrical content may differ depending on the subgenre, but more specifically on the level of the artist, the album, or even on individual song level. *The Anthology of Rap* writes that rap has “developed a complex expressive range, driven by narratives of everything from the street life to the good life and by treatments of themes ranging from love to heartache to speculative projections of alternative realities” (Bradley and DuBois xxxi). Even with its “complex expressive range” the voice of rap is usually connected to the (black) urban environment and demonstrates this connection through its authentic articulations of life in poverty. And furthermore, one who is not familiar with the cultural intricacies of impoverished communities or with black American vernacular will fall short in analyzing the language and poetry of rap.

For a genre so rich in lyrical content and open to many interpretable possibilities, it has been difficult thus far to disregard the hermeneutic nature of rap and instead focus on its poetic proclivities. But because rap deals so heavily with themes which revolve around life in

poverty—drugs, incarceration, and police brutality, to name a few—it is crucial that we attempt to bridge these themes to reality. Yet as Candice Jenkins points out, “Critical scripts about . . . popular hip hop as sexist and misogynistic, unnecessarily or outrageously materialistic and hedonistic, corrupted by capital, apolitical and indifferent, provide precisely this sort of automatic, empty hermeneutics of the genre” (2). When we engage with rap, we undoubtedly will encounter lyrics that are shocking or derogatory in nature. However, such lyrics are often presented to the reader as sardonic articulations about the world rather than the rapper’s sincere thoughts or feelings. For this reason, it is important to keep in mind the poetic dimensions of rap as we move forward with interpreting its, at times, offensive or controversial lyrical content. As I have argued, placing rap within the context of lyric theory has allowed for a more liberal and tolerant reading of the genre. Moreover, it is often up to the reader of rap in its written form to deduce whether such utterances should be taken seriously or to determine what truth may be pulled from a particular song. Thus, we will treat rap as it is a “recurrent coming into being in a social space,” or a lyric event which is “always to be constructed by reading of one’s own relation to it” (Culler 301). In this chapter, I will *not* approach rap as necessarily mimetic of the rapper’s or speaker’s subjective experience—instead, I will argue that rap can be read as a representation of life in poverty by analyzing its multiplicity of shared themes such as drug use, criminality, and the impoverished urban environment.

Humanizing Drug Addiction

When referencing drugs—the most recurrent being cannabis, crack cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin—rap asserts its social position on drug use or drug addicts. Unlike cannabis which is generally perceived as a “soft” drug, the others mentioned are “hard” drugs in

that they result in debilitating addiction and physical dependence. The latter will be my focus moving forward. Crack, for example, is an omnipresent drug that has woven its way into many rap songs, such as NWA's "Dopeman" or The Notorious B.I.G.'s "Ten Crack Commandments." It is true that rap music gained prominence somewhat alongside the crack epidemic in the United States. However, this is not to say that rap and the crack epidemic are mutually exclusive with one another, but rather to make the connection between rap lyrics that deal with drugs or addiction in (black) inner cities, and the social implications of drug addiction overall. It is still true today that drug addiction runs rampant in American inner cities in the aftermath of various drug epidemics, and consequently, rap continues to commentate on the social aspects of drug abuse from perspectives that are (usually) personally involved. Mark Naison, in his essay "The Crack Epidemic and the Transformation of Hip Hop: A Bronx Tale," writes that

[The crack epidemic] vastly increased levels of community violence, created profound generational tensions. . .shattered families, and led to overwhelming pressures for an expanded police presence, resulting in mass incarceration on a level never before seen in the 20th Century, with over 2 million people in jail and prison in the year 2000, as compared to 330,000 in 1980. (2)

Not only did the crack epidemic result in widespread addiction, it also gave rise to violence and mass incarceration within the urban ghetto: this information is central to our interpretation of rap lyrics. "Crack had ushered in an era of conspicuous wealth and raw violence, and even the slang reflected its change," writes Jeff Chang in *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hip Generation*, ". . .it was all about getting ill, cold getting dumb" (241). When reading rap in its written form, it becomes apparent that the genre tends to either articulate how one is surrounded

by drugs or sees drug use in their environment, lyricize drugs for comedic purposes, or tell stories about oneself/someone else's negative relationship with drugs.

Rap often presents drugs as something normalized in the ghetto environment—this is demonstrated by how casually rap refers to drugs on the premise that the audience will understand the reference being made. For example, consider this excerpt from the song “Microphone Fiend” by Eric B. & Rakim:

Im hype as a hyper-chondriac cause the rap be one
 Hell of a antidote, something you cant smoke
 More than dope, you try to move away but you cant, youre broke
 More than cracked up, you should have backed up
 (2:46-2:56)

Here it is assumed that the reader is aware of the effects crack cocaine has on its users and therefore will be able to quickly perceive the song's intended meaning. The speaker highlights his appreciation for the craft by comparing rap to crack and comparing himself to an addict. This is further corroborated by the title of the song. In rap, the word “fiend” is a slang word for drug addict; and the word “fiending” refers to one experiencing drug cravings and who is on the search for their next “fix” of the drug. Thus, the speaker is enthusiastically devoted to the “microphone,” or his rap career, much like an addict is dependent on drugs. Moreover, the gratitude the speaker expresses for rap's poetic merits are presented within the “metrical organization and use of lineation” inherent to lyric poetry—and, because “lyric language works against instrumental reason, prosaic efficiency, and communicative transparency, quite independently of the thematic content,” the reference to crack in the song is less critical than the speaker's praise of rap's poetic capabilities (Culler 304). There are two elements central to the

song: the speaker's self-praise and praise of rap *and* the drug metaphor being presented to the reader. Both elements point to the epideictic functions and hyperbolic qualities of lyric poetry. Lastly, the song sends an anti-drug message by claiming the "you" of the song is impoverished due to their addiction, whereas the speaker is in the place of capital and verbal authority. If the "you" of the song would have steered clear of drug use, they would have money and the means to compete in the imaginary verbal battle with the speaker.

Another way in which rap presents drugs is through stories of oneself either personally knowing an addict or being in an environment where there are many addicts. In these instances, the speaker often presents himself as detached from the addict(s) which surround him. For example, in Nas' "N.Y. State of Mind" ("Im livin where the nights is jet black, the fiends / Fight to get crack, I just max, I dream I can sit back"), the speaker voices from a perspective of one who has agency over his situation and who chooses to avoid drugs altogether (3:08-3:13). Encounters with addicts may also be personal, as with Hopsin's "Chris Dolmeth" which tells the story of the speaker's high school friend, Jesse, a young man who becomes addicted to methamphetamine, overdoses, and lashes out when his sister attempts to intervene:

She tried to give him CPR before the kid was lost
 Then he had woke up and saw her on him and it pissed him off
 All of sudden he went crazy just to fucking get her off
 He threw her up against the wall so hard it made a picture fall
 (2:53-3:05)

Here the song discloses a very personal and emotional moment within a family unit. Although the speaker is the one who recounts the story, we learn later in the song that the speaker was not present during the overdose, thus marking his disassociation with drugs. Moreover, the repeating

lines of chorus (“Hi, Im Chris Dolmeth” which sounds strikingly similar to “high on crystal meth”) anthropomorphizes the drug as a human who lures the victim into a car. “Chris Dolmeth” conveys the notion that it is not the addict who is corrupt, but rather the drug itself which causes nefarious behavior—it is common for rap to condemn the drug itself rather than its users.

What is most striking in rap’s treatment and portrayal of drug addicts lies in its attempt to humanize a group that is often disregarded, criticized, and considered an untouchable aspect of society. For instance, in Tupac’s affecting song “Dear Mama,” the speaker confesses:

And even as a crack fiend, mama
 You always was a black queen, mama
 (0:58-1:03)

Here the speaker is not ashamed of his mother because of her struggle with addiction. Instead, the speaker offers praise to his mother for her efforts in raising him. The song continues:

You always was committed. A poor
 Single mother on welfare, tell me how ya did it
 (1:09-1:14)

The speaker imagines and acknowledges the obstacles his mother must have had to face while living in poverty and being dependent on social welfare benefits. This moment of realization allows the reader of the song to experience compassion toward a drug addicted person. The reader is temporarily placed in a position wherein one must offer forgiveness to a drug addict while simultaneously condemning the drug itself for causing pain for the speaker. Such emotionally complex moments of triangulated address in rap humanize drug addicts by eliciting empathy from the reader; moreover, these moments expand one’s knowledge of life in poverty in

permitting the reader “to participate in a restructuring of the sensuous and affecting domain of life” (Culler 330).

Criminality and Accountability

We have established that rap responds to rampant drug use in the ghetto environment through a certain humanization of drug addicts and condemnation of the drug itself—but how, then, does rap represent criminality in its lyrics? When rap references acts of criminality, it often does so as to make a call for social change from a perspective in which the speaker believes one should be held accountable for their actions. The most notable song to draw critical attention to police brutality in the inner cities was NWA’s “Fuck tha Police,” a song which I have previously discussed, and which evokes the performative quality of lyric poetry, persuading its audience to take a stance. “Fuck the Police” presents police brutality as a crime and the police are to be held accountable. These calls for accountability can either be directed at societal systems such as the police or the government, to the ambiguous “you” of the song, or a reflection to the speaker itself; it can also be directed at multiple entities at once, what I will call double accountability. There are various other songs which articulate similar claims about the world—“Police State” by Dead Prez; “Murder Murder” by Eminem; or “Hip Hop Sinister” by Hopsin, to name a few—songs which extend blame to various American entities such as the government, the political atmosphere, or the culture of the ghetto. Consider this excerpt from Immortal Technique’s “Industrial Revolution” as an example of such double accountability:

And fuck packing grams nigga, learn to speak and behave

You wanna spend twenty years as a government slave

Two million people in prison keep the government paid

Stuck in a six by eight cell, alive in a grave

(1:54-2:05)

Here the word “slave” implies enforced labor and holds the government accountable for perceived exploitation of prison inmates. At the same time, the song urges “you” to leave a life of dealing drugs so that “you” do not become a “slave” to the system. Both the government entity and the “you” of the song are responsible for what the song deems as negative actions committed. “Industrial Revolution” calls for social change by stating *everyone* involved is accountable and should be willing to participate in collective change as a society.

When rap presents the speaker as engaging in acts of criminality such as using drugs, homicide, or sexual assault, it does so by invoking the hyperbolic quality of its poetic form—conversely, when rap draws critical attention to acts of criminality committed by legitimate social entities such as the police or government, it does so to offer blame and to hold such entities accountable for what the song perceives as crimes against humanity. For example, consider this excerpt from Eminem’s “Just Don’t Give a Fuck”:

Then I went to Jim Beam, thats when my face grayed

Went to gym in eighth grade, raped the womens swim team

Dont take me for a joke, Im no comedian

Too many mental problems got me snortin coke and smokin weed again

(3:06-3:16)

Here the claims made by the speaker are hyperbolic to the point of absurdity. It illustrates an image of a primary school aged child committing criminal acts and partaking in alcohol and drug consumption—the reader is meant to recognize these acts as preposterous. Therefore, the reader

adopts the speaker's sardonic view of criminal behavior, rather than believing the criminal acts to be a representation of reality.

On the other hand, when rap extends blame to societal entities, it does so by pointing to what it perceives as criminal behavior committed by those who are in a position of authority. One example of this is Kendrick Lamar's song "Alright" which directly calls out police brutality and has been associated with the Black Lives Matter movement in America.

We been hurt, been down before nigga
 When our pride was low
 Lookin at the world like where do we go nigga
 And we hate po-po
 Wanna kill us dead in the street forsure nigga
 (1:13-1:24)

Here we can assume the "we" of the song represents the black community. In stating "we been down before," the song evokes a collective memory of suffering within oppressive forces such as racism or slavery—the next lines imbue the reader with a sense of uncertainty when looking at the future and, moreover, hatred and fear of the police. This moment in the song reinforces the community it addresses by generating feelings of injustice, anger, and desire for social change.

The last way in which rap presents crime is through stories of fictional characters who have participated in crime and thus have had to face some sort of retribution. Richard Shusterman, for example, writes that:

One very prominent theme of hip hop is how the advertised ideal of conspicuous consumption. . .lures many ghetto youth to a life of crime, a life which promises the

quick attainment of such commodities but typically ends in death, jail, or destitution, thus reinforcing the ghetto cycle of poverty and despair (Shusterman 623).

Recalling Immortal Technique's "Dance with the Devil," which I have discussed extensively in Chapter 1, the song represents crime negatively and sends a message that criminality should be avoided. Billy was fascinated by gang life as he viewed it as an easy path to riches. His criminal behavior, however, is punished by the end of the song and the warning "a dance with the devil might last you forever" is uttered by the speaker. Rap often recognizes criminality or violence as being detrimental to one's life in poverty; and even in cases when rap positions the speaker of the song as a *thug* or *gangsta*, such as in NWA's "Gangsta Gangsta" or Ice T's "6 'n the Mornin'," "the source for admiration of thug lifestyle [is] its toughness, and in particular how it represent[s] unwillingness to back down under pressure" more than it is an accurate representation of the rapper or speaker (Newman 418). At the same time, rap holds the stance that criminality occurs at all levels of society—from the microlevel such as in the ghetto environment to the macrolevel such as the police force or the government—and overall, each individual or entity must be held accountable for what the song perceives as acts of crime committed.

Evocations of Adversity and the Need for Agency

The last theme to be examined is the representation of the impoverished urban environment in rap songs—"Rap was born as a form of necessary speech," writes Bradley and DuBois, "it provided young people, many of whom were from difficult and impoverished backgrounds, with a voice and a means of vivid expression" (xxxviii). Rap frequently evokes images of the impoverished urban environment as to foreground the struggles faced by those

living in poverty. Moreover, it presents the urban environment as a sort of obstacle course which the speaker must face or is currently facing. For example, consider this excerpt from Eminem’s “If I Had”:

Im tired of being white trash, broke and always poor
 Tired of taking pop bottles back to the party store
 Im tired of not having a phone
 Tired of not having a home to have one in if I did have one on
 (1:59-2:11)

Each line begins with the adjective “tired” as to convey a sense of exasperation or angst in the speaker’s claims. The unique inclusion of the mundane—returning bottles to the store to receive a small fund in return—immediately relates to the reader who is particularly experienced in living in poverty. What may be a tedious task to one is a necessity to another. The speaker exclaims to be poor and therefore cannot afford what is essential in modern society: a house and a phone. Thus, the speaker who lives in poverty is stripped from any materiality and is left only with the ability to voice these issues in hopes the lyrics will elicit some response.

Just as rap presents the reader with common obstacles faced by those living in poverty, rap also articulates what it perceives as consequences of poverty through its observations of the ghetto urban environment. That is to say, rap observes the social conditions of the masses living in poverty and comments on such conditions. Consider this couplet from Immortal Technique’s “Harlem Streets” as an example:

Innocence devoured like a chicken spot snack box
 Government cocaine cooked into ghetto crack rock
 (0:34-0:39)

As the song title suggests, the speaker is voicing his perspective of the streets of Harlem, New York. In the first line, “Chicken spot” refers to the many independent and inexpensive fried chicken restaurants in NYC, frequented by those living in the underclass of society. Here the song reflects on two observations of life in poverty: the loss of one’s innocence and the consumption of unhealthy food in the ghetto environment. The second recalls drug use as being an integral part of the ghetto, a point I have already discussed. The song continues:

Check to check, constant struggle to make the payments

Working your whole life wonderin where the day went

The subway stays packed like a multicultural slave ship

(0:43-0:51)

The explicit inclusion of the phrase “constant struggle” points to the continuity of the cycle of poverty and the inescapable pattern of living on minimum wage. Moreover, the enunciative apparatus of lyric poetry positions the speaker as indirectly calling on “you” to reflect on life in poverty by placing “you” within it—“you” who must experience the lack of freedom in the work-home cycle. Lastly, the song remarks on the collective experience of life in poverty when comparing the NYC subway to a “multicultural slave ship”. Poverty, according to “Harlem Streets,” is an all-encompassing tragedy for those who are trapped in its cycle.

The last way in which rap exhibits the impoverished urban environment is through its articulations of uncertainty when confronted with violence in the streets, and furthermore, the precarious nature of living in poverty. The urban ghetto is presented as a place of the unknown wherein an individual who lives in poverty is always aware of the next impediment to social or financial progression. For example, Kendrick Lamar’s “m.A.A.d city”—which begins with the speaker stating “Brace yourself, Ill take you on a trip down memory lane / This is not a rap on

how Im slingin crack or move cocaine / Not the drill sergeant but the stress that weighin on your brain”—goes on to tell a story of a speaker who witnesses a gruesome murder (0:26-0:38). The song then continues with the following lines:

That was back when I was nine, Joey packed the nine

Pakistan on every porch is fine, we adapt to crime

Pack a van with four guns at a time

With the sliding door, fuck is up

(1:04-1:14)

Here the song carries the tradition of rap to assert it is conveying some form of the truth to the reader when it claims it is taking “you” on a “trip down memory lane”. It goes on to present the ghetto as a place where violence and crime are so rampant that the “we” of the song have adapted to this by bearing arms and standing as imposing figures on the porch. The speaker communicates that one must be prepared with firearms to exist in the uncertain and dangerous landscape of the ghetto. However, “m.A.A.d city” then goes on to read “You movin backwards if you suggest that you sleep with a TEC”—the previous notion that one needs firearms is immediately deconstructed as the speaker claims that to *solve* crime *with* crime is foolish, and additionally, the speaker insinuates that by doing so, one contributes to the decline of society. Therefore, the gun violence which the speaker initially claimed as happening in the impoverished urban environment stands figuratively for the speaker’s authority within the ghetto. Thus, by the end of the song the precarity of the ghetto environment does not change, whereas the speaker’s response, actions, and autonomous position while living in poverty—a life that is uncertain, unpredictable, or unreliable—can change.

Conclusion

What happens when we apply lyric theory to rap in its written form? And moreover, what lyrical, stylistic, and thematic elements of rap are foregrounded when we bridge together the frameworks of hip hop studies and lyric poetry? By reading rap within a strictly literary context, our attention is heightened to an awareness of its poetic proclivities, rhyme schemes, rhythmic structures, and witty wordplay. Using Culler's model for lyric poetry, I have charted instances of poetic articulations in rap which evoke the audience to judge and respond to its claims *and* which illuminate parts of our world as to interpret it for us. In centering focus on the lyrical underlying structures of rap, what is most prominent is the position of the speaker, his authenticity, and his authority. The speaker of rap is almost always positioned as in opposition to his environment; and the reader occupies the place of speaker, voicing the "I" of the song and expanding his or her knowledge, and perspective of, the ghetto. The consistent return to "I" statements of observation allow the reader to be of judgement to rap's claims. Lastly, I have argued that rap can be read as a representation of life in poverty through an analysis of its shared tropes and themes. What I have found is that the voice of rap is unequivocally connected to the experience of the impoverished urban ghetto. The speaker of rap often positions himself in relation to those living in the cycle of poverty by confessing his own hardships in impoverished conditions, and moreover, the speaker of rap often assertively positions himself as a voice of authority. This rhetorical device allows the speaker to maintain agency in the duration of the lyric/rap event, and consequently, the reader submits to the poetic authority of rap.

Rap has a turbulent past wherein many people have associated rap music with gang violence, drug use, and other forms of criminality—a quote from the president of the national Fraternal Order of Police reads: "People who ride around all night and use crack cocaine and

listen to rap music that talks about killing cops—it’s bound to pump them up. . .no matter what anybody tells you, this kind of music is dangerous” (Chang 396). Although this is an example of one’s input on rap music, nevertheless it has become a prevailing prejudice to view rap as violent music that stems from an inherently violent, drug-ridden culture. I have attempted thus far to prove the harmonious nature between rap and lyric poetry, the latter being a widely respected form of literature within academia. What has resulted is a sort of proof that rap can be read with the same critical methodologies one would use in their approach to traditional lyric poetry. And as I have argued, taking rap into the privileged space of lyric poetry has allowed for a more capacious and tolerant reading of the genre. The many ritualistic dimensions of poetry—rhyme and rhythm, deixis, apostrophe, and hyperbole, to name some of the most prominent discussed here—act as a medium through which the speaker voices rap. To a large extent, this thesis has attempted to answer what effect such dimensions have on how rap exists socially for its audience.

While many explorations and interpretations of rap have been included here, it is important to remember that lyric theory equips the reader of rap with a lens that is timeless and variable. We may bring rap in its written form to contemporary social or intellectual spaces to explore its intentions as a genre, its artistic or literary merits, or its social commentary or implications. In his brief section on rap music, Culler writes that the rhythmic nature of rap “illustrates the continuing appeal of rhythmic language with vigorous patterns of prominences” and goes on to posit that:

A greater foregrounding of rhythm as central to lyric. . .might lead to a different sort of poetics. One could thus imagine an approach more connected with evaluation, which has

not been central to literary studies recently: What works and what doesn't? What engages our attention. . .and what does not? (Culler 172-173)

To *read* rap, as I have done throughout this project, implies two forms of reading: to passively read and to read with the aim of literary analysis. It is only when we switch from passive reading to active reading that aspects like rhythmic language or literary prominences become apparent to us. What Culler suggests here is that the allure of lyric poetry, and our compulsion to be satisfied by its linguistic uniqueness, are two elements that are central to an analytical reading of rap music. As a rhythmically captivating, thought provoking, and emotionally pervasive form of lyric poetry, rap has a future in literary studies.

Works Cited

- Bradley, Adam, and Andrew DuBois, editors. *The Anthology of Rap*. Yale University Press, 2010.
- Brooks, Cleanth, and Robert Penn Warren. "Introduction to *Understanding Poetry*." *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, John Hopkins University Press, 2014, pp. 177-192.
- Chang, Jeff. *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. Ebury Press, 2005.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. 1817. The Floating Press, 2009.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Theory of the Lyric*. Harvard University Press, 2015.
- . "'Theory of the Lyric' book talk by Jonathan Culler." 22 August 2018, Cornell University, Cornell, NY.
- Dubrow, Heather. "Lyric Forms." *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, John Hopkins University Press, 2014, pp. 114-128.
- Foster-Wallace, David, and Mark Costello. *Signifying Rappers*. 1990. Penguin, 2013.
- Gosa, Travis L. "The fifth element: knowledge." *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*. Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 56-70.
- Jackson, Virginia, and Yopie Prins, editors. "General Introduction." *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, John Hopkins University Press, 2014, pp. 1-8.
- . "Genre Theory." *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, John Hopkins University Press, 2014, pp. 11-16.
- Jenkins, Candice M. "Introduction: 'Reading' Hip-Hop Discourse in the Twenty-First Century." *African American Review*, vol 46, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1-8.
- Naison, Mark. "The Crack Epidemic and the Transformation of Hip Hop: A Bronx Tale."

(2021). Occasional Essays. 14.

Newman, Michael. "Rap as literacy: A genre analysis of Hip-Hop ciphers." *Text -*

Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Discourse, vol. 25, no. 3, 2005, pp. 399-436.

"Opioid Use Disorder." *American Psychiatric Association*, <https://psychiatry.org/patients-families/opioid-use-disorder>. Accessed 05 April 2022.

Pate, Alex. *In the Heart of the Beat: The Poetry of Rap*. Scarecrow Press, 2010.

Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

Shusterman, Richard. "The Fine Art of Rap." *New Literary History*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1991, pp. 613-632

Winters, Joseph. "Contemporary Sorrow Songs: Traces of Mourning, Lament, and Vulnerability in Hip Hop." *African American Review*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2013, pp. 9-20.

Discography

- Canibus. Lyrics to “Poet Laureate Infinity 3.” *ADD HER ALL MUSIC. The Anthology of Rap*, edited by Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois, *The Anthology of Rap*. Yale University Press, 2010.
- D12. “Rap Game.” *8 Mile (Music From And Inspired By The Motion Picture)*. Shady Records and Interscope Records, 29 Oct. 2002. *Spotify* app.
- Dead Prez. “Police State.” *Let’s Get Free*. Loud Records LLC, 8 Feb. 2000. *Spotify* app.
- Dr. Dre. “The Message.” *2001*. Aftermath Entertainment and Interscope Records, 16 Nov. 1999. *Spotify* app.
- Eminem. “If I Had.” *The Slim Shady LP*. Aftermath Entertainment and Interscope Records, 23 Feb. 1999. *Spotify* app.
- . “Just Don’t Give A Fuck.” *The Slim Shady LP*. Aftermath Entertainment and Interscope Records, 23 Feb. 1999. *Spotify* app.
- . “Murder Murder.” *Next Friday (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)*. Priority Records LLC, 14 Dec. 1999. *Spotify* app.
- . “My Name Is.” *The Slim Shady LP*. Aftermath Entertainment and Interscope Records, 23 Feb. 1999. *Spotify* app.
- . “Rock Bottom.” *The Slim Shady LP*. Aftermath Entertainment and Interscope Records, 23 Feb. 1999. *Spotify* app.
- . “The Real Slim Shady.” *The Marshall Mathers LP*. Interscope Records, 23 May 2000. *Spotify* app.
- . “The Way I Am.” *The Marshall Mathers LP*. Interscope Records, 23 May 2000. *Spotify* app.

Eric B. & Rakim. "Microphone Fiend." *Follow The Leader*. Geffen Records, 1988. *Spotify* app.

Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five. "The Message." *Kings of the Streets-The Definitive Anthology*. Sanctuary Records Group LTD, 19 July 2010. *Spotify* app.

Hopsin. "Chris Dolmeth." *Gazing at the Moonlight*. Ruthless Records, 27 Oct. 2009. *Spotify* app.

———. "Hip Hop Sinister." *Knock Madness*. Funk Volume, 26 Nov. 2013. *Spotify* app.

———. "What's My Purpose." *Knock Madness*. Funk Volume, 26 Nov. 2013. *Spotify* app.

ICE-T. "6 'N the Mornin'." *Rhyme Pays*. Sire Records Company, 1987. *Spotify* app.

Immortal Technique. "Dance with the Devil." *Revolutionary Vol. 1*. Viper Records LTD, 18 Sept. 2001. *Spotify* app.

———. "Harlem Streets." *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. Viper Records LTD, 18 Nov. 2003. *Spotify* app.

———. "Industrial Revolution." *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. Viper Records LTD, 18 Nov. 2003. *Spotify* app.

———. "Revolutionary." *Revolutionary Vol. 1*. Viper Records LTD, 18 Sept. 2001. *Spotify* app.

———. "The Cause of Death." *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. Viper Records LTD, 18 Nov. 2003. *Spotify* app.

———. "The Message & the Money." *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. Viper Records LTD, 18 Nov. 2003. *Spotify* app.

———. "The Prophecy." *Revolutionary Vol. 1*. Viper Records LTD, 18 Sept. 2001. *Spotify* app.

Kendrick Lamar. "Alright." *To Pimp A Butterfly*. Aftermath Entertainment and Interscope Records, 16 March 2015. *Spotify* app.

———. "DNA." *DAMN*. Aftermath Entertainment and Interscope Records, 14 April 2017. *Spotify* app.

———. “HUMBLE.” *DAMN*. Aftermath Entertainment and Interscope Records, 14 April 2017.

Spotify app.

———. “m.A.A.d city.” *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. Aftermath Entertainment and Interscope

Records, 22 Oct. 2012. *Spotify* app.

Nas. “The Message.” *It Was Written*. Columbia Records, 2 July 1996. *Spotify* app.

N.W.A. “Dopeman.” *Straight Outta Compton*. Priority Records LLC, 8 Aug. 1988. *Spotify* app.

———. “Fuck Tha Police.” *Straight Outta Compton*. Priority Records LLC, 8 Aug. 1988.

Spotify app.

———. “Gangsta Gangsta.” *Straight Outta Compton*. Priority Records LLC, 8 Aug. 1988.

Spotify app.

———. “Straight Outta Compton.” *Straight Outta Compton*. Priority Records LLC, 8 Aug.

1988. *Spotify* app.

Public Enemy. “Miuzi Weighs A Ton.” *Yo! Bum Rush The Show*. UMG Recordings, 10 Feb.

1987. *Spotify* app.

The Notorious B.I.G. “Ten Crack Commandments.” *Life After Death (2014 Remastered Edition)*.

Bad Boy Records LLC, 4 March 1997. *Spotify* app.

Tupac. “Changes.” *The Best of 2Pac*. Interscope Records, 3 Dec. 2007. *Spotify* app.

———. “Dear Mama.” *Me Against The World*. Interscope Records, 14 March 1995. *Spotify* app.