Rap as literacy: A genre analysis of Hip-Hop ciphers

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Abstract

Socioliteracy, meaning concern with practices, genre, and ideologies, has arguably displaced decoding orthographic writing in the mainstream of literacy theory and research. However, this shift has engendered disagreements about the meaning of literacy itself. Whereas some theorists take the Multiliteracies view that all forms of communication can be considered literacy, others require involvement of written language or, alternatively, education-dependent genres.

The present study supports the Multiliteracies definition by exploring an oral vernacular genre, the rap cipher*—improvised round-robin rhyming—which fails both proposed delimiting criteria, as literacy. The study explores a young inner-city rap crew's ciphers using the kind of ethnography and genre analysis typical of socioliteracy research. It finds that the practices and forms of the ciphers are tightly bound up with their creators' ideologies and that when holders of incompatible ideologies interact in rap, generic conflict results. Since such findings directly parallel those of numerous literacy studies of written and educational forms, they suggest that similar processes occur across modalities and domains. This conclusion suggests that it may be useful to conceptualize literacy as a particular perspective on communicative forms rather than as an inherent quality of certain forms.*

Keywords: *Hip-Hop; literacy theory; ideological model; multiliteracies; rap.*

1. Literacy and the definitional problem

Traditional literacy research (e.g., Goody and Watt 1968; Ong 1982, 1992) defines literacy as the ability to extract and encode information in

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written text, and it explores the components and consequences of that ability. Street (1984: 105) famously problematizes that definition and research agenda. He argues that 'the concrete forms and practices of literacy are bound up with an ideology, with the construction and dissemination of conceptions as to what literacy is in relation to the interests of different classes and groups.' This and similar claims have shifted research toward *socioliteracy* (Johns 1997), meaning how literacy functions actively in social interactions. The focus on literate activities has usually been realized by analysis of genres and the ideologies behind them (e.g., Delpit 1995; Heath 1983; Swales 1990; Kulick and Stroud 1993; Scollon 1995; Pennycook 1996; Johns 1997; Hanauer 1998; Ramanathan and Atkinson 1999; Barton and Hamilton 2000; among many others). However, neither genre nor ideology depends on written text per se, and as these factors have become the objects of socioliteracy research, the role of written text as the defining element of the field has come into question. At present, for instance, three definitions of the basic concept of literacy are in competition.

The most conservative definition retains reading and writing as essential criteria for literacy by embedding them in the social practices and ideologies in which 'literacy acts' are employed (e.g., Street 1984, 1993, 2001; Barton and Hamilton 2000). However, it is unclear just how central the written text ought to be for an act to merit the descriptor 'literacy'. Furthermore, written, oral, and graphic forms can be hard to disentangle once the focus broadens to include the activity they are a part of. Also, when strictly applied, the definition leads to unintuitive conclusions: Is yielding in traffic a literacy act in the United States where the relevant sign reads 'yield' but not in Europe where a triangle is used? Such difficulties in application are particularly acute in education, where modalities intertwine, and literate forms have clear oral correlates and precursors (Heath 1983; Fishman 1988). Therefore, many educators assume a definition that replaces modality with domain as a criterion. Typically, this implies a professional or educated level of communicative skills (Wells 1986). For instance, the U.S. Workforce Investment Act (U.S. Department of Justice 1998), defines literacy as 'an individual's ability to read, write, speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual, and in society.' Yet the vagueness of the definition above shows that the limits of this domain are difficult if not impossible to establish. The third definition, associated with the Multiliteracies Project (e.g., New London Group 1996; Gee 1990, 2000; Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Kress 2000), avoids these problems by not trying to designate which forms of communication are literacies and which are not. In Kress's (2000: 157) words, all

'socially made forms of representing and communicating', meaning all human communication, are literacies. This definition also responds to the proliferation of new means of communication in technologically advanced societies and to the lack of writing in traditional ones, which nevertheless develop complex communicative systems. Yet it is easy to see why a researcher might become uncomfortable with such unconstrained conceptual scope. Snow and Dickenson (1991), for instance, argue that this kind of opening of floodgates makes the concept of literacy vacuous by overextension; what form of learning is not literacy under such a definition?

The present research defends the Multiliteracies definition through an examination of *ciphers*—improvised round-robin rapping—a genre that simultaneously fails the modality and domain criteria. I argue that, far from being vacuous, literacy can be usefully defined as *a particular perspective* on all communicative acts: specifically one that formally analyzes communicative domains, such as genre analysis. The proposal is grounded in Wittgenstein's (1953) *family-resemblance* theory, according to which concepts have no *a priori* meaning but present an indeterminate number of related potential references. Each definition shares features with some but not all other definitions, just as family members share some but not all physical features: some have similar noses, others similar eyes, and so on. Specific definitions are established only in the course of communicative interactions, what Wittgenstein calls 'language games'. Furthermore, the use of one definition rather than another crucially determines the playing of one language game rather than another. From a Wittgensteinian perspective, the argument over the definition of literacy is really over what literacy theory should be about, not what literacy actually is in some essential way.

On this point, it is worth noting the popular evolution of the term 'literacy', where the traditional definition coexists with a broader one. This new meaning refers to competence at systems of information, extraction, and manipulation within specified domains or modalities (e.g., computer literacy, geographic literacy, etc.). The usage depends on an assumption that such competence consists of knowing sufficiently well how the systems in question work. The analysis of generic structures is the research correlate of that assumption. It is a way of approaching human communication that differs from those used in, say, literary theory, media studies, semiotics, and so on because it reveals the systematicities involved. In the present case, the analysis of ciphers produces a recognizable literacy study, one that highlights the role of ideology in genre construction and reveals the ideological sources of generic conflict.

2. Background on ciphers and rap music

Rap is the best known and most widely practiced of the four *elements*—forms of artistic expression—of Hip-Hop, the others being graffiti art (a.k.a. *writing*), break dancing (a.k.a. *b-boying*), and DJing (a.k.a. *turntablism*). This cultural movement emerged in the wake of the fractures provoked by the civil rights struggle in the moral and legal foundations of the centuries-old U.S. racial caste system. The resulting instability in race relations became one motivation in 'white flight', the abandonment of cities by middle-class European Americans. In New York City, the resulting urban decay reached a crisis point by the early 1970s. The most affected area was the southern Bronx, large sections of which burned as landlords set unprofitable properties on fire for insurance money.

Yet at the same time, factors that were to eventually bring about urban revival were beginning to appear. They included the arrival of third-world immigrants, the emergence of new technologies, and the emergence of new, more flexible capitalist modalities (Gee et al. 1996). These three factors combined felicitously in the southern Bronx in the creation of rap. Jamaican DJs adapted their sound-system style of street parties to New York, a practice that meshed well with the lack of traditional facilities in impoverished, half-destroyed neighborhoods. As they did so, they began to reconceive vinyl records not as expositions of recorded music but as the raw material for the creation of new music. The following concise history describes the contributions of the Jamaican DJ Kool Herc, the most innovative of this group:

> Herc was one of the most popular DJs in early 70s New York, playing at neighborhood parties (his first gig was on Sedgewick Avenue, Bronx), ... Herc and others DJs extended the percussive breaks using an audio mixer and two records, and other mixing techniques soon developed. Performers spoke while the music played; these were originally called *MCs* (*Master of Ceremonies* or *Mic Controller*) and, later, *rappers*. These early rappers focused on introducing themselves and others in the audience, with some improvisation and a simple four-count beat, along with a simple chorus. Later MCs added more complex lyrics, often humorous, and incorporated sexual themes. (Wikipedia n.d.)

The rappers' style was and is rooted in a number of African-American traditions. The MC's spoken verse adapts oral traditions that are, as Yasin (1997: 26) puts it, a 'survival from Africa'.[1] Thematically, too, Hip-Hop displays the classic African-American motif of using creativity to overcome seemingly overwhelming social forces. This idea is African American not only in that it is characteristic of much literary art of African Americans, but also in that it is a darker variant, so to speak, of the

American rags-to-riches myth of making good through one's own actions. Rashid, a student attending the school that was the study site for this research, was a member of an often-violent youth gang, and so he may seem alienated from mainstream U.S. society. However, when I discussed why he liked Hip-Hop, he gave reasons that reflected these core American mores:

> [Hip-Hop]'s original and we developed it, and what's his name, Don King, he took it to millions, and it's millions. Hip-Hop took it for millions. I knew he would 'cause in the 80's and 70's growing up, he wasn't really gettin' that much money; you really couldn't have concerts 'cause most people thought oh, 'Hip-Hop will bring the gangsters and they will start shooting up the malls' [imitates standard white dialect] and stuff. Now Puff Daddy came out with a big concert. That's what happened.

This kind of knowledge and pride in the commercial and popular success of the form is widespread and separates Hip-Hop from previous African-American musical forms. Similarly, Rap, unlike Rock and Roll, remains firmly rooted in the African-American community even as it has achieved worldwide popularity. The role of the civil rights struggle can also be seen in the way Hip-Hop finesses the still robust American racial barriers by simultaneously taking on a self-consciously post-ethnic ethos. Sega, one of the rap artists in this study, put it as follows:[2]

> Hip-hop is like mad [= very] diverse. I mean like, the industry now is like there's more African-American rappers out there. But if you go to the underground [non-commercial scene], there's so many like Chinese rappers, White rappers, Spanish rappers. All over, there's everything, Hindu [= south Asian] rappers.

Ethnicity is not downplayed in Hip-Hop but is seen in terms of the core Hip-Hop value of authenticity (Fernandes 2001), expressed in the maxim 'keep it real'. An artist expresses his or her ethnicity as a personal characteristic but does not use it as the basis for in-group formation to exclude others. Being real goes beyond social divisions to include all aspects of identity. Hip-Hop works are assertions of personal identity and are expected to succeed in their creators' own, sometimes idiosyncratic, terms, often in conflict with some opposing force. Importantly, this declaration of autonomy is not limited to opposition to mainstream White middle-class norms but involves rejection of impositions on the artist from any source. Complaints about the sexism, materialism, and violence of rap artists' lyrics—sometimes from within minority communities—may actually serve to bolster an artist's stature. These comments by Tropics, another artist in this study, concerning the White rap artist Eminem are typical:[3]

Man, Eminem, he's very outspoken. He takes freedom of speech to the next level. I have nothing against it. I believe that's great you know, sayin' what you feel 'cause a lotta rappers really, they go by how the system wants to work, how people want them to say this; people wants them to say that, but that narrows down your creativity. You really can't do much, and don't take what Eminem says as something towards like offending someone. I just see it as his form of creativity, how he expresses his creativity. It does offend people, but if you listen to all his tracks, he's not out there saying 'I hate fags; I'm going to kill them.' He's just like, all right 'I don't want nothin' to do with them.' You know what politics did they just made him seem like this bad guy who hates fags, hates all this other stuff, wants to kill them, can't stand them. He kills his wife. He hates his wife. But if you think about it logically that's all concept. It's nothing real.

Despite these commonalities, Hip-Hop is no more homogeneous than any other cultural movement. In rap, there are different styles or trends, particularly:

- conscious or message rap, focusing on uplift and political awareness,
- hard-core or *gangsta* rap, focusing on stylized imagery and action, particularly associated with ghetto life, and
- party rap, which emphasizes the beat over the wording.

There are also a number of genres of rap. Ciphers, the genre examined here, consist of round-robin rapping. Most commonly, participants rhyme to a recorded or synthesized loop of music called *the beat*, but sometimes a human voice called a *beat-box* provides a background rhythm. It is also possible to rhyme *a capella*, i.e., to no beat. Ciphers are one of the two main *freestyle*, or improvised, genres of rap, the other being *battles*, which are best understood as a rap version of traditional African-American ritual insults (Labov 1972).[4] Both forms contrast with *writtens*, which are recorded on CDs and performed as set pieces in concerts. Because *freestylin'* involves participation, it is performed mostly by and for other rap artists and core fans in the underground. Figure 1 provides a schematization of the relations between these different genres within the overarching context of Hip-Hop culture.

Much of the information in this outline has been discussed in research on Hip-Hop done from a variety of perspectives. In the cultural studies tradition, Boyd (1994), Garofalo (1994), Rose (1994), Yasin (1999), Fernandes (2001), and Weaver and Daspit (2001) present interpretations of rap and rap artists. Ethnomusicologists (Keyes 1996; Norfleet 1997) use participant observation with rap performers to provide accounts on the place of rap in society and its relation to musical traditions and forms. Linguists and applied linguists (e.g., Yasin 1997; Ibrahim 1999; Morgan 2001; Pennycook 2003; Alim 2003) reveal specific aspects of rap that

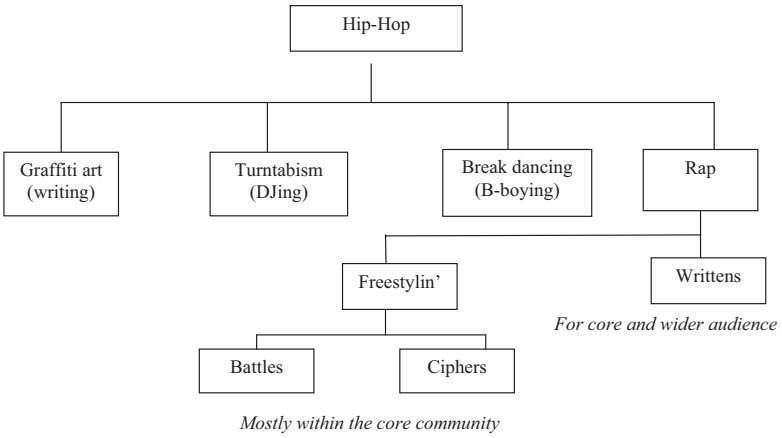

Figure 1. *Generic breakdown of Hip-Hop*

interact with specific linguistic and sociolinguistic patterns. Examining rap as literacy reveals new and previously unexplored facets of this form of human communication, much as literacy studies have long done with written or educational language practices.

3. Participants and methods

Participants in this study are members of the rap crew I call 'Squad Innumerable', who performed in their schools, homes, and public venues in the underground rap scene (see Table 1). The crew was housed and sponsored by a small public secondary school (7th to 12th year of schooling) in Queens, New York, called here 'Urban Arts Academy' (UAA). UAA students come from a mix of inner-city backgrounds ranging from two-parent households to group homes. At the time of the study, families of 28% were poor enough to qualify for free school lunches, a common benchmark for determining 'low-income' status. Although no other socio-economic statistics are available, it is safe to assume that most UAA students are from lower middle- or working-class families. Most are from Queens, the most ethnically and linguistically diverse county in the United States (Sanjek 1998), with a population of almost two million people and consisting of many neighborhoods that vary considerably by income, ethnicity, and density. All students attending UAA select it from a list of available schools, although it may not be their first choice. They are typically attracted to the school by its small size, the arts and technology programs, and/or its safe, relaxed, and welcoming environment,

Table 1. *Squad Innumerable members involved in study*

Rap pseudonym	Ethnicity	Other crews
Kareem	Jamaican-American	
Sega	Puerto Rican-American	Mad Latino
I-mation	Puerto Rican-American	
Kaliph	Dominican-American	
Hilarrius	Colombian-American	Rego Venom/Mad Latino
Topdog-G	Guatemalan-American	Rego Venom
LocoMan	Puerto Rican-American	
Mal Co.	Puerto Rican/African-American	
Cherub	Jamaican-American	Team
Delphee	Jamaican/African-American	Team
Triumph	Puerto Rican-American	
Tropics	Dominican/Ecuadorian-American	Team

visible through its cheerful modern interior decorated with high-quality student artwork. The caliber of student performances, including music, dance, and drama, was and remains also remarkable. In the tradition of small schools, there is an emphasis on student–faculty relations, with teachers and administrators referred to by first name. Some go out to lunch with students, and it is not unusual for students to consider them as friends.

The participants were enrolled in one of two simultaneous classes in Hip-Hop production and in poetry from Fall 1999 to Spring 2001 as part of an arts program, which took one-half day per week. The Hip-Hop classes began in Fall 1998, taught by two professional underground MCs who I call David Star and Limitless. Each year, the students produced a CD of their writtens as their end-of-year project. In Fall 2000, Limitless was promoted to head the entire arts program, and David went on an international tour, so they were replaced by Ebony and Ralph, an MC and DJ, respectively. David returned in May 2001 and retook his old position after Ebony left in mid-semester, although he did not return the following year.

Most participants formed their own crews outside the school, and they considered the Squad to be an artifact of school, with some dismissing it as 'just a class' and others crediting it with being the only reason they stayed in school. It is a sign of the success of the program that all core members aspired to become professional rap artists, and a few actually formed a production company, which currently makes MP3s available for downloading. Others continued to rap while beginning college and/or work unrelated to music. Perhaps because of the realism deeply embedded in rap, most claimed not to believe that they would actually achieve great success, but it was clear that this was a dream they were

pursuing. A common and reasonably realistic 'Plan B' was to get a job somewhere in the music industry.

All participants were males between 15 and 17 years of age as of Spring 2000 and were divided evenly between Blacks and Latinos. The Blacks were mainly of Jamaican heritage, although one had an African-American parent. Another had African-American and Puerto Rican parents. The Latinos were of variously Puerto Rican, Dominican, Colombian, and Ecuadorian backgrounds. Nevertheless, (non-Creole) English—mainly in African-American and NY Latino vernacular forms—was the only language they used with each other.[5]

Data gathering consisted of participant observation in the weekly class and at the occasional show, as well as interviews. The interviews were open-ended and began with questions about music, their own and what they listened to, before moving on to questions concerning values, aesthetics, and relations with other youth cultures. Another strand of questions dealt with ethnicity, neighborhood, school, social life, politics, various incidents that I had heard about, and future plans. Most weeks involved about four hours of interaction with participants. I also interviewed Limitless, Ralph, and academic teachers known to be close to the students. Kareem was hired as a research assistant upon his matriculation to college in Fall 2000, and he transcribed and recorded interviews, conversations, and rapping. He also functioned as a key informant. Emerging analyses were 'member checked' with him and early write-ups passed on to Sega and Delphee, the participants who showed the most interest in the findings. I gained access to the group through the cooperation of the school where I was a former teacher. Kareem, Mal Co, and Topdog-G were my students as 9th graders, and Hilarrius was my student as a 7th grader. I should also point out that I identify as a (secular) Jewish-American, which leaves me considered White by some, though curiously not all, of the students in the school. The rap data comes from three ciphers recorded in the course of the research. The first two of these ciphers were recorded by Kareem in non-class contexts, and I recorded the third, which took place in class.

4. Two ciphers: Generic practice, social norms, and ideology

The first cipher took place in a school hallway when Kareem asked three of the members of *Team*, Tropics, Cherub, and Cherub's cousin Delphee to perform. There were no adults present. Delphee spit only short portions, and none are included here.[6] The cipher opened with Tropics trying to catch the rhythm by repeating syllables:

(1) 1 Yuh, yuh Yuh, yuh Yuh, yuh Yo, Yo. Hey yo
2 That nigga's so gross,[7]
3 the most
4 'cause y'all-niggas can't see[8]
5 that when I host a show, it blows off this meter shit
6 can't you see? I come equipped
7 with my whole crew
8 How'd we do?
9 We come through
10 niggas like quick sips of Mountain Dew
11 in ya bodily fluids.
12 Y'all-niggas know few'll do it.
13 That T E-A-M. You wanna finish the rest
14 You can't test the best
15 'cause we leave the rest
16 in ashes passing the line
17 can't you see? I'm spittin' out these rhymes
18 from my mind.
19 We roam ashes lashes of cashes (or caches)
20 the earth is destroyed by Cherub's wrath.
21 Can't you see
22 that that Delphee
23 gives off that final testament?
24 Y'all-niggas will see
25 the prophet comes true
26 'cause when we come through
27 it's all through.
28 My niggas thorough
29 in every borough
30 But for now we keep it down
31 to Queens town,
32 Queens Bound.
33 Take it to that Seven,[9]
34 yeah that ride to that mystical heaven.
35 Uh Tropics yo!

In this opening turn, Tropics spit 35 verses consisting of a series of images and statements with very loose connections between them. The statements can be divided into two categories: put-downs and boasts of potency. There are only one or possibly two put-downs: 'that nigga's so gross' (line 2) and 'Y'all-niggas know few'll do it' (line 12). There are, by contrast, a total of eight boasts, one for every eight verses.

- When I host a show, it blows off this meter shit. (line 5)
- Can't you see? I come equipped / with my whole crew. (lines 6 and 7)
- We come through / niggas like quick sips of Mountain Dew / in ya' bodily fluids. (lines 9–11)
- You can't test the best / cause we leave the rest / in ashes. (lines 14–16)
- The earth is destroyed by Cherub's wrath. (line 20)
- Can't you see / that Delphee / gives of that final testament? (lines 21–23)
- Y'all-niggas will see the prophet comes true / 'cause when we come through, / it's all through. (lines 24–26)
- My niggas thorough in every borough (lines 28 and 29)

Each boast appears to be a reference to the strength of the crew or its members in an imagined rap conflict. The next turn, by Cherub, lasts for about 121 verses—depending on the count—and so I will present only the first third here:

(2) 1 Yao Yao Hey yo,
2 Yeah Cherub blasts past everyone
3 Proud with all around me.
4 Like my name is the sun.
5 Number one.
6 Breaking out all the charts
7 Cherub is guaranteed to spit a dart
8 right through your heart.
9 Appear in the dark
10 When the night comes.
11 Cherub always the rhyme never done.
12 My style flow consistently
13 Ain't nobody
14 in this vicinity
15 fuck with me.
16 'cause I can't count back from three.
17 And you can see how easily
18 I crush MCs
19 'cause I flow consistently.
20 Cherub, huh, that cat that lyrically
21 rip rappers in half; you know their name.
22 Remember this: it gonna be the same
23 ten years from now, but right now, fear this style.
24 Cause Cherub, huh, gonna freestyle.
25 You betta get it

26 cause I leave MCs twisted
27 to the back like a fitted.
28 I'm gonna get rid of
29 MCs in the industry
30 'cause as you can see,
31 Cherub stands alone lyrically
32 on the top of charts.
33 Yeah, I'm known to rip rappers apart.
34 Don't even get Cherub, don't make this nigga start
35 'cause once I start,
36 I never end.
37 Cherub's not a foe, not a friend
38 I'm just that person that appear to transcend.
39 Let my thoughts come out of my mind into yours.
40 Cherub kick open all doors
41 Let you know that I'm not rappin' with no flaws.[10]

In Cherub's total turn of 120 verses, there are about 43 different boasts, although they sometimes run together in ways that make counting difficult. The boasts are far more colorful than those Tropics opened the cipher with. In fact, as the cipher went on, the imagery of all three MCs got increasingly extravagant and grotesque. Later Cherub boasted:

(3) 1 You never heard of this lyricist
2 but you soon will because of Cherub skill
3 that use raps like bullets that kill

and:

(4) 1 I'm here to teach you all a lesson,
2 how to use nouns and adjectives and verbs as weapons.

Tropics similarly rhymed:

(5) 1 Cause Tropics comes with shift
2 of a fatalness
3 that will combat and
4 come and pull you apart
5 'cause it's simply like that. That we take apart body parts
6 and sell them in shops.
7 Chop 'em up drop 'em up.
8 Niggas get shot up
9 Not by bullets but by these lyrics 'cause see these weapons
10 'cause when we come off and attack in a matter of seconds
11 you meetin' your fate.

12 tryin' to anticipate,
13 you can't await

Tropics showed a propensity to spit grotesque imagery, with a curious mix of mathematics and Catholicism.

(6) 1 but I'm gonna flip it back and tell
2 ya how when I was negative 2000 years old, the devil
3 sent me to kidnap baby Jesus
4 and pump the Virgin Mary full of 500 diseases,
5 but instead I took on the world and set it into pieces
6 till I was stopped by 666 priestes,
7 and in my recent confession session
8 I gave my deacon a mouth order of recompression
9 when he asked for the proper directions
10 on how to run a knife 20 times through his vital sections.
11 All I wanted to know if there was truth behind resurrection
12 But now I'm suff'rin' an eternity of redemption.
13 Yet I still haven't learned the lesson.
14 And yes I do testify that I have no comprehensions.
15 And yes I am a lyrical weapon,
16 but you gotta tell God to stop givin' my life an extension
17 'cause I don't even know my next cruel intention.
18 Uh uh, that's you' testimony, nigga.

In another case, the religious imagery turned to God's antagonist:

(7) 1 'cause I battled the Devil, made Satan look like abyss
2 because did you know that he was really a bitch?
3 And when I raped him and gave birth to his seven demons,
4 did you know that my semen
5 is flowin' through they whole body veins?
6 Can't you see? I can't maintain
7 my brain just computes all these thoughts in the level of matter refrain
8 'cause I kill pressure points in your vein,
9 make your blood stop circulate.

Excerpt (7) combines three conceits that were found alone in other places in the cipher. The first was that it constituted a twisted (the Hip-Hop term is *flipped*) appropriation of popular culture images, in this case of the movie, *Rosemary's Baby*, in which the Devil is the father of the title character. The second is the MC as penetrator, appearing in four guises, all of which reappeared with a certain frequency in the MCs' other freestyles and writtens:

– sexualized, as in this rape,
– as disease or poison, as in the unconsummated attack on the virgin,
– with weapons, as in the various mentions of bullets, darts, and knives,
– mentally as in Cherub's ideas entering the listener's mind.

The third was graphic depictions of bodily fluids of various kinds, presumably as metaphors for a person's essence as well as, of course, sex.

The MC as perpetrator of verbal violence is called the 'Warrior MC' (Keyes 1996). In fact, much of the dismay this type of rap sometimes provokes involves these continuous violent and sexist references. However, it is also important to note that these MCs make clear that the violence they describe is strictly *virtual*, for instance as in Cherub's phrase 'nouns and adjectives and verbs as weapons', which places it in the context of a hypothetical rap battle. Similarly, violent actions are sometimes located in a mythical world, as in Tropics's imagery or references are made to images and associated with settings in popular culture. The effect of these techniques, which frequently are combined, is to place the violence in a purely rhetorical space, what Tropics referred to in his defense of Eminem as *concept*. Eminem's critics, he meant, do not understand that the insults to gays and his wife are not to be taken literally because, 'that's all concept.'

The second cipher with Hilarrius and Sega was also recorded by Kareem again without any adult present, this time in Sega's house, and it provides similar images to the first. Here we will examine the opening segment by Hilarrius:

(8) 1 Let's talk about the religion
2 in the mind of a person's schism
3 And they start to go down with the opposite the rhythm
4 They start to see a vision
5 they start to fall.
6 They try to take it all,
7 but they tryin' to correlate themselves with no one else
8 They are felonious
9 And no one else
10 can grab them and they try to be mediocre
11 But I pop the shit like I was a motorola
12 Talkin' two stages
13 My skills is like the illest wages,[11]
14 pays for all dayses
15 It's like my meditated thought
16 was never bought it was taught
17 Neva' sold
18 is like I been sixteen years old.

19 Now it's my birfday and neva' released
20 Until I started to rhyme on this be like I was a beast
21 I rhyme on any instrumental
22 to my mind lyrical-
23 ly Number One, I'm Divine
24 No wrong skills that I say were refined
25 they been thrown away cast away
26 Sometimes people say my blasphemy
27 is for plastaway, but they were long livin'
28 in putdowns with predictions
29 That I said neva did it
30 but I definitely spit it
31 I only admit it
32 and my lyrics will commit
33 to be ill
34 always for any day now frees sounds is the skill
35 that I show
36 and it's like if I step on a show
37 and killa' flow
38 when everybody started to go.
39 It's inspirational,
40 and no one can else can take my skills
41 in they hand 'cause my shit was like a verbal
42 dance with vocabulary.
43 My words are definitely unsanitary
44 'cause they dirty. Life in my times are never perty
45 'cause it's neva' pretty
46 Life in times like my mind, started to stay pretty
47 my lyrical skills are definitely witty
48 I crash on any MC; I give no type of pity.

Excerpt (8) shows fewer verbal violent images, although they are not absent as can be seen in verse 48. There are boasts about the potency of the MC's lyrics (lines 37, 43, and 44), and his daring (lines 26 and 27), toughness (lines 44 and 45), and virtuosity (lines 46 and 47). In sum, in these three MCs' selections, it is possible to discern commonalities:

- Opposition and competition are assumed.
- The MC boasts of his own abilities and puts down his opponents
- Motifs assume what Kiesling (1997, 1998) calls hegemonic masculinity, largely comprising penetration, potency, and destruction.
- Action takes place in 'concept', a rhetorical space clearly distanced from reality.

Although these elements are certainly formulaic and may appear limiting and even monotonous to an outsider, the MCs never get bored with them but instead use them over and over in various combinations. The situation seems analogous to highly constrained literary genres, such as fairy tales, detective novels, or elegies, in which formulaic elements form part of the generic structure. However, the formulas, unlike, say, a word that evolves into an inflectional morpheme, are never entirely reduced to structure because they maintain their denotations. The rap may not be really about killing, but words are still weapons.

A revealing statement about this issue, and the appeal of the style to young teens, was Kaliph's response to my description of Wu-Tang's work as 'thug stuff' because of that group's often violent content. Kaliph, it should be noted, hardly qualified as a thug either in lifestyle or identity.

Kaliph:	It is thug stuff, but not really.
MN (author):	Because there's more there?
K:	Yeah, it's sort of survival, getting out of certain places.
MN:	Why do you like that? What does it tell you?
K:	That anyone can do it; it sorta like motivates me.

A good analogy might be a computer game, which is also a virtual world that is far more violent than the real one. It creates interest in part by placing protagonists in challenges to be overcome.

Interestingly, however, the structural side of the violent imagery became apparent when I asked the MCs what they were trying to do in their rhyming. The responses almost inevitably emphasized what they referred to as *skills*, not the violent content that was the inevitable product of those skills. Hilarrius describes a cipher as follows:

> A cipher is a whole bunch of MCs that want to freestyle, and they just show their skills and I think that's where the energy comes in. Your energy comes from the cipher.

We can begin to see what is meant by skills in Sega's emphasis on artistic success as creativity and clever wordplay:

> Sega: I just I find it real fun. I find it fun, I amaze myself sometimes you know, like I wanna see how I could be more creative with saying something, like instead of just sayin' it straight out how I could be creative and describe it and say something without really sayin' it. Like describe an object without sayin' the name of the object, sayin' like that's how I try to change it up and be creative with it. Like sayin' this is like a tape recorder, without saying it's a tape recorder but you still know what I'm talking about.

MN: Is that what makes a good MC being able to do that?

S: Yeah being able to use your words, and not say the same thing over and over and being creative and like expanding doing stuff that nobody ever does, you know finding new ways to be more creative. That's the way I see it.

The importance of virtuosity at word play becomes abundantly clear in the rich vocabulary the MCs possess for youths their age, particularly given their socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. In just the segments shown, we see erudite words like *wrath* (Tropics: Excerpt [1], line 20), *vicinity* (Cherub: Excerpt [2], line 14), and *transcend* (Cherub: Excerpt [2], line 38), *schism* (Hilarrius: Excerpt [8], line 2), *correlate* (Hilarrius: Excerpt [8], line 7), *mediocre* (Hilarrius: Excerpt [8], line 10), *blasphemy* (Hilarrius: Excerpt [8], line 26), all used correctly. The improvised placement of these words into rhyming rhythmic sequences is extraordinarily difficult. To do so, achieving a *flow*, is an impressive feat.

If it makes sense to consider this oral genre as literacy, it should be possible, as literacy studies typically have done, to connect these generic characteristics with general value systems in other areas of their lives. In fact, the MCs' social interactions reflect a similar hegemonic masculinity and aggressive competition softened by a reluctance to engage in actual violent acts. Particularly when teachers were out of hearing, much of the interaction in the studio consisted of name calling, sometimes in the form of jostling for use of the limited equipment, chairs to sit, or rights to rap. The insults were typically the inverse of those used for self-promotion in ciphers, e.g., *herb* (dominated), *punk* (weak),[12] *fag* or *bitch* (soft, feminized, sexually subordinate), *wack* (lacking skills). At times, more personal references to peers' personal insecurities were also made. Not surprisingly, gay male students avoided the studio entirely, and few girls entered.[13] Kareem described the relations in the group as 'like in prison', and 'any sign of weakness' would lead to being taken advantage of, but aggression rarely became physical as it might have in prison, or in a rougher school for that matter.

An interesting illustration of this interplay involved I-mation, who was younger than the others and initially had great difficulty freestylin'. He once passed in an in-class cipher, and was subsequently pounced on by none other than his main mentor, Hilarrius. In his own turn, Hilarrius 'explained' in rhyme that I-mation had not contributed because he had nothing good to say about himself. He then spit what I-mation would have had to say, rapping that he woke up in the morning, looked at 'his big dick head' in the mirror, and so on. I-mation was left practically in tears. To me, Hilarrius explained this apparent betrayal like this:

> I'm trying to make him better, and trying to make him understand it even more . . . I was coming out of love, out of for him, to try to make himself better.

Although this explanation might seem to be adolescent dissembling, months later I-mation's performance had improved substantially, to which Hilarrius credited his cruel-to-be-kind nurturing. Hilarrius and Sega did in fact see him through some tough family problems.

On a more abstract level, the generic characteristics, rough interplay, and tough-love mentoring were congruent with ideological positions that the MCs staked out during interviews, again paralleling the characteristic findings of literacy research. A striking example concerns both fixing responsibility for actions and establishing primary identity at the individual not collective level. In other words, the MCs tended to look to persons and not communities as determinants of fate and as their locus of loyalties.

This individualism can be seen in the MCs' responses to ethnic and racial identity, far and away the most prominent social category in New York. To my questions about the exclusively Black and Latino membership of the crew, all the MCs claimed that a White, Middle Eastern, or Asian MC would find no obstacle to participation; all that mattered was the MC's skills and authenticity. There is reason to take the MCs at their word about this issue rather than seeing it as an answer that they thought would please a Jewish interviewer. First, Kareem and Cherub had close European-American friends during high school despite the small numbers of European Americans in the school. Second, a number of MCs commented positively on the multi-ethnicity of underground Hip-Hop, as in Sega's comments about Hip-Hop being 'mad diverse'. In fact, it was difficult to elicit prejudiced comments from Squad members; even common and relatively mild New York stereotypes, such as the purported pushiness of Russians or bad driving of Asians, were never leveled in conversation or lyrics. Finally, race did not present itself as a barrier to relationships with David Star, who is Jewish, and Limitless, who, while of mixed race, appears White and was largely considered to be so. By contrast, Ebony and Ralph are African-American, but they had less success with the crew and never got the same respect, at least until Ebony won a televised rap battle.

Furthermore, a number of MCs explicitly downplayed the importance of ethnic community: Kaliph was an extreme case, expressing a lack of interest in his Dominican heritage:

> MN: Some people are really into being Dominican. You see these guys with the Dominican flag on their car.

Kaliph: I'm not really into that too much. It's like annoying, talking in Spanish all the time, listenin' to Spanish music. I'm not really into that too much.

Cherub justified downplaying of racial identity in meritocratic terms, interestingly enough, using many AAVE (African American Vernacular English) features, although he was Jamaican-American:

MN: What about ethnicity? Is that important?

Cherub: Nah, me, I joke about stereotypes 'cause I don't care, yo, what complexion you are or what race you are. Yo, if you ill, you ill. If you not, you not. Know what I'm sayin? I'ma judge you by what you put out,[14] what you put out in the world. If you put out negativity, and you try to be something you not, then that's the way I'ma judge you, negatively. If you real positive, if you believe in yourself and you really strong at what you do, then I'ma give you respect, know what I mean? So race doesn't really mean nothing to me. I ain't gonna go out and make a point. I'm not no revolutionist; like, 'Yo! I'm Black, and I could do this; I could do that.' 'cause you know, it's not all about that. It's about me being a individual. I could do this, 'cause I'm me, 'cause I can't represent a whole race you know. Like they say, like oh, Tiger Woods in golf or whoever, first Black person in golf or like Jackie Robinson, first Black person playin' baseball. That's important 'cause he's the first person, know what I mean? doin' it. He gets much respect for that. But at the same time, just 'cause he could do it, don't mean that every other Black person could do it. Know what I mean? It's just the way that he doin' it, showin' it that, you know, Black people can do that, or any race could do whatever another race could do. I mean, so it's just all about the individual.

This meritocratic individualism fills out the claims, mentioned earlier, regarding the emphasis on an MC's skills as opposed to his or her ethnicity. In fact, one reason Eminem was respected was that he overcame the perceived disadvantage of being White (see also Fernandes 2001), also a subtext in Eminem's subsequent movie *8 Mile*. Sega similarly pointed out that he saw his own success as a Latino in terms of the relatively few commercially successful Latino rap artists.

It is particularly illuminating to see how the MCs place ethical responsibility at the individual level in their comments regarding the violent lifestyle associated with being a *thug* or *gangsta*, a common theme in rap

lyrics. All the MCs expressed high regard for artists who had thug credentials, such as Nas, Jay-Z, or 50 Cent, because they participated in violent actions. The source for the admiration of thug lifestyle was its toughness, and in particular how it represented an unwillingness to back down under pressure. Yet not one of the MCs was really a thug, although Triumph came close, and Delphee had some (apparently loose) gang connections. No MC appeared to carry guns, sell drugs, rob, or be in a gang, and they thus had to finesse their non-participation in this iconic lifestyle with their explicit respect for it. This was done by framing being a thug as a free choice, and their decision not be one was then explained in pragmatic criteria. One MC discussed his participation in a mugging before beginning high school as 'the first time I ever did something like that too, and that was the last.' I suspect because of his affect and the multiple times he described the incident as 'stupid' that he was still disturbed by his actions. Yet his rationales for both his participation and his lack of repeating the crime were expressed in practical terms: 'We got a little bit of money and that's it, and I saw that it was stupid. I always try stuff to see how it is, but I never do it again.'

This kind of framing of the *thug* issue was widespread among Hip-Hop fans as well as MCs. Claudio, a non-MC who strongly affiliated to Hip-Hop culture, presented his relationship to the school's thugs in a revealing way:

> I stay focused; I go to class. I'm still cool with [the thugs]—you know what I mean? You know, we hang out, whatever. They respect the fact that I want kids, house, wife, car, everything, you know what I mean? This is the only way I know to do it. You have another way? Go ahead. Hey, I respect that; you're still my boys,[15] and that's how it is. You know? That's it. You know? Whatever. You got your way; I got my way. We respect each other.

Claudio's desire for and expectation of upward mobility was also common among the MCs. All valued their authenticity and identified with the underground rap scene, but they did not hesitate to express their goal as achieving commercial success and ultimate riches. Sega, Kareem, Delphee, Cherub, and Tropics all claimed (more than once) that they would only remain involved in rap as long as they had a possibility for some success. Their views and life trajectories were sometimes expressed in counterpoint to those of their rap teachers. A number of MCs felt that the teachers were foolish for adopting a bohemian lifestyle in pursuit of what they saw as excessive purism in music. For Kareem, who experienced considerable poverty as a child, the teacher's bohemianism came down to an incomprehensible decision to suffer. He expressed relief that, when Limitless was promoted to head of the arts program, she now had

'a real job'. In a conversation recorded by Kareem—with no adult present—Cherub implicitly contrasted his imagined life trajectory with that of his teachers:

> I ain't gonna be no broke ass rapper. Ain't gonna be none of that. Ain't gonna *be* none of that. Either I'm makin' some cheese, or I'm just getting a straight job. By then, if I'm not making money off my music, I probably still do it, but it ain't gonna be like number one in my life, . . . be like some hobby type shit. Yo, I can't be making music and be broke, starvin'. That is not happening. That don't work for me. Ends gotta meet. I don't want ends just to meet; I want my ends overlappin'.

Most, though not all, of the MCs decided to go to college to be assured of that 'straight job' that would guarantee their future welfare. One who did not, Sega, set up a production company with himself as president even before he left school with one math credit remaining.

A capitalist orientation was also occasionally expressed in overt political statements, such as Cherub's claim that he was 'no revolutionist'. Kareem felt that all the attacks on the government made by the teachers were a bit tedious.[16] The only exception to these views was a commonly felt distaste for then-mayor Giuliani, who was disliked for his aggressive police tactics and perceived racism. A similar lack of revolutionary orientation also appears in disagreements with teachers over the virtues of highly political 'conscious' rap. Tropics, Kareem, and I-mation expressed active dislike for Arrested Development, Public Enemy, De La Soul, and KRS-One, all well-known conscious rap artists or crews. In Tropics's words, if you want to do politics, you should be a politician, not a rapper. Hillarius, Kareem, and Sega did appreciate Ded Prez, another conscious rap crew, and Hillarius claimed to be a fan of KRS-One. However, Hilarrius explicitly identified KRS-One and Ded Prez's message as 'socialist', which, he felt, involved 'good ideals, but wouldn't work.' His respect was on the basis of their artistic merits.

All the MCs preferred commercially successful hard-core rap artists, particularly Jay-Z, Nas, Wu Tang Clan, 50 Cent, DMX, Nelly, Eminem, Tupac, Big Pun, and Ludicris. In those artists' styles, the warrior, boasts of commercial success and virtuosity, and violent and sexist images are all unapologetically portrayed. These themes also dominated student MCs' writtens, which varied from their freestyling mainly in refinement. Sega, for instance, showed me the following piece he had just written and recorded. Spelling is left as in the original:

(9) This mad Latino man's reppin [= representing] Life / messin' with us is like suicide twice / sharpen the knife / vein splice / you get it right / feel ya system fail / Body shutdown / Verbal ammunission

was unloaded / and it was only 1 round / Duck Down like the label / spin and twist you like a dradel [= top used in Chanukah celebrations] / ya lifes a fable / I desacrate you at the grave where they layed / I made you what you are / educate you wit every bar / By far / This intellectual non-super star / superior metaphorist shatter ya / camoflauged in the desert repitoire / in a yellow car / so who's betta ya'll / Sega / Vigorously executing greatness accurately / So battlen me tells me exactly what you imagin be / you on top nigga? / Nah! Maybe when you fuckin' / you know who to watch nigga / Nah! You could stay hiding and / ducking / Rhyming or something / While I'm wining and dining / you wife / inside of her while she / still lies to her husband / decide or keep frontin' [= putting on a façade]

Occasionally, however, they did produce writtens, referred to as *deep*, which explored intellectual concerns. I-mation produced the following impressive example:

(10) Why do people search for meaning, / In shit they don't comprehend, / Why do humans cling to life, / When they know that it's bound to end, / We contrasend, / With the radios lyrics, / Up in this world that we live in, / My words are touchin' ya spirit, / Spitin the illest of truth / Got ya skins recepters, skippin / Make ya' feel this, / I-mation the realest emcee / Since the days of slavery, / Niggaz is claimin' they free, / While they all up in the mall, / Pickin' cotton with they illa [= *iller* = *better*] tools for farmin' / Like Visa and Discovery, / For the love in me, / I want to rise above these streets, like christ, elevatin' to illa' heights, shit is deep, / Got my people fightin for peace / Infinitely, struggle with the beast, 'cause / His tactics is Drastic, / In fact I'm surpassed this, / Freedom illusion / So I've come to this conclusion, / Fuck a Rap Revolution, this is verbal Armaggeddon, / Mind skippin' through evolution.

5. The third cipher: Generic conflict

It is a consistent finding of literacy research that a major cause of educational miscommunication and pedagogical failure lies in educators' efforts to impose generic norms that clash with the vernacular ones students bring to class (e.g., Heath 1983; Hill and Parry 1992; Delpit 1995; Johns 1997; Cazden 2003). This also is exactly what we find in the third cipher, conducted in class and organized by the teachers. This cipher took place

in the aftermath of one of the two fistfights I heard about during my two years of fieldwork. The sudden appearance of violence among the members of the class was very disturbing to Limitless, and she described it as making for 'a very emotional day'. Particularly upsetting was that the fight involved a dispute over studio space, and so it concerned the rap class. The studio had been open to MCs, mostly seniors (i.e., final year students) working on their end-of-year CD when they had a free period. Unfortunately, some younger students began to take advantage of the open studio to record or just hide out when they were supposed to be in class. The administration responded by shutting down the studio for a week, and when it reopened the seniors were told that they would have to police attendance upon pain of renewed closure. Thus, when Damien, a second-year student, tried to enter the studio during a class period, he was ousted by Kareem. A few days later, Damien attempted to exact revenge. What happened was narrated by Sega, explaining the incident to Limitless:

> So on Monday, they were walkin' to the train station, and Damien comes sounding like he wants to fight Kareem, and Kareem doesn't want to fight. So whatever, they're walkin' to the train, and Damien was in front of him. So he stops and put up his hands like he wasa hit him. Kareem is like, 'all right, he got a fight.'

In fact, Damien did not really get the fight because one of Kareem's friends intervened by punching him, making clear that there would be no one-on-one duel. The MCs unanimously considered Damien to have been both at fault and appropriately dealt with.[17] In contrast to this focus on individual behavior and responsibility, Limitless viewed the fight as a function of a breakdown in Squad unity. These assumptions informed a class discussion she led, in which she asked about the origins of the perceived decline of solidarity from the previous year, of which the fight was cast as a symptom. She began to ask the students what they believed had been missing this year. The most cogent response was given by Mal Co.:

> I think this year we've kinda been like left on our own to do what we want. I mean last year, we had a lot of ciphers. Like every day, all of us, we were in a circle cipher, all of us. You all was conducting a cipher tellin' us to rhyme about like different types of things, and we was doing it constantly. When you all not there, let's tell it straight, kids are kids. They have different temptations or whatever, including myself also, and I mean we wasn't, we shoulda gotten that consistent building of the peace and everything. I was giving it. Every time I was in the cipher I was giving peace, peace, peace and happiness. I remember that 'cause we was all together. We were all making a beat; we were all rhyming together. . . . We had our ciphers. But I think this year I think we didn't have enough ciphers. That's the only thing I can think of. That's the *only* thing I can think of.

Mal Co.'s explanation appeals to what might be termed one of the major origin *myths* of Hip-Hop.[18] Specifically, the role of rap in preventing violence is ascribed to the figure of Afrika Bambaata, a South Bronx gang leader in the 1970s (Norfleet 1997). Bambaata is said to have steered youths into Hip-Hop as a way of consciousness-raising and finding non-violent ways of playing out disputes. Mal Co.'s account also appeals to an understanding of ciphers as, in Hilarrius's words, 'the spiritual side of Hip-Hop'. Finally, he overtly accepts the teachers' leadership to decide on activities that counter kids' 'temptations'.

Although no one contradicted him at the time, Sega in a later interview made it clear that he, at least, did not agree; he felt Limitless's goal was not realistic because the group was hopelessly divided into various 'factions'. LocoMan, who arrived late, directly challenged Limitless's assumptions, including the meaning of the term 'unity', after she filled him in on the discussion:

Limitless: We're talking about why there's less unity this year than there was last year.

LocoMan: Well, in way it's good 'cause now we lookin at every aspect of Hip-Hop instead of just focus on lyrics or what not, but in a way that kinda discourages unity 'cause people are focusin' on everything else. Except on like ... he might be focusin' on the rhyme. He doin' the beats, and he's doin' the engineering or what not. And in a way it got to be like that 'cause you can't always jump on everybody's subject and expect everybody to be there all the time 'cause people got stuff to take care of, but in a way I feel it's true that there has been less unity, but I'm sayin' it's just you get out what you put in. You get out what you put in. I'm sayin' if you wanna keep things runnin' you gotta put in more. I'm sayin' that's on my part too. I coulda put in a lot more. You know, I ain't goin', act like like I done everything right even though I know I had my ups and downs too.

I suspect Limitless was really alone in her assumptions and that even Mal Co.'s acceptance was not sincere. One reason for my suspicion is his past history of playing the good student, including in my own class three years previously. Another is that although the cipher was actually set up to explore the origin of violence, Mal Co. said nothing about that subject in his opening turn. Nor did he give 'peace, peace, peace and happiness', but a modified version of classic warrior images:

(11) 1 I spit mic check.
2 I flow too fast
3 [. . .].
4 I have to slow down my flow
5 to stay low
6 like du-rags. I can go
7 from Hip-Hop to folk
8 music to blue grass.
9 I spit the back draft.
10 Yo, my flows is so potent,
11 [not rhyming] I said that on the last CD.[19]
12 This year you're gonna have some [incomprehensible]
13 matta fact fast with me, Top-Dog and Sega
14 we make tracks that kick that like Sega.
15 We scream in yo' face like hater! [laughs]
16 alpha to omega,
17 Yo, we the answer to [or *two* or *too*]
18 Yo, we all Squad Innumerable crew.
19 the answer flows like cancer.
20 Yo, we're going mad shoulder to shoulder
21 loco man loco
22 man right here in the studio

He was followed by LocoMan, who also did not touch on the subject of violence and ended with the following, indicative of the same themes as earlier:

(12) 1 Fillin' your cranium with another lyrical matter.
2 Rhyme shatterer, rhyme blasterer,
3 comin' thru harrassin' her
4 anybody get the mic about to get hyper
5 about jumpin' up and down.
6 You like that, jumpin' up and down

With the students not responding to the question, David Star returned to the topic:

(13) 1 What is the meaning of violence?
2 That's the question I have. [incomprehensible]
3 Where does violence come from?
4 Where does it come from?

Limitless then reinforced David's efforts by repeating the question, nominating a student, and offering possible answers.

(14) 1 Top Dog-G
2 what you got for me?
3 Mal Co. went already.
4 what you beat?
5 B is on your hat.
6 We're talking about violence. What do you say about that?
7 Where does come from?
8 From your own mental slums?
9 Economic slums?
10 Where does it come from?
11 Tell me about it, son.

These tactics worked to the extent that Top-Dog's response did finally engage the theme, but he did so in a way that undermined its premises:

(15) 1 It comes from the street,
2 but I still will defeat.
3 I don't have to use a gun.
4 I use my lyrical tongue.
5 Yeah, comin' through from Rego Park
6 Top Dog's art.
7 I don't freestyle that good, but I write some acid.
8 y'all-niggas come through. I bite your head of with my lyrical skills,
9 like that alligator in Lake Placid.

Top-Dog's opening (line 1) identifies the street, an icon of the challenges of urban life (see, e.g., Spady et al. 1999), as the source of violence, essentially providing a non-answer. He reinforces this implied lack of interest in underlying causes in line 2, which simultaneously locates responsibility at the individual level and looks forward toward how to respond to violence rather than backward to explore its sources. His following couplet (lines 3 and 4) suggests that the appropriate response is to shift it to the virtual poetic realm of concept. Just how this can be done is illustrated in lines 5–7, which introduce the warrior figure and make a reference to his home neighborhood of Rego Park. The turn closes with a popular cultural reference to the movie, *The Alligator in Lake Placid* (line 9), causing everyone to laugh. Next, David nominated Sega, one of the most accomplished MCs of the Crew:

David: What about Sega? I wanna hear what he has to say about that. Where does violence come from?
Limitless: Sega, Sega
Others: Sega

Sega: Sega, y'all. Yo violence what's the real meaning of violence? / He seems hotta / than the sona' / with a silenca'. / So silence all you rap sayers / an' wack sayers / comin' back wack phrases. / I'm in back goin' throwin' down to your dungeon in layers. / Can't you ah ooo see me handcuffed to my man Cherub [Stops rhyming] *Damn man! I can't even freestyle right now. I don't know. Somebody else freestyle, yo. I can't catch it, yo.*

Top Dog: I can't catch it. yo . . . I can't neither. . . .

Sega: I can't neither. I don't know. Somebody else freestyle . . .

Some: [laughs]

Sega: keep you in handcuffs / in my master rap. *Yeah man I can't even read rhymin' I can't catch it.*

Sega later explained his difficulty by using the expression for a lack of interest: 'I wasn't feelin' it.' LocoMan went again, and he did rhyme on topic, but similar to Top-Dog G, his focus was squarely on his individuality:

(16)
1 Violence comes from your mouth, man.
2 That situation every time the breeze is blowin'
3 where's my place?
4 Right here my own two feet I'm standin' on. I be right here, you catch me
5 right here where my [incomprehensible]
6 you neva catch the cops harrassin' me
7 'cause I be on there [incomprehensible]
8 flow is so blessin'
9 whoeva' manafesin'.

This cipher so far betrays an eerie resemblance to a failed class discussion. The MCs' responses to their teachers' questions began with two off-topic replies by Mal Co. and LocoMan. When the theme was re-emphasized through a teacherly known-answer question, it was met with an explicit challenge to the premise by Top-Dog G, then a kind of 'I don't know' response by Sega, and finally a barely on-topic response by LocoMan.

This pedagogical failure responded, as is common in literacy research, to a covert generic struggle. For instance, Limitless explained her purpose in the cipher and her reaction to the response she got from Top-Dog in terms of her dissatisfaction with warrior figure:

[Violence] has been around since the beginning so what I was asking is, where does it come from. Does it come from your own mental slum? Does it come from your own economic slum? trying to get the cause. . . . He says it comes from

the street, and that's it, but 'lets not explore the streets; let me just talk about how tough I am.' I'm not going to say I have a problem.

A little later she added 'It's just classic, that character, that Hip-Hop caricature, that warrior.' In part, Limitless's dissatisfaction with the warrior relates to the development of Hip-Hop and the direction it should be going. As she sees it, the warrior once did have a place since it channeled disputes into verbal forms. However, she argued that Bamabatta's further plans for a more general uplifting of the urban community through Hip-Hop were stifled by an 'industry attack'. At present, 'only one kind of Hip-Hop is supported, and it's completely void of meaning; it's like pornography basically for the most part.' In response, she hopes rap artists 'elevate beyond', as she put it, the warrior. The MCs by contrast were unwilling to abandon that central element of their rhyming.

In any case, given that they had not provided the answer Limitless was aiming at, she provided it herself, as again often happens in classroom discussions when students do not provide an expected answer on their own:

(17) 1 Yo, violence where does it come from, you asked
2 I got somthin' to say, matta' fact.
3 It's my talent [incomprehensible]
4 come from the top down.
5 I'm no clown
6 I understand how it goes around
7 It's systematic
8 and tragic.
9 We young soldiers, we still in the end
10 get put in our head
11 video games
12 mashin' our brains
13 like television games
14 make us all into soldiers for their own gain.
15 Yo, we gotta ride the bus back.
16 Guns and crack
17 through your neighborhood
18 without jobs to the young brothers who become hoods.
19 It's all done systematically.
20 That's why I come here to help everybody plan
21 the next generation watchin the fan.
22 Yo, I put out my hand
23 to give a pound
24 'cause, yo, that's how I get down.

This answer is a variety of progressive analysis of urban ills. Violence is depicted as a conspiratorial effort 'from the top down', to generate profits (lines 10–14), a point also emphasized in line 19. The response should be to fight back, with an oblique reference made to the civil rights struggle—through the bus-back image—and present socioeconomic conditions (lines 15–18). To do so, an emphasis on solidarity is made through the gesture of 'giving a pound' (lines 22 and 23), the touching of fists followed often by an elaborate handshake. In fact, this kind of view, was, as Limitless says, an important motivation for her working as a teacher of urban youth (lines 20 and 21).

Providing the answer led to two responses. The first, from Triumph, accepted the topic and provided a partial elaboration, although he did not accept the cause-and-effect relations that Limitless proposed.

(18) 1 I know David.
2 I used to see all this shit
3 all the blood runnin'
4 down my neck all the blood round the floors or the crack in the stairs
5 That's why I always see I was like, 'yo life ain't fair.'
6 This is why it all about the crack cocaine; put the gats on ice
7 Niggas don't know how to fuck with their life.
8 Yo, what's this all about? I'm from the streets; it's Harlem, yo can't nobody . . .

The second, from I-mation, the youngest MC, interrupted him with a classic class-clown response, which, while it started on topic, seemed designed to cause maximum disruption:

(19) 1 Fuck violence
2 the toilet perspires.
3 My lyrical combat is mortal
4 out the portal
5 death row comin' from the oral cavity.
6 It's like y'all bitch ass niggas just can't handle me
7 It's like I inflict verbal fatality,
8 'n' end up in like animality.
9 two seven, [stops rhyming] *ah fuck this shit* . . .

In fact, there may be a bit more than adolescent silliness going on here. The toilet image reflected an undercurrent of tension over content between some MCs, Sega and Kareem especially, and the teachers. Those

MCs had a propensity for scatological and graphic sexual images, which the teachers did not support and certainly did not want to see recorded on the class CD.[20] In any case, the clowning did not prevent LocoMan from following Triumph's lead in an accommodation to the theme, which enabled Limitless to go into greater detail on her views on the origin of violence:

LocoMan:	Yo, Violence comes from crime / not no blue collar crimes / not no sellin dimes. / Violence is like a big crime. / Everybody get hit in there spine. / violence yo . . .
Limitless:	In a neighborhood with guns / take away the jobs what you think? / It's violence / and its [incomprehensible] / like I said before that's my allegory from the top down / from the top down
David:	[not rhyming] Ow! leave that one. I like that one. I like that one. . . .

However, the accommodation was short lived. While the next contribution, by Triumph, remained on topic, it actually subverted the viewpoint that Limitless and David wished to communicate, and it did so with considerable virtuosity:

(20)
1 Yo, yo, all right, yo, yo, I was in Spanish Harlem the other day
2 I was walkin' the street, yo. Three little kids was about five
3 or seven, they was robbin' these Chinese guys
4 for their chicken wings and french fries.
5 There were three. I'm dead
6 serious; that ain't no joke
7 they had a bat
8 they slapped
9 him with it. They slapped him in the head, almost broke his scull up.
10 They almost leave him toe up.
11 You can even see his brain inside his skull
12 You can even see the nigga crawlin' on the floor.
13 Nobody helped him out, an' nobody said nothin'
14 'cause in the streets nobody else be frontin', [= telling the authorities]
15 or else nobody else be snitchin.
16 'cause there's no rat
17 niggas'. 'Cause if there's a rat,
18 you're gonna get killed

19 just like burst of the steel, yo
20 that's what I saw. I'm telling you the truth, yo.

This contribution is what might be called an anti-fable; meaning inverts the form of a fable with its dark and hyper-realistic setting, explicit action, and unexemplary moral. Triumph's narrator is an observer to the crime, which takes place in Triumph's home neighborhood, incidentally the Latino part of America's ur-ghetto, Harlem. The incident actually refers to the well-publicized murder earlier that year of a Chinese-immigrant restaurant deliverer by a group of teens. The grotesque thematic elements of this story can be seen in the minuscule loot (line 4), the exaggerated youth of the criminals (lines 2 and 3), and the graphic images (lines 9–12). The moral bankruptcy of the community—a prominent subtext of the news stories, which opposed the dreams of the hard-working immigrant to the get-something-for-nothing savagery of his killers—is then mentioned (lines 13 and 14). It is followed by the pervasive fear (lines 17–19), in which it is claimed that anyone cooperating with the police will be murdered. This statement doubles as the moral. The rhyme closes with a claim to truth, which, of course, is not to be taken literally, but as a kind of rhetorical appeal to validity or moral truth. It is useful to compare Limitless's allegory to this fable and Top-Dog's early response (see Table 2).

Triumph's anti-fable functioned as a turning point. Although the theme of violence continued to hover for the next two turns, the teachers' efforts to elicit target responses, and so the resemblance to class discussion, ceased. The cipher then continued for six more turns, with no more reference to the supposed theme. The teachers' contributions became descriptive, including a long discussion by David of a problem he had with an aggressive audience member during a performance, which modeled an assertive but peaceful response. The students' rhymes resembled modified versions of the warrior figure. The generic struggle thus ended in stalemate in which both sides proceeded in their own style, with their own messages, listening to each other, but no longer struggling over what the cipher should be.

Table 2. *Limitless's allegory versus Triumph's anti-fable and Top Dog's response*

Limitless's 'allegory'	Triumph's anti-fable & Top Dog's imagery
Violence as imposed top-down	Violence as arising from street
Urban youth as collectively manipulated into violence	Individual urban youths as (potential) perpetrators
Concern with origin of violence	Concern with responses to violence

6. Implications for literacy theory and studies of rap

This genre analysis reveals the ideological investments participants made in the oral vernacular genre of the rap cipher, findings that closely parallel those of investigations of written and oral educated uses of language. Just as with other literacy research on written and educational forms, the analysis of rap ciphers reveals generic elements that depend crucially on an ideology that is also manifested in participants' social norms and explicit statements. In the case of the young MCs, all these elements prefer individuality to collectivity, view moral responsibility as operating at the level of the individual, and display positive evaluations of strength, dominance, and pursuit of self-interest. They are unapologetic in their hegemonic masculinity. They also manifest belief in realism and denigrate idealism. What is interesting and somewhat surprising is that all these beliefs actually form an ideological system familiar in the United States as that of the libertarian right.

The analysis of the teachers' contribution to the cipher is equally consonant with their beliefs as manifested in statements and lifestyle. They attempt to use the cipher for adult-directed consciousness-raising. There is perceived social progress to a 'higher level', which focuses on collectivities, such as social classes and the crew itself as a unit, and as a corollary, considerable concern with solidarity. The teachers are skeptical of capitalism and highly conscious of class, gender, and race, i.e., collective, privileges. In their artistic production and actions, they idealistically place artistic integrity and political principle ahead of personal gain. All of these features are equally characteristics of the progressive left.

The ideological conflict was largely covert. I was not aware of any arguments over merits of free enterprise versus a regulated economy; nor did I hear contrasting opinions regarding the origins and solutions for urban strife, unemployment, underemployment, and so on. While they never showed any sympathy for leftist causes beyond the issue of police brutality, and particularly police shootings, they never expressed contrary opinions either. I certainly never heard any sympathy for the Republican Party, in whose ranks mainstream U.S. libertarians can be found. Nor were the MCs even aware of the Libertarian Party which houses libertarians who are less willing to compromise with other rightist tendencies (e.g., social conservatives). Given the socioeconomic context of the students' lives, the typical libertarian policy obsessions of reduced taxes or government regulation were of no concern to the MCs, with the notable exception that they favored legalized marijuana. Hilarrius's doubts about the practicality of socialist ideals cited earlier and the disparaging comments from Kareem about teachers' preoccupations with the government

were the only explicit anti-leftist ideological statements that I heard. Perhaps part of the latency of the conflict is due to the young age of the MCs, their high degree of respect for their teachers as artists and as teachers, and the difference in status within the school structure. Another may be the huge cultural distance and distance in economic interests that separated them from the mainly upper class and very White centers of gravity of the libertarian movement.[21]

Yet a close examination of generic practices reveals this unmistakable ideological framework, which, as Limitless identified, was undoubtedly closely tied to the rhetorical figure of the Warrior. The ideology—though perhaps tacit—is, therefore tightly 'bound up', in Street's (1984: 105) words, with this particular concrete form and associated practices. Just as the ideological concept of the author as autonomous individual and the capitalist notion of intellectual property are embodied in the concept of plagiarism (Ramanathan and Atkinson 1999), so the ideological assumptions of the MCs are expressed through the warrior and its manifestations.

This analysis reveals that the students were not, as the teachers supposed, apolitical or simply unaware of political issues, and in particular of progressive interpretation of their social situation. It implies a similar error may be made by some progressive critics of hard-core rap (e.g., Boyd 1994; Garofalo 1994; Rose 1994). I suspect that the explicitly anti-political posture that the MCs (and many hard-core rap artists) sometimes manifested is more the result of associating politics only with progressive political positions, including criticisms of elements of Hip-Hop such as sexism. Evidence for this view comes from statements, such as Tropics's, that politics has a negative influence on Hip-Hop.

Where does this libertarianism come from? Since it is not overt, in the sense that it is named or has a manifesto, it clearly does not come directly from libertarian ideologues, which for a number of cultural reasons would be unlikely in any case. Yet, although I can only speculate, it does not seem all that surprising, at least on reflection. Various libertarian ideas and attitudes are evident in the American public sphere and have been for centuries. It is not unreasonable to see in the self-driven, rule-breaking loner in westerns and action movies and the poor-boy-makes-good of Horatio Alger elements of the *gangsta* in rap. The view of the world these archetypes represent are supported by explicit messages of American history, such as those embodied in the Declaration of Independence. It is not necessary to read more recent tracts, such as those of the Libertarian Party, to absorb the gist of the message. Bright, thoughtful teenagers in the process of figuring out their place in the world are certainly capable of realizing the meaning of these various images and morals; that is what they have done for generations. It is logical that self-confident youths who see

themselves as upwardly mobile find this ideology more attractive than those favoring self-denial or group uplift. On that point, even those of us without much sympathy for libertarianism—particularly its current role in American politics—can still find it encouraging that poor minority youths believe in it. It indicates that, for them, the psychology of the racial caste system has finally broken down sufficiently that they believe they can compete as individuals without giving up their identity or heritages.

Turning to theoretical issues, previous research in literacy has noted the importance of ideology and its relation to generic conflict in written language and related educational settings (Street 1984, 1993, 2001; Delpit 1995; Heath 1983; Gee 1990; Swales 1990; Scollon 1995; Pennycook 1996; Johns 1997; Ramanathan and Atkinson 1999; Newman et al. 2002). It is a cornerstone of current thinking that ideology and conflict are a part of literacy. The present analysis of genre, of what it means to know how to do rap ciphers, highlights how formulas and normative practices define that genre in the minds of its users, and that differences in those formulas create different definitions of the genre. What gives these structures their power is that they express assumptions about the nature of the world, and so they are attractive or unattractive depending on an individual's take on that world, that individual's ideology.

As I discussed earlier, a considerable body of research has been conducted on rap within ethnomusicology (Keyes 1996; Norfleet 1997), cultural studies (Boyd 1994; Garofalo 1994; Rose 1994; Yasin 1999; Weaver and Daspit 2001), linguistics (Yasin 1997; Morgan 2001; Alim 2003), media studies (McLeod 1999), and education (Weaver et al. 2001). That work has made clear the importance of rap as a cultural phenomenon and delineated many of its salient qualities. Yet, despite some interest in ideological issues (Boyd 1994; Garofalo 1994; Rose 1994), none of this work has been able to describe how the ideologies of active rap artists are involved in the creation of their work or how generic features embody ideological values. It is the literacy approach that reveals this information. As a result, to the extent that literacy theory abandons specific restrictions of domains and modality, it becomes a far more powerful tool. It has discovered an important window onto how humans organize their world through their forms of self-expression.

Notes

1. See Yasin (1997) and Norfleet (1997) for a full account of these roots, which are beyond the scope of this study.
2. Rap names are customarily used in place of real names. Despite their already pseudonymous nature, I have given participants pseudo-rap names to protect anonymity, in the

case of artistic success. These doubly false names are either based on the originals or were selected by the MCs themselves. The adoption of these false names has necessitated occasional changes in rhymes presented, and I apologize to the artists for the consequent distortions of their work. On the other hand, it is often customary in ethnographic studies to invent pseudonyms for locations. However, there is often something simply pro forma in such efforts since the actual locales are often obvious to those familiar with the region, and when they do not there can be a loss of contextualization. In this case, therefore, I only disguise the name and location of the school, and I use the real names of the Queens neighborhoods the students live in and 'represent'. Each of these areas, it should be noted, contains tens of thousands of inhabitants, and so anonymity is not really imperiled.

3. The comments were made before the appearance of the film *8 Mile*, and Eminem's subsequent media rehabilitation.
4. The older non-versified insults used to be known as the *dozens* and are sometimes currently known as *snaps*.
5. The two varieties are closely related, and they vary mainly in the pronunciation (see Slomanson and Newman 2004) and in the frequency of Spanish calques in New York Latino English.
6. The verb *spit* means rap, and the base form is used as past tense.
7. *Nigga* is an informal word for *guy*, not unlike *dude*. The racial slur form has an *r*-ful pronunciation or a slightly *r*-colored vowel in a non-rhotic variant. It is, of course, rarely heard.
8. *Y'all-niggas* is a common 2P plural form in rap and less frequently in conversation in this group.
9. The reference is to the number 7, an elevated subway line that runs through much of Queens.
10. This rhyme is dialectally interesting since it depends both on *r*-lessness and on the adoption of tensing and raising of (oh), characteristic of New York European-American English.
11. *Ill* is good.
12. Curiously, the MCs seemed to be completely ignorant of the traditional AAVE meaning of *punk*, or male sexually penetrated by another male, often by force.
13. To their credit, there were few if any attempts to apply the competitive masculine ethos outside the group. Although there were at least five openly gay students in the school, the only UAA student who was mocked for gayness was one considered by both the MCs and the openly gay students to be closeted. Kareem said that there was no point in accusing someone of being gay if they did not mind admitting it, an assumption that guarding sex role boundaries is less important than authenticity.
14. *I'ma* is a common AAVE form for *I'm going to*.
15. 'my boys' = 'my friends'.
16. It should be noted that this attitude took place during the Clinton administration, and that Kareem predicted, correctly it turns out, that the election of George Bush would cause a change.
17. In any case, as Kareem explained it, if Damien had to resort to fists rather than a rap battle to settle a 'beef', then he was implicitly admitting his incompetence as an MC, and so whatever the outcome of the fight, he would have been the loser.
18. My use of the term 'myth' is not meant to say anything about the veracity of the story, just that it is known to Hip-Hoppers and serves as reference point to explain some of the characteristic phenomena.
19. For this line, Mal Co. stops rhyming.

20. One of Sega's writtens has the couplet 'I made the shit spin / like a toilet since ten.' Kareem wrote 'I'm like premature ejac / I come when you don't expect it'.
21. Recently, this situation may be shifting as the Bush administration has made decisions that affect the poor in ways that are more palpable than before, in particular sending many into a war that is not particularly popular among minorities. Thus, a number of hard-core rap artists, P. Diddy, Xzibit, and Eminem, have become more overtly political and against this administration, in particular against the Iraq war and Bush's character, and cultural conservatism.

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