"Bring It to the Cypher"
Hip-Hop Nation Language

H. Samy Alim

Language constitutes a crucial facet of hip-hop expression, not just in rap music but also in the broader contexts of everyday life. H. Samy Alim identifies what he calls "Hip Hop Nation Language" that reflects a shared attitudinal aspect of language while encompassing linguistic forms and systems of meaning that are unique to hip-hop. Alim is himself a dexterous wordsmith and he demonstrates the flexibility of hip-hop language within his essay, flipping between the formal definitions of the academy and the sophisticated free form style of the cypher. The similarities suggesting that an artist's rhymes simultaneously encapsulate one's identity and talent while articulating regional aesthetics and other cultural affiliations.

Alim explains here that words have power but some of that power comes from the flexibility of language and meanings and a wily capacity to mobilize discourses that oppose and critique various societal conditions. Included in this analysis are extensive discussions with some of hip-hop's most notable "verbal architects"—Kurupt, Pharoahe Monch, and Rakim, among others—about hip-hop poetics and lyrical strategies for critiquing social issues, decimating the opposition, or uniting the audience.

Four hundred years ago, when black slaves were brought to America, Africans who spoke the same language were separated from each other. What we're seeing today, with this insatiable campaign to intimidate rappers and rap music, is just another form of separating people that speak a common language.

(Ice Cube, June 25, 1998; cited in Sexton 1995)

The centrality of language to the HHNL is evident in such song and album titles as "New Rap Language" (Tresch, Three, 1980), "Wordplay" (Bahamadia, 1996), "Gangsta Vocabulary" (DJ Pooh, 1997), "Project Talk" (Bobby Digital, 1996), "Slang Editor" (Cappadonna, 1998), Real Talk 2000 (Three-Eazy, 2000), "BorntotheMac" (Big L, 2000), Country Grammar (Nelly, 2000), Project English (Jevonnie, 2001), "Dangerous Language" (A$$a, 2002), and many more. In numerous ethnographic interviews, I have found that language is a favorite topic of discussion in the HHNL, and its members are willing to discuss it with great fervor—and to defend its use.

In this chapter, we enter a Black Language Space as we take a journey through Hip Hop's linguistic landscape and explore the anatomy of language and language use within the HHNL, providing a thorough description of Hip Hop Nation Language (HHNL). My research on the language and linguistic practices of the Hip Hop Nation Speech Community examines how HHNL both builds upon and expands the Black American Oral Tradition. Here I outline several Hip Hop discursive practices and cultural modes of discourse—call and response, multilayered totalizing expression, signifier and signified (hustin), tonal semantics and poetics, narrative sequencing and flow, battle and entering the cypher.

In exploring the development of nation language in Anglophone Caribbean poetry, Caribbean historian, poet, and literary and music critic Kamau Brathwaite (1984: 13) writes: "Nation language is the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect or the West African/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in terms of its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English." Concerned with the literature of the Caribbean and the sociopolitical matrix within which it is created, Brathwaite used the term "nation language" in contrast to "dialect." Familiar with the pejorative meanings of the term "dialect" in the folk linguistics of the people, he writes that while nation language can be considered both English and African at the same time, it is an English which is like a "howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun or the wind or a wave." Then he likened it to the blues. Surely, nation language is like Hip Hop (as rapper Rakim, 1980) with the machine-gun-rap (on Wu-Tang Forever, 1997). HHNL is, like Brathwaite's description, new in one sense and ancient in another. It comprises elements of orality, total expression, and conversational modes (Brathwaite 1984).
Rapper Mystikal, known for having a unique, highly energetic rhythmic style highlighted with lyrical sound explosions, provides a perfect example of nascent language when he raps. "You know, JAH!!! [Danger] Get on the FLO' [floor]! The rigger right, preachah!!" (2000). Mystikal know who the f...ck this is in "DAANNKH-JAH!!! [Danger] DAANNNKH starts out speaking to his listener in a low, threatening growl, asserting his individuality ("You know that they have entered a dangerous verbal zone") and then explodes as if sounding an alarm, letting everyone know his brutally gushing listeners to lie down before the上报的 verbal "DAANNKH-JAH!!" and four "BOOOLLUH!!" and raps "Creak, Creak, PIG PIG! Do away with the FOOREE-ah!! Only then, compelling one to do as he says. In that brief example, he is in conversation with Black flesh which Muslims consider unholy.

When we speak of "language," we are defining the term in a sense that is congruent with the HHNL's "linguistic culture" (Schiffman 1996). Widener (1978: 34) situates HHNL in the broader context of Black American speech.

There is no single register of African American speech. And it's not words and innovation, it's a whole attitude about speech that has historical roots. It's not a phenomenon that consists of the people inside of that culture. It has to do with the way a culture feels about speech, and how you use speech in ways other that directly to communicate the situational level that the people in American speech is in spontaneity, the requirement that you not only have a repertoire of an attempt to meet the person on a level that both uses the language, mocks the language, and recreates the language.

On her single recording "Spontaneity" (1996), Philadelphia rapper Rahiysis validators Widener's assertion. She raps about her "verbal expansion" in a stream of consciousness style and "pass a swarm of bootay-ass-grass-voxx-have-an-MLC's." The verbal architext constructs her lyrical influence. She cites Rappers Kool Keith of the Ultramagnetic MC's, D Positive, and they try to push the boundaries and go against the grain of it, you know what I mean? (Spady and Alim 1999: xix). Widener continues: "It's a very active exchange. But at the same time as I say that, the silence and refusal to speak is as much a part, in another way, of African American speech, a refusal to simply to say something, among the great orators and leaders in the Black community. They always looked up to great orators like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X. Anybody who could ever stand up and persuade a group of young men at a nation... just the way they were able to articulate. The way they emphasized their words. And the way they would use power... just the way they could make words cause feelings to you, you know what I'm saying? Just perpetuate thought within people, you know. (Spady and Alim 1999: xviii)

So, "language" in HHNL obviously refers not only to the syntactic constructions of the language but also to the many discursive and communicative practices, the attitudes toward language, understanding the role of language in both bonding/bonding community and distancing/mothering linguistic opponents, and language as concept (meaning clothes, facial expressions, body movements, graffiti, and overall communication — "cuz as Beanie Sigel knows, 99% of communication is non-verbal").

In addition to the preceding, HHNL can be characterized by ten texts.

1. HHNL is rooted in Black Language (BL) and communicative practices (Spady and Ewen 1991; Smith et al. 1997; Yasin 1999). Linguistically, it is "the newest chapter in the African American book of folklore" (Riddick and Riddick 2000). It is a vehicle driven by the culture creators of Hip Hop, themselves organic members of the broader Black American community. Thus HHNL both reflects and expands the Black American Oral Tradition.

2. HHNL is just one of the many language varieties used by Black Americans.

3. HHNL is widely spoken across the country, and used/borrowed and adapted/transformed by various ethnic groups inside and outside the US.

4. HHNL is a language with its own grammar, lexicon, and phonology as well as unique communicative style and discursive modes. When an early Hip Hop group, The Treacherous Three, rapped about a "New Rap Language" in 1980, they were well aware of the uniqueness of the language they were rapping in.

5. HHNL is best viewed as the communicative combination of speech, music, and literature. Yancy (1991) speaks of Rap as "musical literature" (or rhythmical-praxis discourse). Henderson (1973) asserts that the Black poetry of the 1960s and 1970s is most distinctively Black when it derives its form from Black speech and Black music. HHNL is simultaneously the spoken, poetic, lyrical, and musical expression of the HHNL.

6. HHNL includes ideologies of language and language use (see Phnecy dialogue later).

7. HHNL is central to the identity and the act of envisioning an entity known as the HHNL.

8. HHNL exhibits regional variation (Morgan 2001). For example, most members of the HHNL recognize Matter P's signature phrase, "Ya heesaaad maa" ("You heard me"). Rapper Xhibit grew up in the Hip Hop saturated streets of Detroit, New Mexico, and California, and his HHNL is a syncretization of these Hip Hop Nation Language varieties.

9. The fundamental aspect of HHNL—and perhaps the most astonishing to some—is that it is central to the lives of the members of the HHNL. HHNL is a systematic and cultural OHNL variation.

10. HHNL is inextricably linked with the sociopolitical circumstances that engulf the HHNL. How does excessive police presence and brutality shift the discourse of the HHNL? How do disproportionate incarceration rates and urban gentrification impact this community's language? As Spady (1993) writes: "Hip Hop culture [and language] mediates the corrosive discourse of the dominating society while at the same time it functions as a subversive revision... Volume is turned up to tune out the decalogue of the dominant culture."

Rappers are insightful examiners of the sociopolitical matrix within which HHNL operates. Discussing the role of HHNL in Hip Hop lyrics, Houston's Scarface concludes that HHNL functions as a communal "code of communication" for the HHNL.

It's a code of communication, too... Because we can understand each other when we're rapping. You know, if I'm saying, [in a nasal, mooshing voice] "Well, my friend, I saw this guy who shot this other guy and..." I know that shit down for you and you say, "Cowards, man!"
The relationship between HHNL and BL is a familial one. Since Hip Hop’s culture creators are members of the broader Black American community, the language that they use most often when communicating with each other is BL. HHNL can be seen as the submerged area (Brathwaite 1994: 13) of BL that is used within the HHNL, particularly during Hip Hop-centered cultural activities, but also during other playful, creative, artistic, and intimate settings. This conception of HHNL is broad enough to include the language of rap lyrics, album interludes, Hip Hop stage performances, and Hip Hop conversational discourse. Black Americans are on the cutting edge of the sociolinguistic situation in the US (as evidenced by the preponderance of recent sociolinguistic research). HHNL, thus, is the cutting edge of the cutting edge.

A revised edition of the lexicon of “Black Talk” (Smithsonian 1994 (2003)) begins with a chapter entitled, “From Dead Presidents to the Benjaminiz.” The term “dead presidents” (meaning “money” and referring to American notes with images of dead presidents) has been in use in the Black American community since the 1930s. In the late 1990s, Hip Hop group Dead prez both shortened the term and made explicit its multivocal meanings (within the revolutionary context of their rhymes and philosophy, they are surely hinting at assassination—a form of verbal subversion). The “Benjamins,” referring to Benjamin Franklin’s image on one hundred dollar bills, is a term from the late 1990s popularized by Rapper Sean “Puffy” Combs (P. Diddy).

While several scholars and writers have produced work on the lexicon of BL (Turner 1949: Major 1970; Smithsonian 1994; DiLard 1977; Anderson 1994; Swamy, Moore and Moreson 1995; Holloway and Van 1997), it is important to note that Hip Hop artists, as street linguists and lexicographers, have published several dictionaries of their own. Old School legend Fab Five Freddy (Brathwaite 1992, 1993) documented the “fresh fly flavor” of the words and phrases of the Hip Hop generation (in English and German). Atlanta’s Goodie Mob and several other artists have published glossaries on the inside flaps of their album covers. Of course, as lexicographers Hip Hop artists are only continuing the tradition of Black musicians, for many jazz and bebop artists compiled their own glossaries, most notable among them Cab Calloway (1944), Babs Gonzales, and Dan Burley.


I feel that I saw the ghetto. The majority of street slang “it’s all good. ‘Feel me’ Fo’ shiniest,” all that shit come from 46. "What’s up, fool?" As a matter of fact, I’m writing my own dictionary book of slang right now. It’s a street demand [for it]. Everywhere I go people be like, “Dude, you need to put out a dictionary. Let them know where all that shit come from,” you know what I mean?

(Spydy et al. 1995: 200)

E-40 is credited with developing a highly individualized repertoire of slang words and phrases. If he were to say something like, “What’s crackalatin, pimpin? I was choppin’ it up wit my playa-potna last night on my communicators—then we got to marinastin, you underdog, and I come to find out that the homie had so much fed in that he was tycoonin, I mean, pimpin on some real boss-status, you smell me?”, not too many people would understand him. “(Crackalatin)” is happening, an extended form of “crackin”; “pimpin” is sometimes used as a noun to refer to a person, like “bonnie”; “choppin it up” is making conversation; “playa-potna” = partner, friend; “communicators” = cell phone; “marinastin” = a conversation where participants are reasoning on a subject; “underdog” = understand; “fed in” = money; “tycoonin” = being a successful entrepreneur; “pimpin” = being financially wealthy; “boss-status” = managing things like a CEO; “you smell me” = you feel me? Or you understand me? In HHNL, “pimpin” refers not only to one who solicits clients for a prostitute, but also has several other meanings. One could be suffering from “record company pimpin’” (the means by which

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These are but a few of countless examples in the corpus of Hip Hop lyrics, but this equitable copula construction can also be found in everyday conversation, as in these examples:

"We be them Bay boys. (Bay Area's Mac Mall in a conversation with James G. Spady)

"I'm (marriage) be that good stuff." (Caller on the local Bay Area radio station)

"You know we be some based brothers." (Philadelphia speaker in conversation)

It is possible that speakers of BL have begun using this form only recently, and that it represents a recent change in the system. Alternatively, the form may always have been present in the language but escaped the notice of investigators. Certainly it is present in the writings of Black Arts Movement poets of the 1960s and 1970s, most notably in Sonia Sanchez's We Be Nerd Sistahs. We also find the form being cited in one linguistic study of Black street speech ("They be the real troubleshooters"). "Lea be the one to tell it like it is" (Rusling 1983). It is possible that members of the HHN, with their extraordinary linguistic consciousness and their emphasis on stretching the limits of language, have made this form much more acceptable by using it frequently.

The HHN's linguistic consciousness refers to HHN speakers' conscious use of language to construct identity. Addressing the divergence of BL from "standard English," Bugh and Smitherman (in press: 20) write:

Graffiti writers of Hip Hop Culture were probably the coiners of the term "phant" (meaning excellent, great, superb)... although "phant" is spelled in obvious contrast to "fine," the former connotes that those who use it know that "phant" is pronounced like "i." In other words, those who first wrote "phant" diverged from standard English as a direct result of their awareness of standard English: the divergence was not by chance linguistic error. There is no singular explanation to account for linguistic divergence, but Hip Hop Culture suggests that matters of personal identity play a significant role.

This conscious linguistic behavior deals with matters of spelling and phonemic awareness. (See Morgan 2001 and Oliva 2001 on "spelling ideology"). One case—one of the most controversial uses of language in Hip Hop culture—is the term "nigga." The HHN realized that this word had various positive in-group meanings and pejorative out-group meanings, and thus felt the need to reflect the culturally specific meanings with a new spelling ("nigga" becomes "nigga"). "Nigga" is your main man, or one of your close companions, your home. Recently the term has been generalized to refer to any male (one may even hear something like, "No, I was talkin' about Johnny, you know, the white nigga with the hair") though it usually refers to a Black male. And even more recently, one might hear the term being used by females of all ethnicities in the San Francisco Bay Area to refer to each other in much the same way that males do, as this example from a conversational exchange between White and Black female teenagers shows:

Black female: Call me, nigga
White female: Yeah, nigga, you know wasup. I'ma call you.

Tupac Shakur, showing Hip Hop's affinity for acronyms, transformed the racial slur into the ultimate positive ideal for young Black males—Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished. As with the highlighting of regional vocabulary, HHN speakers intentionally highlight regional differences in pronunciation by processes such as vowel lengthening and syllabic stress (Morgan 2001). When Bay Area Rappers JT the Bigga Figg and Mac Mall announced the resurgence of the Bay Area to the national Hip Hop scene with "Game Recognize Game" (1993), they did so using a distinctive feature of Bay Area pronunciation. The Bay Area anthem's chorus
repeated this line three times: “Game recognize game in the Bay, man (mane).” “Man” was pronounced “main” to accentuate this Bay Area pronunciation feature. Also, as fellow Bay Area linguist David Kraybill notes, “You can tell from my slang I’m from the Bay, mane.” (2000).

When Nelly and the St. Lunatics “busted” onto the Hip Hop scene, they were among the first to establish their identity in the fiercely competitive world of Hip Hop Culture. For example, in a single by the St. Lunatics featuring Nelly they emphasize every word that rhymes with “nurrr” to highlight a well-known (and sometimes stigmatized) aspect of southern/midwest方言特色. Linguistic features associated with their city (and other southern cities), they rap, even some not from that region, have played and experimented with this phonological aspect of BL.

Nelly and the St. Lunatics are conscious not only of their pronunciation, but also of their syntax. On his platinum single “Country Grammar” (2000), Nelly proclaims, “My grammar boss them grammar conscious.” Clearly, HHNL speakers vary their grammar consciously. An analysis of copula variation in the artists’ lyrics represented the construction of a street-conscious identity—where the John Richard has suggested in a conference comment made in 2001 that the use of creole syn- }


tactic and phonological features by many rappers supports the ability of HHNL speakers to manipulate their grammar consciously (see Evie’s reported use of Creole in Spady et al. 1999 and }

the HHNL) HHNL speakers elect dialects to demonstrate their high degree of linguistic consciousness and in order to construct a street-conscious identity.

Hip Hop Cultural Modes of Discourse and Discursive Practices

Beyn (1946: 143) applied Smitherman’s (1977) Black modes of discourse to HHNL. Working in Hip Hop’s gestation period, she wrote that “Smitherman schematized four broad categories of black discourse: narrative sequencing, call-response, signification/dosage, and tonal semantics. All of these categories are strategically used in rap music.” We know that rappers in and of itself cultural practices of Africanism in America. Rappers are, after all, “postmodern African griots” (a Smitherman 1997). This section will demonstrate how the strategic use of the Black modes of discourse is manifested in HHNL and how the new ways in which these modes are practiced gen-

data-–rap lyrics, Hip Hop performances, and Hip Hop conversational discourse.


call and response

Here is perhaps the most local definition of call and response:

As a communicative strategy this call and response is the manifestation of the cultural dynamics which finds audience and listener and background to a unified whole. Shot through with action and interaction, Black communicative performance is concentric in quality—the “audience” becoming both observers and participants in the speech event. As Black American culture stresses commonality and group experientiality, the audience’s

linguistic and paralinguistic responses are necessary to co-sign the power of the speaker’s rap or call.

(Daniel and Smitherman 1976, cited in Spady 2000a: 59)

The quintessential example of the HHNL’s use of call and response grow out of funk perfor-


A description of a Hip Hop performance by Philadelphia’s Roots paints a picture of a scene where MCs Black Thought senses that there is a communicative schism developing between him and his Swiss audience (Jackson et al. 2001: 25). The rapper says, “Hold it, hold it, hold it!” and stops the music abruptly. What follows is “improvised instruction” in the call and response mode of Black discourse:

Y’all can’t get the second part no matter what the funk I say, right? I wonder if it’s what I’m saying, A’yo! We gonna try this shit one more time because I like this part of the show.

Providing more explicit instruction, Thought shows it down a bit:

Aight, Aight this is how I’m gonna break it down. I’m gonna be like “ahh,” then everybody gonna be like “ahh.” Then—I don’t know what I’m gonna say second but y’all gotta listen cause then y’all gotta repeat that shit—that’s the fun of the game!

Thought is not only providing instruction but he is also administering a challenge to his European audience: either git sick with it or git bawled (get hit with it) (in this context meaning, “Become active participants in this activity or get caught off guard looking culturally ignorant!”). Call and response mechanisms are so pervasive in HHNL that talented MCs’ (Rappers, Masters of Ceremonies) have taken this mode to new heights. Mos Def describes one of the elements that made Slick Rick a legendary rapper:

Slick Rick is one of the greatest MC’s ever born because he has so many different abilities that he would use. Style. Vocal texture. The way he would even record. Like, he would do call and response with himself. He would leave four bars open, and then do another character, you understand what I’m saying?

(Alim 2000, unpublished interview)

The individualized uses of call and response in the Hip Hop cultural mode of discourse deserve more attention. Also, as is evident from Mos Def’s comments, HHNL speakers can be cognizant of the fact that they are operating within and expanding upon the Black American Oral Tradition. The linguistic and communicative consciousness of the HHNL also needs further exploration.

1. Multilayered Totalizing Expression

Beyond the explicit instruction, one can witness the multilayered nature of the call and response mode at Hip Hop performances where both performer and audience are fully conversant with Hip Hop cultural modes of discourse. At the first Spithkicker Tour (2000) in San Francisco’s
signification in Hip Hop conversational discourse. In the dialogue, Booty Brown is advocating the Black folk notion described by Mitchell-Kernan earlier. He implies that his partner is glorifying a Eurocentric meaning-making system over a meaning-making system that is African-derived. This does not become clear until Brown chooses his examples-carefully and deliberately. "Just like they use any other word as a slang, my brotha!" He emphasizes the "slang phrase" my heezah, as it is usually used as a sign of cultural unity and familial bond between Black American males (female will use this term in familiar situations). Then he proceeds to ask the direct question. "Whose definition are you glorifying" which is, in fact, a statement. Finally, as if to really lay it on thick (add insult to injury), he chooses to use the word "Black" to show that Webster's Dictionary is inadequate. The heat is diffused when "P" says, "I'm saying, I'm saying, that's what I'm saying" and they— and others around them—break into laughter. This dialogue is an example of how language is used to remind, scold, shame, or otherwise bring the other into a commonly shared ethic through signification.

We see an example of signifin in Rapper Bushwick Bill's (of Houston's Geto Boys) description of the ever-changing, fluid, and flexible nature of "street slang" and the dangers of not "keepin your ear to the street" (being aware of what's happening around you at all times). In this case, Bushwick is referring to the rapidly evolving street terminology for law enforcement officials. He takes us deep into the locus of Hip Hop linguistic-cultural activities.

You lose flavor. You lose the slang. You lose the basic everyday kickin it, you know, knowin' what's goin' on at all times. You know what I'm saying? Knowing the new names for "5-6." They ain't even 5-6's no more. They call them "pipo." That means everything changes. And they call them "one-time," you know what I'm saying? But you got to be in there to know that the police might know these words already. So they got to change up their dialect so that way it sounds like Pig Latin to the police.

(Spyde et al. 1999: 308)

Bushwick's comment refers us directly to tenet 10 above. He is describing the changing nature of the various terms for "police" in the streets—from "5-6s" to "pipo" to "one-time." At one time, bloods referred to the "one-time" as "black and whiter" (Folb 1980), while currently Young Heavy refers to federal agents as "dem alphabet boys" (referencing the various acronyms of these agencies, such as the FBI, CIA, DEA, AEP, etc.). As I write this, brothers in Harlem and Washington Heights got a new name for the pipo—equalie. Jada Santana, operating like a street journalist, captures the multiple uses of the term, including its use as a general lookout call that's shocked when cops is coming—equalie-sahyyyyyyyy! As New York-based Hip Hop historian Meghelli (personal communication 2005) notes, it is the sociopolitical context of many depressed and oppressed Black neighborhoods that necessitates these speedy lexical transformations.

Even though the police are not present in the dialogue above, Bushwick signifies on them with a clever one-liner that also serves to buttress his point. After running down all of the various terms (which have gone out of style as quickly as the police have comprehended them), he concludes, "So they got to change up their dialect so that way it sounds like Pig Latin to the police." "Pig Latin" is chosen here, rather than Greek, Chinese, Swahili, or other unfamiliar languages, to echo the fact that at one time police officers were called "pips." Bushwick is not only signifyin on the police, but he is also demonstrating yet another term for police that has gone out of fashion! In addition, he is referencing an old form of Afroamericanized Pig Latin that employs innuendo, wordplay, letter and syllabic shifting, rhyming, and coded language designed to communicate with those in the know.

Like call and response, signifyin is ubiquitous in Hip Hop lyrics. In an example of male-female urban verbal play, in "Minute Man" (2001) with Missy Elliott and Ludacris, Jay-Z
signifies an female R&B group Destiny's Child. Some insider knowledge is required to fully understand this speech act. Earlier that year, Destiny's Child had released "Independent Women," an example, they introduced each question with the word "question" and then proceeded, "How income?" saying that one of Jay-Z's many personas is the "play-pump" type (one who uses to give you love and affection). I'm trying to give you 60 seconds of affection! I'm trying to give you don't become clear until the last line, or really, the last word, when Jay-Z borrows the word and tone. The only thing left to do is say, "Ooohhhhhhhhh!"

We also witnessed significations in the call and response section of the Black Thought performance described above. Alckerson et al. (2001) note, Thought appears to be signifies on the def what 7'm saying ... A-A! The Roots have been known to signify on audiences that are uninitiated to the rich cultural modes of discourse: "I won't as culturally responsive as they would like them to be. During a recent concert at Stanford like "Difftent Strokes" and "Facts of Life," mapping their fingers and signing in a comical (not their fingers)—apparently obvious to the insul. After the show, the band's drummer and other band members remove any hint of indirection and blantly bent on the repercussions of these strategies are skillfully employed.

**Tonal Semantics and Poetics**

Black American tonal semantics can be thought of as the creative force that drives Hip Hop lyrics. As such, I've added the category poetics to the discussion. Smitheman (1977: 154) describes tonal semiotics as "the voice as voice," and depicts the voice as voice in black American tonal semantics: "If the pitch of this word is changed in such a way that it becomes a new word, the whole meaning of the sentence changes." In the same vein, Rap as an art form is a creative force that drives Hip Hop lyrics. In their lyrical excellence, The Roots remove any hint of indirection and blantly bent on the repercussions of these strategies are skillfully employed. The examples above make clear that HNHL speakers readily incorporate significative and conversational semantics into their repertoire. Whether Hip Hop heads are performing, writing, rapping, or just conversing, these strategies are skillfully employed.

**Table 4.1 Effective use of repetition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(A)</th>
<th>Never take a man's life out you hate yours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(B)</td>
<td>Never become so involved with something that it blinds you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(C)</td>
<td>Never forget where you from someone will remind you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(D)</td>
<td>Never take for granted what's been given as a gift</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**"Bring It To The Cypher"**

- **(A)** I been around this block, too many times
- **(B)** Rank you too many rhymes, checked, too many rhymes, too
- **(C)** To all my brothers, it ain't too late to come together
- **(D)** Cause too much black and too much love equal forever

I don't follow you guidelines cause too many nigga ride mines
So I change styles every two rhymes

In "21 Twenty" (my-2 exploits the homonymy of "to/twenti" and also the letters "to") (together) to place/"21 Twenty" in a sequence,igg's main mission is to demonstrate that he's one of the most gifted rappers in the game. In an undecipherable confidence, he adds, "That's 22 two's fo' y'all muthafukas out there, ya nub- man? Shall I continue?" Iigg is also driving the point home that he's learned lessons from the streets and "it ain't too late for brands to come together."

**Table 4.2 Effective use of repetition**

- **(A)** What's that I ain't gon' do
- **(B)** See the 5-9 and swing a tight dosent
- **(C)** Uh-uh, that's what I ain't gon' do
- **(D)** Be the nigga at the bar talk shit but outside throwin up

**K methodology**

As a street linguist, Pharoah knows that his phonetics alone will "force freble MC's into defense on the fly." His linguistic sophistication ("skills" in HNHL) is evident in this verse.

The effective use of repetition and alliteration are often found in combination with complex rhymes. Rhyme is such an essential aspect of HNHL that one almost need not mention it, but we need a deeper exploration of Hip Hop poetics. Hip Hop heads ("disscussants") are constantly evaluating rhymes, and what makes a perfect rhyme. Rapper Korg describes what makes a deep ("excellent") rhyme:
Perfection of the rhymes. Like perfection. Selection. Interjection. Election. Dedication. Creation. Domination. Devastation. World domination. Totally, with no hesitation, you perfected rhymes. . . . Really. Silly. Philly, you know. These are full word like rebuild you know what I mean? You got two words in we will. One word in. Perfection connection is the key to writing when you write your rhyme. And meaning too. When you’re saying something that makes sense. Then are the keys to writing a rhyme. Perfect rhyme connection. And style.

(Spydy et al. 1999: 556)

A close examination of one verse from Talib Kweli on "The Truth" (1999) reveals multiple layers of complexity and creativity:

1. *Check it, on my neck I still got marks from the nooses*
2. *The truth it produces four that got nigga on the run like C-146 Lewis*
3. *The truth is my crew is the smoothest spittas of saliva juices like the roots*
4. *More organic than aspic*
5. *Heavenly . . . put you free and kill you in the same breath*
6. *That shit you gotta get off your chest before your death and rest*
7. *The way you speak is lighter than a pamphlet*
8. *Cut the truth give the words the weight of a planet goddamn*
9. *I can’t will what God put on my heart and I understand it*
10. *To bring the light to the dark, breathe some life in this art*
11. *This must be the truth ("why") cut we keep marchin’ on ("true")*
12. *The truth lay the foundation of what we rockin’ on ("true")*
13. *You can’t see it if you blind but we will always prevail ("true")*
14. *Life is like the open sea, the truth is a wind in our sail*
15. *And in the end, our names is on the lips of dying men*
16. *If ever crushed in the earth, we always rise again*
17. *When the words of dying men sound like the sound of a violin*
18. *The truth is there; it’s just the heart you gotta find it in*

In examining Talib’s multi-rhythmying skills (the ability to produce multilayered rhymes by employing multiple rhyme techniques synergistically), we’ll begin with Line 1 where we see the beginning of a recurring assurance with the short /e/ vowel. This short /e/ is repeated several times in Lines 1, 5, and 6. Line 1 is also the starting point for a series of triple rhymes that follow back chain rhymes (see Alim 2003). The truth is rhymes with as crew is, the smoothest; and the roots is. These rhymes also match perfectly with two unexpected rhyme matches: (2) the last syllable of "saliva" and the word "juices"; (a) juices, (b) Talib splits the name "Cali" into two syllables, "C-a" and uses the last syllable to continue the triple rhyme pattern with as crew. Lewis. etc. goddamn, right up, plotted, understood it. If you notice, all of these rhymes follow the pattern: a–noun (either n or m)–it. In Line 10, Talib blesses us with a rare sextuple rhyme as he describes his Hip Hop mission to be to: "bring the light to the dark, breathe some life in this art.

This sextuple rhyme is accomplished by the use of parallel phrasing in which the poet matches up like categories across the parts of speech. For instance, the parts of speech in this rhyme are per perfect: /be-reduced vowel long i-reduced vowel-th-art.

Lines 15 through 18 contain another set of triple rhymes that follow the pattern of: /ong l-ended vowel–in/ What makes this verse even more complex, as far as tonal semantics are concerned, is that Talib begins Line 15 with "And in the end," which serves multiple functions. Not only does this phrase refer to a final moment in history, "the end," but it is also cleverly signifies the beginning of the end of the verse. In addition to this, Talib says "in the end" in such a way as to almost prepare us for the triple rhymes that are to follow. The intonation is what gives this phrase to the triple rhyme series.

Talib also exhibits wordplay in Lines 4 and 5. "The truth is my crew is the smoothest spittas of saliva juices like the roots is more organic than aspic." The Roots is a Hip Hop group from Philly who released an independent LP entitled Organic (1993). So, not only are roots considered organic in the dictionary definition of the word, but the phrase here is complementing The Roots for their strong musical production. The word "organic" is also used here in a play on "organ" and "acoustic."

In Line 10, Talib references a famous line from Battlefields, a poem by William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878), which reads: "Truth crushed to earth shall rise again! /The eternal years of God are here! /But Error, wounded, writhe with pain. /And dies among his worshippers." The first line of this stanza has been utilized by many Black American religious leaders, including Minister Louis Farrakhan and Reverend Jesse Jackson, although the phrase is most associated with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Talib has taken this line, and through semantic extension, refers to him and his crew (and by extension, his people), "If ever crushed in the earth, we always rise again."

The collision of "truth" with "we" brings the truth that much closer to heart.

Given all of this intricacy and poetic complexity, it is remarkable that the meaning of the verse is retained. Talib is giving us his understanding of "the truth" which, of course, means different things to different people. The truth to Talib is the pure unbridled power of Hip Hop. The beats, the rhymes, the content, the vibe. "The truth lay the foundation of what we rockin’ on."

The truth will always remind one of one’s own history (in this case, the days when Black Americans were lynched for the enjoyment of Whites—see 100 Years of Lynching by Ralph Ginzburg, 1962, as well as protect one’s own history (truth must be protected from the "words of lying men"). Talib uses the phrase "the truth" several times, invoking new meanings each time. And in classic Hip Hop call and response fashion, we see that the theme of "the truth" is reframed by the clever and also classically Hip Hop affirmation—"true" (as sung by Talib’s crew in Lines 11, 12, and 13).

Talib, by exploiting the use of tonal semantics and poetics, demonstrates the multilayered and multicontextual complexity of HHNL by employing talk-singing, repetition and alternative wordplay, intentional counterpoints and extremely complex multi-rhythmying, HHNL users have truly taken this Language Thang to newer heights and deeper depths of discursive activity.

While scholars usually turn to Rap lyrics, or perhaps music videos, to analyze the discourse of the Hip Hop community, few have turned to the Hip Hop conversational discourse of the very agents that create and recreate Hip Hop Culture—particularly those who deploy superior skill and staying power in a record industry that has always been shady ("truthless and not trustworthy"). Spady (2001), writing on the link between Black American expressive culture and the dynamics of HHNL, provides an excellent analysis and theoretical framework for us to begin closely examining Hip Hop conversational discourse.

A close examination of Kurup’s lyrical and musical oeuvre, as well as his conversational narratives and overall communication practices reveal a highly sophisticated plays in the Hip Hop Nation Speech community. Kurup’s speech acts, witty, sardonic and satirical verbal exchanges, wordplay and play on words, ritualized speech and an assortment of distinct African American discourse markers single him out as a skilled member of this speech community. Contrary to the popular myth perpetuated and perpetuated by critics of mass
Contrary to the belief that Hip Hop artists lack the awareness and knowledge of the art form's cultural and linguistic foundations, Kurupt demonstrates his cognizance of Hip Hop's historical background in a memorable remark:

"I think Black Language is an essential part of Hip Hop—period. Hip Hop is a Black culture influenced art form of music. [repeat twice] That's the shock. In the hood, that's the shock. "(Kurupt in Spady 2001: 18)

Kurupt's use of metaphor and hyperbolic language in this passage is representative of the vast body of his Hip Hop conversational discourse. He does not merely describe Tupac as being emergent—rather, "his energy splits the room in half," and makes one "feel like jumping off the top of the roof." In responding to a question about the changing demands made of him as an artist, he responds with a unique, witty series of metaphors and similes rooted in the oral tradition of Black American folklore:

You get too hungry (eager, ambitious). It's like seventy thousand other people, man, that's hungry as fifty five slaves with no food for seven years! [similar, hyperbole] . . . So, while you lolly-gaggin, see a penny, pick it up. "I don't need a penny." He'll sneak up right behind you, pick up all the pennies. "I'll take it." Hungry! [word explosion]. And then come the next thing you know, he's just zippin' right by you! You're like the totoise, "Do-dum-do-do.

This boy is like the hare. [hyperbole] Gone! [word explosion] similar word pictures] (Spady et al. 1999: 543)

referral voices—any member of the HBNSC would recognize DJAM's lines by the vocal texture and timing Kurupt employs! The feeling strikes you and at that second is when you decide on whether it's a good song or you whether it's not. [key summarizing statement] . . . But just like Master P P is not the most poetically, the most lyrical, but he has feeling with music that makes the board [hyperbole]. And so when the music is kickin-bam! [word explosion] "Oh, my goodness!" [dialoguing other voices] "I'm a No Limit Soldier! That's what I told ya!" [imitating referral voices—using Master P's characteristic vocab lengthening and New Orleans phonology; kinetics—waving hands up and down; boom, boom, phish! [word explosion as references to musical sounds in Master P's song]. Then you like, "Wow!" Then you hear his lyrics and it's, "Awww, he's alright." [dialoguing other voices] But then the delivery pulls you back in. You feel like, "Woo!" Okay!" Because you're starting to listen to things that he's sayin. Music is the first thing they catch. Then it is lyrics and delivery and the emotion for the situation. Then there's subject matter. Musical keys of making a hit: the music, the delivery and the lyrics that you spit, and what you're talkin about, the subject matter. [key summarizing statement]

(Kurupt in Spady et al. 1999: 542–543)
small forms of pressure, you know. But it's all pressure, you know. Basically, pressure can push you to do things you don't want to do, say things you don't mean to say. Pressure can make you act out of character. Pressure can make you crumble, you know what I mean?

(Spayd et al. 1999: 545)

As in the previous discussion of the use of repetition in Hip Hop lyrics, Kurupt often combines repetition with other forms of figurative language. In the conversation, he describes how he connected with other rappers (Ras Kass, Canibus, and Killah Priest) to form a group called the Four Horsemen. Notice his use of figurative language as he depicts each member of the group.

Well, me and Canibus and Ras, we've always been folks. And I told them, man, we're gonna make a group called the Four Horsemen. The Horsemen was one of the most dangerous, wreak havoc, you understand what I'm saying? So, that was a great thing to label ourselves don't have no groups that's strictly for choppin' heads off. Me and Canibus, we're strictly my boy and Canibus boy. And he's the assassin with the mic when it comes to the pen. We of their heads. Everyone! When it comes to the written, we got Canibus and we got Ras on the mic. And he has a camp of assassins behind him and that's Killah Priest's situation. And that's Canibus' main nigga, you feel me? And Ras and Canny is my main of the foibles, you know what I mean? Canibus and Ras and Killah Priest will decide which one of them is gonna chop they heads off. Anybody freestylin', that's when I come into the picture. I'm the Headless Horseman, you know. We all get alases.

(Spayd et al. 1999: 551)

In this passage, Kurupt turns to his freestyle abilities. His explanation of a perfect rhyme (earlier in this section) demonstrated freestylin' ("improvisational rhyming") or what Henderson Movement of poetry in the 1960s and 1970s that have correspondences in Rap lyrics. What Henderson described as virtuosic free-rhyming was usually in the context of a rhyme couplet or exploited to create a new form called freestylin'. In freestylin', one is expected to sustain witty and clever improvisational rhymes for extended periods of time (skilled freestylers can rhyme until they literally run out of breaths). Kurupt, in describing his lyrical writing process, explains:

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

(Spayd et al. 1999: 538)

Kurupt claims that he not only freestyle, but he shits in freestyle (Jay-Z and other Rappers claim to have never written a rhyme on paper in their lives). Adding support to his claim to a freestyle mode of thinking, he бута ("Raps") a spontaneous freestyle in the middle of conversation. The passage begins with him speaking: "That's where Philly and Delray Borough kick in, you know. Rhyming against others and outlasting, and lasting through the wars, you know. That's the key to building up that confidence..." Then the freestyle begins dramatically: "Yo, check this out! I rap 575 flows in the making of a second!" Expecting to disassemble these in less than two verses! I'm able to disengage mics and chew encores up like Mike and Ike when I recite/ Daylight's eclipsed! I sink MC's like ships!" (Spayd et al. 1999: 550).

Clearly, Kurupt is a skilled user of language by any standard. Still unexplored are his word creations ("multimodal," describing someone who has a wide range of taste in music, a wide range of musical abilities, and the tendency to incorporate various musical forms into one), his unique phrasing (in describing his album, "I see it as being the East, West, North, and South. Upper East, upper West, upper North, upper South, downtown East... [Laughing..."), and his varied and diverse discourse markers ("woo-woo-woo-woo"") used to provide structure in Black American eras narratives, common in the West Coast, along with, "woomp-y-woomp-woomp" and "woopy-woopsy-woo-woo"). It is important to note that while Kurupt is a highly skilled user of language, his Hip Hop conversational discourse shares many elements with that of JT the Bigga Figga, Scooby D, Beanie Sigel, Eve, Busta Rhymes, Mos Def, and other members of the HHN.

Narrative Sequencing and Flow

Narrative sequencing includes both ritualized story-telling and narrative speech as a frequently occurring genre in Black American discourse (Smithein 1977). Storytelling is highly valued in the HHN. In the 1980s and 1990s, Slick Rick rapped about Hip Hop heads with humorous narratives (The Great Adventures of Slick Rick) that quite often concluded with a lesson for the listener. Skilled storytellers, such as Slick Rick, have influenced the next wave of Hip Hop artists, and they in turn influence the next wave and the narrative torch is passed on. In a prime example of the HHN's love for the art of storytelling, and the passing of the narrative torch, Outkast coming onto the scene waves after Slick Rick) produced "The Art of Storytelling (Part 1 and 2)" (1998). Recognizing Slick Rick as the bastions ("best") storyteller, they joined him on his album The Art of Storytelling (1999) on the single, "Street Talkin." The last four lines of the song capture the point:

Slick Rick and Outkast on this jam
Try to help raise all youth to men
Slick the Ruler Rick his space to sham
The reputation of this team.

Slick Rick's innovative, pioneering story raps have influenced many rappers. In a conversation with Raekwon, a member of the Wu-Tang Clan, he explains Rick's (and other rappers) influence on him, as well as how the narrative torch is passed down:

R: I'm from the 21st Century Rhymers... I grew up listening to Old School shit such as, you know, '89 and '90 with Kane and Slick Rick, Rakim. All of them niggas was doing it, you know. So, I'm like a replica of them, you know what I mean? And I'm a combination of them, as well as being around my way in the projects, the [Wu-Tang] Clan... It's like, Rick is a storyteller to me. He know how to put words together to perfection. Kane was a hardcore lyricist, which Kane would keep it street, too. You got G Rap...

At You said Slick Rick bein a storyteller. Do you see yourself that way, in that tradition?

R: Definitely, you know what I mean? Definitely. I know how to make vivid pictures come up from just experience and being through a lot of shit. And I've said, bein able to watch
some of the best do it, such as brothers like Slick Rick, Rakim and them, you know what I mean? I'm just them niggas in a younger generation, you know what I mean? (Ali 2000, unpublished interview)

Smitherman (1977) states that narrative sequencing may be found in these forms: preaching and testifying folk stories, tall tales, and toasts. While all of these forms are present in today's self-aggrandizements found in Hip Hop. In Toasts, much like many Hip Hop lyrics, the hero is fighting ability and general badness (Smitherman 1977, 1977). Smitherman and Pickford (2000) point to Toasts as a way to understand the "wicked, deft, deft, openly rebellious, and full of bragadocio about his masculinity, sexuality, make the link. Remember, no creation in the Spoken Soul universe emerges from a vacuum. Lil Cool J... is as much a son of Rudy Ray Moore as he is of Muddy Waters."

On "How Many Licks" (2000), Lil Kim proves that she is also a daughter, part of a sexual twist on the famous Tootsie Roll commercial. In one verse, she is all of what Smitherman describes in the previous paragraph and then some (but from a female perspective):

If you drive in the street, hold on to your seat
Niggas grab your meat while I ride the beat.
And if you see a shiny black Lamborghini fly by ya
Zeooooooowoooooo!... that's me the Night Rider
Dressed in all black with the gut in the lap
Lamastics in the street—gotta keep the beat
Sticky on the bezel, a hundred on the rings
Sittin' pretty baby, with a Cash Money bling
12 A.M., I'm on my way to the club.
After three bottles I'll be ready to fuck
Some niggas even put me on their grocery lists
Right next to the whip cream and box of chocolates
Designer pussy, my shirt come in flavors
High class taste, niggas got to spend paper
Look it right the first time or you gotta do it over
Like it's rehearsed for a Tootsie commercial.

When Lil Kim says "while I ride the beat," she is talking about what is known as flow in HHRL. (Flow relates directly to narrative sequencing because it impacts the telling of the story to a great degree. Flow can be defined generally as the relationship between the beats and the rhymes in flow, in order to develop an understanding from the artist's perspective. His definition provides:

Flow is like, how you say it. Flow is like poetry gone to the beat, but you make it connect like a bridge, you know what I mean? It's like buildin' a bridge with your rhymes [see bridge rhymes in Chapter 6]. You want to be able to let everybody know that, "Yo, I could rhyme you know what I mean? And make it still flow, but just a different way of using it, you know what I mean?"

(Ali 2000, unpublished interview)

Keys (1984: 145) provides an interesting analysis, which needs updating (due to the pioneering nature of her work, rather than any shortcoming on her part): "In Rap music, the bass line functions as a time line. The rhythmic structure and the rhymed couplets weave around a two-bar indecisive bass line... (The rap is) superimposed on a four-beat bass melody structure."

P: I mean, poetry is a awesome art form in itself. I dub it in before it write some of the songs that I do. I try to be poetic with some of the songs. Hip Hop is based upon a mixture of that, but more writing musically. Points and timing, you know. So on a level where it's based upon the music, you have to be more rhythmically connected with your listener and crowd. In terms of rhythm, you know. And how are you ridin' that beat. You know, you could do the same thing with poetry without any music at all, you know what I'm saying? Get a response rhythmically. So I'm not disrespecting that. I'm just saying, Hip Hop, it's about where you are on that fourth bar, where you are on that first bar... You got to have flow, and I think that's something that just comes natural.

A: What exactly do you mean by that, by flow?

P: I mean, how the person rides the beat, you know. Some M.C.'s ride the beat sorta 100% like the Village, and they're actually down the beat to it. Some M.C.'s go against the grain of the beat, but they're so on point and you understand what they're doing, you know.

(Ali 2000, unpublished interview)

In discussing the relationship between Rap and poetry, Pharoahe Monch provides additional insight with his definition:

Chad's comments allow us to deduce that if rhythm is one's ability to stay on beat, then flow is one's ability to exploit the rhythm, rhyme around the rhythm, and yet be able to faithfully return to the rhythm on time. Although it is extremely difficult to reproduce rhythm in print, Wood (1999) provides perhaps the most intricate analysis of the issue. While the analysis is preliminary, he bridges musicology and poetics in a way that is both refreshing and revealing. He states that "the primary rhythmic force of rap is to negotiate the varieties of possibilities set up by the sixteenth-note backbeat."
The Hip Hop cultural modes of discourse are at their peak in the communal and competitive cipher (sometimes spelled "cypher/cipher/cyphr"). HHNL (pronounced "Ho-Ho-No-Loo") is both a communal and competitive discourse in which the cipher becomes the height of community and competition within the HHNL. The cipher is where all (or some combination) of the Hip Hop cultural modes of discourse and dissection—call-and-response, multiple-layered verbal expression, signification, bustin, total-making, freestyle, wordplay, word-explosion, word-creation, word-pictures, and the like—converge into a fluid matrix of linguistic-cultural activity. The cipher is the height of linguistic creativity and is not for the faint of heart. Lyrical battles, which sharpened and produced a critical circle of Hip Hop conscious beings. When Truck Turner said, "They are issuing the ultimate challenge.

Despite the centrality of the cipher to Hip Hop linguistic-cultural activity, this discourse event remains almost completely unexplored by scholars. Rickford and Rickford (2000: 87) refer to the cipher as "the supercharged circuit of the rap knowledge and creativity (something not dissimilar—in the vein of highly communal responsive rituals—to the ring shout)." Battling in Hip Hop is also comparable to the competition among choirs in gospel music, "'exchanges' in each one of these artistic endeavors are very high.

Addressing an audience at the University of Pennsylvania's conference on "Islam and the Globalization of Hip Hop," Peterson (2001) offers some insights:

The use of the term 'cipher' in the Hip Hop vernacular is important. Ciphers are marvelous speech events. They are inviting and very challenging. They have become a litmus test for modern day rappers. Ciphers are the innovative forms for battles in Hip Hop. The concept of the cipher is essential to Hip Hop culture and its vernacular. It indicates an epistemology that is non-linear.

California's Ru Fong supports Peterson's definition of the competitive nature of the cipher and offers some further insight:

It's kinda like a training field, you know what I'm saying? It teaches you delivery, you know what I'm saying? You've got to react under pressure, because it ain't even really fans in the cipher. I mean, everybody's a Hip Hop fan, but they ain't Gon fans. They're a fan of themselves. So, you spit? It's gladiators. It's jousting. It's just from the mouth. So, you know what I'm saying, it's a necessity.

(Alim, 2000, unpublished interview)

The cipher is seen as a linguistic training field for MC's. Several skills are developed in the cipher—rap delivery, reacting under pressure, verbal battling, and jousting from the mouth. The cipher is like Hip Hop's classroom, where one studies to learn the tricks of the trade, so to speak. Raekwon alludes to the pedagogical nature of this discursive speech event and highlights the communal aspect:

You know, it's everybody enlightenin' they skills with the next person, and you know, if you learn off of the best, you know what I mean? It's like training. It's like basic training. It's like, sparrin', you know what I mean? So, you know, that makes a better MC, hein able to know that he can express himself amongst people that can teach him as well as he teach them. Everybody's teachin' each other, you know, because they say experience the best teacher. So, when people listen to famous artists... they acquire what they learn from them, and what they got, and they put it together, and that makes them a better person. It's like, it's like how you got Reverend O'Neal there right now that's a replica of Martin Luther King, you know what I mean? They got the same goals, the same ways of thinkin' as that man. And, you know, that's all a part of being able to be a great man, is to be able to learn from the best, you know. (Alim, 2000, unpublished interview)

Whereas Raekwon highlights the communal and pedagogical nature of the cipher (see Newman 2001), others speak about the intensely competitive nature of some Hip Hop ciphers. Karlurst discusses the importance of the cipher as a pivotal stage of development for his MC. His experience includes fistic competition and verbal battling, where each MC is at war with the members of the cipher. The ciphers are required to spit freestyle rhymes that may lead them directly to their next opponent, and the MC who outlasts everyone in the cipher, emerges victorious. Karlurst's story is especially interesting due to the fact that he battled Snoop Dogg in the early stages of his career. Due to his impressive performance in the battle cipher, they became recording industry partners. Karlurst explains how he and Snoop formed their relationship on the West Coast:

We both bust freestyles... At this club called the Keep. We was just bustin' with each other and all that and we was against each other at first. It's like our freestyles was so tight, you know what I mean, that he was busting in my rhyme. He was like, you know, "We ain't gettin' paid for this. If you tight, then I'm tight. Why don't we just bust together, you know what I'm saying? Let's kick some rhymes."

(Spady et al. 1999: 536)

Kurupt explains that he learned his battlin' and freestyle skills as a youngster in the East Coast ciphers of Philly. He begins his narrative about his early days in the cipher with the classic Hip Hop frame, "back in the day":

Back in the day, I was just thirteen. A circle of ten or twelve people, ages of like thirteen and below, one might have been twenty, twenty one. And when it came down to the last two (rhymers), I was always there. And I've always been number one. Always, I never lost.
them type battles. You bust and it’s like you don’t say the next person’s name, and you’re out of there. I’ve always been in there. I just sit back and burst rhymes and I used to spell things on people’s alphas. Like he’d have a shirt that says “Walk” on it, I’d break it down like the “W” is for this, the “K” is for that, the “L” is for this, and the “A” is for that. And they be like, “What?” That’s my style. Nobody else was doing that. That’s something I created . . . Like, he could have a soda can, “Pepsi.” Once, I spelled Pepsi for this nigga. The “P” is for punctuating rhymes and woo-woo-woo-woo. The “E” is for executing. And they’re like, “God!!” And I’m like—what—thirteen, fourteen. C’mon now. They called me “The Kid.” That was my rapping name because I was the youngest nigga that would always make it into the cipher.

(Spady et al. 1999: 539)

What stands out so strongly in this reflective narrative on the cipher experience is the fierce intensity and the desire to be number one. HHNL is an extremely competitive discursive space. As John Wideman (1976: 34) noted:

What’s fascinating to me about African American speech is its spontaneity, the requirement that you not only have a repertoire of vocabulary or syntactic devices/constructions, but you come prepared to do something in an attempt to over the person on a level that both uses the language, mocks the language, and recreates the language.

The Rapster must come prepared to do something with this language. Kurup describes the rules and rituals of this practice in Philly (as they varied in different cities). In his experience, the rhyme had to name the next person entering the cipher, which required the participants to always be on alert. Even those who are not called on are interacting with the rhymers by providing critical feedback, approval or rejection (see Iloyoung Lee’s (2005) study of freestyle battles in Los Angeles and Woods (2005)). Kurup’s language game of picking apart the words on other rhymers’ articles of clothing demonstrates his creativity and inventiveness—“That’s something I created.” A deep sense of pride is communicated with regard to one’s witty, inventive use of language and ability to outlast others in this linguistic competition.

As Rickford and Rickford (2000) suggested, the cipher has roots deep in the Black American and African Oral Tradition. Smitherman (1977: 82) cites H. Rap Brown’s (Black leader in the 1960s and Muslim Imam today) experience with the dozens, which is remarkably similar to Kurup’s description above:

what you try to do is totally destroy somebody else with words. It’s the whole competition thing again, fighting each other. There’d be some 40 or 50 dudes standing around and the winner was determined by the way they responded to what was said. If you fell all over each other laughing, then you knew you’d scored.

Recently, Sonia Sanchez, Black Arts Movement poet—professor of the 1960s and ’70s (and still rapping strong today), was a participant in a Hip Hop cipher on June 23, 1999 in Philadelphia to celebrate Hip Hop Week. The cipher was led by Xulu, formerly the prime time DJ of Philly’s major Hip Hop station and producer of a nightly freestyle competition called “The Cipher Challenge.” About 20 or 90 people were involved in the cipher, along with two DJs and various graffiti artists. The competition was fierce. MCs would take the mic and bust a freestyle rhyme while others evaluated their performance with shouts, hand clapping, and other affirmations. Some MCs stood back with their heads cocked to one side and one eyebrow raised as if to say, “That’s all you got?” Others walked right up to the rhymers and faced directly in the opposite direction with the coolest, most disinterested look on their face—only to snatch the mic and rip their own freestyle! These facial expressions and acts of indirection are common in the cipher.

You want to evaluate the other rhymers while maintaining a cool, calm, and confident exterior that lets the present rhymers know, “You got competition!”

In the best of the moment, Sonia Sanchez entered the cipher and dropped a lyrical bomb on all those in attendance. With many Hip Hop artists on the scene like Parry E, Lady B, Da Fat Cat Clique, Legacy, Eban Jones, and Supreme Da Regulator, Sonia stepped up and roc’d the mic right (yuhhhh!! She described what moved her to do so:

Well, I heard everyone before I got up in that circle. And, initially, I stood and watched it. And I watched not only the energy, but I watched the respect that people had for each other. And then I watched the youngBrothers and Sisters, you know, rapping . . . And it reminded me a great deal of when we also got up on the stage . . . You could not go up and go [makin’ a weak attempt] . . . you had to hold your own. And so when I see those young Sisters hold their own, you know, I smile . . . It was not an alien circle. It was like, as I said, I belong there . . . We used to go out a lot in California. We used to go with Ed Bullins and Burks and Marvin X and Sarah Fabelo. We used to go out and do our poetry and our plays in the streets of Oakland.

(Alim 2000: 21)

As Sonia Sanchez makes clear, the cipher is not alien to Black communicative and discursive practices. It is important to note, however, that while the cipher and other Hip Hop discursive practices are most certainly tradition-linked, they are not tradition-bound. What I mean by that is HHNL is rooted in the Black American Oral Tradition, but also extends and expands that tradition in multiple ways to include new forms and styles of discourse. HHNL will continue to evolve and take it to “da next level.”

Black Language Space, the Power of the Word, and the Hip Hop Nation Speech Community

HHNL exists within a Black Language Space (BLS)—a discursive space where Black Language is the culturally dominant language variety, and the power of the word is the overriding force of attraction. The Hip Hop Nation Speech Community (HHNSC) is driven culturally and linguistically by young Black males and females who are adept at language use in the Hip Hop-saturated streets of America. But who comprises the HHNSC? Hymes (1974) inform us that:

Membership in a speech community consists of sharing one or more of its ways of speaking—that is, not in knowledge of a speech style (or any other purely linguistic entity, such as language) alone, but in terms of knowledge well as appropriate use. There are rules of use without which rules of syntax are useless.

Membership in the HHNSC then, hinges on having knowledge of HHNL and Hip Hop cultural modes of discourse.

This definition is suitable for defining the HHNSC because it is as catholic as the HHN’s philosophy of race, ethnicity, and culture. Norbeck (1997), Catlett (1999) and Newman (2001) have demonstrated the HHN’s strong anti-racist ideology—this ideology has led to the development of a multilingual, multilingual, and multicultural speech community. Due to Hip Hop Culture’s overwhelming influence on popular culture in America and the world, HHNL is influencing the far corners of the globe, creating what is perhaps the alter global speech community. Certainly there are differences in speech communities from city to city (and sometimes block to block), but the unifying elements of the HHNSC deserve attention. Spady (1994: 26) touches on this topic:

"The Philly Hip Hop Language of SchooD D is preeminently modern [spreading beyond
localized boundaries). It shares common elements with Ice Cube, Snoop Dogg, Dogg, Kool Keith, Ice T, Chuck D and Scarface,* Rappers from various regions in the US.

Black Language Space (BLS)

Members of the HHNL often refer to themselves as speakers of a common language. Ice Cube considers this notion, and roots this common language in the historical plight of Africans in America:

Four hundred years ago, when black slaves were brought to America, Africans who spoke the same language were separated from each other. What we’re seeing today, with this current campaign to intimidate rappers and rap music, is just another form of separating people that speak a common language.

(Ice Cube June 25, 1995; cited in Sexton 1995)

The common elements that unite people who “speak a common language” have been described earlier. But given the high value placed on individuality and originality in HHNL, the HHNL speakers of the many regional HHNLs (HHNL Varieties), are constantly shifting and reshaping existing language norms. These language norms exist and evolve in what we have termed a Black Language Space (BLS). It is the existence of a BLS that enables HHNL, to come to life in full effect. By BLS, we mean a discourse space where Black Language is the prestige variety, where Black linguistic and communicative norms are the standard, where one cannot engage in meaningful conversation unless they are fully equipped to handle linguistic combat and competition. One has to come prepared to do battle, to hold their own, to enable the free flow of conversation. This is a space where language is the central focus, and the key element to maintaining and sustaining dialogues, as well as the primary site of authenticity (Bucholtz 2003).

Spady’s hip hopographic (1991) studies in the Unum Hip Hop Trilogy (Native Conscious Rap (1991), Twisted Tales in the Hip Hop Streets of Philly (1995), and Street Conscious Rap (1999)) offer a key source of primary data in considering the concept of a Black Language Space. Several recent unpublished interviews will demonstrate how Spady, as an interlocutor who is fully conversant with HHNL, creates a BLS with a central focus on enabling the narrative. First, we hear from South Philly’s Beanie Sigel, as he recounts the story of how he and Black Thought (from The Roots) used to be in the same grade school class:

S: Who was that 4th grade teacher who used to tell them you and Tariq [Black Thought] to stop talkin in the back of the class?
B: Hah. Hah. Hah. [Beanie just laughin, as a challenge]
S: Who was that, man? Were you talkin or were you rhymin?
B: Tariq, he used to be in ah ...
S: What elementary school was that?
B: Ah man!
S: You don’t remember it. You’ve forgotten it. [Returning the challenge]
B: Wow! What was her name?
S: You remember her don’t you? [Pushing the interlocutor to remember]
B: Wow, McDaniel School, and Tariq was in that school.
S: Were yall write rhymes in her class or what?
B: Yeah actually.
S: She said yall were disturbing her class. [He-said, she-said talk, reporting what others have said]
B: All the time. Actually. See, what it was, Tariq ...

*S: On the real now. [Again, challenging, and enabling the truth]
B: On the real, Tariq was in a higher grade than me. He was one grade in front of me. [Recognizing the challenge to the truth]
S: He wasn’t even called Black Thought at that time!
B: Nah, He was just Tariq. He was in my 6th Grade. They was in the 4th grade and I was in the 3rd grade.
S: You used to go to their room all the time.
B: I used to go to they fourth grade reading.
S: Oh, Reading?
B: I used to go fourth grade to read cause I was in a higher level than the kids in the third grade.
S: They were too slow for you! [Affirming and commenting on the narrative]
B: Ah, Ah, Well yeah. That and was all through elementary. When I was in kindergarten I used to go first grade and read. When I was in the first grade I used to go in the 2nd grade reading class. So that’s how I was always in class with Tariq. And we used to be in the back just rapin, repeatin old Sugar Hill Gang Records and all that ...

(Spady 2001, unpublished interview)

What one does not see from the printed page is the rapid fire-fire rate of some of these exchanges. The story unfolds in a fluid interactive space where the interlocutors fully expect what some might view as “interruptions.” Spady is constantly commenting on the narrative and challenging the speaker. He is also freely using terms and phrases rooted in HHNL, and Black Language in general, such as “on the real now,” which highlights the listener’s desire for real talk ("talk that is both factual and sincere"). The result is a previously unheard narrative about how Beanie Sigel and Black Thought used to rhyme and rap together in grade school.

The following sequence between Spady and Oddball’s Saafir exhibits how both interlocutors are highly competitive. Throughout the conversation, they have been discussing Saafir’s days as a young buck ("adolescent") growing up in "the town":

S: Lookin back on school, man, are there any particular teachers that you can recall ...
B: Hell, naw! Hell, naw!
S: C’morn, man! I didn’t finish the question yet ...
B: Hell, naw! Hell, naw!
S: Get outta here, man!
B: Hell, naw! No teachers. None.
S: Why was school a turn off for you, man?
B: School wasn’t a turn off. I love to learn, but the teachers is anholes. A lot of the teachers bring a lot of their personal attributes to the fuckin classroom, you know what I mean?
S: What do you mean by bringing their personal attributes?
B: As far as their emotional problems and the ill they’re havin at their house, you know what I mean? They take the shit out on the kids and fuck the kids on a certain level, psychologically fuck them up, you know what I mean? Depending on the caliber of teacher, I have experienced some fucked up ones, but I ain’t mad at them, you know what I’m sayin? In actuality, it made me understand them and the people around them a lot more.

(Spady 2000, unpublished interview)

We can see that Saafir anticipates Spady’s question and immediately cuts him off with, “Hell now! Hell naw!” Spady, also fiercely competitive, responds, “C’morn, man! I didn’t finish the
question yet..." Again Sasaf cuts him off, "Hell naw! Hell naw!" Spady replies with "Get outta here, man?" [said in a manner to mean something like, "Are you serious, man?"]. These exchanges and under each other: that is then freed up to testify about his school experiences, which obviously still hold a lot of painful memories for him.

Spady's knowledge of HHNC and Black communication in general allows him to gain great insight from his interactions...In the following interaction, Spady's knowledge of the Black Oral Tradition (specifically Black D) and Jocko Henderson, who produced The Brotherhood six months before Sugar Hill Geng's release is key). Kurupt, who grew up in Philadelphia, is the interlocutor:

K: I think Black Language is an essential part of Hip Hop—period. Hip Hop is a Black culture influenced art form of music.

S: So the discussion about Ebonics and other Black Language expressions was not new to you when it became a hot issue in 1997-98? I guess you've already known Ebonics.

K: Since the 70's. The 80's. The 90's and the 20's. Jocko! [Referring to famous Black D] and Jocko Henderson, and even further back in history. This creates a BLS where Satellitie, Saying Ooh Boy De Boo, and Jocko Jocko]

K: "EEEEEEEEEEE Tiddlee Wop! This is the Jock and I'm back on the scene...

[Spontaneous break into Jocko's rap]

K: With the record machine. [Finishing Kurupt's Jocko rendition]

K: Saying Ooh Boy De Boo. [Continuing the Rap]

S: And K: How do you do? [Said at the same time, completing the Rap]

S: How do you know that shit man? [Said in Black American falsetto, characteristic of Black male speech (Alim 2004a)]

K: Heyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!! [Elaborated "hey", to confidently express his knowledge of the rap]

No, please believe it, man. [Common phrase heard particularly in the Bar Area. This phrase is used in front of people to express their knowledge of the rap].

California. I'm from Philadelphia. [Embodying himself in the place where Jocko's raps are known, establishing authenticity] Listen to that: "I Tiddlee Wop. This is the Jock and I'm back on the scene with the record machine."

S: So you know rap was in the Black tradition?

K: Ooh, Fo Sho. [Said slowly for emphasis in that hip, urban North Philly way]

K: Ooh, Fo Sho. [Meaning, "for sure," "certainly," Associated largely with California, though used elsewhere. Similar to the phrase associated with the East Coast, "No doubt."] (Spady 2001, unpublished interview)

Needless to say, the narrative would have taken a completely different turn [or maybe would spontanteous break into Rap open up the discursive BLS and allow the interlocutor to know that he is speaking to someone who is conversant with those language practices. Too often, members of the HHNC] cannot express their thoughts through language (which should be more widely used). Some members of the HHNC have very limited ability to communicate, for example, many hold the belief that such people have their thoughts communicated through language (which should be more widely used). Some members of the HHNC have very limited ability to communicate, for example, many hold the belief that such people have their thoughts communicated through language. Speech here is an agent of change. What does it mean to build your world with language? Linguistic anthropologists, much like the HHNC artists, have theorized, understood that we construct our realities, identities, and social worlds through language (Duranti 1997, 2004). The power of the word, of speech, is most def ("most definitely") a driving force in HHNC. Many artists believe that their words have the power to change not only their lives, but the lives of members of their community as well. When Tupac joined Scarface on the memorable collaboration "Smile for Me Now" (2001), in which they lovingly expressed and sang about the struggle of Black people in America—realizing that "through all the pain" you got to smile to remain alive in an insane world. Near the end of the song, Tupac speaks on the power of the word with a brief one-line, "Embrace my words, make the world change."

In describing the power of the Rap, provides an added perspective on the phrase "word is life" (or "word life"):
We talk about things that involve life. Meaning that, we get joints that attack emotional spirits, you know what I mean? Meaning that, if we talk about—how could I say it—if we talk about the streets or whatever you hear how shit be going down in the streets, that’s only one side of it, you know what I mean? Then we talk about emotional shit that make you want to cry, that make you flash back to when you go check out your moms and be like, you know, “We probably go through some rough shit, but you know how I feel about you.” It’s like, we make songs to be able to make you think about what’s going on in your life. A: That’s powerful shit right there. B: Yeah, and that’s what makes a great MC.

(Alim 2001, unpublished interview)

I am a spiritual man so I have to speak to you from the Books (Bible and Qur’an). You may not think that I am too hip, but, when you hear from the Books who you are, why you are called, and, what your mission is that you have just begun to see, then, you will know that the Prophets of Allah (God) who saw all the way to the judgement and to the end of the present world, had to have seen hip-hop. You will not find the words “hip-hop” necessarily in the Bible or in the Qur’an, but you are there in a very big way … In the countries where governments do not like western music or western civilization, people are speaking around listening to the word and moving to the beat of the hip-hop generation. If in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God, then, God (here means Force and Power). The Word has Force. The Word has Power; Power to move men to think new thoughts and to do new things.

(Minister Louis Farrakthan 2001)

What have I attempted to do in this chapter is to demonstrate the creativity and complexity of language use in contemporary Black American expressive culture, particularly HHINL, language use in the HHDNC, and the Hip Hop cultural modes of discourse.

Study Questions

1. What are the similarities and differences between “hip-hop language” and poetry?
2. How is the concept of “technique” relevant to a discussion of hip-hop language and aesthetics?
3. Why is hip-hop language significant in the conversation of earlier Black artistic forms and cultural practices?