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Lyrical (re)citation: Remembering, recycling and revoicing bars from the rap canon

ABSTRACT

Rap music has been the soundtrack to global rebellions against the hegemonic status quo. For this reason, it has often been construed as the antithesis of tradition, breaking old systems to make space for the novel and the original. Along these lines, the hip hop community has deeply valued originality as an essential feature of the emcee's authorial voice. Copying the rhymes and styles of fellow rappers has often been condemned as 'biting'. While these practices of ingenuity are plenty within the rap scene, it is integral that hip hop studies also account for practices that directly contradict this ethos of ingenuity: practices of re-citation, re-cycling, re-membling and re-voicing. This study examines the lyrics and the testimonies of rappers for evidence of these practices. The record shows that many emcees are constantly engaged in memorizing the language forms of other rappers and faithfully replicating those forms in their own artistic creations. These practices of re-cycling are contextualized within social theories of voice that posit authorial voice as fundamentally co-constructed by an author's social scene. The study seeks to complicate the caricature of the self-made–self-taught rapper, which has often led to stereotypical depictions of rappers as unstudied, off-the-cuff and extemporary.

KEYWORDS

rap
recitation
discourse
lyricism
sociolinguistics
learning

[W]hen artists take turns of phrase or structures of rhymes from other MCs, and then reconfigure them into their own texts, recognizable and yet new, still another level of call and response emerges.

(Perry 2004: 36)

[T]he word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions.

(Bakhtin 1981: 293)

Jazz has its standards, and we expect it to be re-interpreted and re-cycled again and again. We deeply appreciate having both Ella Fitzgerald's and Nina Simone's version of 'I Love You Porgy' and feel that the more quality interpretations there are, the better we understand the original piece. But what about rap? Is it within the aesthetic and ethical values of the rap genre to recite other people's words? Hip hop's laser focus on originality and realness might lead us to believe that it stands in direct opposition to artistic approaches focused on establishing standards. In rap we frown upon biting someone's lyrics. To copy someone's style is to be fake. The hip hop community often prefers for there to be an intimate relationship between what an emcee says in their lyrics and the actual content of their autobiographical experience – *the content of their character*. And even when emcees are valued for performing fictional and pseudo-fictional personas (i.e. Rick Ross and MF Doom), we still expect the content of those fictional lyrics to derive from the imagination of the performer themselves. It is hard for an emcee to recite someone else's lyrics without facing accusations of identity fraud. In fact, there have been many moments where a rapper's recitation of lyrics that were not their own caused us to question their entire legacy as an author.

On the other hand, highlighting these notable moments where rap fraud was highly policed might obscure some of the other ways that hip hop culture is fundamentally built on reciting one another's rhymes. Clearly, this recitation happens in informal settings. At a party when the DJ switches songs, and the legendary sample from Mtume's 'Juicy Fruit' transitions in, and a husky voice starts with '[i]t was all a dream', inevitably that entire party is yelling out 'I used to read Word Up Magazine', and then proceeding to recite the first verse to Notorious B.I.G.'s 'Juicy' (1994) in a fit of nostalgia. Lyrics are recited in clubs and parties where fans show off their knowledge and mouth their favourite songs in sync with the emcee.

It is clear that fans recite rappers' lyrics, but do emcees recite each other's lyrics? Is it a taboo offense to perform someone else's words? What may come to mind first are a few classic bars that have been reinterpreted again and again. For example, since Sugar Hill Gang said 'Hotel, motel, Holiday Inn' in their classic *Rapper's Delight* and Wu-Tang Clan introduced the acronym C.R.E.A.M. 'Cash Ruled Everything Around Me', these phrases have been recited dozens of times by various emcees. This article will argue that, while inelegant forms of plagiarism are policed within the rap community, recitation and revoicing of lyrics are fundamental poetic elements of the hip hop form. Learning the raps of others, including intertextual references to others' bars, are key aspects of emcees' artistic practice.

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One moment that provides a window into this insight was an interaction between rap contemporaries Black Thought and Mos Def that took place after a cypher in Brooklyn in 2009, captured on film by archiver of the culture Cognito of Frolab. As stagehands disassemble the stage we observe a candid personal moment between the rappers. Mos Def proceeds to recite the entirety of Black Thought's song '75 Bars', word for word, cadence for cadence, intonation for intonation. For long spells the two emcees are circling each other with large grins on their faces as they spit rhymes in unison, in an impromptu performance.

Throughout this 75-bar verse there are only a few interruptions of their perfect synchrony. Black Thought stares at Mos baffled and impressed, '[y]ou might be the only n*** that know that shit yo'. The other moment of interruption is when Mos drops a bar. As soon as they get to bar 36 of 75 Mos realizes he does not know the words. Maybe over the years, after dozens of listens, he never quite made out what Black Thought was saying in that couplet. But in this moment, as Thought continues to spew his poetry, Mos looks intensely at his comrade, directly in his eyes, focusing all of his attention on trying to make out the words. The intensity of Mos's stare stood out to me because it is as if he recognizes the gravity of the moment. Fortunately, he has the author of this verse in his vicinity, and this will be the moment when the mystery will be revealed. After he finally deciphers the missing words, he screams out with understanding '[p]lane to the bus and another dang train!'

As this intimate moment suggests, one aspect of the poetic process of hip hop is the intensity of study that emcees dedicate to retaining other people's

1. All links without accessed dates included were accessed on 11 September 2021.



Figure 1: *'Black Thought x Black Dante (Mos Def): 75 Bars' a YouTube hosted video capturing the two legendary emcees reciting '75' Bars together. To fully engage with this article's or contribution's argument, I recommend that you view the referenced multimedia content while you read by following the provided links: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOLgn9ehuu4&t=74s>.¹*

bars. Many obsess over knowing the words. By construing hip hop music as a form of poetry, this can cause us to place high emphasis on individual authorship and often obscure the role of emcee as listener, memorizer and reciter. One crucial part of what makes hip hop a culture is the way in which language is shared, voiced and re-voiced. While fans appreciate the innovation, they also appreciate the imitation as vocalists re-cite and re-mix the vocal performances of other emcees. This imitation is often much more than a form of flattery – it is a form of veneration.

CALL AND RESPONSE: PAYING HOMAGE AND OTHER FORMS OF DIALOGUE WITH PREDECESSORS

Paying homage is not an extraneous endeavour in hip hop. It is not the acceptance speech happening after the Grammy, or the liner notes that occur in the fine print of the album. Rather it is a fundamental technical aspect of rap lyricism. Executing the homage well requires the same refining of expertise and mastery of language as other literary devices such as the metaphor, the punch line or the rhyme. In fact, Lil Wayne suggests that (re)citation may in fact be the ‘heart’ of hip hop practice. In his song ‘Dr. Carter’, Lil Wayne (Wayne Carter) takes on a fictional persona as a physician. His patients are emcees who are suffering from a number of symptoms that prevent them from reaching their poetic potential. In the following excerpt, Dr. Carter diagnoses the root cause of their underperformance.

The voice of a medical practitioner as she welcomes Dr. Carter at the start of his shift and describes his case load:

Good afternoon Dr. Carter. I don’t know about this one. His confidence is down. Vocab and metaphors need work. And he lacks respect for the game. You think you can save him?

Lil Wayne, Dr. Carter Verse 2:

Okay, respect is in the heart,
so that’s where I’m a start
And a lot of heart patients don’t make it
But, hey kid, plural,
I graduated
‘Cause you can get through anything if magic made it’
And that was called recycling, r-e-reciting something
‘Cause you just like it,
So you say it just like it
Some say it’s biting but I say it’s enlightening
Besides, Dr. Kanye West is one of the brightest

(‘Dr. Carter’, Lil Wayne 2008)

Lil Wayne insinuates that in order to cure the ailing emcee he must start by addressing his heart. The most lethal affliction an emcee can suffer from is one that originates in his heart, a disease that presents as an utter lack of respect for the game. How does Dr. Carter suggest that his patient cure his lack of respect? In the lines that follow, Lil Wayne illustrates directly how to show respect; by studying the bars of great emcees. Wayne quotes a line from Kanye West’s (2009) song ‘Can’t Tell Me Nothing’ where West raps ‘you can live through anything if Magic made it’. It is a line that marvels at basketball

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Figure 2: 'Dr. Carter' from Lil Wayne's 2008 studio album *Tha Carter III*. In the second verse (1:25) Wayne speaks to the importance of re-citation within rap music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=es6goNuHOIY>.

legend Magic Johnson's ability to survive his HIV diagnosis. Lil Wayne (Dr. Carter) cites this line because he wants his own suffering patient to see Magic's miracle as evidence that he, too, can recover from his malignant illness. If he learns to respect the game, perhaps he will survive chronic disease.

Lil Wayne imitates Kanye's line in his verse and then, in the bars that follow, he describes explicitly his intention behind citing this line. Wayne is engaging in what linguistic anthropologists call metapragmatics, when language speakers talk explicitly about the rules and grammars that structure their language use. For those of us who study rap poetics, these moments are informative primary sources, because during metapragmatic discourse emcees explain their authorial intent. They name the literary devices that they use and describe what makes them work. They give their opinion on what separates expert language use from novice use. During his metapragmatic bars, Wayne labels his quoting of Kanye as *recycling*, drawing on a notion of environmentally conscious conservation. For Wayne, recitation is a way to *conserve* the meaning of a prior utterance, so that its original meaning can live on, and is not wasted or forgotten. He argues that while some might call it 'biting' Kanye's style, he looks at it as 'enlightening'. He recognizes the luminous brilliance of Kanye's line of poetry, absorbs its radiant energy, so that he can magnify the luminescence of the original message. Remember Wayne's

homage to Kanye is also supposed to be a lesson for his weak hearted patient, exemplifying how exercising the heart includes a process of practising classic rhymes, internalizing them until you know them *by heart*.

Imani Perry (2004) argues that when emcees recite throwback lines, these are instances of call-and-response between the citer and the cited. She illustrates a similar dynamic when Nas reuses Rakim's (Eric B. and Rakim 1987) bars from '*As The Rhyme Goes On*', 'I'm the R to the A to the K-I-M/If I wasn't then why would I say I am'. Nas salvages Rakim's rhyme scheme and upcycles it, inserting his own name and therefore transforming the bar through creative reuse 'I'm the N the A to the S-I-R/If I wasn't I must've been Escobar'. Perry argues that these revoicings (whether they are direct quotes or rhyme schemes amended with new content) illustrate why writing hip hop is not simply an individual endeavour. An emcee is in conversation with rappers from previous generations, with his/her contemporaries, and with the wider discourse around hip hop culture (critics, fans, Black Twitter, etc.). The discursive space of hip hop can be imagined as various conversation threads unravelling across time and space. An emcee's ability to contribute to the conversation is predicated on their ability to listen, or to *ear-hustle* as we say in Black English. These re-citings are ways for rappers to signal that they are 'students of the game' and that they can know the genre well enough to contextualize their creative contributions. Perry argues that aesthetic expertise in the realm of hip hop is based on listening to the *call* of other emcees, *re-calling* what was said and then *responding*:

To make something good in hip hop means in part to effectively employ the call-response trope on several levels, and, just as important, to know what is good requires a sophisticated, albeit not necessarily conscious, understanding of the symbolic references and the cultural history from which the music derives.

(Perry 2004: 36)

Expert emcees respond directly to previous utterances and therefore every rap verse is dialogical. I use the word (re)citation here to describe two interrelated sets of practices: (1) the *citational practices* where rappers cite how their lyrics are inspired by other emcees' lyrics, and (2) the *recitational practices* of revoicing the bars of another emcee, either for fun, for practice, or for performance. (Re) citation maps the process by which the cultural symbols of rap are internalized and reproduced. On a spiritual level it is the mechanism through which we become a part of the cipher, receiving vibratory energy from the culture, internalizing those vibrations into our knowledge structures and then giving the energy back. Much attention has been paid in hip hop to the beef; the argumentative battle between emcees where poet is turned against poet, and one's words are used to tear apart the words and reputation of the enemy. Many stories have been told about the battle-emcee rising up and triumphantly slaying his competition with verbal weaponry. Battling is also a form of call and response. However, we have perhaps paid less attention to the ways in which rappers are engaged in dialogue that is collaborative instead of combative.

EXPLORING RAP (RE)CITATION AS CITING TEXTS

David Diallo analyses the prominence of recitation in rap, by applying Bakhtin and Kristeva's theories of intertextuality to rap lyrics. Diallo argues that rap is

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fundamentally intertextual in that rappers are ‘draw[ing] a parallel between their own text and a pre-existing one (hypotext)’ (2015: 24). He points out various forms of intertextuality and how the fragments of hypotexts are reanimated in new compositions. Direct recitation is one of the most explicit forms of intertextuality, given that rappers are *copying and pasting* sections of someone else’s lyrics into their own. Other forms of intertextuality are more implicit, for example when an artist compares himself to a previous artist (Drake: ‘I’m the light skin Keith Sweat’), or when an artist takes on a subject matter previously expressed by his forbearer. In these bars from ‘Sunshine’, Pusha T (2015) engages in intertextuality, making reference to various other rap texts including the tragic character Brenda who leaves her unwanted child in a dumpster in Tupac’s (1991) ‘Brenda’s Got a Baby’:

In order to be me
 You gotta see what Chief Keef see
 Brenda’s baby next door to the candy lady

(Pusha T 2015)

Researchers studying textual allusion, citation and reference happening within written texts have been primed to see similar processes happening in rap verses (Diallo 2015). At the same time, we must be attentive to the constraints of thinking of raps as *texts*, given that rap is primarily an orally delivered artform. Since the activities of art criticism and academic theorizing are dominated by the written word, these disciplines tend to overemphasize writing as the prism through which they understand rap. Although some rap lyricists compose their verses first in the written form, the oral performance is the seminal artistic product, and this oral format is the one that the audience actually experiences. We do not read rappers. We hear them. We process their utterances through the auditory system, a system evolved to detect sound waves. Studies of oral tradition and musicology are an important resource in understanding the fundamental dynamics of lyrical re-cycling. Analysing the way that recitation is an embodied form of vocal mimicry problematizes the way that studies of intertextuality in poetry have often focused too much on the written word as the prototypical ‘text’.

Both written texts and vocal performances can be reproduced. However, when trying to explain lyrical recitation we must remember the differences between these formats. Written text is a mode of discourse with certain affordances and constraints when it comes to conveying meaning. A written composition can convey information primarily through the semantics of words (what individual phonemes and sequences of phonemes mean). Voices, on the other hand, also communicate paralinguistic information through intonation, pitch, melody, dynamics (volume), cadence (rhythm), pronunciation, timing and rhythm (Lundström and Svantesson 2022). In fact, researchers have shown that listeners recall content better when it contains intonation and change in pace (Rockwell 1996). Voices do not just denote, they emote; and they do so through altering the sonic properties of utterances. The human vocal tract can modify or nuance the meaning of lyrical content by the way that it modulates the sound of words. We know a voice is scared by hearing the way it shakes. When words come in short powerful bursts we know a voice is aggressive even if the content of what is said is meek and passive. Oral performances use all of these elements of ‘voice’ to communicate meaning, and therefore when we

attend to Mos Def and Lil Wayne's recitations we must be attuned to how they reproduce all of these elements of an oral hypotext, not a written text.

Re-citing a fellow emcee's lyrics can also be a form of shouting them out. The shout-out has always been a part of the role of an emcee, perhaps tracing back to the emcee's role at 1970s New York house parties, and the Jamaican dance hall practice of toasting. When you get on the mic, you extend praise and show love to the people who have impacted your life or influenced the culture more broadly. Recitation is one way to show love. It must also be said that recitations are not simply acts of cultural preservation but can serve many rhetorical goals. Sometimes shouting out another rapper or reciting their words is a way of legitimizing yourself as an emcee. When you recite the rap goats you are arguing that you are worthy of being in conversation with them. You show your knowledge of the canon and prove your credibility as a student of the game. Therefore, recitations and shout-outs can be used rhetorically to build clout. Evans (2021) refers to this form of clout chasing as a form of 'self-fashioning' that allows rappers to accumulate popularity and acclaim.

CULTURE AS WORD-OF-MOUTH PHENOMENON: (RE)CITATION AS THE FUNDAMENTAL TRANSMISSION FORCE OF CULTURE

In the previous sections we have shown that one of the fundamental practices of hip hop poetics is that of oral (re)citation. It is important to situate this practice as something that is not simply unique to hip hop but is part of the human legacy of oral tradition; the transmission of stories, narratives and other linguistic forms using the voice. We can think of hip hop as one genre among thousands where poets are tasked with memorizing the poetic forms of predecessors and re-articulating them. There are countless examples, including Homer's epic poem *the Odyssey*, which was transmitted in its entirety from generation to generation by word of mouth for 1500 years before it was recorded somewhere between the sixth and tenth centuries (Foley 2007).

At an even more fundamental level, researchers of cultural transmission have thought of the revoicing of previous utterances as a fundamental way of describing how human culture is transmitted by word of mouth. Children come to understand their cultural perspective by being socialized into its language. When members of our social milieu assign language and signs to phenomena, we internalize these symbolic systems and use them as tools to help us perceive and describe the world. Social theorists like Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin focused on ways in which our everyday thought and speech is made possible by the internalization of other people's words, phrases and stories.

This process can be traced by examining how an individual linguistic form (word or phrase) is invented in a social context and then is disseminated throughout the cultural community. One example of this from hip hop culture was described by journalist Elijah Watson (2018) when he uncovered how the word 'woke' was introduced into contemporary vernacular. It happened by a process of oral transmission and revoicing. Watson described the introduction of this phrase by hip hop artists Erykah Badu and Georgia Anne Muldrow in 2008. In their pivotal song 'Master Teacher', the duo chants the phrase 'I stay woke' a total of 44 times, each time in a hypnotic ascending melody. Again and again 'I stay woke'. This song, with its mantra of awakening, is found on Badu's fourth studio album, *New Amerykah Part One*, a project that was critically acclaimed by both African American hip hop figures like Drake and by more mainstream critics like the Associated Press, who named it the #1 album of 2008.

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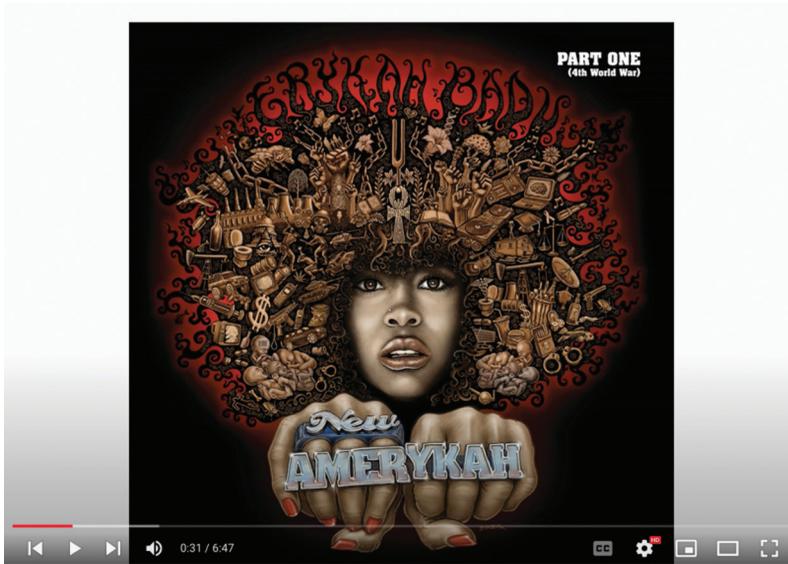


Figure 3: The critically acclaimed song that many have attributed as the origin of the word 'woke'. In *'Master Teacher'*, from her album *New Amerykah: Part One (4th World War)*, Erykah Badu features Georgia Anne Muldrew repeating the mantra 'I stay woke': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dieo6bp4zQw&list=PLeCO3VkusdWQAB9tOsIFfMulDgubJusCj&index=8>.

Is it a coincidence that this album invoking a new America was released during a historical moment when Black Americans were watching the impossible made possible? *New Amerykah* dropped 26 February 2008. A month earlier, a big-eared even-keeled Illinois Senator who was running for president on a campaign of 'hope and change' shocked the pundits by winning the Iowa Caucuses, setting the stage to eventually win the Primary Election and the Democratic nomination. In response to his early success, his partner Michelle Obama proclaimed '[l]et me tell you for the first time in my adult life, I am really proud of my country [...] not just because Barack is doing well but I think people are hungry for change'. When Erykah's album dropped, the possibility of a new America with an African American president was in the air.

With the widespread dissemination of the song, and the political climate of the time, this phrase 'stay woke', in particular, was a phrase that resonated with its listeners. It was a way to describe a deep awareness of the history of African American oppression, or of oppression more broadly. Erykah Badu and Georgia Anne Muldrew introduced a word deeply drenched in the Black vernacular, a word that so eloquently summarized the state of alertness achieved when sleep is wiped from our eyes (and third eyes) and we are roused into a more radical social consciousness. Maybe the word had a previous reincarnation as 'conscious' in the 1990s, as Erykah and many of her contemporaries cultivated an ethos of social awareness and Black radical politics in their work (Knight 2008; Rabaka 2011). Acts like A Tribe Called Quest, De la Soul, The Roots and Common were all pegged with the label of 'conscious rap' because they incorporated Africentric themes, embraced eclectic forms of spiritual development and attempted to highlight social issues

that affected Black communities. When we heard Erykah using this new word ‘woke’, it seemed to be the newest incarnation of that ethos. By the time Badu starts her tour for the *New Amerykah* album in 2009, you start to see leaked footage emerging of audience members chanting along with the band ‘I stay woke’. At this point, the phrase is becoming a part of the lexicon of sections of the hip hop community that are adjacent to Badu’s scene.

Between 2009 and 2016 the phrase ‘stay woke’ was used only by niche communities. This can be evidenced by its sparse use by rappers during that period. Although there were not a large number of rap recitations of the phrase during this period, there are a handful of hip hop artists who used it in their lyrics. The band Of Montreal references the word in their 2010 song ‘Like a Tourist’ directly quoting Erykah, ‘[d]on’t treat me like a tourist, let’s stay “woke” like pharaoh E. Badu’. In 2012 Bay Area rapper E-40, who is known in his own right for inventing multitudes of slang phrases, uses ‘stay woke’ in his song Gargoyle Serenade, ‘[g]otta stay woke while everybody else asleep/Cause they dusty mayne, they dirty mayne, they’ll try and sneak’. There are a few other notable rappers that revoiced the phrase during this period including Jadakiss, Black Milk and Kool AD. At the same time, these songs did not gain a great deal of mainstream popularity. For about seven years after Badu and Muldrew’s invention the public record shows this word being used sporadically among hip hop adjacent communities. If you knew, you knew.

However, in November 2016 rapper Childish Gambino adds a refrain of ‘stay woke’ to his falsetto groove *‘Redbone’*, which highly amplifies the use of this phrase in the mainstream discourse. ‘Redbone’ becomes a global hit winning a Grammy for Best Traditional R&B Performance and is featured in the opening scene of Jordan Peele’s horror film about liberal racism *Get Out* (2017). It is the global crossover success of Gambino’s ‘Redbone’ that launches this word into the mainstream zeitgeist. Post-‘Redbone’ there is a groundswell of artists between 2017 and 2022 who were using the phrase stay woke in their lyrics including Meek Mill, Arianna Grande and J. Cole. Eventually the term ‘woke’ is associated with various intersectional values of social and racial justice and can reference people supporting the #MeToo movement against sexual assault, and folks who are critically aware of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. By 2017, we see the word ‘woke’ finally being added to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an action that lexicographers have not traditionally done with Black English until a critical mass of white speakers are using it. Many would argue that the connotation of the word has been distorted from its original meaning. By 2018 the word ‘woke’ was just as often used by critics of the social justice left to mock them and portray them as hypersensitive virtue signallers. In fact, in 2019 the phrase comes full circle when Barack Obama uses the phrase (by this point he is former president Barack Obama). At his Obama Foundation Summit, he attempts to warn Gen-Z not to be too self-righteous with their call-out activism: ‘you know this idea of purity and you’re never compromised and you’re always politically woke [...] [Y]ou should get over that quickly’. In this sense, he is seeming to define being woke as being self-righteous and holier-than-thou. This new usage is a far cry from what Erykah and Childish Gambino meant when they were commanding us to stay woke.

The proliferation of the word ‘woke’ illustrates ways in which our modern political discourse has been shaped by processes of (re)citation in hip hop communities. The hip hop discursive community can be thought of as an

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informal thinktank, where rappers collaboratively invent and share language, revoicing phrases that were invented by comrades and repurposing them for new lyrical objectives. Through this process of revoicing, the community collectively theorizes concepts and narratives that everyday people can then use to make sense of the American sociopolitical landscape (and beyond). The words and narratives invented by the hip hop discursive community have then gone on to shape mainstream discourses in society, where they are revoiced, transformed and even co-opted.

ORAL TRADITION OF RECITATION AND TRANSMISSION: THE WEST AFRICAN GRIOT AS A COMPARATIVE GENRE

The transmission of 'stay woke' across discursive communities helps us see that all of our words have origins in other people's mouths, and therefore we can always perceive our utterances as the reanimation of vocabulary, stories and narratives from previous speakers. Most of the time we are neither creating nor destroying words, but more commonly we are conserving their meanings, taking them up from our surroundings and applying them to new contexts.

Because this type of (re)citation that Bakhtin describes is ubiquitous, it can almost seem unremarkable. Of course we use words from our surroundings! But when we think of hip hop artists learning the skill of (re)citing, we are talking about a much more exceptional and expert skill. We are not just talking about them passively reciting old words, or phrases (i.e. 'the revolution will not be televised') but also whole narratives, stanzas and verses from memory. For example, narrative elements of Slick Rick's 'Children's Story' were (re)cited by Eminem (2009), The Game (2009), Tricky (2010) and Black Star (2018), each of them re-interpreting this classic story about a young man who takes a tragic wrong path ending in death at the hands of the police. How do we describe this more intentional process of memorization and recitation – of homage – that goes beyond our human tendency to spontaneously repeat catch phrases in everyday speech?

There are intellectual trades within societies (historians, bards, storytellers) that have taken even more formal or specialized roles in memorizing cultural discourse of the past, preserving it and re-articulating it so as to disseminate it to community members and pass it along to future generations. This historiographic or journalistic role is nodded to in Chuck D's labelling of hip hop as 'the Black CNN'. Perhaps we can think of some hip hop artists as serving similar roles to the professional storytellers from South Asia in the accounts of Ramanujan (2007), who recited religious verses of the Mahabharata interspersed with tidbits from television and local news, or the wise African American men and women who Zora Neale Hurston (1935) described in her ethnography of Eatonville, Florida that sat on the porch reciting old folk tales like *Why the Mocking Bird is Away on Friday*. Each of these genres is quite different from the next one when it comes to their poetic conventions; however, what connects them is their conscious intent on re-telling. One way to pinpoint this conscious intent is to look for examples of verbatim recitation. However, another thing to focus on might be the testimony of artists when they declare the responsibility they feel to revoice old wisdom. Artists very often express the importance of *passing on* the knowledge that their OGs imparted on them.



Figure 4: The narrative and melodic structure of Slick Rick's iconic song '*Children's Story*' has been re-cycled by various rappers. The linked content is the official music video released by Island Def Jam Music Group: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjNTu8jduKA>.

When differentiating the skills of the agentic author from the powerless one, Bakhtin makes primary distinctions between the passive assimilation of others' words and a more active conscious appropriation of those words:

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, then he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention.

(Bakhtin 1981: 293)

For Bakhtin the expert user of language is not the one who creates words and narratives from scratch. For him, all the words we use are someone else's. The person who thinks he is making up new words or new stories is simply unaware of whose words and intentions they are channelling. For Bakhtin the truly 'conscious' or 'woke' speaker is most importantly the one who has an awareness of where their words come from. He describes the powerful speaker not as a word-maker but as a word-accenter. If one is aware enough, they can at least partly allow the words they channel to do their bidding.

This framing pushes us to see hip hop at its best as primarily a (re)citative act, one where artists are aware of what they are re-voicing. Many of the most notable hip hop artists have argued that their role is more of a re-interpreter. In the documentary *Nas: Time Is Illmatic* (One9 2014), Nas said that he viewed his role as primarily a re-teller, or a preserver of the Queensbridge story.

This was a story that needed to be told. It was already told by MC Shan, and Marley Marl, Craig G, Shante, the Juice Crew. You know what I'm saying [...]. It was already told. So I was just an extension of that. They paved this way.

(One9 2014)

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Figure 5: The documentary *Nas: Time Is Illmatic* is a biographical memoir of the Queens emcee, detailing his rise to become a preeminent hip hop storyteller. While being interviewed for the documentary, Nas lists the emcees that preceded him (MC Shan, Marley Marl, Craig G, Shante and the Juice Crew) and how his storytelling is merely a re-telling of the narratives they initiated: https://pluto.tv/en/on-demand/movies/nas-time-is-illmatic-giant-2013-1-1?utm_medium=textsearch&utm_source=google.

Nas speaks to a 'traditional' aspect of hip hop in which emcees are collectors and preservers of stories. He is aware of the voices that he is channelling. Nas certainly has a great deal of accuracy when he (re)cites the words of the hip hop canon. In that same documentary (seemingly on the spot) he (re)cites MC Shan's 'Kill that Noise' by heart. But the recycling role of the emcee is not just their ability to produce identical copies of the original. On a more philosophical level, even when Nas is not (re)citing something verbatim, he thinks of his poetry as a reimagining of the emcees that came before him.

Researchers have situated the hip hop poetic tradition as sharing philosophical similarities with the West African griot tradition (Toop 1984; Smitherman 1997; Kopano 2002; Sylvan 2002; Smitherman 1997), storytellers who keep alive the histories of their communities by retelling stories and revoicing old wisdom. These scholars have made connections between oral storytelling practices in sub-Saharan Africa and the poetics of hip hop music. Elements of these griotic traditions travelled across the ocean during the trans-Atlantic slave trade creating the blueprint for Negro spirituals ('Follow the Drinking Gourd'), Afro-diasporic mythology ('Tales of the Orishas') and African American folktales ('Brer Rabbit'), all of which influenced contemporary Black music. Griots from sub-Saharan Africa recite epic poetry, or the genealogies of their clan, using rhythm, narrative and song, relaying the cultural innovations of their forefathers to the community (Hampâté Bâ 1981; Stoller 1994). The Mongo people, the largest ethnic group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have had storytellers reciting the Lianja epic poetry for seven centuries to transmit the heroic story of a leader who is born to unify war-torn communities in Central Africa (Finnegan 2012). For societies like the Bambara, the Mande people, the Songhay people and the Dagomba of Northern Ghana, who prior to colonization conveyed knowledge more through speech than writing, the act of (re)citation was the main vehicle for the transmission of cultural concepts, including

the religious wisdom of folklore and proverbs, as well as the practical knowledge of the agricultural and medicinal sciences (Hampâté Bâ 1981; Stoller 1994). Of course, today most of these communities are engaged in multimodal literacies and create written literature, film and all types of digital media. However, the oral tradition still plays a strong role in cultural life.

With the spread of Islam across Africa during the seventh century, traditional African oral literatures often combined with Muslim cultural traditions of (re)citation, which were also very concerned with the reproduction of stories through methods such as citing sources (*isnad* in Arabic) and preserving the chain of transmission (*silsila*, which means chain in Arabic). Hampâté Bâ in his reflections on African griotic traditions speaks about the respect for the chain of transmission among the Komo storytellers of the Sudanese Ethiopian borderland:

If the Komo bard happens to add anything to the message he has received, he takes care to warn his audience by saying: 'This is what I am adding. If I am wrong, do not forget that, like you, I live on a handful of millet, a mouthful of water and fresh air. Man is not infallible!'

(Hampâté Bâ 1981: 177)

Part and parcel of the decentralized nature of oral tradition is the assumption that retellings will not be identical to one another. At the same time, a great deal of consistency was expected and an intention on integrity was one of the values pursued. It must be said that all the griots in West African societies were not treated as conveyers of traditional wisdom. Some are purely entertainers and are expected to tell half-truths and be mischief makers, like court-jesters. These jesters are more likely to be using artistic license as compared to conserving traditional truths. However, other griots go through a process of initiation where they learn to be 'owned' by the words of previous generations, and to be possessed by the stories of old (Stoller 1994). Notice that there is a decentring and a humbling of the self in this phrasing, in that the traditional words come to own the storyteller instead of vice versa, and the griot is simply a vessel through which divine wisdom flows. This role of the griot as traditionalist can be seen in the Bambara storytellers known as *doma*, which translates to *those who know* (Hampâté Bâ 1981).

Can the emcee play a similar role in our modern hoods as the *doma* played in Bambara society? Can emcees (at their best) act as vessels of ancestral wisdom? Over hundreds of years *doma* acted as reliable repositories of local history and preservers of traditional customs. In hip hop culture, while the role of entertainer is often primary, we are many times asking emcees to play roles as historians or articulators of 'the culture'. If we are to respect emcees as cultural commentators, then we must interrogate their chain of transmission. The fact that Nas and Lil Wayne are engaging in (re)citation, citing and reciting their sources should give us some assurance that their accounts have credibility and that there is some tradition-keeping component to their praxis. Without some form of verification, emcees could just as easily be propagating lies as truths. Hampâté Bâ argues that in the Bambara tradition, some storytellers go by the name of *dieli*, which also means blood. Like the crimson plasma that spreads nutrients and oxygen (and also viral infections) throughout the body, griots 'circulate in the body of society, which they can cure or make ill, depending on whether they attenuate or exacerbate the conflicts within it' (Hampâté Bâ 1981: 188). Similarly in hip hop, the emcees are the fluid through which both pro-social and dysfunctional cultural forms flow.

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Storytellers can spread both ancestral wisdom and nonsense. Therefore, a rapper is not automatically a historian just because he tells stories. It is the rapper's methodological praxis that makes them keepers of tradition; and one of the most fundamental methods is that of (re)citation. As hip hop culture continues to evolve, it is crucial for music educators and cultural critics to advocate for methods of (re)citational ethics as being integral to the artform.

CONCLUSION: SELF-MADE OR SPOKEN INTO BEING

Oftentimes hip hop artists convey the notion of being self-made, in that their successes and their expertise were the result of their own individual agency. Artists Slim Thug and Sosa Mann (2015), Young M.A. (2017) and Bryson Tiller (2017) all have songs entitled 'Self Made'. Given that the rags to riches story has become such a prominent narrative trope in the rap game, artists often convey that they created themselves, as if they pulled themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps.

Been made a name for my self
 Little n*** I don't need no help
 [...]
 Been made a name for my self
 I'm doing me n*** nobody else

(Slim Thug 2015)

If we are to take these claims at face value, the actions and discourses of emcees are theirs and theirs alone. How can we reconcile this radical individualism and independence with Lil Wayne's notion that the heart of hip hop practice is respecting the game and those who played it before you? Doesn't the idea of the self-made emcee contradict with what we would deduce from watching the intensity through which Mos Def studies and memorizes the language of his comrade? Mos Def is clearly made from Black Thought and vice versa. It cannot be true that all hip hop artists prefer novelty to tradition and self-authorship to collective authorship. Even the Maybach Music Group (MMG) consisting of Rick Ross, Meek Mill and Wale (who released four albums by the name of *Self Made*, volumes 1–3) coauthored these projects together and in other contexts shout-out the storytelling mentors that shaped them. Even some of the most braggadocious artists see themselves as being guardians of 'the culture'. Maybe when we say we are self-made or self-taught we are not arguing that we had no help, but we are indicting many of the formal institutions that were supposed to school us, but did not. Maybe we are saying something like: 'The schools and governmental institutions did not make us or teach us. We learned in the school of the hard knocks'. The ways that public education has failed Black children and communities are numerous. But nonetheless we have certainly learned from someone. Someone gave us the building blocks to design these flows, these bars, these gems. It is their lyrics that preceded us, and spoke us into being.

I have introduced the term (re)citation to make visible the citational practices in rap music. These practices share features with those in other notable genres, including citation within academic fields, and recitation within oral storytelling traditions. As hip hop artists we are often trying to shed the stigma of being unstudied or unlearned. We did not study music theory at Julliard, but that does not mean that our music is theory-less and that we

have not systematically analysed it. The citational practices I have described here suggest that emcees are elaborately studying the narratives, cadences and ideological positionalities of hundreds of predecessors. They are even remembering and revoicing direct quotes. In academia, we prize citation as a practice because it makes clear the structure of knowledge in a domain; how recent innovations were inspired by previous ones. Building theory is impossible without making sense of how ideals build on other ideals. In this sense, hip hop artists are consciously studying the field, citing the contributions that have added to the culture, and incorporating their own ideas to fill gaps in the literature.

Some of you will respond with a reasonable counter '[m]any of the rappers I hear these days don't deeply engage with history at all'. And to that I say, 'you right, some don't'. Frankly, hip hop is not a homogenous genre when it comes to emcees' commitment to reciting old stories. Some have the commitment, and some do not. Like griots, hip hop artists are often employing quite different aesthetic philosophies from one another. Maybe in hip hop there are both court-jesters and historians, essayists and improvisationists; and everything in between. There are individuals doing as Bakhtin and Hampâté Bâ would encourage them, making intentional choices to know the history of the discourses they employ, locating themselves in a philosophical tradition, consistently shouting out their OGs with proper citation, repetitiously chanting mantras and catch phrases like hymns from the canon, allowing the best of the tradition to own them. At the same time, there are other rappers who prefer to rely on the unconscious or subconscious, allowing freestyles to flow through them in exercises of free association, expressing whatever drives they feel in their bodies, without really putting too much thought into whose 'perspectives' they are channelling and whose 'intentions' they serve (i.e. corporate interests or the patriarchy). Free expression in this sense could be seen as recklessly unrooted in history, or perhaps to others invoking a Buddhist perspective it could be radically in touch with the present moment. Surely free expression has its place as therapeutic practice, but it must be balanced by attempts to consciously preserve the wisdom of the tradition. All in all, we should be intricately studying the practice of (re)citation in rap if we are to understand how almost forty years after Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five delivered 'The Message', both French Montana and E-40 are still starting off verses with 'It's like a jungle sometimes ...'

Illuminating the ubiquity of (re)citation within rap highlights the deep structure of cultural transmission and historiography within the genre. With this in mind, it is appropriate to look at some emcees as philosophers and even social engineers. The most distinguished rap artists are analysing histories of thought and intervening in popular discourse with their own arguments. Oftentimes, the stories, parables and arguments they spit are intended to shift discourse in a way that solves problems, opens minds or speaks truth to power. For example, Erykah Badu's conception of 'staying woke' was a resounding intervention in the way we talk about social awareness. In fact, when reactionary agents mangle the meaning of that word in ways that do not (re)cite Erykah, we owe it to her legacy to push back. If we trace back the meaning of that word to her original invocation, a state of 'wokeness' is not about being self-righteous or judgmental, but it is a humble pursuit of enlightenment in the face of systematic oppression. Through proper (re)citation praxis, we take control of the discourse.

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As a genre of literature, hip hop is a storytelling modality with the potential to assist us in cultivating our liberation. But the genre's potential will only be realized if we cite it, and (re)cite it. A new vision of the interdisciplinary woke university places hip hop language artists in conversation with sociologists of class, raciolinguists, engineers, biologists and many other disciplines in order to preserve Black and Brown cultural practices, and solve problems that impact the Global South Side. As scholars of hip hop, our task is to look seven generations in the future and envision the community leaders of tomorrow, asking them, '[a]re we building a hip-hop philosophy and a system of knowledge transmission that empowers you to cultivate a life-giving world?' It is an incredibly ambitious task to pursue. But if we accomplish it, then maybe they will re(cite) our generation's bars – *by heart*.

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Kalonji Nzinga is a cultural psychologist, rapper and educator exploring how young people's holistic development is influenced by the cultural lifeworlds and scenes that they inhabit. One major strand of his research has attended to young people in hip hop scenes and how their participation as hip hop artists, critics, writers, composers and producers provides them with philosophical orientations, literacy skills and technological savvy to engage in self-authorship, cultural production and community activism. Using methods of validated psychological instruments, clinical interviews, cognitive think-alouds and ethnographic observation, his research investigates the philosophies and voices of youth hip hop practitioners. As a rapper and hip hop practitioner himself Kalonji also produces music that draws on Black ancestral legacies, depicts the sociopolitics of the hood and explores visions of Afrofuturist healing. His research has informed the design of learning environments for all ages, multimedia arts exhibitions, and is published in the *Journal of Cognition & Culture* and the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. He is currently the director of CU Boulder's RAP Lab (Ritual Arts & Pedagogy), an interdisciplinary hub for the study of hip hop praxis.

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