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# UNRAPPING THE GANGSTA

## The Changing Role of the Performer from Toast to Gangsta Rap.

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

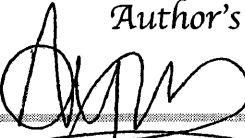
by  
Andrea Symons  
2003

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

*Author's Signature*



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(Andrea L. D. Symons)

Approved, May 2003


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(Professor Grey Gundaker)


*2<sup>nd</sup> Committee Member's Signature*



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(Professor Richard Lowry)

*3<sup>rd</sup> Committee Member's Signature*



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(Professor Brad Weiss)

For all those who supported me,  
mentally, physically and lyrically.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgements	v
Abstract	vi
Introduction	2
Chapter I. Last of a Dying Breed	8
Chapter II. The Return of the Honky Tonk Bud	25
Chapter III. Player's Ball	40
Afterword	49
Bibliography	58
Vita	61

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Without Bridget Albrechsten and Bronwen Speare I would never have become so fascinated with rhythm and the importance of passionate music.

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Without hip hop I would be a sorry person.

## Abstract

The purpose of the following study is to examine the relationship between African-American toast lyrics and rap music, with reference to the changing roles of performer, protagonist and audience in modern, urban performance.

The study combines an analysis of the urban performance and its attributes, with an examination of the manner in which academics have interpreted the transition from toast to rap. Furthermore, the study attempts to show the nature of the relationship between toast and rap through an investigation of contemporary cultural expressions of urban, oral tradition, such as Hollywood movies, music videos and websites.

Within this framework, the role of the performer as protagonist is explored in a comparison of toast lyric and style with that of rap; in a comparison of the 1971 blaxploitation film, Shaft and the sequel Shaft of 2000; and, in a comparison of the hero in toast stories with the gangsta rapper in the music industry.

Specifically, this paper identifies a gap in the scholarship of academics of twentieth century oral tradition and attempts to show how a greater understanding of the relationship between these two genres will help any investigation into contemporary oral cultures and the future of this tradition.

The paper concludes that identifying the elements of toast in rap provides a way to understand that rap, in its current formation, fulfills a different role than the toast. The rap, as a genre that has been appropriated by mainstream culture, can no longer offer the same fluidity that the toast did and instead we must look to different mediums and styles, such as the rap battle or the internet, for a true expression of the urban mythic.

## UNRAPPING THE GANGSTA

The Changing Role of the Performer from Toast to  
Gangsta Rap.



## Introduction

"Bury me smilin' with G's in my pocket  
have a party at my FUNERAL  
Let every Rapper rock it  
Let tha hos that I usta know from way before  
Kiss me from my head to my toe  
Give me a paper and a pen, so I can write about my life of sin  
A couple bottles of Gin in case I don't get in  
Tell all my people  
I'm a Ridah  
Nobody cries when we die  
We outlaws"<sup>1</sup>

Tupac Shakur

Whilst working on some literature about African-American toasts, I half listened to the Back in the Day radio program on 102.9fm. The voice of Tupac Shakur, the dead and martyred gangsta rapper, spat bitter lyrics into my ear and drew me away from my page. As I listened to "Life Goes On" I noted that the radio station could just as easily be playing a Bronx street toaster, rhyming about Shine or Stackolee. Tupac's song about ghetto crime incorporates many elements of traditional toasts; the protagonist's sexual prowess, his love of liquor, an acceptance of death and a knowledge that his actions and his power exist outside the boundaries of middle-class society.

However, despite the similarities in content I could not ignore that Tupac was more like Stackolee than the cat on the street corner telling toasts to friends who already know the ending.

The roots of rap in toast stories remains undisputed by sources as diverse as Nelson George and funkmaster j, the founder of an exhaustive and informative website about the roots of rap.<sup>2 3</sup> The toast, as a fantastical rhyming tale of an extravagant hero, bears a strong resemblance to the gangsta rap on the radio, but there are stark differences in the relationships between narrator and protagonist, performer and audience, improvised street jive and pre-recorded, digitally communicated performance. How has the evolution of the narrator's role changed the significance of the traditional themes in African-American urban performance? Has the relationship between performer and audience changed? How are these changes presented and what does this new style suggest?

A look at previous scholarship on African-American oral tradition as a whole or toast and rap more specifically gives us an unsatisfactory answer to these questions. The significance of the toast as a continuation of the black oral tradition came out of a scholarship on slave narrative, folklore and music initiated by scholars and orators such as W.E.B. DuBois, Frederick Douglass, and Sojourner Truth. A combination of African-American studies and literary criticism supported by writers such as Henry Louis Gates Jr., saw the analysis of toasting style and its oral origins alongside studies of works by the likes of

Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison.<sup>4</sup> This type of analysis gained respect and status within literary and historic circles and led into the more anthropologically focused work of Bruce Jackson and Roger D. Abrahams in the 1960's. Abrahams and Jackson documented and analyzed not only the content of the toast lyric but also the performance of the toast and how this was relevant to the community and the space in which the toast was performed. In more recent years it seems that rap music and hip hop cultures as a field of academic inquiry has gained similar acknowledgment and respect to that of the toast, as part of the study of afro-centric oral tradition.

However, despite the general consensus of opinion that rap and hip hop can, in some way, be attributed to toasting and a twentieth century African-American poetic the relationship between the two seems to have been neglected.<sup>5</sup> Many writers have linked the cadence, style and significance of Afro-Caribbean cultural expression, blues, jazz and the toast performance to contemporary rap. Paul Gilroy notes that hip-hop has a deeply rooted history and is no modern phenomena, but a gap seems to have appeared in scholarship that seeks to find the relationship between the content and the significance of this relationship.<sup>6</sup> Although Tricia Rose cites the importance of toast tradition in locating rap as a connected element of a self-conscious, black, oral history, she nonetheless abandons this to an examination of rap and its technologies without any in-depth analysis of how it

is connected or why this is meaningful.<sup>7</sup> Cheryl L. Keyes centers rap in a framework of the African Diaspora, but rejects an analysis of rap as another link to an African past, or even a 1930's Bronx past. Instead she focuses on the production of rap and its status as a politicized art form, which embodies a modern street aesthetic.<sup>8</sup>

It seems that although contemporary scholars of rap music and hip-hop culture are ready and willing to acknowledge a strong progression from toast to rap in the twentieth century, they have been unwilling or uninterested in examining this connection in any great detail. The constantly changing nature of rap styles and the strong body of literature that relates to the 'seventies origins of hip hop in Harlem has in some way discouraged a belief that previous street performance can hold any great relevance for the multi-million dollar producers and performers in the rap world today. However, it is my belief, that further scholarship is needed in order for us to fully understand why rap is so hugely influential throughout the globe and what this means for urban oral tradition in the future. How is it possible to understand where you are going without first acknowledging where you are coming from? Can we expect to fully comprehend the power of a rap performance without being able to posit it within a framework of past experiences and previous styles?

The following pages are an attempt to understand the relationship between rappers and their lyrical ancestors and to look more closely at a performance that has traveled far beyond urban street culture in North

America. Before looking at the disparity between the performance acts of toasting and rapping it seems salient to identify the historic and contextual links within the realms of African-American oral tradition. The first chapter will discuss the development of rap and hip-hop as a continuation of toasting, signifyin', jiving and other performative speech acts. More specifically it will assess the significance that this development bears on the changing role of the narrator. By contrasting traditional toast performance with modern performative street acts evident in film production, such as 8 Mile, and in contemporary gangsta rap music by artists like Jay-Z and LL Cool J the transformation of power relations within the performance itself is brought into relief. We become aware that although both performances are based in fiction, rap artists manipulate this fiction differently because the performer has also assumed the joint role of protagonist and, thus, holds a double authority.

The second chapter will look at how the role of rapper as both storyteller and protagonist has altered the significance of street talk and performance as portrayed in popular culture. Using an analysis of the Shaft films of 1971 and 2000 as an example I will demonstrate that rap has become a most powerful force in the shaping of African-American identity and indicates a move from that of observer to participant on the narrator's part. An application of oral street performance theories to rap performance and black urban expression in the two Shaft interpretations enables a greater understanding of the new performer-protagonist role. Using the Shaft

productions also gives us an opportunity to examine how black speech performance is interpreted for, and viewed by, a multi-racial, mixed class perspective. Shaft is not simply an expression of black urban cool, but an example of how this cool is signified and manipulated for that which is not the black urban experience.

Finally, I will examine the effect that commercialization has had on the content of African-American urban performance. This section will consider the transference of street mythology from a fluid and community controlled context to that of a more rigid, yet accessible medium. Significantly, I will examine those elements present in both toasting and rap, which have become manifest in the material identity of the gangsta rap scene. The transformation from the malleable and interactive street performance to the industry-focused form of gangsta rap simultaneously strengthens the rappers role as performer-protagonist whilst disabling the rapper's function as the creator of new performative styles and interpretations. As the function of the performer-protagonist is crystallized we must look to more transient fields to find the modern toast performance and experience. Street toasts and rap battles are certainly not dead, but the purpose of these performances has naturally evolved and their original goals are also fulfilled by the creation of an urban mythos which is not focused on fictional heroes but, instead on gangsta rappers. This transition is evidence in itself of the power of the performer-protagonist rapper.

## Chapter I

### Last of a Dying Breed<sup>9</sup>

In 2001 the movie 8 Mile was released, starring Eminem, a.k.a. Marshall Mathers. Making over \$116,000,000 at the box office, the film was yet another example of a multi-million dollar rap star successfully crossing the boundary from music into film. 8 Mile tells the story of a young, white, trailer park resident struggling to make it in the tough world of underground rap battles, a cultural space infused with latent prejudice and rigid norms/tropes. Eminem is juxtaposed against a literally dark and racially colored space and struggles with his identity as culturally fluent and yet ethnically othered. As we watch Rabbit nervously rehearse the lead track in the film, it is hard to distinguish between this fiction and the reality of Eminem performing the same track in the “Lose Yourself” music video. The words of the rap are both reflective and instructive, and like the lyrical battles performed throughout the film, it relies on elements of the self-praise of original street raps and the mocking tone of the Dozens.

8 Mile is a film about urban street culture and, as such evokes predominantly African-American street style. It is impossible to ignore the mark of the urban mythic hero as Rabbit fights to establish a reputation

against all the odds. Rabbit's only hope in the face of a working-class, African-American audience is to call his competitors on their private school education. Even the protagonist's name is reminiscent of African-American mythic tales and fables of animals and suggestive of African-American street slang'.<sup>10</sup> However, most significantly, we note that the story is told as an account of Rabbit's life, recited in the first person. Instead of tales of a rapping idol, told and retold by the competitors to demonstrate their lyrical skills, the young hopefuls combine speech games and style to build up their own reputation. Even though the rappers are portrayed as novices, their own street experience is raised up and used as part of the classic boast and brag of urban black oral cultures. The toast is absent, but the hero is alive and strong in the voice of urban experience.

A consideration of rap expression and performance, such as 8 Mile, gives us the opportunity to focus on the central elements of not only the performance, but the context of that act. At the fore of the film is the act of rapping, which in this case takes place both in designated performance spaces, such as the nightclub stage and the recording studio, and in more improvised spaces, such as the street and the home. We note the type of people who are involved in the performance and what a change of performance space means to their social status. Rabbit is comfortable rhyming with his friends in the car, but performing in the parking lot, nightclub battle or the recording studio is progressively more intimidating to him.



Rabbit's apprehension stems from a fear of failing to rhyme well, which, in the midst of Detroit urban poverty, is the only way he can access power and build a reputation.

An analysis of any current rap album or hip hop film will show that rap lyrics bear the familiar marks of other rappers, other battles and other hit records. However, rather than invoking the previous success and power of another rap icon, a beat or rhyme is manipulated to provide fuel for the contemporary performer. The rapper not only toasts, but changes the framework of the performance so that the mythic element of the rapper's own life comes into focus and becomes the foundation for the reality of their fame. This chapter will explore the role of the performer in relation to the protagonist of a tale and the audience. An examination of toast lyrics will show the foundations of rap and the distinctive style of current gangsta rappers will be highlighted.

Before we examine toast content and style it is important to understand why we can consider toast and rap within the same category. Both toast and rap find their origins in lower-class African-American communities. The exact origin of the toast is disputed but the toast stories, which we will consider here, were established during the 1930's.<sup>11</sup> Studies on the toast show that this particular storytelling style was most popular amongst prison convicts and at neighborhood gatherings in poorer urban areas. Hip hop is attributed to

African-American teenagers of similar neighborhoods in New York City, in areas like the Bronx and Brooklyn.<sup>12</sup>

The forms of toast and rap that we are considering here are, then, spawned from the same city environment and fed by a predominantly male group of lower-class African-Americans. Subsequently, the terms “urban” and “street” will be used throughout, as a signifier of this experience. However, it is valuable to remember that although the performance style may have originated with an essentially African-American oral tradition, the development of this style has taken place within a more diverse urban setting that spread beyond African-American communities. Asian, Latino, European and Indian communities have appropriated hip hop culture, and rap music specifically, and used the essence of a defining cool and an urban aesthetic and reapplied to this to their own urban experience. Non-African-American hip hop cultures have appeared both in immigrant groups inside the USA and in many cities throughout the world. Rap is performed in complex urban dialects of Spanish, French, Punjabi, Chinese and Gujarati, as well as English. The terms “urban” and “street” denote a more inclusive and complex cultural group and ideology than a simple class or racial term would denote. It is also important to remember that although toasting and rap is most commonly related to a poor, black experience, rap expresses a language and knowledge that lower and middle classes and different ethnic groups share. As Volosinov notes, “various classes will use one and the same language”.<sup>13</sup> Rap language and

hip hop style is not exclusive to one specific group or geography, but rather an amalgam of a shared verbal history that is fluid and permeable.

In an attempt to understand the type of urban performance to be considered in this analysis it is salient to briefly outline the African-American toast. In Roger D. Abraham's book, entitled Positively Black he notes specific forms of what he terms Negro expressive culture.<sup>14</sup> Within this category of speech acts Abrahams notes many oral games and practices which he finds common in American urban street cultures. Abrahams, like any other scholar of non-white, urban oral tradition, considers such events as playing the Dozens, shucking, jiving, toasting and rapping. The meaning of the word rap has changed from its original definition of a verbal flirtation.<sup>15</sup> Street language has evolved in such a way that there are elements of many other street styles evident in what we now term rap music or hip hop cultures. Despite commercial rap music's modern character the culmination of oral skill and advanced technology gives performers the opportunity to re-express classic modes of black speech performance. As Tricia Rose notes, "Rap's poetic force, its rearticulation of African-American oral practices, and its narrative strategies are central to rap."<sup>16</sup>

For the purposes of this essay we are essentially concerned with toasting, as a storytelling event, and rap as a performance of a similar narrative experience, which has incorporated these other styles. By limiting this investigation to a direct comparison of toast and rap styles it is possible to

gain a better understanding of modern urban oral cultures, which is the topic of the discussion. As Rose indicates in her book, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America, it is right to acknowledge that rap music is the result and the continuation of a vast array of styles in an extensive black oral tradition. However, writers like Abrahams and David Toop have convincingly argued that rap is the most deeply rooted contemporary “Afro-American music” and that it is strongly embedded in twentieth century poetic traditions of the toast. Here follows a brief examination of the basic toast formula, which should give breadth to our understanding of what the urban speech performance offers to both performer and audience.<sup>17</sup>

In Abrahams’ book, toasts are scrutinized as a male form of lyrical posturing, which enables the storyteller to elaborate as floridly as he wishes.<sup>18</sup> The focus of the tale is not simply the content leading to an inevitable climax or moral (as is familiar in European contexts) but, rather the storyteller’s own mannerisms and the style and fluidity with which he approaches his task. The toast is usually an account of a boastful hero’s attempts to grapple with his many enemies and still find time to drink all the liquor and love all the women he can before he dies. Or, the toast is centered on animal characters, such as the Signifying Monkey, who is able to outwit the stronger animals of the jungle.

Toasts created a stock of characters and events with which the black community could identify and use to enact their own personal frustrations and victories. It served as a history outside that of white experience and influenced many mediums of black performance and speech-styles. The protagonists of these stories were male and embodied the equivalent of the mythic hero in Greek and Roman literature. Their attributes, be they stamina, fearlessness or a sharp tongue, enable them to carry out incredible feats which frequently reverse traditional power relations. In one story of Stackolee, recorded by Abrahams, a judge disregards the charges against Stackolee for fear that he too may fall victim to the protagonist's violent tendencies.<sup>19</sup> In most stories of the Signifying Monkey, the monkey invents false slurs to trick the lion into a fight with the elephant that can only end in defeat. The Monkey then mocks the lion who can no longer brag he is king of the jungle, and so administers a double defeat.

Both stories demonstrate the power of the protagonists and reiterate a value system which differs greatly from that of the white European's and from that of middle class African-American's. In middle-class American cultures success has traditionally been centered on that expressed by the American Dream. This notion works on the premise that hard work and thrift will bring its own reward and a twin merit is thus placed on the outcome and on the effort required to obtain it. Alternatively, African-American street culture seems to place more emphasis on the ability to achieve goals without any apparent

effort. The value is twofold if it seems that the prize has come without exertion. This can be seen at work in the reality of Detroit rioter's accounts of their employment status, which placed emphasis on the advantages of money and disregarded the importance of the employment.<sup>20</sup> We can also see this action as an achievement celebrated specifically because it works outside a closed world of praise and reward that is not accessible to those not fluent in middle-class speech and action.

This type of achievement is also present in the fiction of the toast or the rap lyric. Shine out swims a whale in his escape from the Titanic and a moment later is working his thang in the local whorehouse.<sup>21</sup> In one chorus and a verse Jay-Z racks up over a hundred million dollars without missing a beat.<sup>22</sup> This type of street ideology is played out through some essential characteristics of the urban hero in both toasting and rapping. In the behavior of the hero we can identify such themes as (1) violence, (2) sexual prowess, (3) verbal skill, (4) alcohol and drug use, and (5) material wealth. All of these elements evoke an image of power and triumph outside of an enclosed and discriminating society in the toasts about Shine and Stackolee. In commercial rap today many artists demonstrate their ability to gain control over money, women, and material objects with ease. They describe themselves as princes, kings and Gs, all significantly powerful males with control over a certain power and a certain populace. The toast can, therefore, be seen as serving a dual purpose. Firstly, the toast is an opportunity for the narrator to

exhibit his lyrical style, reflecting the favor placed on ingenuity of speech by black American cultures. Secondly, the toast serves as a literal and metaphorical ground for a ritual assertion of power and desire, within the community in which it is spoken. Both elements simultaneously rework previous stories and experiences, whilst generating new realities and styles to be challenged in the future.

The performance of a toast is an intrinsically fluid and unique act. Bruce Jackson quotes a Bronx teenager whose comments suggest that the storytelling skills are of equal, if not greater significance than the actual content of the toast. In Joe's account the toast is told and re-worked within a group who act as both audience and performer:

“Sometimes a person might start one and might not know the whole thing and another person might come in and finish it, it might not be specific to one person. Like sometimes, if two or three persons know the same one, one person might say a part and another person might say, ‘Well, let me do the other part, I like this part.’ And they do it, and another person might do it. And then another person might come up and do a new one that nobody ever heard. That’s how they learn and find more, you know, by starting saying them around different people they don’t know.”<sup>23</sup>

This account highlights the importance of the need for response from others with a shared experience in order to establish both the story and the performance itself. The desire to develop and re-work older languages and styles is something which is of great importance within the African-American oral tradition and this is no less true today than it was a hundred years ago.

As discussed earlier, the ability to perform power through linguistic command is appealing to those without other means of access to that power.

Marcyliena Morgan notes that

“This is especially true of African-American urban youth, for whom the interminable invention and re-invention of African-American terms...actually serve to unravel the relation of verbal skill and social and political power.”<sup>24</sup>

We can see this re-invention at work throughout the Gangsta rap genre as rappers borrow and transform lyrics (and even beats) back and forth, sharing words and styles to perfect their own version of the rap story. On the remix of Jadakiss’s “Good Times” the lyric,

“Niggas got some audacity/ They went gold now they half of me/  
Take it in blood, kick it Hood”,

was a direct translation of the Notorious B.I.G.’s rap on Lil’ Kim’s

“Queen Bitch”,

“You Niggas got some audacity/ You sold a million now you half  
of me/ Get off my dick, kick it bitch”.



Mos Def exactly re-told one lyric in his track “Brown Sugar (Extra Sweet) that had originally appeared in “Electric Relaxation” by Q-Tip.

By this method of telling and retelling a base for shared experience and shared values is created, which can evolve with the people who shape the stories. Furthermore, by using familiar stories and patterns the audience’s attention can be fully grasped by the performer. The story becomes more accessible and the focus shifts from the actual content of the story to the delivery and the performer’s ingenuity of style and phrase. As Walter Ong notes in his book Orality and Technology,

“narrative originality lodges not in making up new stories, but in managing a particular interaction with this audience at this time – at every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely into a unique situation...formulas and themes are reshuffled rather than supplanted with new materials”<sup>25</sup>

This is true of both toast and rap and aids in our comprehension of the levity a toast or rap performance can hold. The performance is a direct demonstration of the orator’s power of the audience. The content of toasts and raps can be read and re-read to create an understanding of power and affect, as detailed in urban street cultures; here, we are concerned with how this content is delivered and how it can change the meaning of those words.

Gangsta rap, as it stands today, resembles toast performance in many ways but it is distinctly different in the way it is performed. In a toast the

performer has an opportunity to better his reputation as a lyrical master by telling and re-telling a story. The tale is fictional and concerns a protagonist who possesses some kind of super-human powers. These powers inspire awe in the audience, but also reflect on the lyricist. The audience know that the tale is fictional and that whatever tricks are played or jokes are told, are played and told in the mind of the performer. Therefore, the mythic powers of the protagonist are somehow invested and reflected in the performer. There is a sense that the physical and material greatness of the hero are unobtainable but that the awe, which the performer himself inspires amongst his contemporaries, is a tangible goal.

When we consider the celebrity a clever toast performer can obtain on the street in contrast with the typically powerless status held by that same individual in the eyes of those outside his social group, the incentive for learning to play the Dozens at an early age becomes obvious. In accounts of toast-telling the performance usually takes place in a setting where the participants are part of a shared community, e.g. families, prison, a neighborhood, or a workplace. As Bruce Jackson notes, one person may start a toast and another may join in to finish, or reply with another version or even an entirely new toast.<sup>26</sup> This is an opportunity to earn respect from one's peers and to share in a mutual appreciation for the outlandish behavior of a mythic hero whose feats took place beyond constraints that limit real members of a marginalized group. The participants can also revel in the

experience of a group performance and the fulfillment of call and response, the catharsis of a retold tale.

In contrast, the rap performance also offers these opportunities but in an enhanced environment where the benefits are not only socially significant, but materially beneficial. It seems that the material wealth and power that can be obtained through successful rap performance alters the onus and the perspective of both the performer and the audience. In hip hop cultures, and in gangsta rap especially, verbal performance is most often a retelling of one's own personal experience. Jay-Z raps about his personal wealth, LL Cool J (Ladies Love Cool James) even uses his name to imply his success with members of the opposite sex and 50cent rhymes that he's into having sex not into making love. The Sugarhill Gang's record *Rapper's Delight* was the first rap or hip hop record to ever be made and released by a record company and on it rapper Big Bank Hank boasts that Lois Lane rejects Superman for his own superior charms. This rhyme was actually taken from the lyric book of fellow rapper Grandmaster Caz, but the significant point is that these rappers were lyrically and literally usurping mythic figures and placing themselves in the limelight as powerful idols.<sup>27</sup>

This action produces significant consequences. Firstly, rappers layer the creation of a fantasy hero over the real progression of their own careers to evoke a tale that bears a cultural currency. Rap, be it fiction or reality, posits the storyteller/rapper as protagonist and thus at the centre of the myth,

enforcing the dual role of both real and mythic idol. Secondly, the rapper holds double respect as a verbal adept and as a hero who has used this skill to gain material success in the music industry. To the audience, the goal or that which commands respect is bifurcated and appears to be that much more achievable. The rapper is idolized for his command of the spoken word but also as one who has reconstructed his realm of experience in order to gain material wealth and success. Rather than working outside of society and winning respect through aggressive action, he is transforming the performative space to gain a physical and immediate triumph.

The change in the nature of the hero also causes the fiction of the performance to change status. In toast, fiction and the imagination are elevated and praised as the devices which construct the environment where gratification becomes possible. The toast protagonist is seen to achieve success of mythical proportions, but this is characterized in overtly fictional terms. The feats achieved by the toast hero are impossible and that is what aids in the audience's delight. Rap music shifts the focus of the audience so that the delight comes in the belief that the rapper's feats, be they fictional or real, have the potential of being true. The idolatry and the joy of the rap fiction is that it is posited as something possible. The performance is played out as something that is real and the fiction is disguised.

It could be argued that the commercial nature of contemporary gangsta rap has been so far removed from the 'hood that it is almost a music without

class or specific geography. Can we truly examine the rap performance as a link to street reality? Despite the fictional nature of much rap performance the success of a rapper not only rests in his physical wealth and success, but in creating a real reputation as one who fulfills the role of a gangsta. His rep' is reliant on establishing an image as a real G and this, in turn, is dependant on a staged and exaggerated identity. The creation of this identity is a performance in itself. However, gangsta rappers consistently utilize any connection with the street and the tough life to increase their reputation. The term "underground" is often referenced to denote a raw and real street aesthetic to which only a few rappers can claim authentic, and exclusive, access.<sup>28</sup> Rappers frequently refer to the failings of their competitor's music as evidence of their lack of experience on the street.

The content of Gangsta rap and the identity of the Gangsta rapper, therefore, is entirely dependant on reputation, which is often fictional in the popular, commercial field. In turn reputation with other rappers and the black urban market, which forms the real basis of much rap music and generates many of the performers, relies on real street experience. Consequently we can view both toast and Gangsta rap as the products of a shared urban street experience and language, despite the often-exaggerated style of Gangsta rap and the evident wealth and success of its stars.

It is this complicated interplay between reality and fiction which, I believe, has made rap music successful on a global scale. The fiction of the

rapper's identity makes his story more entertaining in the same way that descriptions of Shine and Stackolee's outlandish behavior completed the toast genre. By integrating the fantastical with the reality of what a million album sales in the first week of release can bring makes the reality that much more enticing and the fictional seem that much more probable. We do not really believe that Dre is regularly on the streets, defending his crew from the threat of street gangs, but the suggestion that he does makes it easier for groups who really do face that experience to identify with him. That he then chants about his house in the Caribbean and the champagne he uses in his Jacuzzi in the next verse makes the possibility of leaving gang warfare behind with a lucrative record deal that much more possible. Snoop Dogg is still puffing away on a giant reefer with Pharrell in his video for the new single "Beautiful", despite the fact that his rejection of the weed in favor of his three children has been widely reported. Being seen to fulfill his rap star lifestyle appropriately is just another way for him to maintain his reputation as a 'dawg' and affirm the theory that, just like Shine, he can break the law and get away with it because of who he is.

In summary we can see that although rap is a natural progression and development of previous street speech acts, the change in delivery has a profound effect on the relationship between the performer, protagonist and audience. The performer now commands respect as one who has mastered the ability of imaginative lyricism and of material wealth and success in a

once prohibited space. As an orator he holds the power to battle his adversaries verbally and as a businessman he has the influence to shape music and fashion trends to ensure that he embodies a heroic form that is intrinsically mythic, and yet connected to an apparently achievable status in the real world.

The following chapter will examine the cultural expression of this progression. An examination of two film productions of Shaft from 1971 and 2000 offers a method by which we can look at the multi-faceted persona of the urban mythic hero and consider the relationship between reality and fiction in modern rap performance. The original Shaft interpreted black urban style and music for Hollywood and was re-styled for the movie market in 2000, with Samuel L. Jackson proposed as the new icon of street cool. The subject matter approached in these movies and the generational divide between the two features offer us a salient expression of black urban street performance and will illustrate the evolving functions of performer, protagonist and audience.

## Chapter 2

### The Return of Honkey Tonk Bud<sup>29</sup>

“There are two kinds of hip hop movies. Those that helped create the culture and those that reflect the culture spawned by the first”<sup>30</sup>

In 1971 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer released a movie, which, uniquely, featured a black male hero. The hero's name was John Shaft and the movie was a hit with black and white audiences alike. In 2000 John Singleton and Paramount Pictures were responsible for the reinterpretation of this most famous of blaxploitation flicks. Despite being well received at the box office both films have been criticized for their lack of technical quality and failure to adequately challenge problems of black identity in American society. Nonetheless, if we examine Shaft (1971) and Shaft (2000) it is possible to draw some interesting conclusions regarding the development of the black hero within African-American oral tradition.

This chapter will deconstruct both new and old Shaft movies by using black street-tales and verbal-contests as a foundation for the style of hero that Shaft represents. I will attempt to show that by cross-referencing theories of



black speech acts with these films we can see a transformation in the way which black experience is interpreted for American society as a whole. Most significantly, I will posit that rap and hip hop cultures have assumed the role of the street-corner toast and through the commodification of such tales; notions of black desire and achievement have been changed unalterably. As a new genre it was important that Shaft and films like it established an ideological connection with their audience. Street culture was used to manipulate a cultural style and language currency that created that connection, hence the use of the term Blaxploitation.

Toast themes were identified and taken from the street and worked into the original Shaft film in 1971. John Shaft is portrayed as a smooth man, capable of shooting the breeze with the cats in Harlem and rescuing the daughter of a gangsta from the grips of the mafia, barely scuffing his leather jacket. The recurrent theme of Shaft (1971) is the street, where the 'private dick' is at his most powerful; his power demonstrated in all the traditional ways of the toast hero. He is physically powerful, matching his strength against the criminals of New York and throwing himself back into the fray, just hours after receiving a gunshot wound. He is sexually dominant, making love to both black and white women and even appearing attractive to the white, homosexual male bartender; the phallically named 'Dick'/'Shaft'. He is also able to outwit his opponents, and this is demonstrated through speech acts as well as through detective strategies. John Shaft also represents the urban

desires and victories of toasting, manifest in his slick appearance and his superior street knowledge to that of the white police lieutenant.

All of these traits are established within the first few scenes and show that, in embodying these qualities, Shaft is the definition of the street hero, the cat. Shaft walks through the chaotic traffic of New York City, stopping only to pull the finger at a hasty cab driver. A news stand owner and a shoe shine guy inform Shaft that there are some men looking for him and shortly after he is followed and approached by two white men, later identified as cops.

“Where are you going?” asks one, “To get laid. Where are you going?” replies Shaft. In only minutes Shaft has spotted the men who are after him and with one deft move he grabs one culprit and, as a result, lures the other to his office where a brawl ensues. Obviously, John Shaft is the victor. We know within fifteen minutes that he is a desirable man for many different reasons and to many different people.

Shaft is characterized as the coolest of cats and relies on his ability to determine if “clever docility, verbal persuasion or convenient brutality”<sup>31</sup> will best serve his purposes in each situation. We are most aware of his cat status in a scene where Shaft pays the barman of his local drinking hole to let him work behind the bar. This gives Shaft the opportunity to talk to some mafia mobsters who are watching his apartment, across the street. In the ensuing action it is Shaft’s ability to assess a situation and respond accordingly which is elevated. Shaft quickly makes conversation with the men

and eases their reservations by drinking with them. Shaft then calls Lieutenant Vic Androzzi who, unlike Shaft, is asleep on the job and unaware of what's happening on the street. Shaft speaks in code to Vic, explaining that the mobsters are in the bar. He stands beside them throughout the conversation, demonstrating his intellectual superiority over all parties. Furthermore, he disguises the conversation by responding to Androzzi as if he were yet another woman who is desperate for some Shaft lovin', reaffirming the white policeman's need for Shaft's abilities and information, even though he works outside of the law, outside of the institution. As the mobster's are dragged away by the police one spits at Shaft and his only response is to break a beer bottle over the villain's head. His words and actions demonstrate his capability to style and code switch when necessary.

In Shaft (2000), however, the emphasis on the hero's characteristics has shifted dramatically. The title role, played by Samuel L. Jackson, is the original Shaft's nephew. Shaft the elder is still a private eye and watches over Shaft the younger, a New York City police officer. Although the opening titles are a Bondesque montage of blue-lit sex and guns, the rest of the film is devoid of the sexual power that Shaft was previously defined by. Instead, the older Shaft's wit and bravado are replaced by a younger Shaft with a thuggish tendency to lash out rather than "playing the dozens", a traditional sign of weakness.<sup>32</sup> Shaft is now more gorilla hard-man than hustling cat and this appears to emphasize his lack of power to work the system.<sup>33</sup> The extent of

Shaft's lyrical power is represented by a few cheap one-liners and his only verbal power lays in his use of profanity and his macho stance. The new Shaft is angry and loses his cool easily, unlike the Shaft of the 1970's.

It seems that Shaft is powerless without his gun or his fists.

Continuously defeated and mocked by the white racist Walter Wade, who he is initially trying to capture, and disillusioned by the police department, he is determined that there will be "No lawyers, no politics, no rules, no regulations." He throws his police badge like a ninja star into the wall of the courtroom, registering his resignation. He will solve the case his own way, with the help of fellow cop Carmen (Vanessa Williams) and Rasaan (Busta Rhymes), a street-savvy 'hood boy. Shaft does not have the rhymes or the street knowledge to negotiate his way smoothly through the underworld alone and as Abrahams notes, "The prestigious way of having style provided is by being able to manipulate others".<sup>34</sup> Although, in Gordon Parks' version, Shaft is domestically removed from the street (based in a swanky, midtown apartment) he is still familiar to the hustlers on the curb and his previous involvement with the black power movement is made known to us. Alternatively, Singleton presents a Shaft devoid of that basic street knowledge, putting him out of the loop.<sup>35</sup> He represents the African-American middle class and has left behind the urban street. In fact none of the black men in the film possess any significant ability to manipulate other's actions by words alone. They are devoid of the traditional black street power. Incapable

of shucking and jiving they are left with violence alone. Incapable of dealing with bad ass street Gs, the new Shaft can now only take on middle class, white racists.

The first suggestion that black speech acts have been reappropriated comes in the third scene, as the murder victim's girlfriend relays the details of Wade's actions to Shaft. In her account Trey Howard, the victim, is noticeably silent and uses only visual signs (a Ku Klux Klan hood made from a napkin) as a response to the racial insult he receives. Instead Wade is the individual with the verbal power. After receiving no response to his jibes Wade calls, "Hey dog, are you deaf? Holla back. You got dat Tupac?" as he gestures to Trey with the actions of a 'true' G. Wade here invokes oral aggression and power in two acts, defined most coherently by Kochman and Antonio Brown. Firstly he uses both oral and physical threats which denote a position of attack and which highlight his opponent's silence/impotence.<sup>36</sup> He applies both the use of black speech, i.e. words, which are traditionally associated with black street, slang, and uses cultural symbols, naming Trey "dog" and calling up Tupac Shakur, as a notably dead and silent rapper. This speech act is used to assert his own control of the situation and to provoke a retort from Trey, thus affirming his position of dominance as what we might call a signifying lion. Secondly, by using black dialect he can be seen to lend a certain 'truth' to his declaration. He is in an advantaged position; dialectically bilingual, he demonstrates his ability to invoke different cultural dialects to fit

his own purposes. He is not simply making a literal statement, but uses knowledge of Trey's culture to lend his comments weight and potency.<sup>37</sup>

This is reiterated when Wade later lures Shaft into a confrontation, after he has been arrested. As Trey lapses into a seizure, which ultimately results in his death, Wade calls across to Shaft. "Homeboy's got rhythm, huh?". Shaft immediately walks across and punches Wade in front of a crowd of journalists, diminishing his own authority in both official and street realms. Wade later reminds Shaft that it is this action that is responsible for encouraging the judge to release Wade on bail. A similar event occurs later in the film when Shaft and his colleague Luger stage a mugging of Wade. Plotting to reveal some corrupt police involvement with Wade and Peoples Hernandez, a local drug dealer, their actions are notably theatrical and comic. During the attack Shaft remains silent and unidentifiable, whilst it is Luger that calls out "Don't make a fucking move, or Ah'll bust a cap in yo' dome". Luger too can invoke black speech style and this time it is to assert an image of black aggression. Supposedly Luger is more threatening when posing as a black criminal than a white one. Shaft comments later that this style was "Pure, Notorious P.I.G.", confirming that even white police officers are capable of performing black speech acts to great effect.

Earlier in the film Luger is also posited as superior to Shaft in the realm of verbal battles. They come face to face in a dispute over a racist comment Luger makes to a prisoner and Shaft states he is more afraid of "Nazis with

badges” than the criminals he deals with. Luger mocks Shaft, suggesting he might take an “ethnic sensitivity workshop” and Shaft’s childish retort is “Fuck you!”. The battle continues but Luger escapes unharmed and still smiling. A suspect being finger printed highlights our own disappointment in Shaft’s failure. “Hey Shaft” he calls, “like the way you handled that, brotha.” “Fuck you too” says Shaft.

Throughout the film Shaft is faced with problems, all solved by plotting with characters like Rasaan or by sheer brute force. His case rests on finding a waitress (Toni Collette) who was witness to the murder of Trey. When he approaches one of her colleagues she explains that she will help him in his investigation if he stops the local bad kid, Malik, from using her twelve year old son as a runner. Singleton uses a shot-reverse-shot technique to contrast the image of Shaft alone, with Malik and his crew. Shaft is in his black, leather Armani uniform; the clean smart lines incongruous with the baggy pants, red bomber jacket and do-rag rag of Malik. Shaft strides across and proceeds to pistol-whip the young ‘hoodlum’, turning his mouth the same scarlet as his jacket. Shaft’s words are simple and it is only the power of his gun which enforces his message, not his style or superior lyrical prowess.

There are three significant points in this scene which show the black hero’s altered status in the street setting. Firstly, Shaft is silent and alone, rejecting a set/crew/posse. This is unusual in both the reality of the street world<sup>38</sup> and in the realm of rap culture, but can be attributed to toast heroes.

He is the antithesis of Malik, surrounded by his compadres and sermonizing on the “haves and the should not haves”. Shaft and the toast hero are thus posited as a direct rival to street culture. This image is reinforced when Shaft has almost finished beating Malik. Pressing the young thug into the ground, Shaft looks up. Instead of Busta pulling up in a pimped out “nine-nine jag” and helping out his fellow cat, it is a white cop cruisin’ by in a police car who lets Shaft carry on his business, undisturbed.<sup>39</sup> A silent and knowing nod passes between them, proclaiming Shaft’s actions the only way to deal with the hustler.

Most significant in this sequence is John Singleton’s use of the soundtrack at this time. Throughout the scene gangster rapper Black Rob’s hit track “Whoa” is playing in Malik’s car. It acts as a signifier of the street environment and of Malik’s affiliation with rap culture. The lyrics speak of guns, fast cars, hot women and hard drugs, a vocal expression of urban lifestyle among the ‘ghetto-fabulous’ dawgs of the hip hop story. However, as Shaft moves into Malik’s space and prepares to attack, the volume of the track increases and echoes faintly, creating a certain feeling of menace. The track has switched our attention and its own affiliation and becomes a metaphorical weapon in Shaft’s artillery. Shaft uses minimal speech and style, and instead Black Rob speaks for him. As a hero he can no longer battle verbally with Malik, but instead must usurp his street culture and don the mask of gangsta in order to do battle. At this point rap encompasses all that is



powerful in street culture and can express the mythic black hero in a more direct manner than he can express himself.

It is rap music which now denotes the power of blackness, more acutely than in Shaft (1970). As Gladstone Yearwood notes, "...in Shaft ... the use of music functions not so much as a secondary support for the visuals, but on occasion serves as a primary driving force in the flow of the narrative."

<sup>40</sup> The success of Isaac Hayes's composition matched the success of the film in both sales and its establishment as a signifier of all that is cool and black. The opening snare and bass riff undoubtedly expressed a sense of seventies sexual freedom and the prowess of the dangerous street cat. Isaac Hayes rap-style lyrics ask the audience directly "Who's the black private dick that has sex with all the chicks?" and they know the answer before they are even told. Reminiscent of call and response patterns, this rap is at a most simplistic level and simply directs the audience's attention to the plot of the film. The music announces to them that they are about to watch Stackolee and the Signifying Monkey, transformed into one black private dick, and that they will be witness to some 'shucking', 'jiving' and 'signifying'<sup>41</sup> that is aimed at them as well as the characters in the film. From there it is Shaft who is lyrically in control, using his street language to avoid the questions of Lieutenant Androzzi and manipulate the gangster Bumpy and the revolutionary Ben.

In Shaft (2000), John Singleton asked Isaac Hayes to once again direct the musical score for the film. The original theme tune is used but only

as a tool to invoke the nostalgia of the seventies blaxploitation era. The rest of the soundtrack is filled with Latino, R&B and rap tunes, which speak for the action. In contrast to the original Shaft, the lead character has a limited amount of dialogue and his power centers on his anger and frustration with the system he works under. He is unable to speak out and recreate his own space, forced out of the institution and silenced. The roles of script and soundtrack are reversed and the signifiers of urban authority and street culture become R. Kelly, Outkast, Black Rob, and Mr. Vegas, rather than Shaft himself.

When Shaft first calls on Rasaan, his young companion is lying on a couch with a fly girl, listening to Sean Paul and Mr. Vegas' "Got Gal Today". Rasaan, and not Shaft, is smoking weed and typifies the playa/cat mentality. When Shaft and Luger stage their mock mugging, they are supported by the rhymes of Outkast, calling out "we'll be burying you and your whole motherfucking family" in their rhymes on the track "Tough Guy". The lyrics threaten anybody to criticize Outkast, but also condemn the constant threats made on the street. They speak for Shaft, expressing a desire to end the violence and corruption of urban culture, but using their rhymes to express their supremacy over other 'niggas'. They have the voice and thus, claim the power.

It is important that in any analysis of a film we do not forget its nature as a commercial item, created and displayed for profit. In using such films as

Shaft (1971) and Shaft (2000) to look at culture, it is not the actual content or reception of the film which is most revealing, but rather the decisions that a director and their production team have made in order to make the film successful. These decisions are made on the basis that they reflect contemporary trends and beliefs within the audience they are marketed to. In this case the Shaft of 2000 was made in an effort to attract a mixed racial audience, of both the generation who watched the original Shaft and the next generation of viewers who are potential buyers of the Shaft image. We cannot, therefore, divide the style and content of the movie from Paramount Picture's desire to appeal to a diverse range of viewers, who do not necessarily share the same value system. However, the style of the Shaft remake can be seen as representative of a contemporary cultural currency within American society: rap and hip hop music.

Shaft (2000) can be viewed as evidence of what Brown calls the "endarkening" of American culture.<sup>42</sup> This highlights for us the important place that verbal expression has held within the black community and how the constant retelling and recycling of these stories will continue to influence American culture in the future. However, through the analysis of Shaft it also becomes apparent that the reverse is true in that the commodification of black culture will inevitably mean its appropriation by those dominant practices, which already hold a hegemonic position over the world of entertainment. Without constant changes in the application and style of black verbal

performance, its message and its relevance will be absorbed into mainstream culture and become indistinct from other folklores and other experiences.

A comparison of the two films also enables us to see a transformation in the way that rap is delivered and received. The rapper embodies everything which was defined by the 'cat':

"The cat seeks through a harmonious combination of charm, ingratiating speech, dress, music, the proper dedication to his 'kick, and unrestrained generosity to make his day-to-day life itself a gracious work of art." <sup>43</sup>

This definition reiterates Afrika Bambaataa's description of hip hop as a whole culture and lifestyle, and is pertinent as the speech act of a rap evolves from a simple street-jive to a multimillion-dollar commercial practice. <sup>44</sup>

The image and identity of the toast hero is now embodied in the dramatic world of the Gangsta Rapper, who has usurped the crime fighting Shaft and repossessed the attributes of the mythic black male hero. Matthew Henry suggests that this commodification of rap has resulted in the development of "A particular type of black masculinity--one defined mainly by an urban aesthetic, a nihilistic attitude, and an aggressive posturing", evident in films such as Shaft (2000). <sup>45</sup>

Although this seems true to an extent, his statement fails to recognize a number of significant points. Firstly, these attributes are somewhat consistent with the content of previous black verbal performance and this

does not detract from the value laid on the 'skillz' of a rapper. The same division between protagonist and narrator is also present within both the toast and modern black cinema. The difference here lies in the status of the toast performer and the rap performer. The keeper of the urban black myth has become as important as the hero of the toast story and in many cases the reality of the commercial rapper's success appears to be more achievable. The fantasy of the toast has been outlived by the reality of the rapper. Rappers now toast about themselves and this creates a reality that is unacceptable to many. The toast hero's escapades are acceptable when told in the third person, as a fictional release of internal frustration and desire. The inevitable progression from dream to action crosses a previously unseen moral line and the result is too dangerous and too realistic for comfort. Shaft has been out-toasted by Dr. Dre.

The final chapter of my thesis looks to changes in performance space and expression as the last element rap's progression from a street toast performance. The toast represents an ancient and most basic form of entertainment, the oral tradition. The folk tale functions as a means of entertainment, escapism and a way to seize power in a manner which works outside the hegemonic social order. Hip hop culture afforded a way to believe the same goals could be achieved, but within the mainstream, commercial arena. The transition from the street to the marketplace saw the urban lyric gain a duality which has ensured its ongoing success, but has nonetheless

changed it irrevocably. Rap is embodied by the twin themes of the performer/protagonist, the fictionalized reality, the othered mainstream and the glamorized ghetto. The final chapter examines rap music as a culture and not simply a single performance.

## Chapter 3

### Player's Ball<sup>46</sup>

As Todd Boyd suggests of Arrested Development, “fashion and style function as both icon and commodity” and the same can be said of the entire rap world.<sup>47</sup> It would be impossible to complete an examination of a change in urban performance roles and contexts without considering the dramatic change in performance spaces and media and the effect that being able to purchase a performance and take it home has had on the very meaning of rap and street culture. The street narrative is no longer a simple activity. It has become a multi-billion dollar industry, creating huge markets and changing youth expression throughout the world.

As we noted in the previous discussion of rap style and technique, the creativity and lyrical re-invention that characterizes powerful and ingenious oral performance are still at work within the rap industry. We also know, from the huge business in mix tapes and frequent nightclub battles in cities, that the spoken word is still highly valued in urban street settings. However, the most common rap experience is that of the pre-recorded and highly stylized version presented through the mainstream pop music industry. The music

industry has become extremely diffuse as a result of the revolution in communications technology and dominates newspaper, film, television, and internet forums, as well as the traditional radio and music recordings market. It is valuable to consider the different ways that the rap performance is disseminated to the public. By examining the contemporary rap performance a new perspective is brought to our understanding of the contemporary urban myth.

The pre-recording of rap and hip hop music alters the way in which the performance is received and the role of the audience to the performer. The toast and other forms of verbal exchange are described as a community performance. The toasting group members alternate in their roles as performer and narrator, feeding from the energy of the other members to create a community language and style. In rap cultures there is also a tradition of the group or 'crew'. At the roots of hip hop were New York street gangs that fed into groups like Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation, Grandmaster Flash and the 3Mcs, and the Funky 4+1.<sup>48</sup> The Rap scene was notoriously split in the early 'nineties between the East Coast of Puffy Combes and B.I.G. and Dr Dre and Snoop Dogg of Death Row Records on the West Coast. All of these groups were eager to establish their power as a force to represent their communities. These crews, like Irv Gotti's Murder Inc Records today, used each other's verbal skills and street reputation to build empires, which commanded respect from like-minded artists and audiences.



Nonetheless, the pre-recorded nature of most rap performance creates an experiential and spatial divide between rapper and audience. The audience is entirely removed from the creation of the story and the rapper, or crew, are thus invested with the power to validate their own lyrical creations. Tracks are promoted through mass marketing across a large geographical and social area and then sold as a tangible and quantifiable product. Anyone with enough money can walk into Tower Records and buy Ice Cube or all of the Ruff Ryderz and return home to enjoy their own performance of their favorite track. Despite the increased audience size the performance becomes an individual experience with little or no opportunity for an immediate response. It is inaccessible to the listener, who is deprived the opportunity to inject their own style and power into the act. However, the performer's absence also enables a more personal experience of the music. A white, middle-class girl can layer the lyrics with her own identity in the privacy of her own home, but this is only possible in her solitude.

The physical distance from the audience reinforces the rapper's idolized status and this is utilized in marketing the rapper. The rapper is depicted as the Grandmaster, the G, the Daddy. MC names are heavy with metaphors of power and violence; The Fresh Prince, Big Daddy Kane, Hammer, Ja Rule, Skillz and Havoc. This image is projected onto packaging and advertising for the singles and albums the rapper needs to sell. Media hype and the street reputation of the rapper are used to create sensation and

publicity prior to the public release of the rapper consumables. The listener becomes familiar with one recording of a track and value is invested in the rigidity of this performance. Each time the music video is played on MTV or the local radio station gives the track airtime, the status of this performance is fortified. An ability to reproduce the experience of the initial recording is significant in the way that the rapper is judged. A live performance may offer the listener an opportunity to become involved in the performance itself, but this interaction is mediated by the performer and by the performance space itself. As an official performance the event is surrounded by cultural notions of the status of the entertainer above that of the entertained, who does not have the ability to direct the focus of the performance.

Similarly, the image of the rapper as idol is reinforced through music videos. These digital spaces become the most sacred incarnations of rap performance. A popular rap song may become part of the MTV's regular playlist and consequently that video may be aired four or five times a day. Repetition enforces the image of that specific rapper and of rap music as a genre. When rap music becomes defined by ten or twelve successful music videos for an entire month it is those familiar images which will supercede other rap interpretations for both rap fans and all other audiences. This concentrated rap image then becomes the focus of those who aspire to hip hop fame, focusing and limiting their efforts.

The medium that has most recently been favored by rap and hip hop labels is that of the internet. Every major and minor rap celebrity and label has their own website containing a store of facts and information about themselves. The content of the website is frequently overshadowed by the context within which it is situated. A good example is The Murder Inc. website, which is designed to create a dominant image for the entire label, whilst the identities of the artists are manipulated to fit neatly with the label as a whole.<sup>49</sup> The initial image that we see is that of the Murder Inc. label, pierced by four gun shots, quickly replaced by a panoramic photo of the gangsta family. This 1920's Mafioso image is then replaced by a format reminiscent of police records. Ja Rule, Ashanti, Cadillac Tah and the rest of the crew are depicted in a police line-up at the top of the page with their fingerprints running alongside the text. Described as "Murderers" their biographies are linked through "Wanted" poster icons as Ashanti's playful track, "Happy" plays in the background.

There is no doubt that Irv Gotti is determined to create an image for his label that reeks of the street. Regardless of the incongruous nature of this image with some of the artist's signed to the label the defining theme is that of danger and violence. However, this image is superceded by the reality of his fiction. When we visit the site we know that this identity is an imaginative branding tool, constructed with the help of I.T. professionals and a huge amount of corporate money. Gotti's ability to create a street fiction is only

possible through means which are the very antithesis of street. This duality is permanent and, like many other good branding ploys, characterizes the work of the artists both on the website and in the real world. The fan's only method of helping to shape this process is through the site's message board, entitled "Hollaback". Messages may be posted by fans, but once again the space in which this action takes place is regulated by the artist. Messages are often only read or commented on by fellow fans and may even be removed from the site if the label feels that the content may reflect badly on them.

However, it is clear that there are responses to rap music, which continue to shape the genre and hip hop culture as a whole. Most evident are the lyrical references made by fellow musicians, which were discussed earlier. Added to these we can place response tracks, which harken back to the call and response patterns of African oral tradition. In 1986 the Brooklyn crew, UTFO, released a track called "Roxanne, Roxanne" that told the story of a "young ghetto princess" who has the power to reject the group's three rappers' come-ons.<sup>50</sup> An immediate response came from Lolita Shante Gooden, who simultaneously renamed herself Roxanne Shante and released "Roxanne's Revenge", a vicious answer and a public statement about "teen sexual etiquette".<sup>51</sup> More than twelve such responses to "Roxanne, Roxanne" were made in the following year. Similarly, in 1999 Sporty Thievz released "No Pigeons" in answer to "No Scrubs", TLC's damning testimony against the street playa who scrounges from the women in his life.

The answer record is testament to the continuing power of the urban spoken battle. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that as an answer or response the track is still confined to the issues raised by the initial rapper's comments. In toast we see a continuation of African orature principles, where the Caller's "individual desires are subsumed as s/he becomes a conduit who speaks on behalf of the group".<sup>52</sup> The caller and the rest of the group become a single entity who combine the member's identities and problems and use them in the toast. In rap the individual's desires are the focus from the production of the track to its performance. The rapper defines the topics and the space to be animated by talking in the first person and thus, any response is confined and impeded rather than facilitated by the rapper.

However, the cathartic role of public performance and resolution makes its absence impossible. Where, then, is this need fulfilled? It seems impossible to resolve a community or group problem through self-exploration alone. Instead, it is necessary to turn once more to the mythic hero. Today, I believe that dead rappers, such as Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, fulfill this role. At the 2003 Grammy music awards Eminem took to the stage to accept the award for Best Rap Album. Eminem stated that rather than thank the people involved in making the album he would read a tribute list of the MCs who had inspired him to rap. At the end of the list came Tupac and the Notorious B.I.G. This event is far from unusual and similar tributes are paid every day by rappers around the world. It seems that the death of Gangsta

rappers like Pac and Biggie has prompted a huge debate into a number of significant issues. Namely, what it takes to become a rap idol, the failure of the police to gain the respect of many urban communities and the problem of violence on the street. Ja Rule, 50 cent and Fat Joe are just three artists in a culture that appears to be obsessed with the martyred rappers. Run DMC DJ Jam Master Jay and even R&B star Aaliyah have recently died and they too have been raised up as icons within the hip hop community.

Furthermore, the hip hop audience reflects this theme. Stories of Pac and Biggie are rife both on the streets, in the media and especially on the internet where discussion between rap fans around the world is easily accessible and largely unmonitored. A visit to the website, [www.tupacfans.com](http://www.tupacfans.com), offers links to over fifty websites about the dead rapper. Numerous histories, discographies, testimonies and rumors fill the pages of these sites, which are fueled by the mysterious circumstances of both unsolved homicide cases. A quick glance at [www.angelfire.com/hiphop/pacbak/east.html](http://www.angelfire.com/hiphop/pacbak/east.html) reads like a toast story itself. The biography page records Tupac's ghetto upbringing, his friendship with Biggie that is later destroyed by the vicious east coast/ west coast battle, the attack made on his life 1994 at a recording studio in Manhattan, his murder in 1996 and finally the shooting of Biggie outside a club with Sean (P. Diddy) Combes. A changing point in Tupac's life was the shooting in Manhattan. After being shot five times in the foyer of the studio, whilst Biggie was upstairs

recording, Tupac was taken to the local hospital. However, according to the biography at the "pacbak" website, Pac made his way upstairs to the studio, accused Biggie and Puffy of plotting to kill him, and would only go to hospital after stripping naked, lighting up a joint and bleeding profusely over the floor of the studio. According to this version, a policeman arrived and on noticing that Tupac's testicles were bleeding asked, "Hey Tupac, how's it hanging?" It seems that only the toast could be more gruesome or more fantastical.

## Afterword

The fantastical themes of the urban mythic are essentially what is so appealing about the toast performance. The characters are outrageous and fearless, powerful and cunning and their feats are grotesque and ridiculous. However, their troubles are the same that face the performer on the street. Violence, money, style and sex can be fierce battlegrounds and the toast story and the performance itself are evidence of this. It is the same combination of the real and the fantastical that makes hip hop culture exciting and enables those rappers, who in their success are distant, to communicate the urban mythic to those still on the street. Be it Tupac or Shine, 50 cent or Stackolee, the fantasy is still the same although the reality is always changing.

It may seem that the rapper has taken over every role that the toast performance once held. As the rappers perform they are the lyrical masters of a fictional expression of power. Speaking in the first person, the rapper makes the role of the urban hero his own. As a performer distanced from an immediate audience response and without challenge from other performers he is his own self-affirming community. However, the thriving hip hop industry is testament to the continued innovation of rap veterans and the constant



emergence of newer, more inventive voices. This fact alone suggests that the cathartic and motivating forces of the toast are being worked through in another forum. Evidently, the notion of the urban mythic hero and the need to vocalize his deeds is still important. It is simply that the forum for this storytelling process has evolved. Rap has been formalized and assimilated into mainstream popular culture and so, in many ways, the opportunity for the audience to control the evolution of the urban mythic is not possible. Like any cultural development, this is not the end of the pattern, nor is it a blow to the community itself. Rather, it is a transformation that will offer up new opportunities and new patterns.

In conclusion, the ever-increasing hordes of rap artists that flood the music charts around the world offer a unique progression from the street poetry of the twentieth century. Rap music has become a space where the fantasies which were once unrealized are now tangible to many. Rap music has also incorporated the styles and aspirations of other cultures and brought the problems of the street to the forefront of public awareness. Rap has thus taken on the role of ambassador in many ways and must naturally continue to evolve and transform to continue this one branch of a vast oral tradition. The functions that toasting held for many years have been taken up instead by forums which are more accessible to those who most need them. On the street, in the 'hood, on the web, the forces of fantasy feed into rap music and continue to shape it as an innovative, dynamic and raw experience at its best.

However, rap music faces a significant dilemma. The diamonds are shiny and so are the cars and rap artists face the danger of being drawn to the material rewards of the music industry, forgetting the street that they came from.

Scholars too are susceptible to these glittering stars and for both rapper and scholar it is important to remember that rap is not new in content or in style.

Instead rap must relish in its power to reinvent the toast and its powerful street message and bring it to the fore with cool style.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Tupac Shakur, "Life Goes On ", All Eyez On Me, CD, Death Row Records, 1996.
- <sup>2</sup> Nelson George, hiphopamerica (New York: Viking Press, 1998).
- <sup>3</sup> Jordan Rich, "Toasts and Other Roots of Rap". Retrieved April 3, 2003, from <http://funkmasterj.tripod.com/toasts.html>
- <sup>4</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The signifying monkey : a theory of Afro-American literary criticism (New York : Oxford University Press, 1988).
- <sup>5</sup> John F. Szwed, "The Real Old School" p.3-13 in Light, Alan (ed.), Vibe History of Hip Hop (New York: 3 River Press, 1999) 8.
- <sup>6</sup> Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) 103.
- <sup>7</sup> Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (London, University Press of New England, 1994), 52.
- <sup>8</sup> Cheryl L. Keyes, Rap Music and Street Consciousness (Chicago, University of Illinois, 2002) 39.
- <sup>9</sup> Scarface, Last of a Dying Breed, CD, Rap-A-Lot/Virgin, 2000.

## Endnotes (continued)

<sup>10</sup> Rabbit is a slang term for a white person, see Clarence Major (ed.), Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Jackson, "Get your ass in the water and swim like me" Narrative Poetry from Black Oral Tradition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1974, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, Yes Yes Y'all The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip Hop's First Decade (Da Capo Press: Cambridge, MA, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> V. N. Volosinov, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (Seminar Press, 1973) quoted in Dick Hebdige Subculture: The Meaning of Style (Routledge, London 1988) 17.

<sup>14</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, Positively Black (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970) 37.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Kochman, Black and White Styles in Conflict (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 76.

<sup>16</sup> Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (London, University Press of New England, 1994) 85.

<sup>17</sup> David Toop, Rap Attack 2: African Rap to Global Hip Hop (Boston: Consortium Press, 1992) 19.

## Endnotes (continued)

<sup>18</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, Positively Black (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970) 43.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-47.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89.

<sup>22</sup> Jay-Z, "U Don't Know", The Blueprint, CD, Roc-A-Fella Records, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> quoted in Bruce Jackson, "Get your ass in the water", 5.

<sup>24</sup> Marcyliena Morgan, "More Than A Mood or An Attitude: Discourse and verbal genres in African-American culture", pp251-281 in Saliko Mufwene, John R. Rickford, Guy Bailey, and John Baugh (ed.), African-American English: Structure, History and Use (London: Routledge, 1998), 252.

<sup>25</sup> Walter Ong, Orality and Technology: The Technologizing of the Word (London: Methuen, 1982), 42, quoted in Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (London, University Press of New England, 1994), 86.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce Jackson, "Get your ass in the water and swim like me" Narrative Poetry from Black Oral Tradition (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1974) 5.

<sup>27</sup> Fricke and Ahearn, 68.

## Endnotes (continued)

<sup>28</sup> Cheryl L. Keyes, Rap Music and Street Consciousness (Chicago, University of Illinois, 2002) 122.

<sup>29</sup> Toast found in Dennis Wepman, Ronald B. Newman, and Murray B. Binderman, The Life: The Lore and Folk Poetry of the Black Hustler (University of Pennsylvania Press, Pennsylvania, 1976)

<sup>30</sup> Nelson George, hiphopamerica. (New York: Viking Press, 1998), 103.

<sup>31</sup> Abrahams, 92.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Kochman, "Rapping in the Ghetto" in Lee Rainwater (ed.) Soul (USA: Transaction, Inc. 1970) 72.

<sup>33</sup> Abrahams, 86.

<sup>34</sup> Abrahams, 87.

<sup>35</sup> John Horton, "Time and Cool People", " in Lee Rainwater (ed.) Soul (USA: Transaction, Inc. 1970) 42, 45.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Kochman, Black and White Styles in Conflict. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 52.

<sup>37</sup> Antonio Brown African-American Review. "Performing "truth": Black speech acts", Summer 2002 vol. 36, 2, 214.

<sup>38</sup> Horton, 36.

<sup>39</sup> Lyrics to Black Rob, "Whoa", (n.d.) Retrieved February 12, 2003, from <http://www.ohhla.com/anonymous/blackrob/story/whoa.rob.txt>

## Endnotes (continued)

<sup>40</sup> Gladstone L. Yearwood, Black Film as a Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration, and the African-American Aesthetic Tradition (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, Inc. 2000) 45.

<sup>41</sup> For a definition of these terms see Clarence Major (ed.), Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

<sup>42</sup> Brown, 224.

<sup>43</sup> Abrahams, 87.

<sup>44</sup> “Hip hop: A term for a whole culture, including rapping, breakdancing, graffiti art. It involves how you dress, the way you speak.” in Michael Small, Break it Down: The inside story from the new leaders of rap (New York: Citadel Press, 1992) 3.

<sup>45</sup> Matthew Henry, “He is a “bad mother \*\$%@!#\”: Shaft and contemporary black masculinity.” in Journal of Popular Film and Television, Summer 2002 vol. 30 i2, 116.

<sup>46</sup> Outkast, Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik, CD. La Face, 1994.

<sup>47</sup> Todd Boyd, Am I Black Enough For You Popular Culture from the ‘Hood and Beyond (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 43.

<sup>48</sup> Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, Yes Yes Y’all The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip hop’s First Decade (Da Capo Press: Cambridge, MA, 2002).

## Endnotes (continued)

<sup>49</sup> Murder Inc. Records website (n.d.) Retrieved March 15, 2003, from <http://www.murderinrecords.com>

<sup>50</sup> B. Adlerand and Janette Beckman Rap: Portraits and Lyrics of a Generation of Black Rockers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991) 35.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Adetokunbo F. Knowles-Borishade "Paradigm For Classical African Orature" pp94-101 in Christine Kelly, E. Anne Laffoon, and Raymie E. McKerrow (eds.), Diversity In Public Communication: A Reader (Iowa: Kendall/ Hunt Publishing Company, 1994) 96.



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