“What’s the Position You Hold?”

Bourdieu and Rap Music

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Rap music has met with increasing scholarly interest since the appearance of the first full-length studies in the mid-1990s (Rose; Potter). While early scholarship focused on the social conditions from which rap music emerged and the political debates it incited, recent studies have increasingly addressed its literary qualities as well (Bradley; Caplan 103-32; Pate). In the following I will explore an approach from relational sociology that draws on both of these areas and helps elucidate the interconnections between them. Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of fields is particularly useful for a literary-sociological analysis of rap music, I argue, because it foregrounds an aspect of social interaction that rappers have continually discussed and performed: position-taking.

The importance of defining, claiming, and occupying one’s position in the field of hip hop is a central concern in many rap songs, and the frequency with which positions are defined by referring to other actors in the field confirms a basic assumption of Bourdieu’s relational model. The beginnings of rap music were shaped by an explicitly relational activity, the rap battle, in which two rappers competed for superiority, often by addressing and comparing themselves to each other. The social milieu out of which rap music emerged was dominated by street gangs, which additionally underscored the importance of position-taking: Claiming or denying one’s membership in a gang could be a question of life and death. When rap music became a national phenomenon in the 1980s, these relational principles were extended accordingly. Rappers now defined their position with reference to

larger spatial entities such as their hometown or, as the East Coast-West Coast feud intensified, an entire part of the country. At the same time, the emergence of message rap saw rap music defining itself against mainstream society, a tendency strengthened by hardcore rap a few years later. In the mid-1990s, rap music entered yet another phase as the most successful rappers made themselves into icons by developing personae that combined strategies from earlier phases and staked their iconic status on obsessive self-positioning.

The title of this essay is taken from the intro of *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1* (1997), an aptly titled album by Jay Z, one of these iconic rappers. Entitled "A Million and One Questions/Rhyme No More," the intro celebrates Jay Z's achievements by contrasting them with the incredulous questions he was facing at the beginning of his career:[1]

A lot of speculation
On the monies I've made, honeys I've slayed
How is he for real? Is that nigga really paid?
Hustlers I've met or dealt with direct
Is it true he slay the beef and slept with a tech?
What's the position you hold? Can you really match
A triple platinum artist buck by buck by only a single goin' gold?

Not only does the passage illustrate the importance of defining one's "position" and the unusually explicit discussion of position-takings in the field of hip hop. It is also a position-taking itself, drawing on various markers of status and legitimacy specific to the field (money, womanizing, street life, guns, successful albums) that Jay Z claims by implication. The relationality of such position-takings is emphasized by the communicative situation evoked in the passage, which implies that some other actors in the field already admired Jay Z while others questioned his status, and by the explicit comparison Jay Z draws with an ostensibly more successful peer at the end. The comparison indicates that positions are defined by combinations of status markers (or in Bourdieu's terms, types of capital) that are themselves open to negotiation: Jay Z in effect suggests that he can match an economically

1 Quotations from songs by Jay Z and Ice-T are taken from the records listed in the bibliography. Transcriptions are available at rap.genius.com.

more successful rapper because of the artistic superiority of his work. This essay argues that Bourdieu's theory can help us understand both the role of relational position-takings in rap music and the transformations the field underwent as a result of changes in the valorization of different kinds of capital. The first section of the essay discusses this proposition from a theoretical perspective; the second section traces the position-takings and historical transformations in the field of hip hop by examining three representative rap texts: Kool Moe Dee's rap battle with Busy Bee Starski (1981), Ice-T's "O.G. Original Gangster" (1991), and Jay Z's "Empire State of Mind" (2009).

BOURDIEU'S FIELD THEORY AND RAP MUSIC

The concept of position-taking emerges out of Bourdieu's field theory, which he began to develop early in his career and differentiated in a series of case studies. A field, Bourdieu says, is "a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions" defined "by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions" (Wacquant 39). All actors in the field are engaged in a struggle for power, that is, for a position that gives them control over the distribution of these profits (*Rules of Art* 232). As Bourdieu's definition suggests, his understanding of capital is not limited to the economic sense of the term. He distinguishes three main types of capital – economic, cultural, and social – but points out that every field ultimately defines its own kind of capital ("The (Three) Forms"). The one kind of capital operative in all fields is symbolic capital, which Bourdieu variously equates with "recognition," "prestige," and "honour" (*Language* 106; *Logic* 118). In highly institutionalized fields such as politics or religion, most positions exist independently of the actors who occupy or aspire to them. In less institutionalized fields such as the literary, by contrast, actors often define their own position, and even preexisting positions (such as that of poet laureate) depend on the occupant for much of their authority. The arrival of an influential young writer or a new school changes the configuration of the literary field, so that personal and temporal factors acquire considerable importance in

sociological analysis (*Rules of Art* 127-28, *passim*). As a result, Bourdieu's study of the literary field, *The Rules of Art*, contains not only his most thorough discussion of the concept of position but adjusts to the fluidity of that field by introducing the more dynamic concept of position-taking.

Since in the modern world actors are seldom born into positions, they need to make their aspirations to a position known by means of direct or indirect discursive signals. It is these signals that Bourdieu calls position-takings. In sociological terms, position-takings have a subjective and an objective component: They result from the individual actor's personal dispositions but also from the structure of positions in the field. While they are not determined by either of these components, sociological analysis of dispositions and positions can elucidate the motivations behind position-takings (*Rules of Art* 234-35, 264-67). Bourdieu uses the term both for singular, empirically traceable acts like criticizing another actor in the field and for larger projects like developing a new school or movement (92-93). With regard to literary texts, he argues that both the content and the form of the text function as position-takings in the literary field. Some position-takings are explicit, for example in autobiographical or metafictional texts, but most are implicit in that the author's "aesthetic choices" signal his position relative to the various groups, schools, and movements that structure the field at the time of publication (231-34). While Bourdieu offers few examples for such implicit, "aesthetic" position-takings, he points out that a wide range of formal aspects can fulfill this function, including "genres, styles, forms, manners" (233; cf. Dubois, "Pierre Bourdieu" 100; Müller 45-52; Speller 64).

Position-takings are only one element in Bourdieu's detailed sociological analysis of the literary field, which raises the question of whether they can be analyzed without reconstructing field structures and actors' dispositions in detail. In *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu himself begins with a close reading of a literary text and later points out that his model allows for both deductive and inductive approaches. A "stylistic strategy," he says, may "furnish the starting point of a search for its author's trajectory" (234), and one might add the analogous point that the structure of the field can be elucidated by tracing stylistic choices through a number of works. The inductive approach has the additional advantage of avoiding the reductive tendencies of Bourdieu's model. With regard to rap music, his limitation of structural power differentials to issues of class is particularly problematic as

it risks occluding the racial issues so momentous in an African American context. Similarly, Bourdieu's tacit assumption that his field theory can explain any society in its entirety has resulted in problems of national or cultural bias when applied to global or non-Western social formations.[2]

The inductive analysis of position-takings is also supported by a phenomenon specific to rap music: the ubiquity of explicit position-takings. Whereas literary texts usually "veil" their negotiation of the field and of the world in general, as Bourdieu and his followers have stressed (*Rules of Art* 33; cf. Dubois, "Flaubert" 83-84; Rabaté 29-31), rappers have made their messages and their position toward one another clear from the beginning. The rapper's sociological interests, in the sense of both socio-political concerns and of aspirations in the field, are the central topic of many songs. In historical perspective, moreover, the alliances, goals, and even institutions of rap music emerged from negotiations often conducted in the music itself. To a considerable extent, then, the field of rap music does not only motivate position-takings but is constituted by them.

In analyzing these songs as position-takings, we can account for both their sociological and their literary dimension without reducing one to the other. Bourdieu himself argues that position-takings "challenge the alternative between an internal reading of the work and an explanation based on the social conditions of its production or consumption" since they foreground the interplay of these aspects (*Rules of Art* 231). With regard to rap music, the concept of position-taking helps bridge the division between social and poetic approaches noted at the outset of this essay. The analyses that follow will address the function of position-takings both in the field of hip hop and within the aesthetic configuration of the individual songs.

While a thorough sociological analysis of the field of hip hop is beyond the scope of the essay, a brief survey of relevant structural features will help demonstrate the applicability of Bourdieu's concepts and provide background information relevant for the case studies.[3] The field of hip hop emerged in New York City around 1980, when the art forms that make up hip hop were a few years old and began to institutionalize within structures provided by producers, record labels, and art galleries, but also by street

2 For discussions of these problems, see Figueroa; Gurr; for a Eurocentrically biased application, see Casanova.

3 The survey draws on Chang; Forman; and George.

gangs. The oppositional self-definition of these gangs made hip hop an unusually bounded and structured artistic field. The principle of gang territories was extended first to the boroughs of New York, then to the nation as a whole, as the well-publicized East Coast-West Coast feud attests.

The foregrounding of capital is another characteristic feature of the field of hip hop. Actors seek and demand "respect" from their peers, a term that could be added to the list of Bourdieu's synonyms for symbolic capital. A closer look shows that respect is usually gained by foregrounding other kinds of capital. This distinguishes the field of hip hop from other artistic fields, which, as Bourdieu has shown, try to obfuscate the importance of capital in general and valorize cultural capital over other kinds. Economic capital is demonstrated by status symbols such as cars, diamonds, and champagne. Cultural capital is awarded for artistic skills (in rap music, primarily the originality of rhymes, metaphors, and insults) but also, again unusually for an artistic field, for quantitative factors such as sales figures and the size of concert audiences. Social capital is generated by associations with successful artists, producers, and music executives on the one hand and by loyalty to one's neighborhood and gang or clique on the other. Hip hop here differs from other artistic fields in that it awards social capital for purely material relations such as those with the music business. From the mid-1990s onward, rappers like Puff Daddy, Jay Z, and Kanye West began to create personae that demonstrated their possession of all three types of capital.

While Bourdieu's concepts have proven useful in analyzing various fields,[4] they are particularly suited to the field of hip hop, with which they share several core metaphors. For example, Bourdieu describes fields as "social games" (*jeux sociaux*) that have their own rules, require the "players" to believe in "the game and the value of its stakes" (*enjeux*), and maintain themselves by the "continual reproduction" of this belief (*Rules of Art* 248, 228, 227). In the field of hip hop, the word "game" has become synonymous with rap music and the rap business, implying the same underlying mechanisms. Another example is the metaphor of "struggle," which for Bourdieu captures the dynamic that defines and sustains a field. The

4 Bourdieu himself published analyses of the academic (*Homo Academicus*), educational (*State Nobility*), and fashion fields (*Sociology* 132-38). For other applications, see Benson and Neveu; Hilgers and Mangez.

"history of the field is the history of the struggle for a monopoly of the imposition of legitimate categories of perception and appreciation," Bourdieu writes, and "it is in the very *struggle* that the history of the field is made" (157). He returns to struggle and related metaphors such as "symbolic violence" throughout his case studies of specific fields (*Language* 164). Position-takings are weapons in this struggle, which they reinforce because most position-takings function "negatively, in relation to others," and thus "often remain almost empty, reduced to a stance of defiance, rejection, rupture" (*Rules of Art* 240). The field of hip hop, too, emerged out of struggles over authority: first in the ritualized form of rap battles in which artistic superiority was at stake, then in the larger-scale "beefs" and "feuds" that established the structure of the field. The frequency with which these terms, and indeed the word "struggle" itself, appear in rap songs attests to the continuing awareness and negotiation of struggle as a core dynamic in the field of hip hop.[5] It also confirms the finding, cited above, that the field of hip hop is unusually aware of its own mechanisms and willing to discuss them openly.

CASE STUDIES: FROM RAP BATTLE TO RAP PERSONA

Rap music emerged in the predominantly African American areas of New York City in the 1970s, when local DJs began to extend the popular instrumental passages of funk and disco songs and to speak ("rap") over these passages. As rapping increased in popularity, "masters of ceremony" (emcees) began to specialize in this occupation, animating the crowd with rhymed stories and party calls. The frequent personal references and comparisons with other rappers in these early pieces indicate the importance of position-takings for the definition of the new field. These position-takings found their most condensed form in rap battles, where two rappers competed in generating noise from the crowd. The dynamic of the emerging field, and the usefulness of Bourdieu's vocabulary for analyzing this dynamic, is perhaps most evident in the legendary battle between Busy Bee Starski and Kool Moe Dee at the Harlem World Christmas celebration in 1981. The

5 The online database rap.genius.com features dozens of songs with these titles and hundreds in which the words appear in the lyrics.

contestants positioned themselves at opposite poles of the emerging field. Busy Bee was one of the most successful party rappers at the time, whereas Kool Moe Dee questioned the artistic value of party rap and emphasized verbal skills and innovation instead (Nguyen). In Bourdieu's terms, the contest pitched a member of the orthodoxy who fulfilled existing requirements for recognition against a heretic who sought to redefine these requirements.

Both contestants voice their aspirations to the "number one" position, as Busy Bee puts it, but Kool Moe Dee turns his reply into a comprehensive critique of party rapping in general and Busy Bee's work in particular.[6] He accuses Busy Bee of stealing rhymes from other rappers and goes on to portray party rapping as "counterfeit," repetitive, and childish ("ba-ditty-ba"). The negative dimension of this position-taking is evident in the frequent personal attacks on Busy Bee, but also in the comments Kool Moe Dee makes about the structure of the emerging field:

You're not number one, you're not even the best
And you can't win no real emcee contest
Celebrity clubs and bullshit like those
Those the kind of shows everybody knows
Celebrity clubs, those are the kind you can win
They're all set up before he comes in
But in a battle like this, you'd know you'd lose
Between me and you, who do you think they'll choose?

The opposition between "real" and "fake" was one of the basic structural features of the field of hip hop from the beginning. It manifests in Kool Moe Dee's distinction between "real emcees" and celebrity emcees who win rap battles not because of their superior skills but because of outside support. The positive dimension of his position-taking is beginning to take shape in this passage: Kool Moe Dee wants the field of hip hop to emancipate itself from such outside influences and award cultural capital for artistic skills, not popularity. This would make the field homologous to other artistic fields such as the literary, which, as Bourdieu shows, established itself

6 Quotations from the rap battle are taken from the recording available in Nguyen and the partial transcript available at *rap.genius.com*.

in this very act of separation (*Rules of Art* 47-112). It would also require field-specific rules by which skills can be measured and cultural capital distributed. One of the reasons for the success of Kool Moe Dee's intervention was, arguably, that it was not only a demand for but also a practical demonstration of such rules. The second part of his performance opens with Kool Moe Dee's announcement that he will now "say those rhymes that I invent," which recalls his claim about Busy Bee's stealing rhymes while at the same time drawing attention to the originality of his own rapping. He underscores this self-reflexive dimension by extending each of the following rhymes over several lines:

And for your pleasure, a rhyme you'll treasure
Please don't try 'cause you can't measure
The length of time can't touch the rhyme
Hip hop don't stop, 'cause you know I'm
An MC supreme and I'm one-of-a-kind
And if you search real hard, I'm sure you'll find

The repetition of rhymes here functions as a positive position-taking in that it showcases Kool Moe Dee's artistic skills, but also as a negative position-taking in that its inventive repetitions contrast with Busy Bee's dull ones, as summarized in the alliterative lines "Party after party, the same old shit / Record after record, rhyme after rhyme." Several other passages in the song function in this manner, for example Kool Moe Dee's inventive puns on his opponent's name: "Busy wanna-bee / Cause you know he wanna be another Kool Moe Dee." The formal complexity of the language underscores the explicit position-takings formulated on the level of content. The Busy Bee vs. Kool Moe Dee battle is widely regarded as formative of the field (Nguyen). In sociological terms this is because it replaced the old orthodoxy of party rap with new rules for the distribution of cultural capital. Authority was now conferred for verbal skills rather than crowd response, so that the field of rap emancipated itself from popular music and instituted rules similar to those of other artistic fields.

Party rap remained a popular strand of rap music but no longer commanded the recognition it did at the beginning. On the contrary, it became a foil against which succeeding movements defined themselves. The most influential of these movements – the one that had the greatest impact on the

structure of the field – was arguably hardcore rap, which combined verbal skills with an aggressive style and an insistence on street credibility (De Genova; George 53-60; Quinn). The breadth of positions in hardcore rap is indicated by two of its most successful representatives: Run-D.M.C. were celebrated for their rhyming skills while N.W.A. brought the "gangsta" lifestyle to nationwide attention in simple, authentic language. In sociological terms, hardcore rap changed the field of hip hop by establishing the importance of economic and especially social capital alongside the cultural capital awarded for skills and success. Many successful hardcore songs, especially of the gangsta variety, were centrally concerned with defining and claiming these types of capital. One of the best known gangsta rap songs, Ice-T's "O.G. Original Gangster" (1991), demonstrates both the valorization of social capital and its combination with the other types.

The song is of particular interest in our context because it opens with an explicit position-taking and goes on to undergird that position-taking on the levels of form and content. Ice-T recalls his origins in party rap and his eventual realization that instead of imitating other rappers he needed to draw from his own experience:

So I sat back, thought up a new track,
Didn't fantasize, kicked the pure facts.
Motherfuckers got scared cause they was unpre-
Pared. Who would tell it how it really was, who dared?
A motherfucker from the West Coast, L. A.
South Central fool, where the Crips and the Bloods play
When I wrote about parties it didn't fit
"6 in the Mornin'"—that was the real shit.

The position-taking has a positive and a negative dimension, but both refer back to the authentic personality of the artist: Ice-T distances himself from his own earlier party songs and defines his new style by autobiographical reference to the "pure facts" about life in his gang-ridden hometown. The self-referentiality of the song is also evident in the heavy use of first-person pronouns ("When I wrote about parties someone always died / When I tried to writ happy yo I knew I lied cause / I lived a life of crime") and the repeated linking of the eponymous "Original Gangster" with Ice-T's name. It points to the central role of social capital in the song and its position-taking.

Social capital is conferred for street credibility, a concept that was defined in large part by hardcore rap and encompasses distinctions drawn on the basis of race, class, and geography. "I rap for brothers just like myself," Ice-T announces, and reinforces the distinction by addressing the listener as a "fool" unacquainted with life in lower-class black neighborhoods: "I'm from South Central, fool, where everything goes / Snatch you out your car so fast you'll get whiplash." The notorious South Central neighborhood is not merely mentioned as a posture but depicted as a conditioning social environment characterized by violence and a lack of education.

These claims to social capital are intertwined with claims to economic and cultural capital. Economic capital still plays a subordinate role in "O.G. Original Gangster." Just as the party rappers had occasionally referred to cars and other indicators of wealth, Ice-T mentions his "quest for extreme wealth" but clearly valorizes the other kinds of capital more highly. His claims to cultural capital are based on artistic skills, which indicates that the redefinition of the field inspired by Kool Moe Dee's battle rap had been successful in the long term. When Ice-T describes his rap as "Hardcore topics over hardcore drum beats," he positions himself in the new movement of hardcore rap and at the same time in the tradition of Kool Moe Dee's artistry. The line evokes an approach similar to the formalist aesthetic the literary field had instituted in the process of its self-definition: form and content enter into an organic, mutually supportive relationship.

Ice-T demonstrates his artistic skills by using internal and triple rhymes (game to me / fame to me / claim to be), and especially by paralleling gangsta life and rap music throughout the song. This is not only an aesthetically valuable conceit but it allows him to marshal his social capital (gangsta life) in support of his aspirations to cultural capital (rap skills). While other rappers pose as invincible action heroes, Ice-T recognizes the emptiness of their posture and turns to the more valuable pursuit of rapping instead: "I ain't no super hero, I ain't no Marvel comic / But when it comes to game I'm atomic / At droppin' it straight, point blank and twisted." The concluding reference establishes a metaphoric link between rap songs and guns that is sustained throughout the song ("I blast the mic with my style"; "my wit's as quick as a hair trigger"), echoing Amiri Baraka's influential poem "Black Art" (1966) which calls for "poems that kill. / Assassin poems, poems that shoot / guns" (116). The strategy of drawing on social capital and inventive language in pursuit of cultural capital can be found

throughout Ice-T's work, starting with the title of his 1987 debut album, *Rhyme Pays*. Given the positive reviews his albums received within the field of hip hop, the strategy was fairly successful, and Ice-T is now remembered as one of the defining rappers of the period (Metcalf and Turner).

From the mid-1990s onward, a new generation of rappers began to redefine the popular perception of rap music by incorporating strategies from other fields, especially from pop music and the economic field. These rappers made themselves into carefully constructed personae, or "icons." By individualizing their appeal, they stabilized their authority in the field of hip hop and at the same time reached audiences beyond the field. They differed from previous rappers, one might argue in Bourdieu's terminology, in that they elevated economic capital to the same importance as the other types and laid claim to all three. The fusion of social, cultural, and economic capital into a rap persona is succinctly illustrated by Jay Z's "Empire State of Mind" (2009), arguably the most successful song by the most successful rapper of this generation.

The title of the song indicates that geography continues to be an important source of social capital but now acquires an additional dimension. While the song stresses Jay Z's origins in Bedford-Stuyvesant, a notorious black neighborhood in Brooklyn, it presents these origins not as a determining or conditioning factor but as the starting point of a success story. This trajectory is established at the very beginning of the song, where Jay Z introduces himself in terms of the geographical coordinates of his success: "Yeah I'm out that Brooklyn, now I'm down in Tribeca / Right next to De Niro, but I'll be hood forever." These lines signal a change in the rules of the field, a change that Jay Z instituted along with other rap "icons" such as Puff Daddy and Kanye West. Social capital is now awarded not only for street credibility ("hood") but also for economic success and upper-class markers such as living next to movie stars. New York, nicknamed the Empire State, thus functions both as a geographical indicator and as a metonym for a personal quality that enables economic success: the "Empire State of Mind."

The various sets of images Jay Z uses to outline his success story indicate the continuing importance of relational position-takings, which acquire an additional dimension in that they serve not only to situate the rapper in the field but to define and solidify his persona. The geographical references,

for example, are intertwined with references to Jay Z's business ventures, from his early drug dealing to his current status as co-owner of a basketball team. The parallel between these career trajectories serves to reinforce the success story but also, in sociological terms, the fusion of social and economic capital in his rap persona. Moreover, the linear geography of the success story (Bedford-Stuyvesant to Tribeca) is embedded in a set of horizontal references to the various black neighborhoods in New York City (like Harlem or the Bronx), which underscores Jay Z's claim that his persona is representative of New York and *vice versa*.

The same strategy can be detected behind the frequent references to other celebrities who became personae. On the one hand, Jay Z parallels his success story with that of better-known mainstream celebrities (Robert De Niro, Frank Sinatra, Bob Marley); on the other hand, he lays claim to field-specific social capital by referencing classic New York rappers (Afrika Bambaataa, Special Ed, The Notorious B.I.G.). The association with The Notorious B.I.G., or Biggie, is developed into a complex position-taking in the course of the song. It positions Jay Z as an East Coast rapper in the East Coast-West Coast opposition Biggie came to embody, and as a Brooklyn rapper in the New York scene. On the temporal scale, Jay Z is laying claim to Biggie's legacy as one of the greatest rappers of all time but also an early rap persona and thus one of the few rappers to attain celebrity status beyond the field of hip hop. On yet another level, Jay Z combines this temporal succession with the coordinates of his personal success story when he parallels his precursor figures with New York landmarks:

[…] rest in peace Bob Marley
Statue of Liberty, long live the World Trade
Long live the King, yo; I'm from the Empire State

The succession from Bob Marley to Biggie ("the King") to Jay Z extends the temporal position-taking further back in time, toward an earlier black icon whose Jamaican origins point to the role of Caribbean immigrants in the emergence of rap music; the link between Marley and the Statue of Liberty emphasizes this connection. The next pairing, of Biggie and the World Trade Center, is indicated by the repetition of "Long live …," an ambiguous phrase that expresses veneration but in this context also relegates its subjects to the past. The phrase alludes to the unbroken succession

of monarchs in the Middle Ages ("the King is dead, long live the King"), thus underscoring Jay Z's claim to the social capital held by his precursors (cf. Kantorowicz). The allusion to the title of his own song right afterward reinforces this claim. In the context of this passage, the reference is now unmistakably to the Empire State Building, itself an iconic site that has survived where the World Trade Center has not and that combines aesthetic appeal with business success.

The complexity of the "Empire State" trope amounts to a claim for cultural capital alongside the other types. It prominently demonstrates the verbal skills manifest throughout the song in such formal devices as slant rhymes (Dominicanos / that McDonalds; melting pot / selling rocks / hip hop) and double-layered wordplay (drug-dealing is discussed in terms of food and of basketball), but especially in the linguistic and formal density of the final section:

Lights is blinding, girls need blinders
So they can step out of bounds quick, the side lines is
Lined with casualties who sip the life casually
Then gradually become worse; don't bite the apple, Eve
Caught up in the in-crowd, now you're in-style
And in the winter gets cold en vogue with your skin out
The city of sin is a pity on a whim
Good girls gone bad, the city's filled with 'em
Mommy took a bus trip and now she got her bust out
Everybody ride her, just like a bus route
"Hail Mary" to the city, you're a virgin
And Jesus can't save you, life starts when the church ends

The main skill required of rappers, rhyming, is demonstrated not only by the frequency of rhymes in this passage but also by their variety and inventiveness. The section features slant rhymes, triple rhymes, internal rhymes, parallelisms, assonances, and alliterations, to a degree that several examples could be cited for each of these devices. Since each line is interwoven with the neighboring lines, often by several links, the section has a tight structure even by the standards of formal poetry. The formal connections often reinforce semantic affinities or contrasts: the blinding lights necessitate blinders, the casual attitude of the newcomers makes them casualties, and so

forth. The section is additionally structured by extended metaphors for life in the big city, especially football, religion, and fashion. The second line describes the challenges of the city in terms of an athletic competition played on a field. Various references suggest American football, a rough, relentless game where players "step out of bounds," stand on the "sidelines," can easily become "casualties," and in desperate situations throw "Hail Mary" passes. These references frame the passage, as does the religious imagery introduced in the fourth line ("don't bite the apple, Eve"), taken up in the "city of sin" phrase, and developed more fully in the concluding lines of the passage. The central metaphor in terms of its location in the passage, and also of its significance for the song as a whole, is that of fashion. While it only extends over two lines ("now you're in-style / And in the winter gets cold en vogue with your skin out"), it exemplifies the compact wordplay of the passage and thus the rapper's verbal skills. As Jay Z himself has pointed out, the lines do not merely describe the exposure of fashionable girls to the hardships of the city but also contain a string of references to fashion magazines: *InStyle*, *Vogue*, and the notoriously icy editor of the latter, Anna Wintour (*Decoded* 129).

The fashion metaphor also recalls the importance of economic capital for the sort of rap persona Jay Z is developing and presenting in the song. References to status symbols pervade the song: living "next to De Niro," driving an "off-white Lexus," living "on Billboard," "sipping mai tais," holding courtside seats at professional basketball games. Many of these status symbols are brands that combine all three types of capital in that they indicate economic success, social recognition, and cultural authority in the field of hip hop. These brands stand in metonymical relation to the rap persona of Jay Z, which also combines the three types of capital and depends on global marketing and instant recognizability. When Jay Z brags that he "made the Yankee hat more famous than a Yankee can," he summarizes the aspirations underlying his creation of a rap persona. His iconic status not only equals but surpasses that of the New York Yankees, the most successful baseball club of all time, in that his iconicity ranges beyond its field of origin. This achievement can only be measured against that of the Yankees, however, and the obsessively comparative self-descriptions of many "persona" rappers indicate that relational position-taking has lost none of its importance since the early days of hip hop.

This essay has provided only a broad outline of the interplay of social structures and artistic strategies in rap music. A more detailed study would inevitably complicate the configurations and trajectories identified so far, and would thus present a fuller picture of the social relations that shape rap music.

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