‘Stuck Off the Realness’

Rap as Aural Literature

Not only is a serious rap serious poetry… it's quite possibly the most important stuff happening in American poetry today. - David Foster Wallace[1]

I - Preliminary Remarks

What we call poetry today has undeniably existed both as a literary and as an oral tradition throughout history and pre-history. We can view oral and literary poetry as separate and distinct traditions, as two strains of one tradition, or as anything in between, but it is important that we do not assume that either one has sole claim to being called "poetry." It goes without saying that no serious literary critic would reject Homer[2] solely on the basis of its existence as part of an oral tradition, nor would they argue that Shakespeare's plays have a diminished literary value because of their intended medium, oral performance. In like manner, we cannot reject rap[3] simply because it exists primarily as oral poetry rather than written poetry. There may be other reasons to deny that rap is serious poetry, but its oral nature cannot be one of them. Because of this oral medium — and for numerous social, cultural, racial, and historical reasons — rap looks (sounds) quite different from most contemporary literary poetry. Without detailing these differences at the moment, it suffices to say that they do not *prima facie* necessitate that rap be rejected as serious poetry. There may be other barriers, both inherent and incidental, to an attempt to address rap as serious poetry, but all I can ask is that we try to keep an open mind,

---

[1] pp. 99-100.

[2] Or Anglo-Saxon literature. In fact, both Homeric and Old English scholars have been dealing with the question of the relationship between orality and literacy in poetry for quite some time now, and in quite a sophisticated manner. Cf. O'Keeffe's article "Orality and the Developing Text of Cædmon's Hymn."

[3] A note on terminology: it has been pointed out to me that "rap" may not be the best term to refer to the whole of hip-hop lyrics or MCing. However, despite its possibly negative connotations and imprecision, there is really no other suitable term. By "rap," I simply mean the lyrical (both composition and performance) aspect of hip-hop music.

relatively free (or at least aware) of bias and prejudice against this promising popular verbal art form.

Before beginning an attempt to treat rap with the same sustained and serious critical attention that so much literary poetry has received, I would like to define some terms and address at least some of these possible barriers. Because rap is a relatively new phenomenon, and because there is not yet much of an active literary-critical discourse around it[4], it is necessary to provide some discursive contextualization. First of all, I would like to make a distinction between rap and what is referred to as "oral poetry." Because the latter term usually connotes a tradition that exists in a cultural context situated *before* widespread literacy, it seems inaccurate to use it to refer to rap. To do so would be to ignore two essential features of rap that distinguish it from these pre/non-literate traditions: that it is necessarily associated with modern recording technology that allows verbal art to exist and be distributed in a fixed form as sound (rather than as printed text); and that it exists in a cultural context that, if situated in relation to literacy, might be said to be *post-literate*, at least to some degree. By post-literate cultural context, I mean simply a situation in which the written word is no longer the sole/dominant medium of verbal art, entertainment, and communication; but mixed media (music videos, audio tracks, television, radio, etc.) have legitimate claim to a space that was once the sole (or at least primary) province of the printed page. Additionally, I use the term *post-literate* to highlight the fact that rap is an "oral" tradition by choice, not by necessity, and that it exists in the same general cultural milieu as a highly developed literate poetic tradition — another feature that differentiates it from most other traditions of "oral poetry." Thus, instead of continuing to call rap "oral poetry," I would

---

[4] Though there is social, historical, cultural, and political work on it, as well as *some* literary-critical interest.

prefer to use the term *aural poetry*. This slight variation acknowledges the differences I have described while still maintaing rap's strong connection to orality. Also, conceiving rap as aural (rather than oral) suggests an emphasis on listening rather than speaking, on the ear rather than the mouth. When we listen to a rap recording[5], there is nobody actually speaking/performing in that very moment, as there would be in a traditional oral context. Rather, our experience is of a fixed track/album that we can rewind, replay, and skip through.

Dana Gioia does a decent job of recognizing some of the ways that rap (among other new popular poetry forms) is important in the context of post-literacy in her article "Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture." Though I would question many of her assertions and assumptions, she makes several good points about rap that may be helpful in framing this new aural poetry within the context of established literary culture. I would recommend skimming through her article, as I only have the space here to review a couple of the highlights. Though she

[5] Which is the way rap is most often encountered, and the medium it can most be said to exist in. I do not deny the significance of live events, especially in the formation of rap as a genre, but merely suggest that the recorded form is generally the dominant form, and definitely the form that lends itself most to textual criticism.

stops short of recognizing individual rappers as valid literary artists[6], she does acknowledge the important and revolutionary role that rap (as well as other new popular verbal art forms) is beginning to play. She even acknowledges the epochal shift that aural poetry is a part of: "Just as European literature changed two and a half millennia ago as it moved from oral to written culture, so has popular poetry transformed itself as it moves from print culture to our audio-visual culture in which writing exists but is no longer the primary means of public discourse" (29). She also recognizes the broader movement back towards aurality, rhyme, meter, and narrative that rap is a part of, and even draws a connection between the accentual meter of rap and Anglo-Saxon verse (31-2). Keeping both Gioia's arguments and her attitudes in mind as we move forward, I would like to suggest that we should not dismiss the possibility that rap (by which I mean specific tracks, lyrics, and rappers — not some abstract idea) can be seen as literary art simply by pointing out that it is unlike established literary forms, but rather we should remain cognizant both of its differences and similarities to the modern literary text.

---

[6] Indeed, she seems to enjoy a state of cognitive dissonance in which the new aural poetry somehow "has enormous implications for the future of poetry" despite the fact that "individually considered as works of literary art, most of this work is undistinguished or worse" (25). She goes on to assert that "in general terms it [aural poetry] hardly seems to connect to any conventional academic notion of literary poetry. What is a conscientious critic supposed to do with an Eminem or Jay-Z? As individual texts for analysis, Snoop Dogg's 'Doggy Style' or Wallace McRae's 'The Cowboy Curmudgeon' offer a Harold Bloom or Helen Vendler little opportunity to display their critical chops" (26). Instead of responding to this narrow-minded (if not entirely ignorant) assertion, I would only point out that this is about as far as "open-minded" literary critics seem willing to go in appreciating rap as serious literary art. That a "conscientious critic" stands helpless when confronted with an entire body of verbal art would seem to say more about the critic than the art. Though Gioia's dismissal of rap as serious literature seems damning, one only has to realize that within the genre there are several quite different traditions (a fact which she seems unaware of), some of which are indeed not at all literary. However, just because some rappers cannot be considered serious literary artists does not mean that the ones that are should be dismissed. Not all poets are good poets, not all writers good writers. Indeed, because rap is a popular art form, there is quite a lot of not very good (in a literary sense) rap. However, there is a significant amount of quite good (and also quite popular) rap. Perhaps "high" and "popular" art has been so divided that we are unable to accept that art can be both good and popular.

This brings us to another important barrier to engaging in a sustained literary-critical investigation of rap, and another question in terminology: how do we define the "literary text"? It would be difficult to make the case that we can treat oral poetry (in the absence of recording technology) in the same way that we treat a literary text, if only because of the necessary lack of fixity on the part of the former. We cannot look over a purely oral poem repeatedly because it necessarily exists transiently in time, rather than permanently in space. Every performance may be different, so we cannot conceive an oral poem as a specific fixed entity. Once the poem has been performed, that specific performance is over. We can transcribe it, but by doing so we surely transform it into a literary text and thereby alter it. This is not to say that we cannot find ways to engage critically with a purely oral poem, but rather that it would be difficult (though perhaps possible) to make the case that an oral poem (which has not been transcribed) is a "text" in the same way that a literary text is. However, aural poetry (in recorded form) seems to present itself in much the same way that a literary text does. Though it still exists in time (sonically) rather than space (visually), it is like a literary text in that it is linear, traversable, and fixed. We can refer to specific moments in an aural text just as we refer to specific moments in a literary text. We can discuss an aural text as a fixed and unchanging entity that any individual can listen to. We can listen to the same verse as many times as we want, just as we can return to the same lines in a literary text. Therefore, I feel it is acceptable to extend the standard terminology somewhat: "aural text" is not an oxymoron, and does not require that the definition of a "text" be stretched very far at all.

Though the literary text and the aural text may be treated similarly in terms of literary criticism, they are surely very different with respect to their form. Indeed, in "Writing Degree

Zero," Barthes' critique of modern poetry and comparison to classical literature allows us to draw a connection between aural poetry and classical poetry, and to differentiate both from most of what we think of as "modern poetry." Writing of the novel, Barthes asserts that (the emphasis is mine) "when the Narrative is rejected in favour of other literary genres, or when, within the narration, the preterite is replaced by less ornamental forms, fresher, more full-blooded and *nearer to speech* (the present tense or the present perfect), Literature becomes the receptacle of existence in all its density and no longer of its meaning alone" (32). Though his focus is on verb tense, this seems to be only one characteristic that might be used to distinguish "fresher" literary forms, which would be closer to the natural patterns of speech, from more traditional (in the modern sense) genres. Barthes goes on to clarify the absolute discontinuity between classical and modern poetry: "Modern poetry is opposed to classical art by a difference which involves the whole structure of language, without leaving between those two types of poetry anything in common except the same sociological intention" (43-4). In his description of classical literature, he writes that "classical words are on the way to becoming an algebra where rhetorical figures of speech, clichés, function as virtual linking devices; they have lost their density and gained a more interrelated state of speech; they operate in the manner of chemical valences, outlining a verbal area full of symmetrical connections, junctions and network from which arise, without the respite afforded by wonder, fresh intentions towards signification" (46). Though this description is of classical letters, I would like to suggest that it may also apply to certain aspects of aural poetry. Rather than try to prove this contention explicitly, I would leave it as a background, a frame through which to view my attempt to treat aural poetry as serious literature. Barthes' emphasis on the importance of connections and (inter)relationships to the overall project of

classical poetry — in opposition to the density and "explosion of words" (46) that define modern poetry — will help guide my analysis of aural poetry, which I would like to suggest is a verbal art form that also is defined in large part by its interrelations. Finally, Barthes clearly points out the importance of oral forms in classical poetry (and the difference between oral and written forms): "classical literary art… is a product conceived for oral transmission… it is essentially a spoken language, in spite of its strict codification. We have seen that on the contrary modern poetry destroyed relationships in language and reduced discourse to words as static things" (49). I do not bring in these quotes merely to suggest that aural poetry is "good" (like classical poetry) and that modern poetry is "bad," but merely to highlight the fact that there has been an extraordinarily diverse variety of Western literary poetry, some forms of which are fundamentally quite different from others. In confronting the genre/form of aural poetry for the first time, we would be well advised to keep the broad historical context of Western poetry in mind, and not just to compare this new form to the specifically modern form of literary poetry, which is itself only one of many modes of valid poetic expression.

In the final pages of "Writing Degree Zero," Barthes describes a kind of literature that seems strangely similar to aural poetry, and indeed to the very material I intend to analyze in this paper: "During such moments when the writer follows languages which are really spoken, no longer for the sake of picturesqueness, but as essential objects which fully account for the whole content of society, writing takes as the locus of its reflexes the real speech of men. Literature no longer implies pride or escape, it begins to become a lucid act of giving information; as if it had first to learn the particulars of social differences by reproducing them. It takes it upon itself to give an immediate account, as a preliminary to any other message, of the situation of men

immured by the language of their class, their region, their profession, their heredity or their history" (80). Though I am not suggesting explicitly that aural poetry is exactly Barthes' "writing degree zero," I would assert that many of the characteristics that he associates with this ideal can be found in aural poetry. For example, we will see that a great deal of *The Infamous* consists of an attempt to directly and immediately describe the situation of individuals enclosed (immured) in a certain class/region/heredity and its language/discourses. The spoken discourse of aural poetry is not just an imitation of an actual spoken language, but rather a (poetically wrought) spoken language in its own right, which is however closely paralleled by (and associated with) a specific (non-poetic) mode of speech used by a great deal of people daily. Keeping these observations in mind, I would ask that we keep an open mind to the entire scope of aural poetry and its potential, rather than getting stuck in prejudices, assumptions, or misunderstandings. It is also important that we enable ourselves to see aural poetry not just as a completed genre, but as a new form with potential for development, incorporation, and synthesis with existing literary forms.

My goal is therefore not to eliminate or ignore the (significant) differences between aural (or oral) and literary texts, but rather to show that these differences do not necessitate a total differentiation in the methods of reading/listening and interpretive strategies we employ. My contention is not that aural and literary texts are the same, but rather that certain modes of criticism that may traditionally have been restricted to one form can be extended with relative ease to accommodate the other. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that both forms may have much to gain by being put in dialog with one another, and that the discipline of literary criticism

especially may find itself enriched both by engaging with aural poetry and by juxtaposing it with written literary works.

II - Aurality in Action

Before embarking on a literary-critical analysis of a significant portion of a rap album, it would be helpful to further explore some of the features that make rap, as aural poetry, unique (or, if not utterly unique, at least quite different from literary poetry). At the same time, I would like to confront an impression, which is perhaps a significant barrier to accepting rap as serious poetry, that much of rap explicitly glorifies, valorizes, and encourages violence. I propose to do so by looking closely at some verses from an important rap group, the Wu-Tang Clan.

Though it may be obvious to those familiar with the genre, I feel obligated to point out that the verses I will quote in written form do not adequately represent their original aural source material. I strongly recommend listening to these verses, as opposed to simply reading them[7]. However, this is not to say that aural poetry necessarily loses all its value when it is transcribed; just that it is important, especially for those of us so familiar with the written text, to keep in mind that these texts are fundamentally aural and that any transcription is a makeshift stand-in for the real thing, rather than a sufficient representation or translation. Furthermore, there are almost always significant problems in transcription, and I frequently come across serious errors

[7] Everything I quote can be easily found on the website http://rapgenius.com, which contains both a transcription of the lyrics (with wikipedia-style annotations that are often helpful and explanatory, especially for a listener unfamiliar with the genre) and the tracks themselves, which can be played easily. I would recommend listening to the track while reading the lyrics.

in most written versions of raps[8], not to mention the inherent and intended ambiguity that exists in some verbal pronunciations, which must of necessity be disambiguated during the transcription process. Also, it is helpful to keep in mind that all transcriptions are necessarily arbitrary in their choice of punctuation, lineation, etc. That being said, these difficulties are not insurmountable: if we conceive of transcribed verses of aural poetry as stand-ins for their sonic sources and do not get distracted by, caught up or overly invested in this written representation, we can simply consider the written words as pointers to (symbols of) their sonic counterparts, necessary because of the constraints of the written form itself. Thus, the quotes that follow should be taken as symbolic stand-ins for the sounds they represent, not as legitimate or valid forms as such.

The first lines of the first verse of "Bring Da Ruckus," which is the first song on "Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)," introduce the common theme of the act of rapping being metaphorically represented as an act of physical violence[9]:

Ghostface, catch the blast of a hype verse

My Glock burst, leave in a hearse, I did worse

These lines might, at first glance, be off-putting to many listeners, as they seem to directly attack us, threatening to shoot and kill us. The rapper also seems to be glorifying gun-violence, proudly

---

[8] For example, in RZA's own book, "The Wu-Tang Manual," he erroneously includes the words "like a runaway slave" in his transcription of the third line of GZA's verse in "Bring Da Ruckus" (147). These words are from the last line in Ghostface Killah's verse on "7th Chamber," but they are mistakenly transcribed here. If RZA himself, who produced, managed, and participated in the Wu-Tang Clan when they made these albums, made an error like this, my transcriptions *definitely* should not be trusted. The audio track is the medium of aural poetry, not the page.

[9] Accumulating data from the first four songs on this album, which admittedly probably contain the highest number of these metaphors, I nevertheless counted an incredible 78 distinct instances of the rap-as-physical-violence metaphor within a span of roughly 200 lines.

associating his name with this assault. However, if we look (listen) closely, there is something interesting going on, something that challenges this simplistic interpretation. Notice that the addressee is threatened with "the blast of a hype **verse**," which suggests that this poetry itself is a weapon, like a gun (which it is metaphorically represented as). Also, "hype" gives the verse a sense of exaggerated efficacy, and even points to the fact that it derives its power from its own definition/description of itself[10]. In the next line, the threat is fulfilled when Ghostface's Glock actually shoots and kills. However, the suggestion is clearly that a performed verse is analogous to a fired gun. The Glock here is just as much the verse as the verse is the Glock. This is made especially clear by the metrical scheme: the phrases "hype **verse**" and "Glock **burst**" are metrically parallel; both are iambs with a rhymed second syllable. This strong metaphorical connection between violence (esp. gun-violence) and rap might seem baffling at first, but if we take it as a springboard from which to explore the differences between written and aural texts, it may prove productive. Also, this conceptual framing of rap as physical violence pervades the genre and may offer some insight into the nature of aural poetry itself, as theorized by its own lyrics. Going forward, I would like to examine the symbolic connotations of this analogy, taking the above quoted verse as an introductory example.

I would like to continue exploring the question of why and how violence is used as a metaphor for the act of rapping, for several reasons: this question can confront the criticism that rap encourages and glorifies violence with violent lyrics and should not be respected as an art form because of this cycle of violence it participates in; and it gets at one of the important points

---

[10] "Hype" is often used as a positive adjective to describe rap's exciting and stimulating qualities. For example, in "Microphone Fiend," Rakim raps that:

> I'm hype as a hypochondriac
> Cause the rap be one hell of an antidote

of tension/contrast between rap as an aural poetic form and literary poetry as a written form: the physical nature of rhythmic verbal art. So, let's look at some lines/verses from one song on *36 Chambers* with these questions in mind, and in order to trace the poetics of violence, or rather the utilization of metaphors of violence and exaggerated physicality for poetic action. Then, we will perhaps be able to distinguish this metaphorical violence from actual violence, and better understand the implicit physicality of aural poetry.

I provide a complete transcription of the lyrics of "Wu-Tang: 7th Chamber" in appendix B[11], which I would recommend reading through (and/or listening to) before proceeding[12]. In verse one, Raekwon uses several interrelated image strands, relating to both physical violence and sex, to describe the act of rapping. It is important to observe that all the metaphors in this verse are qualified and exaggerated in specific ways. He attacks like a pit-bull, the most (at least symbolically) aggressive, muscular, and tenacious dog, which is also well-known for fighting other dogs. He "freaks the sound" not just gently or tenderly, but "hardcore." He "get[s] you open" like a six-pack of beer, as though rap were an intoxicating beverage[13]. This rap attack is not just murder, but first-degree murder. Raekwon doesn't just have one gun, he has "twin Glocks." And war, for Wu-Tang, means bombing, the most devastating aspect of modern warfare. This exaggeration points to the fact that these metaphors of violence are over-the-top, extreme, fantastic ways of describing the physicality of the act of rapping rather than

---

[11] I do not have the space to address the fact that Wu-Tang's tracks typically include lyrics from several (seven here, even more on other tracks) rappers in the group (as well as affiliates who are not officially part of the group). However, this is an interesting, novel, and powerful poetic device that deserves in-depth study.

[12] The Rapgenius lyrics page for this track is also fairly well-annotated - http://rapgenius.com/Wu-tang-clan-wu-tang-7th-chamber-lyrics

[13] This metaphor of rap as an intoxicating substance, as well as a direct analogy of the music industry to the sale and distribution of crack, is common.

descriptions of specific and personal violent experiences and acts. This is important to keep in mind, especially when we consider that what might seem to be an enthusiastic affirmation of violence-as-such is really nothing but an excited embodiment of poetry-in-action, which is metaphorically presented as exaggerated violence[14]. Before moving on, I would like to point out briefly (I don't have space to walk through every word, and the multiple meanings and symbolic relations) how masterfully Raekwon weaves these image strands into one verse. The robbery strand is introduced with "I get that ass robbed on spite" and then picked up again in the second to last line with the backronym "**w**e **u**sually **t**ake **a**ll **n**iggas **g**arments" (which additionally develops the clothing image of the first line). Also, a footwear theme is introduced in the first line, and then extended later with "I kick it like a Nike Flight," drawing a contrast between the addressee (another rapper, the listener, etc.) and the speaking subject. Notice, finally, the primary images at play here are the physical tropes of violence, sex, and drugs/alcohol.

Method Man's verse includes a similar exaggeration: he's psychotic, and he has a gun *and* a sword. I would like to suggest that this dual weaponry ("I'm on the trigger, plus I got the Wu-Tang sword") might serve as a metaphor for the dual written and oral nature of aural poetry. The gun is the mic, the sound, the rhythm, the performance; the sword is the pen, the written composition. He's also a sniper, but even more so: a sniper hyper off a psychoactive substance, employing the style of the P.L.O. Method Man also shows an excellent sense of metaphor and symbolism, as he develops an image of "saving the beef" (i.e. discouraging the addressee from futilely trying to fight him) before turning it onto another semantic level (beef as literal cow

---

[14] Think of a Tarantino movie, in the sense that the violence is not "real" but exaggerated for stylistic/ aesthetic effect. This strategy ends up being much more subtle in poetry/rap than in film because of the extremely realistic nature of the visual spectacle of violence contrasted with the more imaginative and suggestive linguistic medium.

meat) and then expanding it into an image of milking the cow, which then turns into a kind of "cash cow," representing rap as a money-maker.

Inspectah Deck's verse continues these thematics, as he does violence to the mic, presents himself as a bad man and a madman (riffing off the first line in Method Man's verse), as a "mic wrecker," and his verses as "murderous material." He threatens to pierce (stab or shoot) the addressee "just like your ear" (both like an earring and like a sound), and then develops an extended four-line metaphor that is worth examining in some detail. In it, Deck figures himself as an "armed and geared" escaped convict "charged by the system for murdering the rhythm." This metaphor of rapping as murdering the mic gets taken even further, as now Deck is sent to prison for this crime (which he has committed in the preceding lines). However, he then breaks out and begins to murder the mic again, i.e. commit the same crime he was sent to prison for in the first place. In the last line, with another complex double-metaphor, Deck explodes (like a bomb; like a rapper spitting murderous lyrics), catching another charge (on one level, like a bomb; one another, a criminal charge). In this verse, yet again, we see how the act of rapping is described using an astonishing range of metaphors, utilizing several meanings at once and developing a sophisticated set of interconnected images. I will not try to tell you what these metaphors "really mean" explicitly, nor reduce them to any sort of broad conclusive assertion. Rather, I would encourage us to appreciate the artistry at play here, and the fantastic effort to put forward a metaphorical vision of the act of rapping. Also, it is important to point out how multi-tiered this approach to describing rap-in-action is. In the second-to-last line, Deck points to the lyrics he is performing *at this very moment* ("lo and behold") as participating in the metaphor he is developing, making this metaphorical description of rap as much about practice as theory,

action as analysis. In other words, the discourse of rap, at least here, is simultaneously concrete and abstract, direct and indirect, expressive and descriptive. It exists and excels on multiple formal and textual levels at once, in a unique tension typically found in the most potent and vital poetic forms. Again, I refuse to reduce this constellation of metaphor and action, this straining richness already full and self-sufficient, to a coarse and de-contextualized, trite apparition of definitive understanding. To overstep the role of analyst/critic is easy, but especially in this wide new field of criticism, as yet undefined and relatively pristine (at least within the academic tradition), I would strive to carve out a space for a criticism that is less about reduction and more about amplification, less about definition and more about highlighting tensions and drawing suggestive connections within the intricate motifs of literature rather than trying to extract "meanings" and "interpretations" from them.

We can surely draw a connection between the image of the escaped convict in Deck's verse and that of the runaway slave in the last two lines of Ghostface's, which perhaps suggests a vision of rap as an instrument of liberation from slavery/prison, while at the same time drawing our attention to black history and its slow liberatory process. In RZA's first line, he riffs off Raekwan's verse and its theme of robbing someone for their "garments." He also continues both Method Man's and Inspectah Deck's image of rap as swordplay, before connecting this metaphor to a pencil (used to write raps) through the line "Sus**pen**seful force being brought through my utensil" (which could apply both to the sword and to the pencil). This explicit connection between the sword and the pencil further strengthens my earlier assertion that the sword and the

gun may be thought of as metaphors for the written and oral aspects of rapping[15]. Ol' Dirty Bastard (ODB) plays off this same riff of rap as swordplay before delving into his own metaphor of rap as physical violence, in which another rapper "kicking" (rapping) rhymes leads to ODB kicking them (literally) to the curb.

GZA picks up on and develops the theme of rap as (both gunplay and) swordplay, and then compares his own method of slicing someone's back apart to the way he would slit a cigar vertically in order to empty out the tobacco and fill it with marijuana, creating a blunt. I have been developing the argument that the theme of rap as swordplay has been developed continuously throughout several interlocking metaphors and verses by several different rappers on this track. However, I would like to point out that GZA, in the final verse on the track, says this himself: "I came down with phat tracks that combine and interlock / Like getting smashed by a cinder block." This whole track, which consists of the combined and interlocking metaphors and lyrical styles of the seven rappers and their verses, comes down on the addressee's head like a heavy, solid, and singular cinder block. The various styles, verses, and rappers are not disparate strands in a confused and fragmentary mix (a possible downfall of having seven rappers on one verse), but rather combine into one solid knock-out punch. Also, the aggression, combat, conflict, and contradiction that we might assume would accompany this kind of violent battle-rap

---

[15] Cf. Ghostface's verse from "Protect Ya Neck"(http://rapgenius.com/Wu-tang-clan-protect-ya-neck-lyrics):

> Ejecting styles from my lethal weapon
> My pen that rocks from here to Oregon…
> I love gats, if rap was a gun, you wouldn't bust back

Here, Ghostface makes the analogy between rapping and gun-violence explicit, and also includes the pen in this network of metaphorical association.

style reveals itself to be part of a greater, unified, cooperative effort[16]. This cooperation, in the end, is the overarching emphasis, rather than the competition between rappers. Just as in Inspectah Deck's verse above ("lo and behold…"), we get an action line before a description of the results of its violence. Again, rap is both the action of rapping and a metaphorical description of this act; a physically efficacious and self-aware verbal art form. To conclude my analysis, I would like to point out that the violent metaphors above are presented in such a way that it would be impossible for any intelligent listener/reader to miss their metaphorical nature and the fact that they are representing, describing, and embodying the act of rap itself, rather than describing and valorizing actual personal violence. This is not to say that using violent metaphors is totally harmless, but rather to distinguish violence-as-metaphor from violence-as-such.

Having discussed the use of violence-as-metaphor in this track, I would like to turn to the first verse on "Tearz"[17] for an exploration of violence-as-such. In contrast to the lyrics considered above, this verse is a quite different style of rap. Instead of focusing on rap itself and describing it using a series of embodied metaphors, the following verse is a narrative in which actual violence plays a major role.

RZA's poignant and deeply felt story begins with a happy and carefree scene (the laughter before the tears) in which he and his friends remember and laugh at an incident wherein RZA (or at least his rap persona) tried to rob an individual, and then killed him when he ran away. Their laughter seems callous and cold, but RZA's drawn-out chuckling transitions directly into another, quite different, story, in which the rapper's little brother is shot and killed for a few dollars and

---

[16] Cooperation is indeed an essential part of much of rap. Cf. pp. 37 and also the track "Eye for an Eye" on *The Infamous*.

[17] See Appendix C

some Wonder bread, which he refuses to give a mugger. In opposition to the cold lack of emotion and empathy displayed in the first section[18], the rapper's reaction to his brother's death is warm and intense, profoundly empathetic. The rapper "ran frantically" over to his brother and "dropped down to his feet." Interestingly, when RZA recalls the murder he commits in the first part, he uses the same verb: "dropped." This similarity, and the connotation of falling or being brought down, highlights the cycle of violence RZA is drawing our attention to. RZA drops a kid, and then the death of his own brother drops RZA. It would be naive to see this verse as simply pointing out that we are more empathetic to our loved ones than to random strangers; instead, we might see this as an elegant portrayal of the reciprocal nature of random and pointless violence, and an evocation of shared humanity in the face of a common mortality. The rapper is obviously intentionally juxtaposing these two incidents in order to demonstrate the real cost of violence. By portraying these two murders together, he suggests that the killer, in a fitting karmic circularity, actually ends up experiencing the transposed suffering of his victim. This view suggests that it is not possible to simply ignore empathy and emotionality (i.e. we cannot just choose to be sociopaths), but that murder is inherently wrong, participating as it does in a cycle of death and suffering that ends up coming back around to the killer himself. In short, actual violence and murder are being profoundly denounced here.

Notice that RZA leaves out the word "dead"[19] in the line "his eyes shut, that's when I knew he was…" The two end-rhymes "head" and the implied "dead" serve to separate this second section (the "tears" part) from the first and the third in an envelope structure operating

---

[18] Which may be partially due to his intoxication, which is described in the first two lines.

[19] Though we know, because of the rhyme scheme, that it is implied.

with the two end-rhymes “ahead” and “bread,” which occur at the beginning of this section. The second section is encapsulated within these parallel rhymes. In the third part of this verse, RZA reflects on the death of his little brother and bemoans the futility of using language to express his sorrow. He leaves out “dead,” as I have pointed out, which highlights the impossibility of verbally expressing the reality and experience of death. He also asks “how do I say goodbye?” as though at a loss for words in the face of the permanent absence of death. The next line calls attention to the fact that random violence is not fair, and that the innocent and good (the rapper’s little brother) end up being killed, while the “bad” (perhaps the rapper himself, who is feeling guilty at this point for his earlier murder) end up surviving. The words “memories” and “laughing” in the next few lines call to mind the beginning of the verse, in which the rapper’s friends remember, and laugh about, “the kid” he killed. This perverse parallel between remembering and laughing at a murder on the one hand, and remembering laughter with his little brother on the other, further emphasizes the parallel between these two events and brings to mind a karmic balance (or unbalance). In the final line, RZA again leaves something out, this time an implicit “I love you,” which he cannot say to his brother because he is dead. This theme of ineffability highlights the extreme difficulty of dealing with the realities of love, death, and loss[20], and also definitively draws a distinction between the expressible, exaggerated, and emphatic violence used as a metaphor throughout the album and the inexpressible fact of an experience of actual violence. In other words, the superficial appearance of violence and its metaphorical connotations may be employed as an analogy for the physical efficaciousness of aural poetry, but actual acts of personal violence cannot be conceived in the same way, nor taken

[20] Especially in a world in which random homicidal violence is commonplace.

lightly. Finally, we might take the inability to speak about emotional issues as a part of a macho "hustler" identity that does not allow for explicit emotionality.

Having made this important distinction, I would like to return to the first example I gave, Ghostface Killah's first lines from "Bring Da Ruckus,"[21] in order to highlight another aspect of these lines, the portrayal of rap as an active physical process. In order to further explore the connotations of the analogy between rap and violence, let us observe that verbal art is conceived in these lines (and in the analogy in general) as an act rather than an artifact. The blasting of the verse is like the bursting of the gun, not the bullet or the gun itself. In this verse, Ghostface is not just *describing* the poetic act, he is embodying it, *doing* it. When he raps "my Glock burst," he means right now, in the words themselves and his performance of them; the bursting is going on within the verbal action itself. Verbal art, in this aural conception, is not to be found in the words on the page but rather as it is realized/embodied in a performance. This highlights an important difference between aural and written poetry, which may seem to imply a fundamental break between the two. The former exists as an active performance (verb-like), the latter as a static object (noun-like). However, it is possible to significantly reconcile this dilemma if we allow for the possibility that even written poetry is not actualized as a poetic experience until it is read by an individual, i.e. that it does not somehow exist as poetry-as-such within an unread objective ether but must be read in order to be realized. Then we can draw a strong analogy between a rapper's performance of his written poetry and a reader's internal (or possibly external) reading of a poem written by someone else (or in some cases, by the reader him/herself). In other words, when we read any poem, we transform it from a visual/spatial form into a sonic/temporal form in

[21] Here they are again: "Ghostface, catch the blast of a hype verse / My Glock burst, leave in a hearse, I did worse."

which the actual sounds of the words can be heard or felt. This (possibly internal, silent) performance can be compared, and even considered parallel to, the aural performance of rap.

In order to better place rap in a dialog with literary poetry, I would like to bring in some Coleridge, if I may. From “Frost at Midnight”:

> The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
> Have left me to that solitude, which suits
> Abstruser musings: save that at my side
> My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.

If we read this excerpt to ourselves, but do not make any effort to hear the sound of the syllables or the rhythm of the lines — i.e. if we read this as we might absent-mindedly read some dull or formally unremarkable prose — we would miss out on significant poetic features that were intentionally written into these lines. For example, the consonance of the “s” sounds is salient if read properly, but if we have no performative/aural mechanism in our silent reading that can catch onto this foundational poetic attribute (that of words sounding the same: rhyme, assonance, consonance, etc.), we might easily miss it and thereby overlook an important formal aspect of these lines, one of the things that in fact makes this poetry. The consonance of the “s” sounds is an aural feature, rather than simply a written/visual feature, which is to say that euphony must be heard (though possibly internally) like we hear music; it cannot just be seen, read, and understood, like an academic paper or a technical manual. Also, the fact that this analogy can be easily made suggests that the seemingly disparate traditions of oral/aural and written poetry may really be more like different perspectives or angles through which to approach the poetic

experience rather than categorically different essences; different frequencies on the same spectrum, different emphases within the same phenomenon.

With this in mind, it might be useful to conceptualize the aural form as a different medium for poetry, rather than as an entirely different poetic tradition. In other words, if Coleridge had had the ability (i.e. the technology) to record and distribute his poetry as sound (rather than as text), might he not have? Vocalizing written poetry in order to exaggerate and emphasize its formal features seems like a natural (though not necessary or essential) part (or perhaps extension) of the poetic act. The ability to record that vocalization and distribute it as a poetic item, as a replacement for (or addition to) the printed text (which itself is dependent on the technology of writing or publishing) also seems to be an instance of utilizing new technology within an existing tradition/framework rather than fundamentally altering the tradition itself. In a certain sense, the development of audio recording and mass-distribution technology mirrors the invention of the technology of writing[22], or possibly that of the printing press[23].

Returning to Ghostface's verse and the discussion of the utilization of violence as a metaphor for the active quality of rap, we might assert again that part of the reason his verse is so active is that it is, in the fact of its performance, an action. It is much easier to conceptualize poetry as an act if it is performed rather than written. Though there is definitely an act of

---

[22] Which would lead us to compare the transition from literate to aural poetry (i.e. rap) coinciding with (and made possibly by) the technology of the recorded audio track to the transition from oral to literate poetry made possible by the technology of writing. Two specific areas of interest for future inquiry: Homer in the late 8th/early 7th century BC, and Old English poetry between 700-1000 AD.

Cf. pp. 5, above.

[23] Which brings up the question of mass-reproduction technology and its effect on literary production. Perhaps the ~1450 European invention of the printing press can be compared, in its effects on the composition and distribution (i.e. the medium) of literature to the use of the audio track as a unit of literary production.

writing[24] on the part of the writer, the reader experiences written language more as an object than an action or even an event, in contrast to the listener, who hears a rapper *doing* rap. When we listen to a rap, we experience a movement, an action, a series of sounds, which appear to us more as a performance-in-time than an object-in-space. Inspectah Decks captures this perfectly:

> Bombs strike ya like the mighty Thor, blast the door
>
> Recite a page like a tidal wave, crash the shore
>
> ("Visionz" from "Wu-Tang Forever")

Notice the relationship, in the second line, between the page and its recitation, which brings to our attention the complex dynamic between the written and oral/aural tradition *within* rap. I have been simplifying the matter somewhat by asserting implicitly that rap exists *solely* in aural form. As these lines make clear, most rap is written *before* it is performed[25]. However, the page is not the tidal wave, but the recitation is. The bombs are not the words-as-written-text but the words-as-verbal-recitation, as verbal performance, as verbal *action*. The emphasis is on the action, the event of performance, rather than on the written text, which is conceived as more of a prelude. Let us take a moment to appreciate the fact that rap exists in a unique and charged space between written and oral poetry, that it is a kind of hybrid, built as it is on a foundation of both written and oral technologies and modes of expression. This complex relationship between a rap and the written lyrics it is performed from — which mirrors the relationship between oral and literate influences within the aural mode of poetry — deserves some discussion, especially since

---

[24] An act that rappers in fact refer to quite often.

[25] Obviously, freestyle is the exception. However, most of the lyrics in most studio recordings, and all of the examples I give in this paper (to the best of my knowledge) were written before being performed.

(alarmingly) many people think of rap as a solely/primarily improvisational form. Let's look at a couple relevant lines from Method Man's verses on "Deadly Melody" ("Wu-Tang Forever):

> Home on the range, rebel with a pen
>
> Writing critically acclaimed scriptures that do you in…
>
> Red marker still bleeding through the paper
>
> Of this sick premeditated murder caper

In these lines, as in both of the quoted verses above, we see a strong connection between verbal performance and violence. I hardly have to point out the fascinating fact that Method Man is actually discussing his rap as a *written text* and the relationship between this written text and its performance. The latter two quoted lines paint an elegant picture of the relationship between verbal composition and performance. The "red marker," Method Man's writing utensil, is "still bleeding through the paper", i.e. he just wrote these lines moments ago. Also, the red blood fits into the metaphor of rap-as-violence, and the fact that it is still bleeding emphasizes the freshness of this violence/performance/composition, i.e. that it is occurring *now*. His "murder caper" (i.e. his rap) is "premeditated" because of its literary foundation as a written composition. If we take Method Man at his word, these lines were written on a piece of paper and then *shortly thereafter* performed, which emphasizes the close relationship between the performative and compositional aspects of rapping, which are however conceived of as distinct steps. Unlike an improvised/un-premeditated rap/murder, Method Man's is literate (and maybe even literary).

If we consider the analogy between physical violence and rapping, it becomes apparent that this conceptualization is an extension (or possibly an aggressive/emphatic exaggeration) of the analogy between physical and poetic action. Though this analogy surely exists in written

poetry, it seems to be much more common and significant in aural poetry. For example, in "Follow the Leader" Rakim raps:

> Pull out my weapon and start to squeeze
>
> A magnum as a microphone, murdering emcees

A typical, though characteristically elegant, expression of the combative and physical aspect of rap, these lines highlight (and echo[26]) Ghostface Killah's analogy (or even identity) between a gun and a mic, above. Notice the triple alliteration (and fourth m-sound in "emcees") in the second line, as well as the stressed end-rhyme. If we heard just the first line, we might think that Rakim is simply rapping about a literal gun. It's a weapon, and it's being drawn and squeezed. We might not associate this conceptualization with a verbal performance or the production of verbal art. However, once we envision the microphone as the primary instrument of rap performance (much as a pen may be considered the symbolic instrument of writing), the possibility is opened up to extend this metaphor of instrumentality further. Like a gun, a microphone is a powerful physical object capable of effectually discharging projectiles (i.e. words). When transposed onto a sonic field, the idea of a gun shooting bullets matches well with that of a microphone amplifying the intentions of the rapper into words, which can then strike the listener like physical objects. Furthermore, the action of rapping is aligned (identified) with the physical (and rhythmic) process of firing a gun. Passing over the association that both the gun and the microphone have as direct means to overcoming socioeconomic obstacles and making money appear seemingly out of thin air, the association between writing/performing raps and

---

[26] Though in reverse: Rakim is definitely the original.

receiving a prison sentence[27] (as though rapping was so much like shooting a gun that it was a crime), and an implicit analogy between the recurring strong stressed beat on many rap songs and the sound of gunfire, we can move on to the simple fact that conceiving rap as a physical attack enables us to observe the physicality of aural poetry in action.

As Rakim raps later in the same song: "rap is rhythm and poetry."[28] Though one might argue that poetry is itself inherently rhythmic, and thus "rhythm" is redundant in this formulation, we can surely appreciate that rap is more emphatically rhythmic than most modern written poetry. Modern literary poetry has, over the last several decades especially, embraced "free verse" and mostly dismissed regular rhythmic meter. Though the argument can be made that free verse has its own complex rhythm (as some prose does, too), it seems clear that this rhythm is not the same kind of thing as a metronome, the beat of our feet when we walk or run, or that of our heart as it beats. Persistent and regular (highly syncopated) rhythm is typically associated more with music than poetry nowadays, which perhaps explains why rap is often categorized as the former. However, it is important to remember that, historically, the overwhelming majority of poetry has expressed regular metrical and rhythmic features that make it formally more similar to rap than to the free verse forms of most modern literary poetry. What Rakim is getting at is the essentially rhythmic nature of rap and the fact that written poetry, at least today, does not consider rhythm to be absolutely essential to its form in the same way that rap does. While avoiding a prolonged discussion of the relationship between rhythm and physicality[29], I would also like to suggest that one of the key differences between aural and

---

[27] Cf. Inspectah Deck's verse from "7th Chamber," above.

[28] Notice the acronym: "Rap is **r**hythm **a**nd **p**oetry."

[29] And the body/bodily motion.

written poetry is its rhythmicity, and that this rhythmic basis underscores the physicality of aural poetry. I would like to extend my earlier assertion that aural poetry is an action/verbal, while written poetry is more object-like/nominal, to contend that aural poetry is conceived (to some degree) as physical, rhythmic, and even bodily while written poetry is often thought to be more intellectual, rarefied, dignified, abstract, moral, mental.

Method Man, who addressed the relationship between written composition and oral performance in the quote above so well, can also bring our attention to the physical aspect of aural poetry. From "The What," on Notorious B.I.G.'s album "Ready to Die":

Yo I gets rugged as a motherfucking carpet get
And niggas love it, not in the physical form but in the mental
I spark and they cells get warm

In the first line, the rapper describes himself as physically tough, and compares himself to a material object (notice the pun with ***"rugg***ed" as a carpet). However, in the second line, he identifies his raps as being *not* physical, but rather mental. In the first place, Method Man seems to be hinting at the dual existence of verbal art in general: that it has a physical/material existence (as a tape/CD, as a book), but that it also can be said to exist primarily as a mental phenomenon, based as it is on the mind's ability to perceive an abstraction of language that is not necessarily linked to any particular physical object[30]. Without going into a discussion of the physicality (or a-physicality) of the mind, we can nevertheless appreciate the paradox here. If rap is like a gun, doesn't that make it physical? How can a view of verbal art as powerful, physical, and effective be reconciled with the point of view that poetry only really exists as a mental

[30] For example, where does a memorized verse exist, physically?

phenomenon? In the third line, Method Man represents rap as a spark (extended, as fire), which is an excellent metaphor for something that is both physical and ethereal. Furthermore, he makes an implicit analogy between rap and smoking a drug (perhaps tobacco or crack, but most likely marijuana) by comparing the biological effects of listening to rap with those of taking drugs. Just like rap, drugs straddle the physical and the psychological, the external and the internal. Though they exist materially as chemicals, they also have subjective psychological effects. Listening to rap, like smoking, involves an exchange between what is often thought of as distinct fields (in the cartesian mode, at least): the physical and the mental. Though one might argue that the terms are reversed (i.e. that rap is a non-physical thing having a physical effect rather than the other way around), the analogy serves to emphasize rap's physical efficacy and immediacy. The analogy between drugs and rap, which is commonplace in the genre, helps to emphasize a specific conceptualization of aural poetry; one in which it is efficacious, real, and physical, while at the same time internal, psychological, and subjective. I would tie this analogy to the analogy of rap as gun-violence by pointing out that both are physical actions that have a specific and powerful effect on an individual. Moreover, both analogies point to the way that rap, as aural poetry, seems to exist physically in the real world, as an action. It is bodily, rhythmic, can be externally heard and felt, and is conceived as existing in the physical world of action and motion in a way that written poetry often is not. We might even take this argument further by suggesting that because of the object-like medium of written poetry, it is conceptualized as existing latent in its own self-contained and separate sphere (contained within the object, the page) until it can be realized as experience within the private/internal/subjective space of the reader's own mind, while aural poetry, because it exists in common/objective/public space/time and is embodied as

externally apprehensible rhythmic sound, can be more readily considered parallel to real and efficacious physical action (and to social intercourse), which it is so often analogized to.

III - *The Infamous:* An Aural Reading

From an outsider's perspective, *The Infamous* by Mobb Deep may seem to extol, maintain, and participate in an aggressive, violent, hyper-masculine discourse centered on an idealized vision of the "street/thug/hustler" ethos which it glorifies and embodies. These themes and attitudes may contribute to the rejection of this album (and others like it) by serious literary critics, even *if* the negative discourses it purportedly perpetuates are actual expressions of a real cultural situation (rather than an arbitrary and intentional construction) not limited to the specific community within which the album is conceived to exist, but also typical of mainstream American culture as well. To condemn this album, and others like it, on the basis of its glorification of violence and crime is tenuous at best. In *The Iliad*, for example, the Greeks fight a protracted and bloody war with dubious justification. Most of the action of the poem is violence and carnage, and it could well be said to glorify an idealized hyper-masculine identity based on martial prowess. However, it would be absurd to suggest that *The Iliad* is not literature because of this, or that it does not deserve our critical attentions. We might argue that these particular problematic aspects of *The Iliad* deserve critical analysis, or we may challenge certain conceptualizations within the poem, but we would never reject it outright. The same argument could be made for innumerable literary works that contain difficult or questionable themes. In fact, in many cases these difficulties can actually make the text more compelling, especially if they are presented in a rich, complex, nuanced way (in contrast to a simple or superficial

depiction of problematic themes). We might especially appreciate an effort on the part of the text to confront and analyze these difficulties internally, as certain practices, discourses, and ideologies are both embodied and critiqued.

That being said, I will not attempt, in the following literary analysis, to justify or challenge the problematic violent features in *The Infamous* (which make up a significant portion of the album) from an external position in relation to the text itself, nor from a historical/social/ anthropological perspective. Neither will I take as given that just because this album (and others in the genre) may seem to a naive listener to valorize certain discourses, that this is indeed the case. Instead, I would like to examine how these discourses of hyper-masculine violence (and their attendant conceptualizations) are both embraced, embodied, and profoundly challenged from within the text itself. In addition, it is essential to remember that much of the violence present in this album is, as I have discussed above, metaphorical, and related to the action of aural performance itself. I am interested, however, in those violent features that are not necessarily metaphorical, or that exceed metaphorical conceptualization. In other words, I would like to demonstrate that the violence in *The Infamous* ought not to be over-simplified or misunderstood, but that it exists as part of a complex nexus of discourses and counter-discourses, a rich profusion of meanings and metaphors, an ambiguous and multi-layered symbolic structure that is characteristic of the literary text.

To begin with the beginning:

I keep it real pack steel like my man Y.G[31]

When a fool try to play me, wet 'em up then I'm Swayze

(verse 1 on "The Start of Your Ending"[32])

These lines introduce the standard flyting motif, the primary (in this instance) thematics of which are: I, the speaker, am strong, dangerous, powerful, physically menacing, and manly; you/he, the addressee/other, are weak, physically ineffectual, and inferior. "Realness" is a characteristic associated with the distinct hyper-masculine identity of the speaking subject, one which is necessarily related to his situation within the projects/ghettos/streets and his childhood history in that same difficult and volatile environment. Realness is further associated with proficiency with firearms ("steel") and a willingness to use this weaponry with devastating effectiveness against any potential opponent. The addressee "must be crazy" to challenge the speaker, who associates himself with a specific lifestyle and neighborhood, an identification which adds greatly to his menace. Just as a special forces veteran might say "I'm a green beret, so don't mess with me," so the speaker uses his cultural-geographical location to signify, as well as back-up, the menace of his projected physical presence. While the addressee "just sit[s] scared," the speaker "cock[s] back the gat." In fact, the speaking subject associates himself so strongly with the gun as a symbol of violence (and verbal ability) that the two become an identity:

It's the semi-auto, you can bring it on yo

---

[31] Cf. An interview with Havoc (http://www.complex.com/music/2011/04/the-making-of-mobb-deep-the-infamous/the-start-of-your-ending): "With my crew being around me, I incorporated them like, 'Yeah, keep it real like my man YG.' That was a dude from my neighborhood that was just notorious for robbing people, sniffing coke, and wilding out. Everybody was scared of him but he was just one wild individual, so I had put him in my rhyme."

[32] See the rapgenius page for the complete lyrics: http://rapgenius.com/Mobb-deep-the-start-of-your-ending-41st-side-lyrics

Welcoming any physical (or verbal) challenge, the speaker seems calm and unafraid in the face of a potential challenger, an embodiment of the hyper-masculine characteristics of power, confidence, and physical menace — with respect to both his physical and verbal ability. He continues to identify and describe both himself and his group of associates:

I'm sick, the Mobb rolls thick

Cross paths with my clique, and get vic

Threatening to make the addressee a victim, the speaker continues to present an image of himself that conforms perfectly with the violent hyper-masculine identity described above. It is important that we pause here and consider these verses as typical of the practically universal tradition of flyting, albeit specific to a certain social context. In other words, these identifications and descriptions fit into a specific cultural construction/conceptualization of masculinity, and are not standard or universal, though their mode of expression may be. At this point, the aural poet seems totally invested in this over-the-top, fantastic, idealized masculine identity. However, we might raise the question of whether these thematics should be taken literally or metaphorically (and to what degree), and whether the rapper is taking on this idealized character as a total identification or as a partial act within a broader narrative scope. To whit:

I'm on some bullshit that's how I was raised…

In pools of alcohol, walk before you crawl

Thus, instead of conceiving the flyting mode of aural poetry as a totalizing expression of the rapper's poetic intention and artistic persona, we might consider it as a specific reaction to concrete circumstances and as part of a process of coming to grips with both those circumstances and the attitudes and identities they enforce and encourage. The (re-)presentation of the hyper-

masculine identity of the poet is part of a broader dynamic in which this identity is both embodied and critiqued, in which the movement of the text vacillates between direct expression and indirect reflection. We might also consider the degree to which the rapper is aware of specific cultural (racial, socio-economic, geographical, etc.) circumstances and their effects on his identity. He denies the value of some (or all) of his activities, including possibly the flyting itself, by calling them all "bullshit," and posits that these tendencies may be a result of the way he was raised. I would like to draw our attention, and critical thought, to the relationship between childhood and adulthood suggested here: namely, that our childhood situation, in many ways, defines us and sets up a framework within which we must live our adult lives. The implication here is that a bad childhood sets us up for serious difficulties later on, and that we must consider the relative privilege of an individual's childhood experience if we are to consider their modes of adult behavior[33]. The image of this childhood experience is evocative and expressive, and contrasts well with the flyting verses it is placed within. The "walk before you crawl" phrase is particularly potent, drawing our attention to the lack of a period of childhood/infancy and a forced early development.

Quite a few lines down, after another section of flyting and another reference to childhood[34], we get a line that provides us with some understanding of a poetic intention implicit

---

[33] Not to belabor this point, but the extended social implication of this assertion is quite profound. It would be ridiculous, under this view, to ignore the extremely strong connection between, for example, criminal behavior and a difficult childhood. If we are interested in living in a fair, free, and equal society, we must recognize that while some communities and individuals are given (by chance of birth) a solid foundation of privilege and opportunity, others are *not*. We might also let go of any naive assumptions we have about equal opportunity and free choice; as expressed in the above lines (and intuitively grasped by a thoughtful observer), the way we are raised profoundly affects (either increases or impairs) the possibilities for our future development. In a world where privilege is drastically stratified across racial and socio-economic lines, we would be well advised to pay close attention (and give full significance) to vastly different environments and material circumstances and their affects on individual lives.

[34] "Word to my unborn…"

throughout this album, one which will end up undermining and subverting the dominant ideology of hyper-masculinity:

Every rhyme is the truth that I must get ‘cross

The truth, the realness, is here something subtle yet stark, ever-present within these narratives and identities, something verbally expressible and indeed implicit within the structures of formal language, something beyond our simplistic characterization of the idealized, violent, hyper-masculine subject, while at the same time related to its embodiment. The “must” here highlights a kind of compulsion, an implicit intentionality, a need to confront, encode, perform, and communicate the rapper’s experience in the action of aural poetry. In opposition to a naive interpretation of the violence and hyper-masculinity at play here, we can see that these identities and performances are part of an embodied practice in which truths (derived from lived experience), and the ideologies that form and restrict them, are transformed into an aural poetic form in which they can be realized, developed, and critiqued. In confronting and expressing the difficulties and complexities of lived experience, as well as its resulting ideologies and discourses, the poet forms these realities as participants in the interrelated dynamics of the aural-poetic text, and refuses to take them at face value. In fact, the ethos, worldview, and discourse of this hyper-masculine “hustler” lifestyle is continuously challenged, interrogated, and finally subverted by a self-conscious, introspective, and thoughtful poetic voice:

No doubt I’m stuck and I can’t get out

Of this lifestyle: the 41st side, get bent run wild

The rapper’s incisive characterization of his own situation (and his fixed role within it) highlights both the fact of being caught up in one’s own cultural situation in general and, more importantly,

the specific identity (and lifestyle) that is embodied throughout the flyting verses. The description he gives of this lifestyle — distinguished by a specific place (and time) which was well-known for its values, priorities, cultural identifications, and material circumstances — emphasizes both its extreme limitations and the difficulty (or near-impossibility) of escaping from them.

The primary focus, in this verse, is on constructing a persona/identity that seems to be a direct and inevitable response to the inescapable cultural situation of the individual. It is as though awareness and introspection can only go so far, and that in the face of such extreme material and cultural circumstances, it is inevitable that the individual will fall back into his culturally (re-)enforced paradigm/ideology. Furthermore, these twin voices — embodiment of cultural norm and informed/aware critique of cultural norm — twist themselves through the text, telling a multi-layered story made up of both entrenched psycho-cultural discourses and an introspective consciousness that can intelligently reflect upon and subvert them. The effect is that we are confronted with a significant degree of inevitability in an individual's response to his material and cultural conditions, while being given to understand that even though these responses may be virtually inescapable, the individual's attitude towards (and conception of) his own situation is free. Furthermore, the individual may recognize the flaws in his own worldview and lifestyle while at the same time being unable (or unwilling) to resist the massive influence of the material circumstances and cultural ideologies that enforce these negative discourses.

Skimming through the second verse, which consists primarily of flyting and descriptions of "this lifestyle"[35], I would like to draw our attention to a couple lines towards the end:

And to the kids you don't wanna be me

I'm up in the mix of action, where niggas wanna kill me

This third challenge to the implicit ideology of the violent, hyper-masculine subject contains a new element, one which is repeated several times throughout the album: a direct address to a younger generation (in the same cultural context as the rapper's) in which the lifestyle (and accompanying ideology) of the rapper himself is pointed out as deeply flawed and the direct result of undesirable circumstances beyond his control. In other words, these lines specifically discourage any attempt to glorify the violent lifestyle embodied throughout many of the rapper's own verses. In a reversal of the macho role, in which the "real man" is totally invulnerable and all-powerful, the speaking subject is revealed here as seriously threatened by those who want to kill him. The violence comes around full circle, and what seemed to flow in one direction (away from the speaking subject) is revealed to be reciprocal[36]. Finally, in these lines we see a clear and coherent attempt by the speaker to utilize the discourse of hyper-masculine identity as an example to be avoided, rather than an ideal to be followed. This dual movement of embodiment/ expression and then explication/subversion of a dominant social construction (that of violent hyper-masculinity[37]) demonstrates the efficacy of (aural) poetry in profoundly challenging

---

[35] As well as another poignant reference to childhood and growing up in the ghetto, which is important to our discussion of the perceived inevitability of an individual's response to his environment: "Our sons will grow up to be murderers and terrorists." Also, notice the intensified characterization of the "other" (i.e. the opposite of the speaking subject) as fearful/cowardly and as a counter-identity to the hyper-masculine speaker: "Putting cowards where they supposed to be."

[36] Cf. The analysis of "Tearz," above.

[37] As well consumerism, among others that are beyond the scope of this paper.

deeply entrenched discourses and ideologies, which however originate in the material circumstances from which they inevitably arise. The expression and embodiment of this violent discourse, which may at first seem to glorify and valorize it, actually serves to subvert it and emphatically deny its desirability.

Taking the first track as a thematic introduction, I would like to continue my analysis by focusing on one set of interrelated themes, that of time and motion, that appears throughout the symbolic and narrative structure of the album. I would like to explore these thematics and highlight several of the dispersed, though related, verses in which they are embodied in order to appreciate a fullness of symbolic and structural interrelation, as well as to better understand the complex action of the text. My goal, again, is not to delineate and extract a single meaning or interpretation, but rather to bring to light the networks of symbolic structure inherent to the text and highlight their interrelation. Furthermore, we will see that this theme (time/motion) mirrors the dual action described above, in which a thematic/discursive paradigm is both embodied and subverted.

As a prelude to this analysis, I would like to give a relatively simple example in order to introduce the method I will use on the more complex thematics to follow. Returning to the first track, I would like to point out the last couple lines of Havoc's verse (just after the "lifestyle" lines):

> The 41st side two [tune] you know how we do
>
> Violate motherfucker, I'ma see you with the linden
>
> It's the start of your ending, setting it again and again

I hear "two" in the first line, but it may well be "tune." Both would make sense in this context, as "two" would refer to Prodigy and Havoc, while "tune" would refer to the track or album itself. If we take it as "two," however, this line serves to introduce a thematics of cooperation between the two rappers[38]. Notice the specific kind of gun (a "linden"[39]) that Havoc is both handling and describing here. In the very next verse, Prodigy raps:

> But it's the start of they ending my man's lending
>
> Me his linden forty-two shots depending
>
> On whether or not the clip is full to the top

Playing with the similar sound of "linden" and "lending," Prodigy both identifies rap with a gun (yet again) and highlights the cooperative aspect of his and Havoc's collective artistic project. Because Havoc is the producer (i.e. he makes the beats), the gun could be seen as a metaphor for the gunshot-like beats he "lends" to Prodigy in order to be paired with the latter's lyrics. However, this also draws a clear connection between literally handing a gun off to a friend and cooperating on a track. In other words, the metaphor exists both on a literal and a symbolic level. More importantly, we see here how a relatively minor image is introduced by Havoc and then expanded and played with by Prodigy, who adds additional layers of meaning to it. This process of introducing a relatively simple or straightforward image, which is shortly thereafter developed and complicated until it has a much greater symbolic scope and range of meaning, is exactly what we will see in the analysis of the thematics of time and motion to follow.

---

[38] Cf. the discussion of "7th Chamber," above.

[39] Or perhaps "lenden." I could not find the specific brand, which may well be because this is a slang term for a type of gun. "Linden" is also the name of a major street that goes through Brooklyn and Queens, one which "A Tribe Called Quest" mentions several times. In any case, "linden" is used here to designate a specific kind of firearm. Cf. also Havoc's verse from "Right Back at You": "With macs and tecs, the linden get your dome crushed."

In “Cradle to the Grave,” Havoc passes his gun to Prodigy as part of the narrative (either because he is too emotionally distraught [by his friend’s gunshot wound] and/or because Prodigy is going to dispose of the incriminating weapon): “So to P I passed the iron.” Prodigy then immediately responds and continues his own verse, in which he tries to “stash the murder weapon.” Thus “the iron” is both the gun and the microphone, and the act of passing the microphone is highlighted as an important part of the cooperative creative process at work in the album. Furthermore, we can see Havoc’s emotional reaction to his friend’s gunshot wound as preventing him (temporarily) from being able to hold himself together and continue his verse. In this view, “the iron” might also represent a kind of weighty emotional burden that Havoc is passing to Prodigy, who, as a good friend, is shouldering it in order to ease his suffering. With every use and fresh context, the image of a gun being given from one rapper to the other is complicated and expanded[40].

With this in mind, we can move on to the primary theme itself, that of time and motion: How are time and motion portrayed and constructed in this album, and how does this

---

[40] Another example of a similar phenomenon, in which Havoc doesn’t pass Prodigy a gun, but rather something else, from Prodigy’s verse in “Q.U. — Hectic”:

> I could move the crowd popping slugs in the sky
> Why come around if you afraid of what's over here
> My man Havoc put the bug in my ear

In this case, Prodigy is drawing our attention to the relationship between him and Havoc, and a specific conceptualization of their cooperative artistic effort. The “bug” in Prodigy’s ear may just be Havoc’s beats, as in the first example, above, which stimulate and underly his poetic rhythms; but it could also be Havoc’s lyrics that Prodigy is responding to. As we have seen in all of these examples, both Prodigy and Havoc are acutely aware of their shared role in the production of this album, as well as the relationship and interconnection between their artistic efforts. I would extend this by asserting that in every track on the album, Havoc and Prodigy intentionally engage with each other’s imagery, thematics, lyrics, and style in order to develop a complex and interfused poetic text. In their intense cooperation and mutual engagement, their distinct voices and lyrics are melded together into a coherent aural movement. In opposition to a more simplistic, more typically literate conception of the individual artist/poet/author as sole creative authority and source of the text, here we get a complex interrelated text in which several voices interweave themselves into the fabric of a single coherent yet multifaceted text. Therefore, let us keep in mind how each verse stands in interrelation to the other verse/s on the same track, and indeed to other verses throughout the album.

construction relate to the thematics of the album as a whole, especially those of violent hyper-masculinity? Let's return to a phrase from the first track, one which we already looked at, in order to frame the question. Recall the phrase "walk before you crawl" from Havoc's description of his childhood experience. Let's pair this with Prodigy's opening lines from "Q.U. — Hectic:"

> I open my eyes to the streets where I was raised as a man
>
> And learned to use my hands for protection
>
> In scuffles, throw all my blows in doubles
>
> I'm coming from Queens, motherfucker, carrying guns in couples

In both of these instances, we see the "normal" order and pace of childhood development denied; the course of time interrupted, confused, and even reversed in a frantic, frenzied, forward motion. Prodigy's opening words bring to mind both waking up and being born, and his "raised as a man" closely parallels Havoc's "walk before you crawl." In both cases, the speaking subject's childhood is skipped, as his life's trajectory accelerates rapidly towards an adult manhood which is associated closely with physical violence. However, this violence, at least at first, is not aggressive but defensive, a response to a hostile and violent environment in which protective violence is required for the sake of survival. In the next couple lines, this defensive physical violence is transformed rapidly and suddenly into gun violence, with the twin fists turning into twin firearms. Emphatic physical violence is thus escalated into emphatic gun violence[41], in much the same process of forced acceleration and frantic forward motion depicted

---

[41] In the rest of this verse, in which the rapid escalation from physical to gun violence is explored further, and posited as a symbol/symptom for/of the general deterioration of environmental conditions: "It's only crack sales makin niggas act like that / Back in the days we could scrap, now you lay on your back / As things changed with time I traded in my knuckles for a Mac-10 / And rather live the life of crime." Notice also the emphasis on time and its inevitable and ominous forward motion. As an additional note, this verse includes several references to Notorious B.I.G.'s "Things Done Changed," and indeed Biggie may be the "Bed-Stuy" connection.

in the previous lines. Thus, we see the movement and development of violent modes of action linked both to a specific construction of manhood and to a mode of accelerated time. Keeping this connection between violent hyper-masculinity and an accelerated temporality/motion in mind, let's turn to the track "Cradle to the Grave,[42]" in which this frenzied and accelerated temporality is further expressed.

The Prelude ("[The Grave Prelude]") introduces the track that follows by "quoting"[43] a man being shot. As rain beats down, his friends try to keep him alive until an ambulance arrives. As the ominous sample begins and sirens sound in the distance, we transition to the track itself:

Forever wild from the cradle to the grave

Kid watch your back, one time's coming always

They locked me up for twelve days I can't comprehend

Now I'm a free man on the streets again

Chasing St. Ide's down with some Seagram's gin

Life is like a dice game and I'm in to win

The first line mirrors the song title, utilizing the common expression "from the cradle to the grave"[44] in order to frame living as a tenuous space between birth and death. However, Prodigy does not just take the common phrase as it is, but rather employs it within a structural nexus which alters, deepens, and multiplies its meanings and connotations. Both the cradle and the grave are enclosed, confined spaces which the individual cannot escape from. This connotation

---

[42] http://rapgenius.com/Mobb-deep-cradle-to-the-grave-lyrics

[43] I.e. depicting directly with sound, rather than describing with words.

[44] Which may also be a reference/allusion to Rakim's lines on "Follow the Leader" (http://rapgenius.com/Rakim-follow-the-leader-lyrics#note-131955).

of incarceration[45] mirrors the episode described in this verse[46], in which the speaking subject is briefly incarcerated before being released. In order to forget this imprisonment, as well as, by metaphorical connotation, the fact of death itself[47], the speaking subject gets "wild," drinking malt liquor and gin[48]. Alcohol intoxication[49] can be seen as an escape from temporality and memory, but it can also be, in this case, a celebratory affirmation of life and freedom, the first instinct of a man recently released from prison[50], a symbolic and literal escape from incarceration and the restrictions of imprisonment. Additionally, notice the backwards reversal of the order in which Prodigy downs his drinks: he is chasing malt liquor (which admittedly is not particularly appealing) down with hard liquor. This could indicate his hardcore status (i.e. "I'm so hardcore that I drink straight gin as a chaser"), his intoxicated state (in which he is confusing the usual order), and/or a reversal of temporality itself. The latter corresponds with the power of alcohol to induce a confused state of (a-)temporality. In this atemporal state of alcohol intoxication, the speaker can believe that he can live "forever wild," and that he is not bound by

---

[45] Though the grave serves as a direct metaphor for prison/incarceration, the fact that the cradle can also be seen as a mode of forcible confinement suggests a kind of birth to prison pipeline (paralleling the inevitable movement from birth to death), in which individuals born in certain environments and cultural contexts are predestined by the fact of their birth to be incarcerated.

[46] As well as the beginning of Prodigy's next verse, below.

[47] Imprisonment (esp. a "life" sentence) is strongly connected metaphorically with death. Cf.:

> … cock back the gat then hit a nigga like a bid;
> Twenty-five, naw kid you gettin' life
> Forever burnin' in hell, niggas is trife

from "Start of Your Ending."

[48] Cf. "Forever wilding, that's how we live up in the bridge" from the first verse (Havoc's) in "The Start of Your Ending."

[49] Which is used elsewhere as a complex extended metaphor/allegory for diverse phenomena: Cf. "Drink Away the Pain (Situations) f. Q-Tip" and the lines "put us together / It's like mixing vodka and milk" from the first verse of "Survival of the Fittest."

[50] Cf. "Used to be wild, but locked up, you can't get bent" from the first verse (Prodigy's) in "Up North Trip."

time or mortality (i.e. that he is not actually in that tenuous space between the cradle and the grave), which delusion is explored and then revealed in the verses that follow. We might also notice the second line, in which the slang (but also metaphorical) term for police, "one time" is used. Just as the speaker is "forever wild," so the police are "coming always," threatening to turn the open and free temporal expanse into a restricted (cradle- or grave-like) fixity in which there is only and always "one time.[51]" Temporal movement and plurality is thus linked to freedom, and fixity of time to incarceration. The difference between these two temporal modes is highlighted by the third and fourth lines, in which the speaker cannot "comprehend" the transition from one to the other; nor can he comprehend that period of time (the "twelve days") he spent in jail/ prison from the perspective of "now," i.e. a state of freedom. Lastly, the conception of life as a "dice game" highlights the randomness of violence and incarceration, and brings to mind statistics on young black male incarceration/death in poor urban areas. In this view, it is easy to see that one wrong move, one bad roll of the dice, can easily lead to death or incarceration.

The metaphorical connection between prison and death is extended further in Prodigy's next verse:

> To all my peoples locked down coming back to life
>
> In the world once again though your bid[52] was trife[53]
>
> While you was gone we was going to war and even more
>
> Saw my man laying dead on the floor, kid I swore

---

[51] For many years, at San Quentin, there was a big broken clock above the yard that did not move forward anymore. It's gone now, but its mythos remains. In prison, time stands still; or rather, time is the wall of the prison itself, enclosing its prisoners in both space and time.

[52] Prison sentence.

[53] Difficult.

That our crew will live forever, I guess I was wrong

Getting out of prison is symbolized as "coming back to life" as though being in prison is just like being in a grave[54]. Prison is not considered a part of this world, but rather a kind of hell disconnected from real life[55]. Also, the delusion of the first verse ("forever wild") is extended: the speaker thought that he and his friends were invulnerable to the violence around them, though he is then forced to acknowledge that this is false[56]. His "man laying dead on the floor" is surely the individual from the Prelude, whose death underlies the thematics of the track.

Observing the stylistic, rhythmic, and discursive modes at play in the second half of the preceding verse, as well as the four verses left on the track, we feel the same sense of frenzied, accelerated temporality and motion that we saw in the first verse continued and amplified. In the rest of Prodigy's second verse, he runs across the street; then, "just as" he approaches the block, he sees a cop, so he makes a u-turn; then he hurries back to warn his friend. This paraphrase highlights the speaker's emphasis on time and motion, which we see continued in the following verse. Upon hearing the news[57], Havoc's heart begins "rapidly pumping," which signifies an accelerated sense of time and motion at the bodily level, in this case in response to a stressful and

---

[54] Another example of temporal reversal. We will see an extension of this confusion/reversal between life and death in the final verse of the track.

[55] Cf. footnote 42, above.

[56] This observation is extended even more emphatically by Prodigy in "Q.U. — Hectic:"

> But wilding ain't the way to be living
> You're only gonna end up bloody on a floor shivering
> Or locked up, caught inside the beast
> Meanwhile on the streets ain't no more peace

In other words, death or futile incarceration (i.e. the "grave") are the only possibly results of a "wilding" lifestyle. Notice again that Prodigy both endorses, participates in, and then emphatically rebukes this lifestyle.

[57] Here is another example of the transition from one rapper's verse to the next being paralleled by a shift at the narrative level. I.e. Prodigy warns Havoc, who then describes, in his own verse, the effect of that warning.

dangerous situation: the impending gunfight. The change in the rhythm and flow of the delivery here delineates a shift in the action. Havoc is involved in a gunfight, in which he:

> Got grazed in the arm, one slug hit my son
>
> He was bleeding from the head, I couldn't believe it
>
> We was defeated, if it was a case I couldn't beat it
>
> Felt like crying (the temperature's rising)
>
> I saw my man helpless, damn near on the verge of dying

Notice the similarity between "one slug" here and "one time" above — which further suggests the parallel between death and life (or a long sentence) in prison — as well as how the threat (or fact) of death is compared explicitly to a court "case," which would presumably lead to a prison sentence. The extended analogy between a prison sentence and death, and the "grave" metaphor associated with both, impresses us with the sense of a life trajectory with only two possible (and indeed impending) endings: prison or death. Indeed, Havoc makes this explicit in his next verse: "The cradle to the grave is where I'll end up / Fuck gettin sent up North[58]." Additionally, Havoc has an intense emotional reaction to his friend's death, an instance of the hyper-masculine facade of invulnerability and emotional disengagement[59] breaking down. "The temperature's rising" here is a reference to the song by that name, but it also serves to express both the emotional intensity and frantic motion[60] of the situation. Havoc's friend's helplessness in the face of death (and, metaphorically, incarceration) and Havoc's incredulity demonstrate the breakdown of the

---

[58] "Up north" = to prison.

[59] Cf. Havoc's next verse: "I gots no time for catchin feelings" as well as Prodigy's from "Shook Ones Part II:" "And when the things get for real my warm heart turns cold."

[60] One imagines particles zipping around at high speeds both like the individuals involved in the gunfight and like the bullets themselves.

"forever wilding" mentality, of Prodigy's belief that "our crew would live forever." The point is that death (as well as incarceration) is real, devastating, and a predictable result of the hyper-masculine, aggressive, violent lifestyle described and embodied in much of *The Infamous* (cf. footnote 51, above).

In the next verse, in which Prodigy tries to "stash the murder weapon," the sense of frantic motion is maintained by his delivery, the pace of narration, and the story itself. Notice the uninterrupted series of actions, movements, and words, and especially how Prodigy "jetted up the staircase." Let us briefly attend to the first line of Havoc's next verse before moving on to Prodigy's final verse, which we will spend some time on: "Yo it's the real: drama kills, nobody moves, stand still." On one level, Havoc is simply describing a stick-up situation, in which he threatens death to those who do not obey his commands as he robs them. However, notice the attempt to confront and express "the real," i.e. to interpret and abstract from the preceding stories. The truth is that all this drama, all that he has been describing, leads to death, to the grave[61]. Instead of glorifying his lifestyle, Havoc is clearly critiquing it[62]. Furthermore, notice that the frantic motion of drama, of conflict, gives way to a stillness that could be seen either as a cradle/grave-like fixity or as a productive pause/interruption of the frantic pace. Movement is associated with violence, conflict, and death, while stillness is associated with a temporary

---

[61] Compare to Prodigy's lines from "Survival of the Fittest:" "God bless my soul, before I put my foot down and begin to stroll / into the drama I built." Drama is then the circumstances of conflict which the individual participates in and even creates.

[62] Which is not to say that we should interpret this to mean that responsibility for this death, destruction, and incarceration is solely vested in those individuals, like Havoc and Prodigy, who participate in the lifestyle described here. In fact, I would argue that the level of introspection and self-awareness displayed here indicates the degree to which cultural/environmental circumstances (which are caused by the prevalent forces of society as a whole) are responsible for, and indeed inevitably cause this drama. In other words, the cultural context is so extreme, the situation so bad, that individuals are unable to break the pattern despite their awareness of it. Self-reflection can only go so far; in the end, the responsibility lies not just with the individual but with the forces that create the environment in which he/she is trapped.

peace, which in this case is figured not by a lack of conflict but by a pause within the conflict itself. However, notice the connection between this introspective attempt to describe "the real" and the pause/stillness that comes with it, as this will be important in several verses to follow.

In the final verse of "Cradle to the Grave," Prodigy describes his impatience as he waits to kill a man who has snitched on his friend. Towards the beginning of the verse, we are told that Prodigy (or possibly his friend, it's hard to tell) "know[s] him [the snitch] well and probably go[es] way back." Prodigy wants to "get it over with quick" because he's "tired of waiting," while Havoc's brother says to "chill for a while." This situation sets up another temporal confusion, which is expressed elegantly in the following lines:

I get the chills when I see that nigga in my sight

A dead man walking…

You don't know how much I fiend to put his ass in a coffin

One day my man and the next he's not

Didn't know him long anyway, so fuck it

It's funny how things change

Instead of "chilling" (i.e. relaxing and waiting), Prodigy gets the "chills" because he knows he's going to kill this man, who is in fact already in his sight (both vision and gun-sight). The next line metaphorically expresses the fact that even though this man is alive, it is as if he is already dead. This life/death confusion plays with the idea of "the cradle to the grave" by suggesting that even during the brief span of time the snitch is alive, he may really already be dead, or at least destined for death. Making this connection even more explicit, Prodigy uses the word "coffin," invoking the imagery of the grave. Finally, notice the surprising shift in temporality in the brief

span of this verse: in the beginning, Prodigy knows the man for a long time, but by the end things have changed and he actually hasn't known him for very long at all. In fact, not just things-in-time but temporality itself changes with the movement of the verse. Time, specifically the length of time Prodigy has known the snitch, changes to suit the needs of the moment. The same kind of confused temporal state that allows a man to be both dead and not dead at the same time renders time itself fluid and non-linear. Because of the sudden shift in loyalty from one day to the next and the life-or-death importance of this change[63], Prodigy re-writes the story of his relationship with the snitch. In other words, the instability and volatility of this relationship leads to a need to warp and alter the fabric of time itself. Because of his snitching, the "dead man walking" has denied his shared history with Prodigy and his friend. Prodigy denies this history as well, in order to justify his intention to kill the snitch. In this example, we see how the frantic pace of time, as well as a temporal confusion/reversal, is closely associated with violence, hyper-masculinity, and the "lifestyle" that accompanies these modes of behavior, identities, and ideologies. In order to make this connection even more explicit, I would like to bring in a couple more examples and expand the discussion to include motion-in-time as well.

Closely related to the depiction of temporality in *The Infamous* is the depiction of motion-in-time. Going back, again, to "The Start of Your Ending," let's recall the line: "When a fool try to play me, wet 'em up then I'm Swayze." The speaker's defensive violence here is followed by an immediate retreat ("then I'm Swayze" = "then I'm ghost" = "then I'll depart rapidly"), presumably in order to avoid further retaliation or police involvement. The connection

[63] As it could lead to death, in the case of the snitch, or incarceration (metaphorically: death), in the case of the man being snitched on.

between rapidity and violence is not explicit here, but it is introduced. It can be seen more explicitly in Prodigy's first verse from "Give Up the Goods:"

The fool retaliated so I had to think fast

Pull out my heat first he pulled out his heat last

Now who the fuck you think is living to this day?

Prodigy explicitly connects survival with being quick on the draw, quick to shoot, the first to respond to or instigate violent action. He had to think fast and attack first in order to avoid being killed by his opponent. Havoc says much the same thing in "Q.U. — Hectic:"

As I walk around the streets

Son I got mad beef, I'mma blast you before you blast me

That's my philosophy cause nowadays you gotta be relentless

Again, being quick to instigate or respond to violence is associated with survival in a hostile and violent environment. The specific cultural situation ("the streets") and temporal context ("nowadays") seem to necessitate or justify this aggressive philosophy/lifestyle. One must be relentlessly at the ready, relentlessly self-defensive, relentlessly violent in response to the constant, oppressive, violence of the environment itself (and the dangerous individuals in it). A final example, from Havoc's verse in "Shook Ones Part II:" "Ain't no time for hesitation, that only leads to incarceration." Thus any pause, any hesitation, is linked not only to death but to incarceration as well, bringing to mind the "grave" metaphor (and its dual meaning). It is as though the speaker must keep up with the frantic pace of time itself in order to avoid being destroyed by it (i.e. killed or incarcerated). Any attempt to stop, pause, reflect, hesitate, or consider is linked to a negative outcome: prison or death — the grave. As a final note, we might

observe that both prison and death can be seen as a stoppage of time, and so the fact that this stoppage is linked to a pause or hesitation seems intuitive. When survival is associated with being attuned to and in sync with a frantic pace of time and motion, and death or incarceration associated with a pause, one seems stuck in motion, trapped in time, forced to "think fast" or face the consequences.

As Prodigy says in his final verse on "Give Up the Goods," "There's crime in the air, ain't no time to be afraid." In fact, there's no time for a lot of things on *The Infamous*. In "Up North Trip," there "ain't no time to slip" and end up in jail. In "Q.U. — Hectic," there "ain't no time to chill." As noted above, in "Cradle to the Grave," there's "no time for catchin feelings." In "Survival of the Fittest," there's "no time to get lost in the system" (i.e. incarcerated). Earlier in "Give Up the Goods," there's "no time for faking jacks" (i.e. putting on an act or appearance) "cause niggas who fake jacks get laid on their backs" (i.e. killed). This lack of time, this rush, contributes to the sense that time is fast, frantic, and frenzied; one must either keep up or suffer the consequences, and there is no time for anything that is not an absolute priority for survival; definitely no time for pausing, hesitating, or reflecting. Havoc expresses the difficulty of pausing and reflecting more explicitly in his verse on "Shook Ones Part II":

> Sometimes I wonder do I deserve to live
>
> Or am I going to burn in hell for all the things I did
>
> No time to dwell on that cause my brain reacts

In other words, introspection and self-reflection, especially about moral issues, is a kind of luxury. When you are fighting for your very survival, there is no time for this reflection, as it will only render you paralyzed and unable to keep up with the frantic pace of time. One cannot invest

in these kinds of thoughts processes, which can undermine one's entire worldview, when survival itself is at stake. Indeed, in these lines we see Havoc pause and wonder, only to immediately reject this mode of reflective thought because of the pressure of time, which he seems powerless to resist, if only for the sake of his own physical survival.

IV - Beyond the Frantic Pace of Time

In contrast to the examples above, which highlight the association between violent hyper-masculinity and a state of being stuck within a frantic temporal movement, Prodigy explicitly pauses four times throughout the album and "slows down" once. In pointing out and exploring these moments, I would like to focus on how Prodigy utilizes his own (and Havoc's) established framework of frantic temporality (which I have just described) to undermine its inescapable power and associated ideologies of hyper-masculinity. Because frantic forward motion is described as all-encompassing, Prodigy's thoughtful and reflective pauses signify a challenge to and subversion of this lifestyle, both in their explicit content (which challenges these violent hyper-masculine ideologies through introspection and criticism) and in their metaphorical framing (as a pause in a temporal motion that seems to be unstoppable).

Looking at Prodigy's first verse from "Give Up the Goods," we will see our first example of the "pause." Notice that in the second line, the speaker is "caught up in the hustle." This "hustle" could be seen as the "lifestyle" from "The Start of Your Ending," but the description here extends the connotation to that of frantic temporality. The "hustle" is surely the "hustler's" world, but it is also, as a noun, any "busy movement or activity." As a verb, "to hustle" means to

"force (someone) to move hurriedly or unceremoniously in a specified direction."[64] This frantic hustle is associated with violence, and with the necessity of acting quickly in order to defend oneself (see above). Immediately after Prodigy admits to being trapped in this construction, and seems to endorse the necessity of rapid violent action[65], he says:

I'm tryna tell these young niggas crime don't pay

They looked at me and said "Queen's niggas don't play—

Do your thing, I'll do mine kid stay outta my way"

Again, Prodigy's awareness and questioning of the lifestyle he is participating in is obvious, though in this case his attempt to convey his understanding to a youth ends up being futile. Even though Prodigy makes it clear that he participates in a "criminal lifestyle," he still tries to tell the youth that this lifestyle is not a good choice. Notice that the youth's response to Prodigy's "lesson" is couched in terms of motion[66], highlighting again the connection between violence/ criminality and frantic forward motion. However, just after advising the youth to avoid crime, Prodigy explains why he (and those he has just addressed) must resort to criminal behavior in order make money, perhaps even despite their awareness that such behavior is not beneficial in the long term:

It's type hard tryna survive in New York state

Can't stop 'til I'm eating off a platinum plate

---

[64] New Oxford American Dictionary

[65] "The fool retaliated so I had to think fast
Pull out my heat first, he pulled out his heat last"

[66] Cf. the theme of forward motion in "Though that shit [wealth] is out of reach, anybody in my way gets scarred" from Havoc's first verse on "Q.U. — Hectic." Also, "On my road to the riches, hitting snitches off with mad stitches" from Havoc's verse on "Eye for an Eye." In all three instances, the common theme is doing/threatening violence to those who block one's (possibly criminal) movement towards money.

Not only is survival difficult, but the drive towards material riches (again, couched in terms of motion and the inability to stop/pause) is all-powerful. Notice the word-play with "platinum plate," which connects three meanings/images: needing money in order to eat, material excess, and record sales[67]. Finally, towards the end of this verse, we get the first and shortest of Prodigy's pauses:

> I pause, step back, look at my life as a whole
>
> Ain't no love it seems the devil done stole my soul…
>
> I'm trying to get this Lexus up, and plus a cellular

Though this pause is brief, and Prodigy does not continue along the path of slow, introspective thought, his one-line reflection here is closely related to the more developed pauses to follow. He "looks" at his life visually, from a more distanced perspective, rather than identifying with it so closely. Observe that religious imagery follows the pause, as this will be true of another pause as well. Also, notice that this brief reflective critique is followed immediately by a return to the very obsession with material wealth that is being critiqued. Though we can see the voice of

---

[67] Cf. Havoc's lines from this same song ("Give Up the Goods"):

> Can't roll without steel, I feel how I feel
> Cause I was born to kill, do what I gotta
> To eat a decent meal, brothers is starving
> Don't try to find a job son, it's all about robbing
> So don't be alarmed when we come through
> We supposed to, if you opposed to, get your face blown dude
> Off the map, cause I react, attack
> A brother wasn't blessed with wealth, so I act like that

He cannot "roll" (move forward) "without steel" (violence) just like Prodigy cannot "stop" until he gets to the top. Notice the close connection between birth and death in "born to kill," which can here refer both to the close connection between the early childhood environment and violent behavior, and also to the tenuous and frantic transience of life between the fixity of the cradle and that of the grave. Furthermore, observe that Havoc is "robbing" (and engaging in other criminal behavior) in order "to eat a decent meal" because the economic situation and opportunities are so bad that there are very few other options. Violence seems inevitable in this context, and indeed is linked explicitly to being poor and in need. Lastly, notice that though Prodigy says that because he is "used to having money to live with," he wants to have more money again, Havoc has the opposite perspective. However, it doesn't end up making a difference, because whether they are used to having money or not, they still want more.

introspective thoughtfulness or moral conscience beginning to speak, it is cut off and replaced by the ideologies that it seeks to critique. This may make us believe that there is no way to critique these discourses, as this clear attempt is interrupted and forced back. However, this is just the beginning. Additionally, though our first instinct may be to valorize this voice of introspective critique over the voice of descriptive embodiment, it is important to remember here the Barthes quotes from the first chapter. The fact that Prodigy keeps returning to an "immediate account" of his immurement in his own class/region/heredity points to the fact that this is the main focus, and that the voice of introspection, rather than falling outside the voice of embodiment, as we might tend to think, is in fact just another part of it. In other words, by describing his own reflective thought, Prodigy is serving the greater purpose of giving an immediate account of his own situation. In fact, the best way to describe his state of immurement is to express his own reflective awareness of it.

In Prodigy's final verse on the "Give Up the Goods," we see the first instance of a developed, introspective pause that stands in contradistinction to the frantic movement of/within time outlined above:

First of all, slow down you on the wrong route

Let me put you on your feet, and show you what's it all about:

The street life ain't nothing to play with

No jokes, no games, kid— for years I been doing the same shit:

Just drinking liquor, doing bids, extorting crack heads

And sticking up the stick-up kids

Firstly, notice the imagery in “put you on your feet,” in which the addressee is depicted as not being fully grounded, stable, or upright. When compared with Havoc’s “niggas who fake jacks get laid on their backs” in the previous verse, it is clear that uprightness represents an accurate perception of reality or a state of “realness” whereas trying to deceive others or oneself is represented as being not fully upright. Thus, the first step towards apprehending one’s own situation is slowing down one’s own involvement in it. Then, one must look at (or be shown) one’s life, reality. Again, the negative “wilding” lifestyle is presented as the “wrong route,” as a frantic forward motion that must be slowed down. Prodigy utilizes this imagery of slowing down and pausing for reflection in order to introduce an accurate, self-conscious description of the “hustler” lifestyle. In his description of this lifestyle, he highlights the fact that it is not some game that one plays nor something to be glorified, but rather a harsh reality that is surely undesirable, the difficult result of unfortunate circumstance. Replacing the glorified and fanciful modes of representation we see elsewhere throughout the album (and very much throughout the genre), the final two lines here are neutrally descriptive, blunt, and stark: alcoholism, prison time, drug dealing, and armed robbery. Though Prodigy seems to take some pride in the legitimacy that his activities give him, he also seems quite ambivalent about the correctness of his own mode of being. Again, rather than painting his own lifestyle as desirable or good in itself, Prodigy simply tells us what it is like. Taken with his injunctions to the youth to avoid making the same mistakes he has made, his depiction is definitely meant to deter others from taking on this lifestyle.

Moving straight on to the next, and more vigorously developed, example of Prodigy’s pause in order to extend the discussion of these thematics:

I got the powder, combine with the powder and water

It oughta drop in a half and hour

In the form of oil watch the cocaine boil

Keep my eye on it so the shit won't spoil

Then I pause... and ask God why

Did he put me on this earth just so I could die

I sit back and build on all the things I did wrong

Why I'm still breathing and all my friends gone

I try not to dwell on the subject for a while

'Cause I might get stuck in this corrupt lifestyle

But my heart pumps foul blood through my arteries

And I can't turn it back it's a part of me

Too late for crying I'm a grown man struggling

To reach the next level of life, without fumbling

Down or folding, I got no shoulder to lean on but my own

All alone in this danger zone.

Time waits for no man, the streets grow worse

Fuck the whole world kid, my money comes first…

(Prodigy's second verse from "Up North Trip")

Instead of putting forward a specific interpretation of this complex and multi-faceted verse, and drawing out explicitly every implicit conceptualization and expression, I would like to point out just a few of the thematic connections and allusions to other parts of the album, as well as the

temporal imagery at play here. In this verse, Prodigy has an opportunity to pause and reflect on his life as he waits for cocaine and baking soda (the two powders) to cook into crack cocaine. As he watches and waits, he places the introspective pause that follows within a specific narrative and temporal context. In other words, Prodigy does not arbitrarily decide to pause and reflect; the rare opportunity for self-reflection is created by a natural pause in an otherwise hectic environment. That this pause occurs in the midst of criminal activity is not a coincidence: it is figured as the eye of a storm of frantic motion and accelerated time. In fact, we might connect this framing to the idea that these introspective pauses, though they seem utterly at odds with the voice of frantic hyper-masculinity, are in fact a part of the larger attempt to describe the immediacy of the speaker's total social situation. In this sense, the twin voices are not at odds, but rather different means to the same end, which is again to utilize words as "essential objects which fully account for the whole content of society.[68]" Notice the profusion of time references throughout this verse — even when he is pausing and reflecting — and specifically the focus on the frantic progressive motion of time (which does not wait for anyone).

Compare the "corrupt lifestyle" that Prodigy is "stuck" in to the "lifestyle" that the rapper is "stuck" in from "Start of Your Ending." Notice that time cannot be turned "back," but rushes inexorably forward like the blood in his veins, which indeed seems tainted by corruption, too. In fact, time has already progressed too far, and it's "too late" to cry or act like a child[69]. As time rushes forward, the speaker must continue to ascend[70] despite the difficulties and lack of support.

---

[68] Barthes (80).

[69] Just as we saw earlier with the phrase "walk before you crawl."

[70] Either towards wealth and power, or possibly up a sort of Maslow's pyramid towards physical security and eventual self-actualization.

Thus the pause, and its attendant introspection, breaks down under pressure from the frantic forward motion of time, which again seems inescapable. The importance of the pause, therefore, is not that it is a stop, a change, or a shift, but rather that it enables the individual to see the franticness of his life for what it is. Though the speaker cannot permanently avoid time, he can recognize and express his entrapment within it.

In this verse, the speaker seeks to reconcile his own misdeeds with his awareness of them in a kind of existential crisis. The imagery of breath and heart suggests an awareness of the tenuous physicality of his own existence, while the "foul blood" can be seen as a metaphor for "all the things I did wrong." Though he recognizes the problematic aspects of his own life, the frantic motion of time forces him forward and pulls him away from sustained reflection. There is a fear that if he continues to reflect, he will become stuck (or perhaps recognize the fact of being stuck) in his own history, unable to more forward from his difficulties. In the midst of reflection, the heart continues pumping, reminding the speaker of the regular motion of time that he cannot escape. Again, though the dual modes of frantic temporality and the pause that challenges it seem totally at odds, on a fundamental level they are interrelated in that they are both part of the "lucid act of giving information[71]" that underlies the artistic project of *The Infamous*.

In Prodigy's final pause, we get a further expression of the importance of an accurate perception of reality, introspective thought, and slowing down the frantic pace of time:

> It's only the facts coming out of my mouth piece
>
> As far as I can see these streets is getting sour
>
> Q. U., too much drama to get into

---

[71] Barthes (80).

And niggas regret when they begin to

Regardless of your name or what you been through

Pause for a second, open your eyes and think, dude.

Life ain't the game that it seems to be

Fuck a fantasy I'm living in reality

Caught up in this untouchable mentality

Hit you up bad, make you loose a few calories

I need to slow down, moving through life at a high speed

Watching all the slow runners pass by me

I can see through you, due to, my Queens education

Speaking in behalf of this drug-game nation

Beginning his verse by explaining that he is going to express, in the lines that follow, "the facts" of the situation, namely the fact that he (as well as those stuck in environments similar to his own) is trapped by his environment and the cultural forces that have shaped it. As Prodigy explains more succinctly in his verse before this one, "Everything is real inside my mind: / These days you can't make it if you ain't affiliated with crime." In other words, he is enabled — both by his thoughtful disengagement with prevalent discourses of hyper-masculinity and by his interruption of the forward motion of time — to accurately apprehend and express the truth of things, which is that he is stuck, because of cultural conditions, in a criminal lifestyle. The need to survive trumps everything else, and in the "illegal world" (Havoc's verse from "Survival of the Fittest") he is stuck within, this need necessitates violence and criminality.

In the second quoted line, the alliterative sequence with “see,” “streets,” and “sour” highlights the worsening of the actual situation on the ground, of the reality that he must live within. The “drama” in his neighborhood is indeed “too much,” and leads those who participate in it (both the implicit addressee and the poet himself) to regret their situation. However, this regret does not lead to anything, because once one gets involved in such a world, there is no turning back. This idea of being unable to turn back harkens back to the previous instance of the pause (“And I can't turn it back it's a part of me”), to the first song on the album (in which “the start” is closely associated with the “ending”), and to the frantic motion from the cradle to the grave. When the speaker asks the addressee to pause, open his eyes, and think, we are given to understand that these three actions are associated with an accurate apprehension of reality. Notice that though the poet is purportedly addressing an external subject (“dude”), he is also speaking to himself. Just after he asks the addressee to pause and think, the speaker himself concludes that life is not a game or a fantasy (which we might link to the glorified, fantastic depiction of hyper-masculinity and the “hustler” lifestyle) but rather consists of being trapped (“caught up”) in “this untouchable mentality” (surely the hyper-masculine invulnerability associated with being a “hustler”). Notice that the speaker only momentarily pauses, briefly acknowledging the truth that he is trapped in a fantasy before returning to that very fantasy. It seems like a contradiction, but indeed the realization implicit in these lines is that “living in reality” consists in recognizing that one is “caught up in” some sort of mentality. In the next line, we get an example of this, as the speaker falls back into (and at the same time describes) this same “untouchable mentality” by threatening gun-violence against the addressee. However, this time, in opposition to the previous

instances of the pause, Prodigy only briefly falls back into the violent hyper-masculine discourse he attempts to critique.

This time, he comes through with another profound realization. Though he began by explicitly addressing another individual, now he is clearly addressing himself ("I need") when he recognizes that he needs not just to pause momentarily within a context of frantic forward motion, but to slow down his entire mode of being. Though he seems to be rushing forward, he is in fact being passed by all the "slow runners." Again, quickness can be associated with violence and an investment in the "hustler" lifestyle, while slow movement can be associated with more considered, thoughtful action, perhaps even with the action of introspective aural poetry itself. The implicit argument here is that though he is moving forward, there is really nothing to get to (other than perhaps the grave). Rather than rushing forward, he wishes he could slow down, and indeed he seems to do so by the end of this verse, wherein the "education" he received on the streets prepares him for the next level of life, which we might hope to be the state of slow movement he desires. In the final line, the fast-moving lifestyle he denies and moves away from is possibly associated not just with his own specific cultural context but with the nation as a whole. In other words, the franticness described and critiqued here is not only applicable to the specific cultural environment of the poet, but to the country at large, in which frantic forward motion might be seen as a metaphor for the greed and profiting by the addictions of others that defines modern consumer capitalism. I leave as an open question to what degree the embodiment and critique of frantic temporality displayed in this album can be applied to a broader societal frame, and to what degree it is specific to its own cultural context.

Finally, I would like to sum up my analysis by asserting that the underlying discursive mode of *The Infamous*, behind the embodiment of hyper-masculine discourses and their critique, is simply to express the real situation of the individual speaker. The genuine, thoughtful, forthright, and overwhelmingly real voice we hear is not that of a merciless criminal, a thoughtless killer, or a violent psychopath, but that of an intelligent, introspective, and exceptionally eloquent individual raised (and stuck) in extraordinarily difficult circumstances beyond his control. Recalling the line: "every rhyme is the truth that I must get 'cross" (from "Start of Your Ending"), we are reminded that perhaps the most effective way to challenge and subvert a dominant ideology is simply to express it honestly and realistically. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that the direct expression of lived experience can be seen as one of the highest goals of literary art since antiquity. Perhaps as readers we have becomes so used to narrative complexity and other incidental genre-specific features that we sometimes miss the whole point of verbal art: to describe and express reality as we experience it. *The Infamous* succeeds as literary art because it is a substantial, vivid, and formally innovative description of lived experience.

V - Rhymed Time: Towards an Understanding of Rap Meter

Finally, I would like to ask why time (and motion-in-time) is the field upon which this album both embodies and subverts these hyper-masculine discourses. Though I have examined the depiction of time and motion in *The Infamous* on a symbolic/metaphorical (i.e. large) scale, I would also like to suggest, as a sort of epilogue, that time and motion also figure importantly into the formal metrical elements that underly the rhythmic poetry of these lyrics, and furthermore

that this playing-in-time is related to the structural playing-with-time. In order to examine this on a small scale, I would like to perform some (relatively basic) metrical analysis in order to highlight the way that time, rhythm, and sound are played with at the formal level. Leaving aside the "meaning" of the words, I would like to focus briefly on their form, their sound, their timing, and their placement within a complex metrical system[72].

Having examined the metrical features of this album (which fall clearly within the variation afforded by the metrical structure of rap as a genre, thereby making it an acceptable exemplar) at some length, it seems best to introduce them by describing the two primary metrical/rhythmic qualities that together account for a significant portion of the formal metrical phenomena at play. Though this description cannot be total — as it only takes into account a couple gross metrical features and cannot consider the significant nuance of the wide variety of formal features that contribute to "flow" (i.e. a sonically pleasing metrical structure) — it may form a basis or introduction to an understanding of rap meter. In any case, these two features are rhythmic stress (both verbal and instrumental) and rhyme (construed as any correspondence of sound between words, including assonance, consonance, etc.). Both are extremely salient to any listener, though stress might be considered slightly more salient than rhyme, at least in some cases.

Taking the simplest (at least in my description of it) of these features first: instrumental rhythmic stress. Practically every track (on this album, but also in the genre) includes a regular stressed beat around which much of the metrical structure is grounded. Though this stressed beat

---

[72] A metrical system that has not been analyzed sufficiently (or at all) as formal poetry, though an interesting foray has been made into describing some aspects of the meter(s) of rap in musical terms: http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.09.15.5/mto.09.15.5.adams.html

does not always correspond exactly to a particular stressed syllable, it does so quite often. For example, if we listen to “Survival of the Fittest,” we will surely notice the highly distinguishable regular stressed beat that occurs twice per line, once in the middle and once at the end. From the first verse (syllables spoken at the same time as stressed beats are bolded):

There’s a war going **on** outside no man is **safe** from

You could **run** but you can't hide for**ev**er

From these **streets** that we done **took**

You walking with your **head** down scared to **look**

You shook, cause **ain't** no such things as **half**way crooks

They **ne**ver around when the **beef** cooks

In my part of **town**, it's similar to Vi**et**nam

Focusing on the third and fourth lines, it’s clear that each of the bold stressed monosyllabic words coincides with a stressed beat. In these two lines, all of the instrumental stresses coincide with a verbal stress, and there is only one verbal stress that occurs without accompaniment by a stressed beat (“these”). These lines, in their close association between verbal and instrumental stress, highlight one tendency in rap meter: that of utilizing the stressed beat to emphasize the stressed syllables and their rhythmic placement, and furthermore to emphasize rhymed stressed syllables (“took” and “look” in this example).

However, it is important to realize that this is not the gold standard of rap meter, but only one tendency among several. There is also a fairly strong tendency to include stressed (and often rhymed) syllables that do not coincide at all with the stressed beat. Thus, we might say that there are two rhythms at play in rap meter: the usually very regular stressed beat of the instrumental

track and the significantly more irregular rhythm of verbal stresses (which are often accompanied by rhymes). Though verbal stresses may coincide (and often do) with instrumental stresses, they also may not, which creates a complex rhythmic effect around a relatively simple beat. For example, the words “shook” and “crooks” in the fifth line are verbally (though not instrumentally) stressed and also rhyme both with each other and with the instrumentally and verbally stressed rhymes (“took” and “look”) in the previous two lines. This variation in stress placement (rhythm), in which rhymed stressed syllables sometimes coincide with instrumental stresses and sometimes do not, creates a rigid metrical structure that however allows for significant variation. Because meter is often universally described as a regular pattern that allows for significant variation in order to keep the listener/reader surprised, I could just stop here and conclude by arguing that rap meter can be described by the variation in coincidence of verbal stresses and instrumental stresses. However, it seems to me that while this explanation is sufficient to explain a significant part of the formal structure of rap meter, we would only have to extend and deepen it slightly in order explain quite a bit more.

Though one might make the argument that rhyme is only an ornamental feature, and that stress patterns are the basis of rap meter, I would contend that rhyme is (or can often be) an essential structural feature as (or nearly as) significant as stress. In fact, we might consider rap meter a two-part structure, the first element of which (stress) can be further subdivided into instrumental and verbal stress, while the second element (rhyme) can be subdivided into the various types of rhyme (perfect rhyme, consonance, assonance, etc.). However, it is important to remember that whatever type of rhyme is utilized, the essential feature of rhyme is similarity in sound, and as such the essential structural feature of rhyme is that it connects groups of similar

sounds. I would like to introduce another verse that has been marked up according to a slightly different notation. In addition to bolded syllables representing coincident instrumental stresses, italicized syllable(s) represent rhymes, some of which may be more audible than readable (i.e. the performance may alter the pronunciation of some syllables so that they sound more rhymed than we might expect them to). These rhymes may or may not be verbally stressed, and at varying degrees of intensity. Also, when an instrumental stress clearly falls between words rather than on one or another, I have marked it with a bolded "X." Havoc's verse from "Shook Ones Part II:"

For every *rhyme I* ***write*** it's twenty-*five* to *life* **X**

Yo it's a *must*, in gats we ***trust***, safeguarding my ***life***

Ain't no time for *hesit****ation***, that only leads to ***in****carceration*

You ***don't*** *know* me, there's *no rel****ation***

Queensbridge and we ***don't*** play, I *don't* got ***time***

For your petty thinking ***mind***, son I'm bigger than ***those***

Claiming that you pack **heat** but you're scared to ***hold***

And once the smoke clears **you'll** be left with one in your ***dome***

Thirteen years **in** the projects, my ment**al**ity is *what kid*

You **talk** a good one but you don't ***want*** *it*

Sometimes I *wond****er*** do I deserve to ***live***

Or am I going to burn in **hell** for all the things I ***did***

No time to dwell on ***that*** cause my brain ***reacts***

Front if you **want** kid, lay on your ***back***

I don't fake ***jacks*** kid, you know I bring it **to** you *live*

Stay **in** a child's place, kid you **outta** *line*

Criminal ***minds*** thirsty for recogn***ition***

I'm *sipping*, **E**&J got my mind ***flip****ping*

I'm *bugging*, ***dig****ging* my ways out of holes by ***hust****ling*

Get that loot **kid**, you know my *function* **X**

Cause *long as I'm a****live*** *I'mma live il****leg****al*

And once I **get** on *I'mma* put on all my ***peop****les*

React *quick*, *spit* ***lyr****ics* like Macs I hit **X** your *dome up*

When I ***roll*** *up*, don't be caught *sleeping* 'cause I'm ***creep****ing*[73]

The first thing we might observe is that rhymes seem to come in groups. Not that these groups are always exclusive (i.e. groups may overlap), but that every rhyme can be said to be a part of a group of 2-5 (though sometimes more) similar sounds. In addition, we can distinguish various degrees of rhyming. For example, in the first line the words "rhyme" and "write" can be seen to form one group and "five" and "life" another. However, the assonance of the "i" sound links all four of these words with the word "I," forming a greater rhyme group within which there are more closely associated sub-groups. In the next line, "must" and "trust" form a rhyme group, but then the word "life" at the end must be added to the rhyme group in the previous rhyme. We might view the end-rhymes here between "life" and "life" as the most structurally important (and

[73] One might observe, as I admit, that my notation is insufficient to fully (or even partially) express the groups of rhymes and the complex degrees of association introduced by their relative intensity. I have experimented with the use of color coding to match groups of rhymed syllables together, but this can become visually overwhelming and even more confusing in a verse such as this. In the long run, only computerized metrical analysis tools will be able to offer a sufficient level of accuracy to represent a significant portion of the formal features of an aural text.

indeed they might be the most salient rhymes in this particular instance), but it is important to remember that unlike the rigid rhyme schemes of common English literary meters (such as that of the Shakespearean sonnet), end-rhyming is not always the most important kind of rhyme. Also, we might contrast the rigidity of more traditional rhyme schemes with the complex mix of a wide variety of rhymes (assonance, slant rhyme, consonance, perfect rhyme, end-rhyme, internal rhyme, etc.) in rap.

The tactic of grouping rhymes together can be seen as simply a way to keep the meter fresh and surprising, among other things. In other words, just before the listener is used to the recurrence of a certain sound, a new rhyme is introduced that is formed from a different sound. Also, because rhymes are not always placed at regular intervals, the listener never knows exactly when the next rhyme in a rhyme group will occur. For example, in lines three and four the rhyme scheme could be described as AA/BA, which is to say: there are two rhymes on the first line, each of which correspond to an instrumental stress. On the next line there is a non-rhyming stressed syllable ("don't," which does however fit into a separate rhyme group that includes three "don'ts"), immediately following by another stressed rhyme ("relation"). The third non-rhyming stress is used to break up the sequence of rhymes and create a sense of anticipation, which is fulfilled by the third and final rhyme. This is a common pattern in rap meter, though in this instance there is an added level of complexity due to the fact that the rhyme is polysyllabic and the instrumental stress falls on different syllables in each rhyme. In "hesitation" and "relation," the instrumental stress falls on the "-ation" (more specifically the "at" syllable, which is where we would expect the primary verbal stress). However, in "incarceration," the instrumental stress falls on the "in" syllable, which is given an atypical verbal stress as well, which leaves rhyming

part of the word to coincide with a non-stressed beat. The effect is that the second rhyme (“incarceration”) is de-emphasized, and sounds less emphatic than the two other rhymes, creating a more subtle soundscape than if each rhymed syllable corresponded perfectly to an instrumental stress. In this example we can also see how the interplay between instrumental stress, verbal stress, and rhyme grouping forms the backbone of rap meter.

In order to connect this formal analysis to my earlier discussion of the interplay between the embodiment and critique of hyper-masculine discourses, I would like to come back to an observation I brought up briefly (pp 21, above), that there is an implicit analogy between the recurring stressed beat and the sound of gunfire. In fact, we can extend this connection to include verbal as well as instrumental stress. With this analogy in mind, it is fairly easy to connect the rigid temporal structure of recurring stressed beats with the framework of frantic forward motion (and its associated ideology of violent hyper-masculinity) outlined above. Considering the connection between gun-violence and violent hyper-masculinity, and especially the utilization of the action of gun-violence as a metaphor for the action of rap[74], it is not so far-fetched to relate the dual embodiment/subversion of violent hyper-masculinity couched in terms of time/motion to a dual rigidity/flexibility on the part of rap meter itself. In other words, the interplay between verbal stress and instrumental stress can be considered parallel, in some ways, to the interplay between the pause and the frantic forward motion of time. Just as the beat continues inexorably, so the pressures of a frantic temporality cannot be avoided. Just as the rapper must keep up with the driving pulse of the beat, so the hustler must think fast in order to avoid being trapped in the

---

[74] Cf. Rakim’s lines (among numerous others), which I quoted above:

> Pull out my weapon and start to squeeze
> A magnum as a microphone, murdering emcees

fixity of the grave. Though I don't have time (or space) to explore this connection further, I leave it as an open question.

Appendix A - Bibliography

Books:

Barthes, Roland. Writing Degree Zero. New York: Hill and Wang, 1968. Print.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1990. Print.

Chang, Jeff. *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*. New York: BasicCivitas, 2006. Print.

Dyson, Michael Eric., and Sohail Daulatzai. *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2010. Print.

Hutcheson, B. R. *Old English Poetic Metre*. Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1995. Print.

Marcus, Greil. *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975. Print.

Martin, Richard P. *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989. Print.

Perkins, William Eric. *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1996. Print.

Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover, NH: University of New England, 1994. Print.

RZA, and Chris Norris. *The Wu-Tang Manual*. New York: Riverhead, 2005. Print.

Articles:

Collins, Michael S. “Biggie Envy and the Gangsta Sublime.” *Callaloo* 29.3 (2006): 911-938. Print.

Gioia, Dana. “Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture.” *The Hudson Review* 56.1 (2003): 21-49. Print.

Halama, Alta Cools. 'Flytes of Fancy: Boasting and Boasters from Beowulf to Gangsta Rap.' Essays in Medieval Studies. 13 (1996): 81-96.

Orchard, Andy. 'Oral Tradition.' Reading Old English Texts. Ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 101-123.

Rosen, Ralph M., and Marks, Donald R. “Comedies of Transgression in Gangsta Rap and Ancient Classical Poetry.” *New Literary History* 30.4 (1999): 897-928. Print.

Shusterman, Richard. “The Fine Art of Rap.” *New Literary History* 22.3 (1991): 613-632. Print.

Appendix B - “Wu-Tang: 7th Chamber” Lyrics

[Verse 1 - Raekwon]

Champion gear that I rock, you get your boots knocked

Then attack you like a pit that lock shit down

As I come and freaks the sound

Hardcore, but giving you more and more, like ding!

Nah shorty, get you open like six packs

Killer Bees attack, flipping what, murder one, fat tracks aight

I kick it like a Nike Flight

Word life, I get that ass robbed on spite

Check the method from Bedrock, cause I rock your head to bed

Just like rocking what? Twin Glocks

Shake the ground while my beats just break you down

Raw sound, going to war right now

So yo bombing

We usually take all niggas garments

Save your breath before I bomb it

[Verse 2 - Method Man]

I be that insane nigga from the psycho ward

I'm on the trigger, plus I got the Wu-Tang sword

So how you figure that you can even fuck with mine?

Hey, yo, RZA! Hit me with that shit one time

And pull a foul, niggas save the beef for the cow

I'm milking this ho, this is my show tical

The fuck you wanna do for this mic piece, duke?

I'm like a sniper, hyper off the ginseng root

PLO style, buddha monks with the owls

Now who's the fucking man? Meth-Tical

[Verse 3 - Inspectah Deck]

I leave the mic in body bags, my rap style has

The force to leave you lost like the tribe of Shabazz

Murderous material made by a madman

It's the mic wrecker, Inspector, bad man

From the bad lands of the killer, rap fanatic

Representing with the skill that's iller

Dare to compare, get pierced just like your ear

The Shooby-do-wop-pop strictly hardware

Armed and geared cause I just broke out the prison

Charged by the system for murdering the rhythm

Now lo and behold, another deadly episode

Bound to catch another fucking charge when I explode

[Verse 4 - Ghostface Killah]

Slamming a hype-ass verse til your head burst

I ramshack dead in the track, and that's that

Rap assassin, fast and quick to blast and hardrock

I ran up in spots like Fort Knox

I'm hot, top notch, Ghost thinks with logic

Flashbacks how I attacked your whole project

I'm raw, I'm rugged and raw, I repeat, if I die

My seed'll be ill like me

Approaching me, yo out of respect, chops your neck

I get vexed, like crashing up a phat-ass Lex

So clear the way, make way, yo open the cage

Peace I'm out, jetting like a runaway slave

[Verse 5 - RZA]

Yo, you're getting stripped from your garments, boy, run your jewels

Holding meth got me open like fallopian tubes

I bring death to a snake when he least expect

Ain't a damn thing changed boy, Protect Ya Neck

Ruler Zig-Zag-Zig Allah jam is fatal

Quick to stick my Wu-Tang sword right through your navel

Suspenseful force being brought through my utensil

The pencil, I bring strong winds up against you

Abbot, that run up through your county like the Maverick

Caps through the tablets, I gots to make the fabrics

[Verse 6 - Ol Dirty Bastard]

A-a-a-ah-ah are you a warrior? Killer? Slicing shit like a samurai

The Ol' Dirty Bastard, wunderbar

Ol' Dirty clan of terrorists

Coming at your ass like a sorceress, shooting that piss!

Niggas be getting on my fucking nerves

Rhymes they be kicking make me wanna kick they fucking ass to the curb

I got funky fresh, like the old specialist

A carrier, messenger, bury ya

This experience is for the whole experience

Let it be applied, Unique drop that science!

[Verse 7 - GZA]

M-M-My clan is thick like plaster, bust ya, slash ya

Slit a nigga back like a Dutch Master killer

Style jumped off in Killa Hilla

I was the thriller in the Ali-Frazier Manilla

I came down with phat tracks that combine and interlock

Like getting smashed by a cinder block

Pow! Now it's all over

Niggas seeing pink hearts, yellow moons

Orange stars and green clovers

Appendix C - Verse 1 (RZA's) from "Tearz" on "36 Chambers"

Check the script, me and the gods getting ripped

Blunts in the dip, forty dogs in my lip

Had a box, 'Boom Boom' the bass will blast

We was laughing at all the girls that passed

Conversation, brothers had began to discuss

(Hey yo, Ra, remember that kid ya bust?)

Aww yeah, he ran, but he didn't get far

Cause I dropped him, heh heh heh heh heh ha

Not knowing exactly what lied ahead

My little brother, my mother sent him out for bread

Get the Wonder, it's a hot day in the summer

Didn't expect to come across a crazy gunner

"Hey Shorty, check it for the bag and the dough"

But he was brave, looked him in the eye, and said “No!"

Money splattered him, BOW! then he snatched the bag

Hit his pockets, then he jetted up the Ave

Girls screaming, the noise up and down the block

(Hey, Rakeem!) What? (Your little brother got shot!)

I ran frantically, then I dropped down to his feet

I saw the blood all over the hot concrete

I picked him up then I held him by his head

His eyes shut, that's when I knew he was...

Aw man! How do I say goodbye?

It's always the good ones that have to die

Memories in the corner of my mind

Flashbacks, I was laughing all the time

I taught him all about the bees and birds

But I wish I had a chance to sing these three words

Appendix D - “Shook Ones Part II”

[Intro]

Yeah, to all the killers and a hundred dollar billers

For real niggas who ain't got no feelings

[Verse 1 - Prodigy]

I got you stuck off the realness, we be the infamous

You heard of us, official Queensbridge murderers

The Mobb comes equipped for warfare beware

Of my crime family who got nuff shots to share

For all of those who wanna profile and pose

Rock you in your face, stab your brain with your nose bone

You all alone in these streets cousin

Every man for they self in this land we be gunning

And keep them shook crews running like they supposed to

They come around but they never come close to

I can see it inside your face you're in the wrong place

Cowards like you just get they whole body laced up

With bullet holes and such

Speak the wrong words man and you will get touched

You can put your whole army against my team and

I guarantee you it'll be your very last time breathing

Your simple words just don't move me, you're minor, we're major

You're all up in the game and don't deserve to be a player

Don't make me have to call your name out

Your crew is featherweight, my gunshots'll make you levitate

I'm only nineteen but my mind is older

And when the things get for real my warm heart turns cold

Another nigga deceased, another story gets told

It ain't nothing really

Hey, yo Dun spark the philly

So I can get my mind off these yellowback niggas

Why they still alive I don't know, go figure

Meanwhile back in Queens the realness and foundation

If I die, I couldn't choose a better location

When the slugs penetrate you feel a burning sensation

Getting closer to God in a tight situation

Now take these words home and think it through

Or the next rhyme I write might be about you

[Hook]

Son, they shook

Cause ain't no such things as halfway crooks

Scared to death, scared to look, they shook

Cause ain't no such things as halfway crooks

Scared to death, scared to look

Living the live that of diamonds and guns

There's numerous ways you can choose to earn funds

Some get shot, locked down and turn nuns

Cowardly hearts and straight up shook ones, shook ones

He ain't a crook son, he's just a shook one

[Verse 2 - Havoc]

For every rhyme I write it's twenty-five to life

Yo it's a must, in gats we trust, safeguarding my life

Ain't no time for hesitation, that only leads to incarceration

You don't know me, there's no relation

Queensbridge and we don't play, I don't got time

For your petty thinking mind, son I'm bigger than those

Claiming that you pack heat but you're scared to hold

And once the smoke clears you'll be left with one in your dome

Thirteen years in the projects, my mentality is what kid

You talk a good one but you don't want it

Sometimes I wonder do I deserve to live

Or am I going to burn in hell for all the things I did

No time to dwell on that cause my brain reacts

Front if you want kid, lay on your back

I don't fake jax kid, you know I bring it to you live

Stay in a child's place, kid you outta line

Criminal minds thirsty for recognition

I'm sipping, E&J got my mind flipping

I'm bugging, digging my ways out of holes by hustling

Get that loot kid, you know my function

Cause long as I'm alive I'mma live illegal

And once I get on I'mma put on all my people

React quick, spit lyrics like Macs I hit your dome up

When I roll up, don't be caught sleeping cause I'm creeping

[Hook]

[Outro]

To all the villains and a hundred dollar billers

To real brothers who ain't got no feelings

G-yeah, the whole Bridge, Queens get the money

41st side, keeping it real, Queens get the money