

Spring 5-2016

"That's the Way We Flow": Hip Hop as Oral Literature

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“That’s the Way We Flow”: Hip Hop as Oral Literature

An Honor Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Program of African American Studies

Bates College

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by

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Lewiston, Maine

3/28/16



Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all of my Bates Professors for all of their help during my career at Bates College. Specifically, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Professor Sue Houchins, for all her hard work, helping me wrestle with this thesis, and for being a source of friendship and guidance since I first met her. Professor Nero, I would also like to send a big thank you to you, you have inspired me countless times and have pushed me since day one. Professors Rubin, Chapman, Jensen, and Carnegie, thank you all very much, each of you helped me on my way to this point and I am very grateful for your guidance. Also, a big thank you to Chris Schiff, your help was amazing. An especially big thanks to my parents for supporting me for my whole life (!) and for being there throughout this whole process. And, last but not least, all of my friends at Bates, especially the Core Four, thank you for supporting me everyday and putting up with my terrible jokes!

Now for some shout-outs. Shout out to my cousin Marcella and my old friend Khalil, you two were pivotal in my development, both introducing me to Hip Hop at an early age. I would not be here if it wasn't for your song recommendations. Shout out to Big Mack, who's had my back since day one. Shout out to my best friend Eliza, you are still the best! Shout out to Eva Townes for being my friend, mentor and overall guardian angel. Shout out to Friends Seminary, and all my high school friends for making me into the person I am today. Shout out to Nas, Wale, Big Daddy Kane, Joey Bada\$\$, Biggie, Tupac, and countless other MCs for inspiring me every single day. And shout out to HIP HOP, thanks for taking me in and molding who I am!

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Hip Hop as Orature (‘It Ain’t Where Ya From, It’s Where Ya At’)

Since Hip Hop music started in the South Bronx in 1973, it has spread all around the U.S., and has come to span many different cultures and has developed many forms. Hip Hop has morphed throughout this time, proving difficult to absolutely define as a culture. Now, it is studied as a piece of popular culture, and popular culture brings with it a certain set of labels and perceptions. John Storey, in his book, *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, says that while popular culture is very hard to define,¹ the simplest way to understand it is “to say that popular culture is simply culture which is widely favoured or well liked by many people” (Storey, 7). However, this definition does not cover the whole politics that surrounds popular culture, especially in a place like the U.S. He continues to expand the definition:

[P]opular culture is to suggest that it is the culture which is left over after we have decided what is high culture. Popular culture, in this definition, is a residual category, there to accommodate cultural texts and practices which fail to meet the required standards to qualify as high culture (Storey, 7).

Popular culture then, stands in opposition to “so called” high culture because it has not met the requirements to be considered high culture. However, while Hip Hop has been labeled popular culture, it too has a sort of exclusivity, with its strict definition of what constitutes Hip Hop culture. Storey also explores the idea of taste and how it is related to high culture. He examines the idea of “natural taste,” which is used “as a marker of ‘class,’” (Storey, 7) to separate high culture from popular culture, and he describes how those two groups have access to taste. There is “a

dominant group, those who *instinctively* know, and a fortunate subordinate group, those who know only through education, the rules and rituals of taste” (Storey, 190. At author’s Emphasis). Again, this concept can be re-interpreted in terms of Hip Hop because along with Hip Hop’s exclusivity in terms of access to its culture, there are certain people that produce the culture and there those that learn about the culture by consuming the music or studying the culture through film, television or books. So, while Hip Hop is connected to popular culture, the study of Hip Hop is far more complex than that of a pop-culture trend.

With its combination of funky beats and complex lyrics, Hip Hop has developed into a modern form of oral literature, which allows it to be studied as popular culture. African scholar Ngugi Wa Thiong’o renames oral literature as orature in his essay, “The Oral Native and The Writing Master,” and defines orature as “the use of utterance as an aesthetic means of expression” (Ngugi, 73). When emcees write their rhymes, they are combining the oral traditions of African American culture with the literary traditions of American culture. Whether it is through their vocal styles, the sampling and versioning in their songs, or the twists on storytelling techniques, emcees connect orality and writing through their music.

However, before Ngugi put forward his definition of orature, and explored the relationship between orality and writing, Walter J. Ong’s book, *Literature and Orality*, was considered the canonical work on orality, and he approached orality in a very different way. His book, published in 1982, consists of research on the history of oral cultures, the development of writing, and how, as he puts it, writing came to be the dominant culture over oral culture. Ong made it clear that he did not want to

see oral cultures eradicated, but he believed that, “writing...enlarges the *potentiality* of language almost beyond measure,” and that, “writing gives a grapholect a *power* far exceeding that of any purely oral dialect” (Ong, 7-8. Emphasis added). Ong’s tone seems to suggest that orality and writing can only ever be examined as oppositional concepts that are separated based on their power and potential. Ong continued, stating that, “writing from the beginning did not reduce orality, but enhanced it, making it possible to organize the ‘principles’ or constituents of oratory into a scientific ‘art’” (Ong, 9). Ong labeled orality a rudimentary concept that can be enhanced by the greater concept of writing. Orality is also seen as primitive and unrefined, which can be modernized and polished by the “scientific art” of writing. Ong’s analysis assumed orality and writing are concepts that cannot coexist or be analyzed together. Instead, Ong looked at how one concept improves another and how therefore it is naturally better.

As the canonical work on orality, Ong’s conclusions hold many consequences for the study of Hip Hop as orature. Ong felt very strongly about the concept of oral literature that was developing in the years before his book was published. He characterized oral literature as a “monstrous,” and “preposterous term,” (Ong, 10) because it makes no sense in his strict binary between orality and writing. Towards the end of his book, one of Ong’s conclusions clearly shows just how strict that binary is, as he stated that he has “never encountered or heard of an oral culture that does not want to achieve literacy as soon as possible. (Some individuals of course do resist literacy, but they are mostly soon lost sight of)” (Ong, 175). Ong made a sweeping generalization about oral cultures, which he knew was not true,

but thought it would eventually become true. He assumed oral cultures “naturally” want to evolve or advance their culture to obtain literacy. Talking about advancement in such a way suggests that oral cultures would simply abandon their culture to adopt the culture of literate societies.

Hip Hop therefore presents a contradiction for Ong. Combining orality and writing, it would seemingly refute the dichotomy that Ong set up in his writing. However, Ong avoided this problem by creating the concept of “secondary orality” (Ong, 11). Ong defined secondary orality as “a new orality [that] is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic writing and print” (Ong, 11). Ong needed this concept because it relieves the tension that an art form like Hip Hop raises in his binary. The oral nature of Hip Hop, understood with Ong’s definition, is sustained by other forms of communication, such as the radio or simply writing the lyrics down. Expanding on Ong’s definition, Erik Pihel, in his dissertation, “Post-Literate Poetry: Towards an Aesthetics of Popular Art,” renames secondary orality as “post-literate,” because:

It acknowledges the historical progression from orality to literacy to post-literacy *rather than a circular development back to orality*; it implies that post-literate poetry both incorporates and exceeds literate poetry, and therefore is not inherently inferior to literate poetry; and, most importantly, *it distinguishes this third kind of text from both oral literate poeties*. This last point is important because the fusion of oral and literate elements should not be thought of as an equation that *simply adds literacy to orality and gets the sum ‘oraliterature’ or ‘orature’* (Pihel, 67. Emphasis Added).

Pihel sees Ong’s term as insufficient in terms of *separating* orality and literacy, and prefers to orientate the word that divides those two concepts around literacy, avoiding the “circular” definition that relies on orality. He also says that it is

important to distinguish the now three separate terms, orality, literacy and post-literacy, because when orality and writing work together, they cannot simply be combined into a concept such as orature, but rather must be separated into a tripartite model.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o follows these works, writing his book, *Globaletics*, in 2010, where he puts forth his idea of orature. Ngugi begins his chapter on orality by exploring the historical context of orality. He describes how the "hegemony of the written over the oral [came] with the printing press, the dominance of capitalism, and colonization," and that because of these processes "we witness...a double colonization: first, a language is seen as lower than another in general, and second, its oral ontology is considered to be lower than the written 'being' of the dominant other" (Ngugi, 64). This context helps to explain the perspective that Ong, and later Pihel, take on orality, and their desire to separate orality and writing. Ngugi expands on this topic, saying, "the oral aesthetic has been buried under the weight of the written, just as the validity of the oral in colonial life had been supplanted by that of the written, whether as evidence in law disputes or sources in historical research" (Ngugi, 70). Ngugi's interpretation of the relationship between orality and writing refutes the idea that they are diametrically opposed to each other as concepts. Under Ngugi's definition, Hip Hop's combination of orality and writing does not necessitate the invention of a "new" orality, or a new term to enter into the dichotomy of oral and literate cultures. Instead, Ngugi explains that before this colonial way of thinking, orality and writing "were not oppositional absolutes...they had their adequacies and inadequacies as representations of thought and

experience. Writing and orality were *natural allies*, not antagonists” (Ngugi, 72. Emphasis Added). He pushes back against the colonial study of writing and orality and says that studying orature uses an “oral system of aesthetics that [does] not need validity from the literary” (Ngugi, 73). Instead of examining orality in contrast to writing, Ngugi uses this different system of aesthetics to understand the relationship between writing and oral cultures. With this viewpoint on orality, Hip Hop music does not prove the validity of orality over writing, or complicate the binary between the two concepts so much so that it falls apart. Instead, it is just another example of how orality and literacy work together in a culture, relying on each other for support. Hip Hop shows that, “orality [is] mediated by writing,” (Ngugi, 84) and that “they have always had [a natural alliance] in reality, despite attempts to make the alliance invisible or antagonistic” (Ngugi, 85).

Besides Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, several Black scholars in the United States have also written about the oral traditions in African American communities through out the U.S. These scholars’ studies help to set up the cultural background from which Hip Hop would emerge and on which it would build. For example, Hortense Spillers, in her essay “Moving On Down the Line: Variations on the African-American Sermon,” examines the history and significance of the black sermon in the United States. Ong’s analysis did not focus on specific cultures and how they came to incorporate literacy and writing into their culture, and Spillers focuses her work specifically on African American culture. She starts at slavery and speaks about the forced adoption of European literary values. She says that “for the captive personality to learn to read is not only mastery of the inherited texts of his or her

culture, but also its *subversion*, or a seeking after those moments that enable a different, or ‘thickened’ reading” (Spillers, 253. Emphasis in the original). So, while Ong believes that all oral cultures naturally want to adopt writing culture, Spillers is studying a case where people coming from oral cultures were forced to adopt writing culture, and even still, found a way to exploit it to their benefit. Because the slaves brought from Africa came from orally based cultures, they did not simply forget their culture, but incorporated literate culture into their own to create a deeper or “thicker” understanding of the two cultures in the United States.

Spillers then turns to the sermon, and describes its significance in both the sacred and secular worlds. She explains that:

Whether or not we encounter the sermon in its customary social context, as the driving words of inspiration and devotion, or in its variously secular transformations and revisions as urgent political address, we perceive it fundamentally as a symbolic form that not only lends shape to the contours and outcome of African Americans’ verbal fortunes under American skies, but also plays a key role in the psychic configuring of their community (254).

As Spillers explains, African Americans retained their oral culture, while adapting to the writing culture of the United States, and orality remains a fundamental aspect of their culture. Therefore, Hip Hop is a sort of secular sermon, which continues to demonstrate the central role of orality in African American culture. The sermon is still a central form of communication within Black communities, and Hip Hop’s early messages of peace and community only continued that tradition of communication.

These aspects of the sermon demonstrate its influence on Hip Hop’s cultural background, and in his book, *Black Talk*, Ben Sidran explores the musical history of

Black culture as it relates to orality. Sidran wrote his book in 1971, before both Ong and Ngugi, but his observations foreshadow Ngugi's view of orality and its relationship with writing. He says that "not only is it possible that oral man will be 'misunderstood' by the literate man – a failure to communicate – but that literate man will *fail to recognize that an attempt at communication is even being made*" (Sidran, 4. Emphasis Added). This echoes Ngugi's observation that colonialism installed a new aesthetic, where orality and writing were seen as opposites because of the European colonial way of thinking. Sidran provides a great example to illustrate this miscommunication in relation to music, saying that "capturing the rhythms of African or modern Afro-American music with Western notation is a lot like trying to capture the sea with a fishnet" (Sidran, 6). So, Hip Hop cannot be understood by Ong's binary because it operates with a different kind of aesthetic, that based off on orature and orality.

Sidran, just like Spillers, starts with slavery to describe the evolution of African American musical culture. Sidran says that "oral culture survived in the New World and was retransmitted and reinforced in America through speech patterns...and through musical idioms," essentially "recomposing America in terms of Africa" (Sidran, 12). So, the musical and cultural background of Hip Hop is essential to understanding how Hip Hop combines orality and writing together, and continues the oral traditions of Black culture. Sidran then turns to the development of Black music, explaining that:

The rise of a black music employing Western instrumental parallels that acceptance and facility with which the second and third generation Negroes were approaching the English language in general. Learning how to converse

in Western idioms predicated the rise of a peculiarly black “American” tradition (Sidran, 32-33).

Sidran suggests that Black music began to develop when black people began to incorporate Western styles of music making and developing them into their own musical processes, which is the moment they incorporated writing culture into their oral traditions. And, while this seemingly supports Ong’s conclusion that all oral cultures want to move into literacy, Sidran asserts that:

Because the [black and white] Americas are not mutually exclusive but exist in a relationship that creates a social atmosphere, the Anglo-conformity of American life is, although inadvertently, a ‘racist climate.’ Anglo-conformity *implies* the ostensibly ‘necessary’ subjugation of black values to white ways (Sidran, 36. Emphasis in the original).

For Sidran sees the transition, that Ong would write about a decade later, in the United States as an imbalanced transition, one that is not fair and equal in terms of which culture gets to retain their traditions, and which culture is forced to assimilate. Hip Hop emerged from a culture where orality and writing had been combined instead of kept strictly apart, and that combination was fundamental to the development of Hip Hop’s musical aesthetic.

After Sidran, Geneva Smitherman wrote about the evolution of oral traditions in black culture in her book, *Talkin and Testifyin*, published in 1977, and spoke about what were the current cultural aesthetics for Black English. She describes the immediate cultural background of Hip Hop, which was created in 1973, by speaking about a different kind of rapping that proceeded the emcee. She also foreshadows Ngugi’s argument about orality and writing, explaining that, “the linguistic pedagogy which emanates from the difference-bi-dialectalist concept

generally reflects the power elite's perceived insignificance and hence rejection of Afro-American language and culture (Smitherman, 209). Besides being a bit of a theoretical tongue twister, Smitherman explains how the imposed hierarchy of language, which was implemented by colonialism, rejects Black culture because of its perceived inferiority.

Smitherman addresses poetry in her book, saying that it is "written to be recited, even in a sense 'sung', in such a way that its creator becomes a kind of performing bard" and that it combines "orality, music, verbal performance and brevity – and when performed before a black audience it evokes [a] 'collective ritual'" (Smitherman, 180). Smitherman wrote her book just after Hip Hop's inception, while it was still an underground movement, and yet her observations speak straight to Hip Hop's culture. Emcees write their lyrics down, but they fully intend them to be heard, which directly influences their word choice, their storytelling method, and their delivery style. So Ngugi's assertion that writing and orality naturally coexist is seemingly embodied by Hip Hop's musical culture.

Smitherman also describes rapping in Black communities, however, her concept of rapping actually proceeds the art form that emcees would make popular in the 1980s. Rappers, in the 1960s and early 1970s, were individuals who could deliver their message in entertaining ways, usually by employing Black vernacular and rhyming. Smitherman explains that these kinds of messages:

Ain bout talkin loud and sayin nothing, for the speaker must be up on the subject of his rap, and his oral contribution must be presented in a dazzling, entertaining manner. Black speakers are flamboyant, flashy, and exaggerative; black raps are stylized, dramatic, and spectacular; speakers and raps become symbols of how to git ovuh (Smitherman, 80).

This description perfectly captures what the foundation of rap music and emceeing grew out of and valued as its cultural origin. Rhyming and oral deftness was a desirable trait in Black communities, which explains the cultural origins of the emcee and his or her relationship to their DJ. Hip Hop was born out of these oral traditions, the “talk-singing, repetition and alliterative word play, intonational contouring, [and] rhyme,” (Smitherman, 137) valued in Black communities and raps. Smitherman continues to describe the Black storyteller:

Modern-day yarn spinners, like their ancient African counterparts, become the words they convey. That is, they are not content just to sit back and rattle off the words to a story; rather, they use voice, body, and movement as tools to bring the tale to life (Smitherman, 149).

This description has strong parallels to the definition of an emcee in Hip Hop culture. Not only is their lyrical prowess important, but their delivery and interaction with the crowd are seen as just as, if not more important.

The statement that Hip Hop is orature has more implications than simply describing the oral nature of the music. It pushes back against the Eurocentric definition of orality, and embodies the African definition of orature. The cultural background of Hip Hop also demonstrates how Hip Hop culture developed in the United States from oral Black culture, and shows how Hip Hop came to combine orality and literacy. And, after studying the cultural environment that inspired Hip Hop, it is important to understand Hip Hop’s culture, and how it understands the concepts of orality and writing.

¹ Storey, 6.

Hip Hop Culture: The Essentials (‘Cause Who I'm Talkin Bout Y'all Is Hip-Hop’)

Throughout its forty-year history, Hip Hop has changed and adapted to new styles of music, musical production, and business models. But during this time, Hip Hop has remained rooted in orality, even while writing has permanently moved into Hip Hop culture. To understand Hip Hop as a form of orature, it is important to know how Hip Hop’s oral traditions evolved over time, as well as how rap music’s culture developed more generally in the United States. And though KRS-One has argued in his important book, *The Gospel of Hip Hop*, that Hip Hop and its culture should not be confused with rap music, this essay will use these terms interchangeably because they have become synonymous in popular culture today.¹

In 1973, DJ Cool Herc began setting up his now legendary sound system, the herculords,² in the park outside of his housing project and spun records for the people who lived in his housing project, who were used to community gatherings in the park. While this moment is often viewed as the beginning of Hip Hop culture and rap music as we know it, the actual influences that led to Hip Hop culture and rap music began in the decades before that. In her book, *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose explains that the urban context of the Bronx in New York City, had a profound effect on the development of Hip Hop culture. She says that because of “shrinking federal funds and affordable housing, [and] shifts in the occupational structure away from blue-collar manufacturing and toward corporate and informational services,” minority communities such as those in the Bronx were “more susceptible to slumlords, redevelopers, toxic waste dumps, drug rehabilitation centers, violent

criminals, red-lining, and inadequate city services and transportation” (Rose, 30). These conditions in the Bronx meant that black and latino communities were suffering from widespread poverty, which affected how they lived their everyday lives. These conditions, along with the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, which was meant to connect the tri-state area to New York City, led to the demolition of nearly “60,000 Bronx homes,” (Rose, 31) in the 1960s and early 1970s. These conditions were the immediate context for Hip Hop, on top of the cultural traditions that led to the music itself. Black and Latino people made music from music, and painted on walls because they were not given instruments or canvasses. The culture that Hip Hop created was crucial for the Bronx in the late 1970s because it promoted peace and community building.³

So in 1973, DJ Cool Herc was not simply playing records in a park in the Bronx for fun. His jams in the parks turned into “impromptu parties and community centers” where he would extend “obscure instrumental breaks that created an endless collage of peak dance beats” (Rose, 52). These jams were meant to provide a safe, creative space for the kids in Herc’s neighborhood and provided a safe space for Hip Hop culture to develop. Herc named the people who danced to his music B-boys and B-girls, and their style *breakdancing*, because they loved to dance to his break beats, or the extended instrumental sections that soul, funk and R&B artists would include in between their verses. DJ Cool Herc also began to say short rhymes while playing his records, which reflected the style of the black radio personalities of the 1970s, who presented their radio shows with witty couplets and

catch phrases in between songs.⁴ And so, the elements of Hip Hop culture slowly began to develop from DJ Cool Herc's jams in the park.

The four elements of Hip Hop culture are emceeing, DJ-ing, Breakdancing, and Graffiti writing.⁵ These activities were not isolated to specific groups, but were practiced by people as part of their everyday lives.⁶ As more and more DJs like Cool Herc began DJ-ing, Hip Hop culture began to expand. DJs were the first celebrities in Hip Hop culture, with their ability to entertain large crowds in the Bronx. In an interview with Elliot Wilson and Jay-Z's YouTube channel, "Life and Times," Q-tip, one of the members of A Tribe Called Quest and a respected rapper and producer in his own right, describes the mindset of those early DJs while talking about his own experience DJ-ing. Elliot Wilson asks Q-Tip what the difference is between rapping and DJ-ing, and Q-Tip responds:

When I spin, I try to take people... ya know, first of all, I try to read the crowd and read the energy of the crowd. And not try to make it too much about me, but at the same time, whatever that crowd...makeup is, you know, then I just, like, instantly try to like pull things and try to take them on a journey, and try to like, connect different, you know, music from genre different period, ya know what I'm sayin', but like still keep the party going, you know what I mean?

(Wilson, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ll2fx33ffs>).

Q-Tip's response is insightful because he stresses several points that are central to DJ-ing. His biggest emphasis is on the crowd and their response to his music. This element of entertainment was crucial for early DJs, whose success was predicated on feeling the mood of the crowd, whether it was in the park or in a club, and playing an array of music that would suit the energy of that crowd. So, while DJs have fallen behind the master of ceremonies, or emcee, in terms of fame today, the

DJ was the star of the show early on in Hip Hop. This is important because it effects the development of the emcee, and the overall trajectory of Hip Hop culture.

Emceeing is the element of Hip Hop that has arguably gone through the most change over Hip Hop's forty-year history, and continues to change today. In the beginning, the emcee developed out of a necessity. In his book, *Hip Hop Culture*, Emmett G. Price III explains that DJ Cool Herc "desired assistance keeping the crowd excited, entertained, and motivated to participate" (Price, 35). It was hard for the early DJs to rhyme along with their records because they were so focused on keeping the beat going for their audience and making sure they had the next record lined up; and, therefore, they needed an emcee to help keep the crowd energized, especially in the moments when the DJ had to change records.⁷ So, parties soon had DJs spinning records and emcees keeping the crowd motivated for the DJ by rapping rhymes over their beats. Emcees would continue to grow their skills and eventually become the headlining act over the DJ. It was not until 1979 that the art of rapping truly became a practical occupation instead a hobby. In 1979, the Sugar Hill Gang released "Rapper's Delight," a fifteen-minute song with a live band providing the beat. This song was the first time many people heard rapping, and most rappers from the 1980s have a story about how they remember where they were when they first heard "Rapper's Delight." It seemed to inspire an entire generation of rappers and emcees. "Rapper's Delight" was also the beginning of rap's entry into the music industry, which made Hip Hop culture financially viable.⁸ In the 1980s, rap music would start to become a nationally consumed music genre,

with the popularity of the culture spreading thanks to the financial boosts from the music industry.

The 1980s saw Hip Hop begin to emerge in popular culture and gaining more attention from the music industry. The artists of this decade expanded the craft of rapping beyond the small club shows in the Bronx. Instead of freestyling, the act of spontaneously rapping a song, at shows that promoted DJs, emcees were now the entertainment and financial focus of Hip Hop. During this time, the major elements of Hip Hop were becoming more clearly defined. Popular emcees of the time started to define their craft for people outside of Hip Hop as well. In his book, KRS-One defines the emcee as:

A Hip Hop poet who directs and moves the crowd by rhythmically rhyming in spoken word. The emcee is a cultural spokesperson. Technically, the emcee is a creation of one's community whereas the rapper is a creation of corporate interests (KRS-One, 116).

KRS-One says that directing and moving the crowd is part of the emcee's definition, which adheres to the culture of the 1970s and early 1980s when emcees and DJs performed in front of crowds in small venues instead of large sports/music arenas and they could actually carry a dialogue with their audience.⁹ KRS-One also defines the emcee in opposition to the rapper, stating that they originate from different areas, the local community versus the financial district. This part of the definition gestures back to Hip Hop's origins in the poverty of the Bronx in the 1970s. Emcees are seen as closely connected to their respective community, just as they were in the 1970s, whereas the rapper, who wants to use rap to get rich, is seen as out of touch with the communities they are supposedly representing. It is also evident in KRS-

One's definition that orality plays a central role in being an emcee. Writing would later enter rap music in order to enhance the emcee's oral skills by allowing them to create more complex rhymes or storytelling methods.

In his book, *Hip Hop Culture*, Emmett G. Price III quotes Kool Moe Dee, a well respected emcee from the 1980s, as saying emcees have “a high degree of originality and versatility; attain a high level of mastery over substance, flow, and ‘battle skills’; have a significant social impact; and possess outstanding live performance abilities” (Price, 37). Kool Moe Dee's definition stresses the art form of rapping, which when in balance with crowd interaction makes a great emcee. This is also critical because this allows artists in the 90s and 00s to claim emcee status, even though they do not strictly fit the definition. Later emcees/rappers performed at different venues as their predecessors, where there may not be an opportunity to interact with the crowd, but can still be considered emcees because of their lyrical gifts. Hip Hop songs in the 1980s also began to define what an emcee was, like in Rakim's song “Move the Crowd.” Rakim raps:¹⁰

[Verse 1]

How could I move the crowd
 First of all, ain't no mistakes allowed
 Here's the instruction, put it together
 It's simple ain't it, but quite clever
 Some of you been trying to write rhymes for years
 But weak ideas irritate my ears
 Is this the best that you can make
 Cause if not and you got more, I'll wait
 But don't make me wait too long cause I'm a move on
 The dance floor when they put something smooth on
 So turn up the bass, it's better when it's loud
 Cause I like to move the crowd (Eric B. & Rakim, “Move the Crowd”).

Rakim stresses creativity and ability to engage with the crowd, which echoes KRS-One and Kool Moe Dee's definitions of an emcee. These references to "good" emcees grew as Hip Hop culture continued to debate the aesthetics of good emceeing well into the 90s. The 80s are often seen as the last time rap music and Hip Hop culture coexisted,¹¹ whereas moving into the 1990s, the money that flooded into rap music caused Hip Hop culture to fade into the background.¹² With advances in musical technology, the skills of early DJs and emcees diminished because they could be replicated by using a piece of technology. Also, because rapping became the most popular element of Hip Hop culture, the music industry did not invest any of its money into preserving Graffiti or Breakdancing because they were not equipped to market such activities.

The 1990s were the Golden Era of Hip Hop, with rap music soaring to new commercial heights and more great emcees emerging from all over the country. Pockets of Hip Hop culture developed in the Mid-West and the South, and the West Coast rap scene rose to a level of popularity that rivaled that of the East Coast. From a musical stand point, the domination of the emcee over the DJ was a large phenomenon of the 90s, with the producer's¹³ role growing and the DJ's notability and skills diminishing.¹⁴ Also during this time, the idea of a "real," authentic, Hip Hop began to emerge within the culture, with emcees starting to claim a difference between "emceeing", being lyrically gifted and engaged with the crowd, and "rapping", using the skill of rapping to make money.¹⁵¹⁶ Many songs from the 90s

are concerned with defining an emcee's realness, and what makes a good emcee.

KRS-One raps on his song "MCs Act Like They Don't Know:"

[Verse 2]

MC's can only battle with rhymes that got punchlines
 Let's battle to see who headlines
 Instead of flow for flow let's go show for show
 Toe for toe, yo, you better act like you know
 Too many MC's take that word 'emcee' lightly
 They can't Move a Crowd, not even slightly
 It might be the fact that they express wackness (KRS-One, "MCs Don't Know").

KRS says that emcees must battle in order to see who is better, and that instead of simply comparing rhymes, they should compare their shows to see which emcee can move the crowd better. He also asserts that rappers take the idea of emceeing too lightly because they are not concerned with keeping the crowd engaged, which means they are "wack."

On their song, "Phony Rappers," the group A Tribe Called Quest also speaks about emceeing versus rapping. Q-Tip raps:

[Verse 3 – Q-Tip]

MC's for me make things happening
 Talk about a world but in a form of rapping
 ...
 Just because you rhyme for a couple of weeks
 Doesn't mean that you've reach the MC's peak (A Tribe Called Quest, "Phony Rappers").

Q-Tip says that emcees are active and that they use their rhymes to make things happen. He also says that a rapper cannot become an emcee simply by rapping for any period of time. He implies that becoming an emcee is a longer process that is not simply focused on the skill of rapping.

By the end of the 1990s, the themes of inner-city plight and drug dealing dominated the cultural production of rap music. Many great emcees began their careers by exploring the conditions of inner-city minorities and the terrible conditions those communities faced, but by the end of the 90s, artists had begun to use these narratives to their advantage and to exploit the gangster image of Hip Hop to their financial benefit. A group like Mobb Deep is an example of a group that started out rapping about drugs and inner-city poverty, on their album from 1995, *The Infamous*, but continued to use these narratives on their album in 2006, *Blood Money*, after they had made millions of dollars. The continuous usage of these narratives would foreshadow the rise of artists in the 2000s that would base their whole rap persona on gangster culture and drug dealing, such as 50 Cent. KRS-One and A Tribe Called Quest's song's above were in part a response to these rappers that were commercializing the genre for their own benefit. Those who considered themselves true emcees took it upon themselves to police the original culture to preserve what it stood for.

The 2000s were a decade of large financial growth for rap music,¹⁷ with many more great emcees emerging during this time, but also a plethora of rappers surfacing that simply fed off of the dominant themes in Hip Hop and exploited them for financial gain.¹⁸ The themes of drugs, gang violence and inner-city poverty were all taken to a stereotypical level in Hip Hop because they were seen as the basic elements to a popular Hip Hop song. This meant many rappers were creating unoriginal musical personalities and rapping about these stereotypes, rather than

developing their skills as an emcee. If “Rapper’s Delight” made rapping viable as a profession, Hip Hop could now turn an artist into a superstar and cultural icon. This lured rappers and music executives to find way to exploit the genre for its financial potential.

The 2000s were dominated by major changes in the genre of rap music. Hip Hop culture spread around the globe, developing underground communities with their own interpretations on the culture in countries all around the world. It also expanded all over the US, with rap music being produced and consumed in all areas, not just inner-city communities. In an interview with the radio station Power 105.1, Bun B spoke with The Breakfast Club about the trend of rappers versus emcees in Hip Hop:

Here’s the problem: we have more rappers than emcees. That’s all. That’s all it is. It’s a numbers game. You know? And that’s because of the lifestyle that Hip Hop has, and its very enticing, you know what I’m sayin’, so when people look at television and look at the internet, and see what is perpetuated as the quote “Hip Hop lifestyle,” who wouldn’t want a part of that? Hip Hop is the new Rock and Roll. Like, everything that used to be attributed to rock stars, is now attributed to Hip Hop, who wouldn’t want to be a part of that? And you look at the people that most of Hip Hop is promoted to, and the life that they’re living currently and the demands of that life, and, you know, growing up and trying to struggle and survive in the inner cities of America, who wouldn’t want to get the hell out of that and be a rapper? (The Breakfast Club, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLL7-Ky-tk>).

Bun B speaks about up and coming rappers, and how they approach rapping as a source of income for their families, instead of, he implies, how emcees approaches rapping as an art form that they would like to contribute to, for profit or simply for the sake of the art.

The differentiation between “real” and “fake” Hip Hop, and an “emcee” versus “rapper,” would expand during this decade, just as it had started in the 90s. The 2000s was the most successful period for Hip Hop as a music genre, but many within the culture said it had become a shadow of its former self.¹⁹ Snoop Dogg, on his YouTube show GGN News, interviewed DJ Premier about the current state of Hip Hop, and the topic of emceeing arose:

SNOOP DOGG. DMC told me that before (...) he like ‘yo, you an emcee, you a real em-cee.’ I’m like, fo’ real? I’m like, ‘DMC, you know Snoop Dogg’s shit, don’t fuck wit me, man’.

DJ PREMIER. Just you talkin’ on stage, to talk to a crowd, and wit no, and without the, doin’ your performance, that’s emceein’. You rhymin’ when you spitin’, emcee-in’ is when you like ‘ayyo, how many of y’all (gibberish)... AHFFF (crowd screaming).’ You could ask that same question and they could be like ‘ehhh (unenthused crowd)’.

SNOOP. Mhmm, Mhmm.

PREMIER. And if that’s how they do it, an emcee goin’ go, ‘hold up, did y’all hear what I said?’...

SNOOP. ...Yeah...

PREMIER. ‘I gotta make anyone’...

SNOOP. ...Master of Ceremonies.

PREMIER. Yeaahh, you gotta control that crowd.

SNOOP. Okay, see, you teachin’ now.

PREMIER. Yeah, you know, but a lotta people that want it, that want the mic, are not emcees. You know, there is a difference. Emcees will always be able to live in the culture

(Snoop Dogg, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjor6oI0otM>).²⁰

Snoop Dogg is a respected emcee in Hip Hop, but even he looked to an older artist to call him an emcee, which demonstrates the reverence for artists from the 1980s and earlier, as well as the fact that emcees rarely give themselves the title of emcee, and instead bestow it on others. And DJ Premier reiterates the earlier definitions of emceeing by emphasizing the emcee’s interaction with the crowd. Artists from the 90s and 2000s continued to reminisce about the 1980s as the period of true emcees

and base their definitions of an emcee on the culture from the 70s and 80s. Other concepts developed in conjunction with the definition of the emcee throughout Hip Hop's history, such as terms to describe the lyrical abilities of emcees and their personas, such as their flow and their realness in Hip Hop.

Flow is a more clearly defined concept in rap music than emceeing and is crucial to any emcee or rapper. The most succinct definition comes from Raekwon, one of the original members of the Wu-Tang Clan, who was interviewed by H. Samy Alim and anthologized in Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal's book, *That's the Joint!*. Raekwon says that, "flow is like, how you say it" (Forman and Neal, 550). Alim also interviewed Pharoahe Monch about flow, and Pharoahe described flow as:

How the person rides the beat, you know. Some MC's ride the beat soulfully...some MC's go against the grain of the beat, but they're so on point and you understand what they're doing, you know (Forman and Neal, 551).

Jelani Cobb offers a more formal definition in *Till the Break of Dawn*, where he defines flow as:

An individual time signature, the rapper's own idiosyncratic approach to the use of time. Flow has two basic characteristics: the division of syllables and the velocity at which they are spoken (Cobb, 87).

Cobb breaks down flow in relation to time and explains how an emcee approaches the speed of their delivery. Emcees can either elongate or shorten syllables to speed up or slow down their delivery, or they could increase the rate at which they say the words they are rapping.

Flow is critical to an emcees' persona because it is what differentiates them from other artists in the genre. Ol' Dirty Bastard, from the Wu-Tang Clan, with his

loud and soulful voice, flows completely differently from Jay-Z, with his slow and slick delivery, who flows completely differently from Rapsody, with her ability to change the pitch of her voice depending on the verse, and so on and so on. There are common types of flow that rely on the two basic characteristics that Cobb defines. Some emcees can rhyme extremely fast, such as Twista and Busta Rhymes; and other emcees have smooth voices that, for lack of a better word, flow over the beat, like Big Daddy Kane and Method Man. Flow is also the skill in rap music that prevents cover bands²¹ from developing in Hip Hop. Every rhyme ever said by a rapper or emcee essentially has its own “flow context,” that when read on paper or taken out of context does not sound right.²² It is therefore inappropriate if a performer chooses to recite a rapper’s song, and simply tries to replicate that rapper’s flow. The following songs will demonstrate both good and bad flow in relation to their respective beats. On his song “King Kunta,” Kendrick Lamar changes his flow from a slow pace to a moderate pace, all while staying rhythmically in sync with the beat. He begins by rapping:

[Verse 1]

... The yam is the power that be {*echoes*}
 ... You can smell it when I'm walkin' down the street
 (Oh yes we can, oh yes we can!) I can dig rappin'
 ... But a rapper with a ghostwriter, what the fuck happened? (Kendrick Lamar, “King Kunta”).

The source of these lyrics, the Original Hip Hop Lyrics Archive,²³ included ellipses to indicate the pauses that Kendrick takes in-between lines, trying to show his slow pace. He speeds up towards the end of the song, where he raps:

[Verse 2]

*I was gonna kill a couple rappers but they did it to themselves
 Everybody's suicidal, they don't even need my help
 This shit is elementary, I'll probably go to jail
 If I shoot at your identity and bounce to the left
 Stuck a flag in my city, everybody's screamin' "Compton"
 I should probably run for mayor when I'm done to be honest
 And I put that on my mama and my baby boo too
 Twenty million walkin' out the court buildin', woo woo (Kendrick Lamar,
 "King Kunta").*

For understanding Kendrick's flow, the content of these lyrics is not as important as their delivery. Besides being more lyrically dense than the first verse, this verse is delivered at a much quicker pace than the first lines rapped by Kendrick on this song. An example of a flow that is out of sync with the beat is Vinny Cha\$e's "Rolls Rollie." Here, the beat is too complex and fast for Vinny's slow and quiet rapping style. The song has a synthetic drum beat that moves in and out, as well as a sound that is reminiscent of a tambourine in the background, which is also moving at a fast pace. All of these sounds confuse the listener because Vinny's flow stands in such opposition to the beat. He raps:

[Verse 2]
 The way that I control the V when I move to the city, yeah
 Controllin' a milli, million dollars let's get it
 My art on the wall, your bitch on my balls
 I feel like Lebron, niggas should pay me to ball
 See this bitch with me? I got sick swag
 I call that bitch Nicki, plus I let me clique bang (Vinny Cha\$e, "Rolls Rollie").

Vinny's style is so slow that the complex beat overpowers his lyrics, and the final result is a song that sounds off and unappealing, at least for a fan of Hip Hop.²⁴ These two songs demonstrate how flow operates in a rap song, and how it affects the sound of the song, as well as the listener's reception of the emcee/rapper.

Beyond the skills an emcee possesses, the listener's perception of the emcee's authenticity is critical for their success. This authenticity in Hip Hop is called "realness."

The most common aspect of realness is staying true to Hip Hop's original message and values, and not giving into commercial incentives or pop music trends.²⁵²⁶ However, this is where realness seems to have a circular definition. To be real, one has to know what is real, and therefore they are real. So, the many interpretations of Hip Hop's original messages and values means that realness changes from emcee to emcee, fan to fan. Besides staying true to Hip Hop's culture, geography and origin also play important roles in defining realness. In his book, *Prophets of the Hood*, Imani Perry speaks about realness, and asserts that it "demands that artists maintain or use symbols asserting their allegiance to black youth populations, or subgroups within that community" (Perry, 87). So, an emcee's relationship to Black culture is also pivotal to being real in Hip Hop. And as it relates to Black culture, realness gains a literal meaning, requiring an emcee to have real life connections to Black culture, and not mythicizing their cultural background.²⁷²⁸ Blackness is pivotal to Hip Hop because it provided the cultural foundation for the music, so to be real in Hip Hop means that an emcee cannot lie about their cultural roots, and how they tie into Black culture. This is critical for white rappers especially, because if a white emcee, such as Vanilla Ice, lie about their origins, they can be called out and dismissed by others in Hip Hop. This is crucial for understanding Eminem's place in Hip Hop, because is the anomaly

among white rappers. He did not lie about his rough background from the slums of Detroit, and he worked on his craft enough to prove to others in Hip Hop that he could hold his own on the microphone. Those who are not real in Hip Hop are called “wack”, or are said to be “fronting/frontin” or exhibiting “wackness.”

Realness is a topic that supports certain value judgments and claims that real emcees/rappers or songs are more pure or significant than others.²⁹ Emmett George Price in his book *Hip Hop Culture*, discusses the development of the idea of realness, and why there was a growing need for such a term in Hip Hop. He says that in the “mid-1970s, questions of authenticity were irrelevant,” because the culture was confined enough that speaking about a common reality and challenges that the community faced was the only authenticity an emcee needed,³⁰ whereas in the 1980s and 1990s, realness and authenticity expanded, and as he says, opened “a Pandora’s box of mischief” (Price, 45-6). Price goes on to list some of the important questions that were raised as a result of the concept of realness coming to dominate Hip Hop:

Do practitioners have more rights and privileges within the community than the fans[?]...Is inclusion into the realm of Hip Hop based on participation as an artist, or can participation as a consumer off the same entitlement to claim Hip Hop affiliation? Is Hip Hop only for Blacks? Latinos and Latinas? Is the culture only for the poor and downtrodden? (Price, 46).

Price’s questions raise interesting issues relating to realness, especially that of participation or membership in Hip Hop culture. Realness is the concept that Hip Hop uses to police the boundaries of its culture, which means emcees have two audiences that they must satisfy. Emcees are expected to remain real in the eyes of

their fellow emcees, as well as their listeners, and if they do not satisfy one of these groups, they can be called out for being fake.

Realness is also constantly discussed in Hip Hop songs, just like the definition of emceeing. On KRS-One's song "Ova Here," he attacks the rapper Nelly, who at the time was making commercial rap songs in St. Louis. KRS raps:

[Verse 2]

Yo Nelly, you ain't for real and you ain't universal
Your whole style sounds like an N'Sync commercial

...

I think it's 'bout time we stop these pop rappers
Fuck these pop rappers, hip hop does matter
To me; does it matter to you, my crew?

...

Let me tell you, let's give hip hop a lift
And don't buy Nelly's album on June 25th
That'll send a message back to all them sellouts
House nigga rapper, your bottom done fell out

...

Even St. Louis don't like you (KRS-One, "Ova Here").

KRS makes several references to selling out and being a pop rapper, which echoes the central theme of realness. He also compares to Nelly to a house slave,³¹ meaning that Nelly does whatever the music industry wants him to do in order to make a hit record, even if it means compromising Hip Hop's culture. KRS' final diss³² is to attack Nelly's street cred³³ in St. Louis, which demonstrates Imani Perry's explanation of realness.

These essential Hip Hop terms not only construct the foundation for Hip Hop culture, but they also demonstrate how the cultural background of orality directly influenced the development of Hip Hop culture. The emcee relies on his or her oral delivery when rapping, and are considered wack if they do not have good control of

their vocal abilities. Flow's central role to the emcee clearly relates to the value Black culture places on an individual's oral abilities, whether it relates to the sermon or simply rapping in the 1960s sense of the word. And, realness ensures that Hip Hop remains faithful to its cultural background, even though writing culture and commercialism have entered the culture. Hip Hop demonstrates the strong bond between orality and writing in three different types of songs. The first group of songs involves sampling and versioning, and how they take previously written lyrics and give them a new meaning in a Hip Hop song. The second group contains songs that focus on vocal styles, and how artists use their voices or means of delivery to create a unique oral signature on their songs. And, the third group consists of songs that use unique interpretations of storytelling, and how artists create different ways to deliver a story by using orality.

¹ He says that, "Hip Hop's true history is NOT the history of Rap music entertainment. Rap music's entertainment history can be included in Hip Hop's history, but to interpret Hip Hop's cultural history through mainstream Rap music entertainment is a mistake" (92). This is a crucial distinction that KRS makes between Hip Hop and rap. I want to make it clear that the following "history of Hip Hop" is in fact my perspective on the history of rap. I am only addressing the history of rap because it is the only element of Hip Hop culture that is relevant to my study of orality.

² Rose, 51

³ KRS-One, 552

⁴ Rose, 52

⁵ Beatboxing and fashion/street wear also sometimes included as Hip Hop elements, but they developed after the core four elements

⁶ Hip-Hop Within and Without the Academy, 62

⁷ Price, 27

⁸ Rose, 56

⁹ See Appendix, fig. 1, 2, and 3.

¹⁰ This is the first of many quotes from songs that I will use in this thesis. Here, I want to address my own subject position in relation to these quotes. I quote several

songs that use the n-word, and I do so to keep the songs as they were intended to be heard. As a white man, I understand that this word has a very complex meaning, and in no way am I trying to put forward my own idea as to how the n-word should be used. I am not even a part of the debate between the meaning of the n-word, that is, if it is a reclaimed word or forever a racial epithet. I do not have the right to comment on the meaning of that word, and I reproduce it here so as to remain authentic to the emcee or rapper's intended message.

¹¹ KRS-One, 124-125

¹² KRS-One, 125

¹³ The producer is the person in charge of making the artist's record. This includes everything from financing the record to advising the artist on how to produce their music. Unlike a DJ, they are an employee of a record label, and therefore have larger responsibilities than just making the beat for a record.

¹⁴ Breakdancing and Graffiti writing also lost out on the commercialization of rap music, and became niche activities that struggled to survive in Hip Hop as the culture was being commercialized for the white mainstream audience by the music industry.

¹⁵ KRS-One, 712

¹⁶ Perry, 95

¹⁷ Price, 197

¹⁸ KRS-One, 125-126

¹⁹ I follow what I call the "Nas School of Thought" which means that I do believe Hip Hop "died" at some point in the mid-2000s, if not at the moment when Nas released the single (and album of the same name) "Hip Hop Is Dead" in 2006. And while I am happy to debate the merits of Hip Hop's death, and recent resurgence or "rebirth," whatever metaphor is appropriate, I will not digress further into this argument for the sake of remaining focused on the overall timeline of Hip Hop.

²⁰ The DMC he refers to is DMC of the group Run-DMC.

²¹ a band that plays songs previously recorded by other performers,
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cover%20band>

²² Bradley, 30

²³ ohhla.com

²⁴ Thankfully, Vinny is a much better rapper than portrayed in this one song.

²⁵ Hess 16, 23

²⁶ KRS-One, 62

²⁷ Perry, 87

²⁸ KRS-One, 63

²⁹ In the introduction to chapter four of the book *Hip Hop Culture*, where Emmett George Price discusses realness, he writes that he presents "an unbiased, objective view of some of the major challenges and controversies of Hip Hop culture" (Price, 45). Just as with authenticity, whenever a Hip Hop fan talks about realness, they attempt to give an unbiased answer that seems like the evident truth.

³⁰ Price, 45

³¹ Amiri Baraka put forth the dichotomy between house and field slaves. He said that “the house servants were extended privileges that were never enjoyed by the majority of ‘field niggers’ (Baraka, 123). So, KRS-One’s diss of Nelly carries extra weight because of this comparison that KRS chooses to make between Nelly and the house slave.

³² slang for disrespect/disrespecting

³³ slang for respect in one’s neighborhood

The Methods of Sampling And Versioning In Hip Hop (‘Can We Hear Your Funky Fresh Scratchin’ Again?’)

From the beginning, Hip Hop incorporated oral traditions into the western writing style of musical production. This was most evident in DJ’s sampling of other songs, specifically the sampling of lyrics, rather than a break beat. In his book, *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy*, Houston A. Baker Jr. gives a succinct definition for sampling:

Taking a portion (phrase, riff, percussive vamp, etc.) of a known or unknown record (or a video game squawk, a touch-tone telephone medley, verbal tag from Malcolm X or Martin Luther King) and combining it in the overall mix (Baker, 90).

Baker describes the complexity of sampling, and its role in making a Hip Hop song. The portions that are sampled are either phrases of lyrics or sections of music. Lyrics are often sampled as the chorus for the DJ’s new song, but they can also be played intermittently throughout the verses. The DJ can also scratch lyrics in, that is, rotating the record back and forth under the needle so that a scratching noise is created through the speakers, in order to elongate or highlight a rhyme that may have been especially witty or creative.¹ If the DJ is not sampling lyrics, then they are sampling a portion of a song’s beat, usually a small part, in order to loop it, playing it over and over again, so that it creates a new beat from that small part. And, as Baker says, when sampling for the beat, DJs do not always sample strictly musical sounds, but instead can sample everything from a whistle or hand clap, to bird calls or even the sound of a glass of water being poured. It is from these small pieces that the DJ creates their beat. They may sample strings, such as violins or

cellos, or brass, like trumpets or saxophones, from one song, and then using a keyboard or drum machine create the other elements of their beat.

Sampling, therefore, is critical to a DJ's agency, especially when an emcee is involved. Even though DJs were the originators of rhyming over records, when the emcee came to dominate rap music, DJs relied on this act of lyrical sampling to retain their voice in Hip Hop. That is, if DJs were to remain relevant in the future of Hip Hop, which had become focused on producing albums, rather than performing live, then DJs had to use sampling to retain their identity. The unique styles of scratching and differing musical tastes are what differentiate DJs from each other, especially when they did not have the same sort of presence or agency that emcees have in Hip Hop. One of the similarities DJs do have is that whether they are sampling an emcee or a soul, funk or pop singer, they are re-interpreting what the old lyrics meant, and giving them a new meaning by using them for their own voice.

On their album, *No More Mr. Nice Guy*, the group Gangstarr, made up of Guru and DJ Premier, has a song titled "DJ Premier in Deep Concentration." On this track, Guru does not rap a single line, but instead DJ Premier samples several phrases over and over again to speak to the audience. He samples the phrases:

(Sample 1) Here's a little story that must be told

(Sample 2) DJ Premier Is in Deep concentration

(Sample 3) Can't remember I'm the real super [?]

(Sample 4) Transform

(Sample 5) Can we hear your funky fresh tracks again

(Sample 6) Have a handout

(Sample 7) People clap your hands

(Sample 8) We outta here

(Sample 9) Moving on (GangStarr, “Concentration”).

DJ Premier’s samples demonstrate how he speaks to the listener without using his own voice. He samples whole phrases from other pieces of music (Sample 1) and also scratches words together from different records in order to make a sentence he wants (Sample 2). There is also a contrast between DJ Premier’s samples themselves, with some coming from soul, funk, disco, or jazz, and others coming from Hip Hop artists, such as Eric B. & Rakim, or Marley Marl and MC Shan. This means that while Premier has sampled musical elements together to make his beat, each vocal sample also brings with it its own tone and style. This is especially evident in the line which DJ Premier samples together several pieces to form a sentence. The tones and speeds of the voices are different because they come from different genres of music, which means that the sentence, while making sense grammatically, sounds slightly choppy because the pieces have been sampled together. This is where the DJ combines orality and literacy: He creates a grammatically correct sentence, which he deliberately forms, but at the same time, the sentence cannot be understood fully until the listener hears that the different pieces do not flow seamlessly together. So, while the sentence can be quoted on the page, the reader cannot fully understand its effect until they hear the song.

Eric B., of the group Eric B. & Rakim, has two songs that demonstrate a different sampling style from DJ Premier’s technique. On the song “Eric B. Is On The Cut,” from the group’s debut album, *Paid in Full*, Rakim, one of the greatest MCs of all time,² does not rap on the entire record, instead letting Eric B. speak

with his hands. Eric B actually samples Rakim from another track on the album instead of having him write a new verse for this song. The only vocal sample on the track is the line “Eric B. is on the cut,” which he scratches in and out many times. He uses scratching to break up the line so that he can repeat it over and over without losing the audience’s attention. And, while this song only samples one line, Eric B. is able to manipulate that one line into a song that is over three minutes long. This, again, shows how the DJ combines oral and writing traditions through sampling. While he has sampled a line from another rap song, in order to write the lyrics to “Eric B. Is On The Cut,” the transcriber would have to write the same line over and over again or try to notate exactly where Eric B. scratches in and out of the line or even the syllable in some cases. Either way, those representations would not fully represent the song’s sound because it is so strongly rooted in the oral delivery of the line. The alliance between writing and orality becomes more clear here because having the line written down, as well as listening to the song, would mean the listener could fully understand Eric B.’s song.

The second Eric B. & Rakim song that uses the sampling technique is called “Eric B. Never Scared,” from their second album, *Follow the Leader*. This song is similar to DJ Premier’s because it samples multiple lines, but Eric B.’s scratching style is completely different from DJ Premier’s style. Eric B. samples several lines that are repeated on this track:

- (Sample 1) Eric B. make ‘em clap to this
- (Sample 2) Felt so smooth, it felt so rough
- (Sample 3) Eric B., never sayin, I just test one

(Sample 4) The mighty God is a living man (Eric B. & Rakim, “Never Scared”).

With just four lines, Eric B. creates a song that lasts five minutes. The song once again demonstrates contrasts between the lines that Eric B. samples, with the first and third samples coming from previous Eric B. records, and the fourth sample, which is a sped up line from Bob Marley’s song “Get Up, Stand Up.” Eric B. also uses scratching heavily on this song, which elongates the lines so that he can make the song last longer.

The song “The House that Cee Built” on Big Daddy Kane’s album, *It’s a Big Daddy Thing*, by Mister Cee, Kane’s DJ, is one of the most complex examples of a DJ sampling on one track. He samples over twenty-one records, some to create the complex beat, and the others to create lyrics on his song. He begins the song with a sample that was used to introduce another record, “introducing, ladies and gentlemen, the young man that’s had over 35 soul classics, among these classics, a tune that will never die, tunes like,” (Big Daddy Kane, “House Cee Built”) and then proceeds to scratch in the names of his most famous Big Daddy Kane songs that he has produced. Once this introduction is over, he begins to sample the rest of the lines that he uses on the song:

(Sample 1) This is a house that Cee Built Y’all

(Sample 2) Get up, get up, cause its party time. Clap your Hands

(Sample 3) Here we go

(Sample 4) Hey, Hey, Hey

(Sample 5) I knew I was the man with the master plan

(Sample 6) Mister Cee

(Sample 7) Here I come

(Sample 8) Here’s Mister Cee, or as we say, the man with soul

(Sample 9) Yeah Kane

(Sample 10) Hey, Hey daddy

(Sample 11) They call me the DJ

(Sample 12) You just got to

(Sample 13) Just don't do it (Big Daddy Kane, "House Cee Built").

Just like DJ Premier, Mister Cee samples entire lines (sample 5), as well as scratching together several pieces to create whole lines (samples 1 and 11). He samples other rappers, such as Slick Rick and Big Daddy Kane, and he also samples soul and funk legends, like James Brown and Aretha Franklin. And, just like DJ Premier and Eric B.'s songs, while Mister Cee's lyrics make sense on the page grammatically, the relationship between the lines cannot be fully understood until they are heard. All of these DJs demonstrate the relationship that writing and literacy have in Hip Hop by using sampling, but it is not the only technique of producing a song in Hip Hop that shows this relationship.

The other method that allows both DJs and emcees to re-interpret old samples is called versioning. Versioning and sampling are very similar, however, as Tricia Rose explains in her book, *Black Noise*, versioning "entails the reworking of an entire composition," so that the "*referenced* version takes on *alternative lives and alternative meanings* in a fresh context" (Rose, 90. Emphasis in the original). So versioning allows DJs and emcees to take the previously written song and re-interpret the entire track by sampling parts of the beat and also rapping in a style that relates to the original song.

One of the earliest examples of versioning comes on Kool Moe Dee's song "Rock You," from his album, *How Ya Like Me Know*. This song uses the beat and the end of the chorus of Queen's song "We Will Rock You." Kool Moe Dee uses the

chorus to emphasize how he is going to best any emcee that stands up to his rhyming abilities. He raps:

[Verse 1]
 We saw you on the pop chart
 Got off to a fast start
 Now you slowin' down, homie
 Show me where is your heart
 I want you to battle me
 But all you do is saddle me
 Ridin' my bone
 And you won't because you know that'll be
 Your crucifixion
 My resurrection
 Here's my prediction:
 You need protection

Rock you
 Rock you
 Rock-rock-rock-rock you (Kool Moe Dee, "Rock You").

Kool Moe Dee's song samples the famous beat of Queen's song, that has become synonymous with fighting or dominating, especially within the world of sports chants. As well, Kool Moe Dee's lyrics are about battling other emcees, so his use of Queen's song about rocking someone is intentional. Versioning allows Kool Moe Dee to reinforce the message on his own song, as well as showing his lyrical ability over a sample that is uncommon in Hip Hop. Kool Moe Dee's use of versioning also means that the audience must acknowledge the original source, while listening to his new interpretation. That means any written lyrics for this song would have to include a note about the chorus and beat sounding different from the rest of the song, and how the sample comes from an entirely different genre. Reading these

lyrics on the page would not give the reader the full experience of Kool Moe Dee's version of Queen's "We Will Rock You."

Big Daddy Kane's "W.G.O.N.R.S," from his album *Daddy's Home*, also versions a very well known song. His song samples Marvin Gaye's song, "What's Going On," for the beat, and Kane also adopts the style of Gaye's song by rapping about his neighborhood and the problems it is facing. Kane's song begins with quiet conversations, similar to those at the end of Marvin Gaye's song, and then the beat comes in. Marvin Gaye sang about unrest and uncertainty at the beginning of the 1970s, with the civil rights movement transforming into the Black power movement, which was captured in the chorus of his song:

Picket lines and picket signs
 Don't punish me with brutality
 Talk to me, so you can see
 Oh, what's going on
 What's going on
 Yeah, what's going on
 Ah, what's going on (Gaye, "What's Going On").

Gaye is searching for answers in his song, symbolically speaking to his mother, father and brother earlier on the track. Big Daddy Kane is also searching for answers, but he is concerned with his community and the violence and deterioration he sees around him. He raps:

I seen a kid freshly dipped with mad gold
 Fifteen years old, with plenty drugs bein sold
 But then somebody caught him for his Air Jordans
 his drugs the cash and the jewels he was sportin
 You wanna call your girl a B-I-T-C-H
 You can't appreciate so now she's humpin your man, then she ain't
 Cause when you teach her that hoe mentality
 They accept that as reality and give all your friends the skin

You need to show some love for your people
 All men are created equal, that's why with everybody I always
 spread love, and keep my pockets full of dol-dollars
 But check it out now
 We're not the uncivilized, the Kane
 So let's get it together, man we did it when we were slaves
 Instead of always tryin to blame someone else
 Take a look around, and ask yourself (Big Daddy Kane, "W.G.O.N.R.S").

Big Daddy Kane raps about drug dealing, violence, misogyny, and a lack of unity as the problems he and his community are facing. This parallels the unrest and uncertainty that Gaye sang about in his song, but recontextualizes it into the problems that Big Daddy Kane sees in 1994. Again, versioning allows Kane to use the message of Marvin Gaye's song to reinforce the message on his own song. And the relationship between his version and Gaye's song cannot be fully described by transcribing the lyrics onto the page. Instead, listening to the song, along with the written lyrics, allows the listener to fully understand Big Daddy Kane's version of Gaye's song.

One of the most famous examples of versioning in Hip Hop came in 1998 with Jay Z's song "Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem)," from his album called *Vol. 2...Hard Knock Life*. His song reused the chorus from the song "It's the Hard Knock Life," from the 1977 musical *Annie*. The musical follows an eleven-year-old girl named Annie, who is an orphan. She lives in an orphanage with an alcoholic matron who makes life very hard for her and the other orphans. Jay-Z versions her song in order to talk about the struggles he has gone through, and about the struggles that people still face in his neighborhood. He samples the chorus from Annie's song, and then raps:

Chorus

["Annie" sample]

It's the hard knock life, for us
 It's the hard knock life, for us!!
 Steada treated, we get tricked
 Steada kisses, we get kicked
 It's the hard knock life!!

Verse 2 [Jay-Z]

I flow for those 'dro'ed out; all my niggaz
 locked down in the ten by fo', controllin the house
 We live in hard knocks, we don't take over we borrow blocks
 Burn em down and you can have it back daddy, I'd rather that
 I flow for chicks wishin, they ain't have to strip to pay tuition
 I see you vision mama, I put my money on the longshots
 All my ballers that's born to clock
 Now I'ma be on top whether I perform or not
 I went from lukewarm to hot; sleepin on futons and cots
 to King Size, dream machines, the green fives
 I've seen pies let the thing between my eyes analyze life's ills
 Then I put it down type real
 I'm tight grill with the phony, rappers y'all might feel we homies
 I'm like still, y'all don't know me, shit!
 I'm type real when my situation ain't improvin
 I'm tryin to murder everything movin, feel me?! (Jay-Z, "Hard Knock Life").

Jay-Z raps for the people strung out on drugs, his friends locked in prison, and women who are stripping to pay for college tuition. He says that when he was poor, he was doing everything possible to reach success, and that he has never lost that mentality, even with his newfound fame and money. By rapping about his life in the ghetto, it lends a different feeling to the chorus with Annie singing "it's a hard knock life." Jay-Z's versioning of her song means that reading his lyrics does not reveal the full effect of his song. Annie's chorus must be heard in the context of his lyrics, in order to understand exactly how Jay-Z is borrowing from and re-interpreting Annie's song.

Kanye West provides another example of versioning, but this time complicates the relationship between his song and the song he versions. On his song “Blood on the Leaves,” he samples the song “Strange Fruit,” sung by Nina Simone, which was a cover of the original song sung by Billie Holiday. These songs were based on the poem “Bitter Fruit,” by Abel Meeropol, which uses the metaphor of strange fruit hanging from trees to represent the lynching that was rampant in the southern United States. At first, Kanye’s message on his song seems to have very little to do with the powerful message contained within “Strange Fruit.” He raps:

[Verse 1]

I just need to clear my mind now
 It's been racin since the summertime
 Now I'm holdin down the summer now
 And all I want is what I can't buy now
 Cause I ain't got the money on me right now
 And I told you to wait
 Yeah I told you to wait
 So I'ma need a little mo' time now
 Cause I ain't got the money on me right now
 And I thought you could wait
 Yeah I thought you could wait
 These bitches surroundin me
 All want somethin out me
 Then they talk about me
 Would be lost without me
 We could've been somebody
 Thought you'd be different 'bout it
 Now I know you not it
 So let's get on with it (Kanye West, “Strange Fruit”).

Kanye raps about two big life events he has gone through since rising to stardom.

The first is the death of his mother, Donda West, who died in 2007 while undergoing plastic surgery. West’s mother played a central role in his life,³ being able to comfort him and calm him when others could not reach him. He says that he

wants the only thing that money cannot buy, and that would be to have his mother with him again. He transitions from his grief over his mother to his frustration surrounding the circumstances with his ex-fiancée. He speaks about how his fame and the vices that come with that interfered with their relationship. And, while these two events caused Kanye a lot of sorrow, they are not obviously comparable to the sadness expressed in the song “Strange Fruit.” However, when taken into the larger context of the album, *Yeezus*, the connections to “Strange Fruit” become stronger. Kanye West did several interviews, which have all now become infamous,⁴ concerning his entry into the world of fashion and the discrimination he claimed he was receiving in the industry. On an earlier track, “New Slaves,” Kanye discusses his troubles with the fashion industry, and makes another reference to “Strange Fruit:”

[Verse 1]

My momma was raised in the era when
 Clean water was only served to the fairer skin
 Doin' clothes you would have thought I had help
 But they wasn't satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself

[Verse 2]

I see the blood on the leaves
 I know that we the new slaves
 I see the blood on the leaves
 They throwin' hate at me
 Want me to stay at ease
 Fuck you and your corporation
 Y'all niggas can't control me
 I know that we the new slaves (Kanye West, “New Slaves”).

Kanye alludes to the discrimination he faces the fashion industry, claiming that major fashion companies would not be impressed with his work unless he picked his

own cotton, an illusion to the master/slave relationship from slavery. He also wants to fight back against the “corporations,” and their attempts at controlling his actions. He references a line from the song “Strange Fruit,” which he also samples on “Blood on the Leaves,” in reference to the corporations, and claims that we, the consumers, are new slaves. And, while it is still being debated whether or not Kanye was discriminated against, and how much of the blame lies on his own shoulders, his claims of discrimination, his aversion to commercialism and corporate power, and his personal grieving, make the connections to the pain expressed in “Strange Fruit,” that much more clear. So, while simply reading the lyrics to “Blood on the Leaves,” may not reveal the deeper connections to the song “Strange Fruit,” and its message, hearing his sample, as well as his lyrics helps to establish the connection he draws in his versioning of Nina Simone’s song. His song demonstrates the need to have both the written lyrics and the song in order to understand how his versioning is re-interpreting the original song.

One of the most recent songs that uses versioning comes from the Wu-Tang Clan, with their song “Miracle” on their album, *A Better Tomorrow*. This song does not version a specific song, but rather a genre of music. The song begins with a male and female voice singing in a Broadway musical style, over soft piano and strings:

If a miracle, could save us from
 The travesty, that we've become
 If a million sons would stand as one
 We will overcome, overcome (Wu-Tang Clan, “Miracle”).

Then a drum line enters and Inspectah Deck begins rapping:

The whole world trippin', listen it's still a cold world

The other day I had to bury my homegirl
 Wrong place, caught one in her face
 Plus her man's on the run and couldn't come to the wake
 For Heaven's sake, you pray God open the gate
 In this modern day Sodom, that's their only escape
 10 year olds are cold, no, they don't hesitate
 2 up a G pack, he chose the whole 8
 Catch a 5 to 10 sellin' 5's and 10's
 And the police informer was your childhood friend
 In the real world, gotta hustle for your dream
 Extend your clips, fit the muzzle with the beam
 For the love of cream, it's nothin' but routine
 Swing on the judge, take a couple for the team
 He's the young Capone, he grew up in a drug home
 Stranded on the Ave with a blunt and his gun shown (Wu-Tang Clan,
 "Miracle").

In the beginning, the miracle that the chorus refers to is unclear, it could reference the relationship the male and female voice seem to have, or something larger that effects them both. But after Inspectah Deck's verse, the chorus is contextualized within the inner-city poverty and violence that he raps about. Their miracle now refers to those living in poverty and their chance at making it out of the conditions that they are living in. In order to understand the difference between the chorus and the verses on this song, the audience must hear the difference between the styles of the singers and the rappers. That difference cannot simply be described on paper and still reveal the contrast between the two parts of the song.

Sampling and versioning are two styles of song making in Hip Hop that demonstrate the coexistence of writing and orality within the music. As Walter J. Ong says:

In an oral culture, knowledge, once acquired, [has] to be constantly repeated or it would be lost: fixed, formulaic thought patterns [are] essential for wisdom and effective administration (Ong, 24).⁵

DJs rely on the fact that their samples can be recorded, looped, and replayed on a new track, but they manipulate that “fixed” and “formulaic” method of music production to create a kind of oral “knowledge.” Not only is it evident that the DJs repeat their samples over and over again for the audience, but because they are sampling and not directly creating the lyrics and beats, the audience cannot fully understand their songs until they listen to them.

¹ See Appendix, fig. 4 and 5.

² See Shabe Allah’s review in *The Source Magazine’s* Top 50 Lyricists of all time.

³ See the song: Hey Mama – Kanye West (2005)

⁴ Kanye did a lot of interviews surrounding the *Yeezus* album, and for the most part he was very incoherent about what he was trying to talk about on the album. Here are just some of the interviews he did: Kanye West on *The Breakfast Club* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCxvk9NjRKQ>, Kanye West on *Sway in the Morning* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S78tT_YxF_c, and Kanye West with Zane Lowe <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9mVmHdYZUI>.

⁵ What Ong means by formulaic thought patterns is the system of knowledge that writing culture values, which he implies oral culture does not.

Vocal Styles: What Makes An Emcee (‘Mostly Tha Voice’)

The strongest oral tradition in Hip Hop is the emcee/rapper’s unique vocal style. What sets Hip Hop music apart from poetry is that the tone of voice and delivery of rap songs is so distinct that simply reading the lyrics does not help the reader fully understand what the emcee/rapper is trying to say. In his film, *Something From Nothing: The Art of Rap*, Ice-T speaks to emcees and rappers about their knowledge of Hip Hop, and he asks Salt, of the group Salt-n-Peppa, about the importance of an emcee finding their voice. She responds:

SALT. Hearing myself and experiencing the art of being on the microphone and figuring out what your voice is, that was the hard part for me. That’s what people don’t understand. Its not like – they think you’re just talking over a record, but we had to develop who we were as artists, our voice, you know, our – our [inflections], our flow, how we were gonna sound, how we were gonna be different from all other women, and that took a minute to develop (Ice-T, 2012).¹

Salt emphasizes that she and her group mate had to develop their own vocal styles before they could truly progress in rap music. Emcees and rappers have to pay special attention to their performative voice because they want to be “different from all [the] other women [and men]” (Ice-T, 2012) in Hip Hop. Ice-T also interviews MC Lyte, another famous emcee, and talks to her about how she got started in rap music, and about her first performance:

MC LYTE. By the time I first performed on a stage for people, I was performing ‘I Cram to Understand U.’ But prior to that, George Lucien, Full Force’s father, used to come to my house every Saturday, and I would practice, because my voice was like this, and that wasn’t a rapper’s voice. Like there was – who was I gonna get to listen to me?

ICE-T. You mean [your voice] was low...

MC LYTE. It was – It was teeny, tiny, no weight to it (Ice-T, 2012).

MC Lyte speaks about practicing her voice, knowing that her normal speaking voice was not the appropriate voice for a rapper. For the emcee/rapper, having a signature vocal style is crucial for remaining relevant in Hip Hop, as well as having longevity in the music business. In his book, *Black Talk*, Ben Sidran explains why having a unique vocal style is so crucial for the emcee/rapper:

Black communication maintains the integrity of the individual and his 'personal' voice in the context of group activity. Thus, the notion that voice tones are superfluous to communication is absurd within the framework of the oral culture. This truth can be applied to instrumental music as well. Whereas Western musicians are recognized for their ability to conform to and master traditional techniques, black musicians are highly regarded for their ability to invent personal techniques and to project personal sounds (Sidran, 14).

Sidran explains that in black musical genres, individual artists seek personal techniques that will set them apart from other artists, whereas, he asserts, Western musicians strive to master traditional techniques. James Brown's grunts, Michael Jackson's shrieks, or Rhianna's murmurings are examples of how Black artists develop personal techniques to set their voice apart from other Black artists. In Hip Hop, emcees develop different tones of their voice, some sound raspy, other are loud and strong, and they develop their own flow, whether it is slow or fast, or works with or against the beat. And, while most voices can be described when transcribing the lyrics, the following songs contain examples of emcees/rappers having unique vocal signatures that are difficult to describe on paper.

One vocal style that is uncommon in Hip Hop is the ability to rhyme with a fast flow. Emcees and rappers can build entire careers on their ability to rap

quickly, and it is a style that is not often mastered. Busta Rhymes, Big Daddy Kane, and Twista are three of the most well known fast rappers, and they have made their fast flows a part of their total identity. On the song “Touch It,” Busta Rhymes demonstrates his versatile flows by contrasting his low voice and steady flow, with his higher pitched voice and extremely fast flow. He begins the song by rapping:

[Verse 1]
 (Get low Bus!) Who be the King of the Sound? (Uh huh)
 Busta Bus back to just put a lock on a town (Uh huh)
 Lot of my bitches be comin’ from miles around
 See they be cumin (Uh!) cause they know how the God get down (TURN IT UP!!) (Busta Rhymes, “Touch It”).

Conveniently, Busta provides cues to alert the listener when he is changing flows. He begins the verse by saying, “Get low Bus,” (Busta Rhymes, “Touch It”) directing himself to use his slow flow. He ends these four lines by shouting “turn it up,” (Busta Rhymes, “Touch It”) which is the signal for him to start rapping faster. He continues:

[Verse 1]
Now you know who holdin’ the throne so gimme the crown (huh)
Niggas solutin’ and tryin’ to give me a pound (come on)
I don't really fuck with you niggas, you niggas is clown
Makin the bitches strippin’ throw they shit on the ground (Busta Rhymes, “Touch It”).

These lines are rapped at a quicker pace than the first four lines, creating a vocal contrast for the listener. This pattern of slow and fast continues throughout the song, every four lines, beginning and ending with the same instructions about Busta’s flow. Busta’s contrast in flow is just as, if not more important, as the

message in his lyrics on the song. Because Busta Rhymes persona in Hip Hop is built off of his ability to rap very quickly, this song acts as a vehicle for him to demonstrate his different flows. Another example of his fast flow comes from the song “Look at Me Now,” by Chris Brown, where Busta is a featured artist. He raps the following verse in just under a minute:

*'Cause I'm feelin like I'm runnin
and I'm feelin like I gotta get away, get away, get away
Better know that I don't and I won't ever stop
'cause you know I gotta win everyday-day
(GO!!) She done really really wanna pop me
(BO!!) Just know that you will never flop me
(OH!!) And I know that can be a little cocky
(NOOO!!) You ain't never gonna stop me
Every time I come a nigga gotta set it then I got it goin
then I gotta get it, then I gotta blow, and I gotta shudder any little thing
a nigga think that he be doin 'cause it doesn't matter
cause I'm gonna dead it-dead it (WHOO-HOO DAMN!!)
Then I'm gonna murder everything and anything
A-bada boom, a-bada bing, I gotta do a lotta things
and make it clearer to a couple niggaz that I'm always winnin
and I gotta get it again and again and again {*Big gasp*}
And I be doin it to death
and now I move a lil' foul, a nigga better call a ref
and everybody know my style and niggaz know that I'm the best
When I come to doin this and I be bangin on my chest
And I bang in the east and I'm bangin in the west
And I come to give you more and I will never give you less
You will hear it in the street or you can read it in the press
Do you really wanna know what's next? (Let's go!)
See the way we on it and we all up in the race
And you know we gotta go, don't try to keep up with the pace
And we strugglin and hustlin and send it in and get it in
and always gotta do it, take it to another place
Gotta taste it, and I gotta grab it
And I gotta cut all through this traffic
Just to be at the top of the throne, better know I gotta HAVE IT!! (Busta
Rhymes, “Look at Me Now”).²*

Busta's style and delivery on this song cannot be summarized on paper. The above lyrics were transcribed as a paragraph by the Online Hip Hop Lyrics Archive, but they could have just as easily been written as one long sentence because Busta's flow is so fast that it does not indicate any sort of punctuation. This demonstrates the unity between orality and writing in Hip Hop because writing allows Busta to remember and practice such a song, but ultimately his performance cannot be described with writing. Both cultures are needed to interpret Busta Rhymes' songs.

Big Daddy Kane is also known for being able to adapt his flow, depending on the song, or even within the same song. On a short song, "3 Forties and a Bottle of Moet," from his album *Daddy's Home*, Big Daddy Kane raps a short verse where he accelerates towards the end of certain couplets. He raps:

[Verse 1]

Some people call me Kane some people call me Big Daddy
 My momma's name is Ruth and my pops is *Clay Bradley*
 I got a little brother, some of y'all may just know him
 I would say his name, but we ain't speakin *at the moment*
 I walk through the streets of New York everyday
 I hang with rappers like Doug E. Fresh and Cool J
 I hang with Tone Loc and Don Cheadle in L.A., plus
 I Got a Man, you know the Positive K
 I get blasted with the Ol' Dirty Bastard
 So peace to the *RZA, the GZA*
and to the rest of the Wu-Tang niggaz
 My man Shyhiem with the gangsta lean, da cream
 to rise to the top, and you don't stop (Big Daddy Kane, "3 Forties").

Big Daddy Kane must accelerate his delivery when he raps certain lines because he has inserted too many syllables into one line. If he was to rap the entire verse at one pace, he would lose the pocket of the beat, and then the song would sound off.

Kane's delivery and flow are difficult to describe on paper, even though his lyrics

can easily be transcribed. Again, Hip Hop demonstrates how writing and orality can coexist, because it is Big Daddy Kane's writing culture that enables him to write his lines with so many syllables because he can insert long and complex words, but it is his mastery of oral performance skills that allows him to rap the song correctly.

Artists will also feature rappers with a very fast flow on their songs to provide a contrast to their own style. Kanye West used this contrast on his song "Slow Jamz," from his debut album, *College Dropout*. Kanye features two artists on the track, Jamie Foxx, who raps/sings in a soft and sensuous voice, and Twista, who raps very quickly. The plot of the song is that women have been asking Jamie Foxx to make more slow songs that speak to their emotions. Jamie's parts on the song provide suggestions as to artists Kanye could play to help these women, like Luther Vandross or Smokey Robinson, which is followed by Kanye's verse, which is about his pursuit of a woman. But, after the second chorus, the song changes, with a female voice asking Kanye for something new:

[*Aisha Taylor talking*]

Now Kanye, I know I told you to slow it down
It's good, it's all good, it's beautiful
But now I need you to do it faster baby
can you please - do it faster, do it faster

[*Kanye talking*]

Damn baby, I can't do it that fast, but I know somebody who can, Twista!
(Kanye West, "Slow Jamz").

This is immediately followed by Twista's verse, which is much faster than both Kanye and Jamie's parts:

[Verse 2: Twista]

When I catch you looking at the glist on my hands and wrist

*While I'm layin' back smoking on my cannabis
 When it come to rockin the rhythm like Marvin and Luther
 I can tell you when I'm messin wit Kan man and Twist
 In the Chi and I be sippin Hennessey - play some R&B
 While I smoke a b - you can preferably find that I'm a G
 And all this (well well well well) (Kanye West, "Slow Jamz").*

Twista's verse has an added effect because it stands in such contrast to both the story of the song, as well as the preceding verses. Similar to Busta Rhymes and Big Daddy Kane's songs, writing allows Twista to craft such a lyrically dense verse, giving him the ability to edit and memorize, but he ultimately relies on his oral delivery to perform the song.

In order to create contrast on their songs, emcees and rappers will also change their voice or the way they deliver words to accomplish this goal. One common method is for an emcee or rapper to create a dialogue on their own track, but changing their voice in order to play both roles. On his song, "Stan," Eminem raps a conversation between himself and a fan. The song is actually Stan, the fan, narrating several letters that he sends to Eminem, with the final verse being Eminem's response to Stan's letters. Eminem, rapping as Stan, says:

[Verse 1]
**Dear Slim, I wrote but you still ain't callin'
 I left my cell, my pager, and my home phone at the bottom
 I sent two letters back in autumn, you must not-a got 'em
 There probably was a problem at the post office or something
 Sometimes I scribble addresses too sloppy when I jot 'em
 but anyways; fuck it, what's been up? Man how's your daughter?
 My girlfriend's pregnant too, I'm bout to be a father (Eminem, "Stan").³**

Stan is a character that reflects many of the insecurities that Eminem was feeling at the time. Eminem portrays Stan as a misunderstood individual who is

trying to connect with one of their favorite artists because their lyrics resonate with them. And after several letters from Stan that contain more obsessive suggestions, Eminem finally responds:

[Verse 4]
 I'm sorry I didn't see you at the show, I musta missed you
 Don't think I did that shit intentionally just to diss you
 But what's this shit you said about you like to cut your wrists too?
 I say that shit just clownin dog,
 c'mon - how fucked up is you?
 You got some issues Stan, I think you need some counseling
 to help your ass from bouncing off the walls when you get down some
 (Eminem, "Stan").

Eminem tries to explain to Stan that the life he portrays in his songs is not meant to be taken literally, and suggests Stan find some help for his issues. Eminem does a masterful job portraying Stan's emotions that change through out the song. Stan begins slightly obsessed with Eminem, but not harmful or threatening, and by the final verse, he sounds like he is on the verge of tears, and slightly impaired because of the "fif of vodka...[and] 1000 downers" (Eminem, "Stan") he ingested before writing the final letter. So, while the story between Stan and Eminem is easy to follow with the lyrics of the song, Eminem's performance as the character Stan is just as, if not more compelling than the story he tells.

Another song that uses a conversation to create contrast within the story being told is "Gimme The Loot," by The Notorious B.I.G, also known as Biggie. In this song, Biggie raps a story about how he and a young hustler⁴ are on the prowl, looking for someone to rob. For most of the song, Biggie and the young hustler talk about all the ways they like to rob people and what techniques of violence they use

to pull off their heists. Biggie uses a higher voice to portray the young hustler, and unlike Eminem, he converses with the other character within the same verse. He and the hustler rap:

The first pocket that's fat the Tec is to his back
 Word is bond, I'm a smoke him yo don't fake no moves (what?)
 Treat it like boxing: stick and move, stick and move

Nigga, you ain't got to explain shit
I've been robbin motherfuckers since the slave ships
with the same clip and the same four-five
Two point-blank, a motherfucker's sure to die
That's my word, nigga even try to bogart
have his mother singing "It's so hard..."

Yes Love, love your fucking attitude
 because the nigga play pussy that's the nigga that's getting screwed
 and bruised up from the pistol whipping
 welts on the neck from the necklace stripping (The Notorious B.I.G, "Gimme the Loot").

Biggie is a mentor to the young hustler, explaining to the kid about the art of the robbery. Just like Eminem's track, the storyline of this song is easily understood by reading the lyrics, but it is Biggie's performance of both roles that drives the song. These two examples demonstrate the relationship that orality and writing have through the vocal styles used by emcees/rappers in Hip Hop. Both songs have stories that are clearly laid out, with narratives that have been clearly constructed and not freestyled. However, the artists' performances of those stories still require the audience to listen to the songs in order to fully comprehend the story and its meaning.⁵

Similar to emcees or rappers changing their voice, sometimes they also change their pronunciation of words. It is quite common in rap songs to elongate or shorten syllables in order to maintain a good flow, and these vocal changes can

range from a few instances in a song to a major section of the track. On her song, “Godzilla,” Rapsody uses creative word play to assert her rapping dominance. The word play comes in her hook,⁶ where she raps:

[Hook]
 Godzilla crushin' y'all villas
 Godzilla only God's illa
 (Amen, Amen)
 Godzilla crushin' y'all villas
 Jamla the squad killa
 (Amen, Amen, yes, Lord) (Rapsody, “Godzilla”).

Rapsody compares herself to Godzilla, the science-fiction monster, in order to boast about her lyrical abilities. It is the word Godzilla that Rapsody plays with, explaining that “only God’s illa,”⁷ (Rapsody, “Godzilla”) meaning that only God is better than her. Hearing her pronunciation of Godzilla/God’s illa helps the listener understand the word play she is using. Reading these lyrics on the page would not necessarily indicate how Rapsody alters her delivery of the words, and Rapsody’s ability to use word play such as changing her pronunciation only reinforces her boasting on the song.

Besides pronouncing words differently, emcees/rappers can even change their accent and the way they speak within a song. On his song, “Sound of da Police,” KRS-One uses two styles of speaking, English and Jamaican patois, and changes between the two in the middle of his verses. In the song, KRS-One compares the police to overseers on plantations, and asserts that they viciously harass black people. He raps:

[Verse 1]

Stand clear, Don man a-talk

You can't stand where I stand, you can't walk where I walk

Watch out, we run New York

Policeman come, we buss' him out the park

I know this for a fact, you don't like how I act

...

[Verse 3]

Check out the message in a rough stylee

The real criminals are the C-O-P

You check for undercover and **the one P.D**

But just a mere Black man, **them wann check me**

Them check out me car for it shine like the sun

But them jealous or them vexed cause them can't afford one

Black people still slaves up till today (KRS-One, "Sound of da Police").

KRS-One blends the Jamaican and English deliveries, transitioning from one to the other even mid-sentence. And, not only does he change his pronunciation, but also his grammatical style based on which delivery he's using. Some of the words that he says in his Jamaican patois can be written in English, but it is difficult to represent the transitions he makes throughout his lyrics on paper.

An even more distinct example of contrasting vocals comes from Ol' Dirty Bastard's song, "Shimmy Shimmy Ya." On this song, Ol' Dirty Bastard,⁸ who was known for his smooth flow and vocal inflections, uses several vocal styles to deliver his rap. He elongates syllables, sings certain words, and even plays his own verse in reverse in the middle of the song. He raps:

Shimmy shimmy ya, shimmy yam, shimmy yay

Gimme the mic so I can take it away

Off on a natural charge, bon-voyage

Yeah from the home of the Dodger Brooklyn squad

Wu-Tang **killerrrr** bees on a swarm

Rain on your college-ass disco dorm

For you to even touch my skill

You gotta put the one killer **beeee** and he ain't gonna kill (Ol' Dirty Bastard, "Shimmy Ya").

Besides the few instances where Dirty elongates certain words, there are not many unique vocal deliveries in this verse. However, after this, we hear a part of this verse played in reverse, while the music continues to play. This section is not like rewinding the track, because the beat does not go backwards, and it is not like the DJ technique of pulling a record back and then releasing it to play a section over again. Dirty chose to play his verse in reverse, having it stand in contrast to the rest of the song. Since he shows this contrast, it is difficult to describe what is happening in the song when transcribing the lyrics.⁹ Like Rapsody and KRS-One, Ol' Dirty Bastard used contrasts in his lyrical delivery to demonstrate his rapping abilities. Each of these examples shows the techniques of oral and writing culture, and how they are used together to produce a Hip Hop song. The emcee/rapper's ability to write out their lyrics allows them to structure their songs, and then from that foundation they can expand on the song with their vocal performance and use oral techniques to demonstrate their rapping ability or their storytelling by complicating their stories even further.

One of the most powerful Hip Hop songs also features one of the most unique vocal signatures in rap music. On his song, "One Mic," Nas raps a masterpiece, depicting the life he sees around him, as well as events that are happening in the fictional life of his song. Over the course of the song, Nas changes the tempo of his rhyming, as well as the loudness of his voice, in relation to the beat. The song itself starts off slow, with a simple beat in the background and Nas rapping his lyrics at a normal level of volume. As the beat gets louder and fast, with sirens playing in the

background and a faster bass line, Nas' delivery speeds up, and his voice gets louder. He raps:

Yo, all I need is one mic, one beat, one stage
 One nigga front, my face on the front page
 Only if I had one gun, one girl and one crib
 One God to show me how to do things his son did
 Pure, like a cup of virgin blood; mixed with
 151, one sip'll make a nigga flip
Writin' names on my hollow tips, plottin' shit
Mad violence who I'm gon' body, this hood politics
Acknowledge it, leave bodies chopped up in garbages
Seeds watch us, grow up and try to follow us
Police watch us roll up and try knockin' us
One knee I ducked, could it be my time is up
But my luck, I got up, the cop shot again
Bus stop glass bursts, a fiend drops his Heineken
Richochetin' between the spots that I'm hidin in
Blackin' out as I shoot back, fuck getting' hit!
This is my hood I'ma rep, to the death of it
'til everybody come home, little niggaz is grown
Hoodrats, don't abortion your womb, we need more warriors soon
Sent from the star sun and the moon
In this life of police chases street sweepers and coppers
Stick-up kids with no conscience, leavin' victims with doctors
If you really think you ready to die, with nines out
This is what Nas is bout, nigga the time is now! (Nas, "One Mic").

Nas raps about how he wants to live a "simple" life, where all he needs is a microphone and stage to perform on, but instead he lives in a world fraught with "hood politics," (Nas, "One Mic") which involves street violence and evading the police. Nas continues this delivery in the next verse, and then inverts it for the final verse, going from shouting to whispering. Nas' flow allows him to demonstrate the anxiety and urgency in his lyrics because as the verses reach their climaxes, he too is at the climax of his vocal performance. The emotions that are portrayed by Nas, as well as the emotions roused in the listener by his performance, are expressed in

the way that Nas combines his lyrical ability with his ability to flow. Nas has written a moving story, but his delivery of the song is what sets it apart from other rap songs with meaningful messages.

Hip Hop's vocal styles play a pivotal role in the audience's experience and understanding of an artist's message on his or her song. Walter Ong describes the importance of embellishment in oral cultures, stating that, "oral folks prefer, especially in formal discourse...a load of epithets and other formulary baggage which high literacy rejects as cumbersome and tiresomely redundant because of its aggregative weight" (Ong, 38). This "baggage" that Ong is talking about is the unique performative styles that emcees/rappers develop. Instead of delivering their song in a basic and formulaic way, artists find a way to deliver their rap by adding extra elements to their vocal delivery. Ong sees these styles as central to oral culture, saying that, "traditional expressions in oral cultures must not be dismantled...there is nowhere outside the mind to store them" (Ong, 39). Ong is speaking about a strictly oral culture—that is a culture that has no system of writing—so he asserts that these traditions must be valued in an oral culture in order to continue them, because there is no way to record them, like in a written culture. However, this is exactly why Hip Hop uses both written and oral traditions to create its songs. The emcees and rappers bring their vocal capabilities to the music, and it is writing that allows them to hone and refine their performative skills. If Hip Hop was strictly an oral culture, then emcees and rappers could not

create such complex styles and flows because it would be too hard to maintain them while freestyling.

¹ The phrase “took a minute” actually means a long time. So it took them a fair amount of time to develop their sound.

² I promise this was not just music industry tricks. He can really rap this verse:
<https://youtu.be/PkyAmkozJZc?t=4m40s>

³ Stan addresses this letter to “Slim”, which is short for Eminem’s nickname, Slim Shady. See the song “My Name Is,” from the album *The Slim Shady LP*.

⁴ In fact, the young hustler is basically a younger version of Biggie, so it is like Biggie is speaking to his younger self even though he does not make this apparent in the song.

⁵ See Kendrick Lamar’s songs “i”, the single version, and “u”, from the album *To Pimp A Butterfly* for more examples of this vocal contrast.

⁶ Usually a set of lyrics that is supposed to capture the audience’s attention. It is often contained with the chorus, or replaces it altogether.

⁷ Illa is a version of Iller, which comes from Ill. To be Ill is to be cool.

⁸ There was no father to his style, hence the name. If you want to better understand ODB, then I suggest you watch the music video for this song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2zgB93KANE>

⁹ I was impressed with one attempt on Rap Genius, where someone actually wrote the lyrics backwards! <http://genius.com/2505>

Methods of Storytelling: The Emcee's Style (I Got A Story To Tell)

The “story” is central not only to Hip Hop music, but also oral cultures as a whole. Stories allow oral cultures to pass on their heritage, and organize their thoughts into a coherent message. In Hip Hop, emcees have the ability to tell complex stories by combining the best qualities of oral and writing cultures. Orality allows emcees to, as LL Cool J said, “paint pictures on the walls in [the reader’s] mind” (LL Cool J), and writing allows emcees to bend time and narrative structures in their songs. As Walter Ong explains in *Orality and Literacy*, oral cultures “use stories of human action to store, organize, and communicate much of what they know,” but that “other lengthy verbal [performances] in a primary oral culture [tend] to be topical [and] a nonce occurrence...an oration is not durable: it is not normally repeated” (Ong, 140-141). So, for oral cultures, stories are convenient ways to organize facts or traditions, but longer, more complex pieces are rare, because they cannot easily be repeated. In Hip Hop this problem is mediated because emcees and rappers can write their stories down so that they can be worked on and performed later. In the film, *Something From Nothing: The Art of Rap*, Ice-T speaks to several rappers and emcees about their writing processes, and they describe how writing and orality inform their stories. Ice-T interviews both members of Naughty By Nature, and Dana Dane’s response is very interesting:

DANA DANE. I write the story first, not even as a rhyme, I just write the story about what I wanted it – uh, you know, I guess it’s from school, you know. And I write the introduction. I write the body. I write the conclusion. I always write the conclusion first. I always know where my story’s gonna end, you know, even before I start writing it (Ice-T, 2012).

Ice-T responds by describing his writing process, which is slightly different from

Dana Dane's:

ICE-T. What I do is when I write, I'll write it, like even if I'm writing in the studio to a track, I'll write it. Then I'll spit a rough. I'll spit it, and then I take that track...

DANA DANE. ...Yeah...

ICE-T. ...And I'll roll with it. You know usually, unless that night I was tremendous, I'll redo it, because the first time, I might have been reading it, so now I'll go in, and I can perform it, because by rolling with it, now I've memorized it, I've locked it in, so you're gonna get different vocal inflections, 'cause now I know it...you know, but I go back in, and the second time, I don't need no paper. I'm just going in, busting it (Ice-T, 2012).

Both rappers talk about how writing aides the process of creating their songs, whether its helping with the content of the song, or helping the emcee/rapper to memorize their lyrics. But, it is also interesting that both emcees begin by writing, knowing that they are going to perform the lyrics. Dana Dane writes his stories, "not even as a rhyme," (Ice-T, 2012) which means that he must go back afterwards and construct how he will perform the song vocally. Ice-T uses a similar method, where he writes the song down and then raps a rough version of the song. From that point on, Ice-T uses the recorded draft to help him memorize the lyrics, as well as figure out how he can include his own vocal style in the story. The emcee/rapper uses both orality and writing to help create their songs, and the following examples demonstrate different balances between the two concepts on different songs.

There have been many examples of rap songs that take the listener on an adventure, with the emcee/rapper at the heart of the story. One of the most famous examples comes from Ice-T on his debut album *Rhyme Pays*. The song, "6'N the

Morning” is famous for its first verse, on a seven-minute song, which describes the beginning of Ice-T’s day on the run from the police, and spending time with his friends throughout the neighborhood. He raps:

[Verse 1]

Six in the morning, police at my door
 Fresh Adidas squeak across the bathroom floor
 Out my back window, I made my escape
 Didn't even get a chance to grab my old school tape
 Mad with no music, but happy cause I'm free
 And the streets to a player is the place to be
 Got a knot in my pocket, weighing at least a grand
 Gold on my neck, my pistol is closed in hand
 I'm a self-made monster of the city streets
 Remotely controlled by hard Hip-Hop beats
 But just living in the city is a serious task
Didn't know what the cops wanted, didn't have time to ask (Ice-T, “6’N the Morning”).

Ice-T weaves an epic tale that involves everything from a seven-year prison stint, escaping from a SWAT team, and ultimately flying to New York City. Ice-T’s story dwells on minor details, such as Ice forgetting his “old school tape” as he runs from the cops in his “fresh Adidas,”¹ (Ice-T, “6’N the Morning”) while still progressing with the overall plot of the story. Also, Ice-T repeats some form of the line “didn't have time to ask,” at the end of each verse, creating a repetition to his song. Writing allows Ice-T to include all of these small elements in his tale about his life as a West Coast gangsta rapper, because it forces him to stay focused on the plot of the story, and not getting side tracked on the minute details of his life. At the same time, Ice-T’s story remains rooted in his vocal performance, with his flow sounding like a steady stroll along the beat of the song, just like we the audience are strolling along with Ice through his life.

As Hip Hop grew, so did emcees ability to create complicated narratives in their songs. Nas' song, "One Love," from his debut album *Illmatic*, is a song about Nas supporting his friends in prison by keeping them up to date with the news in their neighborhood. The song is a letter that Nas has written to one of his friends in prison. Nas raps the letter:

[Verse 1]

Whattup kid? I know shit is rough doing your bid
 When the cops came you shoulda slid to my crib
 Fuck it black, no time for looking back it's done
 Plus congratulations you know you got a son
 I heard he looks like you, why don't your lady write you?

[Verse 2]

Last time you wrote you said they tried you in the showers
 but maintain when you come home the corner's ours
 On the reals, all these crab niggaz know the deal
 When we start the revolution all they probably do is squeal
 But chill, see you on the next V-I
 I gave your mom dukes loot for kicks, plus sent you flicks (Nas, "One Love").

Nas' song ends with his own shout outs to his friends in prison, demonstrating to the listener that while this story may be fictional, it is based on real experiences and that it wil resonate with certain listeners more than others. In fact, there are two stories in the song "One Love," because the final verse describes the average day in Queensbridge projects for Nas, and he describes how he left some "jewels in the skull" (Nas, "One Love") of a young man that came over to smoke some blunts² at his place. Nas is able to have two stories within his song because he can craft his message before actually rapping it. It would be difficult to freestyle such a story because of the detail that it contains, and the smooth transition Nas uses from one story to the other.

Similar to Nas' song, The Notorious B.I.G's song "I Got a Story to Tell," tells a story in two different ways, which the listener gets to compare. Biggie begins the track by explaining that his story is a cautionary tale for men who sleep with women who already have a boyfriend. Biggie describes a night out where he meets a woman he is interested in. After getting her home, he finds out that she is sleeping with a basketball player on the New York Knicks, but "[She was] stressin [him] to fuck, like she was in a rush / [They] fucked in his bed, quite dangerous" (The Notorious B.I.G, "Story to Tell"). Naturally, they are caught, with her boyfriend coming home earlier than expected. Biggie raps:

[Verse 1]

It came to me like a song I wrote

Told the bitch gimme your scarf, pillowcase and rope

Got dressed quick, tied the scarf around my face

Roped the bitch up, gagged her mouth with the pillowcase

Play the cut, nigga comin off some love potion shit

Flash the heat on em, he stood emotionless

Dropped the glass screamin, "Don't blast here's the stash,
a hundred cash just don't shoot my ass, please!"

Nigga pullin mad G's out the floor (The Notorious B.I.G, "Story to Tell").³

Biggie is so happy that he not only got away with sleeping with the basketball player's girlfriend, but also that he got a large sum of money as well. He then calls up his friends and asks them to bring some weed so he can tell them his story. The audience then gets to listen to Biggie tell his friends about the wild night he has had, and while it is the same story, it is delivered in a much different way. The first version, being told to the listener, is straightforward, with a narrative that makes sense and elaborates on certain details. The second version, when Biggie tell his friends, is much like what Walter Ong would describe as a primary oral culture's

story. Biggie does not start from the beginning, jumps around, does not stay focused on the plot, and interacts with his audience. He adds extra details that we did not hear before:

This bitch, playa this bitch fuckin run them ol Knick ass niggaz and shit, I'm up in the spot though. One of them six-five niggaz, I don't know. Anyway I'm up in the motherfuckin spot, so boom I'm up in the pussy, whatever whatever. I sparks up some lye, Pop Duke creeps up in on some, must have been rained out or something *laughing* because he's in the spot. Had me scared, had me scared to death, I was shook Daddy - but I forget I had my Roscoe on me. Always. You know how we do (The Notorious B.I.G, "Story to Tell").

The second version of the story includes the player's height and just how scared Biggie was when he heard him come home early. Biggie also uses much more slang in this version of the song because he is with his friends, so they know that a "Roscoe" is a gun, and that "lye" is some marijuana. This version also has pauses in it where Biggie is responding to his friends' questions. He describes the basketball player's height because his friends want to know exactly which player it was, and when Biggie mentions the fact that he keeps his gun on him at all times, he and his friends have a mutual understanding as to why they always need protection. So, in fact, on this song, we the audience get a Hip Hop song that uses orality and writing to deliver a witty story of Biggie's night out, as well as a purely oral story, where Biggie describes his adventure to his friends.

One of the most creative stories in Hip Hop comes from Snoop Dogg, on his song "Snoopafella," which is actually a reinterpretation of the folk tale "Cinderella." Snoop Dogg inserts himself into the classic tale as the main character, Snoopafella, also known as Cinderfella Doggy Dogg. He raps:

[Verse 1]

Once upon a time, in the L.B.C.
 On the Eastside, off of 2-1 Street
 There lived a young man, Cinderfella's his name
 To make it interesting it's me, peep game

...

He said ah, "Hear ye! Hear ye! Come one, come all!
 The princess is having a royal ball
 If you can rap, also dress fresh
 You might win a date with the sweet princess"

[Verse 2]

With a snap of his fingers sparks began to shoot
 And I was jumpin in my body: a slick silk suit
 On my feet was some white tube socks
 And a fresh pair of Chucks from the Foot-lock (Snoop Dogg, "Snoopafella").

In Snoop Dogg's version, the story takes place in Long Beach, California, the person who will win a date with the princess is the best rapper and the most well dressed at the party, and instead of losing a glass slipper, Snoop loses one of his Converse sneakers. So, while Snoop's story sticks to the basic outline of the classic "Cinderella" story, he changes most of the references in the song to match his neighborhood and his way of life, as well as presenting in an original way. Snoop Dogg was able to re-write the song so that he could deliver it in his own style, and use his own vernacular to make the story reflect his lifestyle.

Nas' song, "Rewind," is one of the most unique methods of storytelling in Hip Hop to this day, because he raps his story from the end all the way back to the beginning. In fact, at the end of the song, we hear Nas' voicemail message play, implying that the song was rewound just like the tape in the machine. Nas' begins the song by welcoming the listeners:

Listen up gangstas and honeys with ya hair done
 Pull up a chair hon' and put it in the air son

Dog, whatever they call you, god, just listen
 I spit a story backwards, it starts at the ending (Nas, "Rewind").

He then begins to rap the story:

The bullet goes back in the gun
 The bullet hole's closin' this chest of a nigga
 Now he back to square one
 Screamin', "Shoot don't please"
 I put my fifth back on my hip
 It's like a VCR rewindin' a hit
 ...
 My nigga Jungle utters out somethin crazy like, "Go he there"
 Sittin in back of this chair, we hittin the roach
 The smoke goes back in the blunt, the blunt gets bigger in growth
 Jungle unrolls it, put his weed back in the jar
 The blunt turns back into a cigar
 We listen to Stevie, it sounded like heavy metal fans
 Spinnin' records backwards of AC/DC (Nas, "Rewind").

Nas pays attention to every detail, even inverting the sentences spoken by characters in his story, so that when the listener plays them forward in their mind they make sense. Similarly to The Notorious B.I.G's song, Nas tells the listener that he has his own crowd in the song, so the audience so supposed to understand that Nas is telling this story as if he was amongst his neighborhood friends. So, while Nas has done a masterful job in writing a story that moves in reverse, he specifies that this is the sort of story to be told, in person, to others, instead of having them reading his story. To perform such a song freestyle would be difficult, especially when speaking the lines of other characters backwards, but Nas' ability to write down and practice the lyrics means that his performance of the song was much more fluid.

Another story that relies on its context is “The Good, The Bad, The Ugly” by The Game, where The Game is speaking to several police officers in what the listener learns is his interrogation after being brought in on suspicion of murdering a few people by his house. The name of the song draws a connection to the old western film *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, where there were three characters that each fit one of the descriptions in the title. In Game’s song, he gives the police three alibis, one where he is an innocent bystander, one where he was doing illegal activities, but did not kill the men, and the final, where he was surrounded and was prepared to defend himself. He raps:

[Verse 1 - The Game as 'The Good']

There was money on the table with the bricks
 I was in the living room feeling on this bitch
 Heard my car alarm going off on my six
 so my dogs start barking and some niggas hit the fence

[Verse 2 - The Game as 'The Bad']

There was money on the table by the bricks
 I was at the kitchen table chopping up some shit
 Listening to Jeezy and I heard a little {*sound of bullet whizzing by*}
 so I turned the radio down and cocked my four-fifth

[Verse 3 - The Game as 'The Ugly']

Then I seen three niggas by my backdoor
 Looked out the bathroom window and seen two more
 So I reached for my chopper and some clips out the drawer
 Guess I had to welcome niggas to the gun store (The Game, “Good, Bad, Ugly”).

And, while Game is telling his story, he is also having to deal with the police officers harassing him and hold him against his will. He raps in between the stories:

I mean, look at these pictures, just so sloppy
 Couldn't have been me, I do my shit like John Gotti

...

How long I gotta stay in this motherfucker? Let me get a cigarette
 I don't even smoke, but shit, y'all got a nigga stressed
 I gotta stay in this motherfucker till I confess?
 Shit, y'all bitches better get some rest

...

And you two motherfuckers should get an Oscar
 with this good cop, bad cop shit, take me to processing
 cause I don't eat breakfast with no pigs
 I watched First 48 so fuck your twenty-five years
 No evidence, no bid
 I don't know who split them niggas' wigs, already told y'all (The Game,
 "Good, Bad, Ugly").

On this song, the context in which The Game places the story also effects what we the audience hear, because we also get his interactions with the police interrogators. So, in total, there are four stories for the listener to keep track of, which is a result of the context of the song. Rapping a song like this, with the multiple layers it contains, would be extremely difficult to do as a freestyle, but The Game has structured the layers by writing his lyrics down. And just like Nas' song, The Game raps his song as if it were being told to an audience, demonstrating his ability to perform the song, not just writing a complex plot.

Besides creating complex or multilayered stories, emcees and rappers will use an extended metaphor to construct their story. On his song, "I Used to Love H.E.R.," Common raps about a woman he's had an interest in, and her life traveling around the country. He describes her in his rap:

[Verse 1]

I met this girl, when I was ten years old
 And what I loved most she had so much soul
 She was old school, when I was just a shorty
 Never knew throughout my life she would be there for me
 On the regular, not a church girl she was secular
 Not about the money, no studs was mic checkin her

But I respected her, she hit me in the heart
 A few New York niggaz, had did her in the park

...

[Verse 3]

Now I see her in commercials, she's universal
 She used to only swing it with the inner-city circle
 Now she be in the burbs lickin rock and dressin hip
 And on some dumb shit, when she comes to the city
 Talkin about poppin glocks servin rocks and hittin switches
 Now she's a gangsta rollin with gangsta bitches
 Always smokin blunts and gettin drunk
 Tellin me sad stories, now she only fucks with the funk
 Stressin how hardcore and real she is
 She was really the realest, before she got into showbiz (Common, "Love
 H.E.R").

After describing all of the transformations that the woman had gone through, Common admits that he has been describing Hip Hop's history the entire time. He clearly disguises the changes to Hip Hop culture, from starting in the parks of New York and the Afro-centric messages that were popular in the late 80s/early 90s, to the West Coast rising in popularity and Hip Hop's embrace of commercialism, all as the actions of a woman that Common met when he was a young boy. Common creates a sort of love story within his larger plea to save Hip Hop from its current trajectory into commercialism.

Another example of an extended metaphor is Nas' song, "I Gave You Power," from his album *It Was Written*. On this track, Nas raps the life of a gun, from the gun's perspective. He breaks down how a gun feels when made to kill, and what the gun thinks of its gang lifestyle. He raps:

[Verse 1]

I seen some cold nights and bloody days
 They grab and me bullets spray
 They use me wrong so I sing this song 'til this day

My body is cold steel for real
 I was made to kill, that's why they keep me concealed
 Under car seats they sneak me in clubs
 Been in the hands of mad thugs
 They feed me when they load me with mad slugs

...

[Verse 2]

Always I'm in some shit, my abdomen is the clip
 The barrel is my dick, uncircumcised
 Pull my skin back and cock me, I bust off when they unlock me
 Results of what happens to niggaz shock me
 I see niggaz bleedin runnin from me in fear, stunningly tears
 fall down the eyes of these so-called tough guys, for years
 I've been used in robberies, givin niggaz heart to follow me
 Placin peoples in graves, funerals made cause I was sprayed

...

[Verse 3]

He walked me outside, saw this cat
 Cocked me back, said, "Remember me?"
 He pulled the trigger, but I held on, it felt wrong
 Knowing niggaz is waiting in hell for 'im
 He squeezed harder, I didn't budge, sick of the blood
 Sick of the thugs, sick of wrath of the, next man's grudge
 What the other kid did was pull out, no doubt
 A newer me in better shape, before he lit out, he lead the chase
 My owner fell to the floor, his wig split so fast
 I didn't know he was hit, it's over with
 Heard mad niggaz screamin, niggaz runnin, cops is comin
 Now I'm happy, until I felt somebody else grab me
 Damn! (Nas, "I Gave You Power").

Nas takes the listener into the mind of the gun, describing how it grows tired of tearing families apart and helping people seek revenge on others. He also explores how the gun goes from eager to kill to eventually deciding to jam on its owner so that he cannot kill again, and how he is ultimately disappointed when he is picked up by someone else after his owner is killed. The listener also gets some insight into why Nas chose this metaphor and why he applied it to himself when he says at the beginning of the song:

Damn! Look how muh-fuckers use a nigga
 Just use me for whatever the fuck they want
 I don't get to say shit
 Just grab me, just do what the fuck they want
 Sell me, throw me away
 Niggaz just don't give a fuck about a nigga like me right? (Nas, "I Gave You Power").

Nas compares the manipulation he feels from those who "sell [him]", presumably the record executives that work for his record label, or simply just friends who are trying to exploit his musical talents for their own financial gain, to how a gun feels when it is asked to kill people at will. Such an extended metaphor would be too difficult to explore in a freestyle rap, so Nas' ability to write out his lyrics enables him to rap about the many experiences the gun goes through and the emotions it feels throughout its career as a killer.

Wale, on his song, "Golden Salvation (Jesus Piece),"⁴ creates an extended metaphor that is very similar to Nas' metaphor. Wale also takes on the perspective of an object, a golden Jesus necklace, otherwise known as a Jesus piece, and describes the hypocrisy that many rappers have when touting their religious commitment, while also living a life full of sin. He raps:

[Verse 1]
 The good book said pray
 But you so stuck in your ways
 You got my image appraised
 Why you sinning out waiting
 Fornicating with women I sat right there on your table
 Don't bow your head for grace
 Though I'm keeping you graceful
 ...
 [Verse 2]
 Hallelujah the things you do to be the manure
 You never thank me at shows but you keep me on tour

...

And they stone me on the cross and niggaz stone me for the ooh's (Wale, "Golden Salvation").

While Wale's metaphor is not as long as Nas', he provides several lines from the perspective of the Jesus piece that offer a critical opinion towards those who wear the necklace and do not maintain their faith. He observes that these rappers want claim a certain lifestyle by wearing the chain, but in reality do not follow any of the guidelines that the Bible puts forth. He also compares how rappers stoning Jesus, that is making his image out of precious stones, carries a similar effect to the actual stoning of Jesus described in the Bible. Just like Common and Nas, Wale is able to delivery such a powerful message by using an extended metaphor in his story. Hip Hop allows the emcee/rapper to develop their ideas as if they were writing out a story, but also lets them add in their own vocal style to the plot so that the story can be performed.

There are also unique storytelling methods in Hip Hop that do not get replicated by other artists, such as the style The Notorious B.I.G uses on his song "The Ten Crack Commandments." Biggie explains at the beginning of the record that he is an expert in dealing drugs and that he wrote a manual to how to sell drugs properly. He then begins to read through and explain the ten crack commandments:

Rule nombre uno: never let no one know
 how much, dough you hold, cause you know
 The cheddar breed jealousy 'specially
 if that man fucked up, get your ass stuck up
 Number two: never let em know your next move
 Don't you know Bad Boys move in silence or violence

...

Number three: never trust no-bo-dy
Your moms'll set that ass up, properly gassed up

...

Number four: know you heard this before
Never get high, on your own supply
Number five: never sell no crack where you rest at
I don't care if they want a ounce, tell em bounce
Number six: that god damn credit, dead it
You think a crackhead payin you back, shit forget it
Seven: this rule is so underrated
Keep your family and business completely separated

...

Number eight: never keep no weight on you
Them cats that squeeze your guns can hold jobs too
Number nine shoulda been number one to me
If you ain't gettin bags stay the fuck from police (uh-huh)

...

Number ten: a strong word called consignment
Strictly for live men, not for freshmen
If you ain't got the clientele say hell no
Cause they gon want they money rain sleet hail snow
Follow these rules you'll have mad bread to break up
If not, twenty-four years, on the wake up (The Notorious B.I.G, "Crack Commandments").

Biggie provides a clear list of rules that an up and coming drug dealer should follow, adding small explanations where necessary. Biggie plays with the idea that a "profession" like drug dealing would require a manual to those entering the business, and what it would entail. He does not change the language to that of the average instruction manual that is strict, straight forward and void of personal opinion, but rather keeps it in the style that a drug dealer would understand. It is rare that emcees or rappers "read" a text straight out to the listener because they usually find a different way to convey their message. But, Biggie wants to claim the

structure and organization that comes with a manual, and apply it to a job that is chaotic and hazardous.

Kanye West provides another unique style of storytelling on his song “Two Words,” that features Mos Def,⁵ Freeway, and The Harlem Boys Choir. Each rapper on this song constructs their verse using two word segments, which they combine to form lines. Mos Def raps:

[Verse 1 - Mos Def]

Two words, United States, no love, no brakes
 Low brow, high stakes, crack smoke, black folks
 Big Macs, fat folks, ecstasy capsules
 Presidential scandals, everybody MOVE
 Two words, Mos Def, K West, hot shit
 Calm down, get back, ghetto people, got this
 Game pump, lock shit, gun pump, cock shit
 We won't, stop shit, everybody MOVE
 Two words, BK, NY, Bed-Stuy (Kanye West, “Two Words”).

Kanye and Freeway follow with their verses, using the same two word formula in parts of their verse. This formula demonstrates the relationship between writing and orality in Hip Hop because each rapper simply has to select two words to fit into each segment, and it is their performance of those segments that will bring the song together. Also, the rapper’s flow is critical when delivering a verse with this formula because it will allow them to stay in rhythm with the beat, even though the length of the lines change depending on how many syllables the two word segments have.

Wale, on his song “Lotus Flower Bomb,” uses another unique way of delivering his story by breaking the fourth wall and speaking directly to his listener. Wale is trying to court a woman on the song by trying to guess what brand

of perfume she uses, but instead of rapping both sides of the story, or describing the actions of the woman he's chasing, he asks the questions straight to the listener. He raps:

[Verse 1]

Flower bomb, lemme guess your favorite fragrance
 And you got that bomb *hehe*, I'm tryna detonate ya
 No disrespectin baby, just tryna make you smile

...

I can be your boyfriend, be yo' nigga or a friend with perks
 I'm just tryna work that *hehe*, they just tryna work yo' nerves
 I'm just tryna read your mind, I'm just tryna feed you mine
 I'm just tryna give you life, they just tryna lead you blind

[Verse 2]

Flower bomb, can I blow up on your mind?
 This is not no Sandra Bul', but you're Potion No. 9

...

I just think I need one night, slightly more if it's done right
 With that gorgeous face, I don't know your name
 It ain't important babe, 'cause I'ma call you mine (Wale, "Flower Bomb").

The last few lines are important because Wale keeps the woman in question anonymous, which allows any listener to insert themselves into her position. This sort of interaction with the listener is unusual in Hip Hop because usually the emcee or rapper describes or even fills the role of the other character. This song represents Wale's approach to picking up a woman he really likes, and the listener gets to place themselves in the song, as if they were having the conversation with Wale. The effect of the song is that Wale's lines sound improvised, as if he had just approached the listener and started talking, when really this is more like a rehearsed speech because Wale has written out the lyrics before hand.

A story never sounds the same in an oral culture because there is no fixed text, so depending on the performer, they may remember certain parts better than others, and therefore the story changes. In a literate culture, a story is fixed because it has been written down, so therefore the audience will always hear the same plot every time the story is performed. Walter Ong explains that in an oral culture, the performer is:

Remembering in a curiously public way – remembering not a memorized text, for there is no such thing, nor any verbatim succession of words, but the themes and formulas that he has heard other singers sing. He...[rhapsodizes] or [stitches] together in his own way on this particular occasion for this particular audience (Ong, 145-146).

The singer is essentially performing their version of their memory of the original story. This means that each version emphasizes the “themes and formulas” (Ong, 145) of the story differently, and that therefore the story does not follow Freytags pyramid.⁶ Freytags pyramid is the common style of a written story where the plot builds up to a climax, after which the plot resolves itself. But, in Hip Hop, emcees and rappers use their writing culture to create songs that emulate the oral culture’s version of a story. That means that while the story is the same every time the listener hears the song, the emcee or rapper has chosen to make their performance reflect the style of an oral culture, with the plot not moving in a linear sense. Ice-T said that he memorized his rough version of the song, to which he could add different vocal inflections to make the story more entertaining. The emcees and rappers cited above also tried to describe their audience on the song, and demonstrate how they would be performing the song to them, rather than to the

listener of the song. Hip Hop's combination of writing and oral cultural traditions allows emcees to craft songs that have a fixed story, but still rely on the way the artist performs them, either for the listener, or for the fictional audience they have created on their song.

¹Adidas were very popular amongst Hip Hop fans ever since they had been memorialized as the coolest sneakers around with Run-DMC's track, "My Adidas," which came out the year before in 1986.

² A blunt is a hollowed out cigar where the tobacco has been swapped out for Marijuana.

³ Biggie has enough time to think because his lady friend asks her boyfriend to bring her up a glass of water. Biggie creates a scene where he is kidnapping the woman, and in his panic, the basketball player not only allows him to leave, but puts a few thousand dollars into a Prada knapsack for him unprompted.

⁴ The Jesus Piece is a common necklace of Jesus' face that many rappers buy once they have become successful in the rap genre. See Appendix, fig. 6.

⁵ He has since changed his name to Yasiin Bey, but he went by Mos Def at the time the track was made.

⁶ Ong, 142. See Appendix, fig. 7 for Freytags pyramid.

Conclusion: Can I Kick It?

At the end of his book, Walter J. Ong reflects on his work and draws some theorems, as he puts it, for his readers to take forward and expand upon as they continue to do work with orality and writing.¹ However, Ong frames all of these conclusions by stating that the “study of [contrasts] between orality and literacy is largely unfinished business” (Ong, 156). Ong sees his work as only the beginning of understanding the differences between orality, literacy, and their cultures. He also refers to the “orality-to-literacy shift” that is occurring because of this type of research, and that the better we understand orality, the better we can teach writing to those of “virtually total orality...such as urban black subcultures or Chicano subcultures in the United States” (Ong, 160). It is not so much Ong’s intention behind these statements, but more what his text means to the larger field of studying orality. By basing his arguments and conclusions on the dichotomy of orality and writing, he normalizes their separation, which has many ramifications for oral cultures and communities.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o would argue that even the phrase “orality-to-literacy shift” still contains some sort of hierarchical judgment that originates from the Eurocentric study of orality. After asserting that orality and writing “are not and have never been real antagonists,” Ngugi goes on to say that a “network, not hierarchy, will free the richness of the aesthetic, [whether it is] oral or literary” (Ngugi, 85). A network implies that orality and literacy have equal status and are on the same plane theoretically, rather than subjugating one to the other by using a

hierarchy. Ngugi continues, explaining that a network would mean that “oral cultures and communities need [not] be denied history because they had not developed a writing system” (Ngugi, 85). Ngugi’s network would help to change how Hip Hop is studied because it would eliminate the divisive question: what is Hip Hop – oral or literate culture? Hip Hop would instead be studied as a musical genre that utilizes pieces of both cultures to create the foundation for its performative styles and musical deliveries. Beyond better understanding Hip Hop’s own culture, using Ngugi’s network approach would also allow Hip Hop to be studied in relation to larger issues, such as how Hip Hop helps to redefine methods of teaching, in both writing and performing, in schools, as well as how Hip Hop fits into the history of orality providing agency to discriminated groups, especially black women in the United States.

Hip Hop’s usage of sampling and versioning, distinct vocal styles, and inventive methods of storytelling all support Ngugi’s position that orality and writing work together, rather than Ong’s position that we need to view orality in contrast to writing, and that we have moved “forward” into literate culture from oral culture. That means that rap music combines elements of oral and writing culture in its creative process, instead of being a strictly oral or literate piece of culture that is having to grapple with the other. This is an important distinction because understanding Hip Hop as a combination of the two cultures allows it to serve a greater purpose by serving as a tool that schools can use to teach those cultures. In her essay, “Modeling Orality: African American Rhetorical Practices

and the Teaching of Writing,” anthologized in Elaine B. Richardson and Ronald L. Jackson II’s book, *African American Rhetoric(s)*, Lena Ampadu speaks about the importance of an African/African American perspective on writing. She argues that teaching “the oral culture of African Americans, [helps] to assist students in producing written discourse that is *stylistically rich and persuasive*. In other words, African ideals, values, cultures, history, traditions and worldview must *inform* any literary, artistic creations and analyses” (Richardson and Jackson, 142. Emphasis Added). So, an art form like Hip Hop would help encourage broader perspectives on writing because it integrates African American oral culture with Western styles of writing. This is important because by stressing a more balanced understanding of writing, “African American texts [would] no longer be associated mainly with a history and tradition of illiteracy but [would] move to the fore of the writing and literacy skills of college students, regardless of their racial and ethnic backgrounds” (Richardson and Jackson, 138). Ampadu advocates for a system of teaching that broadens the general understanding of writing by incorporating African American oral culture into the Eurocentric writing methods already taught in US schools. In Ong’s system, African American writing styles would be relegated to specific classes on that topic, rather than incorporating those styles into the general curriculum for American students.

The book, *Schooling Hip-Hop*, edited by Marc Lamont Hill and Emery Petchauer, seeks to expand the ways that Hip Hop is taught in schools, as well as how Hip Hop can be used as a teaching tool for other subjects. In her essay, “The

MC in Y-O-U: Leadership pedagogy and Southern Hip Hop in the HBCU Classroom,” which is anthologized in *Schooling Hip Hop*, Joycelyn A. Wilson describes the technique of “*schoolifying*,” which is a combination of “signifying *and* schooling” (Hill and Petchauer, 73. Emphasis in the original). She explains that “to schoolify is to craft new lenses through which to view [the] words, images and motifs of Hip Hop. Using metaphor, metonym, and other techniques, rappers press the meanings of words in order to create new significances and construct new word associations in the minds of their listeners” (Hill and Petchauer, 73). Schoolifying would help students understand the culture that Hip Hop produces because it uses methods that are relevant to Hip Hop and that seek to explain what rappers are doing with language and words.

In his essay, “Rewriting the Remix: College Composition and the Educational Elements of Hip-Hop,” which is also anthologized in *Schooling Hip-Hop*, James Braxton Peterson suggests a way that Hip Hop can be used to teach writing to students. He speaks about how connecting methods of writing, such as the brainstorming process, to aspects of Hip Hop, specifically freestyling, can help reach more students that traditional methods may not reach. He says that teachers can use Hip Hop “by positing brainstorming as a form of freestyling or vice versa, via an aesthetic form particular to Hip Hop culture and valuable *to those developing writers for whom traditional structures might seem limiting or impertinent to their own writing processes*” (Hill and Petchauer, 63. Emphasis added). So, because Hip Hop combines oral and literate cultures through several aspects of its own culture,

it can be used as an educational tool to reach students that do not relate to writing styles that do not reflect their culture. One example of this sort of teaching comes from the New Visions Charter High School for Advanced Math and Science II in the Bronx, recently examined in the New York Times article “Bronx School Embraces a New Tool in Counseling: Hip-Hop,” by Winnie Hu. The students at this high school participate in a program called “hip-hop therapy, [that] encourages them to give voice to their day-to-day struggles in neighborhoods where poverty and crime are constants, and provides a foundation for school leaders to engage directly with them in a way that seems more enjoyable than intrusive” (Hu). Hip Hop is able to give these kids a voice because its culture is more relatable to them than traditional methods. In fact, the program was so successful at the high school that a music class was created about Hip Hop lyricism that “allows students to earn credit for their work. There have been other academic benefits as well. One ninth grader who was reading and writing below grade level recently downloaded an app for a thesaurus to expand his vocabulary for songwriting” (Hu). Instead of debating the merit of using Hip Hop as a therapeutic or educative tool, the teachers at New Visions Charter High School simply used Hip Hop to supplement the methods they were already using, and were able to reach even more students than the traditional methods used to. Hip Hop has the power to expand curriculums in higher education, but only if it is viewed as a part of Ngugi’s network, so that it adds to students’ education, instead of replacing or subverting another part of the curriculum.

Besides Hip Hop's potential to broaden methods of teaching, Hip Hop also plays a pivotal role in providing agency to those who may be discriminated against in the United States. Hip Hop's connection to orality means that it can provide individuals with agency when they may not be able to express themselves in other forms of writing. For black women, there is a history of asserting their agency through orality, going all the way back slave narratives.

In her essay, "Runaway Tongue: Resistant Orality in Uncle Tom's Cabin, Our Nig, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, and Beloved," Harryette Mullen explores the history of black women using orality as a tool of resistance and claiming agency during slavery. She explains that:

illiterate slave women operated within a tradition of resistant orality, or verbal self-defense, which included speech acts variously labeled sassy or saucy, impudent, impertinent, or insolent: the speech of slaves who refused their place, who contested their assigned social and legal inferiority as slaves and black women (Mullen, 245).

Orality was one of the tools that slave women could use to resist their masters and the system of slavery. By using insolent speech acts, "African American oral tradition [came to] [represent] the exposed black woman who uses impudent speech in order to defend her own body against abuse" (Mullen, 246). Therefore, orality was critical to a black woman's ability to assert her own agency and defend herself against abuse.

Besides small speech acts, black women also used orality when telling their story to the white biographers who were looking to use their stories for the abolitionist cause. In her essay, "Brothers and Keepers and the Tradition of the

Slave Narrative," Robin Riley Fast describes how ex-slaves had to navigate the privilege of their biographers. She explains that:

Whatever role the editors, sponsors, or friends assume, their contributions—especially when they precede the slave's story—mediate between the (mainly white) audience and the black autobiographer and, by establishing a context for the reading, determine or at least influence the readers' responses. Thus, regardless of whether they participated in producing the narrative itself, questions of control arise (Fast, 6).

Regardless of the biographers' intention, they were another factor that the ex-slave had to deal with when trying to tell their story. In her essay, "Speak Sister, Speak: Oral Empowerment in Louisa Picquet: The Octoroon," DoVeanna S. Fulton describes how Louisa Picquet used orality in her slave narrative, *Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon*, to resist being silenced by the woman, Hiram Mattison, writing her story. She explains that:

Louisa Picquet's illiteracy would have silenced her and relegated her to an object position. However, through orality, Picquet controls the narrative and positions herself as the subject. These speech acts empower her to overcome oppression and assert her identity through Mattison's mediation (Fulton, 101-102).

Orality allows Picquet to assert her agency even though "Mattison's narrative voice is privileged over hers" (Fulton, 102). Picquet exhibited her agency in how she answered Mattison's questions, as well as how she described her master while telling her story.² When literacy is valued over orality, it forces those in oral cultures to find different ways to maintain their identities and retain their agency.

Hip Hop's use of orality directly connects it to this history of resistance through language. As a piece of orature, Hip Hop allows its artists to use subversive language to make larger critiques about the music industry, popular culture and

American culture. In his essay, "From Homer to Hip Hop: Orature and Griots, Ancient and Present," Daniel Banks explains the importance of orature. He says that:

the term 'Orature' is used to *foreground* the unique skills and production of the oral artist, and to give this means of communication and documentation equal legitimacy next to written texts. Orature preserves the history and culture of individual peoples through performance (Banks, 239. Emphasis Added).

So, to label Hip Hop as orature means that the cultural heritage of resistant orality can be recognized and continued in Hip Hop music. Hip Hop's use of orality and writing means that an emcee or a rapper can use the music to "[create] a subjective representation" by employing the "diverse methods [of orality] to overcome oppression and assert one's identity" (Fulton, 102). Ngugi's network between orality and writing ensures that individuals from either culture will not be erased from a medium such as Hip Hop. Instead of fighting the label "illiterate," which values the knowledge of writing over orality, Hip Hop does not need to engage with the binary because it uses both cultures. When Hip Hop is studied as a combination of orality and writing, and being a part of Ngugi's network, it can serve a larger function, such as an educational tool or means of resistance.

¹ Ong, 156.

² Fulton, 99-100.

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Track Listing
(In order of appearance in the thesis)

	Name	Artist	Album
1	Move the Crowd	Eric B. & Rakim	Paid in Full
2	MC's Act Like They Don't Know	KRS-One	KRS-One
3	Phony Rappers	A Tribe Called Quest	Beats, Rhymes And Life
4	King Kunta	Kendrick Lamar	To Pimp A Butterfly
5	Rolls Rollie	Vinny Cha\$e	The Golden Army
6	Ova Here	KRS-One	The Mix Tape
7	DJ Premier in Deep Concentration	Gang Starr	No More Mr. Nice Guy
8	Eric B. Is On the Cut	Eric B. & Rakim	Paid In Full
9	Eric B. Never Scared	Eric B. & Rakim	Follow the Leader
10	The House That Cee Built	Big Daddy Kane	It's A Big Daddy Thing
11	Rock You	Kool Moe Dee	How Ya Like Me Now
12	W.G.O.N.R.S.	Big Daddy Kane	Daddy's Home
13	Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem)	Jay-Z	Vol.2 Hard Knock Life
14	Blood On the Leaves	Kanye West	Yeezus
15	New Slaves	Kanye West	Yeezus
16	Miracle	Wu-Tang Clan	A Better Tomorrow
17	Touch It	Busta Rhymes	Touch It - Single
18	Look At Me Now (feat. Busta Rhymes & Lil' Wayne)	Chris Brown	F.A.M.E.
19	3 Forties & A Bottle Of Moet	Big Daddy Kane	Daddy's Home
20	Slow Jamz (feat. Twista & Jamie Foxx)	Kanye West	College Dropout
21	Stan	Eminem	The Marshall Mathers LP
22	Gimme The Loot	The Notorious B.I.G.	Ready To Die
23	Godzilla	Rapsody	Beauty and the Beast - EP
24	Sound of da Police	KRS-One	A Retrospective
25	Shimmy Shimmy Ya	Ol' Dirty Bastard	Return To The 36 Chambers: The Dirty Version
26	One Mic	Nas	Stillmatic
27	Take It (feat. Joe)	LL Cool J	Authentic
28	6 'n The Morning	Ice-T	Rhyme Pays
29	One Love	Nas	Illmatic
30	I Got A Story To Tell	The Notorious B.I.G.	Life After Death
31	Snoopafella	Snoop Doggy Dogg	No Limit Top Dogg

32	Rewind	Nas	Stillmatic
33	The Good, The Bad, The Ugly	The Game	The R.E.D. Album
34	I Used To Love H.E.R.	Common	Resurrection
35	I Gave You Power	Nas	It Was Written
36	Golden Salvation (Jesus Piece)	Wale	The Gifted
37	Ten Crack Commandments	The Notorious B.I.G.	Life After Death
38	Two Words (Featuring Mos Def, Freeway & The Harlem Boys Choir)	Kanye West	College Dropout
39	Lotus Flower Bomb (feat. Miguel)	Wale	Ambition (Deluxe Version)

Appendix



Figure 1. This is a scene from the movie *Wild Style*, made in 1983, where a local emcee (far right of the picture) is rapping in a small club. You can see just how close he gets to his audience. *Wild Style*. Dir. Charlie Ahearn. Submarine Deluxe, 2013. DVD.



Figure 2. This is from the concert in the closing scenes of *Wild Style*. You can see that the emcees on stage are directing the crowd to clap and move their hands from side to side. *Wild Style*. Dir. Charlie Ahearn. Submarine Deluxe, 2013. DVD.



Figure 3. This is another shot from inside the club in the film *Wild Style*. At the far right of the picture, you can see the DJ's turntables right behind the emcees. *Wild Style*. Dir. Charlie Ahearn. Submarine Deluxe, 2013. DVD.



Figure 4. This is Grand Master Flash in the film *Wild Style*. He is in his kitchen scratching some records together for another character in the film. You can see as he places his hand on the record to pull it backwards, creating the scratching sound on the record. *Wild Style*. Dir. Charlie Ahearn. Submarine Deluxe, 2013. DVD.



Figure 5. This is a better look at Grand Master Flash's set up in his kitchen. In the middle of his two turntables, he has several controls that affect the pitch, speed and volume of each turntable. His left hand is on the cross fader, which changes the master volume to either turntable. *Wild Style*. Dir. Charlie Ahearn. Submarine Deluxe, 2013. DVD.



Figure 6. This is what a Jesus piece necklace looks like. Wale is rapping as if he is this necklace. "Jesus piece (jewelry)." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 29 October 2015. Web. 22 March 2016.

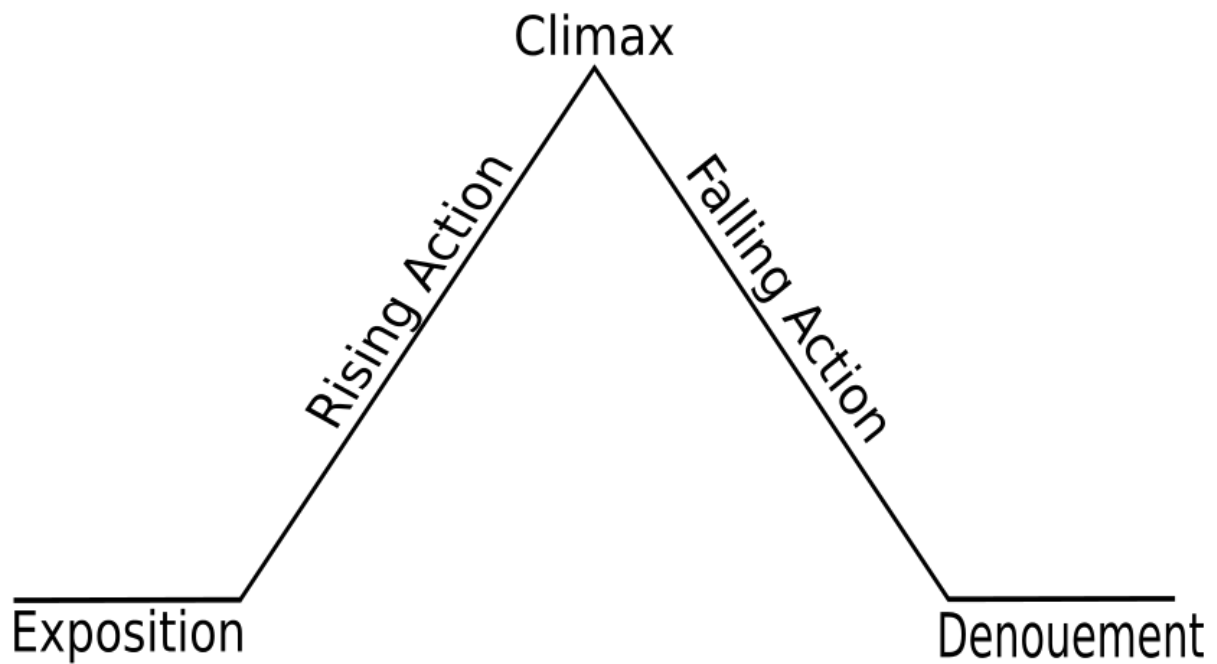


Figure 7. This is Freytag's pyramid that Ong refers to. It is one of the most common plots of a story, with a beginning, middle and end. The middle focuses on the build up to the climax, the climax itself, and then the release of tension after the climax. "Dramatic structure." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 13 February 2016. Web. 22 March 2016.

'Peace Out Premier, Take Me Out With The Fader'