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WORD IS BORN:
CRITICAL GAPS AND THE POETICS OF HIP-HOP

Kabir Hamid
English Honors Thesis
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PROLOGUE

I grew up listening to hip-hop music. Although I lived across the country from its birthplace, I would immerse myself in its sounds during the day and especially at night when my brother would play tapes before we fell asleep in our bunk beds. At a certain point in high school, I became obsessed with the music's lyrics. I was continually astonished by the cleverness, rhyme ability and edginess of the emcees I listened to. My admiration for hip-hop music developed alongside my admiration for the great authors I was reading at that time: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Herman Hesse and Virginia Woolf, to name a few. It was clear to me that English literature and hip-hop music used words in radically different ways. These divergent ways of employing language were reflected in the pedagogical fact that hip-hop would never end up in the classroom while English literature remained one of its fixtures.

In college, I began to visit www.ohhla.com (short for "original hip-hop lyrics archive"), a website almost wholly devoted to transcribing the lyrics of hip-hop songs. At first, I was surprised that many of these lyrical transcripts, especially those that were abstracted from songs that I had never heard, seemed to lose something in translation. Without the voice of the emcee to infuse the words with life and the beat to enter into a synergistic relationship with them, the lyrics seemed simplistic and, at times, even nonsensical. However, as I continued to examine these transcripts, I began to engage with them in new ways; I saw the patterns between them, the similar things that they stressed and played with, the skill and artistry reflected in the turn of their phrases. I began listening to more underground emcees, who are mostly signed to independent labels and consequently given an almost unlimited amount of artistic freedom. While I

discovered this music, I studied transcripts of its songs on www.ohhla.com, becoming increasingly impressed with what I found.

I began to wonder why hip-hop music never received academic attention; a musical form that is so richly innovative deserves to be critically addressed. During the summers in-between my years at Oberlin College, I read a few books on hip-hop to see what they had to say. Many of them were very informative, but none lent an ear to the ultra-lyrical underground music that I had developed a passion for. My love for the music was matched by an equally intense frustration with the fact that certain salient features of it were recognized neither by my academic instructors nor the self-proclaimed experts on hip-hop. Although my frustration was understandable, continued research has shown me that the situation is more complex than I had thought.

This paper represents my attempt to fill a gap in the discourse surrounding one of the most interesting musical and linguistic forms to come around in quite a while. Retrospectively, my project is the fruit of a seed that was planted in high school; I wished then that hip-hop would gain the pedagogical attention that my favorite books received. This thesis is the fulfillment of that wish and my attempt to marry two very compatible entities: the study of English language and literature and the lyrical form and content of hip-hop music.

I. DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM

There are sizable holes in the critical discourse surrounding hip-hop music. The simplest explanation for this phenomenon is that the music itself is young (about thirty-five years old), so the criticism surrounding it has yet to address all of its dimensions. To an extent, this explanation is accurate. Many writers up to this point have tackled what

they have deemed to be the most important aspects of the culture, assuming that what they ignore will be dealt with by future writers. However, there is a good deal more to this issue than the statement, "We haven't had time to write about everything yet," and it will be valuable to explore the reasons why certain aspects of hip-hop have not been dealt with in the articles and books that focus on it.

In his 1995 essay, "Don't Believe the Hype: Why Isn't Hip-Hop Criticism Better?" Adam Sexton responds to the question of whether hip-hop music lends itself to critical writing:

My answer is that *of course* rap is "a critic's music." At the same time I would suggest that the critics themselves, for the most part, have failed to treat it as such. Straight up: most hip-hop criticism is either ill-informed rap-bashing of the it's-not-even-music! variety...or, at the other end of the spectrum, your basic cheerleading. If hip-hop itself wishes to be taken as seriously by the culture at large as, say, jazz and film, this must change (3).

Seven years later, I find Sexton's claim both true and false, his provocation partially fulfilled. Among others, *Black Noise* by Tricia Rose and *Hip Hop America* by Nelson George provide comprehensive examinations of many facets of hip-hop culture. They describe in detail how hip-hop arose out of specific historical circumstances in New York City, its inheritance of African-American oral traditions, its controversial use of sampling technology, its rise to commercial notoriety, its highly publicized "gangsta image," and numerous other topics. Yet, in their primarily sociological exposition of hip-hop, they rarely analyze or evaluate the music on an aesthetic level. Generally, writers address hip-hop as a cultural phenomenon, giving specific songs, especially their lyrics, attention only inasmuch as they reflect or reveal other elements of its culture.

A fitting example of this trend can be found in the seminal text, *Black Noise*.

Describing the many facets of rap (a term that I am using interchangeably with hip-hop music), Rose writes,

It [Rap] is the central cultural vehicle for open social reflection on poverty, fear of adulthood, the desire for absent fathers, frustrations about black male sexism, female sexual desires, daily rituals of life as an unemployed teen hustler, safe sex, raw anger, violence, and childhood memories. It is also the home of innovative uses of style and language, hilariously funny carnivalesque and chitlin-circuit-inspired dramatic skits, and ribald storytelling (18-19).

Rose's list is divided into two categories: rap as a reflection of the socioeconomic and emotional factors of the (predominantly) African-American experience, and rap as a formal structure, an outgrowth of African-American vernacular traditions. In *Black Noise* and other texts, the former category gets a generous amount of attention while the "innovative uses of style and language" are comparatively ignored. For example, when Rose herself conducts a close reading of hip-hop texts, she writes, "A close examination of politically explicit raps from three central and well-established figures will give us some insight into how rap's social criticism is crafted and how such criticism is related to everyday life and social protest" (105). In explicating and contextualizing the craftwork of political resistant rap, Rose is performing an important critical task. However, the lyrics in this case are important because they are "politically explicit." A complementary analysis, which examines raps that are stylistically or linguistically innovative, is absent from *Black Noise*.

Why might a study of hip-hop lyrics as ends rather than means be absent from hip-hop's critical discourse? There are a number of possible explanations. First, this phenomenon seems to correspond to a larger African-American historico-critical trend.

In his book *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality*

literary critic Michael Awkward writes,

Whenever the question has arisen as to whether black literary expression should be analyzed in terms of its internal formal structures and attempts at aesthetic sophistication or, in Richard Wright's famous autobiographical words, as an extratextual 'weapon' in the war against American racism, more often than not the Afro-American reader came down on the side of weaponry (27).

Awkward highlights the historical pattern of perceiving African-American expression solely as a tool to combat prevalent prejudices and oppression.

Awkward's thesis illuminates trends in hip-hop criticism in two ways. Hip-hop critics may either be replicating this tendency because hip-hop is a primarily African-American art, or trying to lend hip-hop credibility by proving that it perpetuates an African-American political and artistic tradition. Writers may be following a traditional critical trajectory when invoking hip-hop as a political act; or, since the African-American artistic tradition is rooted in combating oppression and racism, critics may lend hip-hop's texts and authors legitimacy by showing that they possess these traits. Similarly, if writers can liken emcees whose raps involve violent and deplorable images to realist writers who focus on depicting the dark side of the African-American experience, they too assume a previously withheld artistic authenticity. Hip-hop's status as an artistic form is always a matter of contention; writers addressing its music therefore emphasize its sociopolitical aspects in order to lend it artistic legitimacy.

Furthermore, writers center their texts upon these issues not just to validate hip-hop's artistry, but also to defend it from institutional assaults. It seems that the purpose of many texts is to clarify a misunderstood form of music that has faced its share of attacks from governmental institutions and cultural figures. Cultural figures such as C. Dolores Tucker and Tipper Gore both have waged wars on "gangsta rap," criticizing it

for demoralizing America's youth with its violence and misogyny. Due to the fact that hip-hop's denouncers assault it on a socio-cultural plane, its apologists must inhabit that same turf.

At this point we have discovered why the language of hip-hop is deemed less crucial than its political import; I would also like to argue that hip-hop's critics largely *dismiss* the language of the music as un-poetic. The fact that there has been little or no analysis of the lyrical contours of hip-hop betrays the fact that this element is regarded as not only less important than other elements, but unimportant. Two other writers, Mtume Ya Salaam and Adam Sexton, have also noted this imbalance in the writing on hip-hop. In his essay, "The Aesthetics of Rap," Salaam writes,

After reading many articles supposedly concerning rap music—about the social aspects of rap music, the criminal elements of rap music, the lawsuits caused by rap music, sampling in rap music, gossip concerning rap musicians, how other musicians feel about rap music, etc.—I realized that I had yet to read about the music itself. In other words, I had not read about the "aesthetics" of rap, about the qualities which made particular examples of rap music good music—not necessarily good rap music, but simply good music (303).

Salaam wants hip-hop criticism to include an aesthetic component, an investigation into what makes the beat and lyrics in a song good. In addressing the lyrical ingredient of the song, Salaam asserts, "Critics of rap must consider the same elements commonly found in good poetry—simile, metaphor, and alliteration as well as creative expression, originality, and conveyance of emotion" (305). Salaam has noticed the same critical tendency that I have, and issues a provocation for critics to change. However, the *way* he thinks hip-hop should be broken down unknowingly perpetuates the very reasons why its texts are ignored in the first place.

Hip-hop lyrics are neglected precisely because they are examined in the same way as the art form that the lyrics most closely resemble, poetry. Salaam wants critics to

study hip-hop lyrics looking for “the same elements commonly found in good poetry,” since hip-hop lyrics, especially because they rhyme, are formally similar to poems. However, if you refer to hip-hop lyrics on a page they invariably look like unsophisticated imitations of poetry. Some people argue that the reason for this unfortunate fact is that (as I said earlier) so much is lost in translation when you shift from the experience of hearing hip-hop to seeing its lyrics on the page. This is true, but not enough is lost in translation to make it a sufficient explanation for the fact that written versions of hip-hop songs look like childish poetry.

Transcriptions of hip-hop songs look inadequate not only because they are transcriptions, but also because they are viewed through an alien aesthetic lens. Something is only sophisticated, or artistic, according to a set of independent standards held by an observer. If someone judges hip-hop songs by the subtlety of their rhymes or thematic, tonal and formal ambiguity, chances are s/he will come up empty-handed most of the time. Conversely, if someone judges traditional poetry by standards held by emcees, then it too will appear empty and bland. The appropriate alternative, then, is to create a new aesthetic lens through which to view hip-hop. Sexton comes to the same conclusion after proposing (like Salaam) that hip-hop lyrics should be held up to “traditional artistic criteria.”

Of course, the argument could be made that what I’m suggesting hip-hop critics employ are Western techniques of critical scrutiny, techniques that are irrelevant to hip-hop – a decidedly non-Western form...But if hip-hop is to be generally acknowledged as in every way the equal of established modes, it will have to fight those modes on their own turf.

Or will it? An obvious alternative would be to disengage from this contest altogether. Fair enough. Then hip-hop critics must invent an *alternate* critical approach, one that doesn’t avail itself of Western musical notation or English poetic sound-and-sense jargon – but doesn’t lean on twelve-car pileups of adjectives to make its case either (“Don’t Believe the Hype,” 12).

This proposed alternative critical approach is not only more appropriate to hip-hop, but will do justice to its lyrics.

The only question remaining, which Sexton poses but leaves unanswered, is: what will this new critical approach look like? The most successful critical approach will adopt the standards that the hip-hop community itself uses to judge songs/texts, and investigate the devices and techniques that are assigned importance according to these standards. These standards, devices and techniques constitute a poetics of hip-hop. Collectively, I have catalogued them in two ways. First, since hip-hop is a continuation of African-American vernacular traditions, much of its paradigm can be traced back to them. Henry Louis Gates' scholarly work on Signifyin(g) in African-American oral traditions is especially applicable in this case. Although he uses it as an interpretive model for the African-American literary tradition, it fits just as easily into hip-hop's musical tradition. Second, I make the remainder of my claims out of years of closely listening to the music itself. By immersing myself in hip-hop's sounds and texts, I have become familiar with what is valued and dismissed in terms of rhymes and lyrics. My assertions about the poetics of hip-hop are not made *a priori*; what I claim proceeds from the music rather than precedes it.

Although my analysis seemingly departs from the aforementioned texts that focus on the political aspects of hip-hop, this is not the case. My aim is to reveal the ways that hip-hop contains its own set of devices and standards, and to prove that once a listener is aware of these, s/he can appreciate its texts in new ways. Although this will be an analytical, rather than evaluative, look at the transcripts of hip-hop songs, the result will be to demonstrate that they are comparable to other textual forms in their own unique and

self-defined ways. Therefore, implicit in this analysis is a rejection of the idea that hip-hop lies low in the hierarchy of figurative structures. The artists themselves have repeatedly rejected hip-hop's low textual status, and it is time for a critic to follow their lead by echoing rhyme pioneer Rakim when he proclaims, "I ain't no joke."

II. SOME NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

Of course, there are multiple sets of standards that govern the rules of hip-hop music, each operating in a different realm. I aim to define the poetics of hip-hop that emcees who identify themselves as "lyricists" conform to. This epithet denotes the emcee's pride in his lyrical mastery; emcees who define themselves as lyricists often put transcripts of their songs in the liner notes of their albums. This ultra-lyrical hip-hop has been mostly relegated to the "underground," as opposed to the commercial, sector of hip-hop. Here, emcees can take more chances lyrically and musically than those signed to major labels, who are pressured to obtain or maintain commercial success.

Like the poetics of hip-hop lyrics, critics have largely ignored underground artists up to this point. Commentators have given attention only to hip-hop's dominant and radical figures, who have changed the course of the music in easily detectable ways. These figures have become (in)famous, drawing enough attention from the media to prevent critics from looking any further. Although writers do valuable work when addressing such major figures and groups as Grand Master Flash, Krs-1, Public Enemy, Ice Cube, N.W.A., Tupac Shakur and Sean "Puffy" Combs, there is a whole department of hip-hop that is absent from the list. These underground emcees have seldom garnered national attention, but they pride themselves as the purists of the form, who do what they do for the love of the music rather than a desire for fame. Though ultra-lyrical hip-hop

isn't confined to the underground, it manifests creatively and innovatively there. An ignorance of the underground corroborates a dismissal of lyrics; one cannot truly appreciate lyrics without being familiar with the underground, and vice versa. Therefore, my choice to focus mostly on underground artists parallels my examination of hip-hop lyrics: both serve to correct an imbalance in the critical discourse on hip-hop. My aim is to reveal to readers aspects of hip-hop music that have escaped its critical radar up to this point.

III. SKILLS TO PAY THE BILLS: AN OUTLINE OF HIP-HOP'S POETICS

First, lyrically, hip-hop is a very skill-based form. Emcees strive to perfect certain skills while simultaneously developing a style that is unique to them. Although hearing an amazing emcee rhyme can be similar to reading a great poem or viewing a piece of art, it may be more appropriately likened to seeing an acrobat perform incredible physical feats or a jazz musician wailing on his instrument. In other words, hip-hop lyrics aren't to be appreciated the way certain kinds of poetry and fiction are: for their sense of irony, ambiguity and thematic sophistication (although, as we will see, these qualities do sometimes figure into the music). Instead, hip-hop lyrics hinge on the display of specific skills, such as rhyme abilities, the use of inventive metaphors, Signifyin(g), being excessively complex in a semantic sense, narrative strengths, the power to create evocative images, and having a unique vocal style and delivery.

One of the most universal lyrical qualities valued by the hip-hop community is the capacity to rhyme well. In the early 1980s (and still today in many radio/music video oriented hip-hop songs) most hip-hop artists followed a simplistic AABB rhyme scheme. In the late 1980s, Rakim is widely regarded as the groundbreaking artist who introduced

a complex rhyme scheme to hip-hop's linguistic world. He inspired a whole generation of emcees with his use of devices such as multi-syllabic rhyme, feminine rhyme, internal rhyme, and his ability to pack as many rhymes as possible into his verses. And, while this may look somewhat elementary when viewed on a page, when it is heard aloud the rhymes and the dexterity with which they are delivered is overwhelming. In my analysis I will pay close attention to the ways in which rhyme schemes are employed, noting how emcees conform to or deviate from the informal hip-hop maxim "more rhymes, and more complex rhymes, are always better."

Part of the poetics that define the underground in opposition to mainstream hip-hop is the high value placed on being lyrically complicated and multilayered. Frequently, a listener will praise a hip-hop artist by saying that s/he had to press rewind, or listen to the song repeatedly, in order to fully catch all of the hidden meanings and clever wordplay embedded in the verses. Personally, there have been many moments when, as I'm listening to a song I've heard many times, I catch something that I've never understood before, and suddenly totally cryptic lines become transparent. Eureka! Whether in terms of metaphors that hinge on the multiple meanings of a single word, veiled references to obscure aspects of hip-hop culture or cultures in general, or simply rhymes that make the listener perform a cognitive stretch in order to grasp them, elaborateness is a mark of skill. This elaborateness plays into the voice and delivery of an artist as well. Performing one's words in a way that is complicated and new is also respected in terms of skill. However, being too complex in terms of rhymes and delivery can detract from a listener's assessment of the music. Some underground emcees are

accused of creating “nerd-hop,” which is so convoluted and indecipherable that it is regarded as little more than an exercise in self-indulgence.

No catalogue of the principles that emcees abide by when rhyming would be complete without a description of the African-American oral tradition of Signifyin(g). Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his book *The Signifying Monkey*, defines Signifyin(g) as a super-trope that encompasses many African-American figural customs: “Because to Signify is to be figurative, to define it in practice is to define it through any number of its embedded tropes” (81). There has been a fair amount of contention surrounding a singular definition of the term, since it can be defined through any of its sub-tropes. Two conceptions of Signifyin(g) will be beneficial to this outline. First, an individual can Signify upon a figure who has preceded him or her, invoking this figure or their work in either an agonistic or reverential fashion. This way of Signifyin(g) creates a vibrant dialogue between present and past, with the Signifier either revising the past or keeping a tradition alive. The second form of Signifyin(g) can be located in Gates’ description of the difference between signification in the traditional sense and Signifyin(g): “Whereas signification depends for order and coherence on the exclusion of unconscious associations which any given word yields at any given time, Signification luxuriates in the inclusion of the free play of these associative rhetorical and semantic relations” (49). Regardless of the way a person Signifies, he or she will capitalize on the definitional plurality of signs, punning and playing on words. This vivacious play with the multiplicity of language exchanges “Order and coherence” for linguistic destabilization.

Before chronicling the ways that Signifyin(g) plays into hip-hop’s poetics, I would like to mention the way that writers have interpreted Signifyin(g), in hip-hop and

outside of it, as an act of resistance to sociopolitical hegemonies. Russell A. Potter, in *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*, argues that Signifyin(g), in unraveling the rules of language, undermines the sociopolitical hegemonies embedded in it.

The power of the 'major' language is staked on the continual search for and codification of constants, via grammar, manuals of usage, the educational apparatus, and the sort of linguistics...that discards variance as a kind of secondary, extra-linguistic phenomenon. The mode of power of the 'minor' language, on the other hand, is that of variance, deformation, and appropriation; it is not so much that it refuses or opposes the structural constants sought by the major, as it is that it does not acknowledge the 'constant' as a unit of value; on the contrary it values the variant. In doing so, by setting words into a kind of play (such as Signifyin(g)), the 'minor' is a kind of anti-structure; its speakers and writers perform an ongoing deconstruction of the major (68).

Signifyin(g) can be framed as a defiant act, in which the speaker Signifies upon rules of language systematized by an external force by crossing them out and creating them anew. Although I will not emphasize the political significance of Signifyin(g) in my survey of hip-hop songs (this being one of the main foci of Potter's text), the reader should keep it in mind. When Signifyin(g), emcees carve out their own rules, creating new forms out of the preexisting language.

Signifyin(g) plays a substantial role in hip-hop. When emcees speak figuratively, the cleverness with which they can play upon a signifier determines their lyrical skill. Cleverness and irreverence both play a role in how successful an emcee is in the art of Signifyin(g). Signifyin(g) also informs emcees' metaphorical use of language, causing it to take on a unique form and purpose.

The practice of Signifyin(g) causes metaphor in hip-hop to function uniquely in comparison to other textual modes. In fiction and poetry, metaphor's objective is to create a mood or tone by forging an identity between different things. Metaphor serves

as a means to construct themes rather than being a pure end in itself. In contrast, metaphor in hip-hop frequently is an end in itself, and is purposive only insofar as it demonstrates the wittiness of the emcee. Also, instead of creating meaning by comparing two radically distinct things (as in most poetry and fiction) metaphor in hip-hop derives its worth from playing upon the multiple definitions of a signifier. When Ezra Pound writes, "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough," the metaphor serves to construct a tone and a sense of thematic ambiguity by likening two totally disparate things. Conversely, when Notorious B.I.G. raps, "Your reign on the top was short like leprechauns," the metaphor is just an exercise in ingenuity. The metaphor lets B.I.G. display his skills by playing on the word "short," causing it to simultaneously mean height and a temporal duration. Metaphors in hip-hop, then, are a display of cleverness in which the emcee often forces a single word to mean more than one thing. Often, emcees will take advantage of their oral medium and engage in homophony, playing on two words that sound the same but have a different meaning and spelling. In this case, my transcriptions will contain both words, separated by a slash.

The hip-hop community also esteems an original and engaging vocal flow and delivery. Some emcees depend on these qualities to the extent that it does not matter what they actually say, as long as they say it in their trademark fashion. Incidentally, this is a good tool for demarcating the line between underground and commercial hip-hop; in commercial rap, an emcee is more likely to gain appeal as a result of his voice rather than his lyrics, and in the underground, the reverse is true. In hip-hop in general, though, voice and flow are major components of the lyrics. A few qualities that bring lyrics to life are speed of delivery, the ability to pause at pivotal moments, the authority, wildness

or calmness of the voice, regional accents and the rhythmic relation of the voice to the beat.

Last, despite my emphasis on skill and cleverness, there is a high value placed on emcees' deftness at creating vivid images. Some rappers actually resent the pressure placed on them to construct ingenious punch lines instead of creating vivid and engaging images. An emcee's talent for writing lyrics that evoke vivid mental pictures in the listener's mind can be just as important as funny metaphors and complex rhyme schemes. Some emcees abandon the other standards in favor of poetic imagery. In this way, they are similar to contemporary poets, who eschew the constraints of rhymed verse in order to have free rein over their creations.

IV. "THE WORDS THAT I MANIFEST"¹: CLOSE READINGS OF HIP-HOP

Before delving into specific songs, I would like to clarify my aims in addressing them. This survey is of underrepresented, underground hip-hop, with an emphasis on its lyrics not simply as conveyers of information, but as various embodiments of an aesthetic that I have defined as the poetics of hip-hop. Still, this does not mean I will ignore the content of these songs by conducting a purely formal analysis. Although I have defined previous critics' obliviousness to songs' formal qualities as problematic, to focus on the lyrics at the expense of their content is similarly condemnable. I plan to look at the ways in which form and content *inform* one another and contribute to a song's overall effect upon its listeners. This strategy will reveal the ways in which each song operates and locates itself within hip-hop's poetic spectrum.

¹ Gangstarr, "Manifest," *No More Mr. Nice Guy*.

A. Common

Common (formerly known as Common Sense), a native of Chicago, has released four albums. His earlier work is marked by free-floating wordplay that draws on the traditions of Signifyin(g) and constantly references items from pop and hip-hop culture. Many songs on his later albums focus on specific topics, such as abortion, the life of Black Panther Assata Shakur, and the current state of hip-hop music. Common's body of work ranges from free association to explorations of serious issues through rhyme.

Although his second album, *Resurrection*, marks the height of his emphasis on wordplay, I am choosing to examine the song "Hungry" from his third album, *One Day It'll All Make Sense*. This song is less representative of his work on the latter album, being tonally similar to the former. However, the song is less playful than most of his work on *Resurrection*, opting instead for an aggressive attack upon the listener. The reason I am focusing on "Hungry" is because of its structure; it lacks a chorus, instead containing one elongated verse. Songs composed of free-associative wordplay are so densely packed with Signifyin(g), references and rhymes, that it is not necessary to explicate a full song in order to demonstrate the ways that these devices function.

On "Hungry," Common exchanges narrative and grammar for Signifyin(g) and an elaborate rhyme scheme. He doesn't try to make sense in the conventional definition of the term; instead, he strings together rhymes and metaphors with the connective tissue of references. Most of his lines are laden with hidden meanings, making them seem obscure and nonsensical at first. This brings up the issue of the inclusion and exclusion of certain audiences, for only listeners that are familiar with Common's world will share in his allusiveness.

As opposed to other songs, “Hungry” functions purely as a proof of Common’s skills. The devices Common uses fuel his continuous boasting session; the evidence of his skills lies in the skill with which he brags about them. A listener familiar with the poetics of hip-hop will appreciate this song for its raw and freely associative feel; one can imagine Common spitting these rhymes on a street corner with his peers encircling him as an audience (the line “hungry hip-hop junky in the city,” scratched by a deejay at the end of the song, suggests this very atmosphere). The musical component of “Hungry” also contributes to this effect; its sound is simple and raw, with little more than a piano loop accompanying Common’s vocals.

The first four bars of the song exemplify the aforementioned devices:

I walk the night in rhymin’ armor, bomb a/bomber nigga like a winter coat
Have him on Death Row searchin’ for an Interscope
Yet I ‘Sparkle’ like Irene Cara
Symbolize dope, like sirens do terror [terra]

First, “Bomb a/bomber” is Signified upon, as it is made to mean both to overpower someone and a style of heavy leather coat. Next, Common refers to the highly controversial record label Death Row, which is a subsidiary of Interscope records. On a semantic level, this line is obviously absurd, but on a referential one, it rewards the listener who is privy to hip-hop culture. “Sparkle” is then made to mean both Common’s shining talent and the 1976 film of the same name. (The film starred Irene Cara, and dealt with an aspiring soul group based loosely on the story of The Supremes.) The quatrain is rounded off by a more traditional, yet creative, metaphor. In terms of rhyme, the first couplet contains both the internal rhyme of “armor” and “bomb a,” as well as the feminine rhyme “winter coat” and “Interscope.” The second couplet also contains a rough double rhyme: “Irene Cara” and “sirens do terror [sirens do terra].”

Common continues in this vein throughout the song. The listener needs only to decode Common's lyrics in order to fully appreciate them. He raps,

"I drop a gem on them" who's style is jaded
My juice is grated
Shit is so bangin' niggaz say it's gang related
On philosophers' rink of thought, I've skated with precision
Crews is gettin' split like decisions
Com will let it ride in collision
Vision like Coleco or tele, I battle stars in stellar...
Regions, my thought scheme was my like my offspring
Now, it's teethin'

The first line Signifies on a Mobb Deep song released a year earlier, "Drop a Gem on 'em." In Gates' terms, this citation seems neither respectful nor competitive. However, the fact that Common uses "gem" to play on the word "jaded" suggests that the reference attests to his own skillfulness more than anything else. After a mediocre and confusing "My juice is grated," Common redeems himself by cleverly Signifyin(g) on "bangin'," making it mean both the colloquial "awesome" (as in, that's a bangin' outfit), as well as "gang banging," a term that describes violent gang behavior. The term "split decision" is played on next, followed by a play on "vision." Here, vision means both foresight and part of the signifiers "Colecovision" and "television." (Colecovision is a particularly obscure reference; it was a video game console that was released in 1982 and has hence become a fossil in the world of electronic gaming.) "Stars" is played with next; Common uses "stellar" to make the word mean a celestial body, and "battle" to make it denote a famous person/competitor. Amidst this wordplay comes another, more conventional, simile, where Common compares his "thought scheme" to his growing child. The most impressive rhyme comes in this same couplet, as the off-rhyme "thought scheme" and "offspring" is couched within the off-rhyme "Regions" and "teethin'."

It should be apparent that “Hungry” is crammed full of the tropes investigated above. Rather than scouring the rest of the lyrics as I have the first half of the song, I will decode select excerpts. After the cited passage, Common rhymes, “My reason of rhyme applies to season and time / Season of mind, body and regions divine / In mom’s cookouts, I’m leavin’ the swine / Verbal vegetarian, squashed beef with Ice Cube.” I include the first two lines for their extended double-rhyme, which carries itself out four times. On the third bar, Common refers to the Islamic custom of abstaining from pork, but this also figures into his next statement. He ties the reference to pork to the word “beef,” which is construed as food as well as the slang term for feelings of hostility between two or more people (to squash beef is to resolve the conflict). So, Common is a “verbal vegetarian” because he squashed his beef with fellow emcee Ice Cube (the two had recorded songs berating each other). Again, if one is not cognizant of the idioms Common is using or what he is referring to, these lines will remain opaque.

Perhaps the most difficult references to decipher appear at the end of the song:

At real nigga angles I've stood with ways that's geometric
Don't need to rob banks with dike broads to Set it
I levitate to the occasion, lounge like a lyricist
Rhyme wise, you a rest haven
You sat by the door spooked like I was Wes Craven
You need to do more deletin' and less savin'

The first line fails to make sense; “angles” connects with “geometric” but no overall meaning can be garnered from the statement. However, the second line is particularly impressive because it plays on a title that is not even fully spoken. “Set it Off” is a 1996 film about four women who decide to rob a bank after one is unfairly fired; two of the women have a lesbian relationship. Generally, the phrase “set it off” connotes making big things happen. Common’s politically incorrect, arguably misogynistic statement is

still interesting because of the fact that he alludes to yet another item from popular culture, this time giving his listeners an even smaller clue about what he is invoking, using only the words “Set it.” It is hard to imagine even the most learned popular culture pundit making sense of this line during his/her first listen; this fact makes it all the more rewarding when one does. The next simile alludes to the “Lyricist Lounge,” a live show in New York City that showcases new talent and is known for staying true to the underground. The following simile concerns Wes Craven, a well-known horror film director who brought to life the “Nightmare on Elm Street” and “Scream” movies. Thus, Common’s competitors assume a classic horror film pose of being “spooked” by the doorway as if Common was the predatory monster figure. The last line, which is probably more accessible than the others, uses computer jargon to advise emcees to dispose of their worthless rhymes. Also, these last three lines share the same feminine rhyme: “rest haven,” “Wes Craven” and “less savin’.”

In “Hungry,” Common aggressively displays his skills, tightly packing his verse with similes, tropes, and various references to hip-hop and popular culture. These methods compromise the grammatical sense of his rhymes, causing an outsider to hear nonsense when listening. Conversely, an audience member who is aware of Common’s allusiveness and Signifyin(g) will fully appreciate his wittiness and brashness.

I have shown that the song’s lyrics do not need to be interpreted, but instead decoded. The listener must be aware of the meaning of the references made and conscious of the wordplay being employed; beyond that, the subject matter of “Hungry” is fairly straightforward. In general, a listener should approach a hip-hop song as a decoder rather than an interpreter. However, decoding is not as simple a task as it may

seem; examples like “Colecovision” and “Irene Cara,” especially because they are Signified upon, demand an extremely broad base of knowledge from their listeners.

While many of Common’s songs concern themselves with the kind of stream of consciousness rhyming and referencing described above, some of them are much more serious and topic-oriented. Among these, “Retrospect for Life,” is arguably his most sober and profound meditation. In it, he reflects upon the abortion that his partner had, addressing the unborn baby in the first verse, and his partner in the second.

While other critics might treat “Retrospect for Life” as a socially didactic song that encourages its listeners to be sexually responsible, what is most important is that its content and style cause it to be Common’s most self-revelatory and confessional piece of work. The polar opposite of “Hungry,” “Retrospect for Life” finds Common criticizing his own actions and hypocrisy, rationalizing what he has done, praising his partner, questioning the substantiality of their relationship, apologizing to his unborn child, and, finally, dreaming about being a father. To only read the song as a set of instructions for Common’s audience is to neglect its cathartic purpose; Common discloses his feelings with painful honesty, using the medium of hip-hop to reconcile his turmoil by confessing it to his audience. “Retrospect for Life” betrays the way that hip-hop music cannot be confined to stringent categories; it is not a display of skill, nor a sociopolitical diatribe, nor a celebration of hedonism or violence. It defies easy classification, boldly redefining the parameters of the music. Still, it conforms to hip-hop’s poetics through its innovative nature; by expanding musical boundaries, Common exhibits his skill.²

“Retrospect for Life” has a very soulful feel, with a piano riff complementing the song’s bass line. The most spiritual element of the song is Lauryn Hill’s vocals during

² The reader is advised to consult the transcript of “Retrospect for Life” at this point.

the chorus and her crooning in the background of Common's verses. Common raps more slowly and less forcefully during the song, addressing his unborn child and girlfriend instead of an anonymous listening audience.

The element of "Retrospect for Life" that causes it to take on a confessional, rather than moralistic, tone, is Common's shifting narrative, which keeps revealing new facets of his psyche. The outset of the song finds Common questioning his authority in terms of taking another's life:

Knowin' you the best part of life, do I have the right to take yours
Cause I created you, irresponsibly
Subconsciously knowin' the act I was a part of
The start of somethin' I'm not ready to bring into the world
Had myself believin' I was sterile
I look into mother's stomach, wonder if you are a boy or a girl
Turnin' this woman's womb into a tomb

The unadorned tone here contrasts sharply with "Hungry" and most hip-hop music.

There are no tricks or elaborate rhyme schemes; the lyrics are unconventionally understated. Common first blames himself for what happened, citing his irresponsibility as the cause of the problem. Soon, this changes into a justification for the choice he and his partner made:

But she and I agreed, a seed we don't need
You would've been much more than a mouth to feed
But someone, I woulda fed this information I read
To someone, my life for you I woulda had to lead
Instead I lead you to death
I'm sorry for takin' your first breath, first step, and first cry
But I wasn't prepared mentally nor financially
Havin' a child shouldn't have to bring out the man in me
Plus I wanted you to be raised within a family

Common accounts for his decision by saying that he isn't developed enough as a person to raise another, as well as not being financially stable enough for the endeavor.

Interspersed with this explanation is an apology for what he did, "I'm sorry for takin'

your first breath, first step, and first cry.” Rhetorically, Common is not trying to persuade the listener of anything, only to convey his situation in an emotionally moving way.

Perhaps the height of this poignancy comes towards the end of the first verse: “Nerve I got to talk about them niggaz with a gun / Must have really thought I was God to take the life of my son.” Deliberately revealing his own hypocrisy, Common points out that he (in his songs) denounces the violent nature of hip-hop while simultaneously making a decision that he considers totally inexcusable. He concludes the verse with, “From now on I’ma use self control instead of birth control / Cause \$315 ain’t worth your soul.” Lines like these are striking in the way they reveal Common’s vulnerability. In a musical form where machismo and verbal armoring is prized, Common blames himself for his mistakes in life.

The second verse begins with a tribute to his partner:

Seeing you as a present and a gift in itself
You had our child in you, I probably never feel what you felt
But you dealt with it like the strong black woman you are
Through our trials and tribulations, child's elimination

These rhymes can be seized upon in order to prove that hip-hop is not wholly dominated by misogyny, but also contains portrayals of strong women. Yet, it is also significant that Common is using this song to address and deal with things in his life. This is most apparent when he questions his relationship with his significant other a few lines later:

Happy deep down but not joyous enough to have it
But even that's a lie: in less than two weeks, we was back at it
Is this unprotected love or safe to say it's lust
Bustin', more than the sweat in somebody you trust
Or is it that we don't trust each other enough
And believe, havin' this child'll make us have to stay together

Common explores the psychology behind both the decision to abort the child and the desire to have one. In doing so, the song turns from being about the ways in which abortion is painful, and begins to be an exploration of what it means to have a child and family.

Toward the end of the song, Common begins to meditate upon the ideal situation to have a child. He discusses agreement about how family should function, the necessity of spiritual understanding to pass on to a child, and the importance of staying together as parents. He raps,

I wouldn't chose any other to mother my understanding
But I want our Parenthood to come from Planning
It's so much in my life that's undone
We gotta see eye to eye, about family, before we can become one

Interestingly, his reference to Planned Parenthood, the organization that specializes in reproductive healthcare, reminds us of “Hungry.” “Retrospect for Life” is so different formally and tonally from “Hungry” that such a referential moment is startling. There is little to decode here, as Common’s lyrical style matches his sober content.

One could argue that the message of the song is that one must be responsible about sexual activity and be mentally, spiritually and financially prepared when having a child. Many hip-hop critics would use “Retrospect for Life” as an example of the “good” hip-hop that exists and counterbalances the “bad” hip-hop. I have chosen to use “Retrospect for Life” because of the contrast it provides to “Hungry,” and the poetics of the genre that “Hungry” represents. Here, Common uses the musical and lyrical form of hip-hop to express very personal content in a stark, realistic manner. This song is anomalous in terms of hip-hop’s poetics, yet has been hailed by many as a classic. This paradox can be explained by the fact that “Retrospect for Life” is a very innovative song.

Common, in choosing to forgo Signifyin(g) and braggadocio for a simple yet powerful tale, conforms to hip-hop's poetics by doing something with the form that hasn't been done before.

B. Mos Def

When one listens to Mos Def s/he will be struck by the progressive nature of his music, as Mos addresses hip-hop's current materialism and violence, racism in America, and even environmental problems. Since this analysis is avoiding the overtly political hip-hop that has received sufficient attention in the past, I would like to focus on a song that is not politically explicit, but nonetheless represents the progressive qualities of this emcee.

On his song "Hip Hop" from his album *Black on Both Sides*, Mos tries to capture hip-hop culture's highly conflicted and contradictory nature. "Hip Hop" is sonically upbeat, filled with horns and what sounds like an electric piano. The energy of the song feeds into Mos' authoritative account of hip-hop culture. He raps:

There's the hum, young man where you from?
Brooklyn number one
Native Son, speaking in the native tongue
I got my eyes on tomorrow (there it is)
While you still try to follow where it is
I'm on the Ave. where it lives and dies
Violently, silently
Shine so vibrantly, my eyes squint to catch a glimpse
Embrace the bass with my dark ink fingertips
Used to speak the King's English
But caught a rash on my lips
So now my chat jus' like dis

Here, Mos Def portrays hip-hop's closeness to the heartbeat of urban African-America. Throughout the song, Mos refers to canonical African-American texts, such as *Native Son* by Richard Wright. By doing this, he intimates that hip-hop is a continuation of the African-American literary tradition. He follows this with a reference to the "Native

Tongue” movement in hip-hop, where emcees exchanged a hard-core, rugged image for a more soulful, jazzy and lyrical persona. While some are looking for “where it is,” the place where hip-hop resides and flourishes, Mos is on the avenue “where it lives.” This place is silent, escaping the media, which emcees accuse of ignoring the plight of Black America. Mos’ most incisive commentary comes towards the end of this excerpt, in which he rejects the formal English he was taught for the vernacular he was brought up with. His sentiments echo Potter’s description of the vernacular as a site of resistance. By speaking formal English (what certain critics call “Received Standard English”) Mos is stripped of his culture, which he communicates through the figurative “caught a rash on my lips.” He returns to his ‘native tongue’ when stating “so now my chat jus’ like dis.”

Mos Def’s social commentary isn’t didactic; he subtly slips his thoughts in through a polished rhyme flow. He completes a triple rhyme with “there it is,” “where it is,” and “where it lives,” while also packing together the off-rhyme “Violently,” “silently,” and “vibrantly.” His casual, graceful delivery makes the form of the song just as significant as the social issues it tackles. To me, “Hip Hop” is captivating because of how polished and lucid it is. Mos doesn’t deal with punch-lines, but displays his skills in seemingly effortless, yet impeccably constructed lyrics.

Towards the end of the first verse Mos again combines his lucid rhymes with an apt description of the tumultuous business of hip-hop music.

Invisible Man, got the whole world watching
(where ya at) I’m high, low, east, west,
All over your map
I’m getting big props, with this thing called hip-hop
Where you can either get paid or get shot
When your product in stock
The fair-weather friends flock

When your chart position drop
Then the phone calls...
Chill for a minute
Let's see who else tops,
Snatch your shelf spot
Don't gas yourself ock
The industry just a better built cell block
A long way from the shell tops
And the bells that L rocked (rock, rock, rock, rock...)

Mos first sketches out hip-hop's cultural ubiquity. Alluding to Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, Mos reflects on how hip-hop has been a vehicle for the invisible man of color to capture the world's attention. This vision of hip-hop is far from utopian, though; the business is mercurial and the culture violent. Anticipating the second half of the song, Mos begins to outline the contradictions that hip-hop encompasses. It is both a means to gain fame and fortune and a potential threat to one's life. When an emcee drops an album, he seems on top of the world; when his album drops down in the charts, things seem hopeless. Due to these facts, Mos concludes that ultimately the industry itself is just as imprisoning as the jails that house a disproportionate amount of African-Americans. While this may be a hyperbolic statement, Mos is right in saying that today's corporate hip-hop industry is a far cry from its roots. The last two lines need to be decoded in order to be understood. The "shell tops" are Adidas shell-toed sneakers, which were a major component of hip-hop's early fashion, immortalized by hip-hop group Run D.M.C. in their song "My Adidas." Similarly, "the bells that L rocked," refers to emcee L.L. Cool J's 1985 song "Rock the Bells," a raw celebration of L's machismo. Mos contrasts hip-hop's more humble beginnings with its current excessive violence and high financial stakes.

Mos Def also finishes this verse with a flourish of double-rhyme, a trait that has become prominent in the underground. He rhymes the last six bars: "else tops," "shelf

spot,” “self ock,” “cell block,” “shell tops,” and “L rocked.” Also, Mos manages to practically rhyme two whole lines together, with “Snatch your shelf spot” and “gas yourself ock,” rhyming four syllables in each line. He also executes what I would like to call an “implied rhyme,” which is not said aloud but implied by the lyrics and rhymes that precede it. He raps, “When your chart position drop / Then the phone calls...”—the listener expects him to say “stop,” but he doesn’t, allowing the listener to piece the rhyme together on his/her own. This implied rhyme also augments the touchy and awkward business of realizing that your fifteen minutes of fame is beginning to wind down. These qualities make Mos’ lyrics aurally and aesthetically pleasing. The lyrics are not a means of conveying information, but the ingredient that makes the song delicious.

In the second verse of “Hip Hop,” Mos continues to explore the contradictory nature of the music and culture itself. What is unique about this verse is that he neither sides with the defenders or denounces of the music, capturing instead its highly conflicted nature.

Stimulant and sedative, original repetitive
Violently competitive, a school unaccredited
The break beats you get broken with
On time and inappropriate
Hip-Hop went from selling crack to smoking it
Medicine for loneliness
Remind me of Thelonus and Dizzy
Profers to B-Boys getting busy
The war-time snap shot
The working man's jack-pot
A two dollar snack box
Sold beneath the crack spot
Olympic sponsor of the black glock
Gold medalist in the back shot
From the sovereign state of the have-nots
Where farmers have trouble with cash crops (woooo)
It's all city like Phase Two
Hip-Hop will simply amaze you
Praise you, pay you
Do whatever you say do

But black, it can't save you

In the first part of the excerpt, Mos pairs together hip-hop's contentious characteristics. For Mos, it can both stimulate with its raw energy and sedate with its jazzy smoothness. It is both highly inventive in its use of sampling, breakdancing and rapping, and repetitive in the way it recycles the same themes. Harsh competition defines its parameters, yet it also functions as an institutionally unrecognized school for many urban youths in America. Its break beats (old school hip-hop beats that people breakdance to) are a fundamental aspect of the culture, but are also portrayed as vehicles of destruction. Hip-hop is appropriate to the postmodern moment but has not yet found a stable niche in contemporary culture. It grew out of the crack-infested streets of New York and the hustlers who looked for a positive alternative to those streets, only to eventually fall prey to the drugs it originally ran from. It encompasses both "Probers," or distinguished cultural figures, and breakdancers who get "busy" in the streets. In these ways, Mos, instead of arguing one way or another, presents hip-hop in its complexity.

The end of the song finds Mos listing things that sum up one of hip-hop's many facets. Some of them highlight the working-class origins of a now highly glamorous business. Others foreground hip-hop's close ties with crime and homicide, calling it a "war-time snap shot," and the "Olympic sponsor of the black glock." It is construed both as "The working man's jack-pot," a vehicle for achieving fame, as well as "the sovereign state of the have-nots," the site of continuing poverty. Each image is somehow contained by hip-hop culture, a fact that prompts Mos to make his final summaries. Hip-hop is universal, like legendary New York City graffiti artist Phase Two, who tagged his name on subway cars throughout the five boroughs. Mos lists all of the ways that hip-hop can serve those who participate in it, but warns at the end, "but black, it can't save you."

In this verse we see even more double rhyme. The first eight lines all end with two words that rhyme with the two ending words on the last line: “snap shot,” “jack-pot,” “snack box,” “crack spot,” “black glock,” “back shot,” “have-nots,” and “cash crops.” The next five do the same thing with new rhyming words: “phase two,” “amaze you,” “pay you,” “say do,” and “save you.”

“Hip Hop” is representative of Mos’ work: he explores serious issues while paying attention to the formal elements of his lyrics. His rhymes and delivery are lucid and graceful, impressing the listener not with bursts of fireworks, but a steady flow of light. Mos’ skill comes across in the way he constructs his songs as a whole as opposed to instances of cleverness within them.

C. Aesop Rock

Aesop Rock, a white emcee from New York City, has a far different semantic strategy than the emcees studied so far. His race may help to explain this difference. Since he did not directly inherit the vernacular traditions that inform hip-hop, it makes sense that his style does not reflect them. Both Common and Mos Def have produced songs that display some kind of coherence; whether drawing on conventional narrative structures, traditions of Signifyin(g), or organizing rhymes around a topic, each song has found a way to marry its form to its content. Conversely, Aesop’s lyrics are totally cryptic in their abstraction, yet also evocative in their imagistic density. He often stacks words on top of one another, highlighting the sounds of the words themselves rather than the sense that they produce (or fail to produce). The images he creates are poetic in the traditional sense, resembling Beat poetry more than hip-hop rhymes. Still, Aesop

represents the department of hip-hop that is most complex; the sense and meanings in his lines can only be understood after repeatedly listening to his songs.

In terms of interpretation, Aesop also differs from a large sector of lyricists. Whereas most emcees' lyrics need to be decoded, Aesop is among a unique subset of emcees whose work lends itself to an interpretive plurality. In my analysis, though, I will spend less time pondering over what certain lyrics "mean" (partially because I have picked a song that is less ambiguous than some of his other work), and more time exploring the effect they have on the listener and the ways they operate.

"Battery" has an utterly haunting sound, blending together a violin and a conga drum. Periodically, a woman's voice and a flute hover in the background, eerily augmenting Aesop's lyrics. The sound envelops the listener, transporting him/her to Aesop's surreal rendition of New York's cityscape.

The song reveals Aesop's verbose, obscure lyricism while being more thematically focused than his earlier work. While the lyrics from his first two albums are cryptic to the point of being nonsensical, "Battery" contains specific themes, principally, the relationship between the artist figure and the nine-to-five worker. At the same time, its lyrics are representative of his work in general, functioning in two ways. They contain frequently hard to grasp stark images that make incisive statements, and piles of words that fail to make sense, either syntactically or conceptually. In my discussion of "Battery," I will focus on the two ways that it operates, looking at the way it works both on a visual or imagistic level and on a semantic level.³

The majority of the images in "Battery" do not explicitly depict the horrors of life in New York City, but, more accurately, point to them. Aesop's opening lines

³ The reader is advised to consult the transcript of "Battery" in the Appendix at this point.

demonstrate the way these images are not straightforward or didactic, but suggestive, causing the listener to determine the sense of the statement. He raps, “I burn a Coma candle / When the flame fades, consider my flatline a soldier’s sample.” The identity between the candle and being in a coma connects with the fact that when the flame is extinguished, the patient flat-lines, or loses his heartbeat. The most interesting segment of the couplet is its conclusion. The listener must determine whether “a soldier’s sample” means a kind of martyr, or a sample of something as of yet undisclosed, or nothing at all. The conundrum of such lines often becomes more important than the content of “Battery.”

Subsequent images betray Aesop’s perspective on the “Iron Galaxy” (a term coined by Aesop’s label mate, hip-hop group Cannibal Ox) that is New York City. He portrays himself and his fellow emcees as “those cats talkin’ noise behind that New York trash heap / Where the stench of commuter briefcase replaces a bad sleep,” going on to say “There’s smoke in my iris / But I painted a sunny day on the insides of my eyelids.” The city is conjured as a place of no escape; the only alternative to the stink of the subway is a restless sleep. Sarcastically, Aesop explains that he found a way to avoid the bleakness of his life by painting pictures of sunny days on his eyelids. These depictions do not explicitly preach about the city, but find ways of *showing* its ugliness.

Images such as this, both funny and horrific, abound throughout the song. Both “I’m not trying to graduate to a life with a curse on the lounge barstool / Head in a jar on the desk, feet dangling in a shark pool,” and “Yeah, middle sibling suitable but far from son of excellence / Back a long time ago, I was the way the wishers wish / But Mister Smits, I slept through my appointment” protest the subjugation of the working class.

Again, what is striking about these images is the idiosyncratic way Aesop finds of expressing something that has been said before. The force of his rhetoric comes not through its content, but the way it is conveyed. Using the word “graduate” implies that this pathetic and dangerous lifestyle is somehow systemic; it is something you graduate into if you subscribe to the pedagogy of capitalism. The second excerpt also seems to deal with this kind of essentialism, but is much more vague and slippery. Aesop was a “suitable” child, but failed to accomplish and achieve enough to be a “son of excellence.” He subscribed to the doctrines of his society up to the certain point, behaving in a way that “the wishers wish.” This is immediately qualified with a “but,” as he tells some authority figure, comically called Mister Smits, that he failed to show up to an appointment. Aesop could have failed to show up to a job interview, or maybe to a visit to the dentist, suggesting indifference or an incapability to meet worldly standards. This image is followed by “Saw the liquid dreams of a thousand babies solidify,” another perplexing picture. By solidifying, these dreams were either realized or frozen by the system described above. The appeal of these images is that, despite Aesop’s declamatory voice, they leave the listener wanting a feeling of closure. Aesop raps so fast that the reader barely catches statements that are themselves suggestive of things that they do not confirm. This makes the lines themselves linger in the listener’s mind more than the sentiments that they point to.

During the second verse, Aesop’s images assume a more incisive and sardonic tone. Near its outset, he raps, “Prodigal Son with a prodigal wish to sew that prodigal stitch / And crucify bigot voodoo doll on two Popsicle sticks.” The crucifixion of the “bigot voodoo doll” (supposedly a corporate CEO) is both defiant and pathetic. Aesop

Rock, the errant son of Capitalism, can only execute his maker by using the very capitalist minutiae that clutter up his life. The “Popsicle sticks” represent the profuse, yet totally disposable, products that make our lives messy and meaningless. The crucifixion is not violent, but ironic, as Aesop can only destroy what he hates with their own weapons.

The end of the song contains a proliferation of such images. The most cutting of these are “But starving artists die; I set my alarm for five o’clock,” “I am webbed foot mammal / channel surfing my way to the top,” and “I wanna be something spectacular / On the day the sun runs outta batteries.” Underneath the sarcastic tone of these lines lies a lamentation of the state of the world. The first image provides a contrast that summarizes the song: the artist versus the worker bee. It encapsulates the song’s sense of mourning for the artist, who is forced to forsake his passion in order to subsist. This sacrifice may be the reason for the current destitution suggested in “channel surfing my way to the top.” This tongue-in-cheek juxtaposition of ambition and lethargy captures both the ruthless drive and listless indifference that characterizes the stereotypical American worker. Like many of the rhymes in the verse, it is bitingly sarcastic, reminiscent of Allen Ginsberg’s poem, “America.” Last, Aesop’s mechanization of the sun transforms the apex of the natural world into yet another battery, or energy source to be harnessed and exploited. There is no instance in “Battery” where Aesop concretely denounces the working world he is a part of; instead, it is filled with figurative images that evoke stronger reactions than literal statements.

Juxtaposed against this vision of desolation are poignant, beautiful images. Aesop says, “(Man please) Man please / My name stands for my being / And my being

stands for the woman who stood / And braved the storm could raise this evening / Brother sun, sister moon, mother beautiful / Yeah middle sibling suitable but far from son of excellence.” Oddly, amidst his tirade Aesop gives a tribute to his family. Spiritual imagery abounds here; Aesop’s name represents his spirit, which in turn reflects the struggle his mother went through to raise the “evening” sky of his family. Illustrations like this counterbalance the misery depicted in the song.

Perhaps the most affecting portrayal of the redemptive in “Battery” comes at the end of each verse: “Now where I live there’s a homeless man / He sits upon a crate / He makes a rusty trumpet sound like the music angels make / Now if you ever come and visit me, I suggest you watch the show / Tell him Aesop Rock sent ya just to hear his horn blow,” “Save my nickels up to buy that homeless man a brand new horn / Then sit up on his crate as I witness the beauty born.” The homeless man is portrayed as a romantic figure, paying the price of the starving artist by being ostracized from society. His ability to create something heavenly is directly tied to his rejection of the conventional lifestyles criticized by Aesop. At the end of the first verse, Aesop actually invites the listener to hear the old man’s music, reaching out to his audience for the first time. Aesop ties this man to the financial world he is estranged from at the end of the song, as Aesop meagerly saves his nickels in order to buy the old man a new horn.

Many of Aesop’s lyrics are less connected to the theme outlined above; some are totally resistant to interpretive attempts. In terms of these lyrics, it seems more productive to appreciate the mental images that they provoke instead of looking for subtextual or symbolic meanings. The triplet “Don’t tell me you ain’t the droid that held the match to the charcoals / Don’t tell me Lucifer and God don’t carpool / (This is our

school)” does not require hermeneutical investigation. Inevitably, though, the listener will try to piece together the images, wondering how the image of the droid connects to the image of God and Satan driving together, and how both of these relate to the proclamation “this is our school.” At a certain point, the listener must make a decision between finding meaning in Aesop’s images and just letting them seep into his/her imagination.

At the far end of Aesop’s lyrical spectrum are lines that privilege sound over sense, overloading the listener’s ears. There are two possible ways of receiving rhymes such as “Training generation fallout / Waterfall bricklayer pincushion crawl out.” On the one hand, the sound of the signifiers takes precedence over their signifieds. The words become nothing more than sounds that weave into the mesh of the song, acting as musical notes rather than conveyers of meaning. On the other hand, each word still elicits a corresponding concept, but these concepts remain disconnected from one another. The second line of this excerpt contains three nouns in a row; when I hear the words, “Waterfall bricklayer pincushion,” each conjures an image, but the images have no way of forming an axis of sense.

Often, these two alternative effects combine, so that the listener is caught between only hearing a sound and trying to piece together words to create meaning. For example, the second line of the couplet “My name is something hands can’t hold / But hearts part oceanscapes just to watch the starlet unfold,” is bound to evoke images, but it is fruitless to associate them with one another. As opposed to some of Aesop’s other rhymes, this line makes syntactic sense. Still, conceptually, it is impossible to think of a human heart splitting an ocean to watch a starlet (not stars) unfold. Even so, something idiosyncratic

will be evoked in each listener's imagination. Personally, I see a sea being parted under a night sky. At other times, I just appreciate the sentence as it unfolds, not trying to penetrate into it. With much of these rhymes, letting Aesop's declamatory lyrical flow wash over you is the best way to appreciate it.

Aesop must be situated on an extreme end of hip-hop's lyrical spectrum. His rhymes have little to do with braggadocio or Signifyin(g), being more involved in creating a lyrically dense tapestry of words and images. He fits into the poetics of the underground by forcing the listener to make a cognitive leap in order to understand what he is saying. His meaningful rhymes are never didactic; they hint at something that the listener must piece together on his/her own. This fact, combined with his usually rapid delivery, lends his lyrics an obscurity that is marked by vibrant images, made all the more clear by their nebulous surroundings. Though some accuse Aesop Rock of creating deliberately confusing nerd-hop, he is on the forefront of the innovators in the underground. He weds the rhyme schemes and percussive flow of emcees before him with content and lyrics that are more cryptic, eerie and poignant than the hip-hop of the past.

V. CONCLUSION: REISSUING THE PROVOCATION

As we have seen, hip-hop music is not an undifferentiated mass; its formal elements and content differs from emcee to emcee. Also, the relationship between these two elements changes from song to song. In "Hungry," the devices used eliminate the possibility of a specific topic of focus, while "Retrospect for Life," contains unembellished language that fits its weighty subject matter. "Hip Hop" is able to marry its form and content gracefully, while "Battery" is a linguistic tour de force.

Therefore, it is clear that the artists studied here have used this medium in sometimes radically divergent ways. They have shown that the poetics of hip-hop is a spectrum rather than a single position; these emcees have located themselves on different points on this spectrum (and, in the case of Common, multiple points), revealing its complexity through their diverse approaches to the form. The seriousness with which they take themselves and their work, though, is universal. As hip-hop artists, these emcees, and countless others that have yet to be studied, possess integrity.

Sexton writes, “[Rap] deserves better than the half-assed writing so often perpetrated in its name—deserves, in fact, a criticism as innovative, and yet as rigorous, as the best rap music itself” (“Don’t Believe the Hype,” 13). While the innovative nature of the music is apparent to the reader by now, a matching criticism remains elusive. I have tried to find a new way to address hip-hop texts based on the poetics outlined earlier. Nevertheless, the tendency to view a hip-hop text as one would a poem seems inescapable, and many of my analyses deal with the transcripts as poems more than hip-hop songs. This is because no precedent has been set for this sort of critical task, and when embarking on this new territory it has been a constant challenge not to *think* of these texts as poems. This is all the more reason for other writers to start looking at hip-hop’s uses of language and beginning to build a form of criticism that fits the music more organically.

It has been argued that the formation of the English canon has had more to do with hegemonies and those enabled by them than aesthetic supremacy. Regardless of the arguments surrounding this statement, it is safe to say that many have been excluded from the canon due to racial, economic, gender-based, and social determinants. Hip-hop

lyrics are a direct outgrowth of African-American vernaculars, forms that developed separately from literary forms because they were canonically excluded. To compare them to English poetry is, to use a colloquial expression, like comparing apples and oranges. I have attempted to show the features of the apples instead of looking at them the way one would view an orange. Hopefully, this has shown that within the hip-hop community, emcees find many different ways to operate within, play upon, and expand the poetics specific to their medium. Their work has both more complexity and more integrity than writers have been willing to give them credit for. As the English canon revises itself and embraces new authors and linguistic forms, academics should begin to address hip-hop lyrics. If this happens, maybe generations from now my own children will not only grow up with hip-hop's sounds, but its texts as well.

APPENDIX

Transcripts of Songs Courtesy of <http://www.ohhla.com>

Artist: Common

Album: One Day It'll All Make Sense

Song: Hungry

I walk the night in rhymin' armor, bomb a nigga like a winter coat
Have him on Death Row searchin' for an Interscope
Yet I "Sparkle" like Irene Cara
Symbolize dope, like sirens do terror
Maryloo just had a baby someone else decapitated
Flashbacks of past raps make me so glad I made it
Players is gettin' traded
"I drop a gem on them" whose style is jaded
My juice is grated
Shit is so bangin' niggaz say it's gang related
On philosopher's rink of thought, I've skated with precision
Crews is gettin' split like decisions
Com will let it ride in collision
Vision like Coleco or tele', I battle stars in stellar...
Regions, my thought scheme was my like my offspring
Now it's teethin'
My reason of rhyme applies to season and time
Season of mind, body and regions divine
In mom's cookouts, I'm leavin' the swine
Verbal vegetarian, squashed beef with Ice Cube
Came in this rap life nude
Now I'm fully clothed with flows
You tricks can't hide behind expensive cars and clothes
Old niggaz I expose like Luke does hoes in videos
With classic material, imperial and rugged like
Got mag, but my slugs a mic
You fake like a smile, like a hug I'm tight
Skip ladies, this is rip a muthafucka night
Oracle arouse, niggaz don't even run for cover right
Downtown interracial lovers hold hands
I breathe heavy like an old man, with a cold can of Old Style
Hold a Stone Isle profile
Mix between Malcolm X and Sef when I go wild
Hold mics like a second nut until the second comin'
Hummin' comin' towards you with power like forwards do
Hip hop, you my bitch and like a Ford, I'm Explorin' you
Some wack niggaz be cool, with them, I stay cordial
Flowin' room temperature, cats is presumed miniature
Like golf. Soft like Tiger Woods
And real nigga angles I've stood with ways that's geometric
Don't need to rob banks with dike broads to Set it
I levitate to the occasion, lounge like a lyricist
Rhyme wise, you a rest haven
You sat by the door spooked like I was Wes Craven

You need to do more deletin' and less savin'
A praise in hell, raisin' heaven
As the bill on my pager leavens
What you should have known from day one
You will on day seven

"Hungry hip hop junkie in the city" (*scratched 3X*)

Artist: Common f/ Lauryn Hill

Album: One Day It'll All Make Sense

Song: Retrospect for Life

Knowin' you the best part of life, do I have the right to take yours
Cause I created you, irresponsibly
Subconsciously knowin' the act I was a part of
The start of somethin', I'm not ready to bring into the world
Had myself believin' I was sterile
I look into mother's stomach; wonder if you are a boy or a girl
Turnin' this woman's womb into a tomb
But she and I agree, a seed we don't need
You would've been much more than a mouth to feed
But someone, I woulda fed this information I read
To someone, my life for you I woulda had to lead
Instead I lead you to death
I'm sorry for takin' your first breath, first step, and first cry
But I wasn't prepared mentally nor financially
Havin' a child shouldn't have to bring out the man in me
Plus I wanted you to be raised within a family
I don't wanna, go through the drama of havin' a baby's momma
Weekend visits and buyin' J's ain't gon' make me a father
For a while bearing a child is somethin' I never wanted to do
For me to live forever I can only do that through you
Nerve I got to talk about them niggaz with a gun
Must have really thought I was God to take the life of my son
I could have sacrificed goin' out
To think my homies who did it I used to joke about, from now on
I'ma use self control instead of birth control
Cause \$315 ain't worth your soul
\$315 ain't worth your soul
\$315 ain't worth it

[Lauryn Hill (two layers of vocals, same words)]

I, never dreamed you'd leave, in summer
You said you would be here when it rained
[Common] Yo
Why didn't you stay?

Seeing you as a present and a gift in itself
You had our child in you; I probably never feel what you felt
But you dealt with it like the strong black woman you are
Through our trials and tribulations, child's elimination
An integration of thoughts I feel about the situation
Back and forth my feelings was pacin'
Happy deep down but not joyous enough to have it
But even that's a lie in less than two weeks, we was back at it
Is this unprotected love or safe to say it's lust
Bustin', more than the sweat in somebody you trust
Or is it that we don't trust each other enough
And believe, havin' this child'll make us have to stay together

Girl I want you in my life cause you have made it better
Thinkin' we all in love cause we can spend a day together
We talkin' spendin' the rest of our lives
It's too many black women that can say they mothers
But can't say that they wives
I wouldn't chose any other to mother my understanding
But I want our Parenthood to come from Planning
It's so much in my life that's undone
We gotta see eye to eye, about family, before we can become one
If you had decided to have it the situation I wouldn't run from
But I'm walkin', findin' myself in my God
So I can, discipline my son with my rod
Not have a judge tellin' me how and when to raise my seed
Though his death was at our greed, with no one else to blame
I had a book of African names, case our minds changed
You say your period hasn't came, and lately I've been sleepy
So quit smokin' the weed and the beadies and let's have this boy

[Lauryn Hill]

I, never dreamed you'd leave in summer
You said you would be here when it rained
 You said you would be here when it rained
Ohh I, never dreamed you'd leave in summer
Now the situation's made things change
 Things change
Why, didn't you stay
 Why didn't you stay...
I, never dreamed you'd leave, in summer
 In summer
You said you would be here when, it rained
 When it rained, it rained
Ohhhohh I, never dreamed, you'd leave in summer
 You said you wouldn't leave
Now the situation's made things change
 Things change, why didn't you stay?
Stay, stay stay stay stay stay stay
Mmmmm, stayyy
Uh-uh
Ohh why didn't you stay

Artist: Mos Def

Album: Black on Both Sides

Song: Hip Hop

You say one for the treble, two for the time
Come on y'all let's rock this!
You say one for the treble, two for the time
Come on!

Speech is my hammer, bang the world into shape
Now let it fall... (Hungh!!)
My restlessness is my nemesis
It's hard to really chill and sit still
Committed to page, I write a rhyme
Sometimes won't finish for days
Scrutinize my literature, from the large to the miniature
I mathematically add-minister
Subtract the wack
Selector, wheel it back, I'm feeling that
(Ha ha ha) From the core to the perimeter black,
You know the motto
Stay fluid even in staccato
(Mos Def) Full blooded, full throttle
Breathe deep inside the trunk hollow
There's the hum, young man where you from
Brooklyn number one
Native Son, speaking in the native tongue
I got my eyes on tomorrow (there it is)
While you still try to follow where it is
I'm on the Ave where it lives and dies
Violently, silently
Shine so vibrantly that eyes squint to catch a glimpse
Embrace the bass with my dark ink fingertips
Used to speak the King's English
But caught a rash on my lips
So now my chat just like dis
Long range from the bass-line (switch)
Move like an apparition
Float to the ground with ammunition (chi-chi-chi-POW)
Move from the gate, voice cued on your tape
Putting food on your plate
Many crews can relate
Who choosing your fate (yo)
We went from picking cotton
To chain gang line chopping
To Be-Bopping
To Hip-Hopping
Blues people got the blue chip stock option
Invisible Man, got the whole world watching
(where ya at) I'm high, low, east, west,
All over your map

I'm getting big props, with this thing called hip hop
Where you can either get paid or get shot
When your product in stock
The fair-weather friends flock
When your chart position drop
Then the phone calls....
Chill for a minute
Let's see who else tops
Snatch your shelf spot
Don't gas yourself ock
The industry just a better built cell block
A long way from the shell tops
And the bells that L rocked (rock, rock, rock, rock...)

scratching

Hip Hop is prosecution evidence
The out of court settlement
Ad space for liquor
Sick without benefits (hungh!)
Luxury tenements choking the skyline
It's low life getting tree-top high
Here there's a back water remedy
Bitter intent to memory
A class E felony
Facing the death penalty (hungh!)
Stimulant and sedative, original repetitive
Violently competitive, a school unaccredited
The break beats you get broken with
On time and inappropriate
Hip Hop went from selling crack to smoking it
Medicine for loneliness
Remind me of Thelonus and Dizzy
Propers to B-Boys getting busy
The war-time snap shot
The working man's jack-pot
A two dollar snack box
Sold beneath the crack spot
Olympic sponsor of the black glock
Gold medalist in the back shot
From the sovereign state of the have-nots
Where farmers have trouble with cash crops (woooo)
It's all city like Phase Two
Hip Hop will simply amaze you
Praise you, pay you
Do whatever you say do
But black, it can't save you

Artist: Aesop Rock
Album: Labor Days
Song: Battery

Yo change the fuckin' channel
I burn a Coma candle
When the flame fades, consider my flatline a soldier's sample
We them cats talkin' noise behind that New York trash heap
Where the stench of commuter briefcase replaces a bad sleep
And it's, worker zig-zaggers versus piggy batch flashers
Training Generation Fallout
Waterfall bricklayer pincushion crawl out
There's smoke in my iris
But I painted a sunny day on the insides of my eyelids
So I'm ready now (What you ready for?)
I'm ready for life in this city
And my wings have grown almost enough to lift me
I'm a dinosaur with Jones Beach in my hourglass
Passing the time with serial killer coloring books and bags of marbles
Don't tell me you ain't the droid that held the match to the charcoals
Don't tell me Lucifer and God don't carpool
(This is our school)
I'm not trying to graduate to life with a curse on the lounge barstool
Head in a jar on the desk, feet dangling in a shark pool
(Man please) Man please
My name stands for my being
And my being stands for the woman who stood
And braved the storm could raise this evening
Brother sun, sister moon, mother beautiful
Yeah middle sibling suitable but far from son of excellence
Back in a long time ago, I was to way the wishers wish
But Mister Smits, I slept through my appointment
Saw the liquid dreams of a thousand babies solidify
And picked the rose that wilted
The second I introduced myself as Nervous
Well it appears the scars of learning have spoken
Some are burning, some are frozen
Some deserve tall tales, wrote them
Some are just a brutal repercussion of devotion
Mine are all of the above 'cuz everything leads to erosion
Now where I live there's a homeless man
He sits upon a crate
He makes a rusty trumpet sound like the music that angels make
Now if you ever come and visit me, I suggest you watch the show
Tell him Aesop Rock sent ya just to hear his horn blow
like this

Horn samples

And I ain't getting any younger
My knuckles wear their bruises well

I've yet to lose that hunger
But only time can tell
Prodigal Son with a prodigal wish to sew that prodigal stitch
And crucify bigot voodoo doll on two popsicle sticks
See your name is Ambiguity
My name is something hands can't hold
But hearts part oceanscapes just to watch the starlet unfold
It's like sketching a circle in the dirt with a pointed stick
Knowing the wind'll kill it some day, still it calms my burning wits for now
And if I plow the fields that don't guarantee plentiful harvest
But starving artists die; I set my alarm for five o'clock
Idols block survival crops the cycle stops for nothing
The Bible's carp revivalist winos flock by the hundreds
To the opening, scarlet carpets greeting their duel
Leading the stubborn mule to cruel rug burn
But y'all numb from gut fuel
I administer eclipse, there ain't no motor like a martyr-made motor
Cuz a martyr-made motor don't quit
I am an epiphany, I am webbed foot mammal
Channel surfing my way to the top
Tugboat in a bottle
With no holes poked in the nozzle
I fed 'em bedlam diluted in limelight
Till that rookie boogie graduated hostile
And the vehicle is grandeur and it veered over the medium
The second my halo ran outta helium
Demoted to thorn crown, damn talk about numbskull
I was born bound to a stencil called symmetry
But my energy's a rental
So I take this now to save
My cute seniorita beholding a flame to a lost wick
Thank you James Anthony for the band-aids on my ego
Y'all are family for life
I'll take that bullet to preserve you
I wanna be something spectacular
On the day the sun runs outta batteries
Attach my fashion to the casualties of anarchy
Save my nickels up to buy that homeless man a brand new horn
Then sit up on his crate as I witness the beauty born
like this

(I ain't gettin any younger)

Horn samples to end

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