

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA – FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

Poetics of the East Coast Old School Rap and Hip-Hop Lyrics
Poetika Textů East Coast Old School Rapu a Hip-Hopu

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí bakalářské práce (supervisor):
Stephan Delbos, M.F.A., Ph.D.

květen 2021, Praha

Zpracoval (author):
Jakub Bolbol

Studijní obor (subject):
anglistika/amerikanistika

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V Praze dne 12.5. 2021

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I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express gratitude to my supervisor Stephan Delbos, M.F.A., Ph.D., for his patience, guidance and encouragement in writing this thesis. His endorsement of the project provided for much needed enthusiasm and determination to do my best in researching and compiling the thesis.

Abstract

The thesis explores and analyses the lyrics of the musical genre called rap and cultural movement called hip-hop; the lyrics are analysed and contrasted with the methods of literary analysis and theory. The goal of the thesis is to show that these lyrics, written by African American rappers, are literary texts, narratives and poems, that could be further considered as both American and African American literature in the academic discourse and potential further research. The term East Coast refers to the place of origin of the authors and their local focus in their subject matter: New York and New York's borough of the Bronx; the term Old School refers both to the form and to its placement in time, the 1980s. The thesis briefly introduces the history and origin of hip-hop culture, defines the rap genre and introduces rap terminology, which is used throughout. The thesis then introduces poet Gil Scott-Heron, and a group called The Last Poets, both considered to be the "grandfathers of rap". After establishing the origin and meaning of rap and hip-hop, the focus of the discussion turns to the question of whether hip-hop or rap could be considered as a literary genre. The thesis takes these questions and attempts to answer them in the subsequent chapters dedicated to literary analysis of the lyrics. The texts are divided into two groups, according to their form and subject matter. The first group focuses on the narratives, tropes and social commentaries of the lyricists of the so-called conscious and political hip-hop. These rappers use their texts to report on the social and political situation which damaged the Black community of the 1980s. The second group focuses on rap as poetic expression. This chapter analyses the very form and poetic language of the lyrics: the use of rhymes, figures of speech and figurative language. Moreover, the chapter attempts to establish rap as a form of poetry, both through the analysis of the lyrics and through the personalities of the authors.

Abstrakt

Bakalářská práce zkoumá a analyzuje texty hudebního žánru jménem rap, a kulturního hnutí jménem hip-hop. Texty podléhají analýze a srovnávání s metodami analýzy literárních textů a literární teorie. Cílem této práce je dokázat, že tyto texty, napsané Afroamerickými rappery, jsou texty literární: příběhy a básně, které by se v akademickém diskurzu a možném budoucím výzkum mohly zařadit do kánonu Afroamerické, potažmo Americké literatury. Termín East Coast (Východní pobřeží) odkazuje na místo původu autorů a jejich zaměření z hlediska místa v jejich tématech: americké město New York a jeho obvod zvaný Bronx. Termín Old School (Stará škola) odkazuje na formu textů a jejich zasazení v čase: v osmdesátých letech dvacátého století. Práce stručně představuje historii a vznik hip-hopové kultury, definuje hudební žánr rap a uvádí rapovou terminologii, která se prací prolíná. Práce následně představuje básníka Gil Scott-Herona a skupinu The Last Poets (Poslední básníci), kteří jsou považováni za „praotce rapu.“ Po představení a definici hip-hop a rapu se práce obrací k otázce, zdali by se hip-hop či rap mohli považovat za literární žánr. Práce se touto otázkou zabývá v následujících kapitolách, které jsou věnovány literární analýze vybraných textů. Texty jsou rozděleny na dvě skupiny podle jejich forem a témat. První skupina se zaměřuje na příběhy, užití literárních trop a figur, a společenské komentáře textařů takzvaného conscious (uvědomělého) a political (politického) rapu a hip-hopu. Rappeři tohoto žánru používali své texty jako reportáže společenské a politické situace, která poškozovala černošskou komunitu v osmdesátých letech minulého století. Druhá skupina textů se zaměřuje na rap jako způsob básnického vyjádření. Tato kapitola zkoumá formu a básnický jazyk textů: užití rýmů, rytmu, básnických obrátů a uměleckých jazykových prostředků. Kromě toho se tato kapitola pokouší prokázat, že rap je forma poezie, jak skrze literární analýzu, tak skrze osobnosti samotných autorů.

Table of Contents

Declaration	1
Permission	2
Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
Abstrakt	5
1. Introduction	8
2. A Short Introduction to Hip-Hop Culture	11
2.1. The Origins of Hip-Hop and Rap	12
2.2. The Bronx of the 1970s	17
2.3. Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets	21
2.4. Hip-Hop as a Literary Genre	25
3. Conscious and Political Hip-Hop	29
3.1. “How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise?” by Brother D with Collective Effort: Racial Struggle of the African American Population	32
3.2. “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five: Hip-Hop as a Social Narrative	34
3.3. “Wild Style Subway Rap” by Grandmaster Caz: The City as a Thematic Frame	37
3.4. “Children’s Story” by Slick Rick: Irony as a Means of Social Commentary	39
3.5. “9mm Goes Bang” by Boogie Down Productions: Crime as a Trope	42
3.6. “It’s Like That” by Run-DMC: Hip-Hop as Testimony	44
4. Rap as a Poetic Expression	47
4.1. “The New Rap Language” by the Treacherous Three: Rhyme and Wordplay as Key Methods	50
4.2. “Ain’t No Half Steppin’” by Big Daddy Kane: Rapper as a Poet	53

4.3. “I Ain’t No Joke” by Eric B. & Rakim: Rap as Lyrical Virtuosity	55
4.4. “The Godfather” by Spoonie Gee: Rap Lyrics as Expression of Social Status	58
4.5. “My Philosophy” by Boogie Down Productions: Rap as an Artistic Discipline	61
5. Conclusion	64
6. References	66
7. Appendices	69

1. Introduction

Hip-hop is a global phenomenon that permeates just about every aspect of American society, from sports to business, popular music and culture. Nowadays, hip-hop does not only influence the mainstream, it is the mainstream.¹ Hip-hop, the most prominent African American cultural movement of the 20th century, emerged from the New York borough of the Bronx in the 1970s. The movement gave the devastated Black population of the Bronx an opportunity to turn their lives around and to participate in forming their own unique cultural expression. Hip-hop is not only about music, dance, visual art, fashion and cinematography, it incorporates the whole dimension of African American expression. In other words, hip-hop presents how a significant portion of the Black population thinks, feels and talks. And hip-hop's most prominent genre, rap, is all about language.

Rap is the verbal expression of hip-hop music and its main focus, the rapper, is its voice. Rapping is not singing, yet it follows and complements the instrumental part of rap music. Rappers therefore use musically and aurally pleasing structures that adhere to the patterns of poetry. Considering the extremely varying subject matter of hip-hop expression, which includes long narratives, social critiques, positive and negative emotions, humour and beauty, a discussion on whether rap could be poetry is more than appropriate. This thesis examines the poetics of rap and hip-hop in its formative years in the place where the culture was born. This examination is done by literary analysis of various rap lyrics by various rappers who all originated in the Bronx and produced their lyrics throughout the 1980s. By doing so, the thesis' aim is to project the earliest form of

¹ *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, prod. Darby Wheeler, dir. Darby Wheeler, Sam Dunn, Scot McFadyen, Netflix, Inc., 2016, 22 sec. (This documentary was created by established documentary directors and producers and narrated by rap artist Shad. The documentary series includes interviews with prominent hip-hop experts, such as Nelson George and Jeff Chang, the genre's originators, including rappers that appear throughout this thesis and hip-hop's biggest names).

rap and hip-hop as an extension to the African American poetic tradition and place it in the American literary canon.

The thesis begins with a chapter which introduces the origins of the rap genre and hip-hop culture in its youth and presents hip-hop's pioneers who moulded its earliest forms: the first musicians, rappers and organizers of hip-hop events, the foundation for the culture's development. The discussion then turns to the devastated 1970s Bronx, the place where the genre's pioneers originated and in which they formed hip-hop. The section which focuses on the Bronx explains the reasons for its poor state, how urban planning and negligent policies progressively ruined the borough during the 20th century and how the atmosphere caused both necessity and inspiration for new culture to emerge. The inspiration for rapping itself and a cultural heritage of African American poetry is then discussed in the following section, which also briefly introduces the African poetic tradition and how it relates to the African American poetry. As the closest links and probably the most significant inspiration for rap, the section then discusses the poetry of African American poets Gil Scott-Heron and the group called The Last Poets. As the discussion establishes rap's close affiliation with poetry, the chapter's final section attempts to determine whether hip-hop could be perceived as a literary genre from the point of view of literary theory.

The next chapter discusses the sub-genre of hip-hop called conscious and political hip-hop. The chapter introduces the sub-genre's definition and then it introduces the lyrics, their authors and the respective literary analyses. The lyrics selected for this chapter demonstrate various literary techniques of narratology, social critique and commentary and various treatment of figurative language. The first section deals with the lyrics of "How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise?" by Brother D with Collective Effort and analyses the subject matter of the racial struggle of the African American population. The next section looks at the lyrics of "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash

and The Furious Five and determines how hip-hop works as a social narrative. Then the discussion turns to “Wild Style Subway Rap” by Grandmaster Caz and his use of the city as a thematic frame in the narrative. The following section examines the lyrics of “Children’s Story” by Slick Rick and how he uses irony as a means of social commentary. The lyrics of “9mm Goes Bang” by Boogie Down Production demonstrate how the rapper KRS-One employs the theme of crime as a literary trope. The final section deals with the lyrics of “It’s Like That” by Run-DMC, which present how rap lyrics can operate as testimony.

The last chapter discusses how rap works as a poetic expression. The chapter mentions various views on rap as poetry and establishes the methods of literary analysis applicable to rap lyrics. The chapter’s focus is to disseminate rap lyrics as poems and to highlight their poetic attributes. The chapter introduces the lyrics and rappers selected for the discussion as well as the structure of the respective analyses. The lyrics selected for this chapter exhibit various uses of rhyme, wordplay, tropes and themes which highlight rap’s poetic qualities. The first section focuses on the lyrics of “The New Rap Language” by the Treacherous Three and their treatment of rhyme and wordplay as the key methods of rap expression. The next section discusses Big Daddy Kane’s treatment of the rapper as a poet in the lyrics of “Ain’t No Half Steppin’”. The following discussion analyses the lyrical virtuosity of the rapper Rakim in his lyrics for “I Ain’t No Joke”. The lyrics of “The Godfather” by Spoonie Gee demonstrate how rappers treat the theme of lyrical ability as an expression of social status. The last section presents the lyrics of “My Philosophy” by Boogie Down Production and demonstrates how the rapper KRS-One establishes rap as a serious artistic discipline.

The above-mentioned lyrics are analysed using the methods of literary analysis. The thesis analyses selected excerpts which exhibit the literary concepts, yet the full lyrics are included in the appendices for further reference. The thesis uses various secondary

sources from literary theory which allow the analyses to contrast and compare various themes and forms used in literature. The discussion is then conducted as if the rap lyrics were not merely rap songs but works of literature.

2. A Short Introduction to Hip-Hop Culture

To authoritatively assert that rap lyrics contain any literary or poetic quality, or in other words, that they exhibit structures and subject matter similar to literature and poetry, one must first understand the historical context which allowed the genre to form. The analysis of the individual texts and the methods used by their authors therefore requires an introduction to the genre and the environment that both compelled and inspired those lyricists to produce them. This chapter looks at the origins of the Black cultural movement that became known as hip-hop. It explains how hip-hop originated from its earliest underground forms from the early 1970s to the progressive culture and genre of music that paved its way to popular culture of the American mainstream throughout the 1980s. The chapter introduces the genre's pioneers, who combined the new sounds of DJing music² with the rhythmically structured rhymes of MCs³ that, combined with DJs, gave birth to the genre of music called rap.⁴ The discussion then turns to the socio-political situation of the 1970s in New York's borough of the Bronx, which is widely accepted as hip-hop's true birthplace. The focus on this aspect of American history helps to explain the circumstances under which the inhabitants of the borough existed, as it contributed significantly to the birth of the new cultural movement. Looking back to what could be considered as the starting point for rap, the chapter briefly introduces the African American poets Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets as the direct inspiration for the then-

² Meaning music produced by mixing records of previously recorded musicians.

³ The abbreviation for "Master of Ceremonies", a term used in hip-hop for the person accompanying the DJ, i.e., the one who talks to the microphone during the DJ's parties, later called "rapper".

⁴ A genre of music that emerged from the MC's rhythmical and rhymed utterances during the DJ's parties.

emerging poetic expression of rap. Given that rap has always been very closely tied to poetry, both in terms of its form and the audience's perception, the discussion further attempts to determine on what grounds hip-hop could, as "an umbrella term to describe the multifaceted culture of which is but a part,"⁵ also be considered as a literary genre.

2.1. The Origins of Hip-Hop and Rap

Hip-hop began as a reaction of the impoverished and estranged African American and Hispanic population of the Bronx towards the disco culture that set the sound, lifestyle and fashion of popular culture in the 1970s United States. While the grownups of downtown New York lost themselves in the glamour of disco, the Bronx youth were looking for something else.⁶ And they found it on 11 August, 1973, when DJ Kool Herc threw a block party where the sound of a new culture was born.⁷ Instead of playing the ever present disco music that filled mainstream radio stations and was rather detested by the Bronx community due to its ostentatious nature, Herc was playing exclusively Black funk and soul music. In the process, he introduced the technique of playing two records on separate turntables, focusing on the drum breaks of the instrumentals, thus incidentally inventing a new method of DJing. Kurtis Blow, the first solo MC to be ever recorded,⁸ said the following:

Herc, he was a revolutionary, he revolted, he didn't want to play the disco music that we heard on the radio, he wanted to give the music that we grew up on, soul music. And it was incredible because in the world of disco here's this DJ coming out playing this special kind of music. And that was so important for the birth of hip-hop, that we gonna play funk music.⁹

⁵ Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois, eds., *The Anthology of Rap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) XXIX. (All subsequent quotations from this edition will be indicated in the text by parentheses.)

⁶ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 6 min. 1 sec.

⁷ Mickey Hess, ed., *Hip Hop in America: A Regional Guide* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010) xi.

⁸ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 6 min. 11. sec.

⁹ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 9 min.

The new music of Kool Herc, “the father of hip-hop”,¹⁰ quickly spread through the borough and attracted many practitioners of different arts. Most notable of which were the so-called b-boys and b-girls, break-dancers¹¹ who performed a newly created kinaesthetic movement art to the rhythms of the newly formed music. The parties consequently appealed to people who wanted to bring something innovative to the newly found spirit of Herc’s break music. Soon after the music spread from the clubs to the streets, other artists followed.¹²

With the arrival of the hip-hop DJs also came a person who accompanied them with vocal utterances on the microphone, the hip-hop MC. The first person to be considered as a hip-hop MC was Coke La Rock. The MC accompanied performances of Kool Herc, yet his role in the early parties differed greatly to what MCs do today. In his own words: “The first time I got on the mic, I was just highlighting people’s names, you know.”¹³ The early MCs served as conductors of the parties, announcing the DJs and filling silent spaces between songs with whatever came to their mind. However, as Rock recalls, rhyme swiftly became an integral part of their language:

This was back then. Nobody was talking on the mic back then. There’s not a man that can’t be thrown, a horse that can’t be rode, a bull that can’t be stopped and there’s not a disco that Kool Herc and Coke La Rock can’t rock.¹⁴

The MC soon became inseparable from the DJ, as the focus of hip-hop parties progressively shifted from instrumental music towards the MC’s performance and people started to listen to what they had to say.

As the development of hip-hop progressed, another South Bronx DJ laid the foundations for hip-hop to establish itself as a genuine part of American culture. The DJ

¹⁰ Hess, *Hip Hop in America: A Regional Guide*, xi.

¹¹ Breakdance is a compound derived from dancing to break music played by hip-hop DJs.

¹² E.g., graffiti, the highly stylized art of writing, usually on the walls of buildings.

¹³ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 13 min. 6 sec.

¹⁴ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 14 min. 22 sec.

in question was Afrika Bambaata and one of his most important inputs to hip-hop's development was his formation of the Universal Zulu Nation. This was the first hip-hop organization which would spread hip-hop's message collectively via its fundamental elements of music: DJing, breakdancing, graffiti and MCing.¹⁵ These four elements of hip-hop were later enhanced by Bambaata with a fifth element: knowledge, culture and overstanding.¹⁶ The Universal Zulu Nation sought to unite hip-hop communities as "peaceful, unified entities with a passion for life, a respect for difference and a belief in the positive effects of peaceful coexistence."¹⁷ As an organization, the Universal Zulu Nation organized events which would educate the ghetto youth about hip-hop culture and its five elements. Moreover, Bambaata, as the formerly violent warlord of the biggest Bronx gang, the "Black Spades",¹⁸ used the organization to coordinate meetings in which gang leaders were to discuss their disagreements rather than deal with them violently on the streets. The existence of such an organization then helped substantially towards easing the tensions of gang rivalry that plagued the borough. M.T. Kato comments that "the existence of Afrika Bambaataa and Universal Zulu Nation itself thus bespeaks of the origin of hip-hop in the gang, specifically in its search for peace and in nurturing the African consciousness".¹⁹ Hip-hop then became a transformative cultural movement which attempted to turn crime and violence into something less violent and harmful, turning the negative into the positive.²⁰ Bambaata's intent to create "the Universal Zulu Nation in peace, unity, love and having fun"²¹ contributes to the idea that hip-hop's transformative role came at the right time for the Bronx. The emerging cultural movement

¹⁵ Emmett G. Price III, *Hip Hop Culture* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, inc., 2006) 19.

¹⁶ Price III, 37. Overstanding is a Rastafarian term which inverts the word "understanding", meaning "complete or intuitive comprehension". ("Overstanding", *Your Dictionary*, LoveToKnow, <<https://www.yourdictionary.com/overstand>> 10 May 2021.)

¹⁷ Price III, 93.

¹⁸ M. T. Kato, *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007) 186.

¹⁹ Kato, 187.

²⁰ Kato, 187.

²¹ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 19 min. 37 sec.

therefore began to help resolve the unstable situation in the borough, as Grand Wizzard Theodore, one of the pioneering DJs, comments:

When he formed the Zulu Nation, it was a melting pot of different gang members and people wanting to straighten their lives out and the music was another way for them to get into that. People were getting into MCing. People were getting into DJing. People were getting into graffiti. It was a way for you to release whatever pressure you had.²²

This supports the argument that hip-hop's impact on the United States was a combination of both new cultural expression and a possible solution for the increasing crime rate in the Bronx. Furthermore, with the establishment of the Zulu Nation also came the label for the cultural movement, as Afrika Bambaata recalls: "We put it together as a culture movement, you know and that's when we put the label hip-hop on it."²³ Thus, Kool Herc forged the foundations for hip-hop and Afrika Bambaata built a community around it, although as an art form, hip-hop was still very raw.²⁴

As the hip-hop audience began to focus more on the messages of MCs than on the breaks of DJs, MCs were beginning to replace DJs as the main stars of hip-hop parties. As a result, their lyrics became the focal point of hip-hop's sound. The first MC to throw parties as an MC (as opposed to the previously mentioned Coke La Rock who merely accompanied the DJ) was DJ Hollywood in the late 1970s. Hollywood, was influenced by many, including New York radio DJ Frankie Crocker and the comedian Pigmeat Markham,²⁵ both famous for their exceptional eloquence and rhymes. But for the Bronx community, Hollywood²⁶ was merely another disco DJ. However, as Kurtis Blow has said, "hip-hop lives because of this. Because of the ability to communicate with the spoken word and rhythm. The rapper is the one that brought this thing over the top and

²² Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 20 min. 21 sec.

²³ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 20 min. 49 sec.

²⁴ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 22 min. 33 sec.

²⁵ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 34 min. 9 sec.

²⁶ Originally from Harlem, New York City.

this is what Hollywood did.”²⁷ This then set the trajectory for the genre of rap, whose development soon rocketed towards American popular culture with the release of “Rapper’s Delight” by The Sugarhill Gang in 1979,²⁸ a song which “brought hip-hop to masses”.²⁹ But Similarly, DJ Hollywood may have cultivated MCing but his disco music did not feature the main aspect of hip-hop music, the breaks. Moreover, his parties resembled the sort of exclusive parties the Bronx youth detested. Hollywood therefore failed to capture the raw atmosphere of hip-hop parties that were happening in street blocks.

Despite the success of The Sugarhill Gang, these MCs lacked authenticity and did not get proper recognition from the Bronx community³⁰. Their mega hit may have introduced hip-hop to the world, but “the group became and remains a lightning rod attracting charges of plagiarism and lack of authenticity.” (96) Certain rappers, namely Grandmaster Caz or Rahiem of The Furious Five, claimed to have found their own rhymes in the song’s lyrics. (96) This upset the Bronx hip-hop community, which had to force themselves into the recording industry and produce records in order to prevent further plagiarism. As a result, the Bronx began to produce its own authentic MCs.³¹

Hip-hop and rap started as a cultural movement that attempted to unite and entertain inhabitants of New York’s borough of the Bronx who were disaffected with the popular music of the city’s downtown. Moreover, as the next section of this chapter demonstrates, the harsh situation on the streets of the Bronx obstructed the coexistence of its inhabitants with the youth culture already existing in New York City and the rest of the United States. The Bronx, known affectionately within the hip-hop community as the “Boogie Down”, provided a fertile ground for the birth of a revolutionary cultural

²⁷ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 38 min. 50 sec.

²⁸ Hess, *Hip Hop in America: A Regional Guide*, xiv.

²⁹ Hess, *Hip Hop in America: A Regional Guide*, xv.

³⁰ Hess, *Hip Hop in America: A Regional Guide*, xiv.

³¹ See Chapter 3 and 4.

movement.³² Hip-hop transformed the by-products of deindustrialization into tools for aesthetic productions: aerosol sprays for graffiti, turntables, car speakers, amplifiers and vinyl records for DJing.³³ In addition, the dangerous gang-ridden streets, along with the wild hip-hop parties, provided sources of inspiration for the lyricists and performers later known as rappers. As Bradley states: “These young artists commandeered the English language, bending it to their own expressive purposes. Over time, the poetry they set to beats would command the ears of their block, their borough, their nation and eventually the world.” (XXX) The emergence of hip-hop in New York during the 1970s was therefore a combination of an expressive movement, a social coping mechanism and a means of revolt created by people living within decimated communities.³⁴ And it was in the progressively ruined and neglected Bronx where the new culture was born.

2.2. The Bronx of the 1970s

The origins of hip-hop are linked inextricably with the artform’s birthplace, New York’s borough of the Bronx. The Bronx where Herc and Bambaata laid the foundations for hip-hop was called “America’s worst slum” or “the epitome of urban failure.”³⁵ The streets were filled with rubble from destroyed buildings, shattered glass and dust. Joe Conzo, a hip-hop photographer born in the Bronx, called it “massive urban decay.”³⁶ The borough’s decay was fuelled by arson; the Bronx was believed to be the worst area for fires in the country. Between 1973 and 1977, around 12,000 fires were reported every year, destroying over 5,000 apartment buildings holding over 100 thousand units of housing each.³⁷ As the MC Grandmaster Caz recalls: “I grew up in the Bronx during the

³² Price III, 4.

³³ Kato, 191.

³⁴ Anthony Kwame Harrison, *Hip Hop Underground* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009) 28.

³⁵ Price III, 4.

³⁶ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 5 min. 6 sec.

³⁷ Price III, 47.

sixties. It was like Beirut, you know, certain parts of the Bronx. They say the Bronx was burning, Bronx was burning.”³⁸ The borough’s poorest parts, most notably the South Bronx, resembled a ruined city ravaged by war, with block after block abandoned or inhabitable. When Ronald Reagan, the President of the United States from 1981 to 1989, visited the borough, he said it looked like it had been hit by an atom bomb.³⁹

Price states that “the immensely impoverished, crime ridden, drug-infested streets of the Bronx were not always a symbol of economic demise and social decay.”⁴⁰ The state of the borough in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s and the 1980s was caused by the urban planning of the “authoritarian urban planner”⁴¹ Robert Moses. Moses was an American public official, working as a city construction coordinator, who moulded New York City, from the late 1920s to the mid-1960s, into a privatized network that allowed the flow of commodity and capital.⁴² This meant huge construction projects, such as bridges, tunnels and avenues, that would help the city’s infrastructure to keep up with its ongoing expansion and transformation into one of the world’s largest megalopolises. However, as the urban planning of such a huge built-in area proved successful, one construction project did more harm than good. The project in question was the Cross Bronx Expressway, constructed from the late 1940s to the early 1960s.⁴³ This seven-mile-long six-lane roadway designed to connect Long Island with Manhattan and New Jersey would provide for the needs of the commuters of suburban areas.⁴⁴ The plan also coupled with the so-called Slum Clearance Project, which sought to wipe out “the communities, industries, businesses and social networks of the Bronx consisting mostly of Jews,

³⁸ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 4 min. 45 sec.

³⁹ *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 2 From Underground to Mainstream*, prod. Darby Wheeler, dir. Darby Wheeler, Sam Dunn, Scot McFadyen, Netflix, Inc., 2016, 38 min. 6 sec.

⁴⁰ Price III, 3.

⁴¹ Kato, 182.

⁴² Kato, 182.

⁴³ Kato, 183.

⁴⁴ Price III, 6.

Italians, Irish and Blacks.”⁴⁵ The combination of these two meant that nearly 60,000 homes were demolished, thousands of middle-class working people had to relocate and once relatively stable communities of the Bronx were destroyed.⁴⁶ What was left of the borough was therefore irretrievably consumed by the urban planning and fragments of the population, composed of mostly minorities, were abandoned in the rumble of once relatively stable environment.

As the Bronx was burning, its inhabitants were forsaken by the anti-slum policy and cut off from the rest of the city, the unemployment rate inevitably escalated. Facing an unemployment rate of 25 to 30 percent⁴⁷ and the imminent threat of economic collapse, the people soon took their fates into their own hands, with any means necessary. The gangs and ghetto youth that emerged from this unfortunate environment were aptly called “the children of [Robert] Moses’s grand experiment.”⁴⁸ Grand Wizzard Theodor’s testimony astutely describes the reasons for the rise of the gang problem:

South Bronx where we lived at, people were struggling. You had single parents [...], people wasn’t really working, it wasn’t really no jobs and stuff like that. You couldn’t go in certain areas, man. [...] You had killings, you had muggings, you had people getting killed by the police, people going to jail for the rest of their lives.⁴⁹

The combination of unemployment, the establishment of the Bronx Youth Gang Task Force, through which the New York Police Department declared war on the gang leadership,⁵⁰ and the disappearing housing units forced the gangs to look for a solution to the rapidly worsening situation. Gang members and their leaders needed to find a way out of this unwinnable war. The above-mentioned establishment of the Universal Zulu Nation by Afrika Bambaata began the transformation process, but the initial progress was slow

⁴⁵ Kato, 183.

⁴⁶ Price III, 36.

⁴⁷ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 2 From Underground to Mainstream*, 37 min. 50 sec.

⁴⁸ Kato, 182.

⁴⁹ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 5 min. 24 sec.

⁵⁰ Kato, 182.

and centred around a rather small community. What accelerated this transformation, rather ironically, was a citywide power outage on 13 July 1977 at 9:35pm.⁵¹ The blackout “allowed” gang members to storm the streets and loot whatever they saw fit, including music equipment. Despite the slow but steady development of hip-hop, the possibility to own the necessary equipment for producing this music, such as microphones, turntables and records, remained limited in one of the city’s poorest communities. Therefore, the blackout offered an unexpected illegal but ultimately culturally significant opportunity to speed up the involvement of a wider community into hip-hop. Clearly, “hip-hop was built on overcoming limitations.”⁵²

The progressive deterioration of the Bronx caused by negligent urban planning and prohibiting the borough’s inhabitants to lead normal lives produced a generation of young people who had little to no opportunity to secure well-being for themselves. For the ghetto youth, forming gangs and committing crimes seemed a necessary evil for survival in the dangerous environment. This was a product of “urban neglect and a descendant of the civil rights,”⁵³ and the effects of post-industrialization, dislocation, deskilling and underemployment of the ghetto youth.⁵⁴ As a result “there arose an urban culture that spread like an antidote to a horrible plague. Hip-hop was the solution, the product of self-determination, self-realization, creativity and pride.”⁵⁵ The formation of hip-hop provided a solution and an inspiration for the future MCs who projected this dismal environment in their lyrics.⁵⁶ Rap in this case worked as a “truthful reflection of society.”⁵⁷ The Bronx was undeniably the strongest force that moved MCs to tell stories

⁵¹ Price III, 7.

⁵² Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 2 From Underground to Mainstream*, 2 min. 15 sec.

⁵³ Price III, 19.

⁵⁴ Kato, 191.

⁵⁵ Price III, xi.

⁵⁶ The discussion on the conscious and political hip-hop in Chapter 3 focuses on the narratives about the urgency to show the world what was going on.

⁵⁷ Rachel E. Sullivan, “Rap and Race: It's Got a Nice Beat, but What about the Message?” *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 33, No. 5 (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, Inc., 2003) 613, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3180978>> 25 September 2020.

in rhymes, but in the wider field of African American poetry during the 1970s, things were looking very similar to what was forming in the borough.

2.3. Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets

The Bronx of the 1970s resembled a huge scrapyard of unwanted things that nevertheless served as a sort of playground for its inhabitants, allowing impoverished ghetto youth to make use of various bits and pieces of technology to push themselves into creating new things. As a result, the stage for developing hip-hop music was set. However, instrumental music was but a beginning of the then-emerging phenomenon of hip-hop and rap music that slowly paved its way into American culture. The above-mentioned evolution of the MC stems from an expressive tradition that seems to be one of the crucial parts of Black culture. Nelson George states that “it’s always been a Black thing to talk smooth, [...] and on a mic and be entertaining. [...] I mean, there’s a huge legacy of rhythmic talking over beats that hip-hop is an extension of.”⁵⁸ The core elements of rapping, therefore, are not an invention of the hip-hop MC, as this aspect of Black culture is deeply rooted in the oral tradition of the African poetic practice.⁵⁹ Pigmeat Markham and Frankie Crocker therefore follow the same pattern of Black expressive culture as the poets Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets, the focus of this section.

Traditionally, the African poet functioned “as much as a musician as a wordsmith, weaving narrative verse around patterns of call-and-response with an active audience”.⁶⁰ The African poetic tradition consisted of such aspects as “signifying” or “toasting”, both rhetorical practices based on repetition, boasting and detailed exploits of outlaws.⁶¹ These appeared in long narrative poems that were often recited by Black men on the streets.⁶²

⁵⁸ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 31 min. 52 sec.

⁵⁹ Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2009) 23.

⁶⁰ Bradley, 23.

⁶¹ Bradley, 181.

⁶² Bradley, 181.

African American poetry stems from a tradition which emphasizes oral performance by fashionable eloquence and involvement of the audience, whose reaction to the content allowed for a degree of emotional response during public readings. Together with the tense racial situation of the 1960s and the progressive decline of expressive oral leaders such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, the poetry⁶³ that served as a bridge between the Black poetic tradition and the birth of hip-hop and rap was written by Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets.

The African American group The Last Poets was formed by Jalal Mansur Nuriddin Omar Ben Hassan, Abiodun Oyewole and percussionist Nillijah, in May 1968.⁶⁴ Their approach of recording and performing poems over percussive instruments along with their “politically charged raps, taut rhythms and dedication to raising African American consciousness”⁶⁵ laid a strong foundation for hip-hop music. In 1970, Alan Douglas, producer of Jimi Hendrix, signed the group to his label Douglas Records after he heard them perform on a basketball court in Harlem, an event which foreshadowed the block parties of DJ Kool Herc.⁶⁶ That same year, the label released their critically acclaimed debut album that established The Last Poets as “the artistic vanguard of the civil rights movement”⁶⁷ just as other Black activist leaders, Malcolm X or Luther King, were either killed or imprisoned.⁶⁸ The album’s lead hit song “Niggers Are Scared of Revolution” is a free-verse poem performed over a percussion piece in a rhapsodic and musical manner. The prevailing question that The Last Poets raise concerns the reasons for the somehow static nature, or inability of the African Americans to participate in a

⁶³ Along with the African American art movement called Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and the 1970s.

⁶⁴ Abdul Malik Al Nasir, “Jalal Mansur Nuriddin: farewell to the ‘grandfather of rap,’” *The Guardian*, Guardian News & Media Limited, 6 June 2018. <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/jun/06/jalal-mansur-nuriddin-last-poets-obituary-grandfather-of-rap>> 18 April 2021.

⁶⁵ Jason Ankeny, “The Last Poets,” *AllMusic*, AllMusic Netaktion, LLC, <<https://www.allmusic.com/artist/the-last-poets-mn0000090018/biography>> 18 April 2021.

⁶⁶ Al Nasir, “Jalal Mansur Nuriddin: farewell to the ‘grandfather of rap’”.

⁶⁷ Al Nasir, “Jalal Mansur Nuriddin: farewell to the ‘grandfather of rap’”.

⁶⁸ Al Nasir, “Jalal Mansur Nuriddin: farewell to the ‘grandfather of rap’”.

revolution which would end racial segregation and violence committed on the Black population. These concerns are accompanied by the catalogue of all the things African Americans can do, whether positive, negative, or stereotypical. The main appeal of the poem is that it challenges the Black population of the United States to stand for their civil rights and revolt against oppression. This heavily politicized poem, which gained the group popularity among Black communities, presents a prelude to the conscious and political hip-hop that came a few years later. Moreover, the group influenced another crucially significant poet to start producing his own records.

John Bush writes that Gil Scott-Heron's "aggressive, no-nonsense street poetry is equal parts politically conscious activism, cultural awareness, polemic and social commentary."⁶⁹ Scott-Heron's influence on hip-hop music is undeniably equal to that of The Last Poets, but it was them who mesmerised Scott-Heron when he heard them performing their verses over sparse drum backing.⁷⁰ He adopted their critical tone and transformed it into "hard-edged social commentary on issues as diverse as apartheid and nuclear energy."⁷¹ Yet, while providing conscious insight on the condition of the United States, Scott-Heron sweetened his delivery by using jazz, soul and funk music.⁷² His most famous song "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" is as rhapsodically and musically performed as "Niggers Are Scared of Revolution", but the jazzy-flute instrumental makes the song more melodic. The poem's content deals with a similar idea for African American revolution which would bring an end to the racial oppression, which is yet still out of sight due to "the role of race in mass media."⁷³

⁶⁹ John Bush, "Gil Scott-Heron," *AllMusic*, AllMusic Netaktion, LLC, <<https://www.allmusic.com/artist/gil-scott-heron-mn0000658346/biography>> 18 April 2021.

⁷⁰ David Sharrock, "Gil Scott-Heron: music world pays tribute to the 'Godfather of Rap,'" *The Guardian*, Guardian News & Media Limited, 29 May 2011. <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/may/29/gil-scott-heron-godfather-of-rap>> 18 April 2021.

⁷¹ Sharrock, "Gil Scott-Heron: music world pays tribute to the 'Godfather of Rap'".

⁷² Sharrock, "Gil Scott-Heron: music world pays tribute to the 'Godfather of Rap'".

⁷³ Sharrock, "Gil Scott-Heron: music world pays tribute to the 'Godfather of Rap'".

Scott-Heron's verses of "The Television Will Not Be Televised" critiques how the idleness of sitting in front of the television screen and accepting the doctrine of the media obstructs the audience in developing critical thinking, which is key for securing freedom through the revolution. The television therefore does nothing for its spectators' well-being, quite the contrary, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

You will not be able to stay home, brother
You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out
You will not be able to lose yourself on skag and skip out for
beer during commercials, because
The revolution will not be televised⁷⁴

Scott-Heron emphasizes that activity and prowess are the essential attributes to fight against the corrupt institutions that stand behind the flow of misleading information. This conscious and political treatment of the topic of racism further adds to the idea that Heron's poetry played a pivotal role in the development of hip-hop. However, Scott-Heron rejected this claim.⁷⁵ His interest was more centred around poetry and music rather than hip-hop and rap, as he explained in a 1998 interview: "I had an affinity for jazz and syncopation and the poetry came from the music, [...] We made the poems into songs and we wanted the music to sound like the word."⁷⁶ However, contrary to his beliefs, the considerable number of critics, writers and hip-hop MCs do not hesitate to state Scott-Heron's art as one of the essential influences that contributed to the birth of the rap genre.

The political narratives of Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets, combined with dance music with the feel-good vibes of funk, soul, rhythm and blues, helped hip-hop further distinguish itself from the mainstream disco of the moment.⁷⁷ As rapping relies heavily on the rhythmical language and forms of poetry, their relationship is very close, if not indistinguishable. Bradley states that "the fact that rap is music does not disqualify

⁷⁴ Gil Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised", *Genius*, Genius Media Group, Inc., <<https://genius.com/Gil-scott-heron-the-revolution-will-not-be-televised-lyrics>> 27 April 2021.

⁷⁵ Sharrock, "Gil Scott-Heron: music world pays tribute to the 'Godfather of Rap'".

⁷⁶ Sharrock, "Gil Scott-Heron: music world pays tribute to the 'Godfather of Rap'".

⁷⁷ Mickey Hess, *Is Hip Hop Dead?* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2007) 3.

it as poetry,”⁷⁸ its emotional focal point of presentation and communication is indeed the vocal performance in which rappers use spoken or semi-spoken discourse in rhymes.⁷⁹ Moreover, rap lyrics are frequently structured in narratives or social commentaries that provide either fictional or real-life views on the world of their authors. Certain elements of hip-hop therefore suggest that its proximity to literature is not as dubious as it might seem to some.

2.4. Hip-Hop as a Literary Genre

Hip-hop’s emergence as an alternative approach to producing music was permanently altered with the involvement of spoken word. As the previous section described the heritage of African poetic tradition and its connection to the poetry of Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets and subsequently hip-hop, one might ask whether rap, hip-hop’s verbal expression, could be considered as continuation of the African American poetic tradition. Hip-hop emerged from poverty of the South Bronx to become one of the most impactful cultural movements of the past century.⁸⁰ A very unlikely place to have birthed a new movement in poetry, the Bronx provided a space for innovations in rhyme, rhythm and wordplay, due to the lack of literary education of its mostly Black inhabitants.⁸¹ These innovations then allowed for unique poetic forms to enter the field of African American poetry and to thrust them into the new cultural mainstream labelled as hip-hop and rap music.

Adam Bradley states that “while rap may be new-school music, it is old-school poetry.”⁸² Rap relies on the oldest poetic forms rather than on the free-verse poems of its

⁷⁸ Bradley, xvii.

⁷⁹ Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003) 165.

⁸⁰ Bradley, xiii.

⁸¹ Bradley, xiii-xiv.

⁸² Bradley, xv.

progenitors Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets. Moreover, it is most directly connected to metrical forms of the Western poetic tradition, such as the ballad stanzas of the bardic past or the strong-stress metre of *Beowulf*.⁸³ Nevertheless, rap artists never sought to extend the Western poetic tradition and the high rate of illiteracy in African American communities obstructed them from gaining the necessary knowledge that would allow them to operate specifically in the field of poetry alone. Instead, rap followed the African American oral tradition established during slavery and presented an extension of literacy inherent to the Black tradition, eventually appearing as a unique corpus of the English language. Rap is therefore a literary art based both on traditional literary forms and on novelty derived from Black expressive tradition, as “rap artists explore grammatical creativity, verbal wizardry and linguistic innovation in refining the art of oral communication.”⁸⁴

Rap is also a vernacular art that creatively combines the invented with the inherited.⁸⁵ While the previously mentioned African expressive culture used rhyme as a key rhetorical device, rap attempts to use this heritage to revolutionize the sense and sound of the Black vernacular English.⁸⁶ This approach therefore allows Black rappers to use their own figurative language to tell stories that are similarly germane to Black culture. Moreover, rappers use their language to expand the awareness of hip-hop, to educate the world and their fellow communities about the literary innovation that is rapping. Rap is therefore a constantly changing complex linguistic art in which meanings and intentions fluctuate using innovative figurative language, rappers’ similes and metaphors reshape their and others’ view on the world.⁸⁷ These include various habits

⁸³ Bradley, xv.

⁸⁴ Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds., *That’s the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 66.

⁸⁵ Bradley, 24.

⁸⁶ Bradley, 83.

⁸⁷ Bradley, 89.

and attitudes which developed simultaneously with hip-hop culture, the language of wealth, social status and gang slang. As rappers use unique wordplay, tropes and rhymes which incorporate the concepts of rapper's life or life in the ghetto, they create new images and modes to provide an insight to the daily realities of rappers and their communities. They therefore demonstrate how they perceive the ghetto environment and how rappers' lives are lived. Provided that rap is predominantly Black expressive genre, rappers could therefore be considered as poet-speakers of the African American population. They refresh the English language by structuring communication through figurative variations of everyday speech which allows them to develop the perception of African American experience by telling original stories.⁸⁸

Rap stories exhibit distinctive features that originated exclusively from the environment of hip-hop in the Bronx in the 1970s and 1980s. These origins provided "the creative capacities conditioned by the often harsh realities of people's everyday surroundings."⁸⁹ The crumbling ghetto and the omnipresent threat of gang violence produced both an inspiration and a necessity for rappers to emerge as bards, or redeemers who would simultaneously provide criticism, exposition and liberation. The almost-mythical figure of the rapper often presents themselves as a being of superhuman abilities. This "larger-than-life persona"⁹⁰ therefore adopts a unique position of storytelling in which regular hip-hop themes coincide with both the form of poetic delivery and rapper's insight, often very thoughtful, on their experience and point of view. Their stories often fit into the tradition of American success stories,⁹¹ but to maintain authenticity and strengthen their position in the highly competitive environment of rap, a rapper must

⁸⁸ Bradley, xiii.

⁸⁹ Bradley, xiv.

⁹⁰ Bradley, 191.

⁹¹ Mickey Hess, *Is Hip Hop Dead?* 8.

present how the struggles of an African American individual equipped them with abilities necessary for surviving in the streets.⁹²

However, rap stories are not always “incisive social commentaries nor thug fantasies.”⁹³ The stories in rap follow the same pattern as the stories in literature, they use their genre-specific themes to present alternative realities in the genre’s appropriate form. The themes used in hip-hop incorporate the whole spectrum of the African American life, from serious issues to everyday events. Rappers deal with racism, crime, drug addiction and violence and at the same time they boast about their lyrical skills or wealth. Rappers therefore use both broad topics and specific details and they allow the audience to relate to their various personalities. African American rap therefore presents narratives that provide insight into the broad culture of hip-hop and into the very fabric of American culture. In these narratives rhymes, rhythm and wordplay as the rap formal qualities shape the narratives and create meanings on their own.⁹⁴

Rap’s reliance on the forms of poetry allows rappers to produce literary texts. Even though these texts seem inseparable from the musical part of hip-hop, their structure and meaning produce similar literary values as poetry. Bradley argues that “rap is poetry but its popularity relies in part on people not recognizing it as such.”⁹⁵ While the genre is primarily classified as music, the stories that rappers tell contain as original and innovative insight on the world as narratives found in literature. Moreover, rap as the dominantly African American genre provides a unique and authentic portrayal of the culture, history, language and spirit of Black Americans. This means that hip-hop does not only extend American literature but also cultural anthropology, sociology and politics. The next two chapters employ the above-mentioned literary concepts and methods to

⁹² Mickey Hess, *Is Hip Hop Dead?* 8.

⁹³ Bradley, 158.

⁹⁴ Bradley, 161.

⁹⁵ Bradley, xii.

analyse various rap lyrics produced during the 1980s. The analyses further support the claim that rap is a literary art and rappers may be America's "greatest public poets."⁹⁶

3. Conscious and Political Hip-Hop

Conscious and political hip-hop is a subgenre of hip-hop that focuses on the social and political issues that affect the African American population. Due to the dismal conditions that progressively damaged the Black community through the 1960s and the 1970s, 1980s socially conscious rappers were "forced to address worsening social problems, including high unemployment, police brutality, incarceration, inadequate public schools, political apathy and dysfunctional behaviours that perpetuate oppression."⁹⁷ Rap, sometimes called "the Black CNN,"⁹⁸ was therefore a platform for lyricists to create informative and thought-provoking narratives that primarily served as testimonies of the grim environment of New York's borough of the Bronx. Rappers observed that the principles of mutual respect did not at all apply to the Black population.⁹⁹ Moreover, they began to question the very meaning of citizenship and belonging to the American society.¹⁰⁰

This chapter looks at six MCs who focused on these topics and dealt with them with their own unique methods. The methods analysed are contrasted, compared and paralleled with methods used in literature and studied and literary sciences. The chapter focuses on methods of narratology, the uses and forms of figurative language, social commentary and the personal voice of the MCs. Analyses of the lyrics further provide the

⁹⁶ Bradley, xiii.

⁹⁷ James B. Stewart, "Message in the Music: Political Commentary in Black Popular Music from Rhythm and Blues to Early Hip Hop," *The Journal of African American History* Vol. 90, No. 3 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005) 222, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20063998>> 8 April 2021.

⁹⁸ Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby, eds. *Hip Hop & Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason* (Peru: Carus Publishing Company 2005) 68.

⁹⁹ Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby, eds., 86.

¹⁰⁰ Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby, eds., 86.

MCs' views and opinions on the environment of oppression, violence and social instability. The organization of the analyses follows a pattern which attempts to map the development of the social issues, starting from racial struggles projected in the first song, then moving to the environment of the Bronx from which crime arose to become the main theme. The last song then represents how the culmination of such issues changes rapper's lives.

"How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise?" by Brother D is a playful verse that criticizes the hypocrisy of American society and reminds its audience about the ongoing racial struggle of the Black populations in the form of an address which is very similar to poetry of Gil Scott-Heron or The Last Poets. This first analysis introduces one of the chapter's key themes that acts as a vehicle for the treatment of issues dealt in subsequent tracks: an informative social commentary.

"The Message" by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five is an extensive episodic narrative about the damaged state of the Bronx told in the bardic manner of a distressed poet of the streets who through his account of experience, according to Dyson, "pioneered the social awakening of rap into a form combining social protest, musical creation and cultural expression."¹⁰¹ The narrative is both used as a social commentary and an introduction to the birthplace of hip-hop, another major topic in East Coast hip-hop.

"Wild Style Subway Rap" by Grandmaster Caz uses the city, specifically New York's borough of the South Bronx, as a thematic frame for its narrative whose subject matter is similar to the one of "The Message". Grandmaster Caz uses the thematic frame to develop his statement, eventually acknowledging the liberating potential of the new cultural movement. Yet, as Grandmaster Caz's projects a hopeful vision for the future of

¹⁰¹ Forman and Neal, eds., 62.

the Bronx, the everyday reality of crime persisted in the borough and projected itself as a theme of the following tracks.

“Children’s Story” by Slick Rick tells the story of life in the ghetto, violence and murder. In the narrative, Slick Rick uses tropes of irony and parody to express the subject matter’s absurdity and to support his statement that the social situations he describes are unjust. This rather witty treatment to address a serious topic allows the MC to present a parallel between storytelling and reality, as he uses the narrative strategy to emphasize real-life inspiration of crime. A theme which is further developed in the next track.

“9mm Goes Bang” by Boogie Down Productions makes use of crime as a theme and through sharp exaggeration transforms it into a trope. This figurative treatment assists KRS-One, the MC behind the lyrics, to enhance the effect of his narrative by affecting the sensual perception of his audience. KRS-One’s lyrics serve as a reminder that crime found its way to the lives of African Americans and has been appearing as a major theme throughout the rap lyrical canon ever since. Moreover, crime’s irretrievable damage is included in the subject matter of the next song.

“It’s Like That” by Run-DMC signals a transition from old school hip-hop to the mainstream. The song’s subject matter serves as a testimony of the harsh environment in which the Black population existed and invites the audience to participate in the message of the two MCs present. “It’s Like That” serves as a conclusion to the conscious treatment of issues the Black population had to deal with. Racism, poverty and crime are used as major themes for the lyrics selected for analysis, the last song therefore provides a comprehensive resolution to the 1980s political and conscious hip-hop.

Together these tracks give a representative portrayal of how the Bronx population lived in the harsh ghetto atmosphere. They also demonstrate how rappers treated such topics, each in their own unique way. These tracks therefore provide a view on the 1980s Bronx from the inside through the lens of rappers who structured their narratives as a way

to inform about the dreadful situation. Yet, as rap tracks were never intended only as raw information, the lyrics also show how narratives, social commentaries and various uses of tropes and figurative language found their way into hip-hop.

3.1. “How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise?” by Brother D with Collective Effort: Racial Struggle of the African American Population

“How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise?” by Brother D was the first rap record with explicitly political lyrics. (32) Released in 1980 on Clappers Records, it is a song which, according to Bradley, practices what it preaches. (32) The lyrics present an interesting dichotomy between the seriousness of its subject matter and the playfulness of its presentation. The lyrics’ recurring phrase “You dippy-dippy-dive, you so-socialize / But how we gonna make the Black nation rise?” (33) highlights the main problem identified by Brother D, the hypocrisy and voluntary blindness of the American society. While the more fortunate portion of the United States enjoy their parties and well-being in a civilized and constantly modernizing country, “the Black nation” experiences quite the opposite.

While you’re partying on-on-on-on and on
The ovens may be hot by the break of dawn
The party may end one day soon
When they round the niggers up in the afternoon (33)

Brother D’s metonymy of “the Black nation”, substituting the impoverished and struggling part of the African American population, serves as a symbolic reality that works according to its own and significantly different rules. When contrasting this reality with the one presented in media, or the “true” American reality, Brother D further fortifies the motif of hypocrisy:

The media is tellin lies
Devil takin off his disguise
They're killin us in the street
While we pay more for food that's cheap
And all you want to do is so-socialize (33)

Brother D's assessment about the state of reality in which he and his "Black nation" appears contributes to what Murray Forman calls hip-hop's "striking capacity for political insight and social critique."¹⁰²

Brother D's commentary does not concentrate solely on the unacceptable state of "the Black nation" he wants to elevate. For a contextual comparison and further empowerment of the prevailing hypocrisy of the supposed "true America" he provides several statements about America's own state and origin. "America was built, understand / By stolen labor on stolen land" (36) refers to the horrors caused by colonization and mainly slavery. Brother D's parallel of the America's treatment of the Native Americans also appears in the following lines:

Remember the so-called Indian
Look what they did to him
Maybe they'll do that to us
Dare to struggle, dare to win (35)

This parallel facilitates Brother D to expand the character of American society in a broader context, making the thing described a "common enemy" of the oppressed and the violated.

The lyrics of "How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise?" provide a social commentary that is constructed on paralleling and contrasting the story of "the Black nation" with the story of the "true America". This approach further demystifies the general perception people had on the United States and New York, as the rapper Darryl "D.M.C." Daniels comments "everybody's perception on New York city was like "yo, look at the fur coats, look at the Rolls-Royces, look at the champagne, look at the

¹⁰² Forman and Neal, eds., 7.

diamonds, look at the sex, look at all the money and famous people.”¹⁰³ However, as Brother D asserts, America was not just all about partying and having a good time. This almost symbolic treatment of the two sides of America creates a notion of the archetypal conflict of good and evil, even though Brother D’s treatment of the evil is ambiguous to a point of not being distinguishable at all. Nevertheless, as Bradley comments: “like most stories throughout the history of human civilization, most of rap’s stories are occasions to imagine alternate realities.”¹⁰⁴ The fate of an alternate reality called “the Black nation” is consequently in the hands of hip-hop. As Brother D’s lyrics reach their conclusion, the MC states that “Time is getting late” (37) for “the Black nation”, but then adds that “And DJs if you got a mic/ It’s your job to educate.” (37) This signifies that the job of MCs is to tell a story that would not only entertain but educate its audience about the isolated reality of “the Black nation”, adhering to the Horatian concept from his *Ars Poetica* of a poem both instructing and delighting.¹⁰⁵ Storytelling is then a method MCs often use to deliver their lyrics’ message as an instruction and as an entertainment.

3.2. “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five: Hip-Hop as a Social Narrative

Brother D’s lyrics introduced the potential that hip-hop lyrics could have in addressing social or political issues. But it was the track “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five that transformed the impact rap lyrics could have on American culture. Nelson George says that “this was a record that allows people to see the potential of this as an art form. It really shows that hip-hop could be very explicit about politics, could be about pain and about anger”¹⁰⁶ The MCs of the song assume roles of bardic

¹⁰³ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 1 The Foundation*, 3 min. 56 sec.

¹⁰⁴ Bradley, 158.

¹⁰⁵ Horace, “Ars Poetica”, *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, 13 October 2009, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69381/ars-poetica>> 11 May 2021.

¹⁰⁶ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 2 From Underground to Mainstream*, 42 min. 2 sec.

narrators and perform an exhaustive narrative about the crumbling social environment of New York's Bronx. The song is considered "the most influential and important rap song to emerge in rap's early history"¹⁰⁷ as it not only vividly and comprehensively describes the ruined borough but also provides very immediate intimacy of the ghetto inhabitants' point of view and and most importantly, very poetic treatment of the account. The Furious Five, the group of MCs behind this track, employ rhyming regularity alternating with occasional surprises¹⁰⁸ in the rhythmic framework used to deliver poignant social commentary.¹⁰⁹ This chapter's focus on the latter looks at the lyrics as a narrative produced by distressed observers, experiencers and poets of the 1980s Bronx who through their expressive language produce "a dystopian series of urban vignettes." (65)

The lyrics of "The Message" are an example of a narrative focused on the experiences of the protagonist, who presents his world in a manner that allows the audience to immerse themselves.¹¹⁰ The MCs use vivid imagery of the people and the city to declare their concern about friends, families and people who endure in the destroyed Bronx. The instances in which the MCs describe episodes from the Bronx are not tied together in the traditional storytelling model of plot development. The lyrics present a shattered narrative model which epitomizes the chaotic state of Bronx. This method of storytelling is presented in the opening lines:

Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs,
you know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice. (73)

Broken glass. A shattered life story. Melle Mel, who wrote this verse, implies that the fragments of glass littering the streets do not represent a normal state of things, therefore

¹⁰⁷ Forman and Neal, eds., 61.

¹⁰⁸ Bradley, 82.

¹⁰⁹ Frank Hoffmann, *American Popular Music: Rhythm and Blues, Rap and Hip-Hop* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2005) 122.

¹¹⁰ Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 6.

he chooses to present his narrative in a similar manner. Furthermore, this excerpt precisely exhibits the aforementioned focus on the city, the people and the narrator's inner self. The city is damaged by the glass and the excretion of people who, damaged as well, do not seem to share the same inner sentiment of despair as the narrator does. These two things are conveniently contrasted so that the effect of the narrator's emotional impulse is increased.

The most prominent feature of "The Message" are the lyrical subjects. The group called the Furious Five, consisted of Melle Mel, Kid Kreole, Cowboy, Scorpio and Rahiem, remodel their personae into symbolic beings, alter-egos, whose identities overlap the everyday observers of the world around. Hess states that "rappers often distinguish themselves and their new personae by wearing costumes and masks"¹¹¹ which is clearly visible in the music video shot for "The Message" in which the group wear colourful and extraordinary clothes on the streets of the Bronx. This intentional exaggeration allows them to transform the real-life reporting into an artistic expression, paralleling the method of narrating the serious subject in a versed and rhythmic manner. Hess further adds that "in literature the concept of mask is tied to discussions of sincerity, truth and authenticity."¹¹² The Furious Five therefore deliver truth in their real-life reporting of the broken borough of the Bronx, where crime, illiteracy and drug addiction, among other problems, affect both their families, friends and other African Americans.

The lyrics of "The Message" are a "hard-edged anthem of the urban ghetto."¹¹³ The track is a social narrative that portrays a difficult life in New York's Bronx in an episodic style, a series of scenes and images from everyday life observed in the homes of African Americans and on the dangerous streets and alleyways. The poetic voices of the Furious Five elevate the report into a lyrical address. This further supports the argument

¹¹¹ Hess, *Is Hip-Hop Dead?* 70.

¹¹² Hess, *Is Hip-Hop Dead?* 70.

¹¹³ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 2 From Underground to Mainstream*, 38. min. 37 sec.

that stories told in hip-hop are not merely basic autobiographical reports tied to everyday life on the streets, but they exhibit an artistic power to transform everyday suffering into a literary realism.¹¹⁴ Grandmaster Flash states that “the song is like a window into urban America for people that have never seen urban America or were too afraid to go in.”¹¹⁵ The lyrics therefore provide a view into the estranged urban environment of the Bronx, the alternate reality that the MCs use as a setting for their poignant narrative.

3.3. “Wild Style Subway Rap” by Grandmaster Caz: The City as a Thematic Frame

“The Message” portrays the Bronx from the point of view of the MCs who deliver their narrative in an episodic manner. The narrative of “Wild Style Subway Rap” by Grandmaster Caz features another narrative method called frame narrative. This method is characterized by a theme surrounding the story, usually at the beginning and the end, providing a clear-cut outline in which the plot unfolds.¹¹⁶ In this case, the frame is the city, more specifically New York’s borough of the South Bronx. The lyrics of the song¹¹⁷ were written and performed by Grandmaster Caz, the pioneering artist of hip-hop who spearheaded the genre’s expansion into American culture.¹¹⁸ The MC, often deemed as “the first real hip-hop poet,”¹¹⁹ introduced street-flavoured rhyme with slang that people of the street could relate to and told stories with humour, wit and cleverness.¹²⁰ “Wild Style Subway Rap” is therefore a product of an MC who employed subtle lyricism to communicate his view on the potential of hip-hop.

¹¹⁴ Hess, *Is Hip-Hop Dead?* 69.

¹¹⁵ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 2 From Underground to Mainstream*, 41. min 2 sec.

¹¹⁶ Fludernik, 28.

¹¹⁷ The song is featured in the soundtrack of the first ever hip-hop motion picture *Wild Style* by Wild Style Productions from 1982 which presents a comprehensive audio-visual representation of the emerging hip-hop culture. (Price III, 86)

¹¹⁸ Hess, *Hip Hop in America: A Regional Guide*, 78.

¹¹⁹ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 2 From Underground to Mainstream*, 13 min. 13 sec.

¹²⁰ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 2 From Underground to Mainstream*, 12 min. 26 sec.

The thematic frame of the narrative is outlined by the first and last lines. The former presents the starting point that allows the narrative's characters to develop: "South Bronx, New York, what do I see? / Kids growing up in the community."¹²¹ The last lines suggest that the development progressed to a presumably desired end: "South Bronx, New York, what do I see? / Talent rising out of the community."¹²² The narrator shares the same concern for the young generation of the Black community as the lyrics of "The Message". These two songs also follow the same pattern of reporting the ruined borough. Grandmaster Caz raises his concerns about the South Bronx, the ruined infrastructure, the ever present gang violence, the unfading sense of danger, all touched by his profound concern about the future of its inhabitants. Lines such as "South Bronx, New York, that's where I dwell / To a lot of people it's a living hell" or "Streets are filthy, crime is high / People look suspicious when you walk by" produce a sense of anxiety and sorrow but also create a starting point from which he proposes a solution later in the song. Like the lyrics of "The Message", the content of this song is tightly linked with the MC's autobiographical experience.¹²³

There is a departure from this social-narrative-style reporting in the second half of the lyrics. As Grandmaster Caz lists all the things wrong with the South Bronx, he turns away from them and begins to contemplate the possible escape and, perhaps, a solution. He acknowledges that a new cultural movement is emerging from this borough of New York, referring of course to the hip-hop movement, which will produce a new generation of talented artists, helping create a better community. Emmet G. Price III comments that "from the gang-ridden, drug-infested streets of Bronx, New York, [...] there arose an urban culture that spread like an antidote to a horrible plague."¹²⁴ Within

¹²¹ Grandmaster Caz, "Wild Style Subway Rap", *Genius*, Genius Media Group, Inc. <<https://genius.com/Grandmaster-caz-wild-style-subway-rap-lyrics#primary-album>> 9 April 2021.

¹²² Grandmaster Caz, "Wild Style Subway Rap".

¹²³ Hess, *Is Hip-Hop Dead?* 8.

¹²⁴ Price III, xi

the tragedy of the South Bronx, this specific moment serves as Grandmaster Caz's catharsis, which loosens his sense of anxiety and provides a hopeful outlook for the future.¹²⁵ As Price adds, "hip-hop was the solution, the product of self-determination, self-realization, creativity and pride."¹²⁶

The thematic frame of the South Bronx allows Grandmaster Caz to reconcile with the devastating atmosphere through the emergence of the new cultural movement. The South Bronx therefore embodies a stage on which the MC develops a promising plot's resolution for the development of his characters, the youngest of the Black population. The focus on the struggles of young African Americans is a major theme not only for Grandmaster Caz but recurring frequently throughout the lyrics of conscious and political hip-hop.

3.4. "Children's Story" by Slick Rick: Irony as a Means of Social Commentary

As the previous lyrics demonstrate, storytelling and social commentary are key forms for Black MCs who attempt to get concerns about their environment across. Slick Rick, considered to be the genre's most prominent storyteller, elevated hip-hop storytelling into an idea that hip-hop alone could be considered as a storytelling genre.¹²⁷ Slick Rick is often nicknamed "The Ruler", a moniker he gained both for his exceedingly aristocratic English accent, as he was born in London and his command over the microphone. (289) His storytelling, however, was not solely for entertainment, as he commented that "stories can teach and stories can destroy and stories can ease tension."¹²⁸ This makes a comparison of Slick Rick's view on storytelling with Grandmaster Caz's catharsis in "Wild Style Subway Rap" appropriate. Both use their lyrics as a means of

¹²⁵ J. A. Cuddon, *English Penguin Dictionary Of Literary Terms And Literary Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 1992) 114.

¹²⁶ Price III, xi.

¹²⁷ Bradley, 160.

¹²⁸ Bradley, 160.

dealing with harsh realities of the ghetto life, pacifying their inner anger and disgust. Most important, however, is their address towards the audience, which is both instructive and engaging.

Michael Eric Dyson says that “hip-hop is still fundamentally an art form that traffics in hyperbole, parody, kitsch, dramatic license, double entendres, signification and other literary and artistic conventions to get its points across.”¹²⁹ Slick Rick’s lyrics in the song “Children’s Story” adopt such literary conventions in order to contrast the seriousness of its subject matter with the playfulness of his artistic expression. The lyrics do feature parody, but above all Slick Rick is an ironic lyricist. “Children’s Story” tells a straightforward story of a young man who is misled to a path of crime by a gang member. The story then narrates his pursuit by police for a crime he committed which results in an armed conflict, taking hostage of a pregnant woman and the boy’s subsequent death. However, despite the story’s relatively simple plot, the title and the first lines reveal how the two tropes transform the plot into an almost allegorical tale. The narrative aims to criticize the worsening social situation of African Americans which almost inevitably leads to crime. The title and the song’s introduction are then more noteworthy in terms of the treatment of tropes than the story itself. After all, those stories recurred frequently in the Bronx of the 1980s.

The first four lines of “Children’s Story” serve as an introduction to the narrative and imbue it with irony:

Once upon a time not long ago
When people wore pajamas and lived life slow
When laws were stern and justice stood
And people were behavin like they ought to: good (292)

In the context of the whole story, the irony here represents a complete subversion of the things stated, in other words an “incongruity between words and their meaning, [...]

¹²⁹ Formand and Neal, eds., xii.

between appearance and reality.”¹³⁰ Quite visibly the statements about life, laws, justice and people’s behaviour do not correspond with the following story. Slick Rick employs this figurative approach to demonstrate just how absurd and outrageous the story is. After all, these lines describe the “normal” state of things. Enhancing the story with ironic commentary further intensifies the critique Slick Rick discloses. This adds to the assumption that the narratives of hip-hop lyrics do not only entertain or enlighten, but they can also poignantly refer to things that are wrong, ridiculous and unfair.¹³¹

In addition to the ironic element, “Children’s Story” also parodies a fairy tale. The title itself draws heavily upon this assumption. Fairy tales are mainly directed towards children due to their educational and playful nature, but “Children’s Story” clearly is not directed towards children, nor does it hold the main conclusive value of a typical fairy tale in which the hero or heroine, after experiencing an adventure, lives happily ever after.¹³² The fairy tale element is additionally recognized by the first line which uses the emblematic fairy tale phrase “Once upon a time”. The parody is achieved by imitating the fairy-tale style and exaggerating its traits¹³³ so that the whole notion of the story being a true fairy tale promptly disperses. This, again, allows Slick Rick to demonstrate the silliness of his violent and tragic narrative by using it as a parody of a well-known story format.

Discussing the methods rappers use to express their ideas, Stephen Lester Thompson states that: “If they have a burden to testify truthfully, neither that burden nor its satisfaction seems easily settled in the meanings of lyrics. It follows that hip-hop lyrics mean the way narratives and stories do.”¹³⁴ Slick Rick uses elaborate methods of presenting a tragic story, both elevating his storytelling to a playful and intricate narrative

¹³⁰ Cuddon, 428.

¹³¹ Darby and Shelby, eds., 68.

¹³² Cuddon, 302.

¹³³ Cuddon, 640.

¹³⁴ Darby and Shelby, eds., 68.

and contributing to the meaning of tragic and irrational subject matter. “Children’s Story” demonstrates how conscious MCs incorporate real-life issues into their layered narratives, introducing harsh realities of ghetto life.

3.5. “9mm Goes Bang” by Boogie Down Productions: Crime as a Trope

Like Slick Rick’s “Children’s Story”, “9mm Goes Bang” by Boogie Down Productions uses a similar method of dealing with crime and violence. Both use figurative language, recurring themes and images¹³⁵ to intensify their critical commentaries and autobiographical reports and to incorporate these elements into a poetic narrative. Nevertheless, while Slick Rick uses traditional tropes of irony and parody, KRS-One, the MC behind the lyrics of “9mm Goes Bang” creates his own trope for the purpose of the song’s message. KRS-One is an abbreviation for Knowledge Rules Supreme Over Nearly Everyone. Often praised for his humanistic learnings, promotion of self-enlightenment and anti-violence,¹³⁶ KRS-One in this song presents a narrative that follows a similar pattern as Slick Rick’s “Children’s Story”: an armed conflict, taking a hostage, gang rivalry and a murder. But unlike Slick Rick’s lyrics, there is neither irony nor parody.

KRS-One uses the motif of crime as an all-encompassing trope that transforms the relatively simple narrative into an intense and aggressive sequence of images, sounds and emotional impulses. The hyperbolic treatment of those concepts gives the MC an opportunity to mediate and transfer the insufferably intense sensual stimuli of aggression and violence. As Bradley comments: “Rap never ignores its listeners. Quite the contrary, it aggressively asserts itself, often without invitation, upon our consciousness.”¹³⁷ The introductory hook of the song renders the sound a 9mm pistol makes:

¹³⁵ “Trope,” *Literary Terms*, <<https://literaryterms.net/trope/>> 11 April 2021.

¹³⁶ Hoffmann, 157.

¹³⁷ Bradley, xiii.

Wa da da dang
Wa da da da dang (Ay!)
Listen to my 9 millimeter go bang!¹³⁸

This introduces the main motif of the lyrics, a lethal weapon. Moreover, the song's musical accompaniment contains a beat whose metallic and distorted sound resembles gunfire, enhancing the weapon's role throughout the track. The pistol as a symbolic instrument of control, power and consequently death, is used in the lyrics in exaggerated moments: "Me knew a crack dealer by the name of Peter / Had to buck him down with my 9mm"¹³⁹ or "He reached for his pistol but it was just a waste / Cause my 9mm was up against his face."¹⁴⁰ The treatment of this feature gives KRS-One an opportunity to expose the drama of life-threatening danger to an audience from outside the ghetto environment.

The use of sounds as a rhetorical device produces an audible dimension to the violent situations which further allows the MC to immerse his audience, given that the sounds in question are sounds of violence: "Puffin' sensimilla I heard 'knock, knock, knock' / But the way that they knocked it did not sound like any cop." KRS-One emphasizes that this is not a sound of knocking that could be perceived as familiar or "typical". The tension that he creates by this sound is further enhanced by its unusual nature, the unknown. It is clear from the context of the song's story that this sound is produced by a gang rival, but the narrator's uncertainty and anxiety develop the suspense. This contributes to the argument that the merit of rap's stories does not solely rely on the content but as content expressed in vivid and poetic language.¹⁴¹

KRS-One uses an elaborate trope of crime in his lyrics for "9mm Goes Bang". This allows him to enhance the violent narrative of gang rivalry, pistol shooting and murder, to an intriguing play of literary language. This means that for all the aspects of

¹³⁸ Boogie Down Productions, "9mm Goes Bang," *Genius*, Genius Media Group, Inc., <<https://genius.com/Boogie-down-productions-9mm-goes-bang-lyrics>> 11 April 2021.

¹³⁹ Boogie Down Productions, "9mm Goes Bang".

¹⁴⁰ Boogie Down Productions, "9mm Goes Bang".

¹⁴¹ Bradley, 136.

the violated and ravaged Black community, the rapper's voice remains the only inviolate aspect of hip-hop's storytelling.¹⁴² Crime, then, is one of the major themes which rappers incorporate into their narratives to present their social commentary about the dangers of ghetto life. However, as one of the serious themes used in rap narratives, it certainly leads to the notion that these Bronx rappers came from an environment which was hard to endure.

3.6. "It's Like That" by Run-DMC: Hip-Hop as Testimony

The overall crudity of ghetto life is addressed continually throughout rap storytelling. Some songs focus on specific aspects, while others provide a more comprehensive view on the atmosphere in which hip-hop was born. The last song discussed in this chapter, which focuses on the political and conscious hip-hop and rap, provides conclusive insight into the subgenre. Moreover, the group who created the track is considered the main herald of a transition from old school underground hip-hop to the mainstream and popular culture of the United States. (265) While breaking through to American pop music, Run-DMC promoted the original street quality of the hip-hop pioneers. Their commercial success and their emphasis on authenticity influenced how the ghetto youth walked, talked and dressed.¹⁴³ This is why the group eventually became known as "The Beatles of hip-hop."¹⁴⁴ Run-DMC innovated lyrical conventions and created a brand-new sound for the genre's future that attracted a wider audience. (265) The beginning of hip-hop's process of popularisation did not, however, signal a decline of the quality of lyrics. "It's Like That" shares the same expositional and poignant quality as the previously discussed narratives about the harsh life in the Bronx.

¹⁴² Bradley, 162.

¹⁴³ *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 3 The New Guard*, prod. Darby Wheeler, dir. Darby Wheeler, Sam Dunn, Scot McFadyen, Netflix, Inc., 2016, 15 min. 23. sec.

¹⁴⁴ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 3 The New Guard*, 7 min. 3. sec.

The lyrics of “It’s Like That” by Run-DMC provide a comprehensive catalogue of issues haunting the African American population in the form of a dialogue between the two MCs of the group, Run and DMC. Those issues share the same nature as the ones provided in the previous narratives, but as an addition Run-DMC provide a more political insight. They highlight such problems as unemployment, poverty, education and provide almost philosophical reflection on the state of things. This illustrated in lines such as: “Unemployment at a record high / People coming, people going, people born to die.” (268) The observant narrators also make a quite suitable use of their addressee. The song features certain elements of second-person narrative in which the narrator directly addresses their audience to involve them more closely in the narrative.¹⁴⁵ This allows Run-DMC to partly convey their burden to their audience and to share with them their intended message more intimately, as shown in the following lines: “[DMC] When you feel your failure sometimes it hurts / [Run] For a meaning in life is why you search.” (270) Denise Sullivan comments on this specific method used by Run-DMC and says that “this was hip-hop with an intention to inform not only with reality reportage, [...] but with hard information.”¹⁴⁶ This means that the inclusion of the presumed listener creates a sense of shared space which allows the rappers to address their contemplation more directly.

The notion of testimony, which is thoroughly interwoven in the lyrics’ structure, is emphasized by the recurring statement “It’s like that and that’s the way it is.” (268) For all the problematic things Run-DMC describe in the song there is an involuntary reconciliation, in other words the acknowledgement of their powerlessness as individuals. Nevertheless, Run-DMC eventually conclude that it is only through the lyrics that the rappers can communicate their concerns about their shattered reality and with the

¹⁴⁵ Fludernik, 112.

¹⁴⁶ Denise Sullivan, *Keep On Pushing: Black Power Music From Blues to Hip-Hop* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011) 204.

inclusion of their audience can they transfer their report further. Thompson states that “this communicative-message model of hip-hop lyrical meaning holds that a successful hip-hop lyric must be a genuine testimony about the lyricist’s real self.”¹⁴⁷ As a consequence, Run-DMC prove that the language of hip-hop can be used as a catalyst for social commentary and a testimony about the circumstances under which the Black population struggles.

Run-DMC present a different approach to reporting the social environment of African Americans in the 1980s. They substitute the more traditional style of narrative with a more inclusive method of directly addressing their audience. This allows them to deliver the lyrical subject matter more personally and directly. Moreover, they use the format of hip-hop lyrics to speak their minds truthfully. This transformative process allows them to alter the troubling reality in order to produce self-controlled meaning in their art.¹⁴⁸ Hip-hop lyrics therefore provide a platform for MCs to express their troubled realities and narrate their stories in a way which is informative, educational and entertaining. As Kato comments: “Ultimately, [...] it is the act of peacemaking or the peace movement in the ghetto as an alternative to the spiral of violence that causes every rhyme dropped and every line painted.”¹⁴⁹ In other words, hip-hop says what rappers experience and the way it is said constitutes the poetry of the hip-hop MC.

A rapper is a poet-narrator who uses aspects of the harsh reality of ghetto life and transforms them into their language. The stories rappers tell are experiences lived on the streets and told in a language inherent to the ghetto, which at times seems as unreal as any environment in a fictional narrative. The themes, places and characters featured in rap narratives of the 1980s New York share one thing in common, the Bronx. These lyrical stories revolving around life in the Bronx provide a comprehensive insight into the

¹⁴⁷ Darby and Shelby, eds., 68.

¹⁴⁸ Kato, 192.

¹⁴⁹ Kato, 191.

atmosphere which, as one could imagine, leaves its mark on an artist's life. This subgenre of hip-hop, appropriately labelled as conscious and political, therefore incorporates narratives whose subject matter overflows with pain, desperation and anger lived in New York's burning borough. Yet, the Bronx also gave birth to the revolutionary movement that shook American culture and produced new storytellers and poets who developed a unique language full of sharp rhymes, energetic rhythm and sly wordplay.

4. Rap as a Poetic Expression

While the stories told in rap lyrics present memoirs of the devastated ghetto youth and their estrangement from American society, rap storytelling is but a part of the general expression of rap. Certainly a major part, rap narratives are told as poems, crafted with the restraints of rhythm and rhyme, a focus and restraint which constitutes another major part of rap. The content of those rap songs that are sometimes referred to as "rapping about rapping" incorporates the act of rhyming as the subject of the rhymes and MCs who turn their attention to the craft behind their art.¹⁵⁰ As rappers use the forms that constitute the craft of poetry, their rap expression is eventually a poetic expression. Like poetry, a Horatian concept of *ut pictura poesis*¹⁵¹, his analogy of how poetry could be perceived as painting, is applicable to rap lyrics. Some rap lyrics present a smooth and relaxed portrayal of the joys of rap life, while others portray violent and dark aspects of gang atmosphere. In addition to the varying subject matter of rap songs, the mood is always set by the vocal delivery of a rapper.

Adam Bradley says that "every rap song is a poem waiting to be performed."¹⁵² Moreover, rap, like poetry, is not exactly speech, nor song and yet it employs features of

¹⁵⁰ Bradley, 193.

¹⁵¹ Horace, *Ars Poetica*.

¹⁵² Bradley, xi.

both.¹⁵³ The similarities between rap and poetry concerned rappers, critics and scholars from the genre's very emergence. Many rappers see themselves as genuine poets who contribute considerably to the canon of African American poetry. However, due to rap's reliance on the musical form, the instrumental beat accompanying rap lyrics and MC's vocal performance, it is primarily classified as a genre of music. Furthermore, certain key elements of rap, such as rhythm, rely heavily both on the act of oral delivery and musical form. As a consequence, the poetic metre of rap lyrics is strictly related to the beat's rhythm, or as Bradley states: "simply put, a rap verse is the product of one type of rhythm (that of language) being fitted to another (that of music)."¹⁵⁴ For that reason, this chapter focuses on the poetic features of rap that do not rely on the musical part of rap. These features include the various use of rhymes, wordplay, figures of speech, tropes and phenomena which developed in rap's many varieties of using language.

Rap lyrics transcribed in a proper manner noticeably resemble lines of poetry. Moreover, transcription reveals the lyrics as genuine poems in which one could distinguish many formal features of poetry which would not be as possible when only listened to.¹⁵⁵ As a consequence, reading rap lyrics as poems provides a different, more focused view on their form and content. This allows for a more in-depth understanding of the language and the messages MCs of the 1980s used to communicate the African American culture for the rest of the world. This chapter examines the selected texts as they are transcribed into lines and attempts to contrast and compare them using specific methods of literary analysis. The analyses are organized in a manner which projects the development of the poetic language of rap, the various rap personae and their attitudes towards rhyming, eventually leading to the conclusive lyrics that establish rap as a sophisticated literary mechanism.

¹⁵³ Bradley, xvii.

¹⁵⁴ Bradley, xv.

¹⁵⁵ Bradley, xxii.

“The New Rap Language” by the Treacherous Three shows how rhymes and wordplay work as one of the primary aesthetically pleasing aspects of the rap lyrics. The song exhibits rappers’ achievement of playful wordplay delivered with frequent, sharp internal rhymes. The lyrics formulate the fundamentals of rap language which allows rap to operate as poetry, a theme which further appears in the following lyrics.

“Ain’t No Half Steppin” by Big Daddy Kane presents rap as poetry and a rapper as a poet. The MC uses highly figurative language and intricate figures of speech that contribute to the poetry of the lyrics. Moreover, he declares himself a poet of the rap genre, which further emphasizes his creative use of language. The lyrics introduce a rapper coming into the field of poetry by demonstrating their lyrical skills, a necessity for the rap persona to be successful.

“I Ain’t No Joke” by Eric B. & Rakim introduces one of the most acclaimed lyricists of rap, the rapper Rakim. This MC uses such forms as multisyllabic rhymes that spread through various lines to demonstrate how lyrical virtuosity manifests itself in the genre. In addition to that, the lyrics present one common subject matter of the rap canon: braggadocio. The song introduces the confident rapper who uses his knowledge about own lyrical ability to assert his superiority in the rap genre. This is a theme which relates to the lyrical competitiveness frequently found in rap.

“The Godfather” by Spoonie Gee develops that braggadocio humorously. The MC creates a symbolic figure for himself and presents it in lightened vocabulary in order to maintain a degree of humour and signifying. Rather than slamming other rappers, the MC here highlights various positive attributes of his personality and presents the rapper-poet who introduces humour and linguistic playfulness as a poetic device.

“My Philosophy” by Boogie Down Productions concludes the chapter, with KRS-One, the MC behind the lyrics, declaring the principles of rap as an artistic discipline. He presents certain key elements of rap as an art form, which focuses primarily on the sound,

form and content of language. The MC emphasizes creativity and originality as the primary means to maintain lyrical quality in rap. By reiterating what makes great rap lyrics and a great MC, KRS-One codifies the language of rap as a language of unique quality inherent to the Black culture of hip-hop.

4.1. “The New Rap Language” by the Treacherous Three: Rhyme and Wordplay as Key Methods

The lyrics of “The New Rap Language” by the Treacherous Three, as the song’s title suggests, provide a very eloquent introduction to the then-emerging genre of music and lyrical expression. Released in 1980, (106) the song introduced the very influential and ahead-of-its-time style called “speed-rapping.”¹⁵⁶ The pioneering hip-hop group, consisting of Kool Moe Dee, DJ Easy Lee, L. A. Sunshine, Special K and Spoonie Gee,¹⁵⁷ produced lyrics in which emphasis is put on the technique of language as an aesthetic, almost percussive, instrument. This technique further introduces language of rap which revolves around the use of poetic devices, fast rhetoric and sharp wordplay. The song’s relatively long duration of eight minutes provides an almost hypnotic listen of the rappers relentlessly exchanging sharp rhymed statements and witty puns. The analysis in this section focuses on the poetic devices rhyme and wordplay. By using these forms which are essential for poetry, the Treacherous Three further demonstrate that language of poetry and language of rap work very similarly in regard to the sound of words.

Rhyme is one of the central features of rap lyricism. As many MCs refer to their lyrics as “rhymes”, the ability to rhyme is the key method of turning language into rap.¹⁵⁸ Rhyme, the established consonance of syllables and words,¹⁵⁹ is also the central formal

¹⁵⁶ Hess, *Hip-Hop in America: A Regional Guide*, 35.

¹⁵⁷ Hess, *Hip-Hop in America: A Regional Guide*, 16.

¹⁵⁸ Paul Edwards, *How To Rap: The Art and Science of the Hip-Hop MC* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2009) 81.

¹⁵⁹ Cuddon, 750.

motive used in the lyrics of “The New Rap Language”. The song’s very simple subject matter of the MCs praising themselves for their lyrical and rhyming abilities is strongly supported by the very method the MCs of the Treacherous Three express themselves, thus supporting the lyrics’ authenticity. Instead of relying solely on the “standard” rhyme, defined by Philip Hobsbaum as “the exact echoing of a sound at the end of one line by the sound at the end of another line,”¹⁶⁰ the MCs use various extensions to their rhyming scheme.

The most prominent of those aspects is the use of internal rhyme, or rhyme appearing within a line.¹⁶¹ Despite a few exceptions, the lyrics follow the internal rhyme pattern, with every one or two lines focusing on a specific sound. This can be seen in the following lines: “Well, I’m always **clean**, I’m not too **mean**, the baddest man you ever **seen** / The finger-**poppin**, **nonstoppin** man who gets the party **rockin**” (108) or “Hey, **diddle-diddle** on the **fiddle**, ’cause the cat is in the **middle** / Will he rhyme or will he **riddle**, does he want a tender **vittle**?” (109) As these excerpts demonstrate, the decisive purpose of rhyming in “The New Rap Language” is to create as many “quicksilver-tongued and metaphor-drunk”¹⁶² rhymes as the relatively condensed format of hip-hop lyrics allows. The Treacherous Three employ a huge number of different sounds that are contained in a variety of words, known and unknown.

The method of composing phrases from mutually consonant words and rhymes, creates a space for unique and original wordplay. This unusual and clever use of language¹⁶³ plays an important role in “The New Rap Language” because it allows the MCs to maintain the persistent rhyming quality of the lyrics. Moreover, the search for appropriately sounding words enables the MCs to express themselves in a new creative

¹⁶⁰ Philip Hobsbaum, *Metre, Rhythm and Rhyme* (London: Routledge, 1996) 27.

¹⁶¹ Cuddon, 751.

¹⁶² Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin Press, 2005) 149.

¹⁶³ Edwards, 56.

way, as can be seen in the following lines: “And an ocean full of lotion ’cause it’s like his magic potion / But my notion’s that the potion’s workin some kind of commotion” (109). While the consonant sound is maintained, Kool Moe Dee, the rapper behind this verse, uses figurative language to communicate his meaning. An ocean full of lotion serving like a magic potion refers to an advanced skill of rhyming and the MC’s possession of the “magic” of rhyming, the theme which is maintained throughout the lyrics. Furthermore, Kool Moe Dee states that possession and application of the rhyming abilities brings joy and excitement to the lyricist’s audience. This phrase, among a great number of other phrases in “The New Rap Language”, contribute to the notion that rap, as a primarily oral poetry, relies more heavily on devices of sound than literary poetry.¹⁶⁴ MCs therefore use those devices in more specific instances, suited for the demands of oral expression.¹⁶⁵ As a result, the lyrics of “The New Rap Language” provide an exhaustive exploration of the sounds and forms of the English language.

Adam Bradley states that “rap’s reliance on rhyme distinguishes it from almost every other form of contemporary music and from most contemporary literary poetry.”¹⁶⁶ The Treacherous Three in the lyrics of “The New Rap Language” use rhyme as the primary technique of communicating their lyrics and emphasizing rhyme’s ability to produce aural pleasure. This allows them to create new and original ways of communication and the form of language. By using the innovative methods of expressing thoughts and binding language in a consonant, musically pleasing way, wordplay and rhymes in rap could be perceived as one of rap’s many attempts to refashion language.¹⁶⁷ The group’s fast rhymes and wordplay then demonstrate how the rap language works as a set of poetic forms which allow MCs to produce their rap poems.

¹⁶⁴ Bradley, xvii.

¹⁶⁵ Bradley, xviii.

¹⁶⁶ Bradley, 51.

¹⁶⁷ Bradley, 91.

4.2. “Ain’t No Half Steppin’” by Big Daddy Kane: Rapper as a Poet

The formation of the rap language, as presented in the previous chapter, clearly suggests that rap lyrics should be considered as poetry. The same approach, therefore, could be applied to their authors, rappers and MCs, who through their lyrical abilities and work with language embody the poet’s persona. Big Daddy Kane, the MC behind the song called “Ain’t No Half Steppin’” charmed his audience with his deep and alluring voice. His charismatic persona, stylish delivery and mainly his work with words made him one of the most celebrated rappers of the 1980s. Rapper Craig G says that “Kane put together all the principles of a great MC, which was cadence, just the level of coolness on the mic to deliver his stuff and punchlines.”¹⁶⁸ Moreover, Kane is often considered as a prominent pioneer of the rap expression who expanded rap’s reliance on rhymed couplets and simple similes to lyrical innovations beyond the framework of both rap and poetry. (136) In the lyrics of “Ain’t No Half Steppin’” Kane uses various poetic devices, including the previously mentioned rhymes and wordplay, to establish himself as a poet and to present his language as poetic.

Kane’s lyrics here follow a similar pattern of presenting the MC’s lyrical qualities in a slightly exaggerated self-praising manner as the one in “The New Rap Language” by the Treacherous Three. However, the focus shifts from the ability to maintain the poetic form of rhyme alone to the application of more profoundly figurative and rhythmically structured language. For that reason, “Ain’t No Half Steppin’” exhibits the MC’s highly poetic and elaborate style. Bradley says that “for the MC, just as for any artist, style is the sum of rules and creativity.”¹⁶⁹ Kane’s style incorporates figures of speech, such as metaphor or simile, in order to produce subtle and playful phrases. This can be seen in the following lines: “I speak clearly so you can understand / Put words together like

¹⁶⁸ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution*, ep. 3 *The New Guard*, 34 min. 14 sec.

¹⁶⁹ Bradley, 124.

Letterman” (144) Again, the MC elevates his ability to perform and to express himself purely. Nevertheless, the line that follows presents a very creative use of simile, a figure of speech where explicit comparison is used to enhance an image or a concept.¹⁷⁰ Kane likens his ability to work with language to David Letterman, the acclaimed American comedian and host of the famous television show *Late Night with David Letterman*, whose ability to communicate publicly and to work with language propelled him to the highest levels of his profession. Furthermore, Kane uses the simile as a deconstruction of the word “Letterman” as a compound of the words “letter” and “man” suggesting that he works with language as a literal “man of letters”. The use of this simile, which refers to a concrete image and simultaneously creates an image in the process, shows that Big Daddy Kane exercises what Bradley calls “the concept of genius, the capacity of particular artists to create new possibilities within the context of inherited forms.”¹⁷¹ This process allows the MC to combine the forms of poetry with the language of rap, thus becoming both rapper and poet.

Big Daddy Kane frequently asserts his poetic quality and his poetic persona in the lyrics of “Ain’t No Half Steppin’”. The rapper was undoubtedly aware of his lyrical abilities, as he commented on his progress: “I believe that I know how to deliver metaphors in ways that’s not as typical as I used to.” (137) This commentary along with his own self-entitlement as a poet additionally contributes to the idea of the rapper as a poet. By using figures of speech that stem from poetic tradition, Kane operates with a specific mode of language which is different from casual speech or other literary genres, such as prose or drama, both defined by their own respective rules. Moreover, Kane’s explicit statements about his poetic identity often recur in the lyrics: “I’m the authentic poet to get lyrical” (143) or “The creator, conductor of poetry.” (144) These statements

¹⁷⁰ Cuddon, 828.

¹⁷¹ Bradley, 124.

alone do not grant the MC authority to declare himself a poet, but what strengthens his claim is the aforementioned use of poetic language. Moreover, Kane acknowledges that this mode of expression is inherent to poetry, by using it consciously he expands not only his own insight on his lyrical capability but the extent of the rap language as a whole. (137)

Big Daddy Kane demonstrates how rap transcends its musical boundaries into a sphere of poetry. He uses the already established rap language in the lyrics of “Ain’t No Half Steppin’” to manifest its poetic potential and to use this potential to become a poet. The suggestion that rap is a continuation of poetry, which is to be composed over the beat’s rhythm and performed orally, proposes that rap songs work on the same formal and aesthetic principle as poems. Rappers, therefore, use language to manifest their lyrical skills in a very similar manner as poets.

4.3. “I Ain’t No Joke” by Eric B. & Rakim: Rap as Lyrical Virtuosity

As the previous section established rap as a form of poetry and the figure of a rapper as a poet, the discussion in this section turns to a rapper whose lyrical virtuosity exceeded his contemporaries. The lyrics of Rakim, the MC in question, show that lyrical finesse and thoughtful composition of language are a fundamental part of the rap lyrics comparable to poetry. Rakim is considered as one of the most influential MCs of all time, with a style of writing and rapping that is as relevant today as it was when the group started producing songs in the mid-1980s. (168) The rapper acquired formal musical training as a jazz saxophonist and incorporated this in his phrasing, rhythm and the musical sensitivity of his language.¹⁷² His style, therefore, would almost single-handedly set the tone for what hip-hop has become today.¹⁷³ The lyrics of “I Ain’t No Joke”

¹⁷² Bradley, 142.

¹⁷³ Wheeler, *Hip-Hop Evolution, ep. 3 The New Guard*, 35 min. 42 sec.

released in 1987¹⁷⁴ manifest those mentioned attributes in their sophisticated use of rhymes and euphonicly intriguing figures of speech. Moreover, the lyrics introduce an important aspect of the rap genre called braggadocio, where the MC's knowledge of his own unparalleled lyrical abilities compels him to challenge and oppose other MCs in order to assert superiority.

Rakim's most remarkable treatment of rhyming in the lyrics of "I Ain't No Joke" is his use of multisyllabic rhymes that are distributed both within a line and across various lines. This approach of self-referencing corresponding sounds allows Rakim to employ rhyme both as "a mnemonic device and as a form of rhythmic pleasure."¹⁷⁵ These rhyming multisyllabic chains highlight the meaning of the rhymed words, which are structured accordingly to the lyrics' subject matter and remain dynamic in the lyrics' rhythm. This method can be seen, for example, in the following lines: "Another **enemy**, not even a **friend of me** / 'Cause you'll get fried in the end when you **pretend to be**" (175) Here, Rakim employs three multisyllabic structures as rhymes distributed across two lines. The first one, the word "enemy", signals that the structure is composed of three syllables. The second one expands the notion of Rakim's lyrical capacity in that he employs three separate monosyllabic words, "friend of me", in order to complement the previous, three-syllable word. In addition to that, the third rhyme further demonstrates how Rakim operates with language. The three-syllable rhyming structure occurs in three words that contain four syllables. Yet, the unstressed quality of the first syllable in the word "pretend" allows him to complement the previous rhymes so that when performed orally, the rhythm maintains its motion. Adam Bradley states that: "Rakim, one of rap's greatest rhyme innovators, emphasizes the importance of an MC's control of language on the

¹⁷⁴ Eric B. & Rakim, "I Ain't No Joke" *Genius*, Genius Media Group, Inc., <<https://genius.com/Eric-b-and-rakim-i-aint-no-joke-lyrics>> 14 April 2021.

¹⁷⁵ Bradley, xviii.

smallest possible levels.”¹⁷⁶ The excerpt from “I Ain’t No Joke” demonstrates how Rakim deconstructs the language into miniscule units and uses their sonic qualities to create a dynamic and rhythmic flow of language. Extensive control over their own words often leads MCs to incorporate this into the subject matter of their lyrics and to project their rapping personality as superior in the context of other rappers.

Rakim, in “I Ain’t No Joke”, uses profoundly composed and musical language. He also addresses an unknown figure whom he confronts with his lyrical abilities and challenges them to improve their own. It would be reasonable to assign the addressee’s identity to that of an unknown MC, as John P. Pittman says that “one of the most pervasive motifs is a rapper’s claim to be superior as a rapper to all others on the scene.”¹⁷⁷ This type of lyrical content called braggadocio is frequently used in rap lyrics.¹⁷⁸ The song’s title implies that Rakim considers himself and, more importantly, his lyrical style as important and serious. The aforementioned lyrical virtuosity for which Rakim is frequently acclaimed serves as a ground for his message towards fellow rappers. This phenomenon can be seen in the following lines:

Cause you’ll get fried in the end when you pretend to be
Competing, ’cause I just put your mind on pause
And I complete when you compare my rhyme with yours
I wake you up and as I stare in your face you seem stunned,
remember me
The one you got your idea from?
But soon you start to suffer, the tune’ll get rougher
When you start to stutter, that’s when you had enough of
Biting, it’ll make you choke, you can’t provoke
You can’t cope, you should have broke because I ain’t no joke
(175)

The excerpt demonstrates the harsh delivery of Rakim’s braggadocio. However, its position in the context of the whole lyrics is not coincidental. In the preceding lines Rakim describes and demonstrates his philosophy of writing by using a variety of poetic devices,

¹⁷⁶ Bradley, 40.

¹⁷⁷ Darby and Shelby, eds., 34.

¹⁷⁸ Edwards, 25.

discussion on the nature of hip-hop and rap and his process of working with language. Moreover, this contrastive form of subject matter is maintained throughout the rest of the song; Rakim alternately asserts his lyrical superiority through the previously mentioned methods and then turns back to his addressee to encounter them. Bradley states that “this form of lyrical celebration of self and denigration of others can be puerile, but it can also be gratifying.”¹⁷⁹

It is important to note that the highly competitive environment of the hip-hop genre stems from the historical circumstances of gang rivalry and ghetto life where social status, which can be seen as analogous to rapper’s status, contributed to an individual’s better life conditions and reputation. This phenomenon of status and competition is fittingly illustrated in “I Ain’t No Joke” by Eric B. & Rakim. The lyrics exhibit thoroughly structured language whose aesthetic design and advanced figures of speech allow the MC to declare himself a virtuoso lyricist and to attack other MCs to discredit their abilities. The braggadocio then stems from the MCs’ need to assert his status as superior lyricists in order to maintain his popularity, to discredit their opponents or to become the best player in the hip-hop game. It is a game whose rules emphasize as much a rapper’s lyrical abilities as their capability to establish themselves as rulers of the rap genre.

4.4. “The Godfather” by Spoonie Gee: Rap Lyrics as Expressions of Social Status

Rappers who boast about their lyrical quality are fundamental to the rap canon. Big Daddy Kane’s declaration that his lyrics are poetry and he himself is a poet in “Ain’t No Half Steppin’” and Rakim’s elaborately delivered statement about his verbal superiority in “I Ain’t No Joke” prove that the poetic treatment of language, including rhymes, rhythm, figures of speech and tropes, plays a crucial role in rap. Moreover, this

¹⁷⁹ Bradley, 180.

subject matter of self-praising and scorning other MCs is undeniably the most common form of content in the hip-hop genre.¹⁸⁰ Spoonie Gee, from the previously discussed group the Treacherous Three, introduces a more relaxed approach to this “rhapsodic competitiveness,”¹⁸¹ as Pittman describes. In the lyrics of “The Godfather” Spoonie Gee incorporates a humorous tone and a smooth delivery of precise rhymes into a subject matter whose bragging content does not assert itself as intensely as the previous examples. Since the MC employs a common rhyming structure of rhymes falling at the end of lines in couplets,¹⁸² this section focuses more on his lyrical voice than on the form.

Spoonie Gee calls himself “the godfather of rap”¹⁸³ in the recurring choruses of the lyrics. By that he introduces the concept of a symbolic figure as the central lyrical subject. This transformation from a regular MC to the fashioned and slightly exaggerated “essential” persona of the rap genre allows him to develop his delivery of self-praising, which is as hyperbolic as his symbolic figure. Spoonie Gee, one of the pioneers and originators of the rap language, assumes the status of a godfather and presents his contribution to the new cultural movement in a humorous fashion, maintaining the notion of hyperbole. In his discussion of authors masking themselves, previously mentioned in the chapter about the lyrics of “The Message”, Mickey Hess describes a concept he calls “the doctrine of impersonality of the artist” which leads the audience to perceive the poet’s voice not as a voice of their real identity but rather as the one presented in poems.¹⁸⁴ Spoonie Gee employs this method in order to assert various attributes to his fictional character.

¹⁸⁰ Bradley, 180.

¹⁸¹ Darby and Shelby, eds., 34.

¹⁸² Bradley, 78.

¹⁸³ Spoonie Gee, “The Godfather”, *Genius*, Genius Media Group, Inc., <<https://genius.com/Spoonie-gee-the-godfather-lyrics>> 17 April 2021.

¹⁸⁴ Hess, *Is Hip-Hop Dead?* 70.

As the self-proclaimed godfather of rap, the MC in this track explains how his role in the earliest stages of the development of hip-hop matters, perhaps more than his lyrical abilities. This can be seen in the following lines:

I'm not the king of rap, not lord, not prince
I was a young kid rappin', I've been rockin' ever since
I was just a young buck, I didn't care what
MCs were in my way they never uttered a but¹⁸⁵

The image of a kid is analogous to the hip-hop genre at its birth. Spoonie Gee explains that he does not possess the lyrical traits of the supposed king of rap, yet his place as a godfather of rap is fortified by his perseverance and contribution to the genre in its youth. This adheres to the notion that the need to maintain authenticity in hip-hop requires that the rapper's voice relies on their real personality and achievements.¹⁸⁶ Spoonie Gee further introduces the aspects of current hip-hop culture, such as the male fondness for being surrounded by women, demonstrations of how this rap lifestyle made him a lot of money and generally how fun and enjoyable hip-hop life is. All these features fall under the symbolic figure of the godfather of rap whom Spoonie Gee uses to elevate the subject matter into a playful representation of hip-hop culture.

Hess states: "A hip-hop persona may be composed in response to the conflict inherent in selling one's identity while maintaining in lyrics that this artist's identity matches the performer's."¹⁸⁷ Spoonie Gee uses the titular figure of his "The Godfather" as a symbolic voice to deliver the lyrics' subject matter of humorous braggadocio and the life of a hip-hop lyricist in general. The hip-hop life is therefore a key theme in the lyrical canon of rap, the bragging Black poet is consequently its main voice. This cultural phenomenon emerged, according to Tricia Rose, "as a source for youth of alternative identity formation and social status."¹⁸⁸ The new cultural identity of the young African

¹⁸⁵ Spoonie Gee, "The Godfather".

¹⁸⁶ Hess, *Is Hip-Hop Dead?* 78.

¹⁸⁷ Hess, *Is Hip-Hop Dead?* 74.

¹⁸⁸ Ramsey, Jr., 165.

Americans and their need to maintain their position in the artistic environment of this culture facilitated hip-hop to become an accessible platform where voices could speak, and people could be heard. As hip-hop progressively gained popularity and a wider audience, MCs refined their lyrical skills and increased their knowledge of the genre itself. Rap therefore transformed from the rhyming verbal discipline into a medium for cultural communication.

4.5. “My Philosophy” by Boogie Down Productions: Rap as an Artistic Discipline

Spoonie Gee’s song “The Godfather” establishes the key thematic elements of hip-hop culture and highlights the essential aspects of the life of a rap lyricist. This section turns to a text that substantiates rap as an artistic discipline. The author of the lyrics, KRS-One from the group Boogie Down Productions, uses the thematic frame of a lecture in the lyrics of “My Philosophy”. Correspondingly, he assumes the role of a lecturer to communicate the importance of hip-hop culture and the rap genre as an unequivocal part of American poetry and culture. Richard Shusterman says that “many of the more thoughtful MCs claim not only to be creative artists but also philosophers”.¹⁸⁹ These rappers, including KRS-One, use their poetic voice to communicate the principles of hip-hop philosophy. They see their poetic expression of truth as a crucial element in achieving better political, economic, social and cultural conditions for the African American hip-hop society.¹⁹⁰ The lyrics of “My Philosophy” present an MC’s formulation of the key features of hip-hop philosophy.

KRS-One begins his discussion by professing that the fundamental condition for artistic communication in hip-hop is through mutual respect and respect towards the more acclaimed voices in rap, such as himself. This type of social and cultural status, which is

¹⁸⁹ Darby and Shelby, eds., 41.

¹⁹⁰ Darby and Shelby, eds., 41.

partly referred to in Spoonie Gee's "The Godfather", is gained by authenticity and originality, as the following lines demonstrate:

So please stop burnin and learn to earn respect
'Cause that's just what KR collects
See, what do you expect when you rhyme like a soft punk?
You walk down the street and get jumped
You gotta have style and learn to be original
And everybody's gonna wanna dis you
Like me, we stood up for the South Bronx (151-152)

The MC maintains that the culture greatly values both the form and content of rap lyrics. Rappers' rhyming finesse is the demonstration of their linguistic capacity and needs to be used to express their message, which is to be told truthfully and thoughtfully. Impact on the culture is therefore made by MCs who present innovations of techniques that surpass their own personal style.¹⁹¹ Another aspect visible in the excerpt is the authenticity of the subject matter. As KRS-One mentions his part in representing New York's South Bronx, he emphasizes that relying on the MCs' place of origin is crucial. Both a source for inspiration and an important theme in hip-hop culture, the place of origin and its representation in rap is an important theme which contributes to an MC's need to prove their authenticity.

Bradley and DuBois state that "an interest in cultural studies will likely lead one to situate rap in relation to its sociological, geographical, or racial context." (XXXI) These concepts, as illustrated in the chapter about conscious and political hip-hop, serve as crucial themes for the subject matter of rap lyrics. Racism, poverty and place of origin, among other themes, occur frequently in the early rap canon as a means of contemplation and reaction towards the outside world. KRS-One provides insight on these concepts and contrasts them with their treatment in rap lyrics. In the following lines he describes what differentiates his voice from others:

¹⁹¹ Bradley, 135.

Mainly what I write is for the average New Yorker
Some MCs be talkin and talkin
Tryin to show how Black people are walkin
But I don't walk this way to portray
Or reinforce stereotypes of today
Like all my brothers eat chicken and watermelon
Talk broken English and drug sellin
See, I'm tellin and teaching pure facts
The way some act in rap is kind of wack
And it lacks creativity and intelligence (153)

The MC asserts that his portrayal of the Black community differs from the stereotypical portrayal that is often poorly delivered by other MCs. The emphasis is put on creativity and intelligence, as the key instrument in establishing rap as an artistic discipline. Furthermore, the song states that MCs who promote racial stereotypes and deliberately exploit rap do not belong in the canon. KRS-One hints that the rapper needs to speak truthfully with a perspective on improving the cultural or social background which they represent. As Hess comments: "The message is that growing up Black means growing up poor. The pervading notion is that social disadvantage gives MCs an inimitable quality and a voice to tell their stories"¹⁹² The key factors which make rap lyrics genuine pieces of art are therefore the authentic voice and the artistic vision of a rapper who is determined to contribute to the rap canon with lyrics that are true to the needs of Black culture.

The lyrics of "My Philosophy" summarize the key principles on which rap operates as an art form. The proposal that rap is a full-fledged artistic discipline is further enhanced by the MC's insistent tone used to promote creative and intelligent writing as the source for rap lyrics. KRS-One outlines his philosophical manifesto about hip-hop culture, emphasizing the importance of lyrical expression as the primary source for cultural communication. He asserts that both the message and the form of delivery, the theme and the poetry, are necessary to transform the harsh reality of gang violence and

¹⁹² Hess, *Is Hip-Hop Dead?* 8.

poverty into aesthetic innovation and art.¹⁹³ Bradley says that “together, rap’s formal qualities shape narrative structure even as they are shaped to fit narrative.”¹⁹⁴ KRS-One stresses the significance of having both lyrical finesse and an authentic narrative and rap’s close affinity with poetry becomes a tactile topic for academic discourse.

As much as rappers operate as poet-narrators, they primarily operate as poets. They are poets who use unique language, rooted in the oral tradition of African American culture and producing the official language of the cultural behemoth that is twenty-first century hip-hop. The rap language employs a wide range of poetic forms that are adapted to the personal styles of respective rappers, spanning from nimble rhymes to rhymes that carry multiple lines and witty wordplay which produces unexpected puns. Each of these forms is presented exceptionally, as the unique voices of rappers dictate. Rappers incorporate their eccentric personalities into their verses and together with their lyrical abilities attempt to succeed in the great competition that is rap. Rap then is an unparalleled lyrical discipline in which lyrical virtuosity and personal prowess, style and ego, elevate ordinary block party rhymers into globally celebrated African American poets.

5. Conclusion

Examining the hip-hop and rap of the 1980s Bronx through the lens of literary theory demonstrates that poetry truly appears in many shapes and forms. The revolutionary movement which began the process of Black cultural resurrection introduced a new musical genre and a verbal expression which allowed the shattered ghetto youth to rise from the ashes of the burning borough and gave them a voice to testify the horrors of the ghetto life. The 1970s Bronx, during a failure of urban planning and careless policies, provided the opportunity for an alternative approach to art. As a result,

¹⁹³ Kato, 191.

¹⁹⁴ Bradley, 161.

Black MCs expanded the long heritage of unique poetic tradition into an entertaining genre which blends innovative musical techniques with tireless flow of rhymes, puns and wordplay. Hip-hop and rap therefore transformed hardships of the ghetto into a poetic expression which announced the beginning of a new poetry.

The literary analysis of the selected texts shows that even the most violent and terrible environments can produce verses and narratives that explore human experience and capacities of self-realization. The rap lyrics discussed here exhibit many qualities and values inherent to literature and poetry. They tell captivating stories, provide poignant social commentaries and discuss urgent socio-political issues while embracing the many aesthetic features of poetic language, utilizing creative narrative structures and exploring far corners of the English language. Moreover, rap lyrics provide insight into the many forms and shapes of Black culture in the United States. The stories told in rap uncover how African Americans experience the world and, most importantly, how they expand their ordinary everyday speech into an extraordinary language of rap. And it is the combination of these which brings rap and poetry together.

Rap is poetry. Hip-hop is a literary genre. The immense popularity that hip-hop and rap have gained over the past few decades signifies that audiences around the world are particularly interested in lyricism, probably more than ever. Given that this musical genre relies primarily on verbal expression, the messages and stories rappers tell have a significant impact on the communicative function and perception of culture. This then suggests that research done on modern forms of literature and culture could consider the inclusion of rap lyrics, which exhibit impactful forms and contents while they educate, inform and entertain.

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Appendices

The Last Poets – Niggers Are Scared of Revolution¹⁹⁵

Niggers are scared of revolution
But niggers shouldn't be scared of revolution
Because revolution is nothing but change
And all niggers do is change

Niggers come in from work and change into pimping clothes
And hit the streets to make some quick change
Niggers change their hair from black to red to blond
And hope like hell their looks will change
Nigger kill other niggers just because one didn't receive the correct change
Niggers change from men to women, from women to men
Niggers change, change, change
You hear niggers say, "Things are changing? Things are changing?"
Yeah, things are changing
Niggers change into "Black" nigger things
"Black" nigger things that go through all kinds of changes
The change in the day that makes them rant and rave "Black Power, Black Power!"
And the change that comes over them at night
As they sigh and moan, "White thighs, ooh, white thighs"
Niggers always goin' through bullshit change
But when it comes for real change

Niggers are scared of revolution

Niggers are actors, niggers are actors
Niggers act like they are in a hurry
To catch the first act of the "Great White Hope"
Niggers try to act like Malcolm
And when the white man doesn't react toward them like he did Malcolm
Niggers want to act violently
Niggers act so cool and slick, causing white people to say,
"What makes you niggers act like that?"
Niggers act like you ain't never seen nobody act before
But when it comes to acting out revolution
Niggers say, "I can't dig them actions!"

Niggers are scared of revolution

Niggers are very untogether people
Niggers talk about getting high and riding around in L's
Niggers should get high and ride to hell
Niggers talk about pimping
Pimping that, pimping what? Pimping yours, pimping mine

¹⁹⁵ The Last Poets, "Niggers Are Scared of Revolution" *Genius*. Genius Media Group, Inc.
<<https://genius.com/The-last-poets-niggers-are-scared-of-revolution-annotated>> 2 May 2021.

Just to be pimping is a helluva line
Niggers are very untogether people
Niggers talk about the mind, talk about
"My mind is stronger than yours," "I got that bitch's mind uptight!"
Niggers don't know a damn thing about the mind, or they'd be right

Niggers are scared of revolution

Niggers fuck, niggers fuck, fuck, fuck
Niggers love the word fuck
They think it's so fuckin' cute, they fuck you around
The first thing they say when they're mad is, "Fuck it!"
You play a little too much with them, they say "Fuck you"
When it's time to TCB
Niggers are somewhere fucking
Try to be nice to them, they fuck over you
Niggers don't realize while they doin' all this fucking
They're getting fucked around
And when they do realize it's too late
So niggers just get fucked up
Niggers talk about fucking
Fuckin' that, fuckin' this, fuckin' yours, fuckin' my sis
Not knowing what they're fucking for
They ain't fucking for love and appreciation
Just fucking to be fucking
Niggers fuck White thighs, Black thighs
Yellow thighs, Brown thighs
Niggers fuck ankles when they run out of thighs
Niggers fuck Sally, Linda and Sue
And if you don't watch out, niggers will fuck you!
Niggers would fuck "Fuck" if it could be fucked
But when it comes to fucking for revolutionary causes
Niggers say, "Fuck revolution!"

Niggers are scared of revolution

Niggers are players, niggers are players, are players
Niggers play football, baseball and basketball
While the white man is cuttin' off their balls
When the nigger's play ain't tight enough
To play with some black thighs
Niggers play with white thighs
To see if they still have some play left
And when there ain't no white thighs to play with
Niggers play with themselves
Niggers tell you they're ready to be liberated
But when you say "Let's go take our liberation"
Niggers reply, "I was just playin'!"
Niggers are playing with revolution and losing

Niggers are scared of revolution

Niggers do a lot of shootin', niggers do a lot of shootin'
Niggers shoot off at the mouth
Niggers shoot pool, niggers shoot craps
Niggers cut around the corners and shoot down the street
Niggers shoot sharp glances at White women
Niggers shoot dope into their arm
Niggers shoot guns and rifles on New Year's Eve
A new year that is coming in
The white police will do more shooting at them
Where are niggers when the revolution needs some shots?
Yeah, you know, niggers are somewhere shootin' the shit

Niggers are scared of revolution

Niggers are lovers, niggers are lovers are lovers
Niggers love to see Clark Gable make love to Marilyn Monroe
Niggers love to see Tarzan fuck all the natives
Niggers love to hear the Lone Ranger yell, "High ho, Silver!"
Niggers love commercials, niggers love commercials
Oh how niggers love commercials
"You can take niggers out of the country, but
You can't take the country out of niggers"
Niggers are lovers, are lovers, are lovers
Niggers loved to hear Malcolm rap, but they didn't love Malcolm
Niggers love everything but themselves
But I'm a lover too, yes I'm a lover too
I love niggers, I love niggers, I love niggers
Because niggers are me and I should only love that which is me
I love to see niggers go through changes, love to see niggers act
Love to see niggers make them plays and shoot the shit
But there is one thing about niggers I do not love
Niggers are scared of revolution

Gil Scott-Heron – The Revolution Will Not Be Televised¹⁹⁶

You will not be able to stay home, brother
You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out
You will not be able to lose yourself on skag and skip out for beer during commercials,
because
The revolution will not be televised

The revolution will not be televised
The revolution will not be brought to you by Xerox in four parts without commercial
interruptions
The revolution will not show you pictures of Nixon blowing a bugle

¹⁹⁶ Gil Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised", *Genius*, Genius Media Group, Inc., <<https://genius.com/Gil-scott-heron-the-revolution-will-not-be-televised-lyrics>> 27 April 2021.

And leading a charge by John Mitchell, General Abrams and Spiro Agnew
To eat hog maws confiscated from a Harlem sanctuary
The revolution will not be televised

The revolution will not be brought to you by the Schaefer Award Theatre
And will not star Natalie Woods and Steve McQueen or Bullwinkle and Julia
The revolution will not give your mouth sex appeal
The revolution will not get rid of the nubs
The revolution will not make you look five pounds thinner, because
The revolution will not be televised, brother

There will be no pictures of you and Willie Mae pushing that shopping cart down the
block on the dead run
Or trying to slide that color television into a stolen ambulance
NBC will not be able predict the winner at 8:32 on report from 29 districts
The revolution will not be televised

There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down brothers on the instant replay
There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down brothers on the instant replay
There will be no pictures of Whitney Young being run out of Harlem on a rail with a
brand new process
There will be no slow motion or still lifes of Roy Wilkins
Strolling through Watts in a red, black and green liberation jumpsuit that he has been
saving for just the proper occasion
Green Acres, Beverly Hillbillies and Hooterville Junction will no longer be so damn
relevant
And women will not care if Dick finally got down with
Jane on Search for Tomorrow
Because Black people will be in the street looking for a brighter day
The revolution will not be televised

There will be no highlights on the eleven o'clock news and no pictures of hairy armed
women liberationists and Jackie Onassis blowing her nose
The theme song will not be written by Jim Webb or Francis Scott Keys
Nor sung by Glen Campbell, Tom Jones, Johnny Cash, Engelbert Humperdinck, or The
Rare Earth
The revolution will not be televised

The revolution will not be right back after a message about a white tornado, white
lightning, or white people
You will not have to worry about a dove in your bedroom, the tiger in your tank, or the
giant in your toilet bowl
The revolution will not go better with Coke
The revolution will not fight germs that may cause bad breath
The revolution will put you in the driver's seat

The revolution will not be televised
Will not be televised
Will not be televised
Will not be televised

The revolution will be no re-run, brothers
The revolution will be live

Brother D with Collective Effort – How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise?¹⁹⁷

If you wanna know the truth and that's a fact
Let me hear you say, "And you know that!"
And you know that!

(What you feel?)
You dippy-dippy-dive and so-socialize
But how we gonna make the black nation rise?

While you party down yellin', "Shock the house
Get down, rock shock the house!"
The Ku Klux Klan is on the loose
Training their kids in machine gun use
Obey everything has its place and time
We can rock the house, too, as we shock your mind

What up?
We can brag and we can boast
Producin' neither bread nor butter for our breakfast toast

Look at all the things that can prove the point
Sisters in the discos, brothers in the joint

As you dippy-dippy-dive and so-socialize
But how we gonna make the black nation rise?
How we gonna make the black nation rise?

The people call me Brother-D
And I'm here to shed some light
To bring the truth right on down to earth
From where it once was out of sight
But, before I continue just let me say
This is not my ego soup
I sat down and thought and I wrote this verse
In the interest, of the group

Come on
My people, people, people, can't you see
What's really goin' on?
Unemployment's high, the housing's bad
And the schools are teaching wrong
Cancer from the water, pollution in the air
But you're partying hard, like you just don't care

¹⁹⁷ Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois, eds., *The Anthology of Rap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 33-37.

Wake up y'all, you know that ain't right

Cause that hurts everybody, black or white

Winter's cold, can't get no heat
Just move your body to the beat
While it takes you on a disco ride
Get high until you're pacified
Our youth actin' like the living dead
Ain't talkin' bout the body. Talkin' bout the head
Space out y'all to the disco rhyme
You're movin' to the rhythm but you're wastin' time
Stop and think. Do you know what's real?
Well let me educate you to the real deal
The media, is telling lies
The devil's taking off his disguise
They're killing us, in the streets
While we pay more for food that's cheap
And all you wanna do is so-socialize

How we gonna make the black nation rise?

Remember the so-called Indian?
Look what they did to him
Maybe they'll do that to us
Dare to struggle. Dare to win

I mean damn, get out of your seat!
Damn, get on your feet!
We say damn and I will repeat!
We mean damn we're tired of defeat!

Damn! No more sittin' around!
We say damn, it's time for throwin' down!

Damn. Let's even the score
Cause We're fired up and won't take no more
We're fired up! won't take no more!
We're fired up! won't take no more!
We're fired up! won't take no more!
We're fired up! won't take no more!

The story might give you stomach cramps
Like America's got concentration camps
People like Malcolm lived and died
Warning us about genocide
While you're partying on, on, on, on and on
The ovens may be hot by the break of dawn
Your party may end one day soon
When they round the niggers up in the afternoon

And you start to wonder are the people dumb
Well Martin Luther King said we'll overcome

But how we gonna make the Black Nation rise
When all you wanna do is dippy-dippy-dippy-dive?

No, no, brothers it's not like that
You're gonna rap for the people, tell 'em where it was at

Like Elijah showed us how to pool our wealth
Collectively we must do for ourselves

Don Pedro Albizu Campos he
Gave his life fighting for Puerto Rico to be free
While We fight each other without a fear
But fight the system you never dare
Well if you ain't down We'll get you first
Cause you slow us down just like a curse
Bob Marley's spirit we can't let die
Put a message in our music for I and I

Service to our people who we must redeem
Like Coltrane's horn blowin' Love Supreme

You heard what Marcus Garvey said
And we can't stand still

He said, "Up you mighty nation. You can
Accomplish what you will!"

Rising up! won't take no more!
Rising up! won't take no more!

America was built, understand
By stolen labor on stolen land
Take a second thought, as you clap and stamp
Can you rock the house from inside the camp?
As you're moving to the beat 'til the early light
This country's moving too, moving to the right
Prepare now, or get high and wait
Cause it ain't no party in a police state

Blessed are we who dare to be free
We gotta change the way we behave
You gotta sacrifice for our righteous cause
Or remain a passive slave

We're not anti- any other racial group
Just understand we're pro-Black

And we're against any one or thing
That tries to hold us back

So think, but don't take too long
The time is getting late

And deejays if you've got a mic
It's your job to educate

Well, I know my voice is not rated X
We didn't talk about money, or talk about sex
We didn't talk about clothes or cars and things
And you might be tired of my lecturin'
So while you dance and while you sing
All we wanna do is ask just one thing:

While you dippy-dippy-dive and so-socialize
Are you gonna help the Black Nation rise?

You dippy-dippy-dive and so-socialize
How we gonna make the Black Nation rise?

How We gonna make the Black Nation rise?
We gotta agitate, educate and organize!

How We gonna make the Black Nation rise?
Agitate, educate and organize!

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five – The Message¹⁹⁸

It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under

Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat
I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far
'Cause a man with a tow truck repossessed my car

Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
Ah-huh-huh-huh-huh

¹⁹⁸ Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois, eds., *The Anthology of Rap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 73-77.

It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under

Standing on the front stoop, hanging out the window
Watching all the cars go by, roaring as the breezes blow
A crazy lady livin' in a bag
Eating out of garbage pails, used to be a fag hag
Said she'll dance the tango, skip the light fandango
A zircon princess, seemed to lost her senses
Down at the peep show watching all the creeps
So she can tell her stories to the girls back home
She went to the city and got so, so saditty
She had to get a pimp, she couldn't make it on her own

Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
Ah-huh-huh-huh-huh
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under

My brother's doing bad, stole my mother's TV
Says she watches too much, it's just not healthy
All My Children in the daytime, Dallas at night
Can't even see the game or the Sugar Ray fight
The bill collectors, they ring my phone
And scare my wife when I'm not home
Got a bum education, double-digit inflation
Can't take the train to the job, there's a strike at the station
Neon King Kong standing on my back
Can't stop to turn around, broke my sacroiliac
A mid-range migraine, cancered membrane
Sometimes I think I'm going insane, I swear I might hijack a plane

Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under

My son said, "Daddy, I don't wanna go to school
'Cause the teacher's a jerk, he must think I'm a fool
And all the kids smoke reefer, I think it'd be cheaper
If I just got a job, learned to be a street sweeper
Or dance to the beat, shuffle my feet
Wear a shirt and tie and run with the creeps
'Cause it's all about money, ain't a damn thing funny
You got to have a con in this land of milk and honey
They pushed that girl in front of the train

Took her to the doctor, sewed her arm on again
Stabbed that man right in his heart
Gave him a transplant for a brand new start
I can't walk through the park 'cause it's crazy after dark
Keep my hand on my gun 'cause they got me on the run
I feel like a outlaw, broke my last glass jaw
Hear them say, 'You want some more?' Livin' on a see-saw"

Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head (Say what?)
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under

A child is born with no state of mind
Blind to the ways of mankind
God is smiling on you, but he's frowning too
Because only God knows what you'll go through
You'll grow in the ghetto living second-rate
And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate
The places you play and where you stay
Looks like one great big alleyway
You'll admire all the number-book takers
Thugs, pimps and pushers and the big money-makers
Driving big cars, spending twenties and tens
And you wanna grow up to be just like them, huh
Smugglers, scramblers, burglars, gamblers
Pickpocket peddlers, even panhandlers
You say, "I'm cool, huh, I'm no fool"
But then you wind up droppin' out of high school
Now you're unemployed, all null and void
Walking 'round like you're Pretty Boy Floyd
Turned stick-up kid, but look what you done did
Got sent up for a eight-year bid
Now your manhood is took and you're a maytag
Spend the next two years as a undercover fag
Being used and abused to serve like hell
'Til one day you was found hung dead in the cell
It was plain to see that your life was lost
You was cold and your body swung back and forth
But now your eyes sing the sad, sad song
Of how you lived so fast and died so young, so

Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
Ah-huh-huh-huh-huh

It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under
Huh, ah-huh-huh-huh-huh
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going under
Huh, ah-huh-huh-huh-huh

Yo, Mel, you see that girl there?
Yeah, man (Ooh-oooh)
Yo, that sound like Cowboy, man
Cool
Yo, what's up, Money?
Yo
Hey, where's Creole and Rahiem at, man?
I think they upstairs cooling out
So what's up for tonight, y'all?
Yo, we could go down to Fever, man
Let's go check out Junebug, man
Ayo, you know that girl Betty?
Yeah, man
Her moms got robbed, man
Not again, man (What?)
She got hurt bad
When did this happen? When did it happen?
What's goin' on?
Freeze, don't nobody move nothin', y'all know what this is
What's up?
Get 'em up, get 'em up, man
We down with Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, man
Grandmaster Five?
What is that, a gang?
No, man
Just shut—ayy, shut up, I don't wanna hear your mouth
Shut up
Excuse me, officer, officer, what's the problem?
Ain't no—you the problem, you the problem
Yo, yo, you ain't gotta push me, man
Get in the car, get in the car
Get in the God—
I said, "Get in the car"
Why is he doggin' us, man?

Grandmaster Caz – Wild Style Subway Rap¹⁹⁹

South Bronx, New York, what do I see?
Kids growing up in the community
South Bronx, New York, what do I see?

¹⁹⁹ Grandmaster Caz, "Wild Style Subway Rap", *Genius*, Genius Media Group, Inc.
<<https://genius.com/Grandmaster-caz-wild-style-subway-rap-lyrics#primary-album>> 9 April 2021.

Kids growing up in the community

Hey Caz, look at those kids over there, check 'em out
I hear you Charlie, man
You know those kids now are the grown-ups of tomorrow
They're the future
I hear that, I know where you're comin' from
That's what I'm talkin' about

Streets are filthy, crime is high
People look suspicious when you walk by
No smiles or grins as the city sins
When it comes to violence, nobody wins

Man, look how dirty everything is man
I hear that, look at that
I hate this part of the area
It's not like that everywhere, but
I just hate to see...
Terrible
Look past the garbage, over the trains
Under the ruins, through the remains
Around the crime and pollution
And tell me, where do I fit in?
South Bronx, New York that's where I dwell
To a lot of people it's a living hell
Full of frustration and poverty
But wait, that's not how it looks to me
It's a challenge and opportunity
To rise above the stink and debris
Got to start with nothing and then you built
Follow your dream until it's fulfilled!

Yo I can make that Charlie, you know by following your dream
'Cause I got a dream and that's to be number one and I'm gonna follow mine
Well, my dream is the same as yours man I wanna be up there
You know, we all have our dreams

I'm a warrior, my art is my sword
A place in society is my reward
A mind is a terrible thing to waste
Success is something we all want to taste
Everyone has a talent on the earth
And you can take it or leave it for what it's worth
No matter how hard things may seem
You've got the potential, fulfill your dream
We're the future, it's up to us
To make our home rate an "A plus"
Let your mind be pure and free to create
Then use the beat in your heart and aim to be great!

Word that's what it about man
I'm gonna do my thing and don't let nothing else hold me back
You know, just strive to be number one always
That's the same thing I told my little brother
He said he wanted to drop out of school
I had to tell man, you know
You gotta push, push, that's what it's all about man

South Bronx, New York, what do I see?
Talent rising out of the community
South Bronx, New York, what do I see?
Talent rising out of the community

South Bronx, New York, what do I see?
Talent rising out of the community
South Bronx, New York, what do I see?
Talent rising out of the community

South Bronx, New York, what do I see?
Talent rising out of the community
South Bronx, New York, what do I see?
Talent rising out of the community

Slick Rick – Children's Story²⁰⁰

(Now here's a little something that needs to be heard)

Uncle Ricky, could you read us a bedtime story?
Please, huh, please?
All right, you kids get to bed, I'll get the storybook
Y'all tucked in? Yeah
Here we go

Once upon a time not long ago
When people wore pajamas and lived life slow
When laws were stern and justice stood
And people were behavin' like they ought to: good
There lived a little boy who was misled
By another little boy and this is what he said:
"Me and you, tonight we're gonna make some cash
Robbin' old folks and makin' the dash"
They did the job, money came with ease
But one couldn't stop, it's like he had a disease
He robbed another and another and a sister and her brother
Tried to rob a man who was a D.T. undercover
The cop grabbed his arm, he started acting erratic

²⁰⁰ Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois, eds., *The Anthology of Rap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 292-294.

He said "Keep still, boy, no need for static"
Punched him in his belly and he gave him a slap
But little did he know the little boy was strapped
The kid pulled out a gun, he said "Why'd you hit me?"
The barrel was set straight for the cop's kidney
The cop got scared, the kid, he starts to figure
"I'll do years if I pull this trigger"
So he cold dashed and ran around the block
Cop radios in to another lady cop
He ran by a tree, there he saw this sister
Shot for the head, he shot back but he missed her
Looked 'round good and from expectations
So he decided he'd head for the subway stations
But she was coming and he made a left
He was runnin' top speed 'til he was outta breath
Knocked an old man down and swore he killed him
Then he made his move to an abandoned building
Ran up the stairs up to the top floor
Opened up the door there, guess who he saw? (who?)
Dave, the dope fiend shootin' dope
Who don't know the meaning of water nor soap
He said "I need bullets, hurry up, run!"
The dope fiend brought back a spanking shotgun
He went outside but there was cops all over
Then he dipped into a car – a stolen Nova
Raced up the block doing 83
Crashed into a tree near university
Escaped alive though the car was battered
Rat-a-tat-tatted and all the cops scattered
Ran out of bullets and he still had static
Grabbed a pregnant lady and pulled out the automatic
Pointed at her head and he said the gun was full o' lead
He told the cops "Back off or honey here's dead"
Deep in his heart he knew he was wrong
So he let the lady go and he starts to run on
Sirens sounded, he seemed astounded
And before long the little boy got surrounded
He dropped his gun, so went the glory
And this is the way I have to end this story
He was only seventeen, in a madman's dream
The cops shot the kid, I still hear him scream
This ain't funny so don't ya dare laugh
Just another case about the wrong path
Straight and narrow or yo' soul gets cast
Good night

(Knock him out the box, Rick

Knock him out, Rick)

- Oh boy, that Uncle Ricky is really weird

- I know right what does he mean

“Straight and narrow or yo’ soul gets cast”?

- I don't know, I think he be crackin' it up or something
- Well, good night
- Good night

Another (that's right!) Rick the Ruler presentation
Crumbs!

Boogie Down Productions – 9mm Goes Bang²⁰¹

La la-la la-la la-la la...la...la...la
La la-la la-la la-la la..la..la...la...la

Buck! Buck!

Wa da da dang
Wa da da da dang (Ay!)
Listen to my 9 millimeter go bang!
Wa da da dang
Wa da da da dang (Ay!)
This is KRS-One...

Me knew a crack dealer by the name of Peter
Had to buck him down with my 9 millimeter
He said I had his girl, I said "Now what are you? Stupid?"
But he tried to play me out and KRS-One knew it
He reached for his pistol but it was just a waste
Cos my 9 millimeter was up against his face
He pulled his pistol anyway and I filled him full of lead
But just before he fell to the ground this is what I said...

Wa da da dang
Wa da da da dang (Ay!)
Listen to my 9 millimeter go bang!
Wa da da dang
Wa da da da dang (Ay!)
This is KRS-One...

Seven days later I was chillin in the herb gate
But seven days too much when the gossip has to circulate
Puffin sensimilla I heard "knock knock knock"
But the way that they knocked it did not sound like any cop
And if it were a customer they'd ask me for a nick
So suddenly I realized it had to be a trick
I dropped down to the floor and they did not waste no time
They shot right through the door so I had to go for mine
They pumped and shot again but the suckas kept on missin
Cos I was on the floor by now, I crawled into the kitchen

²⁰¹ Boogie Down Productions, "9mm Goes Bang," *Genius*. Genius Media Group, Inc., <<https://genius.com/Boogie-down-productions-9mm-goes-bang-lyrics>> 11 April 2021.

Thirty seconds later, boy, they bust the door down
The money and the sensemi' was lyin all around
But just as they put their pistols down to take a cut
Me jumped out the kitchen, went "buck! buck! buck!"
They fall down to the floor but one was still alive
So I put my 9 millimeter right between his eyes
Looked at his partner and both of them were dead
So just before he joined his potnah this is what I said...

Wa da da dang
Wa da da da dang (Ay!)
Listen to my 9 millimeter go bang!
Wa da da dang
Wa da da da dang (Ay!)
This is KRS-One...

I gathered all the money and I ran up the block
I said "This is a perfect time to meet with Scott LaRock"
But Scott is either psychic or he has a knack for trouble
Cos Scott LaRock showed up in a all-black BMW
I jumped inside the car and we screeched off in a hurry
And Scott said "What is wrong? Relax, tell me the story"
I said "You remember Peter? Well his posse tried to kill me
I'm all right now because the sensemi' fill me"
Scott just laughed, he said "I know they're all dead
And just before you pulled the trigger this is what you said..."

Run-DMC – It's Like That²⁰²

Unemployment at a record high
People coming, people going, people born to die
Don't ask me, because I don't know why
But it's like that and that's the way it is

People in the world tryin to make ends meet
You try to ride car, train, bus, or feet
I said you got to work hard, you want to compete
It's like that and that's the way it is
Huh!

Money is the key to end all your woes
Your ups, your downs, your highs and your lows
Won't you tell me the last time that love bought you clothes?
It's like that and that's the way it is

Bills rise higher every day

²⁰² Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois, eds., *The Anthology of Rap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 268-270.

We receive much lower pay
I'd rather stay young, go out and play
It's like that and that's the way it is
Huh!

Wars going on across the sea
Street soldiers killing the elderly
Whatever happened to unity?
It's like that and that's the way it is
Disillusion is the word
That's used by me when I'm not heard
I just go through life with my glasses blurred
It's like that and that's the way it is
Huh!

You can see a lot in this lifespan
Like a bum eating out of a garbage can
You noticed one time he was your man
It's like that (what?) and that's the way it is

You should have gone to school, you could've learned a trade
But you laid in the bed where the bums have laid
Now all the time you're crying that you're underpaid
It's like that (what?) and that's the way it is
Huh!

One thing I know is that life is short
So listen up homeboy, give this a thought
The next time someone's teaching why don't you get taught?
It's like that (what?) and that's the way it is

If you really think about it times aren't that bad
The one that flexes with successes will make you glad
Stop playing start praying, you won't be sad
It's like that (what?) and that's the way it is
Huh!

When you feel you fail sometimes it hurts
For a meaning in life is why you search
Take the bus or the train, drive to school or the church
It's like that and that's the way it is

Here's another point in life you should not miss
Do not be a fool who's prejudiced
Because we're all written down on the same list
It's like that (what?) and that's the way it is
Huh!

You know it's like that and that's the way it is
Because it's like that and that's the way it is

Treacherous Three – The New Rap Language²⁰³

We rock and don't stop
Well, it's the supercalifragilisticexpialidocious
With no strings attached, no bags of tricks
This is the way we get our kicks
We're qualifying, rectifying
Rock until the day we're dying
Every time you're screaming, crying
We'll be here with no denying

We hold our honor and our pride

Just take a step and kept in stride

We set down rules, you will abide

We're gonna take you for a ride

Before we're rocking as a full
Let's introduce us one by one

I'm Special K, I'm on display
I rock across the USA

L.A. Sunshine, I rock your mind
I do it to you every time

Remember me, MC Moe Dee
The man that's at the T-O-P

I'm Spoonie Gee, as you can see
I rock the world's society
And at the end you will agree
Nobody rock the mic like me

But Special K, Sunshine, Moe Dee
You add us up, we'll equal three

And on the mic we turn it out
Young ladies fight without a doubt

And if you don't believe it's true
Just check out how we rock for you
And if you don't believe it's true
Just check out how we rock for you
And if you don't believe it's true
Just check out how we rock for you

²⁰³ Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois, eds., *The Anthology of Rap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 107-112.

Do it!

Moe Dee, you got a lotta class
Well, rock a rhyme and make it fast

The super scooper, party pooper
Man with all the super-duper
Disco breaks, have what it takes
A man who never makes mistakes
The rapping lord, I'm not a bore
The baddest man you ever saw
The money-making, earth-quaking
Man who gets the party shaking

Undefeated, never beaten
Never cheated, but succeeded
If I need it, you believe that
Rhymes are guaranteed
Wheeling, dealing, women-stealing
Casanova, booty-feeling
Understanding, reprimanding
Rocking, known as "That's the man" and

No complication, stimulation
Man who's gonna rock the nation
Lime rhyme, battle time
My opponent, he's all mine
I'm not the baddest, not the maddest
When I win I am the gladdest
No beginner, not a sinner
On the mic I'm just a winner

Well, I'm always clean, I'm not too mean
The baddest man you ever seen
The finger-popping, non-stopping
Man who gets the party rocking
I'm so vicious and bodacious
To the young, 'cause I'm delicious
Good loving I always make
I always do with no mistake

And I'm very, very, very, berry
And my favorite flavor's cherry
Oh my God, it's fame and glory
But I never tell a story
Only time I front the a mic
Because it's something that I like
To be assured the rhymes are low
I always keep some sets in store

The bad, bad, super bad
Never sad, always glad
Not a day you find him mad
Ain't nothing I never had
Sleek, sleek, so unique
Guaranteed to move your feet
So every time I play the beat
Ladies get up out their seat

The wheeling, stealing, double-dealing
Man who rocks it on a feeling
Give you more of rhymes galore
I shoot my shot, I always score
Girls on my jock and on the lock
The man who rock around the clock
I never date, I never wait
The man who set the people straight

Well I'm Spoonie Gee, as you could see
I rock the whole society
I always rock, as you can tell
I rock with all the clientele
Finesse this, do you know I will?
I keep the people staring still
Eyes swollen, rhymes tolling
Coming out this microphone

Remember me, MC Moe Dee
The man that's at the T-O-P
A ladies dream, the way it seem
When they see me, their eyes are gleaming
I'm so shocking when I'm rocking
Bound to get your fingers popping
Have no doubt, I turn it out
'Cause that's a party's all about

Equal sharing, always caring
Man who rhymes with all the daring
Satisfaction guaranteed
Giving you just what you need
I'm Special K with all the planning
Known to be the most outstanding
When I look into the mirror
Knowing there's no one sincere-er

I do-it, do-it, battle through it
I don't need no disco fluid
Ball-playing, girl-laying
On the mic I'm rhyme-saying
MC who rock viciously
Satisfaction guaranteed

Or you'll get your money back
Believe me, girl, it's not the wack

Well, I'm indeed the one that be
With any girl I wish to see
That make her smile and never frown
'Cause I'm the man who get on down
I feel they body, feel they face
And give their to— ah, tongue a taste
Stop tryin' to make 'em scream and shout
Just show 'em what it's all about

Treacherous Three as you can see

Special K

Sunshine

And Kool Moe Dee

And don't forget MC Spoonie Gee

For MCs who bite
The fast-talking rhymes
They're gonna feast
So get ready to eat
Moe Dee's the originator
So you might as well starve
'Cause you can't catch this fast beat
(Hit it, Moe)

Hey, diddle-diddle on the fiddle
'Cause the cat is in the middle
Will he rhyme or will he riddle?
Does he want a tender vittle?
Have a lot, maybe a little
Long as he can fill his middle
And an ocean full of lotion
'Cause it's like his magic potion
But my notion's that the potion
Workin' some kind of commotion
With the cat as you come in
And you don't seem to understand
Instead of high he's at the aisle
Tip his hat and then he bow
Thought the cat was found missing somewhere on the line
The only thing he hears is being deaf because of Kool Moe Dee
Or walkin' on a leash or whether talkin' on the street
Whether north or South or East
Or whether human or a beast
I'm so full of disco power

It ain't a MC that I can't devour
In a hour talking fast and he goes sour
Moe Dee, the disco tower of power
So take a deep breath, get a drink of water
Special K, you can say it, but make yours shorter

Well, I'm so sincere, just sincere
The baddest MC of the year
Say it low, say it loud
Say it, Special, say it proud
Taking every year in hell
I weigh the highest on the scale
When I rock I take a bow
Sunshine, come on and show 'em how

The girl-teasing, woman-pleasing
Take a girl, others freezing
Got the heart to play the part
I'm not too sweet, I'm not too tart
We're rapping to the funky beat
The kids all chowed like it like a treat
So come on in and get a taste
Believe me, girl, it's not a waste

The super-rhyming, fascinating
Faster rhyme originating
Number one, we're rhyme creating
Number one with no debating
If you look up on the rating
You will see that you've been waiting
And you're only commentating
And that gets to be frustrating

Yes, for real, we are the deal
And on the mic we use our skill
The latest, greatest, no one hate us
Take us home and gold plate us
Rapping raw and never borin'
And always keep you on the floor and
Rock and roll and take control
And rock until we're grey and old

The law-abiding, never fighting
Girls around are never hiding
Pain-enduring, love-ensuring
Cool, calm and most alluring
Constant on the jock
The man who make the party rock
I gratify and satisfy
Girl, just say, just say good-bye

Well, I'm letting you know I am a pro
Just give me a mic, I'm on the go

The three MCs that never freeze
That rock you on down to your knees

Like Earl the Pearl that shocked the world
Spoonie Gee attracts a girl

We're cool and calm and have the charm
Young ladies say we mean no harm

S-P-O-O-N-Y Gee

S-P-E-C-I-A-L K

The S-U-N-S-H-I-N-E

Moe Dee, all the way, y'all

To the South, to the West, to the East, to the North
(Come on, Moe Dee, yeah, go off and go off)
Well, I can shock ya and amaze ya
Then I hit ya, then I daze ya
Either way I'm gonna faze ya
But I never ever praise ya
'Cause that is your own behavior
And of course it's in our favor
And since you're on the jock
Then you can choose your favorite flavor
If you don't know what's the matter
We can serve ya on a platter
And for your delight, well, we can add a little batter
To the South, to the West, to the East, to the North
Come on, Special K and go off and go off

'Cause we're a top organization
And we're here to rock the nation
We need cooperation to perform this devastation
Have you swinging, have you swaying
On the mic and I'll be saying
No more joking, no more playing
We rock with no delaying
From the South to the West, to the East, to the North
Come on, Sunshine, go off and go off

Say rag-tag, garbage bag
Other MCs know the half
With no permission they all listen
Get their rods and they go fishing
To the bottom of the pod and bite our rhymes no matter how

The party people know we rock
So they can stay all on the jock

From the South to the West, to the East, to the North
Come on, Moe Dee, go off, go off

And to the D-A-N-O B
Well, Dano B is at the T-O-P
The Superstar, as you can see
The slicker, quicker, magic tricker
On the mix there's no one quicker
Any sign of magic tricks
There's no man quicker on the mix
He goes by the name of the Superstar
So young ladies (Ho!) from near or far
Or whether you're high-class or rather bourgeois
Whether you live close or you live far
Or whether bus, by train, or even car
You better come and check out the Superstar
It's Dano B, deejay for me
You say 'cause my presentation when I'm in the nation
Causes total fascination and a total jubilation
With your cooperation and your participation
Don't give no complication, check out acceleration
Talking faster every second
Other MCs now I reckon
You will wanna bite and chew
Sit back, listen, what you do
Get your pencil, papers and pad
You listen to me like I was your dad
Gonna write the rhymes down, the rhymes galore
Better tally it up like it was a score
And when it comes to the fly girls, all the things you were taught
You see a pretty young lady, but have second thought
Because her face is on, but her body ain't so hot
Now maybe you should have her or maybe not
Well if you'd rather have a bunch of gabbin'
News up on at ten to one
Or her physique as just a freak
No way that you can reach your peak
On a girl who conversate
And make sure that her head is straight
But when she don't participate
The other girl is not too late
Take it light, because you're blue
Think about it, what you do
Think about it like a man
And someday you will understand
Sex-sex-sex is the law-law-law
When a guy gets a girl on the floor-floor-floor

He sticks his information into her communication
And for further information try the Board of Education
The Army, the Navy, United States Nation
Let's rock, y'all, it don't stop
And keep on and shock the house

Because we rock non-stop
Because we rock non-stop
Because we rock non-stop
Because we rock non-stop
Because we rock non-stop
Because we rock non-stop
Because we rock non-stop
Because we rock non-stop
Because we rock non-stop (Spoonie Gee's gonna)
Because we rock non-stop (Special K's gonna)
Because we rock non-stop (Moe Dee's gonna)
Because we rock non-stop (Sunshine's gonna)
Because we rock non-stop
Because we rock non-stop
Because we rock non-stop (Easy Lee's gonna)
Because we rock non-stop
Because we rock non-stop
Because we rock non-stop
Because we rock

Big Daddy Kane – Ain't No Half-Steppin'²⁰⁴

Mmm, mmm, mmm
Aw yeah, I'm with this
I'm just gonna sit here laid back to this nice mellow beat, you know
And drop some smooth lyrics 'cause '88
Time to set it straight, know what I'm sayin'?
And ain't no half-steppin'
Word, I'm ready

Rappers steppin' to me, they want to get some
But I'm the Kane, so, yo, you know the outcome
Another victory, they can't get with me
So pick a B.C. date 'cause you are history
I'm the authentic poet to get lyrical
For you to beat me, it's gonna take a miracle
And steppin' to me—yo, that's the wrong move
So what you on, Hobbs—dope or dog food?
Competition, I just devour
Like a pit bull against a Chihuahua
'Cause when it comes to bein' dope, hot damn

²⁰⁴ Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois, eds., *The Anthology of Rap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 141-144.

I got it good, now let me tell you who I am
The B-I-G D-A-double-D-Y K-A-N-E
Dramatic, Asiatic, not like many
I'm different, so don't compare me to another
'Cause they can't hang, word to the mother
At least not with the principal in this pedigree
So when I roll on you rappers, you better be
Ready to die because you're petty
You're just a butter knife, I'm a machete
That's made by Ginsu, wait until when you
Try to front, so I can chop into
Your body, just because you try to be basin'
Friday the 13th, I'ma play Jason
No type of joke, gag, game, puzzle or riddle
The name is Big Daddy, yes, Big, not little
So define it, here's your walkin' papers, sign it
And take a walk as the Kane start to talk, 'cause ...

Ain't no half-steppin'
I'm the Big Daddy Kane
Ain't no half-steppin'
I'm the Big Daddy Kane
Ain't no half-steppin'
I'm the Big Daddy Kane
"Down the road"

My rhymes are so dope and the rappers be hopin'
To sound like me, so soon I'll have to open
A school of emceein', for those who wanna be in
My field and court, then again, on second thought
To have MCs coming out sounding so similar
It's quite confusing for you to remember the
Originator and boy, do I hate a
Perpetrator but I'm much greater
The best, oh, yes, I guess suggest the rest
Should fess, don't mess or test your highness
Unless you just address with best finesse
And bless the paragraphs I manifest
Rap prime minister, some say sinister
Non-stopping the groove until when it's
The climax and IMAX, relax and chill
Have a break from a take of me acting ill
Brain cells are lit, ideas start to hit
Next - the formation of words that fit
At the table I sit, making it legit
And when my pen hits the paper, hah shit!
I stop and stand strong over MCs
And devour with the power of Hercules
Or Samson, but I go further the length
'Cause you could scalp my Cameo and I'll still have strength
And no, that's not a myth and if you try to riff

Or get with the man with the given gift of gab
Your vocab, I'll only ignore
Be sleeping on your rhymes 'til I start to snore
You can't awake me, or even make me
Fear you, son 'cause you can't do me none
So, think about it if you're tryna go
When you wanna step to me, I think you should know that

Ain't no half-steppin'
I'm the Big Daddy Kane
Ain't no half-steppin'
I'm the Big Daddy Kane
Ain't no half-steppin'
I'm the Big Daddy Kane
"Down the road"

I appear right here and scare and dare a mere
Musketeer that would dare to compare, put him in the rear
Back there where he can't see clear
Get a beer, idea or near stare, yeah
So on to the wannabe competition
Trying step to me, must be on a mission
Up on the stage is where I'ma get you at
You think I'm losin'? Pfft, picture that

Ain't no half-steppin'
I'm the Big Daddy Kane
Ain't no half-steppin'
I'm the Big Daddy Kane
Ain't no half-steppin'
I'm the Big Daddy Kane
Mister Cee, step to me

The name is Big Daddy, you know, as in your father
So when you hear a def rhyme, believe that I'm the author
I grab the mic and make MCs evaporate
The party people say, 'Damn, that rapper's great'
The creator, conductor of poetry
Et cetera, et cetera, it ain't easy bein' me
I speak clearly so you can understand
Put words together like Letter Man
Now that's dictation proceeding to my innovation
Not like the other MCs that are an imitation
Or an animation, a cartoon to me
But when I'm finished, I'm sure that you are soon to see
Reality, my secret technique
Because I always speak with mentality
I put my title in your face, dare you to base
And if you try and come get it, yo I'ma show you who's with it
So if you know like I know, instead of messing around
Play like Roy Rogers and slow down

Just give yourself a break or someone else will take your title
Namely me because I'm homicidal
That means murder, yes I'm out to hurt a-
-nother MC that try to get with me
I'll just break him and bake him and rake him and take him and mold him and make him
Hold up the peace sign, As Salaam Alaikum!

Eric B. & Rakim – I Ain't No Joke²⁰⁵

I ain't no joke, I used to let the mic smoke
Now I slam it when I'm done and make sure it's broke
When I'm gone no one gets on 'cause I won't let
Nobody press up and mess up the scene I set
I like to stand in a crowd and watch the people wonder damn
But think about it then you'll understand
I'm just an addict, addicted to music
Maybe it's a habit, I gotta use it
Even if it's jazz or the quiet storm
I hook a beat up, convert it into hip-hop form
Write a rhyme in graffitti in every show you see me in
Deep concentration 'cause I'm no comedian
Jokers are wild if you wanna be tame
I treat you like a child then you're gonna be named
Another enemy, not even a friend of me
'Cause you'll get fried in the end when you pretend to be
Competing 'cause I just put your mind on pause
And I can beat you when you compare my rhyme with yours
I wake you up and as I stare in your face, you seem stunned
Remember me? The one you got your idea from?
But soon you start to suffer, the tune'll get rougher
When you start to stutter, that's when you had enough of
Biting it'll make you choke, you can't provoke
You can't cope, you should've broke because I ain't no joke

I got a question as serious as cancer:
Who can keep the average dancer hyper as a heart attack?
Nobody smiling
'Cause you're expressing the rhyme that I'm styling
This is what we all sit down to write
You can't make it, so you take it home, break it and bite
Use pieces and bits of all my hip-hop hits
Get the style down pat, then it's time to switch
Put my tape on pause and add some more to yours
Then you figure you're ready for the neighborhood tours
The E-M-C-E-E, don't even try to be
When you come up to speak, don't even lie to me
You like to exaggerate, dream and imagine

²⁰⁵ Eric B. & Rakim, "I Ain't No Joke" *Genius*, Genius Media Group, Inc.,
<<https://genius.com/Eric-b-and-rakim-i-aint-no-joke-lyrics>> 14 April 2021.

Then change the rhyme around—that can aggravate me
So when you see me come up, freeze
Or you'll be one of those seven emcees
They think that I'm a new jack but only if they knew that
They who think wrong are they who can't do that
Style that I'm doing, they might ruin
Patterns of paragraphs based on you and
Your off-beat DJ, if anything he play sound familiar
I'll wait 'til E say, "Play 'em"
So I'mma have to diss and broke
You could get a smack for this—I ain't no joke

I hold the microphone like a grudge
B'll hold the record so the needle don't budge
I hold a conversation 'cause what I invent
I nominated my DJ for president
When I emcee, I'll keep a freestyle going steadily
So pucker up and whistle my melody
But whatever you do, don't miss one
There'll be another rough rhyme after this one
Before you know it, you're following and fiending
Waiting for the punchline to get the meaning
Like before the moral of my story I'm telling
Nobody beats the R, so stop yelling
Save it, put it in your pocket for later
'Cause I'm moving the crowd and B'll wreck the fader
No interruptions and the mic is broke
When I'm gone, then you can joke
'Cause everything is real, on a serious tip
Keep playing and I get furious quick
And I'll take you for a walk through hell
Freeze your dome, then watch your eyeballs swell
Guide you out of triple-stage darkness
When it get dark again, then I'ma spark this microphone
'Cause the heat is on, you see smoke
And I'm finished when the beat is gone— I'm no joke

Spoonie Gee – The Godfather²⁰⁶

[Intro]
I'm the godfather
I'm the godfather
I'm the godfather
Of rap

[Verse 1]
Well let's get this straight, there's no contest

²⁰⁶ Spoonie Gee, "The Godfather", *Genius*, Genius Media Group, Inc.,
<<https://genius.com/Spoonie-gee-the-godfather-lyrics>> 17 April 2021.

So now you people know don't have to guess
I'm not the king of rap, not lord, not prince
I was a young kid rappin', I've been rockin' ever since
I was just a young buck, I didn't care what
MCs were in my way they never uttered a but

'Cause I'm the godfather
I'm the godfather

I caught silly young ladies, to just chill
They never said no to me - always say that they will do
Whenever I want them to - when I confront them to
Watch where you're walkin', or you just might bump into
I never rule them, I only school them
But if they ever try to fool me
That's when I fool them

I'm the godfather
I'm the godfather

No time to be jealous, only to make money
I rap on stage, shake my butt for your honey
'Cause I'm rockin' and I'm a non-stoppin'
MC baby, who loves finger-poppin'
So don't diss me, just kiss me
If I ever have ya and leave, you're gonna miss me
I'm just a brother so what's up sis?
'Cause it's the pretty young ladies that make me talk like this

Yes I'm the godfather
I'm the godfather

They say that I'm an MC, some say that I'm a poet
I changed my style people just didn't know it yet
I had to tell them, I might [?] 'em
You mess with me and both of your eyes I swell them
[?] like Al Capone, I'm 'bout to take charge
Got [?] and new car in my garage
All the ladies want to cruise me, they don't move me
See my bankroll they want to try to use me
But I'm no fool never losin' my cool
But for me to undress I make the young ladies drool
I'm not braggin' tellin' you what I'm about
Young ladies no babies and marriage is out
But if you insist, you can come get this
Your house or mine, night or day we'll be fine
So let's get with it, so that I can hit it
In an hour or two me and you can just quit it

I'm the godfather
I'm the godfather

Now the beat will be smokin' when the fire is out
So take your hand off your hips and baby let's work out
No leanin' on the wall, no standin' around
So are you ready (For what?!) for the beat in me now
Because people come and see me, some people want to be me
Pretty young ladies wanna L-U-V me
The beat so bad that at 9 o'clock
In the morning if you play it they'll call the cops

Yes I'm the godfather
Yes I'm the godfather

You got rockin' beats, non-stoppin' beats
Some records even have finger-poppin' beats
Always rappin' on time, Gemini is my sign
I'm so deep that's why I keep all the girlies on mine
I'm a fanatic at this, I'm at the top of the list
Stay cool, don't break the rules unless you wanna get dissed
Respect me while I'm rappin' on a record or show
You could stare, cause I don't care just as long you know

That I'm the godfather
Yes I'm the godfather

Now you'll be jumpin', your heart'll be thumpin'
Place'll be rockin', sweat'll be poppin'
Off your face, all over the place
Easy Lee spin the records at a steady pace
Don't stand around, your face holdin' a frown
This is the season, no reason you can't get down
So get off the wall, let's have a ball
Boogie down to the beat just give it your all
No need to get high just have money to spend
So you can have a good time because it's within

'Cause I'm the godfather
Yes I'm the godfather
Of rap

Boogie Down Productions – My Philosophy²⁰⁷

("So, you're a philosopher?")
("Yes, I think very deeply.")
In about four seconds, a teacher will begin to speak

Let us begin, what, where, why or when

²⁰⁷ Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois, eds., *The Anthology of Rap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 151-154.

Will all be explained like instructions to a game
See I'm not insane, in fact I'm kind of rational
When I be asking you, "Who is more dramatical?"
This one or that one, the white one or the black one
Pick the punk and I'll jump up to attack one
KRS-One is just the guy to lead a crew
Right up to your face and diss you
Everyone saw me on the last album cover
Holding a pistol, something far from a lover
Beside my brother, S-C-O-T-T
I just laughed 'cause no one can defeat me
This is lecture number two, "My Philosophy"
Number one, was "Poetry" you know it's me
This is "My Philosophy," many artists got to learn
I'm not flammable, I don't burn
So please stop burning and learn to earn respect
'Cause that's just what KR collects
See, what do you expect when you rhyme like a soft punk?
You walk down the street and get jumped
You got to have style and learn to be original
And everybody's gonna wanna diss you
Like me, we stood up for the South Bronx
And every sucker MC had a response
You think we care? I know that they are on the tip
My posse from the Bronx is thick
In real real life, we roll correctly
A lot of suckers would like to forget me
But they can't 'cause like a champ I have got a record
Of knocking out the frauds in a second
On the mic, I believe that you should get loose
I haven't come to tell you I got juice
I just produce, create, innovate on a higher level
I'll be back, but for now just sekkle!

In about four seconds, a teacher will begin to speak

I'll play the nine and you play the target
You all know my name so I guess I'll just start it
Or should I say start this, teaching I'm the artist
Styles and new concepts at their hardest
Yo, 'cause I'm a teacher and Scott is a scholar
It ain't about money cause we all make dollars
That's why I walk with my head up
When I hear wack rhymes I get fed up
Rap is like a set-up, a lot of games
A lot of suckers with colorful names
I'm so-and-so, I'm this, I'm that
Huh, but they all just wick-wick-wack
I'm not white or red or black, I'm brown
From the Boogie Down
Productions, of course, our music be thumping

Others say they're bad, but they're bugging
Let me show you something now about Hip Hop
About D-Nice, Melodie and Scott La Rock
I'll get a pen, a pencil, a marker
Mainly, what I write is for the average New Yorker
Some MCs be talking and talking
Trying to show how Black people are walking
But I don't walk this way to portray
Or reinforce stereotypes of today
Like all my brothers eat chicken and watermelon
Talk broken English and drug selling
See, I'm telling and teaching pure facts
The way some act in rap is kind of wack
And it lacks creativity and intelligence
But they don't care 'cause their company's selling it
It's my philosophy on the industry
Don't bother dissing me or even wishing we'd
Soften, dilute or commercialize all the lyrics
'Cause it's about time one of y'all hear it
And hear it first-hand from an intelligent brown man
A vegetarian, no goat or ham
Or chicken or turkey or hamburger
'Cause to me that's suicide, self-murder
Let us get back to what we call hip-hop
And what it meant to DJ Scott La Rock

("So, you're a philosopher?")

("Yes, I think very deeply.")

In about four seconds, a teacher will begin to speak

How many MCs must get dissed
Before somebody says, "Don't f*** with Kris!"?
This is just one style, out of many
Like a piggy bank, this is one penny
My brother's name is Kenny, that's Kenny Parker
My other brother I.C.U. is much darker
Boogie Down Productions is made up of teachers
The lecture is conducted from the mic into the speaker
Who gets weaker: the king or the teacher?
It's not about a salary, it's all about reality
Teachers teach and do the world good
Kings just rule and most are never understood
If you were to rule or govern a certain industry
All inside this room right now would be in misery
No one would get along nor sing a song
'Cause everyone'd be singing for the king, am I wrong?
I say yo, what's up? It's me again
Scott La Rock, KRS, BDP again
Many people had the nerve to think we would end the trend
With Criminal Minded, an album which is only ten
Funky, funky, funky, funky, funky hit records

No more than four minutes and some seconds
The competition checks and checks and keeps checking
They take the album, take it home and start sweating
Why? Well, it's simple, to them, it's kind of vital
To take KRS-One's title
To them, I'm like an idol, some type of entity
In everybody's rhyme, they wanna mention me?
Or rather mention us, me and Scott La Rock
But they can get bust, get robbed, get dropped
I don't play around, nor do I eff around
And you can tell by the bodies that are left around
When some clown jumps up to get beat down
Broken down to his very last compound
See how it sound, a little un-rational
A lot of MCs like to use the word "dramatical"

Fresh for '88, you suckers