

Prof. David Lee Robbins, Ph.D., thesis opponent
Jakub Bolbol
Poetics of the East Coast Old School Rap and Hip-Hop Lyrics
B.A. thesis evaluation
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Mr. Bolbol's 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 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 1970s and early 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. 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 1970s and 1980s. The second group focuses on rap as poetic expression. This (fourth) 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.

Mr. Bolbol's narrative ranges from Langston Hughes (d. 1967) through the formation of The Last Poets (May 1968) and the professional debut of Gil Scott-Heron (1970; "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," on *Pieces of Man* 1971) to DJ Kool Herc's introduction of hip-hop/rap techniques at a Bronx block party on 11 August 1973. He proceeds to trace the contributions during the 1970s of DJ Hollywood (active from 1972, rap style 1975), Spoonie Gee (1975), DJ Afrika Bambaata (1977) and his Universal Zulu Nation (ca. 1978-1979), Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (1978), Grandmaster Caz (1978), and The Treacherous Three (1978), culminating in the national release in 1979 of The Sugarhill Gang's song "Rapper's Delight," which "brought hip-hop to the masses." Finally, Mr. Bolbol traces Bronx hop-hop artists' response to the national exposure of rap by "outsiders," leading to the national promotion of "authentic Bronx" artists and recordings, including Brother D with Collective Effort (1980), Run-DMC (1983, who thereafter carried old-school Bronx hip-hop into the country's mainstream), Slick Rick (1984, with Doug E. Fresh and the Get Fresh Crew), Eric B. & Rakim (1986), Boogie Down Productions, featuring KRS-One (1986), and Big Daddy Kane (1987). The (artistic/creative) "Golden Age" of hip-hop was from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. By the mid-1990s, hip-hop became a best-selling genre, by 1999 the top-selling music genre, and by 2017 replacing rock as the most popular genre in the U.S.

The thesis is exceptionally thoughtful, and Mr. Bolbol's analysis is consistently acute and well-informed, regularly drawing on commentary by valuable critics and intelligently

comparing their insights to his own. His efforts to relate the writers to each other, stylistically, historically, and psychologically, are laudable, and, I believe, frequently successful and illuminating. The thesis is well-written, in exceptionally good English. It was a pleasure to read, stylistically, narratively, and substantively. The essay manages to do very competently what it sets out to do in the first three chapters, although I believe that the success of the effort articulated in the fourth chapter is rather more questionable.

On the the questionability of the thesis propounded in chapter four (that hip-hop compositions merit consideration as "poetry" and/or "literature"), and on several other problematical aspects of the text, let me add, without impugning the overall quality and insightfulness of the work, several observations:

1) Are hip-hop lyrics poetry? Is doggerel poetry? Their intention is perhaps the same; but is quality the criterion that marks the boundaries of art? Who sets the standards of "quality"? Is motivation then the criterion of what constitutes "poetry"? Are the lyrics of popular music poetry? Does Tinpan Alley produce or aim to produce poetry? If it occasionally does, is that the positive counterpart of collateral damage, unintended consequences? Does that make the rest of the production poetry?

The examination of second- or third-rate writing (some might even designate it as—technically—within the boundaries of "literature") has its utilities. It often addresses the typical, average, or widespread concerns and discourse of a given community and/or era better than the notably atypical approach that helps make a first-rate piece of literature exceptional. This value, however, does not somehow magically convert inferior writing and analysis into "literature." Utility is not synonymous with quality. Based on my reading of excerpted materials in this thesis and in the appendices, and on wider reading of other hip-hop products, it is my sense that what Mr. Bolbol is engaged in doing in this thesis is useful analysis of second- and third-rate writing, not (despite what he might think or say in the thesis) vindication of hip-hop writing/lyrics as high-quality "literature." That is not a bad thing, and the results are not unvaluable; but they are not identical with those to which Mr. Bolbol seems to aspire.

2) I believe that poetry should be held to an oral standard: sound. Writing is just record-keeping for poetry; it should not constitute a new medium. In this, I think Mr. Bolbol is in general agreement, although his position on this issue remains largely implicit in the thesis, which, since it centers of hip-hop's oral delivery, might be made more explicit.

3) Mr. Bolbol's exposition of the *dramatis personae* of hip-hop/rap and their socio-economic origins, preoccupations, and products is clear and well-researched—generally congruent with best primary and secondary historical accounts. The general socio-economic positions of many hip-hop participants/artists are generally well-illuminated—less so, the subject positions of any specific individuals. Even less clear is how hip-hop expression provided, or could provide, anything more than a medium for individual complaint/commiseration (and, possibly thereby, for individual transformation); as an instrument of societal change, it remains, on those occasions when it transcends dystopianism, at best, utopian and impractical. The chronology of specific participants/artists (e.g. when they made their professional debut) is also generally lacking, so their place in the overall chronology quite competently traced by Mr. Bolbol is sometimes murky for the reader (and, one sometimes suspects, for the writer, as well). It would not have been hard to provide it.

4) While the language deployed in the thesis by Mr. Bolbol is consistently fluent, fit-for-purpose, and compelling, there are some omissions and unclaritys (a number of which are the result of proofreading gaffs) that the writer might want to correct or eliminate in any future use of the thesis material. A relatively complete list of these questionable items is appended to this evaluation.

Overall, Mr. Bolbol has produced an insightful, accurate, and useful B.A. undertaking. Because of its reach and, in many cases, grasp of the subject, I believe that Mr. Bolbol's thesis merits an evaluation of "1, vyborne."

Thesis evaluation: "1, vyborne."

Signed:

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June 14, 2021

If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at David.Robbins@ff.cuni.cz.

Questionable items:

- p. 17: XXX (instead of intended attribution)
- p. 19: rubble, instead of rumble
- p. 21: potential mention of Southern DJs, church practices
- p. 21: potential mention of toasting, signifying = boasting, braggadocio
- P. 22: First paragraph, 1st sentence, no subject
- p. 23: 2nd paragraph – It was THEY
- p. 24: REVOLUTION, not Television
- p. 25: Second to last paragraph – innovation – can one talk about "innovation" when the "innovator" is ignorant of tradition?
- p. 27: potential comparison to the African griot would be useful here– larger than life, savior
- p. 28: Rap is poetry but its popularity depends on people not recognizing it as such: this observation could have been usefully developed much more fully here and throughout the thesis
- p. 30: 1st paragraph, last sentence – RAPPERS'
- p. 32: Line 1 – inform WHOM?
- pp. 34, 47"Horatian? – again, can one use this descriptor if the author is ignorant of tradition?
- p. 36: 2nd paragraph, 1st sentence – IS, not ARE p. 36
- p. 37: It is not clear that what is being described here is an example (or at least a good one) of the "frame" structure
- p. 39: 3rd paragraph - Hip-hop alone could be considered a storytelling genre (meaning of this sentence??)
- p. 42: KRS-One – humanistic LEARNINGS?
- p. 45: Line 6 – IS illustrated
- p. 46: Paragraph 2, line 2 – substitute FOR
- p. 48: Langston Hughes (d. 1967), musical (jazz, blues) rhythm in poetry

- p. 49: Paragraph 3, second to last line, HIS own
- p. 51: Line 1 – MOTIF? p. 51
- p. 51: Line 3 – In which [THEY] express themselves
- p. 52: Paragraph 1, line 9 – contributeS
- p. 52: Paragraph 2, line 4 – RHYME'S
- p. 55: Paragraph 2; I agree that poetry was once primarily oral; still often accords with its origins, although it is often not read aloud, except perhaps by its authors.
- pp. 59-60: "Impersonality of the artist"(??) - Authenticity requires voice relying on real personality; voice of real identity vs. that presented in poems (fictional, performative)?? Is this not contradictory, or at least problematic?
- p. 62: Paragraph 2 – Surpass their own personal style = authenticity(??) How can one "surpass one's own personal style" and still be "authentic"?
- p. 64: Paragraph 1 – TACTILE(??) topic for academic discussion – meaning of "tactile" here?