

Teaching On the Level: The Poetics of Rap

Academic attention to rap music and hip-hop culture has come a long way from Richard Shusterman's 1991 opening claim in a *New Literary History* article that, "in the view of both the culturally elite and the so-called general public, rap music lurks in the underworld of aesthetic respectability."¹ Wonderful intellectual work has been published in the last two decades which defends the cultural value of hip-hop and rap music (e.g., work by Michael Eric Dyson), which provides a history of hip-hop as a movement and developments in rap music (e.g., Tricia Rose's book *Black Noise*), and which increasingly interrogates the nuances, problems, and complexities of hip-hop and rap (e.g., Gwendolyn D. Pough's scholarship of and editing of work about women and hip-hop). These kinds of cultural studies projects have been essential to maintaining a productive intellectual discussion about rap, but I have yet to see specific discussions of how to bring rap lyrics into the classroom from a deeply literary perspective.

In the last decade that I have been teaching poetry—first at the secondary level and now at the undergraduate level—I have heard repeated affirmation of the belief that rap lyrics are a respectable form of poetry that can be taught in the classroom. Teachers, especially at the secondary level, are paying more attention to the ways that rap lyrics offer a potential to reach students who would otherwise be turned off by poetry, to refute the kind of claim made famous in 1991 by Dana Gioia that poetry is dead,² to examine a distinctly African-American form of poetics, and to keep lessons tuned-in to students' popular culture knowledges. Furthermore, providing students with a platform from which to explore the intricacies of specific lyrical texts as well as the cultural contexts which inform rap production is crucial to developing a

¹ Shusterman, Richard. "The Fine Art of Rap." *New Literary History* 22.3 (Summer 1991): 613-32.

² Gioia, Dana. "Can Poetry Matter?" *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 1991). Retrieved on January 30, 2008 from www.theatlantic.com/unbound/poetry/gioia/gioia.htm.

recognition of rap's role in contemporary poetic production and in helping students develop critical perspectives of the popular culture they consume. My concern in this article is with how to push such discussions in literary classes to incorporate the kinds of close reading (including scansion) and theoretically-informed discussions of rap that we expect of traditional poetry (by which I mean, primarily, British and American following in European-informed styles), but also how to develop the different, but similarly intellectually rigorous, methods of analysis which are required by rap lyrics. Rap lyrics, especially when considered in cultural and musical context, provide complex texts for students to analyze, and I think too often those texts are presented as cultural artifacts or representations without such close analysis.

I do concede that reading lyrics as poetry can create some familiar limitations: the melody is often privileged over the poetics of the line or stanza, repetition is often employed for musical concerns rather than poetic concerns, and rhymes are often designed to be memorable after one listen (as is word choice) rather than to be complex. Certainly there are song lyrics that hold up under the microscope of scansion and close reading, but in general, I have found that rap lyrics hold up better under the rigor of class discussion than the lyrics of folk, punk, or rock music have. Since I have yet to see detailed discussion of how to teach rap lyrics as poetry, I take this opportunity to explore possible practical applications of it in the undergraduate literary classroom.

Last semester (Fall 2007), I had the privilege of teaching a small, special topics course in American literature which I focused on poetry and its connections to music, sound, and orality. We read poetry in four units based on jazz poetry, the Nuyorican movement, hip-hop poetics, and the spoken word movement. I will use examples from this class's unit on hip-hop poetics for

some of the ideas here.³ In this class, we spent three weeks discussing representative rap lyrics and reading Rose's *Black Noise*⁴ to provide a cultural history of hip-hop. I was surprised to discover that few of my students listened to rap music or were familiar with specific artists and those who were had never critically examined it. Therefore, I presented an introduction to rap lyrics that will be the first component of my discussion in this article. I will then move into a discussion of how I think this example could become either a larger unit or a unit designed for a higher-level course.

Scansion and Rap Lyrics

There are two essential elements that students need to be able to read traditional British and American poetry: scansion and command of the vocabulary of literary devices. I teach these at the beginning of any course about poetry and have found that Edna St. Vincent Millay's sonnet "Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink" and Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" are good examples for teaching these methods in one lesson. Both poems provide interesting examples of the meter reflecting, emphasizing, and adding new meaning to the poem's content and both include ambiguities within strict forms that make for animated class discussions. Whether or not students must have this knowledge prior to looking at the rhythms and rhyme schemes of rap lyrics is debatable, but my students did and they frequently referenced comparisons in our discussions of the rap music.

Because rap lyrics may or may not meet different scholars' definitions of "poetry," I began our work with a discussion of how the students each defined poetry. Some of the students were at a loss of how to explain the difference between poetry and prose beyond their visual

³ I am grateful to the students from my section of ENGL390 ("Hip to the Spoken Word") at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs for their receptive, enthusiastic, and insightful discussions about hip-hop and for contributing to the ideas that I write about in this essay.

⁴ Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1994.

differences (in formatting on the page), while others had very specific beliefs about the importance of meter and/or rhyme, the use of lines rather than sentences, and stanza structures. From there, I asked them to explain their own aesthetic criteria for what constitutes a successful poem, without requiring that these criteria be rigid. In fact, the students had very clear ideas of what they felt a “good” poem is and what a “bad” poem is, that would have significant effect on their interpretation and judgment of the rap lyrics. We kept this discussion of aesthetics loose and open-ended so that it could help define our examination of the rap lyrics, but so that it could change throughout our discussion as well.

Some of the invaluable vocabulary for discussing traditional poetry (i.e. iambic pentameter, heroic couplets, quatrains, etc.) become moot in discussions of rap lyrics as poetry, but the concepts do not. Close reading of rap lyrics provides an opportunity for students to develop insightful ways to describe the forms that make up the structure of rap lyrics because they might have to find detailed and expressive ways to describe what they read and hear. There is a vocabulary specific to hip-hop and rap that is useful to be familiar with up front (MC, scratching, sampling, breaking, and flow in particular); my students pulled many of these terms from Rose’s book and we would listen to songs to try to hear how those elements are used. But other elements of a rap song’s structure are more difficult to provide names for: the polyrhythmic beats that control the song’s sound are integrally related to the rapper’s flow, but require more complex description than traditional poetic meter’s terminology provides. The students in my class enjoyed this process of contributing to the developing language of rap as poetry and were surprised by rap’s potential to employ complex poetics and sound. I found that, like the Millay and Roethke poems, Erik B. & Rakim’s “Paid in Full” provides an ideal introduction to rap poetics. The lyric itself is rather short (24 lines in the version available from

lyricsondemand.com, about a minute and a half in playing time) and is dense with internal as well as end rhyme, rhythmic patterns, and Rakim's signature flow:⁵

1 Thinkin of a masterplan
2 Cuz ain't nuthin but sweat inside my hand
3 So I dig into my pocket, all my money is spent
4 So I dig deeper but still comin up with lint
5 So I start my mission—leave my residence
6 Thinkin how could I get some dead presidents
7 I need money, I used to be a stick-up kid
8 So I think of all the devious things I did
9 I used to roll up, this is a hold up, ain't nuthin funny
10 Stop smilin, be still, don't nuthin move but the money
11 But now I learned to earn cuz I'm righteous
12 I feel great! So maybe I might just
13 Search for a 9 to 5, if I strive
14 Then maybe I'll stay alive
15 So I walk up the street whistlin this
16 Feelin out of place cuz, man, do I miss
17 A pen and a paper, a stereo, a tape of
18 Me and Eric B, and a nice big plate of
19 Fish, which is my favorite dish
20 But without no money it's still a wish
21 Cuz I don't like to dream about getting paid
22 So I dig into the books of the rhymes that I made
23 To now test to see if I got pull
24 Hit the studio, cuz I'm paid in full.⁶

In the song, this lyric is followed by Erik B.'s solo scratching for the duration of the three minute song. My class read the lyrics on their own prior to hearing the song, and then we listened to the song a couple of times in class together to analyze and try to scan the lyric.

⁵ I've numbered the lines for reference in my discussion.

⁶ I've used the version of the lyrics available on lyricsondemand.com because I have not yet found access to an "official" version of the lyrics. These lyrics make end rhyme the primary reason for line breaks (with an exception in the line "I used to roll up, this is a hold up, ain't nuthin funny" which allows the repetition of "up" to mimic end rhyme both in sound and pause, but which maintains something closer to the usual syllabic rhythm in the line by making "funny" the end rhyme). I've made a couple of changes for uniformity's sake: all gerunds end in "in" (in the lyricsondemand.com version, some ended in "ing" and others in "in") and all abbreviations of "because" are spelled "cuz" (before some were "cos"). The recorded song is available on Eric B. & Rakim's 1987 album *Paid in Full*, which was widely released again in 1998 as *Paid in Full: The Platinum Edition* through Island Records.

I asked my students to try to describe the correlation they heard between Rakim's lyric and Erik B.'s DJing. Seeking the "meter," they began to count syllables and try to find ways to explain the rhythm that Rakim establishes in the first two lines. Lines one and two contain seven and ten syllables, respectively. My students noted that this syllabic rhythm recurs later in lines 14 and 15, pulling the rhythm back to its origin or, arguably, starting a new stanza rhythmically. The sampled bass line that supplements the rhythm through the beginning of the song stops, symbolically, at the moment when Rakim describes having been a "stick-up kid" and returns again when he describes deciding to search for legal work in line 13, just before the rhythmic coda. They also discovered that repeating Rakim's flow is difficult. The line breaks in this printed version do not mimic Rakim's pauses or his inflected movement through the words. They wondered if the lyric would change if it was printed differently and discussed the ways the use of his voice influences their understanding of the lines, the way a singer's does.

Moving from the rhythms of the poem to the diction, imagery, and rhyming, the students were interested in possible ramifications of alliteration or assonance in lines, especially in significant moments like "roll up" and "hold up" both having the long *ō* sound precede the short *ū*, which we felt could represent some kind of opening up, as in growth or exploration, cut short. This is further enhanced by Rakim's having broken the line into three sections with breaks emphasized by the repetition of "up." We thought there might be popular cultural references in a suggestion like "maybe I'll stay alive" that is followed immediately by the image of him walking up the street à la John Travolta to the BeeGees soundtrack. It took most of the class period (one hour, 15 minutes) to begin to develop specific ways of identifying the structural elements of Rakim's rap that spoke to the musical elements in metaphoric or symbolic ways, but students repeatedly burst out in excitement at discoveries of elements they wanted to discuss. Being able

to recognize and articulate the poetic and rhythmic elements of the lyric changed how they understood hip-hop as a genre and informed their ability to articulate how this song fit into their particular poetic aesthetics.

I hope it is clear that “Paid in Full” provided a provocative platform for initiating discussion of rap lyrics as poetry. Certainly more can be said about it than we covered in one class period (in which this analysis was only one element of the work; the students completed a brief in-class writing to try to independently articulate their interpretation of the lyric as well). In other class periods we covered some of the elements of cultural studies which can supplement a discussion of this poem as well (including inherited poetic forms from Gil Scott Heron and the Last Poets, the cultural traditions of drumming and song structures in African American history, issues of inner-city life and culture, the moral growth of the speaker of this lyric, and the implications of slang). We discussed at least one different song in each class during this unit, but in the end, the students commented that Rakim’s poetics stood out as exemplary for them. In returning to the issue of aesthetic criteria, they felt that Rakim’s use of rhyming and rhythmic patterns qualified his lyrics as poetry. They felt that the complexity of the rhythm’s relationship to the lyrical content, the complexity of his use of sound through assonance particularly, and the positive message made it “good” poetry.

I felt that the lesson was successful, although not all of the lyrics I had chosen for the unit proved as interesting to the students as Rakim’s. Throughout the rest of the semester, I saw evidence that my students’ attention to formal elements of poetry, especially to rhythmic details, was enhanced. When I have a chance to teach this kind of unit again (or possibly an entire course on hip-hop poetics), I would like to spend more time with each song in order to fully examine the ways a song like “Paid in Full” represents and is informed by a variety of cultural factors. For

instance, it opens with a conversation between Rakim and Eric B. over the foundational beat for the song, in which they identify other people in the production of their music who help construct the final sound. In this case, one of the people they acknowledge is “Rush”—who is known today by his given name, Russell Simmons—a central and influential figure in the development of hip-hop culture. As a musical form produced most commonly without orchestral instruments, rap music depends largely on studio production, so that the producer is as much a part of the “band” as the DJ and the MC. Therefore, knowledge of the business and commercialization of rap music informs the lyrics and development of the hip-hop movement, sociology and politics of inner-city culture inform the MCs’ lyrics, and knowledge of the history of the movement is crucial to understanding the impact of a line like Rakim’s “thinkin how could I get some dead presidents.”

Developing Further Analysis

Although I’ve presented a rather formalist approach to one lesson about rap lyrics as poetry here in order to begin to establish a literary discussion of poetic elements of the lyrics for classroom practice, once students have developed these reading and listening skills, many more options open up for literary analysis. Here are a few that I’ve thought about:

1. Other formal elements to examine: Rap lyrics participate in a variety of patterns and styles that become formal elements that MCs adhere to and/or acknowledge. A few of them include:

a) Narrative: Rakim tells a story in “Paid in Full” that is reminiscent of either confessional poetry or dramatic monologue. Some of the most popular and acclaimed rappers from its inception through the early 1990s told stories in their songs as well.

Other famous ones include A Tribe Called Quest's "I Left My Wallet in El Segundo" and many of Biggie's songs.

b) Remnants of Battling: Because rapping began as a freestyle, improvised form of competition in which two or more MCs and/or DJs "battled" for crowd approval, common elements of rap lyrics including touting one's own lyrical prowess or insulting another rapper's skills or neighborhood affiliations are recognized elements of a problematic artistic tradition.

c) Use of the breaks and scratching: Although I didn't discuss it here, pauses in a rhythm or the rapper's flow create caesura-like lacunae which carry as much weight and meaning as the words. The DJs use of scratching can work similarly by creating meaningful rhythms which function in conjunction with or against the rapper's lyrics like the conversation between two jazz musicians' solos.

2. Comparative discussions of the rap lyrics with the sampled music: For example, A Tribe Called Quest's song "Excursions" begins with the lines:

Back in the day when I was a teenager
before I had status and before I had a pager
you could find the abstract listening to hip-hop
my pops used to say it reminded him of bebop
I said well Daddy don't you know that things go in cycles
the way that Bobby Brown is just ampin like Michael⁷

The specific reference to bebop in these lines is immediately responded to in sampled horn riffs behind the lyric. Analyzing what the rapper Phife refers to in these lines alongside bebop jazz allows students to see the connections that many critics and rappers have made between the two musical and cultural developments. Because my class completed a unit on jazz poetry in which

⁷ I've transcribed these lines from listening to the song.

we had listened to mid-twentieth-century jazz, my students were intrigued by some of these connections (although they often disagreed with the kind of direct comparison Phife makes here).

3. Cultural studies analysis: As I noted earlier in this article, there are ample sources of discussion of hip-hop and rap lyrics from historians, sociologists, anthropologists, etc.

Considering these songs from a Humanities perspective could elicit wonderful insight and round out students' understanding of a movement that they often, mistakenly, think they already know inside-out because it is contemporary to their experience of popular culture. For example, the song "Excursions" incorporates sampled clips of the performance poem "Time is Running Out" by the Last Poets—a group of poets and musicians considered the "grandfathers of rap," but whose work also set precedents for the current Spoken Word and Slam poetry movements.

4. Postmodern theoretical analysis: As an art form based on sampling and sonic collage, rap enters a postmodern artistic practice that is explored in theoretical discussion. Might our understanding of what rap is doing or means change through the lens of such theories as Walter Benjamin's analysis of the "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" or Jean Baudrillard's understanding of the simulacra? Benjamin couldn't foresee sampling and rap music, but how might his analysis of the "copy" of a work of art inform our understanding of what rap accomplishes aesthetically? Similarly, how does Baudrillard's discussion of the simulacra adjust our understanding of what the "original" is and, therefore, what rap is doing?

I have not had the opportunity to put all of these ideas into practice yet, but as I continue to evaluate the ways that rap functions in the context of the changing canon of American poetry, I will continue to elicit students' participation in my exploration. They can play an important role in understanding ways the canon is changing to include not only a diversity of voices from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, but a diversity of accepted forms of poetic style,

structure, and production method. Although rap has changed radically in the aftermath of “gangsta rap” and the apparently irreversible commercialization (making it pop music) of the music in the last decade (or more), it is co-partners in returning poetry to popularity among young crowds of people with spoken word and slam poetry. Slam poets like Saul Williams show distinct influences of rap lyricism and pull crowds of thousands of young people (our students!) to performances. Providing college students with the tools to evaluate and analyze rap lyrics as poetry allows for interdisciplinary study, for their participation in discussions of canon formation, and it validates and provides vocabulary for the widely circulated, but largely unqualified notion that rappers are poets.

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