

THE EMCEE'S SITE OF ENUNCIATION: EXPLORING THE DIALECTIC
BETWEEN AUTHORSHIP AND READERSHIP IN HIP HOP

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between authors and readers has been heavily studied in western literatures since the shift between the spoken-subject lost its privileged position to the written author. The struggle for who determines truth has formed a specific dialect that requires either the author or the reader to be silent. Since the acceptance of literary theories like the “death of the author” and “author-function,” we continue to map these concepts on to similar relationships and discourses. Hip-hop culture defies this dialect, instead, based around the concept of the cipher, hip-hop insists on a constant inclusive discourse. Based in African-American traditions of call-and-response, hip-hop is always looking for voices to speak to each other and push the conversation further.

In my thesis, I open up an exploration of the role of an author in hip-hop. Paying specific attention to the rapper, I flesh out the ways western ideas of reading conflate and disrupt the structures of a cipher in hip-hop. Imposing an “author-function” on rappers, displaces the call-and-response relationship that hip-hop thrives on. While hip-hop becomes more prevalent in popular culture, rappers have to learn to navigate within and outside of the immediate hip-hop community. As a case study, I examine the career trajectory of Jay Z. Sean Carter employs the site of enunciation that Jay Z creates to transcend and transform his experiences into a platform for creative expressions as well as lucrative business ventures.

Finally, this thesis serves as an initial inquiry into future research plans to explore rappers as nepantler@s and listeners as “digital griots.” Both of these

designations represents important rhetorical spaces that allow hip-hop culture to continue to work within a cipher and promote inclusivity. These future plans build towards creating a possible model for more productive collaboration, education, and activism.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated Isidria, Pedro, and Gloria. Also to the spirit of Hip-hop.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION THE GENESIS

“Hip-hop is the voice of a generation. Even if you didn’t grow up in the Bronx in the ‘70s, hip-hop is there for you. It has become a powerful force... Do we realize how much power hip hop has?”

-DJ Kool Herc

The relative nostalgia amongst the Hip-hop Community centers on what hip-hop used to represent: a vibrant community building space for urban youth to connect and navigate American power structures that silenced them in every other capacity. In her recent book, *The Hip Hop Wars* (2008), Tricia Rose reflects what generated her investment when she started doing scholarly work in 1994; “At the time, hip hop served as a rich alternative space for multicultural, male and female, culturally relevant, anti-racist community building” (x). Since then, in 2006, hip-hop legend Nas declared through his eighth studio album that *Hip Hop is Dead*, despite the increase in popularity and profitability. In Nas’ critique, despite hip-hop cultures being extremely popular it is a corrupted iteration of its former self. Nas’ album-length eulogy echoes Rose’s nostalgia for the hip-hop that represented a discursive space for knowledge building and expression within a community that builds from an artist’s interaction with the audience.

What these critiques argue is that hip-hop’s ability to transform ghetto struggles into building blocks for knowledge, expression, and consciousness are no longer practiced. Most importantly the ability that hip-hop culture had to be the single thread to

connect different peoples had also been killed. In between 1994 and 2006, hip-hop's profitability has become the main culprit collectively agreed upon for the reason why hip-hop has died. Hip-hop is not dead; it just grew. This thesis will articulate the transformation that hip-hop has had from a discourse experienced in the "streets" to discourse that mimics and complicates the author-reader dynamic we see in literature. The growth that hip-hop experienced came in the form of accessibility. The circulation of records shifted hip hop's main site of enunciation from live shows to a direct interaction between the Emcee (author) and the Audience (reader) preserving the original nostalgia but occurring in a new mediums and forms. Suspended in the verses of rappers, each line and bar represents an opportunity. Functioning like a live-action hypertext, each rhyme and phrase an emcee spits represents a possible reference to multiple histories, people, knowledges, and conversations. Through the stretching of signs and signifiers, the author's intent relies on an imagined reader that is willing to react to the hypertextuality of rap.

The central subject of my thesis is the rapper. I am interested in exploring: How is the rapper constructed? Who are the rappers representing? How do rappers initiate discourses? How do the raps influence the construction and representation of the rapper? As my case study I will examine the development and trajectory of Jay Z. However before a discussion on Jay Z occurs, I will first: contextualize the various elements that make up a rapper; describe the importance of focusing on the rapper; and situate the rapper-audience dialectic through the hip-hop cipher. Finally in my conclusion I will discuss the rapper as Nepantlero/a. Positioning a rapper in this way establishes them as a

specific kind of rhetorician that is contingent on a relationship with the reader. Their work functions in a way that requires readers to engage, think critically, and make meaning from the stories present in hip-hop.

It is hard to deny that hip-hop is transformative. The fact that Jay Z now rubs elbows with the president proves the ability hip-hop has to transform. Hip-hop moguls like Russell Simmons and Sean Diddy Combs have amassed wealth beyond their Queens and Harlem dreams. On basic tangible levels, like wealth, hip-hop constantly reminds us that it represents a powerful force.

Because it is an art form from the margin, it can constantly transform and contest our current understandings of normative conventions. Specifically talking about language, the way rappers use and practice language directly challenges conventions of normative language but also illuminates the role of language. The idea that language serves the people, rather than disciplines them, is a central project of hip-hop's speaking subject. This incredibly conscious deployment of language, through specific lineages that speaks directly from the margins, displays constantly the way these hip-hop rhetoricians enact transformation. The transformation of self, ideas, knowledge and discourse are all at stake.

Hip-hop is not just about the transformation, once that transformation has occurred there is new opportunity. However, as different sites of enunciation are produced, there is a conscious effort to remember the lineage that built the new site. You do not just transform, you transform and then use that new transformed site to build again. Jay Z always builds on his hustler's spirit but transforms from drug dealer to

dapper to an Iconic third space that allows him to be a savvy successful business man as well as elder statesmen in hip-hop. The rapper represents a new highly complex speaking subject. The importance of discussing rappers, like Jay Z, is their ability to connect the subjectivities of their former selves, all the while articulating those connections in coded utterances waiting to be unpacked. In addition, rappers represent a “digital griot” that “offers a useful model for conceptualizing black rhetorical excellence bridging print, oral, and digital communication” (Banks 25). To unpack requires an active participation in the Hip-hop Community. To participate within the community requires an awareness of the rules.

Hip-hop Community Buil(t)(ding)

Defining the Hip-hop Community is a difficult task that can quickly become a trivial discussion about authenticity. Hip-hop insists on being inclusive, therefore I prefer to model my understanding of the Hip-hop Community around Jeff Chang’s use of “generation.” Chang constructs his understanding of the community around the idea of a “Hip-hop Generation” because he sees the “act of determining a group of people by placing a beginning and ending date around them is a way to impose a narrative. They are interesting and necessary fictions because they allow claims to be staked around ideas. But generations are fictions nonetheless” (1). Fictions represent realities that have been constructed. The parameters of a generation defined as a narrative is much more flexible, because it highlights the organization as a social construction. Literally constructing the narrative socially promotes a much more attainable inclusivity.

Organized around time, we avoid essentialist tendencies towards geography or race that are otherwise unfairly restrictive of participants in the hip-hop community.

Chang's definition of the Hip-Hop Generation lends itself to the best characterization of what and who, hip-hop represents:

My own feeling is that the idea of the Hip-Hop Generation brings together time and race, place and polyculturalism, hot beats and hybridity. It describes the turn from politics to culture, the process of entropy and reconstruction. It captures the collective hope and nightmares, ambitions and failures of those who would otherwise be described as "post-this" and "post-that." So you ask, when does the Hip-Hop Generation begin? After DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa. Whom does it include? Anyone who is down. When does it end? When the next generation tells us it's over. (2)

The description Chang provides has two main foci: The inclusion of subjectivities and the presence of participation. The latter proves to be most important and adaptive to the discussion of hip-hop's discursive nature. The question of "Who does it include" followed by the response "Anyone who is down" means that if you actively participate in hip-hop you are part of the community.

However the question of "being down," represents hip-hop's obsession with authenticity. A discussion of the obsession is contradictory to this conversation because it promotes the exclusion that hip-hop rejects. Yet, linking authenticity with "being down," means that within hip-hop, authenticity is attainable through specific action. Marina Terkourafi suggests, through her research on global hip-hop communities, that

authenticity is earned through an active engagement between hip-hop signifiers and local influences. Terkourafi explains that hip-hop constituents globally “address local issues and social realities surrounding them directly” and “enter into a dialogue with the whole of hip-hop culture, acknowledging its supra-local origins and drawing cultural capital from them” (Terkourafi 7). The recognition of hip-hop slang and styles from hip-hop’s homeland in the United States serves as the entry points for global audiences. From that entry point, international iterations begin to insert local experiences that demonstrate being down while resisting the urge to seem inauthentic. The root of this interest continues to be the same as it was when hip-hop first reached white audiences in 1980s.

In his 2005 book, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop*, Bakari Kitwana discusses the dissemination of hip-hop culture from mainly urban minority communities, to the surrounding white populations of New York City, and then to a larger American audience. Kitwana contends that the early interest for hip-hop outside the immediate community was, “For many white kids who got into hip-hop during this period (1980s), being down with hip-hop was as much a political statement as it was a alternative music choice” (27). Hip-hop’s 1980s contemporaries were punk music and later the grunge music of the early 1990s. “Many viewed hip-hop as an appealing anti-establishment culture” (Kitwana 26). The idea that hip-hop gave disenfranchised voices an opportunity to speak, laid an inclusive groundwork for politically like-minded white listeners. Furthermore Kitwana states, “Like those who had identified with hip-hop about a decade earlier, many young whites who fell in love with hip-hop around this time (mid 1990s) identify hip-hop’s creative, engaging music as their initial attraction” (30).

Kitwana's and Terkourafi's statements represent a collective voice that addresses authenticity for white Americans and international audiences interested in hip-hop. Both undermine the need to prove authenticity through the demonstration of critical engagement. Whether political, aesthetical, or empowering, hip-hop is not treated as a novelty or a commodity. Engaging hip-hop in a manner that is respectful of the history indicates that the participant has already done the work of unpacking what the culture represents. This critical engagement means that hip-hop is more than a commodity to the participant. The authenticity of one's status as a member of the hip-hop community is represented in actions.

The actions are tied to being able to recognize and articulate specific hip-hop practices. There are specific forms of practicing as well as specific content to address that demonstrates someone's ability to "be down." Terkourafi specifies the forms to represent a "synergy of factors, none of which are unique to hip-hop but all of which have left their imprint on it and continue to favor its spread" (4). She goes on to connect the four elements of hip-hop to their stylistic features:

'Break', 'flow', 'sampling', and 'mixing' are central to hip-hop's expressive code, whether realized as spoken word (MCing), instrumental sound (DJing), physical movement (break-dancing), or visual image (graffiti). These stylistic features compose a structural (or formal) framework that favors the incorporation of heterogeneous elements. This in turn has allowed hip-hop to take root in cultures and languages as diverse as North and South America, Africa, the

Middle East, Europe, South and East Asia and Indigenous Australia. (Terkourafi 4)

Being able to interpret the modes of hip-hop (Rapping, DJing, break-dancing, graffiti) does not function as barriers but rather multiple invitations. The interpretations are coupled with the use of the modes to reflect local experiences with wider hip-hop expressions. Local vernaculars blend the cultures in a way that is both familiar in content but emphasizing context. Just within the United States, we can identify 4 major hip-hop regions that signify using widely recognized hip-hop practices but represent their own distinctive style. Extending past the U.S. borders, there are as Terkourafi contends, various international hip-hop sects rappin', breakin', bombin', and DJing.

Reading Hip-hop and Privileging the Rapper

Building from Terkourafi, we can start to recognize hip-hop as a type of literacy. In the preface to her book, *Hiphop Literacies*, Elaine Richardson challenges the ways we understand the idea of being literate. Richardson specifically challenges literacy scholars that identify a divide “that exists between literates and those who have been untouched by literate culture” who “in this view, literacy restructures thought and is a print-bound, autonomous, private, mental, context-free activity” (xv). According to this definition, hip-hop does not resemble anything remotely near literacy because it contradicts every aspect of this definition of literacy. However Richardson argues that:

Over the past few decades, the field of literacy studies has taken a social multimodal turn as is exemplified in the New Literacy Studies (NLS), which

promote the idea that literacy must be conceived of more broadly, as ideological, not print bound, and socially constructed. Furthermore, oral memory and knowledge making systems are connected to literate ones. (xv)

Academically, the expansion of literacy, allows for an important invitation to study hip-hop in new and important ways. Slowly, the inclusion of hip-hop texts as objects to study are being accepted in classrooms across the country. The expanded community that hip-hop represents means that more and more students in our classrooms will be at least familiar with hip-hop. Students representing the hip-hop generation bring into the classroom an epistemology that we should encourage students to utilize. In addition, hip-hop represents an epistemology in the academy that has de-colonial capabilities. Hip-hop has the ability to be simultaneously theoretical and an embodied practice potentially represents a powerful new direction of study that crosses disciplinary boundaries. In this way, hip-hop studies must insist on being represented as more than lyrics for literary criticism. With the persistent cultural climate in education demonstrated through legislation in Arizona and Texas, hip-hop, “can be useful in integrating a culturally homogenous curriculum that has, for the decades since *Brown V. Board of Education*, been resistant to change” (Kirkland 132). David E. Kirkland argues that students who identify as a part of the hip-hop community view hip-hop as texts and treat it as “something to know” (131). Furthermore, Kirkland argues, “In addition to being able to read it, [they were] in constant dialogue with it—writing it, writing about it, and writing through it” (131). Students are already literary critics according to Kirkland. Instead of trying to develop a skill that students already have, we as educators should be looking

for ways to apply these skills to other topics. If students already “write it, write about it, and write through it,” they can engage topics critically through their hip-hop heuristic. The key is engaging hip-hop and discussing hip-hop as a viable knowledge base for students.

The most prevalent and discussed medium of hip-hop is rap. Specifically, the rapper has become the main vehicle to take hip-hop from its humble beginnings to its current mainstream popular success. To place rap music as the main the site of enunciation for hip-hop also privileges the rapper as its predominant speaking subject. Making this claim raises a specific set of questions: Why privilege the rapper? How did this happen? What are the implications? Privileging the rapper is directly tied to the history of hip-hop’s development and the main implication of this change is the wider importance of language within hip-hop discourses.

Hip-hop was declared dead in 2006 by Nas, but this was not the first “death” of the culture. “The First Death of Hip-Hop” gave birth to the era of the rapper. Jeff Chang pronounces the first death at the moment the DJ-party-centered-experience lost its spotlight. The moment’s catalyst was independent record label owner Sylvia Robinson; everything changed when she contracted three unknown rappers to record “Rapper’s Delight.” Widely known as the first hip-hop record to be played on the mainstream radio, Sylvia Robinson and Sugar Hill Records exposed hip-hop to the radio airwaves that would eventually stretch across the globe. Often celebrated as the crowning moment hip-hop finally arrived, it represents the event that changed the hierarchy in hip-hop to privilege the rapper.

There are interesting developments that are important to highlight about where hip-hop had changed as Chuck D explains, “I’m like, record? Fuck, how you gon’ put hip-hop onto a record? ‘Cause it was a whole gig, you know? How you gon’ put three hours on a record?”¹ (Chang 130) Where before the “gig” situated the rapper’s performance within a larger discourse,

These live performances thrived on quick-witted improvisations and call-and-response audience participation. When they worked up routines, they all gave their DJ and the neighborhood their props first and foremost. After all, they were onstage at the discretion of the DJ, the king of the party, and at the mercy of the audience, his subjects. (Chang 132)

the rapper is now the main focus,

The rap amateurs of the Sugar Hill Gang never had a DJ. Assembled in a New Jersey afternoon, they were a studio creation that never stepped on a stage until after their single became a radio hit. They wrote with the ears of fans, and the enthusiasm of dilettantes...The inexplicable success of the Sugar Hill Gang transformed the scene overnight. (Chang 132)

and now a seemingly inadvertent intervention by the Sugar Hill Gang shapes the approach of a rapper. Specifically since, Chang identifies that rap performances are not monolithic; we understand that those produced for recording, draw their genesis from rappers who approached the performance from the position of a fan. Chang opens up a

¹ Chuck D’s quote appears originally in Jeff Chang’s *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*

discussion, through this history, for the importance of the relationship that the rapper has to the audience. Moreover as Charlie Ahearn, director of *Wildstyle*², says, “Nobody was dancing. Period! Rap became the focal point. MCs were onstage and people were looking at them” (Chang 132).

The birth of the rapper from the MC and the shift that hip-hop undergoes creates a break in the loop of hip-hop. The continued rhetoric of death and hip-hop is always prevalent and discussed. Ironically it is within hip-hop that we forget the practices that built hip-hop, continue to build it, and help it grow. As Adam Banks reminds us, a scratch or break is an interruption in a narrative that allows for other voices to be included. Hip-hop’s epistemology relies on the various tools of the specific performances that DJs, break-dancers, MCs, and graffiti-artists utilize. The way hip-hop produces knowledge is through constant transformation. The transformation occurs during the medley of sampling, breaks, loops, and flow. The transformation of the rapper, that simultaneously transformed hip-hop, represented a break within the loop. The record continues to spin regardless of who is privileged, hip-hop continues to exist using its original core of expressions.

Along with the transformation, Rap music has added dimensions to hip-hop that manifests through language. However for rappers, language becomes a contested site. There is dialectic that forms between hip-hop and normative language practices. This dialectic is not always accounted for but it reminds us again that hip-hop speaks from the

² *Wildstyle* is regarded as the first film about hip-hop culture, filmed as a loose narrative with documentary film techniques.

margins. As hip-hop becomes more popular, outside systems of power that have always surrounded language are now assimilated into hip-hop because the rapper is now privileged. Presumably one could assume that it is easier to engage rap lyrics than DJ performances, graffiti images, or break-dance performances. In addition, raps are recorded and can be reproduced in printed text. These reproduction present the opportunity for readers to take the raps with them, in a way that is not so accessible for the other forms. The print-bound literacy of alphabetic texts is much more prevalent outside of hip-hop communities. These are the kinds of outside systems that language introduces.

Rap music maintains its lineage to hip-hop despite its ties to language because the language of the rapper is resistant. The outside power systems of language can be as harmless as grammar or as oppressive as dominant western discourses. The problem with not recognizing them is surrounded by the idea of Standard American English (SAE). The use of SAE creates a perception that language can be standardized and therefore pretends that every discourse in English follows the same rules. As a result, we are inclined to believe that we can engage hip-hop because we speak and read in English. Thus, because we are dealing with words, those outside of the community choose to avoid the context of the statements and feel justified to comment. We have to remain conscious that words are not equal or equalizing, and words change with the subjectivity of the speaker. It is easier for someone to believe that because they are literate, they can *read* rap lyrics but not *read* a break-dancer's transition of a head-spin

to pop-and-lock. Even reading the description of a break-dancer's routine does not translate without the context and insight from a b-boy/girl.

The same cannot be said for a rapper, it is much easier to divorce a rapper from their words. Western notions of authorship and readership have supported and maintained this relationship. For example, the hook from Snoop Dogg's song "Gin and Juice" seems simple,

Rollin' down the street, smokin' indo, sippin' on gin and juice

Laid Back, with my mind on my money and my money on my mind

without context the song is about drugs, alcohol, and the pursuit of money. Particularly in the historical moment of this song in 1996, even if Snoop was not divorced from the song the legacy of President Bush and Regan's war on drugs further helps to cement the reading. In many ways Snoop's presence as a black body from the inner city further divorces him from the lyrics because he is being replaced with a stereotypical depictions of blackness. But if we remain conscious of Snoop's subjectivity, we can look at how other lyrics in the song shape the hook,

With so much drama in the L-B-C

Its kinda hard being Snoop being Snoop D-O-double-G

to remind ourselves of what is informing Snoop's urban ennui ritual. There is drama in Snoop's life and by in large there would probably be drama in most inner city urban youth's lives dealing with the crack era and gang violence of California³.

The second line of the hook, "Laid back, with my mind on my money and my money on my mind" provides a very interesting glimpse into the cultural moment of gang life in California. Those familiar with hip-hop music from the West Coast have some idea about the history of gang violence. This particular line lends itself to be associated with the era of rap music that "killed" hip-hop because of the obvious connections to money and the relentless pursuit of profit. However, if we look back to an interview Snoop did with dream hampton entitled "Snoop: G Down," he provides a connections between gang violence, money and "laying back." The article reads:

After the rebellion last year Crips and Bloods declared a citywide truce. For several miraculous months, gang violence decreased and gang-related murders practically ceased. "The true is on a li'l bit, but it ain't like it was," Snoop explains carefully. "It's on in Watts. It's mostly back to business as usual, 'cause it ain't no money out there. When the peace treaty was on it was money cuz mothafuckas had looted and had goods to come up on. It was money and everybody was loving everybody. It was feeling good." (hampton 1993)

³ For further clarification on Hip-hop and the Crack era, the documentary film *Planet Rock: The Story of Hip-Hop and the Crack Generation* provides a good historical account of the connections and realities of the era.

The lack of gang violence and a truce are related to the presence of financial security. To paraphrase Snoop, as long as he is thinking about money and there is money to be made he is going to think less about the rivalry with other gangs. If we think about what Snoop says on the song along with what he says in an interview, his words cannot so easily be divorced from him but they can perform a much more transformative meaning.

This example, with Snoop, helps to highlight the importance of Hip-hop to a larger discourse of the way language practices are socially situated. Hip-hop and Rap music engage language with an enthusiastic zeal. What is transformative about Snoop lyrics is hip-hop text's ability to "promote writing and critical classroom dialogue among urban (and non-urban) students around serious social issues pertaining to resistance and struggle, race and gender, and cultural exploitation" (Kirkland 132). Even when hip-hop is read out of context, that reading functions as a method of resistance. Geneva Smitherman attributes hip-hop's black musical tradition for maintaining its resistant nature. Smitherman maintains that regardless of the subject matter in a rap song, "it is counter to mainstream American norms of conformity and adherences to the ordinary. In the same vein, even hedonistic Bubblegum, party Rap is against the grain and staid norms of conventional mainstream U.S. society" (98). For example Smitherman describes the Gangsta in black communities as:

'Gangsta' for Black people has always been about operating outside the boundaries of what Blacks knew was abusive, oppressive, and culturally destructive on any and all levels—dress, music, food, values, lifestyle. Black Gangsta is anti-mainstream, anti-establishment, anti-Government, anti-

convention—in short anti those institutions and social domains that perpetuate White supremacy. (99)

Regardless of popularity, hip-hop continues to speak from this position of the “anti-“ that Smitherman describes because the language tradition that is drawn upon remains in this alternative space. So while hip-hop speaks as the “anti-everything,” what does this mean for its constituents? How does this complicate authorship in hip-hop? How does this complicate readership in hip-hop? How does this complicate the way language functions in hip-hop? Finally, how does complicate the relationship between the author and reader in hip-hop?

The distinction of hip-hop’s author-reader dynamic involves a different kind of literacy. One that is inherently discursive and multi-modal, a literacy that resists the urge to emphasize the death of the author but refuses to privilege the author, and recalls history through practice. A literacy that utilizes a language system that is as persistent on signs and signifiers as it is on lived experience. “Although it is often helpful to understand language from a structural-grammatical perspective, this view of language can obscure the fact that it is history, culture, and lived experience” (Richardson 3). Hip-hop and Rap music force us to remember language in this way because it is both highly aware of itself as it is of its content. Watching Jay Z perform or listening to his voice reminds us that someone is speaking. Somewhere in that performance we are reminded of his artistic skill as an Emcee but conscious of the story he is telling.

Over the next three chapters I will flesh out the relationship between the author and the reader, discuss the transformation of Jay Z, and finally frame the rapper as

Nepantler@. Chapter 2 entitled, “Carry on Tradition: The Importance of Readers and Authors,” will set to define the author-reader dynamic by describing each participant, how they are defined, and their roles in the relationship. Chapter 3 entitled, “Can ‘I’ Live? Sean Carter to Jay Z: Who Speaks when the Emcees Preach,” will use the trajectory of Jay Z’s career to show the complication of a rapper’s site of enunciation and the transformation that site can produce for Jay Z. Finally Chapter 4, “Hip-hop in the Constant State of Nepantla,” will map out where the future of this study is looking to go. I will situate the rapper as a specific kind of rhetorician that helps mediate *conocimiento* (a state of understanding) through their art in way that would normally be difficult to articulate or navigate. As well as starting re-imagining the listener as a Digital Griot.

The push towards a hip-hop centered curricular model is grounded in both a familiar setting for the new generation of students and scholars, but is also a call for more comprehensive and responsible scholar. A hip-hop scholar cannot hide behind disciplinary boundaries or an unwillingness to recognize privilege in subjectivity. It empowers those disenfranchised and holds accountable those bodies already centered. As hip-hop continues to be assimilated into mainstream culture, it is no coincidence that rappers and listeners appear to be straying further from hip-hop’s core values. This means before we continue to assimilate hip-hop into our classroom dialogues, we have to be aware of the way Hip-hop chooses to discourse.

CHAPTER II

CARRY ON TRADITION: THE IMPORTANCE OF READERS AND AUTHORS

In traditional literature, the dialectic between authors and readers has represented a struggle to determine who is actually speaking. The history of this dialectic has developed over time. As speaking subjects became writing authors, the agency of a reader became more evident. Tied to the traditional notion of literacy, readers took over the site of enunciation from authors because they determined meaning. Before written-text based literacy was common in Western society, the readers held important power. As Foucault reminds us, “There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (1990 34). Although this specific quote comes from Foucault discussion on repression and sexuality, the idea that discourses are manipulated through silencing rings true for the dialectic between authors and readers. One must be silenced for the other to speak. More importantly, one must be silent in order for “true” meaning to be established.

Historically hip-hop does not produce the same dialectic between authors and readers. The dialectic between hip-hop’s author-reader relationship and canonical western literatures author-reader relationship represents conflicting systems of discourse. The main difference for hip-hop is represented through the hip-hop cipher. In addition, hip-hop challenges notions of texts and literacy. This separate dialectic also represents the struggle that hip-hop endures as it becomes assimilated into mainstream culture. Seemingly, this conflation of discourses creates the illusion that hip-hop also practices

the same author-reader dialectic. Hip-hop's system of discourse is much more reflexive towards who can create meaning and how that meaning can be produced. Over the course of this chapter, I would like to discuss the ways these dialectics manifest themselves and the importance of recognizing the difference in author-reader relationships.

Rappers, Records, and Authors

Rap music is complicated. If we are to agree that the site of enunciation exists at the moment someone speaks, then for rap music this moment occurs when the needle drops. Before the rapper speaks, there is an expectation for discourse between the multiple bodies involved. Therefore, for hip-hop, the site of enunciation does not represent a space for one speaker to speak, but instead the imaginary space that allows someone to speak. The difference between the assertion of speaking and the opportunity to engage is essentially, the difference between the two author-reader systems of discourse. The subject matter varies but the understanding is agreed upon—the audience and the speaker are about to engage each other. The legacy of the early Emcees remains alive through a rapper's ability to generate a reaction. When Rakim says, "Rocking from party to party, backyard to yard, I tear it up y'all, and bless the microphone Gods," he is insisting upon ensuring that his live performance will move the crowd⁴. The early days of hip-hop, when block parties reigned the DJs, the Emcees, the B-Boys/B-Girls and the graffiti artists in were in physically direct contact with their audience. In this context it is relatively easy to identify whether the crowd is responding. Based on either

⁴ Line quoted from "My Melody," from the album *Paid in Full* by Eric B. & Rakim.

a positive or negative reaction the discourse presented is either rejected or encouraged. The stage on which these hip-hop artists performed represented the initial site of enunciation. When the game changed and the attention turned to poetry on wax, measuring the success to rock a crowd was complicated.

Yet as block parties faded from the spotlight, the exchange was still the same. The needle still drops but the location varies. From inner cities to suburban landscapes, hip-hop's site of enunciation is occurs simultaneously everywhere with every spin of the record and at the same time it is silent without the ability to engage in a dialogue. The nostalgic impulse to say that hip-hop is not the same knowledge-building tool ignores the original conditions that formed hip-hop culture. When hip-hop was born in the Bronx, the interlocutors involved were contained to the relative geography of the borough or wider New York City area. An initial community built from people living the relatively same struggle, willing to participate and able to join specific conversations. This close proximity of body and mind lays the foundation for an epistemology built on interaction and dialogue, to learn hip-hop you must engage with it. The author's message is relatable and articulated in a way that makes sense. The audience continues the conversation past the genesis of the original topic presented. Knowledge is exchanged and built upon feeding the interest to continue to participate.

Ideally within the Hip-hop community, *we* believe this still occurs but the reality is different. The wider circulation of rap records places people of different subject positions in conversation with each other. The intention and result of those conversations are often unpredictable. This new complication also represents the appearance of the

dialectic between hip-hop and literature. In this different medium of distribution, rap music's consumption mirrors a book's. When readers engage a book, "the body withdraws itself from the text in order henceforth to come into contact with it only through the mobility of the eye, the geographical configuration of the text organizes the activity of the reader less and less" (de Certeau 176). The same experience occurs as rap listeners "read" their records in more personal locations. They are removed from the live performance and the dialogue. Thus, they rely on their experience with literature and approach hip-hop with the same dialectic between readers and authors.

This conflation of discourses and dialectics provides the initial complications of Rap music. Particularly in the era after recording, emcees placed greater emphasis on their rapping abilities and the audience needed to become proactive listeners. As audiences made the shift to privilege the rapper they also made a shift to privilege language. With such an emphasis on language we can more familiarly start to construct the rapper using literary theory because the consumption of rap music becomes more akin to the consumption of literature. The conflation of rap as a literary text helps shape the conversation in a way that seems familiar but also exposes how hip-hop texts differ from the way we handle the standard canon. Notions of the author and the reader appear to adapt more naturally to hip-hop when it becomes more rap centered. Essentially we are dealing with a problem of language, when we refer to the problems of discourses and dialectics. Language represents both a communicative vehicle and the vehicle itself. We use language to carry our messages but those messages are also wrapped in our particular English vernacular or whatever language you speak. Not only do the vehicles

change in vernacular, but the way that communicative tradition is built also changes. Rap music also makes us aware that language, as the vehicle, has been used to discipline and exclude. Rap has always been perceived as detrimental to normative language practices because it does not speak “correctly.” While hip-hop may be speaking in the same language, the way it speaks is not.

As Hip-hop continues to grow, it continues to build and rebuild its own language system. Drawing its roots from African diasporic traditions and conditions, scholars Geneva Smitherman and Elaine Richardson have brilliantly tracked this growth. It cannot be overstated, hip-hop comes from the margins. The significance of this statement means that when hip-hop manifests itself, its productions carry what it means to be in the margin. The grammar will be different, the metaphors will be different, the subjectivities will be different. This is why, for example, the Gangsta is not feared but revered. If there is an absence, short coming, or lack of education in our public schools, the community will find a way to fill the void. As a result, the community will educate by using their own system of discourse. When the sub-altern speaks, nobody listens, but you could not understand them regardless. Characterized as its own literacy, hip-hop builds from various traditions. “In keeping with the Black Language Tradition, reflecting generational continuity, Hip-hop linguistics infuses new life into old verbal forms” (Smitherman 294). Hip-hop has the ability to adapt and embrace the way language changes As people move, so does language, therefore we have to remain conscious of the affect this has on the way we maintain cross-cultural discourse. As hip-hop is embraced by mainstream culture, we are faced with the dilemma of rap music being

caught in between different kinds of discourses as well as watching it blend with other literacies.

This blending of literacies brings us back to the importance of the author-reader dynamic. Authors writing in a specific culturally situated space are operating by the literacy practices of their own community, while readers may be operating from a different one. The various literacies represented are coming from these two sites. Historically in the Western tradition, where hip-hop operates in the margins of, literacy represented a position of power. Moreover the shift historically of the author from speaking subject to written product emphasized the power of literacy. The rapper finds themselves caught in between the written and the spoken subject taking us back to that historical moment without really exploring it.

The problem of the speaker and of his identity became acute with the breakdown of the world that was assumed to be spoken and speaking: who speaks when there is no longer a divine Speaker who founds every particular enunciation? The question was apparently settled by the system that furnished the subject with a place guaranteed and measured by his scriptural productions. In a laissez-faire economy where isolated and competitive activities are supposed to contribute to a general rationality, the work of writing gives birth to both product and author. (de Certeau 156)

Obviously, de Certeau was not talking about hip-hop but he retroactively describes the dilemma rappers currently face. With some deviation, for rappers the work of writing is not what gives birth to “product and author,” but the work of producing a record for

distribution is what makes this distinction. The repercussions are the same: Rappers are valued based on their ability to move product and the status of Author creates a distinction. The latter repercussion is most important because it privileges a rapper's author status and fixes the rapper in specific position with a discourse. If we situate the rapper as this kind of author then,

The place from which one speaks is outside the scriptural enterprise. The uttering occurs outside the places in which systems of statements are composed. One no longer knows where speaking comes from, and one understands less and less how writing, which articulates power, could speak. (de Certeau 158)

In hip-hop we can literally examine how the author is constructed and changed when the record splits the rapper from his performance as a speaking subject and his role as a recorded author. A dialectic system is imposed on hip-hop that disrupts the call and response system. Where before rappers and listeners worked together to create meaning, they are now asked to create meaning independently. Therefore, forcing us to choose one over the other, makes hip-hop's site of enunciation a singular space occupied by only one person.

The rapper represented as an author carries specific weight. We can adopt this understanding of the "author" as a function of discourse" and thus "we must consider the characteristics of a discourse that support this use and determine its difference from

other discourses” (Foucault 1977 124). Foucault summarizes four different features of the author-function⁵ as:

The “author-function” is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate the realm of discourses; it does not operate in a uniform manner in all discourses, at all times, and in any given culture; it is not defined by the spontaneous attributes of a text to its creator, but through a series of precise and complex procedures; it does not refer purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy. (Foucault 1977 130)

In a sense what Foucault is describing as the “author-function,” is our ability to manipulate discourses. If we can attribute these texts to a specific person then we can make judgments upon them and locate their relevance. Locating an author fills that void de Certeau described when enunciations were no longer attributed to the Divine. The “author-function” also accounts for the lack of a physical body that wants to manifest itself when one reads a text. This continued train of thought ultimately bleeds into a discussion of the reader. What we discover when we explore the “author” or the “author-function” is how much more invested the act of reading is in an author. Regardless of which position we inhabit, the discourse should be the main focus, yet we focus on the author because it is easier to blame them. For instance, blame is put on the rappers for using offensive language or violent content but the discussion hardly ever centers on

⁵ Foucault limits these features to texts or books with authors.

why these images are so prevalent in urban culture. Furthermore, issues of oppression are not discussed like the previously mentioned example of Snoop Dogg. But hip-hop resists the dominant dialectic because of its discursive nature. Hip-hop chooses to define its readers and authors through availability for discourse. Hip-hop could represent Foucault's vision, "We can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author" (1977 138). Redefining the rapper to reject the Western author-function, we can imagine hip-hop authors as advocates and participant discourse.

Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of the utterance provides an opening to start to define the rapper. To properly connect hip-hop's communicative essence and Bakhtin's understanding of the utterance, I want to introduce one of the original *sites* of hip-hop, the cipher. The cipher can be paralleled to Bakhtin's discussion of the utterance in his essay "The Problem of Speech Genres." Bakhtin describes the utterance as "*a real unit of speech communion,*" meaning it exists outside of the "*nature of language units*" (67). An utterance is not contained to the structures of language that govern words and sentences. Bakhtin attributes this difference in the way utterances are bookended by other utterances. The understanding that: there is not an original speaker, they are influenced by speakers before them, and they are speaking to presumably get spoken back to. The utterance is made up of words and sentences but its wholeness depends on whether it is a complete contribution to the lineage that it is looking to participate in. A sentence's wholeness depends on the rules of language and grammar. In this sense the utterance lends itself to be structured by the modes of communication and specifically to discourses relying on two or more interlocutors.

Make My Cipher Complete

The hip-hop cipher can represent a physical manifestation of the utterance in action but also an important microcosm for the way hip-hop builds knowledge and relies on the author-reader dynamic. The cipher arose during the early days of hip-hop in response to the lack of educational, economic, and recreational access urban youth experienced during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Ciphers demonstrate rhetorical innovation by incorporating the mind, body, and space in a communicative act. They encourage creativity and wit, allowing all involved to reclaim and redefine their subjectivities through the act of the freestyle⁶. Growing up in Brooklyn, rapper-activist Yasiin Bey credits hip-hop as his outlet for artistic expression. He remembers “moments when it was just sublime... ya’ll bump into three other MCs, and the cipher would just start, and the people around you would just start looking” (Fitzgerald) Abiodun Oyewole of the Last Poets states that ciphers create “a protection, and at the same time, an expression” through community (Fitzgerald.)⁷ Recently BET (Black Entertainment Television) has made the cipher an important component of their annual BET Hip Hop Awards.

On the BET Hip Hop Awards ciphers, the standard format is: a DJ introduces the emcees/rappers and provides the background for why this group has been chosen. The composition for each cipher ranges from specific crews to up and coming rappers. This example illustrates how the actual cipher functions but just as important highlights the

⁶ Freestyle- a spontaneous form of rapping that is traditionally completely improvised in the moment

⁷ Yasiin Bey and Abiodun Oyewole’s quotes appear originally in the documentary *Freestyle: The Art of Rhyme*

dialectic that forms around it. Given to us in this format the cipher identifies active participants and passive participants. The DJ and the rappers are the active participants and anyone who observes becomes the passive participants. Ideas pass between rappers in the cipher, but discussion also continues afterward, allowing for further interpretation and ideas to be exchanged. The passive participant is only passive in the sense that they do not actually speak in the cipher. However, theorizing the cipher to have active and passive participants highlights the ciphers ability to be discursive on multiple levels. There is also space to have fluid movement between being a passive and active participant because nobody is ever fixed to being one or the other.

The transgression from passive to active is illustrated by Jay Z when he describes the first time he saw a cipher stating, “All he had were his eyes, taking in everything, and the words inside him. I was dazzled. That’s some cool shit was the first thing I thought. Then: I could do that” (Jay Z 2010 5). Jay Z describes the tools of speaking in the cipher and then immediately identifies with the ability to replicate that process. Specifically elaborating on “the words inside him” and Jay Z’s own personal thoughts on the event, there is a call to acknowledge the conversation happening outside of the cipher. Centering the cipher goes beyond acknowledging another way to have a discourse. The cipher represents an opportunity to re-think the ways we engage with hip-hop cultures, practices and texts. Because the cipher makes us aware of active and passive participants, it reminds us that discourses started in the cipher will continue to beyond the cipher’s physical moment. Theoretically, we can acknowledge active and

passive participants in the moment but we cannot assume everyone to be silent in relation to the discourse. The cipher does not occur in a vacuum.

Within the cipher all discussions are allowed. Often rappers in the cipher start with a declaration of one's self. Seemingly selfish and counter to the community dynamic of the cipher, the declaration of self, functions to situate one's self with the group. As the speakers go around the circle, each one must continue building upon what the last speaker said in order to continue the free-flowing transition that the cipher requires. Once the transition has occurred, the speaker is given license to speak freely. The transition between rappers acts like the transition between utterances. Bakhtin states,

The boundaries of each concrete utterance as a unit of speech communication are determined by a *change of speaking subjects*, that is, a change of speakers. Its beginning is preceded by others, and its end is followed by the response of others (or, although it may be silent, others' active responsive understanding, or, finally, a responsive action based on this understanding). The speaker ends his utterance in order to relinquish the floor to the other or to make room for the other's active responsive understanding (71).

An interesting dynamic ties the speakers to each other within the cipher because the participant next in line must continue to think critically about what s/he will say but also must listen to what the others are saying. The simultaneous act of critical thinking and listening becomes both a skill to be developed and an expression of self, of authorship.

Houston hip-hop pioneer Bun B describes his writing process as directly deriving from studying other rappers. In a 2006 interview he says:

I honestly never sat down and said “OK, here’s my style,” because my whole thing was knowing everyone’s style. Everything I’ve ever written has bits and pieces of everything I’ve ever heard. Any rapper that tells you different is a liar. You can’t write a book if you’ve never read a book. And if you’ve read five books and you try to write a book, your book will mainly encompass the themes and the context of the five books you’ve read. Now, the more books you read, the more you can bring to a book when you decide to write one. So the more rap I learned, the more I was able to bring to rap when I decided to rap. But this was all subconscious.

Bun B basically reiterates Bakhtinian thought, “Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterance,” and then introduces hip-hop’s inherent dialogical nature. Acknowledging that subconsciously the more he learned the more he could contribute references a continued tradition of the cipher. Bun B also describes the fluidity of the site of enunciation of hip-hop. He only becomes a rapper through his engagement as a listener. This movement from passive to active participant/interlocutor represents the core of hip-hop’s transcendent opportunity. Hip-hop has the potential to create significant change and agency which is tied to the understanding of its tradition.

Additionally Bun B extends what we learn from a cipher about building off of other rappers. While he is not in the creative physical presence of the other rappers; the practice of learning and building from them opens up to other spaces. Bun B also reveals the role other rappers play in constructing his *style*. This continues to echo Bakhtin but

also reinforces the idea of being both an author and reader simultaneously separated by the presence of utterances.

The dynamic of the cipher's active and passive participants opens up the author/reader relationship when we start to think about the shifts in mediums. The active role still belongs to the rapper on the recorded medium. The passive role is represented by those "watching" meaning the reader/listener. Through the cipher, reaffirmed by Bun B, we can see the fluidity between the active and passive roles. This not only highlights that readers can be authors but insists on us being conscious of these roles. The discourse does not need for one to be silent. Instead the cipher re-imagines the silence to be very active listening or reading. Therefore the presence of silence is not used to manipulate the discourse but rather to acknowledge the voice speaking in order to identify one's own subjectivity in relation to the speaker and the speaker's discourse. What forms is not a dialect between authors and readers but a call and response based discourse. However in order to respond, the reader must remain conscious of the literacy of hip-hop. In this light, we can imagine hip-hop as a speech genre. The way Bhaktin defines speech genres makes them attractive to a discussion of hip-hop. Bhaktin acknowledges that,

Any style is inseparably related to the utterance and to typical forms of utterances, that is, speech genres. Any utterance—oral or written, primary or secondary, and in any sphere of communication—is individual and therefore can reflect the individuality of the speaker (or writer); that is, it possesses individual style. (63)

For hip-hop and rappers, this statement provides a definition of the utterance that reflects a type of authorship that respects subjectivity. Rappers as literal speakers reflect and construct the self through the particular style they choose to speak. Their style can represent their audible vocal signature as well as their lyrical ability and content. The power of style, for rappers, maintains their authorship. This authorship does not seek to maintain domination over the discourse but preserves their voice and position in the wider discourse. Hip-hop martyrs like Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G. maintain their influence on hip-hop because of the way their style has survived. The preservation of style is a way that hip-hop, through practice, keeps a historical record of people, events and lineages. The hip-hop practice of sampling is essentially the reproduction of history. Nonetheless, this all relates back to a discourse built on the interaction of utterances.

Constructing Rappers, One Utterance at a Time

Learning to read rappers is not only important but becomes a different type of skill that develops as a general literacy for hip-hop. Bakhtin's treatment of the utterance and its relation to the author provides a gateway to reading. Responding to an entire utterance ensures that the response will remain in hip-hop and rap music's context. The adaption of speech genres helps to mediate a transition from literature to hip-hop. Rap lyrics tend not to follow "standard English" or traditional grammatical rules leaving them outside of the *nature of language units*. The utterance also allows for the interpretation of non-linguistic non-alphabetic texts to be read and responded too. While

DJs, B-Girls/B-Boys, and graffiti artists are not as privileged; their artistic contributions to hip-hop continue to be important statements in the wider hip-hop conversation.

Focusing on the rapper, we are free to concentrate on language and how it contributes to the utterance of a rapper. Depending on the conditions of the rap performance the utterance can be contained in a single a verse, an entire track, or an entire album. The nature of the music industry requires artists to release singles for publicity. In this instance, depending on the artists, the single could be an individual utterance or a statement within the utterance of the entire album. While this may seem contentious to detail, if a single is falsely interpreted as an utterance , out of context, influences the resulting discourse. However, one could argue, that within hip-hop the reader has as much agency on determining what an utterance is based on how they choose to respond. Certainly through continued exchanges both sides could eventually reach a consensus.

Along with the utterance's established importance, the next influential factor for a rapper is the negotiating of language situated around written and spoken texts. Taking into account the intersection of written and oral texts; rap music indulges in the layered possibilities of language. Hip-hop texts function much more like hypertexts. Built into the code of words, bars, verses, songs, albums, and utterances is the possibility of a tangible lineage. Vocal signatures, specific phrases, and locations link to histories within hip-hop. These specific hypertextual attributes preserve and distribute knowledge. In this way the rapper serves as an extremely important vehicle for hip-hop to continue its nostalgic call for knowledge building.

The introduction of a concept like hypertext calls upon questioning traditional understanding of how texts function. I draw my precedent from Angela Haas’

“Wampum as Hypertext.” Haas contends,

American Indian communities have employed wampum belts as hypertextual technologies –as wampum belts have extended human memories of inherited knowledges through interconnected, nonlinear designs and associative storage and retrieval methods—long before the “discovery” Western hypertexts. (77)

Rap lyrics as a community writing practice allows for specific encoding that is understood through the context of its environment. The importance of Haas’ article to hip-hop is the emphasis of cultural practice, complex technology, and the social contract of exchange. Comparing wampum to rap provides a productive example for understanding the importance of the rapper’s production and contribution to hip-hop’s community building of knowledge. Haas explains wampum belts and strings as a “sign technology” that records events and histories. Wampum are exchanged amongst different peoples and are “maintained by regularly revisiting and re-“reading” them through community memory and performance, as wampum is a living rhetoric that communicates a mutual relationship between two or more parties” (Haas 80).

There are three significant similarities between wampum and rap: the exchange between peoples, revisiting the texts through performance and community memory, and mutual relationship. Also like wampum, all three of these aspects initiate simultaneously, one cannot exist without the others. Rap music is exchanged amongst various geographical communities. As a cultural practice rap has become a vehicle for

communication. Speaking solely on my own personal experience a song like “Get By” by Talib Kweli taught me about Nina Simone, Norman Mailer, Bed-Stuy Brooklyn, Industrial-Prison complex, and a myriad of other subjects. That song specifically met me when I was a freshman in high school. Most of the reference in that song would have not typically crossed the path of 14 year old Chicano kid in El Paso, TX. Kweli from Brooklyn, was speaking about his experiences that were foreign to me yet the message of the song was relatable, “Get By.” As I learned the words to the song, replaying the song over and over, more of the lyrics “made sense.”

The work of “making sense” from the lyrics *is* the relationship between the rapper and the audience. The *understanding* is both a production of the reader making meaning and the author’s intentions being realized. The understanding between the parties involved is that the possible meanings produced will not always be the intentional ones from the author but the expectation of dialogue is always present. The process of “making sense” reminds us of the work passive participants do beyond the cipher.

As I continue to replay, re-“read,” and rehearse the song, every word or phrase that carries specific meaning or knowledge is remembered and preserved. Thus rap like wampum “embodies memory, as it extends human memories of inherited knowledges via interconnected, nonlinear designs with associative message storage and retrieval methods,” both encompass “complex rhetorical functioning” (Haas 81). Furthermore Haas defines the general perception of hypertext as “an interactive system of storing and retrieving images, texts, and other computer files that allows users to directly link to relevant images, texts, sounds, and other data types in a nonlinear environment” (82).

Rappers employ all of these characteristics along with literary tropes of writing. The hypertextuality of rap lyrics is what makes rap so complicated and foreign to engage. Without the prior *understanding* or *over-standing* of the way rap works most of the music produced just sounds like *sounds*.

At its most transformative rap music can contain the most meaning through its simplest lyrics. For instance when Chuck D of Public Enemy raps, “Elvis was a hero to most but he never meant shit to me” the complications previously mentioned above are most evident. Hypertextually, the mention of Elvis recalls a specific set of information or knowledge but is then influenced by the context of Chuck D’s site of enunciation. Chuck D raps this on the song “Fight the Power” for the soundtrack to Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*. This line stands out within the overall utterance regardless of its simple structure. This line is making a plain statement about race. The way Elvis and Chuch D interact is not linear but their images side by side portray this particular critique about race.

Part of unlocking that tradition is being aware of the emcee’s tools. The basic rules of signs and signifiers are important. A word functioning as a sign will always point to at least one signifier. However within the context of one line that signifier can morph into multiple meanings. Take for instance this Jay Z line from the song “No Church in the Wild”:

Screech! I’m out here ballin’ I know you can hear my sneaks

Everything that is involved with understanding this line is visual, metaphorical, and cultural. To understand this line there is not one initial entry. The line reads from left to right but all the nuances of the line are not linear because within this line there is not one

single referent. The first word, is not even a word, it is a noise. The next *thought* in the line “I’m out here ballin’” references the “Screech” as the noise a basketball player makes with their shoes. The basketball metaphor is referenced with “ballin’” but “ballin’” is also allusion to wealth and to be “out here ballin’” means to do so in a public fashion or in an arena of your own world. However “I’m out here ballin’” could also reference how hard Jay Z is working not necessarily about wealth or basketball but the whole metaphor comes from the idea that a (basket)baller is ballin’ meaning playing hard and Jay Z relating to that. The final clause in the line continues the previous metaphor but also directly engages the audience. The word play in the final clause also adds another dimension to the line because he creates a juxtaposition between *hear* and *sneaks*. The idea that you hear a sneak disqualifies the sneak as a sneak unless there is reason why you are ignoring the sneaks which is why Jay Z opens this clause with “I know you can.” To finally tie the whole line together “Screech” and “sneaks” reinforces the basketball metaphor, the juxtaposition and the overall hip-hop aesthetic of street culture.

Rappers like Jay Z require more from their readers. The further you dig into an utterance, going from rhyme to rhyme trying to remain conscious of the overall point without missing a reference, the more you find yourself attaching meaning where meaning did not exist before. It is within this moment of trying to extract meaning and build knowledge as readers that we perform our own utterances. This space of production echoes Barthes, “the birth of the reader must be required by the death of the Author” (55). Yet the author is born from the reader as well.

After understanding how language factors into the construction of the author and the work that reader has to do with language; the relationship between both sides of the discourse is easier to interrogate. These raps are written to be read by their author. Literally the audible deliveries of lyrical expressions are required because they influence the illocutionary force. This obscures the reader from poaching like de Certeau described. Rap takes us back to time before reading was exclusively an exercise of the eyes. The performance is brought back, de Certeau urges us to “rediscover the reading with the body itself” and then reminds us that:

To read without uttering the words aloud at least mumbling them is a “modern” experience, unknown for millennia. In earlier times, the reader interiorized the text: he made his voice the body of the other; he was its actor. Today, the text no longer imposes its own rhythm on the subject, it no longer manifests itself through the reader’s voice. The withdrawal of the body, which is the condition of its autonomy, is a distancing of the text. It is the reader’s *habeas corpus*. (175)

There is a tension between De Certeau’s reader and rap’s reader. For de Certeau the reader is free to take a text because they no longer need to perform it the way an author did. The text of rap music is distributed through the specific performance from the rapper. A rapper is a rapper because they derive their genealogy from the original MC. Emcee evolves from MC, an acronym for Microphone Controller or Master of Ceremonies. Emcee and rapper is interchanged because the MC became more lyrical and assertive thus becoming the “emcee.” In this respect it is hard for a reader to use their *habeas corpus* and avoid the author’s rhythm.

However we can look elsewhere for a habeas corpus. Where western written texts die; hip-hop utilizes its other elements.

The thing that makes raps special, that makes it different both from pop music and from written poetry, is that it's built around two kinds of rhythm. The first kind of rhythm is the meter. In poetry, the meter is abstract, but in rap, the meter is something you literally hear: it's the beat. The beat in a song never stops, it never varies. (Jay Z 2010 10)

The rapper needs the beat because they practice an oral tradition. Like the way ink relies on the lines of a paper, the speaking subject relies on a beat. Both rhythms work together, they have "a conversation with each other, doing more together than they could do apart" (Jay Z 2010 10). The beat also serves as an invitation for the reader. If the beat provides a physical meter to the word, then it also allows the reader to insert themselves in the conversation. The author's rhythm works with the rhythm of the beat thus the reader's habeas corpus lies in finding a common rhythm. The common rhythm can be aesthetic or content based. What makes us sure that a discourse is still happening? Because rap is being transported on digital media, how do we complete the cipher?

Geneva Smitherman says, when it comes to hip-hop "the best work is a skillful blend of sound and sense...Its verbal clothing is the rhetorical garb of the outcast" (99). Her statement reminds us that there is a discourse around hip-hop while reminding us of this outcast character. Smitherman's opinion of what makes good hip-hop emphasizes audible characteristics as well as something making good sense. Finally the idea of "verbal clothing" raises an interesting point about the way a rapper can construct the

self. The rise of genres in rap music is especially invested in rhetorical garb. The so called “Conscious rapper” speaks on political topics, the “trap rapper” is a southern style of rap about the drug trade, “Gangsta rapper” draws its roots from “dangerous” aggressive urban subjects, and the “Party rapper” discusses the lighter side of rap. All of these labels tend to be more in line with the “author-function” of rapper’s subjectivity meaning as consumers we could not decide how to organize hip-hop speaking subjects. Certain subject matters we could not understand but we insisted on containing them in order to distinguish what is acceptable. It is also easier to package and sell certain subjectivities if we contain them in specific ways.

The appearance of these labels within rap music alerts us to the assimilation of hip-hop into mainstream culture and the continued persistence of the western dialectic between an author and reader. Labeling rappers displaces the utterance because we rely on the label before we allow the rapper to represent the self. This disrupts the discourse between the rapper and the listeners, thus disrupting the opportunity to build knowledge. Of course as an outsider discourse, hip-hop can continue to resist the assimilation. Because hip-hop reproduces itself through theory, as well as practice, there is always the opportunity to resist.

Fluid Subjectivities from the Cipher to the Page

Theoretically the idea that hip-hop represents a discursive practice that respects subjectivity yet invites inclusivity, while preserving authorship and readership respectively, seems too idealistic. Through rap music, hip-hop provides this meta-text

with the capability to be critical in the content and the performance. Seen below we can see hip-hop in action represented through a cipher that transcends time and space.

I start to think and then I sink
Into the paper, like I was ink
When I'm writing I'm trapped in between the lines
I escape, when I finish the rhyme...
I got soul

- Rakim "I know you got soul" (1987)⁸

I start to think and then I sink
Into the paper, like I was ink
When I'm writing, I'm trapped in between the lines
I escape, when I finish the rhyme

I got love, l-o-v-e and I be
Love, l-o-v-e to emcee

-Yasiin Bey (formerly known as Mos Def) "Love" (1999)

In Rakim's classic technical skill and efficiency, he offers a glimpse into his creative process. When he initiates the writing process, the rapper is immediately caught between a beginning and ending. The only escape is to finish the rhyme. The evidence is

⁸ From the Eric B. & Rakim Album *Paid in Full*

in the *I*. Whether the *I* is Rakim's or the readers, the experience is mirrored. Just like Rakim is trapped, so am *I* until *I* reach the end. The end being the literal end word "rhyme" and the final rhyme of the line "rhyme."

What Rakim so cleverly synthesizes in thirty-one words is the range of rap music's (and hip-hop culture's) potential. The potential to: read, write, create, encrypt, decode, rehearse, reflect, and build. Essential to that potential is the awareness of self and the relation to your environment. The environment represents the site of enunciation in hip-hop situated at the beat between interlocutors. The repeated use of the pronoun *I* represents the awareness of self. The description of relationships represents the relation to the environment: ink-paper, writing-lines, and trapped-escape. The acknowledgement of relationships provides a way to read the author and the reader. Both occupy the same space of the words but the relation to the words distinguishes difference in position. If I listen to Rakim perform the words, he is speaking from the position of an author. As I reproduce Rakim's performance of the words, I am speaking from the position of the reader.

Rakim is an author because of the relationship he has to the words. He escapes because his utterance has ended. The reader escapes when they have acknowledged and determined the way they situate themselves in relation to the Author and the utterance. Regardless there is a synthesis that occurs between the author and the reader when they both escape and attain "soul." Here "soul" lacks any profound existential meaning but merely represents the unity of author-reader. The overall message being that, while those

two subject positions do not occupy the same relation to the words, both can achieve a common final destination.

Yasiin Bey's reproduction twelve years later represents the importance of practice but also the ability to continue building. For Bey, his declaration of love, in addition to finishing the rhyme, represents an embodiment of the reader's *I* while performing his utterance in relation to Rakim's. This reiteration emphasizes the importance of cultural memory through continued practice and repetition. We can imagine multiple ciphers occurring that can involve any combination of active and passive participants. A cipher that involves Rakim, Yasiin Bey and myself, shows how all three bodies represent their own individual *I*. In the digitally recorded era of hip-hop, we can accept that ciphers can occur between rappers over beats. The active participants would be those speaking on a recorded platform and passive participants are listening. The importance of Bey, is being able to identify one of the *I*'s going from passive to active. In a cipher where Yasiin is an active participant, Rakim retains his active status because Yasiin's utterance is marked by being in succession of Rakim's. Yasiin follows in the lineage of Rakim's utterance. By writing about this rap, outside the perceived cipher in different medium, I represent one possibility for passive participants to speak without needing to rap.

At one point or another when you participate in hip-hop you are occupying one of these subject positions that are not stable and constantly fluid. The way hip-hop complicates the author-reader dialectic is the ability to be Yasiin. In this sense, Yasiin cannot silence himself because he is always both an author and reader. Yasiin can

initiate and perpetuate the discourse. If hip-hop perpetuates itself through an eternal dialogue, why distinguish the difference between author and reader? If neither is privileged, why acknowledge the opposing subject positions? Why take the time to carefully explore their nuances? Simply stated, it is within the realm of the rapper to articulate and encode their utterances in such a way that provokes. The ability to provoke signifies the initiation of discourse. If the site of enunciation is defined by the moment discourse is initiated, then for hip-hop the site of enunciation lives in cipher. If the discourse starts when the beat drops then the author and the reader are both responsible for engaging in the cipher to keep the discourse alive. Without reader's and passive-participant's ability to form a relation with the author, then eventually the authors cease to emerge. This is why distinguishing rap and the rapper is important.

An exploration of the rapper requires addressing certain specific topics. Of most concern: How does a rapper speak? How are rappers constructed? What are the implications of assigning rappers as authors? How do rappers initiate discourse? My main goal for cataloguing the rapper is to further push the understanding of not only reading content but to be able to locate the rhetorical implications of the way a rapper speaks. Rap represents a powerful rhetorical practice which is currently the most obvious and widely known tool for hip-hop. Rakim's rhetorical ability allows for his rhymes to transgress and transform past clever wordplay into meaningful building blocks.

In the following chapter, I examine the way Jay-Z constructs his position as a rapper. Jay-Z represents the transformative power within hip-hop. He has played with the limits of authorship by exposing the flaws in mainstream relationships to authors

because of his consciousness as a rapper speaking from the system of discourse that hip-hop represents.

CHAPTER III

CAN “I” LIVE? SEAN CARTER TO JAY Z: WHO SPEAKS WHEN THE EMCEES

PREACH

How much of Biggie rhymes is gonna come out your fat lips?

-Nas “Ether”

On Nas’ 2001 diss-track response to Jay Z, he questions Jay Z’s use of other rappers rhymes on his own songs. Nas’ line creates an interesting moment of interpretation for the point of enunciation of a rapper. Hip hop’s element of rap is always enunciated and always connected to the performance. Nas’ accusation helps us question the point of enunciation when a rapper raps. Inherent in this question of enunciation are the multiple complications of the site of enunciation that is contingent on the establishment of authorship. Foucault states that, “the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society” (Foucault 124). Hip hop as a discourse has become increasingly dependent on the author/rapper since its first popular record was released. Jeff Chang describes the shift:

If “Rapper’s Delight” turned hip-hop into popular music, “Superrappin’” shows how pop began to destroy what hip-hop was... For the length of “Superrappin’,” the tension between what rap was—a live performance medium dominated by the DJ—and what it would become—a recorded medium dominated by the rapper—is suspended. (133)

The tension that Chang describes, is the shift in how hip-hop was being experienced. Before hip-hop was experienced in a club where the words being rapped coincided with the performance, now it was physically contained into a record that displaced the performance but highlighted the rapper as the central site of enunciation. Moving forward, the site of enunciation is still complicated, Nas' accusation contests the stability of this site: Who is speaking when a rapper raps? Does this point of enunciation change when a rapper is not performing? Who is speaking when a rapper is being interviewed? How is this complicated by rappers who adopt pseudonyms or stage names?

Using the trajectory of Jay Z's career I want to explore the ways in which rappers inhabit different sites of enunciation. Hip hop as a discourse has four distinct creative categories for artistry. The DJ speaks through music, the B-boy/girl speaks through their dancing, the bombers/graffiti artists speak through their paintings and the rapper/emcee physically speaks through enunciation. The emcee asserts themselves as artists and authors through performing their speech. Jay Z's career becomes an ideal "text" to be studied because of the way his site of enunciation seems to shift from his first album in 1996 as rapper and street hustler to his current status as a 40 year old father, business man, husband, author and respected rapper.

The question of "Who is speaking?" becomes apparent when we consider the subject matter of Jay Z's raps on his first album *Reasonable Doubt* and his return to familiar subjects in his 2007 release *American Gangster*. Both albums are about the drug game but the first is inspired by his personal life experiences and the second by the film of the same name based on the life of drug king Frank Lucas. This change in influence is

important because Jay Z first built a career on writing music that always seemed to be autobiographical with album titles like *In My Lifetime, Vol 1., Vol. 2...Hard Knock Life,* and *Vol. 3...Life and Times of S. Carter* that creates this aesthetic. The use of “Life” “My” and “S. Carter” creates Jay Z’s position of enunciation to be personal with the physical body that performs the speech acts, particularly the use of “Life” is a metaphor for “the Life” as in “the Life of a drug dealer”. All his album titles after this point carry less personally possessive titles and move towards ambiguity: *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia, The Blueprint, The Blueprint²: The Gift & The Curse, The Black Album, Kingdom Come, American Gangster,* and *The Blueprint 3*. None of these last album titles suggest any explicit personal properties. While the first four albums seem to suggest the point of enunciation laying more with Sean Carter, the last six seem to remove Sean Carter as the *interlocutor* and feature Jay Z as the speaker. However the point of enunciation becomes dependent on the “author function” because of the confusion that comes from trying to locate who is speaking. The very moment of writing this exploration forces me to choose between Jay Z and Sean Carter when I want to refer to “him.” I rely on Foucault’s “author function” to make my choice: if Sean Carter’s voice is in any of the music released under the stage name Jay Z, we never hear it unless we have the author Jay Z. Jay Z as an author, functions as the main apparatus to deliver the voice of Sean Carter assuming his voice is located somewhere in those utterances. It is possible to meet Jay Z before we know Sean Carter; in other words Jay Z is the signifier and the signified becomes Sean Carter as a physical body.

Reading Jay Z becomes an interesting task because Sean Carter relies on the drift that occurs between Jay Z the signifier and Sean Carter the signified. The “author function” of Jay Z as a proper name is employed by Sean Carter to serve as barrier. Sean Carter wants to be a private person and Jay Z allows him to remain private. Still this makes “reading” his lyrics a completely different experience from a traditional literary written text. Roland Barthes in “The Death of the Author” contends that,

Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance of saying *I*: language knows a ‘subject’, not a ‘person’, and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language ‘hold together’, suffices that is to say, to exhaust it (145).

The question becomes, How do you kill an author that is not alive? Or in fact Jay Z the author comes alive when he is writing/performing. Jay Z is only alive when he is a ‘subject’ of Sean Carter. Still it becomes more complicated because Jay Z might be the only reason Sean Carter is not dead or in jail. The “Authors” that Barthes, Derrida and Foucault wrote about are so different from the type of author Jay Z is. The key difference resides in the confusion that Sean Carter relies upon in giving his site of enunciation to Jay Z. This intentional shift of enunciation by Sean Carter for survival can only be relied upon for so long because eventually Jay Z the artist helps Sean Carter create enough space between Sean Carter in the “Life” and Sean Carter enjoying Jay Z’s life. The funny thing is Sean Carter seem to realize that Jay Z’s time had run out when

he “retired” from hip hop in 2003. Jay Z’s retirement seemed to have meant the death of Jay Z the author and the return to just being Sean Carter, now a legitimate businessman.

Perhaps we should switch our approach to an author like Jay Z, because he relies on a confusion of the site of enunciation, we have to embrace the confusion and examine all the possible sites. The one opening available for us to start with is Jay Z’s relationship with hip hop journalist dream hampton⁹. Hampton was the first writer to label *Reasonable Doubt* a classic, disguising her praise in an article about Nas’ second album. She has written two other important articles, one in 1998 that seems to be the first article where Jay Z allowed himself to be interviewed and a second article in 2011 that contextualizes the career of Jay Z. She has remained one of the few constants in Jay Z’s life from birth to death and back into resurrection. The 2011 article “Once Again It’s the Life” gives us a clue:

The idea for the book *Decoded* (Spiegel & Grau) began in 2005 when Jay decided that *The Black Book*, an autobiography that he and I worked on for two years, was too revelatory. His fans were deeply disappointed, hoping for Jay to relax his guard at last, to drop his obsessively private approach to being a pop star. *Decoded* began as him examining his lyrics, the metaphors and allusions, the double and triple entendres as in “Monster of the double entendre/Coke is still my sponsor” on Do U Wanna Ride. But it also became an exercise in historicization. By reflecting on what was going on when he wrote certain songs, he began to contextualize—his lyrics, the eras he's surfed, his legacy itself. That

⁹ dream hampton does not capitalize her name as an homage to bell hooks

kind of reflection is usually saved for retirees, for artists whose best days are behind them. (hampton)

Not surprising it is confirmed that Sean Carter prefers to maintain his privacy but the distance between Sean and Jay is contextualized in *Decoded*. The exploration of lyrics by Jay Z in the books carries interesting implications for the way a reader would read his lyrics. Jay provides context and even while he is providing context the site of enunciation is still questionable. When hampton writes, “By reflecting on what was going on when he wrote certain songs,” we have to keep in mind that “he” can be two different sites of enunciation. Dream hampton’s use of “he” is interesting because she could very well mean Jay Z and Shawn Carter. Her personal relationship as a friend and as a journalist allows her to be in conversation with both. She becomes the “Third Space” of enunciation because she can produce meaning from, “both general conditions of language and the specific implications of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot ‘in itself’ be conscious” (Bhabha 53). She always takes her interviews and articles about Jay Z as one unified entity with Sean Carter. Her critical understanding of Jay Z’s lyrics as both art and reflections of Sean Carter makes her an incredibly valuable resource for embracing the confusion of enunciation of Jay Z and Sean Carter. The use of the pronoun “he” becomes the best signifier that points to both signifieds.

If it wasn’t for the crime that I was in

But I wouldn’t be the guy whose rhymes it is that I’m in

-Jay Z “Blue Magic”

The most interesting and frustrating caveat about the confusion of enunciation is that Jay Z is conscious of the ability to move easily between these positions. His tenth studio album *American Gangster* becomes the playground for Jay Z to play as an author with his positions of enunciation. The album is inspired by the film of the same name based on the life of Frank Lucas. There are convenient subtle coincidences with this album and his first *Reasonable Doubt*. The album covers alone on both have Jay dressed up like an Italian mobster but you never see his face. Both are supposed to tell the story of somebody in the “Life,” but also they tell the story of somebody’s life. It is also interesting that this is the second album after he retired. If Jay Z died in 2003 when Sean Carter retired him, who releases *Kingdom Come* and *American Gangster*? Without spending too much time on *Kingdom Come*, it is important to note that that album reflects on the experiences of Sean Carter living in a post-Jay Z life. We are clued into this from *Decoded*, in reference to his song “Minority Report” about race and Hurricane Katrina, he writes:

It’s crazy when people think that just because you have some money and white people start to like you that you transcend race...But even if you do get it into your head that somehow you’re the exception, that you’ve created some distance between where you are and where you’re from, things like Hurricane Katrina snap you right back out of it. (2010 220)

Kingdom Come has received the most criticism as Jay Z’s worst album even though it seems to be his most personal. *Kingdom Come* explores the personal struggles Jay Z endured as Shawn Carter. Specifically on “Lost Ones,” Jay Z discusses his relationship

with Beyoncé Knowles, family members who were killed and the ending of his partnership and friendship with Damon Dash.

The irony of this is that when *American Gangster* was released many people were saying, “Jay Z is back,” like he was not the same person who released *Kingdom Come*. Adding to the irony Jay Z’s resurrection comes on an album that is “inspired” by a film and Frank Lucas. Taking the conditions for which *American Gangster* is being written into consideration; Jay Z takes this album as an opportunity to consciously use multiple sites of enunciation, creating a constant possibility for confusion. The album is a celebration of enunciation and Jay provokes you to explore all of them. He writes in *Decoded*,

Since rap is poetry, and a good MC is a good poet, you can’t just half-listen to a song once and think you’ve got it. Here’s what I mean: A poet’s mission is to make words do more work than they normally do, to make them work on more than one level...The other ways that poets make words work is by giving them layers of meaning, so you can use them to get at complicated truths in a way that straightforward storytelling fails to do. The words you use can be read a dozen different ways...The art of rap is deceptive. It seems straightforward and personal and real that people read it completely literally, as raw testimony or autobiography...Being misunderstood is Almost a badge of honor in rap...The jokes on them because they’re really fighting phantoms of their own creation. Once you realize that, things get interesting. (2010 54)

This appears in a section of *Decoded* where he is addressing two songs one of them being “Ignorant Shit” from *American Gangster* and the other being “99 Problems” from *The Black Album*. On *American Gangster*, Jay Z utilizes the “that” and “things get interesting” on this album unlike any of his others. Jay Z is in complete control of his sites of enunciation.

On the song “Ignorant Shit” he plays through all of these positions of enunciation as well as questioning everything about enunciation in hip hop. The song gets at the heart of specifically right wing criticisms of hip hop music. The criticism being that hip hop promotes illegal and violent lifestyles. Rappers are often put on trial in the public eye for glamorize the violence of street life and the drug trade. Jay Z also questions the way hip hop music is evaluated and read. This reading involves that right wing critique but also what is constituted as “good” hip hop. From here I would like go verse¹⁰ by verse discussing the references and how the position of enunciation is constantly changing, purposely forcing the listener to try and figure out who is speaking and when. This song is the best example of Jay Z at play,

Yessir!

Just the sound of his voice is a hit!

Ya'll niggas got me really confused out there

I make "Big Pimpin" or "Give It 2 Me", one of those...

Ya'll hail me as the greatest writer of the 21st Century

I make some thought-provoking shit

¹⁰ A verse in hip hop is the equivalent to a stanza in poetry.

Ya'll question whether he falling off

I'ma really confuse ya'll on this one

Follow....

This part of the song Jay Z is not actually rapping but is introducing the song and what he intends to do. In the second line he is referring to himself in the third person. Who's "voice is a hit?" Is Jay Z telling Shawn this? Is Jay Z telling the listener? Is Shawn telling the listener? This sort of confusion continues through the song. Lines 3 through 5 are references to songs in his career and the reception of *Kingdom Come*. The word "confused" is introduced. Again a similar line of questioning can be explored, "Y'all hail me as the greatest writer of the 21st Century" who is the writer? Jay Z or Shawn Carter? Then the next two lines after that open points of view "I make some thought-provoking shit, Y'all question whether he falling off." The use of pronouns in reference to himself, continues to show us how Jay is weaving through points of enunciation. Finally saying, "I'ma really confuse y'all on this one" stating exactly what he intends to do. With a final taunt, he extends the false security of "Follow" as his last sentiment. This final word of the verse also means he is going to start the "rap" invoking the presence of a rap performance. There are other interesting things happening with that final invitation. One is the function of the introduction to the song, who is speaking the introduction? Can we interpret this as a hip hop narrator? Is Jay Z the rapper just trying to put you in a mind state? Are we getting ready to listen Jay Z make a criticism about hip hop or is Shawn Carter getting ready to tell a story about his life? Who are we following? This uncertainty is exactly the genius that Jay Z creates in his art and precisely the problem of

enunciation. Jay's abuse of the listener allows for all of these interpretations of the text and shows the diversity of how these texts are received. As an artist and writer Jay certainly deserves the right to play with his audience while simultaneously creating a coherent critique of the discussion happening around hip hop.

When them tops come down, chicks tops come down
Like when them shots come out make cops come around
When the blocks come out I can wake up a small town
Finish off the block then I make my mall rounds
When them stares get exchanged then the 5th come out
The tough guy disappears then the bitch come out
"That's him" -I'm usually what they whisper about
Either what chick he with, or his chip amount
Cause I been doing this since CHIPS was out
Watchin' Erik Estrada baggin' up at the Ramada
Table full of powder, AC Broke
'Bout to take another shower on my 25th hour
Spike Lee's everywhere, game or the flight
You might see me anywhere, day in the life
Only thing changed the tail number on the flight
I can touch down and take off the same night

In this verse the use of pronouns is the most obvious place where we could question the point of enunciation. The 'I' represents something that is personal, we have already

discussed at length of how this “I” can be question as to who is actually speaking on the track (Jay Z or Shawn Carter). All the lines here are describing a specific scene, a specific lifestyle, above all the regular daily routine of a high profile person. There are points where this can easily describe the life of a rapper or a drug dealer. We get the sense that this is a routine but yet “whose” routine remains vague characterized in the line “You might see me anywhere, day in the life.” Continuing with an ambiguous subjectivity, “When them stares get exchange then the 5th come out” could be a reference to other drug dealers getting quiet when confrontation is present or other rappers doing the same. Or all of this is just that “Ignorant Shit,” meaning the portrayal of gangster lifestyle for no other reason except to sell records.

I'm so bossy

Bitch get off me

Trick get off me

You can't get shit off me

I'm so flossy

No 6-exhaust breeze

laid back, Maybach's

Don't even talk to me!

This is that ignorant shit you like

Nigga, fuck, shit, ass, bitch, trick, plus ice

C'mon, I got that ignorant shit you love

Nigga, fuck, shit, maricon, puta, and drugs

C'mon, I got that ignorant shit you need

Nigga, fuck, shit, ass, bitch, trick plus weed

I'm only trying to give you what you want

Nigga, fuck, shit, ass, bitch, you like it don't front

These two verses are presented together because they are getting back to the literal idea of “Ignorant Shit.” The second verse is the hook of the song. Jay Z lists various curse words in Spanish and English to remind us that this is what we want both as consumers and as talking points for conservative pundits. More uses of pronouns are present as well as the rhetoric of a drug dealer. Here the drug is “Ignorant Shit” and Jay is giving what we “like,” “love,” and “need.” Here his critique is about other rappers putting anything in a song to sell a record, clearly the mix of curse words do not actually carry a typical narrative meaning but serve as the signified “Ignorant shit.” It would also seem that because of the nature of this critique we finally have the first concrete position of enunciation. The drug dealer rhetoric is being employed by a rapper to sell raps. It would seem that the speaker is Jay Z the rapper.

They're all actors

Looking at themselves in the mirror backwards

Can't even face themselves, don't fear no rappers

They're all weirdos, DeNiro's in Practice

So don't believe everything your earlobe captures

Its mostly backwards

Unless it happens to be as accurate as me
And everything said in song you happen to see
Then actually, believe half of what you see
None of what you hear even if its spat by me
And with that said, I will kill niggas dead
Cut niggas short, give you wheels for legs
Im a K-I- double -L-E-R
See ya'll in hell
Shoot niggas straight through the E.R.
Whoa- this ain't B.R., no
Its S.C., C.E.O., the next Lyor¹¹?
No, the next leader of the whole free world
And the first thing I'ma do is free Sigel¹², GO!

This verse is the most diverse as far as playing with sites of enunciation and he discusses the rapper as a site of enunciation. The first six lines are describing rappers, specifically making a comparison to actors. Jay gives a good explanation in *Decoded*, “When I say that rapper are actors, I mean it in two ways: First, a lot of them are pretending to be something they’re not outside the booth; second, it also means that even rappers who are being real often use a core reality as the basis for a great fantasy, the way a great method

¹¹ This is a reference to Lyor Cohen, the CEO of Warner Music Group and figure in the early promotion of hip hop artists like the Beastie Boys, LL Cool J and Run DMC.

¹² Beanie Sigel is the referenced. Sigel contributes a verse to the song but was omitted from this paper because it doesn't apply. Sigel spent time in jail and so his freedom has multiple meanings.

actor like DeNiro does” (63). Interestingly in this explanation, Jay himself establishes the site of enunciation with a possessive “I” but also the comparison of rappers to method actors draws genealogy for a site of enunciation that resides between a rapper as an author and rapper as personal subject. He states rather plainly that Jay Z uses Sean Carter as a core reality to create great fantasy. One would imagine that to be an obvious statement but his first explanation of rappers as actors dismisses the obviousness. Lines 5-11 play with the sites of enunciation of a listener and then in line 17 he defines his site of enunciation as S.C. or Sean Carter. There is really no obvious reason why he would define it there but it works in a way to show you what he is being serious about in the song. He is acknowledging his existence outside of rap music but also the real world impact that he has.

I missed the part where it stopped being about Imus

What do my lyrics got to do with this shit?

Scarface the movie did more than Scarface the rapper to me

Still that ain't the blame for all the shit that's happened to me

Are you saying what I'm spitting,

Is worse than these celebutantes showin' they kitten, you kidding?

Let's stop the bullshittin'

Til' we all without sin, let's quit the pulpit-ing

Scarface the movie did more than Scarface the rapper to me

Still that ain't the blame for all the shit that's happened to me

Let's stop the bullshittin'

Til' we all without sin, let's quit the pulpit-ing, c'mon!

The final verse of the song continues to play with sites of enunciation, as “my lyrics” invokes the site of the author. Lines 3 and 4 have confusing appropriations of “me” especially when we considering that “Scarface” is two completely different people yet they are both using “Scarface” to function as signifiers in the same way that Jay Z is a signifier for Sean Carter. *Scarface* the movie could influence his life as a drug dealer as well as his career as a rapper. Lines 5 through 8 are critiquing the critique of hip hop as a bad influence and these lines would assume that Sean Carter is defending Jay Z’s right to authorship. I read this in this way because he says, “Til’ we all without sin” and Jay Z as pseudonym cannot really have sin but Sean Carter has obviously sinned because of his history. *He* makes interesting interventions in this song of when to speak as Sean Carter and when to speak as Jay Z. Sometimes Jay Z is channeling Sean Carter for that “Ignorant Shit” and sometimes it just S. C.

Jay Z is a unique rapper in a specific way because he never actually writes down his rhymes. Instead he thinks through whatever concept or subject he wants to rap about and commits it to memory until he is ready to record. At the beginning of this song when he says “Follow” that is all the listener can do. This invitation of to follow creates an interesting implication of trace. Unless you memorize the song, you have no choice but to follow. To comprehend what he says you are always a step behind because as the speaker he reserves that right. Adding this element of Jay Z’s unwritten raps, most listeners would have a difficult time catching every word and placing into context in real

time. There are points in the song where he will say a word that refers to prior imagery in other lines¹³. Jay Z plays with the idea of an iterable utterance because he raps in a way that invites multiple iterations, as well as purposeful false iterations. Finally locating the signature of *he* would be the last attempt to locate a sign of enunciation. The only signature we have is the voice that is on the record because the raps are never written down. Some rappers do change their voice when they rap but Jay Z and Sean Carter have the same voice. Yet Jay Z's voice is iconic in hip hop so his signature is still important.

Many of the other songs on *American Gangster* can be broken down into Jay Z playing with his site of enunciation. The song "Blue Magic" is a reference to the branding that Frank Lucas created with his heroine but also serves as an allusion for the brand that is Jay Z. The hyper-consciousness of the site of enunciation on this album creates an interesting juxtaposition to his first album. While most praise and critique Jay Z for returning to a familiar subject matter he uses it as an opportunity to take advantage of his position as an author to not only put space in between Jay Z and Sean Carter but to also creating space in between the person Sean Carter was in 1996 to the person Sean Carter is in 2007. What once seemed like a distance of survival is now a space of creativity and critique.

¹³ In "Ignorant Shit" he uses mirror, backwards to continuously create the image of not being able to look in the mirror as well as DeNiro with Actor and practice as in the practice of method acting.

Justify My Thug

Realizing the rhetorical potential of Jay Z's music through the acknowledgment of the various sites of enunciation opens up the ways Jay Z makes meaning in his lyrics. The rupture between Jay Z and Shawn Carter forces us to try and limit how we perceive the music. The tendency to categorize the content in the music either has to be fact or fiction but never both. The ability to readily deal with this rupture seems foreign within a traditional western episteme yet Jay Z is at his most aesthetically lyrical and critically profound when he jumps in between these spaces. Jay Z, and by in large hip-hop, challenges the reader to think in non-traditional western ways. Already there is a complex relationship between Jay Z and a traditional western epistemology that is used to read Jay Z. Within a western hegemonic context, the rupture appears to be between Jay Z and Shawn Carter but actually the rupture is outside the site of enunciation and often residing at the moment the utterance is being received. We can characterize that moment by the ability to recognize "Ignorant Shit" as interesting critique by Jay Z or just another song glorifying negative stereotypes of African Americans. When you are situated within a hip-hop episteme, the multiple sites of enunciation are interpreted as dialectic instead of a rupture.

By the same token the potential for that rupture can be perpetuated by the interlocutor. Right before the end of "Ignorant Shit" Jay Z yells "Its only entertainment!" Rhetorically Jay Z seems to want to expunge responsibility from the rappers for their raps. However we understand from the song that we should never take anything he says literally. Jay Z is challenging the audience to keep working through the site of

enunciation in order to maintain the dialectic that he is interested in. Hip-hop as a critical space of discussion and critique is dependent on the dialectic that Jay Z is point at. Jay Z does not fully realize this potential until Sean Carter killed Jay Z and realized the importance of the site that Jay Z occupied. Every album before his initial retirement, Jay Z probably believed it was only entertainment. Until he made “some thought provoking shit” on *Kingdom Come* did he realize that the ruptured site of enunciation was not like any other site. The ruptured space represented a complex place that allowed heavy theoretical contemplation to exist with unique forms of storytelling that were relatable and comprehensible amongst various people. *American Gangster* is the manifestation of that rupture.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: HIP-HOP IN THE CONSTANT STATE OF NEPANTLA

So what do we do with the rapper? Regardless of the relationship they have with their audience, the rapper nonetheless has a position of privilege. Whether that privilege represents the visibility or the privilege of being a rapper within hip-hop, *we* as a community have to decide how we are going to navigate this privilege. Like authors in any genre, rappers have an artistic ability to move the crowd. Jay Z did not become the business man he is today without being one of the best rappers ever. He parlayed his lyrical abilities to open up opportunities for his business skills to be shown. Jay Z's economic success is a result of the way he navigates the author and reader dialectic built on the consumer based model. He is still the hustler, feeding the streets what they need.

So long as hip-hop continues to grow commercially, there will always be this struggle between hip-hop's and traditional authorship. The success that Jay Z enjoys is not a reliable indicator for the way other rappers will endure the pressure of both systems of discourse. The author in hip-hop, based in a cipher, does not represent the same rapper that produces records for profit. This produces a rupture in the way authorship can be perceived in hip-hop. Rappers are then questioned on their authenticity: Are you real hip-hop? It appears that hip-hop is looking directly at its next moment of metamorphosis.

Whether hip-hop is assimilating into mainstream culture or mainstream culture is assimilating into hip-hop, something is happening. Through the possibility of digital

communities on the internet, passive participants of the cipher have created innovative ways to keep the conversation going. One growing example, RapGenius.com, represents an interesting example of a cipher and traditional engagement by readers. The about section on RapGenius.com gives this description:

Rap Genius is your guide to the meaning of rap lyrics. You can listen to songs, read their lyrics, and click the lines that interest you for pop-up explanations – we have thousands of canonical rap songs explained (2Pac, Notorious B.I.G., Jay-Z – even the beginning of the Torah..) Our aim is not to translate rap into “nerdspeak”, but rather to critique rap as poetry. Who writes the explanations? Anyone can create an account and start explaining rap. Highlight any line to explain it yourself, suggest changes to existing explanations, and put up your favorite new songs. If you make good contributions you'll earn Rap IQ™, and if you spit true knowledge, eventually you'll be able to edit anything on the site.. just like a hip-hop Wikipedia.(RapGenius.com)

In this description, we can see the blending of discourses. Presenting the lyrics in written and audible formats rearranges the ways we previously engaged rappers. Also if we originally established that discourse in hip-hop was initiated by the beat, hypothetically on this site the beat never drops. Instead the rapper is completely manipulated by the reader, if they choose to only engage with the written text. Next, the aim to critique rap as poetry, situates rap in a literary discourse. As well as the idea of “canonical rap songs,” continues to reproduce the language of a traditional conversation about literature.

The autonomy of a reader over text is reinstated on RapGenius. Where in the cipher, participants spoke in linked utterances, on RapGenius readers transcribe and annotate the lyrics independently in search of “true” meaning of the lyrics. RapGenius even calls their annotators and transcribers “scholars.” While I do believe the study of hip-hop is scholarly, to employ the rhetoric of the academy requires that we remain aware of the colonial nature of these terms. Hip-hop discourses are not only concerned with the true meaning of texts but the transformative properties of those texts. This is why hip-hop is represented by the four elements. Critiques aside, RapGenius’ creates an access to hip-hop that can support the growth it has endured. Just like deciphering a rap lyric, a careful reading, creates an entry point into the larger culture and discourse.

Sites like RapGenius solidify the idea that rap lyrics are being critically read as well as proving that rap lyrics are being read through the traditional dialect between authors and readers. Elements of the cipher exist but ultimately RapGenius scholars read lyrics to speak about hip-hop and ignore the expectation to speak through hip-hop. Instead of contributing their own utterance, in conjunction to those before, the work done on RapGenius just speaks about the previous utterance. This removes the utterance from its space in the larger discourse and inhibits the discourse from continuing.

Hip-hop is at a new stopping point, another death. The authors and readers have shifted and changed. Moving forward we have to consider new ways to think about authors and readers in hip-hop. Hip-hop is forever infected from its original pure form. However that original form could have never sustained all the good and bad that hip-hop produced over the last 40 years. Instead, I propose we accept hip-hop’s transformations

away from the traditional author and reader, and towards Nepantler@s and Digital Griots.

Remaining true to the spirit of the cipher, citizens of hip-hop need to remain connected and conversing. Gloria Anzaldua's describes the concept of nepantla as, "the space in-between, the locus and sign of transition" (2009 310). Thus making Nepantler@s, "artistas/activistas [who] help us mediate these transitions, help us make the crossings, and guide us through the transformation process—a process I call *conocimiento* (understanding)" (Anzaldua 2009 310). Re-imagining rappers as nepantler@s, their raps become texts of transformation. Their utterances help to develop understanding of experiences. "For nepantler@s, to bridge is an act of will, an act of love, an attempt toward compassion and reconciliation, and a promise to be present with the pain of other without losing themselves to it" (Anzaldua 2002 4). Rap lyrics as bridges of *conocimiento* shifts the way we perceive these texts. Rappers become vehicles for describing the settings of our experiences. Instead of trying to decipher what the lyrics mean for the sake of knowing what the author originally meant, the raps represent an opportunity to further understand something.

Through this lens, it becomes easier to deflect issues of authenticity. If a rap song has no transformative properties for you, then you can move past it. This requires us to produce a reader that is capable of perceiving the transformative properties of hip-hop. In the introduction to this thesis, I briefly cited Adam Banks and his concept of the Digital Griot. Banks develops the concept from his theorizing about the role a DJ plays in hip-hop. According to Banks, "through the cut, break, sample, mix, remix, mixtape,

and a continual, crate-digging search through past, present, and future texts, the DJ maintains the groove that allows narrative, text, and history to continue while allowing for new voices, new arguments” (29). Digital Griots bridge print, oral and digital communication. Hip-hop manifests itself through any one of these various mediums and therefore readers must be able to engage with all of these forms. Somehow through a navigation of these mediums the cipher must be reproduced.

Thinking back to the structure of the cipher, we have two levels of participants with the intention to have a discourse. The limits of the cipher are defined by the participants. Therefore like DJs, passive participants, “are not mere ventriloquists, playing or telling other people’s stories for us; rather, their arranging, layerings, sampling, and remixing are inventions too, keeping the culture, telling their stories and ours, binding time as they move the crowd and create and maintain community” (Banks 24). Nepantler@s and Digital Griots, authors and readers, of hip-hop must work together. Resisting the urge to silence the other to speak, this relationship is much more interested in producing a larger narrative through the blending of voices. Because the nepantler@ helps to describe the spaces-in-between, their perceived authorship, the genesis of enunciation does not come from a singular internal voice but rather a lived experience. From there a Digital Griot can take the experience and place it conversation with others creating the new narrative.

The discourse that a Nepantler@ and a Digital Griot produces, is a possible reconciliation of the way hip-hop has grown. The productive power of hip-hop, that seems to only exist in nostalgic longings, is not gone. The global phenomenon that

continues to play a significant role in empowering the marginalized, remains resistant.

Like the state of nepantla, hip-hop remains as the in-between-space for people, place and time.

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