

# Voices Underground: Hip Hop as Black Rhetoric

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Throughout African American history, music has emerged as a legacy of innovations, metaphors, tensions, and dynamics that promote both harmony and conflict. As a recent part of this legacy, hip hop evolved to represent what today looks and feels like the reality of contemporary street life. However, hip hop has become the subject of a major national controversy as a deluge of critical and commercial attention is showered upon black artists who regurgitate stereotypical imagery of sex and violence for white charts. The ironic result is that while hip hop can serve as an organic mechanism for resistance and empowerment, its emergent commercial genres undermine the social structures and community construction the music intends to advocate.

According to rap scholar Nancy Guevara, contemporary hip hop exists as a series of ghetto-ized fantasy images useful only for advertizing and entertaining white audiences. She elaborates:

the image of hip hop is uninflected by any hint of the socioeconomic or racial context in which its practices arose. . . hip hop simply *appears* as a faddish display of . . . exuberance in inner-city ghettos, a sudden inexplicable burst of color and energy in [a] cultural vacuum. (Guevara 1)

Put simply, hip hop, as evidenced in popular culture, has deviated from its roots. For the purposes of this article, hip hop is defined as a cultural milieu that fuses four main elements. These are emceeing, the vocalization; deejaying, the rhythmic; graffiti, the visual; and break dancing, the style of dance. This article contends that hip hop music is black rhetoric, a site for intellectual discourse within the African American community.

Black rhetoric, as it pertains to hip hop, is the symbolic social construction and reconstruction of the African American community by African Americans (Nance 1). The rhetoric is strategic, functional, active in the world of events and affairs, and fundamentally persuasive. The rhetorical nature of hip hop allows it to (1) tackle salient issues and aim at specific audiences; (2) use vocabulary with which the audience is familiar; (3) use rhythm to regulate how words are said and understood; (4) act as education and entertainment; and (5) move the audience to some action.

The functional nature of rhetoric uncovers the symbols and labels rappers use, and mediates realities of the African American community. As rhetoric, hip hop allows for the manipulation of symbols to create worldviews and evidence an intellectual stance. As part of a historical legacy, hip hop provides a place for itself among other music (i.e. jazz, the blues) and a kaleidoscope through which to view the past, present, and future of black intellectual movements.

Society generally considers individuals who use their minds creatively as intellectuals, yet the current focus on rappers paints them as demonized imbeciles (Rose, "Rap Music" 35). This is due in part to misunderstanding racialized musical styles. Critics of rap music generally read lyrics literally and do not account for the use of metaphor, simile, double entendre and vernacular English. Words also have to be considered in terms of their syntax, tone and rhythm, especially in a study of black rhetoric. Perhaps, the criticism of rap music is complicated by the fact that many of the critics do not understand what is being said (due to the speed and tone of the rappers) and, in addition, do not understand what the actual words being used mean.

Hip hop lyrics are generally dismissed as anti-intellectual "Ebonics" that incite violence in the minds of youth. Groups like the Parents Music Resource Center rebuke rap as "music which appeals to unloved kids . . . and teaches them that violence is an acceptable form of behavior" (Gore A15). For example, when *Straight Outta Compton*

by Niggas With Attitudes (N. W. A) went gold in 1988, the F.B.I. distributed letters to police chiefs nationwide singling out the song *F--k The Police* for criticism as an example of anti-police rabble rousing. In 1989, Public Enemy was labeled as "anti-Semitic" over remarks by then-member Professor Griff and the group nearly disappeared from the industry (Potter, *Hip Hop Chronology* 4).

In 1992, President Clinton criticized Sister Souljah's comments at Reverend Jesse Jackson's National Rainbow Coalition Meeting. This resulted in a letter to Time Warner signed by sixty members of Congress denouncing its decision to sell certain rap artists. In 1994, C. Dolores Tucker of the National Political Congress of Black Women brought the lyrics of The Wu-Tang Clan before Congress in order to prevent the distribution of their records. Further, the deaths of Tupac Shakur (1996) and Notorious BIG (1997) were portrayed by mainstream media as consequences of their rapping (Kelley & Landas 56-58).

The final blow came on December 29, 1998, when Busta Rhymes was featured on the cover of the *New York Post* as "Busta Crimes," arrested for illegal weapon possession. The headline read, "It's the same old song of violence and crime." Four other rappers, who had nothing to do with the incident, were also featured in the article: Russell Jones (Wu-Tang's Old Dirty Bastard or Big Baby Jesus) for "Bastard burglary rap"; Snoop Doggy Dogg who was "dogged by gang war"; Tupac Shakur whose "troubles are over"; and Vincent Brown (of Naughty By Nature) who is characterized simply as "naughty by nature" (Weiss and Italiano 3). The relentless criminalization of contemporary rappers perpetuates unfavorable judgements against their music.

There is criticism within the hip hop community as well. Underground hip hop artists generally criticize commercial rappers for their over-sampling, feeble-minded rhymes and materialistic motivations. This is in line with criticism from Afrocentrist organizations, such as Black Nia F.O.R.C.E., which claim that mainstream hip hop erases the potential for resistance and empowerment among young African Americans (Griffin 19). Hip hop artists such as Company Flow, Sound Providers and Dead Prez agree and refer to commercial artists like Puff Daddy and Mase as "karaoke emcees." Such criticism is expressed eloquently by the underground hip hop group Sound Providers in their song, "The Field":

It's time to bring it back to the days of rap scholars  
 When your rhyme was for rep and not the almighty dollar  
 You see, I was there every step of the way  
 So now you know the reason why my rhyme style sways . . .  
 This is a musical journey and sound's my only guide  
 I'm skilled in the field so slide to the side.

These lyrics illustrate that underground artists are seizing control of hip hop in order to express meaning and identity. In a broader and deeper sense, they strategically re-create language and initiate sincere emotional and intellectual commitments in their struggles to build community around their messages.

Language not only aids in community development, but takes on different meanings within the context of the rhetoric. This premise is affirmed by Amiri Baraka in his article "Expressive Language," where he states that in order to know any culture, critics should familiarize themselves with the words and word users of that culture (Baraka 325). Culture, Baraka argues, is about the production of meanings, or realities "and it is the users that establish the world's realities. Realities being those fantasies that control your immediate span of life" (325). Unfortunately, most hip hop critics are not the "word users" and therefore do not have the necessary tools to provide valid critiques of the music.

In *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*, Geneva Smitherman states that this transformation of words' meanings is the way in which "hip hoppers seek to connect with past verbal traditions and to extend the semantic space of black lingo by adding a 90s flavor" (28). Hip hop rhetoric is speaker-audience based and demands that audiences and emcees communicate in the same language. This means that both must understand the terms being used and the contexts of these terms (Strother 19). This use of language reflects the influence and personal stylizing so vital to hip hop culture.

Clearly, these criticisms reflect the fact that hip hop needs to be examined from a new perspective. To this end this article presents an understanding of hip hop from a rhetorical stance, continues with an explanation of hip hop culture, and concludes with the key clusters of metaphor in the hip hop conceptual system. This approach is most appropriate to the lyrical expressions of hip hop because metaphors are

emcees' weapons, and their words the blades with which they pierce reality.

### The Rhetorical Approach

A rhetorical stance first acknowledges that as rhetoric, hip hop is both an intellectual and an artistic enterprise (Hauser 13). This foundation then reveals that rappers are "public intellectuals." The fundamental role of the public intellectual is to "create and sustain high-quality public discourse addressing urgent public problems which enlightens and energizes fellow citizens, prompting them to take public action" (Gates and West 71). As black rhetoric, hip hop is a site for the symbolic social construction and reconstruction of community. As "public intellectuals" underground rappers use hip hop to express salient cultural, community, social, and personal issues and move the African American community to action. Therefore, hip hop rappers code and describe reality using metaphors and in so doing persuade their audiences to construct or frame the world according to their images.

The metaphoric process is a way to harness and organize the mind's experiences in order to paint a picture of reality. However, when metaphoric criticism is applied to hip hop, the critic finds that no matter how wild metaphors seem, emcees interpret the styles and provide structural meaning values. "Metaphor is . . . a way of knowing the world that emerges from the interaction . . . the structure of metaphor itself argues" (Foss 361). Rhetorical theory stresses that metaphors eliminate distance between people's minds and their environments. Underground emcees use metaphor to achieve various ends: to describe the new and the nearly-indescribable; to engage the listener's intellect; to produce comic effect; and to alter and jerk the listener's habitual sense of reality and allow for a glimpse of a deeper reality for a more surrealistic approach.

Rhetorical criticism teaches that "what we count as 'real' or as 'knowledge' about the world depends on how we choose to label and talk about things" (Foss 6). Hip hop rappers, from here on referred to as emcees, use metaphor to eliminate the distance between their personally constructed images and those of their various audiences. Rob Marriott, a freelance writer, agrees and maintains that, "because hip hop is such an analogue, it completely deals with metaphors, so a lot of times when people are talking about killing they ain't talking about killing,

they [are] talking about destroying somebody with their lyrics" (Mansbach & Welters 9). Therefore, hip hop represents social, creative, and psychological factors that constitute an entire conception of language, and frame of mind in the language users. Consequently, while many rappers express insights and problem-solving alternatives to interface with the larger society which has largely dismissed them, their words are simply misinterpreted and misunderstood. The metaphors must be analyzed in order to offer valid criticism of hip hop and comprehend the nature of its rhetoric.

### Hip Hop 101

Michael Eric Dyson, professor of history and cultural critic, outlines three phases in rap's evolution. The first phase (1976-1982), called "Hip Hop," is characterized by a light-hearted attitude and a way to have fun. Afrika Bambaataa is a good example of this phase which is commonly referred to as the "Old School." Beginning with Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" (1982), the second phase of hip hop, called "Social Critique," confronts the pain and terror that transforms urban life from sophisticated metropolis to concrete jungle. This phase dominated the scene from 1982 to 1993. Prime examples of this are Rakim and Big Daddy Kane who mixed political styles into their new more fervid styles of emceeing. In this phase metaphors became primary and battling, the showcasing of lyrics in competition was elevated to a new level. Dyson calls the next phase "Pluralization." In this, the present phase, rap fuses with other genres such as jazz, funk, classical, old school rap and soul. Artists in this phase include A Tribe Called Quest, Digital Underground, Black Moon, GURU's Jazzmatazz, Digable Planets and Puff Daddy (although his music is an example of pastiche).

Dyson also discusses what he dubs "Dis Rap," or disrespectful rap, more popularly known as "gangsta rap." The lyrical content is largely disrespectful of societal institutions, women, and even its practitioners. Typical examples here are N.W.A., Getto Boys, and Ice Cube (Dyson, 1989 cited in Aldridge 5-6). The "Gangsta Era" lasted from 1988 to 1996. Still, the perception remains that commercial and so-called "gangsta rap" are the dominant forms of rap music, and that responsible hip hop, if it exists at all, stands in opposition to "gangsta rap" like a David to a Goliath. The truth is not so simple. Actually, the case is that "gangsta"

and commercial genres of rap receive the most attention. In contrast, the more progressive-underground-hip hop messages remain unheard by most hip hop listeners.

At this point a more refined classification of hip hop is introduced to isolate and explore the culture. This discussion will form two broad categories, "Hip Hop" and what will be referred to as "Flip Flop" and several subcategories. Hip hop is black rhetoric, a site for the symbolic social construction and reconstruction of the African American community by African Americans. Hip hop provides a forum for intellectual self-defense, for teaching, and for community building.

"Flip Flop," on the other hand, describes talk that appeals to the stereotypical imagery of African Americans as materialistic, ignorant, violent, and overtly sexual. In an interview with *Vibe Magazine*, KRS-One refers to flip flop as "the final expression of the slave mentality. . . . They've said it themselves: they're real niggas. The nigga mentality is really the ghetto mentality" (Wood 4). KRS-One depicts flip floppers as "niggative," (detrimental to progress in rap), negative and debilitating factors for community development. According to this argument, flip flop is a skewed version of what hip hop can be because it was contrived and created for other means. Flip flop artists are trapped in their own economies because they sacrifice integrity and modify their sound in order to "move units" (sell CDs).

Hip hop is often confused with "Flip Flop" and stripped of its rhetorical context. When hip hop is recognized as black rhetoric that defines a psychological, rhetorical, social, and intellectual function, it cannot be blamed for societal dysfunctions. In a roundtable discussion on hip hop for *Elementary Magazine*, Rob Marriot maintains that "in the last few years you've seen the dysfunction of this society put upon the function of hip hop" (Mansbach & Welters 3). For example, critics attack "gangsta" rap without acknowledging that it is a grotesque and obscene form of the larger American construction of masculinity. In this case critics should investigate the ways in which mainstream culture has linked machismo to the physical and mental domination of women. A valid criticism explains how the distinction between "bitches, ho's" and "good girls" justifies violence against all women. This illustrates how the discussion of hip hop is focused on the microcosm, without piercing the macrocosm that accepts such "outrageous speech" sold in mass quantities.

Beyond these two categories of hip hop and flip flop, there are subcategories of the music. There exist underground, activist, restless,

gangsta, booty, commercial and visually-oriented rap. It is important to note that these categories are not static. Artists can float into and out of them within a song or from album to album. Examples of these types of artists are Tupac Shakur, Busta Rhymes and Redman. The clearest way to illustrate these ideas is by presenting a chart to classify and explain the genres of contemporary rap.

*Flip Flop-Narrative performances of self. "Entertainment" aimed at crossover audience.*

Genre	Lyrical Style	Message	Examples
Booty-females as objects	Explicit/Profane	Sex	2 Live Crew, 95 South
Gangsta-hard-hitting, provocative images	Explicit/Profane	Gang Life/the Hood/ Sex/Gender	N.W.A., Da Lench Mob Ice-T
Commercial/Pop-world of glitter	Mild/Little Profanity	Accumulation of Material goods	Puff Daddy, Harlemworld Will Smith
Southern Playas-cion of gangsta, less focused on police	Explicit	Self, Materialism, Drugs	Juvenile, Master P
Visually Oriented-focused on physical presence and announcement	Mild/Explicit (range)	Self, Accomplishment	Busta Rhymes, Redman, DMX
Me-Too-innovative white rap	Mild/Explicit (range)	Sex/Partying/ Drugs	Beastie Boys Eminem

*Hip Hop-Agenda-driven narratives showing the mark of the individual and the bond that creates community.*

Genre	Lyrical Style	Message	Examples
Old School-the original hip hop	Mixed	"Toasting," Good Times	Run DMC Afrika Bambaataa



Activist - <i>focused on politics</i>	Mixed	Social, Political	KRS-One Public Enemy
Restless- <i>restlessly creative, imaginative, experimental</i>	Mixed	Satire, Social, Evolution, Political Activist, Fun	De La Soul, OutKast A Tribe Called Quest
Underground - <i>innovative, community- oriented, progressive</i>	Mixed	Individual, Activist, Industry	Digable Planets Sound Providers Natural Resource

This typology is helpful because it presents four major themes. First, this typology dispels the myth of rap music as a monolith. Second, it paints a distinction between hip hop and flip flop. Third, it describes hip hop as the more grounded and agenda-driven voice for African Americans, while it is difficult to discern whether flip floppers guise their agendas under the facade of entertainment. Fourth, it reminds us that the historical purpose of hip hop is to educate its audience by stimulating solidarity and intellectual development, and acknowledges that the purpose of flip flop is to capture the attention of mainstream America.

In order to manage a study of hip hop as black rhetoric, this article will narrow the scope and focus on the genre of underground hip hop and its artists. This is because it is the genre that most closely reflects the less commercialized hip hop of the 1970's and 1980's. Vinyl records, turntables, and human voices are the instruments of underground deejays and emcees as they unite to resist attempts by mainstream powers to modify the form and function of their music and culture. For these participants, the focus remains on hip hop as a collaborative performance event with the role of the deejay as integral a component as the role of the emcee. This interdependence is vital to the maintenance of hip hop messages as black rhetoric and de-emphasizes commercial consumer culture.

In its attempts to commercialize and aggrandize hip hop, mainstream culture shifted the focus away from vinyl and onto compact discs in order to generate greater income. Compact discs are portable in a way that vinyl records are not and are consumed in greater numbers

by the general public. "Everyone who is anyone in the consumer electronics business has a dream: to do to the compact disc what the compact disc did to the vinyl record" (Fernando 100). Attempts by companies such as Pioneer, which offered one hundred dollars and five months of free compact discs if vinylites traded in their turntables, have failed in large part due to the impact of underground hip hop. "Without vinyl, . . . hip hop music would become stale and die" (Opal 8). Vinyl not only provides the culture with its historical roots, but also leaves room for present and future creation.

Although steadfast, the hip hop underground is in a constant state of evolution. As a whole, the underground is an inclusive, rather than an exclusive, culture. The social, gender, and racial demographics of the hip hop underground are not what is depicted in most hip hop in videos. The underground is for emcees and deejays who have messages to spread, not for monetary gain necessarily, but for respect and community building purposes. There are realistic and ideological sides to the underground, best expressed by underground emcee Mos Def:

Hip hop is at a crossroads right now. There's people trying to make money and people trying to push the envelope on what the whole culture has to offer. It's a given that everybody has to make a living, but . . . a good name is worth more than silver and gold. Some people choose a good name, others choose silver and gold. Each one has its own set of consequences, but I would rather have the good name. (Yasmeen 47)

Emcees and deejays are not saying that they do not want to earn money, but they emphasize how they earn money.

The cornerstone of the underground is adherence to the basic principles of hip hop: *invention*—composing clever original lyrics; *disposition*—relevant subject matter presented in a manner that will move the audience; *memorization*—reciting lyrics from memory; *elocution*—pronunciation; and *delivery*—lyric presentation. These five principles are also known as the canons of rhetoric. If a sixth principle were to be added it would be the use of metaphor, which offers an outlet for individual creativity as well as a method for encoding messages. Quiet Storm the Unpredictable, an underground emcee, describes the underground as "a site where lyrics come straight from the heart, are

evaluated strictly by their complexity and ingenuity, and follow the basic hip hop principles." Underground emcees recognize hip hop pioneers such as KRS-One, the Treacherous Three, Grandmaster Flash, and MC Lyte because they established themselves as artists with integrity while providing a firm foundation for contemporary emcees. "Flip flop" has veered from that tradition in the pursuit of short term grandeur. The underground is about respecting the tradition of the pioneers, spreading that respect and carrying it into the next millennium.

The hip hop underground is not a new phenomenon. Emcees who are willing to explore new frontiers and take risks with metaphors or offbeat lyrical articulations, referred to as flows, have always taken the spotlight. What makes the current underground scene distinct from past successes is a difference in emphasis rather than absolute reform. Emcees and deejays compose, distribute, and promote their own records and tapes rather than rely on major labels. Thus, they reject the traditional hierarchy of the mainstream record industry. Emcee Tajai from the rap group Hieroglyphics compares the record industry to slavery and sharecropping:

They [major record labels] put forth the money and basically you get a portion of all the stuff you create from that. It's not like pure slavery because you get your little peanuts, but still it's close to sharecropping, where we work the land and give up all the fruits and must be able to eat off what we have, and we're surviving as artists.  
(Meadows 1)

Underground artists claim that rap music is contained, defined and sold by major recording labels. Therefore, much of commercial rap is robbed of its structure, intention and rhetorical mission. The hip hop underground provides emcees and deejays with artistic, economic, and intellectual freedoms that are unavailable to them in the mainstream.

Of course, there exists some confusion and a considerable amount of debate within this diffuse collective over exactly where hip hop is headed. However much underground culture reflects an attitude toward the music, it also carries the implications of being hidden, of operating to some extent in the darkness of obscurity. This implication follows Cheris Kramarae's *Muted Group Theory* which states that "muted structures are 'there' but cannot be 'realized' in the language of the

dominant structure. As a result they are overlooked, muffled and rendered invisible—mere black holes in someone else's universe" (Griffin 442). As hip hop is its ideal sense, the underground operates on the margins of hip hop culture and struggles to be heard with little rotation on radio or in video.

According to this argument, mainstream aficionados like Sean "Puffy" Combs and Jermaine Dupri can take much of the credit for the new generation of the hip hop underground. By selling equally on the East and West coasts and appealing to the mainstream, Combs and Dupri created a formula for making fortunes out of rap. In interviews and lyrics, they asseverate the power of rap as nothing more than creating celebrities, recycling old hits without changing them, and promoting brand names. According to emcee Bahamadia on her Philadelphia-area underground radio show "B-sides," the commercial aspect of flip flop revolves around artists paying for their radio air time or heavy rotation in video. Dupri and Combs's methodology violates the artistic integrity of hip hop because the quality of product is no longer relevant, but rather the number of times songs are heard is crucial. The underground culture is generally disgusted by this formula for success and cites greater feelings of accomplishment when artists "go for delf," or succeed on their own merits without paying for airplay.<sup>1</sup>

Underground hip hop is the genre whose messages most embody Dyson's "Social Critique" and "Pluralization" phases of rap and as such is the focus of this study of hip hop as black rhetoric. Emcees create and recreate language by inventing, collecting, and transforming terms from the traditional lexicon, their environments, and the mass media to facilitate their use of metaphor. As a collaborative performance event, hip hop is speaker-audience based and demands that the audience and speaker communicate in the same language. In this vein, emcees create in order to reveal their worldviews and at their best are stimulating, provocative and intriguing. However, many flip floppers do so in a self-indulgent manner which alienates the audience and, therefore, reveals nothing. In this sense, Sporty Thieves (a commercial rap group) are correct in their song *Cheapskates*, when they proclaim, "you ain't gettin' nada from us."

## Hip Hop Conceptual System

Hip hop offers a multitude of perspectives that encompass expressions of creativity, intelligence, and aesthetics. In the hip hop rhetorical situation, or cipher, the focus is not only on memorization, but often on "freestyling," or impromptu delivery of lyrics. In this setting, detailed arguments and attenuated production pose challenges to emcees. Metaphors become the lyrical foundation of the discourse as emcees incorporate what is going on around them into their messages.

A metaphor is a way of knowing the world that emerges from the interaction of two terms that may seem unconnected, but unite to paint a picture of how reality is perceived. Therefore, metaphors are carefully selected dynamic images. For example, take the simple metaphor "the police are pigs." Here the primary focus, or tenor, is "the police." The frame through which to view the tenor, the vehicle, is "pigs." Hip hop emcees generally use complex metaphors as background images, or as the controlling concepts for lyrics. As aforementioned, metaphors serve several functions. With regard to hip hop they also: (1) provide a list of topics for discussion at the disposal of emcees; (2) present points of view; (3) introduce an argumentative function; and (4) allow for the creation and expression of new and broader perspectives. The metaphors emcees use are important because they allow for the understanding of the nature of hip hop and black rhetoric.

Underground lyrics contain recurrent clusters of metaphor that are employed throughout the genre and are applicable to other genres of hip hop. The four distinct recurrent clusters which are examined here are classified as: (1) the Game cluster; (2) the Science cluster; (3) the Battle/Struggle cluster; and (4) the Life cluster. The clusters are both grounded in perceptual experience and conceptually versatile, which makes them powerful components of the hip hop conceptual system.

### The Game Cluster

Baseball was never for blacks  
 First it was a pastime for whites  
 Now it has mad Puerto Ricans  
 But that's not the point of this song  
 The point of this song and I'll make it mad simple  
 When I be flippin' the script

Is that the industry is all over the mound pitching  
 But nobody's makin' any hits. (Natural Resource,  
*Negro League Baseball*)

In underground hip hop lyrics game imagery is so pervasive that it is nearly impossible to comprehend other clusters of metaphor without understanding the underground hip hop vision of the recording industry as a game. The conceptual pattern is that the record industry is a game consisting of emcees, producers and executives (the players) competing for position, profits, and power. Sports, life, chess, and teams are the vehicles for game metaphors in the lyrics. Underground artists Dead Prez use their lyrics to win in "this game of life." Emcees express the light in which so many Americans perceive black people as "taking over sports." Natural Resource expresses life, baseball, basketball, tennis, and rap as game. Emcees such as J-Live and the Wu-Tang Clan use the game of chess as a metaphor for their rap styles. Siah and Yeshua da poEd, assert that the "span of my arms does not constitute my reach," communicating that they are far more worthy opponents than they may physically appear due to the impact of their words. Rap groups refer to themselves as Clans, Poses, Crews and Cliques, which emphasizes a team-centered approach to the music.<sup>2</sup>

"The Negro League Baseball Song" by Natural Resource, for example, is a lyrical synthesis of sports, entertainment, and race. The song relays that the "playing field" is not leveled yet. Like Jackie Robinson, the emcees "steal bases with pride" and change the focus of the game. Although the pitcher still holds control of the game, the pitcher is no longer in total control since base stealers create a shift in game concept. The song paints the recording industry as a pitcher, pitching (producing) all kinds of songs but "nobody's making any hits." This metaphor implies that commercial rap songs fail to connect with the needs of black Americans and illustrates that regardless of salary, neither sports nor rap are "for blacks" but are merely entertainment or "pastimes for whites."

Further, the game metaphor asserts that black people are socially "out of bounds" when they step off the playing field. This metaphor paints underground emcees as free agents who operate outside of the mainstream game and are able to evaluate and critique the mainstream. The message is clear: African Americans, whether in sports or entertainment, are not considered important until they are of some value

to white people.

The Battle/Struggle Cluster

That's right you wear the camouflage  
 But do you choose to live the soldier's life?  
 I said before this is a war not a play fight  
 Taught to be a slave from the womb to the grave site . . .  
 So dead that I tie my dread back and scheme  
 Put a star on my red, black and green.

(Dead Prez, "Food Clothes and Shelter")

Second in importance to the *Game* cluster, and often used in conjunction with or juxtaposed to it, are images drawn from the hip hoppers' proclivity to perceive the world in terms of competing forces and opposing teams, as in hip hop versus flip flop. Hip hop culture places emphasis on the struggle as a disciplined way of life. Lyrics emerge as weapons of choice for the battle/struggle and provide information on the nature of the threat.

Emcees liken themselves to soldiers who battle against cultural exigencies such as racism, black disunity, the spread of AIDS, and police brutality. Natural Resource presents Jackie Robinson and all black forerunners as soldiers who fought against racism and corruption. Dead Prez articulates reality as a "fight in . . . life for basic human rights" where soldiers are forced to give their lives as sacrifices. This is also maintained by underground emcees Talib Kweli and Mos Def in their song "Definition." They chant, "People think emcee (MC) is shorthand for misconception . . . 1, 2, 3, it's kind of dangerous to be an emcee, They shot Tupac and Biggie, Too much violence in hip hop, Y. O. . . ." As renegades, emcees metaphorically murder those who approach them with less sophisticated lyrics, while they combat and transcend the gravity in hip hop that weighs them down.<sup>3</sup>

Underground emcees also attack commercial consumer culture. In "Collude/Intrude" the Indelible MCs comprise a platoon with lethal force on the "frontline" and equate their lyrics to "caps" (bullets) and grenades which add to the crossfire of ideologies competing for power and control. The battle metaphor likens words to weapons that pierce through various dimensions of time and space. Creativity is referenced in this song as the evasion tactics for avoiding the trap and allure of flip

flop. The objective of this rhetoric is to meliorate discourse by exposing the falsity of flip flop rap, while simultaneously validating and exemplifying the potential of hip hop.

More generally, emcees "battle" against one another in the cipher, or rhetorical situation, where lyrics are "fired" out. Battling is a form of competition in which emcees combat each other and present their lyrics for consumption and approval. In this sense, hip hop lyrics imply a dare for other emcees to reply by testing their lyrical skills and artistic pride against one another. It is similar to the army because the battle metaphor inspires emcees to "be all they can be." In this sense the battle metaphor, which critics interpret as violent destruction, actually inspires lyrical creation and holds the attention of hip hop's global audience. The Battle/Struggle cluster deconstructs reality and informs the audience to facilitate revolution as a solution to the problems confronted by the black community.

### The Science Cluster

Listen and remember  
 MCs who render empty compositions tend to  
 Stop rappin' like Christians at the end of December  
 Called up science to make a deal  
 Put in by defiance of gravity in hip hop  
 Let's form an alliance  
 Keep me rappin' avidly and you'll be proud guaranteed.  
 (Siah and Yeshua da poEd, "Gravity")

The third most frequent key metaphor is Science. Emcees commonly refer to their performances as occasions for them to "drop science," or share wisdom with the audience. Underground emcees often liken themselves to scientists who analyze and dissect society to present its various sections. In this sense, recording studios are referred to as "laboratories" where the scientists convene to experiment with rhetoric and rhythm. Ocean, an emcee of Natural Resource, illustrates this metaphor as he explains how he can "split atoms, [and] blow up as if . . . atomic." This cluster partakes of sets of interrelated animal, evolutionary, genetic, geological, technological, physical, chemical, and philosophical associations.

Siah and Yeshua da poEd's song, "Gravity," is a prime example



of the science cluster. Siah and Yeshua understand that gravity is context-bound. For these emcees gravity is an aching pain that hinders productivity. In this lyric, gravity is the vehicle and oppressive forces are the tenor. The force of gravity is greater or lesser depending on location and discretion. This rhetoric provides a glimmer of hope that transcends daily trappings of society in a ghetto environment. It exemplifies the deconstruction argument of how the black community is weighed down by oppressive forces. This metaphor consoles hip hoppers and African Americans by portraying another world order, and teaches them to disdain the ones that fail to include them.

Underground emcees often employ the animal vehicles of "laboratory mice, heifers, and monkeys" to describe how many black women and men are perceived by others and how black people often perceive themselves. In many instances, underground emcees utilize the science metaphor as the conceptual underpinning for their lyrics. The hip hop version of "scientific inquiry" is the foundation for writing lyrics and a method for reshaping thought and life. Lyrics are referred to as "theses" which opponents are dared to challenge. This emphasizes the African American historical legacy of listening to the surrounding community for inspiration and information. Emcees conceptualize through metaphor the satisfaction and comfort they believe are afforded people who choose to hear their lyrics. In other words, emcees define themselves as revolutionary radical problem-solvers.

### *The Life Cluster*

Everybody has dreams of makin' cash money  
But you're dissin' all of those who showed you loyalty  
You're never thinkin' of the issues of community  
Flashy idiots are destined to be casualties  
Treachery is all I see and it's a God-damn shame  
We broke the bonds of slavery to carry brand new chains  
Greed for money, Greed for money, Greed for money  
Think about it! (Homeliss Derilex, "Cash Money")

The Life cluster allows emcees to incorporate and respond to the thoughts presented by fellow emcees and hip hop audiences. For example, in "Cash Money" Homeliss Derilex bid flip floppers and their audiences to consider issues of community and class. This song explains

how art intersects with life by portraying flip floppers as a part of the white establishment who have lost their effectiveness to oppose or reform the mainstream. Assata Shakur concurs and asserts that:

a lot of the symbols that are in rap records and videos are indications of decadent consumerism, and in a very real sense, those gold chains, hundred-dollar sneakers and t-shirts with a designer's name on it underline how much they've become enslaved by the consumer mentality . . . consumer slaves. (Verán 136)

Flip flop, in general, has taken on the values of the mainstream American popular culture. In contrast to "flip flop," underground hip hop is viewed by young urban black Americans as a means of self-discovery and as a way to replace the master narrative. Underground hip hoppers avoid co-optation by the master narrative because they offer revolutionary messages that oppose the status quo, which is affirmed in flip flop. Underground hip hop develops black intellectuals and their understanding of individual and communal space in a larger structure.

More broadly, life is expressed as a series of choices, such as the one between hip hop and flip flop. In this sense, life is a long road with many signs. In addition, life is portrayed as a sacrifice and an entity that can be redefined by manipulating symbols and labeling patterns. This is evidenced in Talib Kweli's song titled "Manifesto," when he explains how African Americans underwent changes in naming: "from nigger to son to god." These name changes accompanied reforms in civil rights legislation and increased self-esteem among African Americans.

The *Life* cluster conveys an otherworldliness on the part of emcees, especially with regard to pains of life. By employing this metaphor, emcees offer their audiences a conceptualizing image that informs the black experience and places hope in a higher power. For example, emcees often ask the audience to redefine what it means to be black. In addition, the metaphor that "word is life," meaning that words shape and reshape lives, is implied throughout the discourse. This metaphor is a significant manner in which to conceptualize the potential for growth, education, life itself, and the life-death-rebirth cycle as a function of the *Nommo*, spoken word. Talib Kweli describes the power of hip hop in "Manifesto" when he declares that, "We building black minds with intelligence and when you freestyle/keep the subject matter

relevant/Every MC grab a pen and write some conscious lyrics to tell to the children." This directly relates hip hop to black rhetoric and community development. It also illustrates that emcees conceptualize their lyrics as a source of rebirth and renewal in life.<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, the four key metaphor clusters meet under three main functions, all of which are tacit in the definition of black rhetoric: (1) *Construction*--the clusters establish familiar ground between emcees and their audience; (2) *Deconstruction*--the clusters deconstruct and stand as courageous critiques of aspects of hip hop and society that disable community building; and (3) *Reconstruction*--the clusters reconstruct community and constitute an important inventional tool used by emcees to display their intellectual perspicacity and their visions of a more perfect world. This mode of analysis provides a more accessible format to identify and discuss the messages used to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the African American and hip hop communities.

Ideally, lyrics are groups of rhymes arranged in a way in which nothing is said capriciously. As hip hop in its archetypal sense, underground hip hop is a rhetorical avenue through which emcees lyrically punish audiences with their anger and aggressions, and bless audiences with their love and expectations which eventually become the ultimate expression of self. In this sense, the rhetoric is in the tradition of Aristotle's epideictic rhetoric and functions to fight oppression (Battle cluster), to build communities (Game and Life clusters), to debate (Science cluster), and as intellectual self-defense (all clusters).

The rhetoric of underground hip hop transmits a strategic discourse with instructions for community construction. The underground exists as an alternative narrative and a state of mind. Underground culture is not about how people relate to the South Bronx, the birthplace of hip hop, but about how people relate to the culture of hip hop. Underground artists are compelled to deliver innovative approaches and original ideas for the purpose of re-energizing the intellectual dialogue begun by African American music long ago. Cooperation, innovation, revolution, and evolution are essential factors as hip hop builds communities. Underground artists maintain their integrity while critiquing artists who compromise their messages for glamor and glitz.

Hip hop, and more specifically the act of emceeing within this context, clearly and actively construct and reconstruct images of the African American community. In *Dangerous Crossroads*, George Lipsitz

affirms that the messages encoded within hip hop are extremely significant in constructing community:

The significance of these seemingly ephemeral works of popular culture goes far beyond their role as commodities. The diasporic conversation within hip hop . . . provides a powerful illustration of the potential for contemporary commercialized leisure to carry images, ideas, and icons of enormous political importance between cultures. Whatever role they serve in the profit-making calculations of the music industry, these expressions also serve as exemplars of post-colonial culture with direct relevance to the rise of new social austerity and oppression. (27)

Exercising a multitude of rhetorical strategies, especially the use of metaphor and simile, rappers assume active and creative stances. Hip hop provides emcees with a mode for addressing cultural exigencies, creating new opportunities and perspectives for conceptualizing communication, and constructing a hip hop community as inclusive, without regard to gender, race, or class.

To summarize, underground hip hop is an example of black rhetoric as it allows African Americans to engage in the symbolic social construction and reconstruction of the African American community. Underground emcees use hip hop as they struggle to avert criticism of the status quo and critique the aspects of hip hop that frustrate. The acts and artifacts of underground hip hoppers are a rhetorical resource and an arena for intellectual exploration where words are twisted, flipped, spun, and juxtaposed. These verbal acrobatics imply that emcees possess intellectual and verbal stamina and agility. However, when taken out of context these same words may appear antagonistic and whimsical. Through a rhetorical lens, hip hop is understood as a culture with its own language that pulls together and creates worldviews. What becomes open for critique, then, are entirely new worldviews that cannot

be ignored, negated, or stereotyped as "noise" when in the hands of critics.

## Notes

1. Sean "Puffy" Combs (a.k.a. Puff Daddy) is the president and CEO of Bad Boy Records. He produces commercial acts such as Mase, Lil' Kim, The Lox, and the late Notorious BIG. Jermaine Dupri (a.k.a. J.D.) is the president and CEO of So So Def Recordings. He produces commercial acts such as Da Brat, Usher, and himself.

2. Dead Prez is an underground rap group whose name is slang for cash money, also referred to as dead presidents. However, the name is of greater significance as it reflects the emcees' connection to history and its significance in the present. The song examined is "Food, Clothes, and Shelter" from the forthcoming album *These Are The Times (Novus ordo Seclorum)*.

Natural Resource is an underground rap group whose song "Negro Leagues Baseball" questions whether lessons from athletics carry over into good citizenship. The message of the song is clear: black people in America, whether in sports or entertainment, are not considered important unless or until they are of some value to white people.

Siah and Yeshua da poEd are underground emcees who use gravity as a metaphor for that which weighs hip hop down: the predominant flip flop discourse of brand name clothing, cars, and degradation of women. The song examined is "Gravity," from their 1996 album titled *Siah and Yeshua da poEd*.

3. Talib Kweli (a.k.a. Reflection Eternal) and Mos Def are underground emcees who teamed up for the songs "Definition" and "Manifesto" from their 1998 album titled *BLACKSTAR*. According to the emcees, together their names signify a "redefinition" (RE + DEF) of terms which reconstruct images of hip hop and African Americans.

4. *Nommo* is the African belief in the magical power of the spoken word (Asante). The spoken word wields magic that constructs and reconstructs reality. For a general discussion, see Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987): 59-80.

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