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# BLING-BLING

## THE ECONOMIC DISCOURSES OF HIP-HOP

“We hit makers with acres /  
Roll shakers in Vegas, you can't break us /  
Lost chips on Lakers, gassed off Shaq /  
Country house, tennis courts on horseback /  
Ridin', decidin', cracked crab or lobster? /  
Who says mobsters don't prosper?”  
*The Notorious B.I.G. (feat. Jay-Z), "I Love the Dough"*

ABSTRACT: Whereas literary and cinematic representations of economy and management have been analyzed for some time (see e.g. Czarniawska & Guillet de Monthoux 1994, Hassard & Holliday 1998), precious little interest has been directed to similar aspects in popular music. This is interesting particularly as the argument for analyzing e.g. literary works usually has been that it gives us a perspective as to how notions of management and economy are translated into more popular depictions, and that one through this can learn something about such popularization. At the same time, popular music is far more “popular” than either the novels of e.g. Martin Amis or the movies of e.g. Terry Gilliam, arguably making it a far more potent “mirror of production”.

Consequently, this paper analyzes economy as it is portrayed and disseminated in rap music. By discussing how conspicuous consumption and the discourse of economy and riches are used in rap lyrics to convey the image of success and possibility, the paper attempts a reading of contemporary capitalism in a particular cultural setting. Rap lyrics create a particular economic sphere, one with its own symbolic values, its own vernacular, and most importantly, its own politics. Here, economy has arguably occupied the main category of hierarchical positioning, subsuming even sexual prowess in the process. This presents us with a sphere where economy has become radicalized into not only a competitive sphere, but to a cultural politics.

This then ties into the notion of a minor literature as theorized by Deleuze & Guattari. By studying the discourse of economy in rap as a minor literature, one can highlight the potential rap music has as a political language, even while it has become distanced from its political roots. The multidimensionality and ironical approach held to the “bling-bling” thus problematizes simplified analyzes of economic language as colonizing (cf. Gibson-Graham 1996) and instead opens up to a reading of economy as openness.

“This is for my peeps /  
With the Bentleys, the Hummers, The Benz /  
Escalades, 23-inch rims /  
Jumping out the Jaguars with the Timb’s /  
Keep yo bread up /  
Live good”  
Lil’ Kim, “The Jump Off”

“I just signed my contract worth \$100 million on Friday. I ain’t  
worried about saving. I’m ballin’ outta control.”  
Baby, CEO of Cash Money Records, interviewed in *The Source*  
#158, November 2002

## Introduction

Bragging, boasting, showing off – are these economic actions? In a restricted view of economy, they obviously aren’t, and the art of the boast has yet to be institutionalized into the curriculum of business schools. Economy, in such a view, is firmly locked into the simple axioms of vulgarized political economy, where economy consists of natural resources, means of production and means of distribution. So the thumbing of one’s nose, or as Sampson state “I will bite my thumb at them; which is disgrace to them if they bear it”, would not seem to have much to do with economy. On the other hand, what is the point of making it economically if one cannot show it off?

The place of ostentation in economic behavior is well-known, and with seminal works such as Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and Jean Baudrillard’s *The Consumer Society* and *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, there exists a fair amount of theorizing in the field. The existence of “conspicuous consumption” and symbolic excess is one of those economic facts we are all aware of, on a commonsensical level, and few would argue against their role in social life. Still these aspects of economic behavior tend to be marginalized in the discussions of economic discourse, where there is a pronounced tendency to emphasize matters such as control, efficiency, and that perennial favorite of critical analysis, oppression. Bragging and showboating are simply too “fun” to be taken seriously as aspects of economic discourse, whether one is criticizing or praising the same. And, in those cases they have been noted, this is usually veiled in abstruse theorizing regarding symbolism and semiotics in economic analysis.

Consequently, this paper will discuss the role of bragging as an economic language, and to do so in an empirical fashion. More specifically, this is a paper on how narratives

regarding economy and organization materialize within popular music. Whereas literary and cinematic representations of economy and management have been analyzed for some time (see e.g. Czarniawska and Guillet de Monthoux 1994; Hassard and Holliday 1998), precious little interest has been directed to similar aspects in popular music. This is interesting particularly as the argument for analyzing e.g. literary works usually has been that it gives us a perspective as to how notions of management and economy are translated into more popular depictions, and that one through this can learn something about such popularization. At the same time, popular music is far more “popular” than either the novels of e.g. Martin Amis or the movies of e.g. Terry Gilliam, arguably making it a far more potent “mirror of production”.

Similarly, the discussion regarding the connections between literary representation and organizational life has often tended to emphasize a bleak and pessimistic attitude towards bourgeois capitalism. Analyses have often focused on dystopias and critiques, often so that literary works have been used to bring out caricatured tales of the hell organizational man resides in. Although this is understandable from a narrative standpoint (Happy stories are less fun, after all.), it makes little sense if one truly aims towards a more complete understanding of representations of e.g. economy. Thus this piece will analyze narratives that praise capitalism, that revel in the market economy, that exhibit an almost rapturous attitude towards material goods. It will focus on the bling-bling.

“I be that nigga<sup>1</sup> with the ice on me /  
 If it cost less than twenty it don't look right on me /  
     I stay flossed out all through the week /  
     My money long, if you don't know I'm the B.G. /  
     I be fuckin niggaz bitches all in they home /  
 Niggaz be like, "Look at that Benz an' all that chrome" /  
     Diamonds worn by everybody that's in my click /  
 Man I got the price of a mansion, 'round my neck and wrist /  
     My nigga Baby gettin' a special built machine /  
         A Mercedes Benz 700 V14 /  
     I know you niggaz can't believe that /  
 I can't wait to see ya haters face when ya see that /  
     Man look at that /  
     Niggaz wear shades just to stand on side of me /  
 Folks say: "Take that chain off boy, ya blindin' me" /  
     All day my phone ringin' - ring ring ring /  
     Can see my earring from a mile, bling-bling"  
     *B.G., "Bling-Bling"*

The term “bling-bling” refers to the gleam that is projected into the eyes of the observer, or the “hater”, when rays of light reflect and refract from jewelry and gold. As a term it arises in rap vernacular, and has now entered the language of popular culture more

generally. More specifically, it refers to a particular fashion of ostentatious displays of wealth, one where oversized jewelry is the norm. As the seminal and eponymous rap-anthem quoted above shows, it has to do with proving your place in the world through specific displays – such as boasting that the chains one wears around one’s neck and wrists are worth as much as a major piece of real estate. What is interesting about it in the perspective of this article is less the fashion statement it represents, and more how it shows us a narration of life under capitalism that is almost ridiculously affirmative. In bling-bling one can find a way to *perform capitalism*, and it is this trope of re-appropriation that we wish to explore here. Whereas most writing on the use of literature to understand organization(s) has tended to be in a critical vein, and thus focus on more pessimistic texts, this article is interested in the ways in which narratives of the economic can be used in a provocative manner, as a micro-politics unto itself.

The study of literature/organizing has traditionally been highly theoretical. References to thinkers such as Fredrick Jameson, Jacques Derrida and the ubiquitous G.W.F. Hegel positively abound, and the strive has usually been to show how the methods of literary analysis can be used to develop high theory in organization studies. The aims of this article are slightly dissimilar, insofar as we are here interested less in high theory and more in the empirical aspects of performing braggadocio. Consequently, we will work from an assumption that bragging is in fact a central economic fact, and that what can be found in rap music is a highly developed and partially formalized version of this – a living phenomenon with particular political ties.

The article begins with an outline of some aspects of bragging as an economic activity, after which we discuss the modes in which this is accomplished in rap vernacular. The ways in which such extreme ostentation can be understood is then considered, as well as how this specific form of bragging can be understood as a minor literature. In this latter theoretical part, we will take some ideas from Gilles Deleuze and attempt to read the “capitalist language” in (some) rap music as political. This is done specifically to create a counterpoint to the idea that the colonization of language that capitalism seemingly is capable of could not be counteracted. The bling-bling thus, to us, represents a hybrid language, one where the accouterments of capitalism are used in a subversive fashion. As a specific form of narrative and (dare we say it?) literary representation of economy,

hardcore rap can thus be read as an alternative to the pessimistic tone often present in literary analysis of organizational life.

## The social psychology of bragging

Though rarely discussed within the field of critical management studies, the field of economic anthropology has long argued for a view of the prevailing economic order as fundamentally conditional. Whereas critical management studies has tried to show that the managerialistic view of the social order is but one possible, and that this view might entail a number of important omissions and suppressed stories, the study of alternative economic orders (such as practiced within economic anthropology) has made a surprisingly small impact. Still, it remains a fact that the existence of radically different ways to comprehend economic systems presents us with a potent critique of bourgeois capitalism and the politics of management that is assumed to function as its handmaiden. Although capitalism is usually seen as an omnipresent force, one that has managed to colonize most if not all of the world, some writers have shown that such a view might in fact make too much of the powers of capitalism. As e.g. the feminist economists J. K. Gibson-Graham (1996) have argued, the highly phallic notion of capitalism an omnipotent penetrative force downplays the possibilities of small-scale subversion and the existence of hybrids, where e.g. archaic economic thinking remains as an undercurrent to a dominant economic mode. Also, the political possibility to turn the capitalist system against itself is seldom addressed, possibly because the thinking regarding economy has a tendency to keep to a strict policy of polar opposites – you are either down-trodden or a sell-out. According to such a logic, bragging is simple enough to understand – merely a case of capitalist posturing.

“I am Yaqatlenis, I am Cloudy, and also Sewid; I am great Only One, and I am Smoke Owner, and I am Great Inviter. These are the names which I obtained as marriage gifts when I married the daughters of the chiefs of the tribes wherever I went. Therefore I feel like laughing at what the lower chiefs say, for they try in vain to down me by talking against my name. Who approaches what was done by the chiefs my ancestors? Therefore I am known by all the tribes over all the world. Only the chief my ancestor gave away property in a great feast, and all the rest can only try to imitate me. They try to imitate the chief, my grandfather, who is the root of my family.”  
*Benedict 1934, p. 190-191*



One of the more classical examples of an alternative economic order is that of the gift economy. Lovingly depicted in Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* (1924/1990), it is a mainstay in discussions on non-capitalist systems, and often used to portray the Dr. Hyde to the Dr. Jekyll of capitalism. Still, as the quote from the potlatching Yaqatlenis above shows, gift economies were not without animosity and contained a braggadocio very much like the one often despised when part of a market economy. The potlatch, distinguished by being discussed by both Bataille (1967/1991) and Derrida (1992), as a ritual of competitive gift-giving, hinged not on the ostentatious gifts exchanged, but on the self-gratulatory songs of accomplishments that accompanied the great feasts where an enterprising chief could disburse most of his tribes amassed wealth. The potlatch, the very linchpin of alternatives to market economy, was a bragging contest. Arguably, as Jean Baudrillard (1996) has claimed, so is the system of objects that is modern capitalism. Naturally, this does not mean that all kind of economy are just a question of bragging, but it shows something about the nature of how economy should **not** be understood – i.e. as simple constructs, fixed in theory. More specifically, it shows how different forms of performing economy can be undertaken, and that the surface effects of such performances cannot be understood without paying heed the cultural background in which these economic discourses are enacted.

If we look to the discussion of how capitalism has been portrayed in e.g. literature, the assumption has often been that such analysis are written by people with a more or less intimate cultural affinity for the dominant culture thereof (though not necessarily any love for it). In the cases where capitalism has been portrayed in a negative fashion, this is seen as stemming from an understanding of the repressive politics of the market economy, whereas more “understanding” depictions have usually been bypassed as unreflective and similarly grounded in hegemony. Such presuppositions mask the possibility of understanding capitalism in partial, hybrid ways. It also blinds us to the different ways in which hegemony can be attempted. If we instead of accepting the notion of capitalism and its effects (such as language and discourse) as dominant *a priori*, and instead focus on how an anthropological sensitivity to cultural expressions of the economic can be utilized to grasp variations in economic discourse, arguably a more multifaceted view of the representations of economy can be achieved. Our attempt will begin by considering the social psychology of bragging.

Bragging, of any kind, is a question of establishing hierarchy. Whether we are dealing with comparing salaries, the number of published articles or the relative size of reproductive organs, bragging is about one-upping, positioning people in a social order. The ritual of the potlatch, e.g., showed that counter to the assumptions of neoclassical microeconomics such positioning could be accomplished through expenditure and symbolic acts (Codere 1950, Bataille 1967/1991). Thorstein Veblen (1899/1934) further showed how the assumed rationality of the developing American capitalism could be understood in an anthropological fashion, so that the life of the new “leisure class” represented not economic rationality but “conspicuous consumption”, i.e. the boisterous flaunting of wealth and class. Bragging, even economic such, can thus be accomplished in a number of ways.

What bragging needs, though, is a shared set of values, at least to the extent that a boast has to be recognized as being one. For instance, in the academic subculture claiming that one has never published an article in an international journal will not be recognized as a boast unless accompanied by an explanatory statement, such as: “and I have never needed to!” Similarly, boasts can backfire: Wilt “the Stilt” Chamberlain famously boasted of having bedded more than 20.000 women during his career (which makes one wonder when he had time to play basket) – a classic case of bragging. A woman making a similar claim might not be seen as bragging, though, as sexual mores are still highly gendered. It is more likely that her claim will be seen as a confession and an implicit plea for forgiveness. We could thus see this as a boast backfiring, a case where the statement might be planned as braggadocio but interpreted in another manner altogether. Economic bragging, in such a perspective, needs a specific setting. The potlatching chiefs all understood that the “correct” form of a boast emphasized the magnificence of the feasts one had given and the amount of wealth one had given away or destroyed. Stockbrokers, in turn, “know” that the real thing to boast about is the sum total one earns per annum, including bonuses. Another way to say this would be to suggest that understanding how bragging is performed is synonymous with understanding the economic logic of the studied culture.

Bragging is thus something that takes place between individuals or groups that are tacitly assumed to share a cultural affinity. Even in cases where one brags to somebody outside of ones own culture, the assumption is that this person should share in the logic used. A

boast can namely be understood as a specific kind of tale, with its own narrative structure. In order to be understood, at least the rudimentary aspects of this structure must be grasped.

## All About the Benjamins

"I'm strictly tryin' to cop those, colossal sized Picasso's /  
And have papi flip coke outside Delgado's (who!) /  
Mienda, with cash flowin' like Sosa /  
And the latin chick tranportin' in the chocha /  
Stampedin' over, pop Mo's, never sober /  
Lex and Range Rovers, dealin' weight by Minnesota (uhh) /  
Avoidin' NARC's wit camcorders and Chevy Novas (uh-huh) /  
Stash in the buildin' wit this chick named Alona (uh-huh) /  
from Daytona, when I was young I wants to bone her (uh-huh) /  
But now I only hit chicks that win beauty pageants (ahahaha) /  
Trickin', they takin' me skiing, at the Aspens (c'mon) /  
Uhh, gangsta mental, stay poppin' Cristal /  
Pack a black pist-al in the Ac' Coupe that's dark brown (who!) /  
Pinky-ringin', gondolas wit the man singin' /  
Italian music down the river wit your chick clingin' /  
to my bizzalls, player you mad false /  
Actin hard when you as pussy as RuPaul /

[Interlude: Puff Daddy]

C'mon, c'mon, uh-huh /  
It's all about the Benjamins baby /  
Uh-huh, yeah /  
(repeat 4X)"

*Sheek rhyming on Puff Daddy, "All About the Benjamins"*

Many are the times in the history of rap music when money has been at the center of lyrical attention for narrators and lyricists. The topics has become so intertwined that a Swedish hip-hop radio-show at the end of 2002 broadcasted a feature show on "Money", in which the two radio-show hosts ranked and played their favorite top twenty-five rap songs on money – or trap, paper, papes, bones, skins, scratch, scrilla, stacks, flow, chips, cheese, cheddar, bank, grips, green, green guys, moolah, loot, looch, loaded, jing, flow, fetti, ends, ducats, dough, dead presidents, cream, c-notes, coins, chi-ching, cabbage, cake, beans, bankroll, Benjamins, big faces, biz-zank, bricks, butter to name but a few of the slang terms in circulation – and different aspects thereof.

"The music and vocal rapping in rap music also privileges flow, layering, and ruptures in line. Rappers speak of flow explicitly in lyrics, referring to an ability to move easily and powerfully through complex lyrics as well as of the flow in the music. The flow and motion of the initial bass or drum line in rap music is abruptly ruptured by scratching (a process that highlights as it breaks the flow of the base rhythm), or the rhythmic flow is interrupted by other musical passages. Rappers stutter and

alternatively race through passages, always moving within the beat or in response to it, often using the music as a partner in rhyme. These verbal moves highlight lyrical flow and points of rupture. Rappers layer meaning by using the same word to signify a variety of actions and objects; they call out to the DJ to 'lay down the beat,' which is expected to be interrupted, ruptured. DJs layer sounds literally one on top of the other, creating a dialogue between sampled sounds and words."

*Rose 1994, p. 39*

"Back in the day a nigga used to be asked out /  
Now a nigga holding several money-market accounts"  
*Busta Rhymes, "Dangerous"*

Rap music could, as is done by Tricia Rose (1994), be described as "a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music [which] began in the mid-1970s in the South Bronx in New York City as a part of hip-hop, an African-American and Afro-Caribbean youth culture composed of graffiti, breakdancing, and rap music." Academic scholars that have been theorizing hip-hop culture and rap music (Rose 1994; Perkins 1995), music journalists that have paid particular interest to the subject (George 1998), as have hip-hop fans (see e.g. [www.hiphopelements.com](http://www.hiphopelements.com)) – and all seem to agree on the advent of rap music: it stems out of the hip-hop culture in the South Bronx. Along with breakdancing and graffiti, it was one of the founding elements of hip-hop culture. Having sold several million copies in its first year, *Rapper's Delight*, released in 1979 by the Sugarhill Gang, is considered to be rap music's big break – before its release rap music had gone fairly unnoticed by the mainstream music and the popular culture industries (Rose 1994).

The influences in this new music form were as plentiful as the South Bronx community at the time was multi-ethnic. Borrowing – or stealing – from disco, funk, soul, rhythm and blues, reggae, techno, even heavy metal (the list could certainly be made longer), the music could typically be described as being a collage of snippets – sampled beats, breaks, melodies, groans, moans, phrases – from a variety of musical genres and dates. "Highly rhythmic" and "electronically based" or not, rap music heavily relied on the sampling technique, an activity anyone owning a stereo, a turntable and perhaps a record could partake in as the first "affordable" digital sampler hit the American markets in 1981. This patchwork of music samples was typically put together by the DJ, the disc-jockey, the turntablist. On top of the music the MC, the master of ceremonies, the rapper, laid out the lyrics, the "rhymed storytelling". Performed in the streets, in clubs, at parties, the roll of the MC has often been to keep the party hyped by yelling out call-and-response party chants such as: "All the ugly people be quiet!"

Other times the roll of the MC has been to battle other MCs. Battles, such as the battles starring Eminem as Bunny Rabbit presented in *8 Mile*, have been one of the main ingredients, perhaps even the fuel, in hip-hop culture from the very beginning. MCs have battled each other out on stage, DJs have battled each other out behind the turntables, dancers have battled each other out “on the floor”. Graffiti artists have been battling it out by painting subway trains. Hip-hop, claims Rose (1994, p. 36), “remains a never-ending battle for status, prestige, and group adoration, always in formation, always contested, and never fully achieved.”

Starting out as an underground, independent music form in the seventies, rap music steadily gained in popularity. Run DMC were one of the first rap acts to gain major commercial success in the eighties, releasing a gold-selling album in 1984, a platinum-selling album in 1985 and a multiplatinum-selling album in 1986. In that same year the Beastie Boys sold over four million copies of their album *Licensed to Ill*, hitherto the most albums sold by any rap act. By this time rap music was no longer a South Bronx or New York phenomenon, as rappers like Ice-T had seen to it that other cities, such as Los Angeles, had been added to the hip-hop map. By the end of the eighties it was quite clear that rap music was not just another fad, and in 1989 the music form had become of national concern in America, getting its own show on MTV, *Yo! MTV Raps*.

Despite the breakthroughs that rap music made in the eighties, Brian Coleman, in an article on the hip-hop underground, argues that rap remained an independent musical form for years – “artists at the time [the mid 80’s] were more concerned with getting their music out on the market than waiting to get signed, and the DIY aesthetic ruled an art form that was born on and thrived in the streets of urban America” (Coleman 1997). However, as Coleman goes on to state, the multi-million-selling albums mentioned above hinted of there being large audiences “out there” interested in rap music and thus immense profit potentials for major record labels. The “six-figure deals” were closing in on rap music. This commercialization continued in the nineties. Whereas streams of underground hip-hop moved in a direction where 12-inch singles and mix tapes were released on small independent labels, and where “album or singles sales of 5000 to 20,000 units [were] considered ‘hits’”, Coleman states that commercial hip-hop moved in a direction where the image of the artist was “as dependent on their videos as on their

beats, lyrics, and delivery”. Music video directors such as Hype Williams substituted the DIY aesthetics that Coleman points to with a “ghetto fabulous” aesthetics – i.e. an aesthetics showing off classical status attributes such as expensive cars, fancy milieus, exclusive clothing, sparkling colors, drinks, helicopters, and similar accessories in a most extravagant manner.

One could thus argue that this is where hip-hop culture finds itself in 2003, split into two streams; one (tributary-like?) characterized by staying independent, sticking to old-school hip-hop ideals, “keeping it real”, the other (river-like?) characterized by “ghetto fabulous” aesthetics and a bling-bling attitude. These two strategies in rap as a cultural mode of self-expression, the need to “keep it real” and the portrayal of possibilities, could be viewed as a dialectics of sorts. Whereas the first, as a textual strategy, might be seen as a form of ghetto realism, the second is closer in style to the fairy tale. Such stories, as Vladimir Propp (1968) so famously pointed out, tend to consist of a fairly simple structure: a young protagonist is given a task and solves this in a way that brings him fortune and glory (and a girl, as a bonus). As the “realist” tales represented in rap music tend to describe a fairly dark world, one where poverty, random violence and sociopathic behavior is rife, it follows the narrative logic that this is then juxtaposed with tales about abundance and a kind of *Scharlaffenland*. When “keeping it real” one may talk about food stamps, government cheese and going hungry, but this is countered with tales where one chooses between “cracked crab or lobster”, drinks “Cris(tal)” (a brand of champagne) and drives a customized Mercedes-Benz. In other words, the task at hand, for a young hero, is to go from one state to the other, to escape poverty. What is interesting, then, is that this escape is so often portrayed by economic ostentation, through capitalist imagery. The story we weave here is one from rags to (explicit) riches, and told in a language immediately recognizable to a student of business.

So, on to the way to the bling-bling. The first step is of course to get into the business. A number of rap classic read like manuals for the entrepreneurial youngster: The Notorious B.I.G. told of *The Ten Crack Commandments* which outline best practice in the drug trade, whereas E-40 has released an album entitled *The Blueprint of a Self-Made Millionaire*. The business aspect of getting into the music industry, in this case rap music industry, is importantly highlighted by Eric B. and Rakim in the title cut to their debut album *Paid in Full*, released in 1986. Living life broke, their talent for rhyiming and scratching

(DJ:ing/putting together beats) along with their contacts at the record company will according to their master plan help them make money off of their music. And not only are they going to get paid – they will get paid in full.

[Eric B]: Yo Rakim, what's up?  
 [Rakim]: Yo, I'm doing the knowledge, E., I'm trying to get paid in full.  
 [E]: Well, check this out, since Nobry Walters is our agency, right?  
 [R]: True.  
 [E]: Kara Lewis is our agent.  
 [R]: Word up.  
 [E]: Zakia/4th & Broadway is our record company.  
 [R]: Indeed.  
 [E]: Okay, so who we rollin' with?  
 [R]: We rollin' with Rush.  
 [E]: Of Rushtown Management. Check this out, since we're talking over this def beat right here that I put together, I wanna hear some of them def rhymes, know what I'm sayin? And together, we can get paid in full...

[Rakim]  
 Thinkin' of a master plan /  
 Cuz ain't nuthin' but sweat inside my hand /  
 So I dig into my pocket, all my money is spent /  
 So I dig deeper but still comin' up with lint /  
 So I start my mission – leave my residence /  
 Thinkin' how could I get some dead presidents /  
 I need money, I used to be a stick-up kid /  
 So I think of all the devious things I did /  
 I used to roll up, this is a hold up, ain't nuthin' funny /  
 Stop smiling, be still, don't nuthin' move but the money /  
 But now I learned to earn cos I'm righteous /  
 I feel great! So maybe I might just /  
 Search for a 9 to 5, if I strive /  
 Then maybe I'll stay alive /  
 So I walk up the street whistlin' this /  
 Feelin' out of place cos, man, do I miss /  
 A pen and a paper, a stereo, a tape of /  
 Me and Eric B, and a nice big plate of /  
 Fish, which is my favorite dish /  
 But without no money it's still a wish /  
 Cos I don't like to dream about gettin' paid /  
 So I dig into the books of the rhymes that I made /  
 To now test to see if I got pull /  
 Hit the studio, cos I'm paid in full"  
 Eric B. and Rakim, "Paid in Full"

Releasing their first record, *Strictly Business*, in 1988, Erick Sermon and Parrish Smith accentuated the business aspect of getting into the music business. They made no secret of what they were striving for – if their words are to be taken literally, they seem to have had one thing in mind: making money. As if the name of their first record wasn't explicit enough, Erick and Parrish had previously named their group EPMD, acronym for Erick and Parrish Making Dollars. What is notable here is that they in a conscious way use the cachet of having business contacts as a way to enhance their art. Referring to their agent, their business manager and their record company not as something to be revered (i.e. they are not forced to advertise their label), but as something that in a way belongs to them, as a part of their network, and as something they can be proud of “having”,

implies a strategy of self-actualization through business. While referring to an agent or ones management team would seem wildly out of place in the context of e.g. a pop song (N.B.: There are some counter-examples, though. For instance, Lynyrd Skynyrd recorded the track *Working for MCA* and AC/DC sometimes referred to show business aspects, as in *Ain't No Fun (Waiting Round To Be A Millionaire)*), it is part of the legacy of rap music. Making music is not only a cultural strategy, it is a form of metaphorical survival – making it in the world. In other words, rap lyrics can function as a way to talk about the world of business.

Similarly, rap music can highlight the work ethic. When Kool G Rap, assisted by DJ Polo, declared that he was “on the road to the riches” in 1989, he had long ago realized that the road he was on had been paved by Luther – or even Calvin. Hard work. Money in the bank. As simple as that. Having been a highly observant child this had become clear to him already at the age of five:

“When I was five years old I realized there was a road /  
 At the end I will win lots of pots of gold /  
 Never took a break, never made a mistake /  
 Took time to create 'cos there's money to make /  
 To be a billionaire takes hard work for years /  
 Some nights I shedded tears while I sent up prayers /  
 Been through hard times, even worked part time /  
 In a seafood store sweepin' floors for dimes /  
 I was sort of a porter takin' the next man's order /  
 Breakin' my back for a check from headquarters /  
 All my manpower for four bucks an hour /  
 Took the time, I wrote rhymes in the shower /  
 Shoes are scoffed 'cos the road gets rough /  
 But I'ma rock it 'til my pockets ain't stuffed enough /  
 All the freaks wouldn't speak 'cos my checks was weak /  
 They would turn the other cheek so I started to seek /  
 A way to get a play, and maybe one day /  
 I'll be performin' up a storm for a decent pay /  
 No matter how it seems I always kept the dream /  
 All the girlies scream and suckas get creamed /  
 Dreamed about it for five years straight /  
 Finally I got a break and cut my first plate /  
 The road ain't yellow and there ain't no witches /  
 My name is Kool G Rap, I'm on the road to the riches”  
*Kool G Rap & DJ Polo, “Road to the Riches”*

Others, such as Dilated Peoples, have paid more interest to more the metaphysical aspects of money: what is this thing that takes on different form, shape and color, that so many people are hung up on and that surrounds us everywhere we go? Their thoughts on the matter and the conclusion that they reach can be found in the track *Trade Money* from 2001. Trade Money, that's the point of it all. Money merely as the means for trading.



[Evidence]  
Yo, if you live day to day then you probably live life /  
More than a cat who got a Benz, bank roll and a wife /  
'Cause yo, I seen a lot of folks whose so-called success equals depress /  
And look up to broke peeps who hold mics now /  
Play the role, reverse and understand /  
Your friend with no dough might be closer to earth /  
Take the pressure off the weight and see how it equates /  
If you hold yourself back to make papes, get it straight /

[Iriscience]  
You can use cash for tools, to get parks and pools /  
Community centers, rec rooms and schools /  
Book money, off the books and food money /  
Rent money, electronic money and crew money /  
First thing, flippin' over dollars, searching /  
For the eye in the chief corner stone in thirteen /  
Stay beyond hungry and thirsty, ("dilated") /  
We're damn near starvin' and we're dehydrated /  
Make money, money, but please don't waste money /  
We don't love money but we don't hate money /  
Trade money!"  
*Dilated Peoples, "Trade Money"*

Just before the song fades out a guest MC with a Jamaican patois gives voice to the Christian view of love of money – as the root of all evil:

"You know, I just have vibes, you know, /  
The roots of evil is the love of money"  
*Dilated Peoples, "Trade Money"*

This dystopian view of money and capitalism, i.e. the “keeping it real”, is also a reoccurring narrative topic for rap lyricists (see e.g. Sticky Fingaz, *Money Talks*). At times this seemingly pessimistic mind-set converges with a resigned “Cash Rules Everything Around Me”-attitude. To get by you have got to get hold of some of that “cream”, even though it might involve criminal activity.

[Inspector Deck]  
It's been twenty-two long hard years of still strugglin' /  
Survival got me buggin', but I'm alive on arrival /  
I peep at the shape of the streets /  
And stay awake to the ways of the world cause shit is deep /  
A man with a dream with plans to make C.R.E.A.M. /  
Which failed; I went to jail at the age of 15 /  
A young buck sellin' drugs and such who never had much /  
Trying to get a clutch at what I could not... could not... /  
The court played me short, now I face incarceration /  
Pacin' – going up state's my destination /  
Handcuffed in back of a bus, forty of us /  
Life as a shorty shouldn't be so ruff /  
But as the world turns I learned life is hell /  
Living in the world no different from a cell /  
Everyday I escape from Jakes givin' chase, sellin' base /  
Smokin' bones in the staircase /  
Though I don't know why I chose to smoke cess /  
I guess that's the time when I'm not depressed /

But I'm still depressed, and I ask what's it worth? /  
Ready to give up so I seek the Old Earth /  
Who explained working hard may help you maintain /  
to learn to overcome the heartaches and pain /  
We got stickup kids, corrupt cops, and crack rocks /  
and stray shots, all on the block that stays hot /  
Leave it up to me while I be living proof /  
To kick the truth to the young black youth /  
But shorty's running wild smokin' ccess, drinkin' beer /  
And ain't trying to hear what I'm kickin' in his ear /  
Neglected, but now, but yo, it gots to be accepted /  
That what? That life is hectic... /  
Niggas gots to do what they gotta do, to get a bill /  
Ya know what I'm sayin'? /  
Cuz we can't just get by no more /  
Word up, we gotta get over, straight up and down /

[Chorus: Method Man]

Cash Rules Everything Around Me /  
C.R.E.A.M. /  
Get the money /  
Dollar, dollar bill y'all"

*Wu-Tang Clan (feat. Raekwon, Inspector Deck & Method Man), "C.R.E.A.M."*

While Raekwon, Method Man and Inspector Deck of the Wu-Tang Clan rap about the rough situation they were facing in their younger days, Jay-Z seems eager to talk about his situation now that he has left the streets and the daily struggle for money. That money is no longer an issue for Jay-Z becomes clear in e.g. *Money Ain't a Thang*:

"[Jermaine Dupri]

In the Ferrari or Jaguar, switchin' four lanes /  
With the top down screamin' out /  
Money ain't a thang

[Jay-Z]

Bubble hard in the double R, flashin' the rings /  
With the window cracked, holler back /  
Money ain't a thang

[Jermaine Dupri]

Jigga, I don't like it if it don't gleam clean /  
And to hell with the price cause /  
The money ain't a thang

[Jay-Z]

Put it down hard for my dogs that's locked in the bang /  
When you hit the bricks, new whips /  
Money ain't a thang

[Jermaine Dupri]

Come on, y'all wanna floss wit us /  
Cause all across the ball we burn it up /  
Drop a little paper, baby toss it up /  
Ya slackin' on your pimpin', turn it up /  
See the money ain't a thang"

*Jay-Z (feat. Jermaine Dupri), "Money Ain't a Thang"*

Similarly, in *I Love the Dough*, released in 1997, The Notorious B.I.G. does not seem overwhelmingly concerned with the Christian values brought up in *Trade Money* by

Dilated Peoples. The song – being an ode to money, riches, luxury and conspicuous consumption – is a flawless example of what the bling-bling is all about.

"We hit makers with acres /  
 Roll shakers in Vegas, you can't break us /  
 Lost chips on Lakers, gassed off Shaq /  
 Country house, tennis courts on horseback /  
 Ridin', decidin', cracked crab or lobster? /  
 Who say mobsters don't prosper? /  
 Niggaz is actors, niggaz deserve Oscars /  
 Me I'm, critically acclaimed, slug past your brain /  
 Reminisce on dames whose coochie used to stink /  
 When we rocked house pieces and puffy Gucci links /  
 Now we buy homes in unfamiliar places /  
 Tito smile everytime he see our faces /  
 Cases, catch more than outfielders /  
 Half these rappin' cats, ain't seen war /  
 Couldn't score if they had point game, they lame /  
 Speak my name, I make em dash like Dame /

[Chorus]

Gotta let it show, I love the dough, hey /  
 I love the dough, more than you know /  
 Gotta let it show, I love the dough, hey"

*The Notorious B.I.G. (feat. Angela Winbush), "I Love the Dough"*

And in case that is not explicit enough, Sean John Combs – at the time using the name Puff Daddy – sums up the concept well by declaring that: "it's all about the Benjamins", in the song with the same name. It could easily be argued, and it has been argued, that the bling-bling attitude – here represented by Jay-Z, Jermaine Dupri, The Notorious

**Fun bling-bling fact #1:**

Rap stars love to brag about their inches. But this usually refers to the size of their "rims", i.e. customized wheel rims for cars. 20" rims are seemingly seen as being on the small side, 21" the limit for blingin', and a serious player will try to get 23" rims – spinning, stop-and-go or otherwise tricked out. This fascination is so widespread that it can be quoted in an ironic manner, as when Eric Sermon (on the track "React") rhymes: "I got 20" rims when I lean yo! / ("Them tens! [tiny]") / I know – I keep 'em clean tho'..."

B.I.G. and Sean Combs – in recent years has come to be *the* dominating attitude in rap music, and in hip-hop culture. In forums designated to intellectualize on hip-hop culture, such as the Internet site [urbanthinktank.org](http://urbanthinktank.org), one can even find references to the bling-bling as an '-ism', a movement, a bling-bling-ism – a "supercilious rampage of material worship and indulgence" (Tyson 2001). We have however no interest in proving that that is the case, we settle by stating

that the bling-bling exists, (and that is one attitude among others).

What these short excerpts mean to show is that there is a specific rhetoric regarding the market economy and organized capitalism that prevails in rap lyricism. This is important for two reasons. One, it presents us with a case of narrative knowledge regarding

economy/organization that offers us an alternative to “high literature”. Unashamedly part of popular culture, rap lyricism still is a specific brand of literary representation, and might show us other ways of understanding how economy can be told as a narrative. Whereas the use of literature to teach/understand organization and economy has usually focused on “great books”, the “keeping it real”-ethos of rap does not allow for finery, and may give us an empirical counterpoint. Two, it presents us with a case where economic language is used in a positive, affirming way (regardless what one thinks of the veracity of such tales) by a subculture that is usually seen as repressed and downtrodden by the very capitalism it celebrates. This paradox, the marginalized celebrating that which marginalizes, may give us a case to specifically analyze the functioning of economy as language. Instead of observing how economy enters into narrations, we can in these cases see how economy is **performed** through narration, i.e. how one in a specific cultural setting can **do** economy.

## The Kitsch and the Glam

Returning to the bling-bling, we can see that one use of such economic representation is for sheer bragging purposes. Assuming that most rap artists come from modest means, or at least exist in a culture where economic hardship is seen as characteristic for lived experience (“keeping it real”), having achieved financial success is not necessarily something one would keep quiet about. Rap lyrics, as we have seen, keep a very high profile in relation to this. Where economic success in a middle-class culture would be signaled in a fairly modest way, in the rap culture the signaling of poverty and affluence seems to be performed *in extremis*. If we take the eponymous track *Bling-Bling*, this is recorded by a larger group known as the Cash Money Millionaires (the track is officially credited to B.G. featuring Big Tymers and Hot Boyz). This group is formed in the “Dirty South”, i.e. a part of the US that still lags behind the rest of the country when it comes to economic development, and where abject poverty among the black population is widespread.

“Hit the club light and the bitch up /  
Cash Money motto is to drink til’ we throw up /  
Nigga point the hoe out, guaranteed I can fuck /  
Woady ‘cause I’m tattooed and barred up /  
Medallion iced up, Rolex bezelled up /

And my pinky ring is platinum plus /  
Earrings be trillion cut /  
And my grill be slugged up /  
My heart filled with anger, 'cause nigga I don't give a fuck /  
Stack my cheese up /  
Cause one day I'm a give this street life up"  
*Baby rhyming on "Bling-Bling"*

"A lil' nigga seventeen, playin' with six figures /  
Got so much ice you can skate on it, nigga"  
*Lil' Turk rhyming on the same track*

This sheer mass of jewelry is obviously a matter of great pride. Lil' Turks hyperbole, where the "ice"/diamonds are portrayed less like adornments and more like a rhetorical weapon – a skating rink made out of one of the most expensive materials in known existence. A medallion with diamonds, a Rolex covered in more of the same, lavish earrings, stacks of cash and gold all over your teeth (Your smile is your "grill", and a player will get this "slugged up", i.e. fitted with caps in precious metals – according to Source Magazine # 158 (November 2002), Baby's current dental embellishments are made out of platinum, since gold teeth were becoming too common.) seem to represent a uniform of sorts. The track further contains references to private jets, customized cars and a helicopter with a candy-color paintjob and leather interior. Brand names are not massively present, as could be the case in the lyrics of the now deceased Notorious B.I.G., but several allusions to a particular type of "rims" (i.e. custom rims for car tires) are made. A somewhat more "demure" version of the same ethos can be found in the lyrics of Lil' Kim:

"I got lands in the Switzerland /  
Even got some sands in the Marylands /  
Bahamas in the spring /  
Baby, it's a big momma thing"  
*Lil' Kim, "Big Momma Thing"*

And further, in a display of brand-awareness, The Notorious B.I.G. can be found outlining his own shopping preferences:

I put hoes in NY onto DKNY (uh-huh) /  
Miami, D.C. prefer Versace (that's right) /  
All Philly hoes, dough and Moschino (c'mon) /  
Every cutie wit' a booty bought a Gucci (haaaaah!) /  
*The Notorious B.I.G., "Hypnotize"*

The list could be made endless: Ludacris professes to "smelling like Burberry cologne", Snoop Dogg to owning "50 dollar socks, a hundred thousand-dollar-shoes", Tupac referred to himself as a "self-made millionaire", and Jay-Z boasts that his new house is so

**Fun bling-bling fact #2:**

A reference to "Jacob" in a rap lyric means that one frequents the establishment of well-known New York jeweler Jacob Arabo, a.k.a. Jacob the Jeweler. Known for his special designs and his high-class diamonds, he caters for the elite among the bling-bling crowd. Calling out his name is a way to establish that one is a "real baller".

opulent that "you'd have to film *MTV Cribs* [a show that showcases the lifestyles of the newly rich and famous] for a week". Foxy spits: "Who could talk about that money better than me? / Who could stay so hood femininely?" Eminem has used sales-figures to "diss" (disrespect) enemies – such as when he on a track compared the sales of

Everlast's latest album (claiming this to be a paltry 40.000 copies in its first week) with himself "making records break". And so on.

The spectacular show presented in such narrations of personal wealth might be read as the desperate attempts to copy the symbolic capital of the upper classes, a flawed copying of elegance and style. However, the quest for bling-bling is not merely the province of urban black teenagers with a background in the projects. As e.g. the criminal case against the former CEO of Tyco International, Dennis Kozlowski, shows, it occurs in business too:

Tyco provided the agency with a list of Kozlowski's allegedly unauthorized purchases, including \$15,000 for the umbrella stand, \$6,300 for a sewing basket, \$17,000 for a "traveling toilette box," a \$2,200 wastebasket, \$2,900 for coat hangers, \$5,900 for two sets of sheets, a \$1,650 appointment notebook, and a \$445 pincushion.

[...]

Tyco said that Kozlowski borrowed about \$62 million in unauthorized interest-free loans from the company, of which he paid back about \$22 million. Kozlowski also authorized for himself forgiveness of \$19.4 million, according to the filing. Another \$21 million was reclassified to other loan accounts he maintained with the company.

[...]

The filing alleges that Kozlowski borrowed about \$30 million to buy property and build a home in Boca Raton, Fla., in 1997, and about \$7 million to buy a Park Avenue apartment in New York City in 2000. Kozlowski also borrowed millions for other real estate transactions and luxury purchases.

"The improper and unlawful conduct of Tyco's former CEO, CFO and Chief Corporate Counsel in enriching themselves at the expense of the company with no colorable benefit to the company has damaged Tyco," the company said in its SEC filing Tuesday.

<http://money.cnn.com/2002/09/17/news/companies/tyco/>

The difference is of course that while many may live lives of conspicuous consumption, what we see in rap lyrics is a way in which this can be turned into a form of art. Leaving aside philosophical ruminations regarding the limits of art, rap music is nevertheless a form of (popular) culture, and has its own aesthetic notions. One such, in the kinds of rap lyrics we here look to, is that making money and participating in the game of

capitalism can be glorified. The question is, can it be seen as anything besides a flawed attempt at self-actualization?

We wish to claim that in order to understand the lyricism of rap music (keeping in mind that bling-bling is an attitude in just one “genre” of rap music) we can analyze it as an economic language. In other words, rap lyrics can be seen as a way to convey narratives of economy within a sub-culture, so that economic success takes on a

political dimension. “Making it” is in such a perspective proof that the hardships presented by e.g. ghetto life can be overcome, and further (which is a more provocative statement), that one can develop a notion of success that isn’t tethered by the aesthetic notions of the white plutocracy and through this a culturally specific “economy”. One can, for instance, note the importance put on having and advertising a self-owned record label/company or a clothing label. To take but a few examples, Jay-Z owns (among other things) Rocawear, P. Diddy owns Bad Boy Records and Sean John Clothing, Master P

**Fun bling-bling fact #4:**

On the back page of The Source issue #164 there is an ad for the new H2 model of the Hummer series of cars. The copy of this ad copies the rap trope of spelling things out with a repeated “A to the B”-rhythm, and simply reads: “B to the L to the I to the N to the G”. Obviously the term is assumed to be immediately understandable.

the No Limit-group of companies and Snoop Dogg assorted businesses. All of these frequently name-check these in their lyrics. This is often portrayed in both music and magazines as “ghetto entrepreneurialism”. Still, our point is not to claim that such an economic movement exists, nor that rap lyrics and bling-bling:ism would be a solution to the real economic problems in the urban areas where rap music thrives. Rather, it is to show how a particular kind of narrative representation can be understood in context.

**Fun bling-bling fact #3:**

One of the oddest cases of product placement ever might be the famous Doggystyle-video by Snoop Dogg. This featured rap videos, a fashion show with Snoop’s K-Nine Clothing and hardcore pornography – thus combining clothes, music and sex in one video. Unsurprisingly, it sold very well.

“Snoop Dogg is a ghetto Martha Stewart. His ultimate commodity is a way of life. Everything he sells and endorses (the Blunt Wrap tobacco tubes for smoking Buddha, the K-Nine clothing for the pimps, playas, and ho’s, the “Freak Line” phone sex service, the rap music, the films, and so on) designates, validates, and delineates a specific mode of urban existence. He makes it easier to be ghetto, in the way Martha Stewart makes it easier to be bourgeois. With Snoop Dogg, you don’t have to lift a finger; all one has to do is buy whatever he endorses or produces and they will be 100 percent “real.” And “keeping it real” is as valuable to Snoop Dogg as claiming “it’s a good thing” is to Martha Stewart.”

*Mudede 2001*

## Rap as a minor literature

Our attempt to analyze rap lyrics will thus turn towards the theoretical, and we suggest that one might utilize the notion of a “minor literature”, as this has been developed by Deleuze and Guattari, in order to theorize the bling-bling. In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986) they present a framework for understanding a particular form of literature, a framework that emphasizes the political and the potential to deterritorialize. But what then is a minor literature?

Deleuze and Guattari outline three defining characteristics for such a literature:

- It is written in a major language, but from the margin, the position of a minority. It thus changes the rules of the major language, changing it from within and is “affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization” (ibid., p. 16). By changing the major language according to its own positions, it moves the borders of that language, changing the way in which it occupies a specific ideological/political (economic?) territory.
- It is, at its very core, political. The individual becomes the social, and also thoroughly political: “its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating in it” (ibid., p. 17). The “cramped space” in which a minor literature materializes forces all personal matters – the intrigues, concerns or affairs of the individual (fr. *l'affaire individuel*), such as familial matters, marital matters et cetera – to directly to connect politics. None is less indispensable than the other.
- This political nature of a ‘minor literature’ is further inseparable from its collective value. Deleuze and Guattari explain this inextricability: “because talent isn’t abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that ‘master’ and that could be separated from a collective enunciation. Indeed, scarcity of talent is in fact beneficial and allows the conception of something other than a literature of masters; what each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she



says or does is necessarily political, even if others aren't in agreement. The political domain has contaminated every statement (*énoncé*). But above all else, because collective or national consciousness is 'often inactive in external life and always in the process of break-down,' literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of the collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation." (ibid., p. 17)

To summarize, "[minor literature] does not repeat the surface forms of literature; it does not reproduce already established forms and rhythms. What is repeated in minor literature is literary becoming" (Colebrook 2002, p. 119). Deleuze and Guattari famously draw upon the works of Franz Kafka to explain what they mean by a minor literature: Kafka, who was a Czech Jew, lived in Prague but wrote in German. His German was a Prague German, with a withered vocabulary and an incorrect syntax, and it was influenced by Yiddish. This made his German a rare mutation, and it "allowed him the possibility of invention" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 20). As all minor authors, according to Deleuze and Guattari, he was a "foreigner to [his] own tongue".

"Kafka does not opt for a reterritorialization through the Czech language. Nor toward a hypercultural usage of German with all sorts of oneiric or symbolic or mythic flights (even Hebrewifying ones), as was the case with the Prague School. Nor toward an oral, popular Yiddish. Instead, using the path that Yiddish opens up to him, he takes it in such a way as to convert it into a unique and solitary form of writing. [...] He will make the German language take flight on a line of escape. He will feed himself on abstinence; he will tear out of Prague German all the qualities of underdevelopment that it has tried to hide; he will make it cry with an extremely sober and rigorous cry."  
*Deleuze & Guattari 1986, p. 25-26*

The Prague German in which Kafka wrote his novels had, according to Deleuze and Guattari the power to deterritorialize the 'high' German. Being an Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean cultural movement, the language, or languages, of hip-hop culture in general, and the bling-bling movement in particular, is similarly one, or several, Black English(es). Making use of a particular vocabulary and ignoring grammatical rules, this language is nurtured and developed on the streets. The influences are numerous and the creativity seems to be flourishing. This Black English is as explicit as it is crude. It *frightens*. Similar to Kafka's deterritorialized Prague German it is a deterritorialized English, to several degrees.

Through bling-bling rap lyrics this (already deterritorialized) Black English enters into the economic realms. By exhibiting an almost rapturous attitude towards material goods, bling-bling rap lyrics follow different formulas, rules and conventions than what is customary in economic language. In bragging and boasting of economic wealth – e.g. speaking about jewelry worth as much as a major piece of real estate – the bling-bling expresses views rarely expressed in this realm, in rather atypical ways. Being expressed by rappers – often with a background on the streets, leading life on the broke – these words come from social groupings that usually don't occupy a space in the economic discourse. Bling-bling rap lyrics thus challenges the limits of the economic language, blurring what can and cannot be said, creating an economic vernacular of its own, one that ruptures the Economic language, and it makes it take flight.

Paraphrasing Deleuze and Guattari (1987), rap lyrics submit the economic language to creative treatment as a minor language, constructing a continuum of variations. We are thus viewing the mutation of two specific languages: Economy and English. Entering into the economic realm, rap lyrics make the economic language stammer, scratch and wail. Rap lyrics draw from the economic language new timbres and accents where boasting, bragging, kitsch and glam are central issues; rap lyrics move the economic language to different social stratum – such as the “Dirty South”; deterritorializing the economic language to several degrees. The language is different, what it expresses is different, how it expresses it is different, and by whom it is expressed is different.

Stemming from the streets of South Bronx, hip-hop culture was regarded as an underground movement in the seventies and during part of the eighties. However, when Run DMC closed a sponsor deal with Adidas – their favorite footwear company – for their 1987 tour, it became a general concern. Magnified, perhaps blown out of proportion, the topic was important enough to be discussed in *The New York Times*. (Rose 1994) It was a highly political. Had Michael Jackson decided to do the same thing it is improbable that this had received similar attention. Run DMC was acting in a space where such an action, though first seen as merely a concern of the group itself, immediately became of public interest, and a political action.

Speaking of fashion; there seems to be a history of ideas that to some extent sheds light on the weakness bling-bling rappers show for (extraordinary expensive) designer clothes.

At Dapper Dan's, a hip-hop boutique once located on Harlem's 125:th street in New York City, one could in 1990 get more or less any faux designer outfit in thirty minutes (George 1998). In these times faux Gucci outfits, for instance, were *à la mode*. Rose attempts to explain this hip-hop fashion (in *Black Noise*):

"Clothing and consumption rituals testify to the power of consumption as a means of cultural expression. Hip-hop fashion is an especially rich example of this sort of appropriation and critique via style. Exceptionally large "chunk" gold and diamond jewelry (usually fake) mocks, yet affirms, the gold fetish in Western trade; fake Gucci and other designer emblems cut up and path-stitched to jackets, pants, hats, wallets, and sneakers in custom shops, works as a form of sartorial warfare (especially when fake Gucci-covered b-boys and b-girls brush past Fifth Avenue ladies adorned by the 'real thing')." *Rose 1994, p. 36-38*

What used to be a mode in which there was a point to the "fakeness" of the clothes and accessories, and wearing fake designer clothes was a political statement, has in the bling-bling morphed into a fascination for the "real thing", the same gear that adorned the ladies on Fifth Avenue. What was once – at the end of the eighties – perhaps a minoritarian mode, with some power to deterritorialize the fashion industry, has in the bling-bling era, in a sense, become major (possibly similar to the way rap as a music genre has become major?). Still, in so doing, this new fashion mode – Nelly wearing a Gucci hat in all his videos for instance – has, by importing the notion of bragging with the "real thing", instead gained power to deterritorialize the economic language. What yesterday was political in one sense, today is political in another. Morphing, but always, all the same, political.

Bling-bling lyrics are not political in the sense that e.g. the lyrics of Public Enemy were political – proclaiming a political manifest. Bling-bling lyrics have not been overly concerned with social incongruities, of September Eleventh, of the war in Afghanistan or of that in Iraq – although some rap artists have been engaged in these issues. Pharrel Williams of N.E.R.D., for instance, improvised a severe outburst of critique against his own government in a Swedish TV-show in February 2003; The Notorious B.I.G. seemed to be truly worried about the state of his country and the situation of the Black population in *Things Done Changed* from 1994. Still, bling-bling lyrics are not political in the sense that they talk of politics or critique politicians. They don't conceptualize and then express themselves in political matters, and they don't conceptualize and then express themselves in economical matters. They begin by expressing, they start off with

expression. The conceptualization comes after. And that is why they are political. It is not the content of bling-bling lyrics that is political, it is this specific expression.

“Ce qui se conçoit bien s’énonce... Mais une littérature mineur ou révolutionnaire commence par énoncer, et ne voit et conçoit qu’après.”

*Deleuze & Guattari 1975, p. 51-52*

“That which conceptualizes well expresses itself. But a minor, or revolutionary, literature begins by expressing itself and doesn’t conceptualize until afterward.”

*Deleuze & Guattari 1986, p. 28*

As economic actions, the boasting and the showing off link to politics. When Hype Willimas – the prominent R&B and hip-hop video director – chooses to live more or less permanently at the Beverly Hills Hotel, a thoroughly luxurious, pink painted property from 1912 that belongs to the Sultan of Brunei, for year long time periods (as he is said to have been doing in 1999), that becomes not only of his individual concern. It becomes a political statement. Kafka writes in his *Diaries*:

“Even though something is often thought through calmly, one still does not reach the boundary where it connects up with similar things, one reaches the boundary soonest in politics, indeed, one even strives to see it before it is there, and often sees this limiting boundary everywhere. ... What in great literature goes on down below, constituting a not indispensable cellar of the structure, here takes place in the full light of day, what is there a matter of passing interest for a few, here [i.e. in minor literature] absorbs everyone no less than as a matter of life and death.”

*Deleuze & Guattari 1986, p. 17*

Everything in it ties directly to politics, everything is political – this is what the second characteristic of minor literature is all about. In the foreword to *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* Bensmaïa states that:

“it [i.e. minor literature] is always political, not only in the sense in which one speaks of politics, but specifically in the sense in which further activity is no longer related to a unified instance, to an autonomous subjective substance that would be the *origin* of the choices we make, of the tastes we have, and of the life we lead.”

*Deleuze & Guattari 1986, p. xviii*

In the wake of the bling-bling, topics by tradition considered private, have become a public concern. The Source (#158) lists ten big spenders in the history of hip-hop. It is not a list composed of the ten wealthiest rap artists, it is not a list of the ten rap artist that have made the most money over the years – it is a list of ten people that have managed

to spend obscenely large amounts of money. The conspicuous *spending* of money has become an issue of general interest.

What brand of hat Nelly will wear in his next video becomes a hot topic that is discussed in TV-shows (we have a vague reminiscence of this particular topic being discussed in MTV's *The Lick* some time in the spring of 2003). When it turns out that Nelly wears a Gucci hat that becomes a political statement. It might well have an impact on the market, sales, brand identity, brand image, brand recognition. When Jay-Z and Jermaine Dupri rap about Ferraris and Jaguars they are not simply stating that they are driving around in expensive cars; by naming the brands their lyrics become politics, whether that they intended that or not, whether they thought of it or not. What the bling-bling rappers do, wear and say gets magnified. Rap lyrics morph into marketing, or anti-marketing, raises questions about sponsorships. Attention might not necessarily function in favor of the brands in question – rap artists might not at all be the kind of people that a brand wishes to be associated with. They create tensions. Again political.

In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* Deleuze and Guattari pose the question “in what sense is the statement always collective even when it seems to be emitted by a solitary singularity like that of the artist?” (1986, p. 83) The answer that Deleuze and Guattari present is that the statement “doesn't refer back to an enunciating subject who would be its cause, no more than to a subject of the statement who would be its effect” (ibid., p. 84). The statement cannot “be connected to a subject, doubled or not, divided or not, reflected or not”. Instead, when e.g. an artist produces a statement “it occurs necessarily as a function of a national, political, and social community.” (ibid., p.84) And this is the case even if the “objective conditions” of this community have not yet been given – the artist might well precede the collective conditions. The artist and the community, in a minor literature, are both components in a “collective assemblage” that itself produces the statement. However, this “collective assemblage” does not produce the statement in the same manner as a subject would have done; “it is in itself an assemblage of enunciation in a process that leaves no assignable place to any sort of subject but that allows us all the more to mark the nature and the function of the statements, since these exist only as the gears and parts of the assemblage (not as effects or products)”. (ibid., p. 84)

Rather than seeing K – the main character in three of Kafka’s novels – as a general function of a collectivity taken up by an individual, it is a matter of seeing K “*as a functioning of a polyvalent assemblage of which the solitary individual is only a part*, the collectivity being another part, another piece of the machine – without our knowing yet what this assemblage will be: fascist? socialist? capitalist? Or even all of these at the same time, connected in the most repugnant or diabolical way? We don’t know, but we have ideas about all of these – Kafka taught us to have them”. (ibid., p. 85)

We don’t know. The assemblage must be navigated, in some fashion. Through war, for instance. Battling has since the advent of rap music been a cornerstone in hip-hop culture. If one DJ would have been inventive enough, and skilled enough to start scratching records on the turntable, chances are another DJ soon would come along who was skilled enough to scratch records behind the back, with the foot or with a blindfold on – anything to surpass the other and win the battle. Taking part in the battle means giving in to the rules of battling, i.e. outperforming the other competitor. There have of course not existed any official battling rules, created by someone, written down somewhere. The rules of the battle have emerged through the collective. They are not a cause, or a result of the culture, they have been part of the culture. They are not controlled by some higher instance, such as a police force or a juridical system. Rather they have been part of the collective assemblage that makes up hip-hop culture.

Bling-bling is also a battle. This battle has however moved beyond scratching skills, rhyming flow and rapping technique. Not to say that these skills are not important, it is just that other variables have also become (perhaps equally, or even more?) important. Who has, or who spends, the most money, who sells the most records, who wears the most expensive jewelry, who drives the most expensive cars, who wears the most expensive shoes, who spends the most on seemingly meaningless accessories – these issues have also become important bases for battling. Who brags in the most magnificent manner?

The battle is inherent in hip-hop culture. And it is, as Rose states, “never-ending” and “never fully achieved” (Rose 1994, p. 36). Bling-bling is bragging, bragging is inherent in the culture, since it is inherent in the battle. In bling-bling rappers do not necessarily address other rappers – ‘disses’ frequently occur, but they are far from what bling-bling is

all about. Jay-Z does not brag of his new house being so opulent that it would take *MTV Cribs* a whole week to film it as a result of and a response to *MTV Cribs* filming, say, Nas's house for four or five days (Nas might not even have a large house, he has however been in an "overly-hyped feud" with Jay-Z). And that is the point; the bragging are not statements uttered in response to statements made by other rappers. The showboating has become part of the culture, a piece in the hip-hop machine, part of the collective assemblage that is hip-hop – becoming bling-bling.

Is there not in hip-hop culture, in the music industry, among fans, nonetheless, a strong focus on the individual rapper? One might well say that the individual artist is extremely important – Kitwana (2002) suggests that young black Americans are as aware of their whereabouts upon hearing of the deaths of the two most iconic rappers as "baby boomers" are of their whereabouts upon hearing of the murder of John F Kennedy or Dr. Martin Luther King. The personal cults surrounding The Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur will be hard to exceed. Does this, then, not suggest that the individual rapper, and the statements of that particular rapper, are connected to an individuated subject?

Let us turn our attention to what is said in bling-bling rap lyrics. When The Notorious B.I.G. in the song *Juicy*, from the 1994 album *Ready to Die*, raps about his mega size television set, his many cars, his private chauffeur, how he and his mother nowadays drink champagne whenever they are thirsty, and contrasts this new, wealthy state he is in with a former struggle for money in order to be able to raise his daughters, living in a one room-room shack in public housing, he gives voice to a dream inherent in a whole community – to get up and out of the ghetto, to get a break, to escape the stereotype of the black male, considered a fool, dropping out of school, to become someone or something, to get appreciation for who one truly is. To be able to get a megasize television set, two cars and a chauffeur, to drink champagne to quench ones thirst. A dream of fleeing from the struggle of the ghetto, yet staying in the crib – keeping the "same number, same hood". In expressing this collective dream of becoming something else – of taking flight – the statement becomes inseparable from the collectivity and the community. The statement is, rather than being individuated, a collective enunciation produced by a hip-hop assemblage. Again Hype Williams; when he spends most of his time at the Beverly Hills Hotel, it does not only become a political statement, it can be

read as articulating luxury as a desire immanent in the hip-hop culture, or the collective hip-hop assemblage. This statement, as well as that expressed by The Notorious B.I.G. in *Juicy*, occurs as a function of a Black community, of a hip-hop community in a process of becoming something different from what it is, or what it has been.



## Discussion

Economy, which is often read as synonymous with capitalism, is of course a language. It has its own vernacular, and its own particular grammar. What this text has attempted is to highlight a specific way in which this language has been used, in practice, within a specific cultural setting. Our claim is not that we, being white outsiders and academics, would have any greater insight into the thinking and the lived experience of urban black communities, as this claim would be dubious in any number of ways. What we have tried to do is to show how specific economic behaviors, here exemplified by bragging, can be understood as culturally dependent and further as performances of the economic language – performing capitalism.

Further, what we have attempted to show is that the discussion regarding organization/economy and literature can be extended out into the popular culture and into song lyrics. As a scholar in organization theory is still far more likely to go on about the organizational implications of the at times terminally dull *À la recherche du temps perdu* than the very real economies of the at times fabulous *Anna Nicole Show*, one could make a case for the claim that the interest in literature within organization studies is mainly about scholars amassing cultural capital (“Look, I’m learned!”) than analytical potential. This text can thus be seen as an extension to this, as two academics writing about the often crass, coarse and crude “literature” they actually enjoy rather than the good literature their mothers were pushing. Of course, this invites the question whether we aren’t just being wiggas (wannabe/white niggas), amassing our own cultural capital by proving that we are far more hip, cool and with it than those who would still try to dredge something out of Maurice Blanchot’s poor, mangled corpse. These are difficult and important questions. We will, though, not make an effort to sort them out here. We will, however, claim that there exists a bias towards “high literature” within the subfield of organization/literature, and that this needs to be addressed.

This text should thus be seen as an outline of a project. By using Deleuze and Guattaris concept of “minor literature” we have not wished to show that bling-bling is a way out, a real political alternative, merely that one can read bling-bling in such a manner and that one can situate the ways in which the economic language is used. Nor do we claim that bling-bling should be viewed as a major form of bragging in a specific culture, just that it

is an example of a more widespread way to talk the economic. What we do claim, however, is that rap lyrics can be seen as presenting an alternative way to address economic issues, and that this can be analyzed. Whether our reading will stand to critical scrutiny is less important.

Rap lyrics, particularly the brand discussed here, is a form of economic language. It might be seen as a form of resistance, along the lines of a minor literature, or it could be viewed as another aspect of how capitalism colonizes language. But counter to these two extremes lies a third possibility. In *The End of Capitalism ...as we knew it* Gibson-Graham (1996) argue that our readings of economy often stumble due to our tendency to polarize the issue. Capitalism is seen as a binary issue, either not there or there as total colonization. They instead exhort us to analyze the ways in which economic “hybrids” are created, cultural mixtures of capitalism and resistance. Bling-bling might be seen as one such hybrid. It has obviously bought into the larger capitalist project of amassing wealth, measuring all things in money, conspicuous consumption. Nevertheless, it has done so whilst retaining specific cultural markers, and part of its attitude can be seen as defiance against another form of capitalism, the racialized white capitalism that still works to keep ethnic minorities in a subjugated position. So throwing up them bracelets, sippin’ on that Cris, fittin’ up that Benz with Lorenzo rims might not save you. But it’ll feel real good for a while. And while you might have nothing, it can still feel good to know that Jay-Z makes MBAs look like broke fools. Bragging, as an act, can be political. It is uncultured, brash, plays by the wrong rules, but still manages to stay within the economic language. Bragging, in other words, as an economic literature unto itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Although we realize that much of the language used in the songs we quote can be seen as offensive, we choose to present it “as is”, and have not taken any particular stand towards it. We will thus not discuss the use of terms such as “nigga”, “bitch”, et cetera, and refer the interested reader to Rose (1994) and Coleman (1997).

*Pink Machine* is the name of a research project currently carried out at the Department of Industrial Economics and Management at the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. It aims to study the often forgotten non-serious driving forces of technical and economical development. We live indeed in the reality of the artificial, one in which technology has created, constructed and reshaped almost everything that surrounds us. If we look around us in the modern world, we see that it consists of things, of artefacts. Even the immaterial is formed and created by technology - driven by the imperative of the economic rationale.

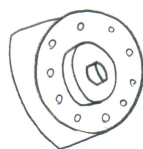
As Lev Vygotsky and Susanne Langer have pointed out, all things around us, all these technological wonders, have their first origin in someone's fantasies, dreams, hallucinations and visions. These things, which through their demand govern local and global economical processes, have little to do with what we usually regard as "basic human needs". It is rather so, it could be argued, that the economy at large is governed by human's unbounded thirst for jewellery, toys and entertainment. For some reason - the inherent urge of science for being taken seriously, maybe - these aspects have been recognised only in a very limited way within technological and economical research.

The seriousness of science is grey, Goethe said, whereas the colour of life glows green. We want to bring forward yet another colour, that of frivolity, and it is pink.

*The Pink Machine Papers* is our attempt to widen the perspective a bit, to give science a streak of pink. We would like to create a forum for half-finished scientific reports, of philosophical guesses and drafts. We want thus to conduct a dialogue which is based on current research and which gives us the opportunity to present our scientific ideas before we develop them into concluding and rigid - grey - reports and theses.

Finally: the name "Pink Machine" comes from an interview carried out in connection with heavy industrial constructions, where the buyer of a diesel power plant worth several hundred million dollars confessed that he would have preferred his machines to be pink.

Claes Gustafsson



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