

SIX **Signifying**

TWO COMPETITORS FACE one another, encircled by a crowd. One of them begins delivering improvised poetic lines filled with insults and puns. The second responds, trying to outdo his adversary by conjuring up even sharper verbal jabs. This goes on for several rounds until one of them gets tripped up in his words, or until the audience asserts its judgment with cheers or jeers. Such a battle could be happening right now in a Brooklyn basement or at a Bronx block party, at an open-mic night or in a street-corner cipher. It also could have happened three millennia ago, at a poetry contest in ancient Greece.

The Greeks may not have been rappers, but they certainly knew how to put on a freestyle battle. The Greek tradition of “capping” involved contests between two or more

poets matching verses on set themes, responding to one another “by varying, punning, riddling, or cleverly modifying” that particular theme. Like today’s freestyle rap battles between rappers, these ancient poetic competitions were largely improvised. As classical scholar Derek Collins explains, “The ability of the live performer to cap his adversary with a verse . . . while keeping in step with theme and meter at hand and at the same time producing puns, riddles, ridicule, depends among other things upon improvisation.” As with rap battles, the competitive spirit of these Greek rhyme contests sometimes spilled over into physical violence. “Improvisation and humor at the wrong time,” Collins writes, “occasionally resulted in death, while such repartee at the right moment could absolve one from punishable offense.” It doesn’t get any realer than that.

Battles are an essential part of almost every poetic tradition in the world. In the tenth-century Japanese royal court, for instance, a poet named Fujiwara no Kintô gained fame for his ability to vanquish his adversaries with just a few lines. Across the African continent, poetic contests have long been common, serving both functional and ceremonial purposes. Among the women of Namibia, for instance, a tradition of heated poetic exchange in response to perceived slights developed, a practice that continues to this day. Unifying all of these disparate traditions are the basic elements of improvisation, insult, braggadocio, and eloquence.

While battling might not be the first thing one thinks of when it comes to poetry, traditions of poetic expression around the world are rooted in it. Rap takes its rightful place within this longstanding practice of verbal warfare. When Jay-Z announced his short-lived retirement, he underscored

the centrality of the battle to rap in the following public statement: "People compare rap to other genres of music, like jazz or rock 'n' roll. But it's really most like a sport. Boxing to be exact. The stamina, the one-man army, the combat aspect of it, the ring, the stage, and the fact that boxers never quit when they should." Far from disqualifying rap as a poetic form, rap's combative nature actually binds it more securely to the spirit of competition at the heart of some of the earliest poetic expressions. Whether in a freestyle session or in a recording booth, rap seems almost to require this spirit of competition.

The battle in rap is not simply between competitors, it is also between the MC and the words themselves. Mastering language before it masters you is the first contest an MC must win, even before the real competition begins. Lil Wayne, who, like Jay-Z, the MC to whom he's most often compared, claims never to write down his rhymes, picks up on this same pugilistic sensibility, but in relation to language itself. "I don't write, homie," he explains. "I just go straight in [the recording booth] and cut the music on. . . . It's sort of like a fight, I just start fightin' with the words. I don't need a tablet [of paper]. If I had a tablet, I'd get beat up."

Rap's proving ground is the cipher, a competitive and collaborative space created when MCs gather to exchange verses, either in freestyle battles or in collaborative lyrical brainstorming sessions. The cipher is a verbal cutting contest that prizes wit and wordplay above all else. It is, of course, connected to the poetic compositions born in the MC's book of rhymes, and yet it exercises its own distinct set of skills. Often a rapper is good at writing, but not at freestyling, or vice versa. It is almost an unwritten rap rule that the dopest

freestylers tend to make the wackest studio albums. Within the hip-hop community, some insist that freestyling is a necessary element of MCing, while others recognize it as a completely separate skill.

Lil Wayne, as mentioned above, sees writing as an impediment to rap. “I could be at my happiest moment,” he says, “my saddest moment, I could be speechless, I could be voiceless, but I could still rap. That’s what I do. So that’s why I really don’t use the pen and pad, ’cause I kind of feel like when you use the pen and pad, you’re readin’, And when you’re readin’ somethin’, man, you’re payin’ attention to what you’re readin’ instead of what you’re doin’.” So what is freestyle’s relation to rap’s poetry? After all, the complex poetics we’ve been discussing thus far are most often the product of composition and revision, not just unfiltered impromptu expression. Is freestyling, therefore, somehow less “poetic” than those lines born in an MC’s book of rhymes? Are the lyrical products of each necessarily distinct?

Most MCs tend to underscore the connection rather than the division between freestyling and writing rhymes. “When you write a rhyme it arrives in the form of a freestyle anyway,” observes Guru. “It’s just a matter of how you catch it and capture it and put it down on paper.” Black Thought of the Roots similarly suggests an inherent connection between the two methods of lyrical creation. Speaking about “Proceed,” a classic track from an early album, he remarks: “All the lyrics on there were written down, not freestyled. But when I wrote the stuff down, it was also always the first thing that came into my head. So I guess it was half and half.” Kuruapt echoes both MCs when he describes his own

compositional process as a hybrid of the written and the freestyled, working in symbiotic unity:

I think in freestyle, I'll kick a rhyme right now, you see what I'm saying? That's like my whole thing. That's where I get my rhymes from. I might freestyle and say something that I just think is so catty. So then I just sit down and write the freestyle rhyme I said, but then I calculate it more, you see what I'm saying? I put more brain power to it when I just sit and write it because I can think more about how I can word it, you see what I'm saying?

No matter how we define the precise connection, the freestyle battle provides a way of understanding something of the spirit of rap poetry as a whole. Most rap, whether freestyled or written, celebrates individual excellence. Through ritualized insults made up of puns and other plays on words, rap embodies a spirit of competition, even when no competitors are in sight. Understanding the rap battle helps explain why MCs often rail against unnamed "sucker MCs," even if they're rapping alone in the recording booth. It doesn't really matter if LL had someone specific in mind when he wrote, "LL Cool J is hard as hell / Battle anybody I don't care who you tell / I excel, they all fail / I'm gonna crack shells, Double-L must rock the bells." The lines are just as fierce, the swagger just as hard. Competition is abstract, but no less real. Whether freestyled or written, something in rap requires this spirit of verbal combat. It is rap's motivating energy and its sustaining drive.

Rap was born in the first person. It is a music obsessed with the "I," even to the point of narcissism. MCs become larger than life through rhyme, often projecting images of

impervious strength. The flipside, of course, is vulnerability, something one sees only rarely, but which is powerful when it appears. When rappers talk about themselves, there is more at stake than the individual. Through self-exploration, they expose an expanse of meaning.

This chapter is about what MCs rhyme about when they aren't telling lengthy stories—in other words, what MCs rhyme about most of the time. While this includes innumerable topics, we can summarize them in just a few: celebrating themselves, dissing their opponents, and shit-talking in every other possible way. This form of lyrical celebration of self and denigration of others can be puerile, but it can also be gratifying. It is fueled by one of rap's great intangible and essential qualities: *swagger*. Swagger, or just *swag*, is the essential quality of lyrical confidence. It expresses itself in an MC's vocal delivery, in confidence and even brashness. Swagger is difficult to describe, but you know it when you hear it. You can hear it in these lines from Lil Wayne's "Dr. Carter,"

And I don't rap fast, I rap slow
 'Cause I mean every letter in the words in the sentence of
 my quotes.
 Swagger just flow sweeter than honey oats.
 That swagger, I got it, I wear it like a coat.

Wayne displays the very swagger he's rhyming about in his deliberate meaning and assured ownership ("That swagger, I got it . . ."). Swagger is not new to rap, of course. It has its roots in the African-American verbal practice of signifying.

Over centuries, black expressive culture has developed a tradition called signifying. Signifying is a rhetorical practice that involves repetition and difference, besting and boasting. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., wrote in his groundbreaking study *The Signifying Monkey*, signifying is “the rhetorical principle in Afro-American vernacular discourse” with roots that stretch through slavery back to West Africa. Among black Americans, signifying has taken on many forms over the years. The dozens, familiar to many through “Yo Mama” jokes, involves a ritualized exchange of insults, with the winner being the one who could marshal creativity without breaking cool. Another product of the signifying tradition was the toasts, long narrative poems often recited by black men in barbershops, on street corners, and in penitentiaries. The toasts detailed the exploits of street hustlers and outlaw heroes like the signifying monkey and Shine. As in so many of today’s raps, in the toasts the underdog almost always ended up on top.

In the decade before hip hop was born, the toasts and other “raps” gained great popularity. Artists like Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets and other masters of signifying like Muhammad Ali and H. Rap Brown are often mentioned as forefathers of rap. Certainly they deserve credit as major influences—sometimes even direct influences, particularly in rap’s early years. H. Rap Brown’s famous “Rap’s Poem” from the 1960s might easily be mistaken for a rap verse with its profane braggadocio:

I’m the bed tucker the cock plucker the motherfucker
The milkshaker the record breaker the population maker

The gun-slinger the baby bringer
 The hum-dinger the pussy ringer
 The man with the terrible middle finger.
 The hard hitter the bullshitter the polynussy getter
 The beast from the East the Judge the sludge
 The women's pet the men's fret and the punks' pin-up boy.
 They call me Rap the dicker the ass kicker
 The cherry picker the city slicker the titty licker

Brown was employing the rhetorical figure kenning, popularized a few millennia ago in *Beowulf*, which joins two terms together to form an eponym, a self-descriptive alias. It's impossible not to hear echoes of Rap Brown in GZA when he rhymes "I be the body-dropper, the heartbeat-stopper / child-educator plus head-amputator." Perhaps the classic example of rap kenning, though, is Smoothe da Hustler and Trigga Tha Gambler trading bars on 1995's "Broken Language." Spitting their brand of thugged-out linguistics, they deliver fierce lines like these:

(Smoothe)

The coke cooker, the hook up on your hooker hooker
 the 35 cents short send my 25's over looker

(Trigga)

The rap burner, the Ike the Tina Turner
 ass whippin' learner, the hitman, the money earner

(Smoothe)

The -tologist without the derma-
 me and my little brother

(Trigga)

The cock me back, bust me off nigga

The undercover

Glock to your head pursuer

It is a testament to the staying power of the technique as well as to the skill of Smoothe and Trigga's use of it that Redman and Method Man remade the track in 2008. This kind of self-mythologizing is a common means of braggadocio, exalting the individual by making him or her too big for one name alone. It is an ancient signifying technique that seems as fresh as ever.

Rap Brown's influence is even more apparent in hip hop's first commercial hit, "Rapper's Delight." In a striking example of signifying, The Sugar Hill Gang echoes Brown's precise language. In the original, Rap rhymes, "Yes, I'm hemp the demp the women's pimp / Women fight for my delight." Years later, Big Bank Hank rhymes, "Yes, I'm imp the gimp, the ladies' pimp / The women fight for my delight." Echoing across both time and genre, what unifies these two expressions is the art of signifying.

Of course, it is facile simply to draw a straight line between verbal expressions like the dozens and the toasts and rap. Rap is also music; it relies upon a rhythmic, and often a harmonic and melodic, relation to song. What rap shares with these earlier expressive practices is an attitude, a spirit of competition and drive towards eloquence. Rap wears its relation to tradition lightly, never with an onerous sense of the past. And yet the past is always there, a past that runs through Africa, but also through Europe and Asia as well. Signifying is far from dead; it is alive and well in rap. For some, that's a problem.

Rap signifying was unexpectedly held up to public scrutiny in the summer of 2008 when a clip of NBA star

Shaquille O'Neal dissing former teammate Kobe Bryant in a rap "freestyle" appeared on the celebrity gossip site TMZ.com. The lumbering lyricist dropped a series of heavy-handed put-downs only a week after Bryant's Lakers were eliminated after they lost game six of the NBA Finals by thirty-nine points to the Boston Celtics. Their personal animosity stems from both on and off the court tensions during their years as Lakers teammates, when they won three straight NBA titles. When Shaq took the mic at a New York club in late June, he channeled much of his animosity into the verse. "Check it. . . . You know how I be / Last week Kobe couldn't do it without me," Shaq begins, then meanders off on a tangent about his rhyme skills not being as good as Biggie's (obvious) and how he lives next to Diddy (or, rather, Diddy lives next to him), before returning again to Kobe. At the end of the verse he spits this bit of rap invective:

I'm a horse . . . Kobe ratted me out
 That's why I'm getting divorced.
 He said Shaq gave a bitch a mil'
 I don't do that, 'cause my name's Shaquille.
 I love 'em, but don't leave 'em
 I got a vasectomy, now I can't breed 'em
 Kobe, how my ass taste?
 Everybody: Kobe, how my ass taste?
 Yeah, you couldn't do without me . . .

In a lyrical equivalent of kicking somebody when he's down, Shaq takes the occasion of Kobe's defeat to settle a number of scores, including getting back at Kobe for bringing Shaq's name up in an interview with police after Kobe was

arrested for sexual assault in Colorado. At once, Shaq's rhyme is the best and worst example of rap signifying. Best, because it clearly displays how rap can be used effectively for the purposes of character assassination. Worst, because Shaq's limited skills as a lyricist keep the verse from achieving the subtlety and invention that signifying at its best always employs. Shaq's verse is a blunt instrument rather than a surgical knife; it doesn't cut out his opponent's heart as much as it attempts to smash it.

Kept within the confines of rap culture, it's unlikely that Shaq's performance would have garnered much notice. It was only after it spilled over into the mainstream media that it became a minor controversy. When first asked for comment, Shaq appealed to the expectations of signifying in rap, which call for an individual who's been dissed to diss back; getting mad means you've lost the battle. Speaking to ESPN's Stephen A. Smith, Shaq responded: "I was freestyling. That's all. It was all done in fun. Nothing serious whatsoever. That is what MCs do. They freestyle when called upon." The explanation of "that's what MCs do" was undoubtedly befuddling to the average viewer. And yet Shaq's appeal to the conventions of the art form, while perhaps something of a rouse, nonetheless speaks to the importance of signifying in the MC's craft. For most people unfamiliar with these conventions, however, Shaq's performance was nearly inexplicable. NPR and Fox News commentator Juan Williams responded to the incident by suggesting, quite seriously, that O'Neal seek psychological assistance. While rap's been around for decades, many still find it difficult to make sense out of dissing and braggadocio, two sides of the same signifying coin.

Dissing at its best employs as much wit as it does insult. When the Pharcyde recorded “Ya Mama” in 1992, they delivered their lyrics with playful panache and inventiveness.

Ya mom is so fat (How fat is she?)
 Ya mama is so big and fat that she can get busy
 With twenty-two burritos, when times are rough
 I seen her in the back of Taco Bell in handcuffs.

Like in a schoolyard snap session, the group trades verses back and forth, trying to outdo each other with their originality. Listening to the track, you can hear them responding to one another’s lines with laughter and appreciation. This same spirit is alive in 2008’s “Lookin Boy” from the Chicago group Hotstylz featuring Yung Joc. Joc begins by introducing the track (“We gonna have a roastin’ session”), then each rapper takes turns inventing disses, not at anyone in particular, but for the sheer joy of conceiving the wildest and wittiest put-downs they can. Raydio G opens the track with these lines:

Weak lookin’ boy, you slow lookin’ boy,
 Dirty white sock on your toe lookin’ boy,
 You rat lookin’ boy,
 “Will you marry me?” Splat! lookin’ boy,
 Whoopi Goldberg black lip lookin’ boy,
 Midnight Train Gladys Knight lookin’ boy,
 You poor lookin’ boy, Don Imus ol’ nappy headed ho lookin’ boy

What makes these lines, and the ones that follow it, work is that they exploit stereotype, maybe even getting you to laugh at something you might not otherwise consider

funny (like the Imus comment). Combining sound effects, off the wall references, and straightforward insults, the song exemplifies the range and meaning of the diss in rap signifying.

While dissing concerns someone else, *braggadocio* centers on the self. More than just bragging, braggadocio consists of MCs' verbal elevation of themselves above all others. Like the diss, braggadocio can range from the straightforward (like Miami's DJ Khaled screaming "We the best!" on most of his songs) to the more ingenious (like Los rhyming that "I'm so out of this world I make telescopes squint" on his freestyle to Lil Wayne's "A Milli").

Braggadocio is one of the most commonly misunderstood elements of rap, in part because it seems so straightforward on the surface. Play rap for someone who doesn't usually listen to the music or only listens to it casually and one of the first things you're likely to hear is: "Why are they bragging so much about themselves?" Even an otherwise astute observer of culture can end up making false assumptions about rap based upon this singular element of its boasts. I was reminded of this in 2007 when I attended a taping of Bill Maher's HBO show, *Real Time*. His guests that week included Rahm Emanuel (then-Democratic congressman from Illinois, now President Barack Obama's chief-of-staff); journalist Pete Hamill, and professor Michael Eric Dyson of Georgetown University. Maher led them, as usual, through a discussion of the week's news: Iraq; the recent racial incident in Jena, Louisiana; the 2008 presidential race. Then Bill launched into one of his trademark rants. What was unusual in this instance, however, was that the subject of his attack was hip hop.

Maher isn't a knee-jerk critic of rap. He often takes provocative, contrarian stances on many social and cultural

subjects—rap included. He’s a familiar face at the Playboy Mansion and, perhaps more important for hip-hop heads, he once dated Karrine Steffans, also known as Superhead, the most infamous “video vixen” in hip-hop history. His problem with rap was its braggadocio. “I’m a fan of hip hop, but I don’t have kids,” Maher said, “And I gotta say if I had kids would I want them to listen to a steady diet of ‘I’m a P-I-M-P’? No, I wouldn’t. . . . Ninety percent of it is affirmative action for the ego. Ninety percent of it is bragging, and I’m sorry, but modesty is a virtue.”

In most rap modesty is anything but a virtue. But how did extolling one’s own greatness take on such a vital role in rap from its earliest days? Why is braggadocio so vital to the art form? The answers are as obvious as they are insufficient: partly as a consequence of rap’s birth in the battle; partly as a consequence of rap’s origins in a black oral tradition that celebrates individual genius; partly as a result of the interests and attitudes of its primary creators and consumers— young men; partly as a result of it being the creation of young *black* men seeking some form of power to replace those denied them. Hip-hop historian William Jelani Cobb makes this point, “In hip hop—and inside the broken histories of black men in America—respect is the ultimate medium of exchange. And that is to say, in battling, the rapper is gambling with the most valuable commodity available: one’s rep and the respect that flows from it.” What Cobb elsewhere terms “the scar tissue of black male powerlessness” might be just another way of identifying Maher’s “affirmative action for the ego.” Both are ways of identifying a defensive, recuperative gesture and, largely, a symbolic one. But beyond seeking an explanation for *why* rappers boast, it

is equally important to understand *how* they boast. And what rappers boast about is not always as straightforward as many assume.

Rap is a musical form made by young men and largely consumed by young men. It is music about those things generally on the minds of young men: sex, cars, money, and above all, their own place in society. But rap has never been just about this. From the beginning what made rap different from other forms of braggadocio is that it extolled excellence not simply in the stereotypically masculine pursuits—wealth, physical strength, sexual prowess—but in something new: in poetry, eloquence, and artistry. Here were young men boasting of intellectual and artistic pursuits. Just listen to a young LL Cool J, for instance, in these famous lines from one of rap's quintessential signifying songs, "I'm Bad":

Never retire or put my mic on the shelf
The baddest rapper in the history of rap itself
Not bitter or mad, just provin' I'm bad
You want a hit, give me a hour plus a pen and a pad.

That "hour plus a pen and a pad" is proof that LL Cool J's badness is nothing less than a revelation. It suggests that in hip hop, artistry is a commodity right alongside money, power, and respect.

To understand rap's braggadocio, it is useful to look to the birth of so-called gangsta rap. While gangsta rap came to public attention in the late 1980s with West Coast artists like N.W.A. and Ice-T, it is an East Coast MC, Schoolly D, who is most often credited with pioneering the genre. Schoolly D took as his subject urban crime on the streets of

his native Philadelphia. Long before curse words became commonplace in rap, Schoolly D routinely cussed up a storm on his albums. More than that, the subject matter he chose distinguished him from his contemporaries. While Run-DMC was rhyming about “My Adidas,” Schoolly D was rapping about pimps, hos, and hustlers. This is not to say, however, that Schoolly D was somehow the first person to extol the virtues of criminal life in rhyme. The black vernacular tradition of the toasts routinely valorized outlaw characters like the pimp and the pusher. Murder and mayhem were frequent themes.

Schoolly D himself paid tribute to these earlier influences when he recorded his own version of the famous toast “The Signifying Monkey,” something he called “The Signifying Rapper.” “The Signifying Rapper” first appeared on Schoolly D’s 1988 album *Smoke Some Kill*, and reached an even broader audience when director Abel Ferrara used the song in a climactic scene from his 1992 film *Bad Lieutenant*. Built upon a replayed riff from Led Zeppelin’s “Kashmir,” the song lyrically embodies the hard edge of the music. As William Eric Perkins describes it, “‘Signifying Rapper’ . . . is a tour de force, a kind of ghetto Brer Rabbit tale replete with gruesome violence, homophobia, and sexual perversion. . . . Schoolly D’s twisted genius lies in his ability to paint a lyrical picture of inner-city decay. But his persona led other rappers to create equally hardened characters whose quirkiness was magnified in their lyrical and stylistic sophistication.” After Zeppelin’s Jimmy Page heard the song while watching Ferrara’s film, he filed suit against Ferrara and Schoolly D. The scene was cut from the film and all remaining copies of the CD, which had been out for nearly five years, were destroyed.

Like the toasts, rap often relies upon the construction of a larger-than-life persona, an outlaw hero with superhuman aptitudes and appetites. The Notorious B.I.G. is not Christopher Wallace, 2Pac is not Tupac Shakur, although he seems to have pushed himself to live up to his persona, to his own detriment. Rappers' aliases afford them the necessary distance from their own identity to fashion alternate selves, voices that are louder and bolder, anything but their own. This is true, of course, of most artists. And yet for rap it has come to dominate the form in ways unprecedented in other genres.

Rappers create, observes music critic Kelefa Sanneh, "an outsized hero that has more sex than you're really having, that does more violence than you're really doing, that sells more drugs than you've ever sold." LL Cool J as lover. Chuck D as new Malcolm. KRS as teacher. Pac as thug poet. Biggie as lovable gangsta. "The persona overshadows the person and the person can be crushed by the persona," Nelson George remarks. Historian Robin D. G. Kelley picks up on this same point:

Exaggerated and invented boasts of criminal acts should sometimes be regarded as part of a larger set of signifying practices. Growing out of a much older set of cultural practices, these masculinist narratives are essentially verbal duels over who is the "baddest." They are not meant as literal descriptions of violence and aggression, but connote the playful use of language itself.

Kelley's last phrase is essential. Too often we approach rap music with a startling and willful lack of imagination that we don't bring to heavy metal, for instance. The "playful use of

language itself” is made apparent by artists like the Notorious B.I.G. whose self-deprecating wit was as sharp as his excoriating disses of others. It may be less apparent—but not to say more subtle—in an artist like 50 Cent whose celebration of a gangsta aesthetic and its trappings (bulletproof vests, semi-automatic handguns, bandanas tied around the mouth and neck) becomes so complete that it *almost* disguises the glamorous life he actually lives—the untold riches, VIP treatment, and award show dates with Hollywood celebrities. Yes, 50 was a small-time crack dealer for a time, but this actual experience is much farther removed from the cartel fantasies of his lyrical fictions than is the high-stakes hustling of the record executives who push him as their product. The point is that gangsta rap has always been an image, an act, and a process of signification not just with so-called studio gangstas but even with the real-life former (and occasionally even current) petty criminals who lived in the shadow of the images they create.

For those MCs able to control the image, the gangsta persona can prove a powerful means of expression. Ice-T, the godfather of gangsta rap, drew inspiration from real life even as he consciously crafted his rhymes to serve his own imaginative purposes. On songs like “Drama” and “I’m Your Pusher,” he renders rhyme personas that are “real” inasmuch as they reflect what he sometimes saw in the streets, but are stylized in the way he crafts the stories to serve his art. “When my dad would teach me lessons, he would never just say: ‘Don’t do it,’” Ice-T explains. “He would tell me stories and he would get me into it. It would be like: ‘He was about to get a million dollars, but that night he OD’d.’ So I always used that technique. Because I *do* really, truly come from the

game, I can't write a story about the hustle where the dude doesn't end up in prison or dead. Because all the real stories do. If I'm rhyming and I shoot somebody, I'm on the run in the next verse." In this case, reality not only lives alongside fiction, it actually shapes the terms of that fiction—demanding authenticity that leads not to glorifying the gangsta aesthetic but to representing and, ultimately, challenging it.

Rap also has a long tradition of what might be called rapping about rapping. When the act of rhyming itself becomes the subject of the rhymes, MCs turn their attention to the tools and the process of their art. Out of this we get Nas describing himself as "a poet, a preacher and a pimp with words." Such artistic self-awareness contrasts with an equally established tradition of rappers outwardly rejecting rap's poetic identity—in other words, of rapping about not needing or wanting to rap at all. This occurs when MCs either downplay their creative process or assert a counter-identity in its place. Out of this we get Malice from Clipse insisting that "I'm not a rapper," or Jay-Z asserting that "I'm not a businessman, I'm a business, man." Hustler or commodity, these are clever fictions meant to disguise the true process of the poet's work. All rappers are poets; whether they are good poets or bad poets is the only question.

At different times in rap's history it has been fashionable for MCs to project either interest or indifference in relation to their craft. After Jay-Z began boasting that he never wrote down his rhymes, or that he could compose an entire verse in fifteen minutes flat, or that he could record it in a single take, it became fashionable for other rappers to do—or at least to *say*—the same. Of course, what might be true for

Jay-Z, the self-proclaimed “Mike Jordan of Rap,” does not necessarily hold for your average MC, nor, in fact, does it always hold for Jay-Z himself.

What do rappers’ stand to gain by downplaying their artistry? It is in the interest of the MC to make rap seem effortless. Hip hop as a culture celebrates virtuosity, excellence that expresses itself with ease. Like b-boys executing a series of complex kinesthetic motions only to end by brushing off their shoulders with feigned indifference, MCs often boast a “Look, Ma, no hands!” lyrical aesthetic that downplays the work it takes to create the rhymes they spit. An audience listens to rap to be entertained, not to be impressed with the formal sophistication at work. The purpose of sophisticated poetics is not to call attention to itself, but to absorb itself so fully within the art that it is invisible to the naked eye—or ear. Downplaying the work they do is just one strategy MCs use, both within and without their rhymes, to maintain the necessary illusion of ease.

The tension between inspiration and craft, between the conception that great art emerges fully formed or that it is the product of conscientious labor, is a matter of great discussion and debate in almost every literary tradition in the history of the world. Aristotle mused upon it in the *Poetics*. Wordsworth and Coleridge troubled over it in their writings in the nineteenth century. What’s new in rap is the commercial element. A major consequence of rap becoming a global industry is that it also attracts individuals primarily motivated by profit. Those hip-hop heads who long for a golden age of rap when the MC did it for the love must realize that the moment rhyme started to pay, or showed the potential to pay, which is to say only a few years into its existence, rap opened itself up to commercial interests.

We've reached a point in rap culture in which 50 Cent will admit to *Forbes* magazine that rhyming for him is a business decision. We've moved beyond boasts about collecting fat royalty checks to rhymes about business deals with multinational corporations. This opens up an important question for those of us interested in rap's poetics: Can rap be both good business and good poetry? Do the calculations that a rap businessman must make to account for market conditions leave any space left for the motivations of the wordsmith?

Rap's artistry, some critics argue, is in inverse proportion to its profitability. But this argument is too absolute. "Commercial success and artistic integrity are not mutually exclusive," writes Stic.man, half of dead prez. "Just because you are a starving artist does not mean that you automatically have more skills or that you lack them. And conversely, just because you are a platinum selling artist it doesn't mean you have no integrity to the roots and artistry of hip hop. . . . You must understand that artistic credibility and financial success can, should, and do work together wherever possible."

While commercialism may not have killed rap's poetry, it has certainly changed it. The influences of corporate labels and commercial radio as gatekeepers separating true MCs from their audience are obvious. Of equal importance, however, is how rap's profitability affects the MC's craft *before* distribution and radio play even become factors. What impact, in other words, does commercialism have on MCs writing in their book of rhymes?

Chuck D, for one, has decried what he calls the "rise of the culture of black animosity" that emerges when rampant commercialism meets a gotta-get-mine perspective. In many ways, rap has become the soundtrack to this cultural malady,

expressed in gun claps and diss tracks. Rap at once reflects and helps create a cultural climate of black violence and black response. “I just think in general our society limits the range in which men can express their emotions. You just have to have your game face on all the time.” Consequently, rap is often obsessed with image. One of the dominant rap personas consists of presenting yourself as someone worthy of respect through *physical* domination rather than through the exercise of often unattainable “virtual powers” like money and social and political standing—things historically denied to black Americans. Indeed, as is evident in an artist like 50 Cent, these modes of power sometimes converge, but always return to the base of physical domination and violence as the anchor of their strength.

This culture of animosity has been a shaping force in the thematic range of hip hop’s poetry. Whether in the classic site of rap domination and submission, the battle, or in the more abstract forms of the same dynamic in so-called gangsta rap, hip hop has always drawn from these conventional masculine energies. Among the relatively few voices to challenge, or even to acknowledge this obvious impulse is the spoken-word poet Saul Williams. Williams sees a fundamental distinction between the poet and the MC, not in terms of their respective forms, but in terms of their expressive ranges. Where the MC must be in control—the “master of ceremonies”—a poet “is allowed to be introspective, allowed to raise questions,” he told Salon.com in 2004. “The poet is allowed to be vulnerable whereas, with MCs and in hip-hop, vulnerability is a sign of weakness. And so it becomes less and less real, less connected to the true nature of

humankind. The further we go on the tip of invulnerability and being hardcore, the less we can show a soft side.”

The greatest casualty of hip hop’s idea of invulnerability may be its capacity to express the full and complex range of human emotion. Rap’s audience is driven by sometimes schizophrenic impulses. The aura of invulnerability attracts us with its obvious difference from ourselves. As an audience we don’t simply want to see ourselves replicated, we want at least to believe that the artist before us is somehow better—elevated, enlightened, inspired, somehow closer to perfection. Rap often advances this mode of escapism. However, when an entertainer becomes not simply distanced but aloof from us and the collective human experience, this usually spells the end of their popularity. Rap has proved itself quite skilled at toeing this line, of balancing its audience’s need for idols with its desire for connection. The next challenge is to see if rap can become something other than the soundtrack of adolescent rebellion, more than the music of the moment.

It has already begun. What distinguishes the rap that lasts from that which disappears isn’t always only the level of technical skill. Another significant component is the expressive capacity of the lyrics. Both Tupac and Biggie shared a necessary humanism, a sense of fallibility that endeared them to their fans. Tupac’s boasts were balanced by his more introspective ventures into his own mortality, social and gender issues, and his family history. Biggie’s persona was so outsized that even his boasts took on a certain self-effacing comedy, one that contrasts sharply with the depth of tragedy and pain expressed elsewhere in his lyrics of suicide and self-abnegation. These artists are only the most visible examples of a set of

countertraditions within rap lyricism that challenges the dominant ethos of invulnerability, the thematic of hardcore.

Rap's expressive growth is also visible from outside hip-hop culture, in the ways that rap has become a mode of expression for an unlikely array of individuals. Early in 2006, *Saturday Night Live* ran a sketch called "Lazy Sunday" in which two of its cast members, Chris Parnell and Andy Samberg, performed a two-minute parody of an old-school rap video. The clip, often referred to as "The Chronicles of Narnia Rap," quickly became an Internet phenomenon, a fixture on YouTube, inspiring numerous imitators. What made the skit so remarkable wasn't simply that Parnell and Samberg are white—white MCs have been around nearly since the beginning of rap and Eminem has gone on to become one of the most respected and successful MCs of all time. Nor was it that they had pulled off a successful rap parody—this has been done before and since; later in 2006 the king of pop parody, Weird Al Yankovic, did a sendup of Chamillionaire's "Ridin' Dirty" called "White and Nerdy." What makes "Lazy Sunday" stand out from so many of the response raps that it inspired was that Parnell and Samberg's flows, though unabashedly old school, were actually quite good. Their rhymes never seem forced, even when rhyming multisyllabically.

Rap parodies like "Lazy Sunday" or Jamie Kennedy's similarly amusing and skillful "Rollin' with Saget" work because they play upon the premise that rap is always dead serious, that even when rappers laugh, they rarely laugh at themselves. Humor emerges from the ironic distance between the "whiteness" (read: harmlessness, softness, corniness) of the white rapper and the "blackness" (read:

dangerousness, hardness, coolness) of rap itself. Tied up in this, of course, are long-standing issues of racial stereotype. These parodists achieve in rap a lesser version of what Ralph Ellison claimed the white southern novelist William Faulkner achieved in rendering black characters in his fiction: “to start with the stereotype, accept it as true, and then seek out the human truth which it hides.” By playing into common assumptions about race and rap, they invite examination of the human complexity that pulses behind the mask of stereotype.

Rap’s stereotypical place in the popular imagination is dominated by images of aggression: young black men talking about guns, drugs, and violence. Comedy would seem to have little place in rap. But rap has more than its share of comedians, from clown princes like Flavor Flav and Ol’ Dirty Bastard to slow, sardonic wits like Too Short and Snoop Dogg. It is in that territory between fear and laughter that rap finds its most fertile expression. “I might crack a smile, but ain’t a damn thing funny,” Mobb Deep’s Prodigy once rhymed, summing up the common attitude of mirthless menace. Even at its funniest, in the clever rhymes of the Notorious B.I.G., for instance, or the weed-head high jinx of Redman and Method Man, rap often retains an underlying promise of violence. “Rap is really funny, man,” Ice-T once cautioned, “but if you don’t see that it’s funny, it will scare the shit out of you.”

Rap’s comedy is often complicit with its aggression—sometimes serving to undercut the violence even to the point of parody, other times rendering it more sinister still. Rap shares in the spirit of the tragicomic, the governing mood behind a host of black American cultural expressions, from the blues to the dozens. Rap’s defining difference, though, is here: While it sometimes laughs, it rarely laughs at itself.

At its most basic level, comedy comes in three types: jokes on them, jokes on us, and jokes on me. The first form is often the lowest; it is humor mixed with a sadistic urge to cause others pain. Out of this strain we get schoolyard taunts and racist jokes. When the joke's on them, the teller need not implicate him- or herself at all. The second form, where the joke's on us, is more common and more affirming. This is the kind where the joke is shared by all or most. Think about standup comics who make their living offering witty observations; think *Seinfeld* and *The Cosby Show* where the comedy is geared toward the common human denominator of experience. The final form leaves the teller most vulnerable, and thus it should come as little surprise that it is the rarest form of all. When the joke is on the teller, the implications are personal and sometimes painful. The laughter, therefore, is deep and often cathartic. This is blues humor. This is Richard Pryor doing a bit about almost burning himself to death while freebasing cocaine. This is laughing to keep from crying.

It might be too simple to say that these three levels of comedy are in ascending relation to one another, that this final form somehow transcends the others. But I think it's safe to say that being able to find humor in one's own experience has been a source of great inspiration to some of the finest artists in a range of disciplines. Is hip hop expansive enough in its expression to encompass such vulnerability? Do the conventions of the form allow the necessary distance for artists to look back at themselves with ironic awareness? "Hip hop doesn't place as high a premium on irony as its ancestral forms, particularly blues—even as it relies upon blues and the surrounding blues folklore for much of its material," writes William Jelani Cobb. "This is not to say that hip hop

is completely anti-ironic, simply that irony is not at the center of the hip hop ethos. That said, hip hop has precious little room for acknowledging pain in order to ultimately transcend it.” Ralph Ellison’s famous definition of the blues comes to mind here: “The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger the jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.”

Acknowledging pain is acknowledging weakness, even if that weakness is exposed only to transcend it with strength and resolve. I would depart from Cobb’s otherwise apt characterization of rap’s difference from the blues in that I believe that rap has a tremendous capacity for lyrically expressing pain, one that is even now emerging. The greatest art celebrates human frailty more often than it does invincibility.

Rather than decrying what rap is, it might be more fruitful to consider what it can become. As a musical and poetic form in its relative adolescence, rap is likely to undergo even more radical changes in the years ahead. Where will those changes lead? The greatest challenge for rap may be in finding the expressive range to deal with the complexity of human experience, in its weakness as well as in its strength.

Rap’s poetry may prove its lasting legacy to global culture. When all the club bangers have faded, when all the styles and videos are long forgotten, the words will remain. “Timeless music. . . ,” Jay-Z mused in a 2006 interview with *XXL*. “Right now in hip-hop, there’s a lot of disposable music, and I believe the genre will suffer unless you have an

event album.” For Jay-Z, an “event album” is one that aspires to the highest level of craft. Rather than a handful of ready-made radio singles with filler tracks mixed in, it is an artfully constructed album that aspires to greatness. It is Dr. Dre’s *The Chronic* or Jay-Z’s own *The Blueprint*. It is an earthquake that shifts the cultural topography one verse at a time.

Hip hop is haunted by this sense of tradition. It is a music whose death was announced soon after its birth, and the continuing reports of its demise seemingly return with each passing year. Part of the fear, as Jay-Z perceived, is that much of the music is disposable—cultural ephemera intended to entertain audiences for the moment, not to make a lasting contribution to our culture. Part of it, too, is the fear of commercialization and cooption. When rappers talk about writing their verses on the spot in the studio, blunt in hand, in fifteen minutes flat, it’s hard to imagine they clutter their minds with thoughts of tradition. Those MCs who do think about tradition often find themselves ignored by the listening public. Mos Def is one MC who’s found commercial success without compromising craft. He describes his longing for tradition this way:

All I know is I wanted to feel a certain way when I heard music, and I was making music from in me. . . . And I wanted it to be something that was durable. You can listen to all these Jimi records and Miles records and Curtis Mayfield records; I wanted to be able to add something to that conversation.

Rap has already found its way into the American songbook alongside legends like Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis, and Curtis Mayfield. But unlike rock, jazz, and soul, rap has been slow to gain acknowledgment as great art. That is starting to

change. Rap now constitutes a tradition unto itself, with roots in Western poetry as well as in African-American oral expression. More than thirty years after rap's birth in the South Bronx, it is now possible to talk about rap's history as well as its present. It is the focal point in a renaissance of the word, a development reshaping the very nature of our daily experience, whether we listen to it or not.