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Throwin' Words At U: A Lyrical Analysis of MC Lyte's Rap Texts

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

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2001

Abstract

Recently, rap music has become a prominent musical genre and is possibly one of the most popular and influential forms of African-American music of the 1980s and 1990s (Erlewine *et al* 921). Rap is dominated by male artists, although females have been increasingly writing and recording rap music. Considerable research has been conducted on various aspects of the rap phenomenon, but there has been little focus on analysing rap lyrics using traditional literary criticism. The present study analysed the rap texts of MC Lyte, an enduring female rap artist, employing literary techniques used to analyse poetry. The development of rap music is traced from its inception, identifying some of its features and impact, particularly within the economically-disadvantaged and predominantly African-American areas of large cities. The emergence of women rappers, and how their input has contributed to the changing nature of rap music, both in its subject-matter and in the language techniques used, is discussed. MC Lyte was chosen as a representative female rapper because she had recorded several albums spanning more than a decade, because she focuses on issues affecting African-American women and because her lyrical techniques have developed across time. Drawing similarities between rap music and “street poetry”, a comprehensive textual analysis was conducted on the albums of MC Lyte. Her use of vocabulary and common elements of poetry was examined, as well as the topics she addresses. The analysis shows that Lyte uses both the common characteristics of rap music, and traditional literary techniques, to successfully comment on issues relevant to her audience. Many of her lyrics involved self-promotion and denigration of other rappers, common elements in rap music. Other lyrics commented and advised on important issues facing African-Americans living in poor black communities, particularly women. Many texts, however, had a more universal relevance. While her lyrics show a consistency across albums, the literary devices and language techniques became more complex, and a wider range of issues were discussed. Inherent limitations in the study were that other possible forms of analysis were not conducted, such as sociological and feminist approaches. Comparisons with other rap artists were not possible due to the lack of prior research into their lyrics. These were identified as topics for future research.

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Introduction

African-Americans have often been sustained, healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 78) and this is perhaps most evident in their music. Throughout history, music has been created to enhance the human experience; it somehow elevates and makes one feel better about oneself. The music created and performed by African-Americans seems to have both a therapeutic and a socially reinforcing power for those who consider themselves oppressed and limited in their ability to speak out and be heard. Many theorists believe that African-American music has been, and continues to be, music which has the ability to heal not only African-Americans, but music lovers in general (Cashmore 10; Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 78; Haskins 182; Oliver 9; Sexton 13). African-Americans have always played a large role in the shaping of styles and images of American popular music (Haskins 182; Hatch and Millward 129; Naison 130). Nowhere is this more evident than in rap music.

The Emergence of Rap

Rap music emerged on the streets of New York towards the end of the 1970s. Young African-American males took two of the most basic devices in the recording industry - turntables and microphones - and turned them into musical instruments (Chambers 189). By using two turntables, they combined other artists' recordings, phasing them in and out, speeding them up, slowing them down and strategically working them into a collage of beats and rhythms to create an original piece of work. Over these sounds, a performer (known as the MC) would talk or "rap" in a form of improvised "street poetry", a performance orientated form of poetry which is characterised by its focus on the everyday life of those on the streets (Dawes 6). Thus, rap music was born.

Rap music arose in the context of the sad conditions in the streets of the poor urban black communities in America; areas where suffering, poverty, deprivation, lack and oppression are commonplace. Rap offered those who lived under these conditions, particularly the young men, an outlet to vent their anger and frustration at the situation they found themselves living in. It also offered them a means by which to gain public recognition and have a public voice. Rap did for the poor blacks in America in the 80s what reggae had done for the poor blacks in Jamaica a decade earlier; it enabled them to become noticed and it helped to create a renewed sense of identity and pride within their local community (Hebdige 136). Audience members felt empowered by the words of rap artists who were talking about common everyday experiences shared by both them and

the rapper. Performers used rap as an expression of resistance or rebellion against the bleak living conditions they seemed trapped in (Boyd 63).

Rap is very much rooted in the experience of lower class blacks, and has gradually developed into part of a culture termed “hip hop” (Hebdige 136; Longhurst 150). Hip hop culture encapsulates not only the music of the streets but also the dance, clothing, language, graffiti and above all, the attitude from there. Rap music and hip hop have been particularly important to African-American youth as these innovations have allowed them to form both alternative identities and positions of social status (Rose, “A Style” 78). Rap music provided a medium for these young people to resist and reject the stereotypes which society bestowed upon them, transcending these stereotypes by speaking out against the prejudices which both the audience and the rap artists face every day.

History is of central importance to African-Americans and is considered essential to the realisation of both their individual and collective freedom (Gilroy, *Ain't No Black* 207). It seems that a knowledge of their history is vital to African-Americans because a key component of their oppression has been an attempt to dislocate them from their historical roots. Too many young African-Americans never get told of any history before slavery. This is what many rappers speak out against in the lyrics of their songs. Young people of African-American descent have been able to re-educate themselves about their history through rap music; they believe it is important that the truth be told about their past. Many of the rap lyrics tell of a history which began a long time before slavery. In this way, rap is far more than just another form of music; it is an important tool for education.

For centuries, African-Americans were forced to create coded means to communicate with one another in order to protect themselves from danger. In the deep South, slaves were prohibited from using and keeping loud instruments which would give sign or notice to one another, so they invented secret means by which to communicate (Brackett 112; Rose, “Fear” 538; Southern 182). In a similar manner to these slaves, rappers have refined and developed their music and lyrics in such a way that it provides a form of coded communication between the oppressed. African-Americans have created their own original form of vocabulary, often termed “black talk” or “street slang” (Fernando 266; Safire 41; Szwed 144). These words, which when used in their original context would possess negative connotations, are given a positive slant, endowing them with a completely different definition, sometimes even inverting their meaning. Black talk is also the African-Americans’ way of guarding their communications from outsiders, particularly Europeans, who do not understand what they refer to. This form of communication not only serves as a protective device, but also allows African-Americans to form a type of community within themselves; they are able to empower themselves

with the knowledge that they speak a type of vocabulary that only they can understand (Szwed 149).

Rappers draw on this black talk frequently; it is of great importance to them and it is this vocabulary which provides the main content of their lyrics (Costello and Wallace 53; Perkins, "Youth" 262). This street slang consists of words easily recognised by those who reside in the poorer communities in America. The vocabulary is constantly changing, emphasising the need for listeners to be a part of these poorer communities in order to understand any new words, or new meanings to familiar words, which may arise in the lyrics. Rappers empower both themselves and those in the audience who are able to understand, by using words that only they would know. They further empower themselves by alienating those in the audience who do not understand what the slang refers to, thereby isolating those that do not belong.

Artists also utilise a variety of literary and language techniques in their raps. These include allegory, double meanings, neologisms, repetition, alliteration and onomatopoeia in combination with black talk (Fernando 266; Gates, "2 Live" 162; Pratt 210). As with their use of slang, they use these language devices to communicate, to share messages that only those who are familiar with their use of these devices can fully understand.

Several theorists, in studying how these ways of speaking have developed in black communities, particularly in the poorer areas, have suggested that they have close historical links to African oral tradition (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 76; Rose, *Black Noise* 27; Szwed 145). They have recognised similarities between both the verbal and musical styles of rap music and traditional oral African-American practices such as African war chants, playing the "dozens", "toasting", field hollers, the "lining out" of hymns in church and tale telling (Pratt 210; Shuker 247; Shusterman 614; Toop 94). This link can be seen clearly in rap music's percussive sounds, polyrhythmic texture, timbral richness, and call-and-response patterns (Walser 297). Several commentators believe that rap music is a return to the fundamental components of African music, with its prime focus on rhythm and voice (Eyerman and Jamison 105; Gilroy, *Ain't No Black* 211; Shusterman 615). But rap music differs from other musical genres, not only in its language devices and vocabulary, but also in its musical form. Unlike most other forms of music, rap places the voice of the artist at the very centre of the text with instrumentation in the background; the rapper's lyrics and ways of speaking are the main focus of the song (Walser 296).

Like other musical forms, rap has a number of identifiable subgenres (Hebdige 136; Shuker 247), although, with rap, these are distinguishable largely in terms of their lyrical

content rather than their musical style. Currently, the most prominent form of rap is “gangsta” rap, which is identified by, and often criticised for, its clinical descriptions of sex, its promotion of violent solutions to black problems, its denigration of women in making frequent reference to them as “bitches” and “whores”, and its glorification of the gangster lifestyle¹. Examples of gangsta rappers include N.W.A., Snoop Doggy Dogg, Eminem, Jay-Z, DMX, Foxy Brown and Lil’ Kim. Another subgenre of rap is “hardcore” or “message” rap which addresses more political issues specifically relevant to a black community and focuses on offering advice to listeners on a number of topical issues relevant to a rap audience (Hebdige 136; Longhurst 155; Ransby and Matthews 528). Rappers like Arrested Development, Public Enemy, A Tribe Called Quest and KRS-One are included in this category. “Booty” rappers like 2 Live Crew, BWP (Bytches with Problems) and HWA (Hoez with Attitude) perform raps which are characterised by an obsession with sex, and often perverted descriptions of sexual activity (Bayles 352; Perkins, “Rap Attack” 24). “Female” rap is rap by female artists that focuses on the experiences of African-American women, particularly emphasising the importance of strength, independence and empowerment of women (Irving 116; Roberts 150; Rose, *Black Noise* 165; Valdes 354). Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Monie Love, Salt N Pepa and Lauryn Hill provide examples in this category. Another subgenre is “nonsense” or “comical” rap which takes a humorous, light-hearted look at common situations; these raps are particularly aimed at youth. Examples of comical rappers include DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, Young MC and Biz Markie. While the main elements of these subgenres are distinguishable, it does not mean however, that one or more elements are not included in other subgenres.

Most rap music is centred on self-promotion, and the dynamic of rap requires the rap artist to focus on personal narrative. The style of rap has always been to brag about oneself by dedicating endless rhymes to one’s appearance, showing the ability to entertain the audience and, above all, by asserting that no other rapper can compare (Valdes 349). Unlike many traditional oral African-American practices, rap often places less focus on information-passing. Rather, the emphasis is on personal word-power and the ability to win verbal contests through entertaining one’s audience. This element of control, of the power of words well used, and the status one can achieve through gaining this control, is of central concern to the rap artist. Most rap pieces also mention the rapper’s sexual desirability, commercial success, or possession of material goods, but usually these are secondary to statements about the rapper’s verbal power. A rapper’s aim is to take control of the language, to outdo any competition, and to be the master over the audience.

¹ For further discussion on “gangsta” rap, see (Bayles 356; Butts 76; hooks, *Black Looks* 35; Kolawole 9; Longhurst 151; Naison 131; Ransby and Matthews 531; Staples 79).

John Szwed talks at great length about “the man-of-words” - an identifiable social type whose aims are to entertain and instruct anywhere and anytime and to ~~whom~~^{call} calling attention to himself as an unexcelled speaker (148). One can see close links between the man-of-words and rap artists. Both are concerned with achieving status and drawing the audience to them, which they do by using various verbal and literary devices to entice the audience and persuade them to listen to what they have to say.

Like the man-of-words, accomplished rappers are able to grab the audience’s attention with their verbal dexterity and are able to speak with conviction and authority about issues which relate to them and their listeners. Delivery is of vital importance to a rapper, as the manner of delivery can profoundly affect the understanding of the content. It is essential for successful rappers to exude confidence and power; they must seize the audience’s attention and win their admiration (Dimitriadis 184). With rap music, the point is not merely to show that one can rhyme, but that one can rhyme differently to and better than anyone else. The lines are never of equal length and it therefore becomes a test of the rapper’s skills to fit them to the beat. Either they pile up the words and deliver them with speed or they use fewer words and stretch them out with pauses and carefully calculated breaks. Rappers are also concerned, however, with flow; with a fluidity in their lyrics. A skilled rapper moves easily and powerfully through complex lyrics but also has the ability to alternate speed, to pause, and to cause rupture not only in their words but also in their music.

Rap lyrics are a critical part of a rapper’s identity and this explains why authorship and individuality in rap music are so crucial to any rap artist. Of course, there are hundreds of shared phrases and slang words across rap lyrics, but any particular rap text conveys the personal and emotive voice of the rapper (Rose, *Black Noise* 95). Unlike traditional Western literary notions of composition, where the text can stand quite separately from the performer, rap lyrics are closely linked with both the author and the performer and are the voice of both.

Rappers are particularly concerned with “naming”. This term refers to both the taking on of new stage names to highlight particular roles or personal characteristics that they wish to emphasise, and also to the tendency to introduce themselves early in their songs and repeat their name throughout (Gilroy, *Ain’t No Black* 216; Lipsitz 23; Rose, “A Style” 80). Katrina Irving has suggested that by repeating their new name, rappers assert their chosen identity as part of a self-construction which enables them to empower themselves and counter the facelessness and namelessness experienced by poor black youth in American culture (112). By renaming themselves, and then constantly making references

to their new name, rappers aim to redefine and reposition themselves, taking on different personas that allow them to talk with authority about different situations.

In terms of setting, the “hood” (short for “neighbourhood”) is a dominant metaphor in rap music, used to emphasise the plight of poor black communities (Boyd 41; Scheurer 245). A narrative about various aspects of life in the hood is a theme which runs through most rap lyrics. Rap is therefore an expressive form of music that is inherently confrontational because of the specific historical, socio-political and economic context from which it has emerged (Zook 519). In most instances rappers claim to be expressing themselves and their concerns in the best way they know how.

This idea of “keeping it real” has certainly been exploited, especially since the discovery of the commercial viability of hip hop culture in general, and gangsta rap in particular. But on the whole, the issues raised in many of the rap lyrics do seem to reflect the social conditions of both the rap artist and the listener². Supporters of rap see it as a means by which rappers can talk about certain realities of street life, expressing viewpoints which are often not represented in mainstream music. While the male-dominated rap scene can at times be undeniably sexist and violent, this unfortunately, often seems to reflect the culture of the streets. Most rappers base their songs on personal experience of what they see going on around them (Cloonan 56; Cooper 1; hooks, *Outlaw* 122; Kennedy 413; Lipsitz 22; Marlowe 221).

Rap music seems to be surrounded by controversy. Some critics argue that rap has no merit; that it is simply a senseless form of music which allows performers to openly abuse women, promote violence and use profanity (Cashmore 154; Dines and Humez 479; hooks, *Black Looks* 34). Others assert that it is an effective means by which to communicate with youth, a form of music which not only encourages black empowerment but a sense of community within the lower classes (Boyd 41; Decker 117; Hebdige 136). Both types of assertion have received strong support. Since its beginnings, rap has often been criticised for its promotion of violent solutions to black problems and, in particular, its denigration of women (Longhurst 151; Naison 131; Ransby and Matthews 526; Rose, *Black Noise* 55). However, it has also been praised for its ability to educate and provide valuable political and social commentary (Butts 76; Marlowe 221; Perkins, “Rap Attack” 33).

² For discussions on this see (Baker 74; Bayles 354; D. and Jah 248; Fernando 117; Fornas 109; Perkins, “Rap Attack” 33; Ransby and Matthews 528; Staples 79).

Some rappers choose to focus solely on the negative conditions that exist in some inner-city communities and write raps about them. On a positive note, however, there is an increasing number of rap artists who should be given credit for their ability, despite coming from such communities, to express black autonomy and pride through their raps. Many rap artists actually write lyrics which aim to uplift and inform. Rap music and hip hop culture have been recognised as an integral part of youth culture (D. and Jah 256; Kitwana 150; Ransby and Matthews 528). While the lyrics often focus on a narrative of life in the ghettos of America, the messages expressed through rap have been acknowledged as transcending cultures (Irving 107; Longhurst 151).

This would help explain rap's widespread appeal; It speaks to people of different genders, different ages, different races and different cultures, encouraging self-determination and cultural pride (Zook 521). Although men were certainly the originators of rap music, women have always been active participants in the development of rap and its lyrics. Today, with the rapid rise in the number of female rap artists, rap lyrics are increasingly concerned with issues which directly affect women, in particular, they emphasise the importance and positive role of African-American women in society.

Women in Rap

It is difficult to identify unequivocally the first female rap recording (Perkins, "Rap Attack" 29) but most critics acknowledge that Lady B's 1979 hit "To the Beat Y'all" was among the earliest. The first female rap group, Sequence, appeared in 1981 with their underground hit "Funk You Up". But in 1984 a point of pivotal importance in the development of women's rap occurred. A male group called UTFO released a song "Roxanne Roxanne" which prompted several responses from black and Latino women. The most popular of these was "Roxanne's Revenge" which was written and recorded by a 14 year old girl from Long Island City, named Lolita Shante Gooden, who took the stage name Roxanne Shante. This song was extremely important in the development of rap, because it raised "disrespect" or "dis" rap to new levels, and brought female rap into the mainstream (Guevara 349; Perkins, "Rap Attack" 16; Valdes 57). Dis rap, although not a separate rap subgenre, permeates most forms of rap. It involves the rap artist making direct insults about that artist's competitors or enemies. In "Roxanne's Revenge", Shante wrote a rap which directly responded to the sexist accusations made against women in UTFO's "Roxanne Roxanne". After Shante's hit, dis became one of the most prominent features of rap. It was used by rap artists to emphasise their own language and lyrical abilities while "disrespecting" those of their competition.

Following Shante's success, a new wave of female rap emerged and at the forefront was a group called Salt N Pepa. Cheryl "Salt" James, Sandra "Pepa" Denton, and their disc jockey (DJ) Deirdre "Spinderella" Roper, formed their group in Queens, New York and they have been hailed by some as the most commercially successful female rap act in both the United States and Britain (Kolawole 12; Valdes 350). Challenging men in songs such as "Tramp" and "Independent", Salt N Pepa used lyrics involving pop sensibility in conjunction with a feminist attitude to rise to success. Another prominent female rap artist is Queen Latifah (Dana Owens) who emerged from New Jersey in 1989. Latifah chose to assume a royal black female image, emphasising in her lyrics the importance of roots and culture as well as encouraging females to stand up for themselves (Allen 175; Decker 117). Other female rappers embraced gangsta rap, and are finding huge commercial success in the portrayal of themselves as "gangsta bitches" (Valdes 356). These include Foxy Brown, Da Brat, Eve and Lil' Kim, all rappers who have adopted this particularly aggressive form of rap to raise issues regarding their relationships with men and to talk about their lives in the hood (Rose, *Black Noise* 174).

Because rap has always been dominated by males, it has taken women rappers a very long time to achieve any recognition. At first, women featured mainly as decoration, standing beside DJs or dancing behind male MCs, or depicted in secondary roles as bystanders rather than as active participants (Guevara 51; K. O'Brien 1; Rose, "One Queen" 317; Valdes 349). From the beginning, sexism and misogyny were common elements in the lyrics of rap music (Allen 175; George 130; Harrison 165; hooks, *Outlaw* 117) and men overwhelmingly dominated the rap scene. However, more female rappers began to emerge and many have set out to define a prominent and respectable place for themselves in the rap world. Not only have they played a vital role in changing the attitudes toward women within the rap community, but also, through their lyrics, they have been largely responsible for raising a variety of other issues. Like all rappers, they maintain an ongoing dialogue with their audiences but they also address the lyrics of male rappers, challenging male views on violence, sexuality, race and culture (Rose, *Black Noise* 146).

In many ways, women have experienced far more opposition to their involvement in rap music than have men. Rapping has strong roots in activities which have tended to be predominantly engaged in by males, such as African war chants, and street games like "toasting" and "dozens", all of which are types of verbal contests that emphasise the speaker's linguistic abilities (Kelley 140; Shusterman 615; Toop 94). Because of this, women have had to work much harder to be recognised in the rap industry, as they are fighting prejudices not only against their race, but against their gender.

Female artists have always tended to be marginalised in the entertainment world (Kolawole 12; Perry 526; Rose, *Black Noise* 154; Valdes 357), and female rap artists are no exception. There is a commonly held misconception that women's lyrics are not valid; that somehow men's interpretations of women and their motives are far more sound than a woman's own declarations (Smith 127). The media assist greatly in maintaining women's secondary position within rap music, with a tendency to ignore, negate or stereotype women's participation in the rap industry (Butler and Paisley 290; Guevara 51). However, female rappers oppose these misconceptions, not simply by objecting to these views, but by speaking in very different and quite distinct ways. They present their own positions on gender politics, often challenging the sexism of many male rappers and articulating the black experience in their own terms (Morris 80).

Female rappers, however, do not merely complain about the unjust treatment by men or the dominant negative characterisations of women. Instead, they are intent on redefining their roles as women, and placing themselves in positions of power (Irving 117; L. O'Brien 16). Speaking with force and authority, female rappers use their lyrics to assert their strength and articulate their desires. Many of them draw energy from a simultaneous discussion of race and gender. Through their lyrics, female rappers make explicit and overt assertions about female strength and autonomy, and at the same time they discuss issues central to the African-American experience in general.

Some female rappers take a strong feminist stance in their lyrics, but most seem content with acknowledging that they are female and do not consciously adopt a feminist identity. Many of them realise that, simply by being women, they are able to articulate and elaborate upon competing interests between men and women within the black community (Decker 116). Their rap music is not inherently feminist or political (Guevara 56; Roberts 142) and many female rappers are able to use their lyrics and particular characteristics of rap to emphasise the strengths of women without consciously assuming a feminist stance. Their lyrics not only offer an alternative to the sexism of many male rappers, but they also articulate the African-American experience in something other than male terms. Female rappers add an important and often alternative perspective in a male-dominated industry.

Since female rappers first emerged, there has been considerable controversy over how they promote themselves in order to sell records. Many female rappers use their sexuality to gain a wider audience. Several view their femininity as intrinsically related to their sexual attractiveness and men's desire for them. At the other end of the scale, however, are female rappers who, although explicitly labelling themselves as "feminine", present themselves in ways that have often been criticised as lacking any physical or verbal signs

of femininity (Kolawole 11; Perry 528). Instead of donning bra tops and tight mini skirts, these rap artists clothe themselves in a more subdued manner. By doing this, they are stating that they wish to be taken seriously as artists and not just as objects of sexual desirability.

For the more conservatively dressed female rappers, being taken seriously means being seen as a subject rather than an object. These artists are concerned that many female rappers have become objectified, selling records largely because of their bodies and not because of their talent as rappers. Refusing to become objectified by wearing sexually provocative clothing, they emphasise the importance of their voice to their success as performers. They command respect because their popularity is based on the complexity of their lyrics and the strength of their delivery, not on how much of their body they reveal.

Black female rappers have been praised for their ability to present various issues in a manner which is both original and unique. They are an important and resistive voice in rap and in contemporary women's cultural production in general (Rose, *Black Noise* 182). Thankfully, with the emergence of more and more female rappers, the notion of female inferiority in the rap world is gradually changing. This is clearly reflected in the increasing number of female rap album sales and the prominence of women in the rap charts today (Rose, *Black Noise* 154; Valdes 356). As the number of strong females entering the rap scene increases, a more balanced perception of rap is beginning to take effect. After all, the reason rap remains one of the most innovative of all forms of modern music is its ability to adjust to changing times and to constantly reinvent itself (Cowan 8; Shuker 248). With the increasing popularity of female rap artists, rap has been forced, once again, to adapt itself to change.

Aims of the Thesis

The present research was conducted to examine key elements in the lyrics of black female rap. Initially, the research was to be conducted on every female rapper in the music industry who had released two or more rap albums. However, early on, it became quite clear that there was a very large number of female rappers in the music industry, just in America. Many of these rappers had not gained much exposure in New Zealand, hence many of their works were not available here. Others were a part of the "underground" rap scene in America which made their texts extremely difficult, even impossible, to locate. So the selection was narrowed down to a handful of prominent and easily accessible female rappers. Even then, however, it became evident that a full analysis of their lyrics would generate data far too extensive for a Masters Thesis. It seemed more realistic to focus on a single female rapper, one who had been important to the development of

female rap. Although this would limit cross-artist comparisons it would allow a broader and more in-depth look at the works of that artist. By extensively analysing the lyrics of most of her raps, the focus would be to identify major themes and language techniques and any developments in these across time.

This thesis provides a lyrical analysis of the albums of MC Lyte, looking at the development of her song lyrics from the release of her first album in 1988 through to her latest in 1998. MC Lyte was chosen because she was one of the first female rappers to emerge from the predominantly male rap scene and she has continued to make recordings up to the present day³. Her albums, which have spanned a decade of rap music, seemed to provide a good example of female rap lyrics and how these lyrics have changed and developed from the early days of rap to the present day. Lyte's emergence on the rap scene has been hailed as the moment when hip hop reached a new dimension and she has often been pinpointed as the leader in the reinvention of female rap (Perkins, "Rap Attack" 31; Valdes 353).

MC Lyte

Born in Queens, New York in 1972, MC Lyte (Lana Moorer) released her debut single "I Cram To Understand U" in 1988, at the tender age of 16. She has since released six albums; *Lyte As A Rock* (1988), *Eyes On This* (1989), *Act Like U Know* (1991), *Ain't No Other* (1993), *Bad As I Wanna B* (1996) and *Seven And Seven* (1998). Lyte has always approached her career with both commitment and integrity. Concerned with being taken seriously as an artist, Lyte has contributed to changing the nature of hip hop. Unlike many of her female counterparts, Lyte has refused to use her physical sexuality as a means by which to sell records. She has also used her status as a rap artist to appear in public-service campaigns for AIDS awareness and to visit schools for the Stop the Violence movement (Valdes 353).

As a rapper, Lyte has been identified as hard-hitting and confrontational, not afraid to "tell it like it is" (Costello and Wallace 5). She has managed to successfully survive in the very male-dominated scene of rap music, and has done this by not only entertaining her listeners, but by challenging them. To both her female and male audience members, Lyte offers street-smart advice, and suggests alternative solutions to problems in relationships (Perkins, "Rap Attack" 31; Rose, *Black Noise* 161). She makes strong use of disrespect, while countering any disrespect shown towards her by using clever comebacks and witty assertions.

³ Lyte is still releasing single tracks, but a new album, although imminent, has not yet been released.

Lyte is considered to have a gift for telling a story, and uses lyrical wit and “dis” to reveal truths about the harsh realities of life in the ghetto and to make important comments on the romantic interactions between men and women (Irving 116; Perkins, “Rap Attack” 30; Rose, *Black Noise* 155; Valdes 353). In choosing the name MC Lyte (making a play on the word “light”), she claims to offer an illuminating perspective on life, a radical revisioning of what her audience encounter every day (Roberts 147). By identifying and critiquing the terms of courtship, for both men and women, Lyte instigates the exploration and revision of a woman’s role in the courtship process (Rose, *Black Noise* 161). She asserts the need for women to be fearless and self-possessed and, although she emphasises the importance of being strong and street-smart, Lyte does not relinquish her femininity (Perry 526). By offering a woman’s interpretation of the terms of heterosexual relationships, Lyte’s raps have been commended for their ability to throw new light on male-female sexual power relations (Rose, *Black Noise* 155).

But it appears that Lyte’s success as a rapper is not due solely to the subject-matter of her rap music. She seems to use, whether consciously or not, a number of lyrical techniques and devices that enhance her music. A major aim of this thesis was to examine, not only the topics she talked about and what she said about them, but also what lyrical tools she employed to strengthen and enhance her presentation.