Nas and Postmodern Discourse

Often hip-hop lyrics are enjoyed, critiqued, and even used in court as testimony for the transparent reporting of literal events. While songs often depict a reality experienced firsthand and emcees constantly strive to maintain a discourse of keeping it real they also actively employ and acknowledge a large amount of artistic license. Emcees often acknowledge that once they become rappers, they can no longer keep it real exhibited in T.I.’s line “I’m too fly to fight, a got a body guard to do that.” Hip-hop discourse is neither direct speech nor embellished fantasy, but a postmodern embodied account of both conditions fueled by a context of exploitive power and economic gain. Ultimately, emcees occupy a space in society that is both reflective of realistic conditions and an extension of those conditions.

The discourse contained in hip-hop reflects real life and holds genuine truth as a sociological voice. It is also a global market that partially depends on said conditions for profit while sustaining a textual discourse that perpetuates said conditions. As Sohail Daulatzai states, hip-hop discourse is representative of local and global urban conditions.

It is a product of the postindustrial condition: the movement of industry and capital away from urban centers across America’s borders, a process that devastated urban communities in the United States, that, when combined with white flight, political scapegoating, and repression created these grimy conditions and pockets of poverty that birthed this thing called hip-hop… It’s important to understand how these geographies of violence are connected and related in the global economy because for far too long many have believed that what happens here, be it in Detroit, New York, or L.A., has little or no bearing on what occurs in other cities like
The history of hip-hop is intertwined with the history of globalized industrialization and the advent of a world market. Nas, sitting in Queensbridge, is a product of global forces as well as a producer of public discourse concerning these forces; he is a commentator of everyday life. He recites on the dichotomy in *Illmatic*

*I sip the Dom P, watchin Gandhi til I'm charged*

*Then writin in my book of rhymes, all the words pass the margin*

*To hold the mic I'm throbbin, mechanical movement*

*Understandable smooth shit that murderers move wit*

*The thief's theme, play me at night, they won't act right*

Watching the 1982 film *Ghandi* staring a white actor, Ben Kingsley, painted in brown face, Nas notes how his discourse will exacerbate violence on the street. The contradiction is that he is watching a film on non-violence, more specifically the rhetoric or discourse of non-violent protest. He is self-reflexive of his own role within the global struggle of representation. He is also in a peculiar postmodern position where he can sip expensive champagne while living in the projects amidst senseless violence. These contradictions both familiarize and defamiliarize words while illuminating contradicting realities. Hip-hop lyrics often represent a highly communicative dialogic discourse that invites the listener to do the work Derrida describes as deconstruction, to decipher what is being said by recognizing the inherent contradictions within.

We join this on-going narrative through the textual lens of Nas’s hip-hop classic *Illmatic*. Officially released in 1994 Nas, then twenty years old, had been formally working on the album since he was seventeen. The cover like all classic albums is the first introduction to the textual product as the auditory story within begins visually on the cover. Featuring a young Nas superimposed on top of the Queensbridge projects the emcee is a product of this place, the largest federally subsidized housing project in the United States. He is a child literally with Queensbridge on his mind. The theme of the
iconic album cover would be repeated numerous times in hip-hop from Notorious B.I.G. to Lil Wayne to Drake more recently. These albums feature lone baby photos of the artists on the cover against a minimal backdrop. Nas holds an aura of authorship with this trope and this is commented on by Reakwon of the Wu-Tang Clan who references the cover on his solo album *Only built for Cuban Links*, “they even biting Nas’ shit” referring to Notorious B.I.G.’s album cover *Ready to Die*, which appeared shortly after *Illmatic*. In hip-hop modus operandi even this element is a detournment by Nas who redoes a jazz album cover from 1974 that depicts a similar scene.

Nas, *Illmatic* 1994

Notorious B.I.G., *Ready to Die* 1994

Howard Hangar Trio, *A Child is Born* 1974

The difference between time periods and the similarity of the two images creates an interesting juxtaposition. Moving from rural scenes of American folklore to the presence an urban reality the innocent smile of optimism in the original is replaced by the stoic vison of a kid who has seen to much too soon. The child’s place does not seem marked by a sense of being better off, but more aware of the conditions that are decidedly bad. While Nas’s era would be slightly better off, it would also entail much more confusion and the discourse of hip-hop would reflect this. Hip-hop is both blues and jazz, downtroden and upbeat, fucked-up and tricked-out.

The child motif is also interesting when we consider the explicit lyric label in the lower right hand side. These two markers of content play off one another dominant vs. subversive, of children, but not for children, child-like, but not childish. Modern rapper Chilish Gambino plays with this elemental theme in hip-hop with his
moniker as does Slick Rick’s classic album title *Children Stories*. These works and others have been labeled “gangsta” rap (mostly stemming from a backlash of conservative forces originating against N.W.A., Ice Cube, and Ice T to name a few) and were made by young people often starting off in their teens. The stories are told from the perspective of a youthful voice. Hip-hop is constantly giving birth to another generation of society dealing with a new set of rules made by the previous generation. The hip-hop generation is always severed and connected to the previous. We see it sampling techniques, in visual and textual appropriation, and the constant change and short life-spans of hip-hop works, emcees, and sounds. Hip-hop discourse exhibits a constant striving to outdo and redo what was just done in order to keep it authentic, current, and ahead of the past.

The warning label on the cover mark these children stories as explicit. Placed on hip-hop albums in the 1990s this label represents a war on youth, a silencing of narrative form, and a dominant discourse. The child on the front is the voice of this explicit narrative, a narrative that he or she would not be able to read, but only tell. A basic tenet in hip-hop discourse, ‘gangsta’ rap, or what Ice-T calls reality rap is the theme of an undesirable environment producing a hardened individual with an equally undesirable attitude. While Tupac made millions and suffered greatly off of a ‘gangsta’ mentality his THUG LIFE rhetoric spoke on the issue through acronym, “The Hate U Give Little InfantsFuck Everyone.” Marking particular stories as explicit and potentially dangerous is not innocent. It discredits the messages contained and it is now difficult to find a hip-hop album without one of these labels. As Jeff Chang writes in his telling book *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*.

During the 1980s, cultural conservatives had launched attacks on everything from government funding of transgressive art to campus initiatives toward multiculturalism and inclusion. But in rap music, race, generation and pop culture all came together. By attacking hip-hop, conservatives could move their culture-war agenda out of obscure
Congressional debates and campus Academic Senates into the twenty-four-hour media spin cycle. (393)

In 1985, after overhearing her daughter listening to popular music, Tipper Gore wife of Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore started a social-political group Parents Music Resource Center to combat sexually explicit lyrics in music. The group was soon joined by other conservative groups who first pointed their antidialogic attention at pop music such as Cyndy Lauper and Madonna, then at ‘satanic’ heavy metal, and ultimately at hip-hop. The reasons are precisely because the sociological content is so rich. Large disputes occurred resulting in arrests, fines, and lawsuits involving the rhetoric of Ice Cube, Ice-T, and 2Live Crew, but many other political emcees such as Public Enemy, Boots, and Paris were also negatively affected.

The conscious underground hip-hop scene would counter this backlash, but never be able to tell the whole story for commercial profit as the dominant discourse would create a market weary of confrontation. What type of confrontational discourse is profitable and what type is not? Why? These albums were assaulted because they spoke of social ills, a conscious endeavor and confrontation at certain levels doesn’t sell. Chang notes that this era during the mid 1990s is marked by an all out war on American youth a decidedly more diverse and potentially subversive youth with a hip-hop face. A culture that respects the past through the remix, but embraces the youth by moving forward despite direction.

*It Ain’t Hard to Tell (3:22), Identity, and Social Advocacy*
The most commercial track on the album is hardly a bass-filled club banger, but it does use the most well known samples on the album, Michael Jackson’s *Human Nature* and Kool & the Gang’s *N.T.*, while receiving the most radio play.


It is a lasting example of real New York rap that has outlived others such as Rakim to remain current. During a time when Dr. Dre and the West Coast was presenting hip-hop as a realistic thug fantasy, Tribe Called Quest was displaying group consciousness, and Wu-Tang was bordering horror-rap Nas brought the best New York producers to create an underground classic that would be displayed on the front page of hip-hop discourse. The album would receive five mics from the Source magazine and Nas would declare his own identity as a complicated emcee. Imani Perry sums up the
The half-man, half-amazing self-definition from Nas comes from the kind of talk popular in young populist black religions of the twentieth century, and specifically from the Five Percenters he references when he calls himself “Afro-centric Asian.” Being half man, half amazing is a statement of the divinity in the flesh and blood person, a radical concept when embodied by a black man, the member of a group often demonized, stereotyped, and abused by society. Nas therefore adopts a political self-concept that is part of an African diasporic religious nationalism. The ways he references Five Percenter theology and the heavens in this song is in some ways an early visions of the way he mentions black power, African American intellectuals, and the history of black music and art in his later songs. Nas always wants to give you something to think about that is bigger than you. He appreciates symbolism and his connections to a larger community: spiritual, racial and political. At the same time, he’s also committed to a kind of political realism. He never disses or departs from the life of the street; instead, he makes it plain and puts it into economic, historical, and social context. (196)

"It Ain't Hard to Tell" is an early single and probably the most well-know track on the record. It also seems to have the least to offer besides being the best selling song on a classic album that was difficult to sell. The verses are shorter on this track than they are on others and the song follows the most predictable organizational pattern. As we begin our artifact analysis of Nas’s *Illmatic* our continual goal might be to decipher between the existential dread contained in our own lives and the fantastical anguish presented in our public discourses. As we are both given our conditions and constructing of our own realities we must be aware of the ecstasy of the simulated world. Our postmodern struggle will not be to win old models of women vs. patriarchal society, black vs. white, working class vs. ruling class, have vs. have-nots, but the defining of the real from the unreal, the real from the hyperreal and to maintain the desire or curiosity for recognizing
Charles Hamilton and Stokely Carmichael re-defined black identity in the 1960s using the phrase Black Power as a way to re-create and empower previously marginalized individuals. In relation to the more universal struggle exemplified by the civil rights movement and the rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr. the Black Power movement reflects a more direct call for rhetorical action. Like Nas later, the movement attempts to name the disenfranchised with new words or similar words with new meaning that recognize the inherent inequalities within society. For Nas, like Hamilton and Carmichael, "It Ain't Hard to Tell" that the populations of American ghettos are equivalent to colonized peoples. Nas redefines himself in the single of his first album as an exceptional individual living amidst great oppression as "It Ain't Hard to Tell" that Nas and his generation have great potential to redefine historical struggles through poetry, expression, and effort. He remarks at the end of the track that this redefinition is inherently political and subversive as his verses "should be locked in a cell." He refers to himself in the third person in this song noting that while he is the mouthpiece of this movement it is larger than himself. While the smooth popular instrumental of Michael Jackson plays in the background Nas declares that the declaration of his identity will have the impact of an explosion and your mind will not have the ability to choose. This poetic violence is a metaphor for the rhetoric of change through art. The three intricate verses on this track are marked as a dense introduction that is designed to capture the audience's attention.

Carmichael and Hamilton in "Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America" similarly bring the notion of black identity to the foreground of American consciousness by recognizing the larger context of white privilege. "We shall have to struggle for the right to create our own terms through which to define ourselves and our relationship to the society, and to have these terms recognized. This is the first necessity of a free people, and the first right that any oppressor must suspend" (35). The ability to define through one's own means of expression is what is at stake for the Black Power movement and later for Nas and his means of expression, hip-hop. Hamilton and Carmichael continue, "Black people must redefine themselves, and only they can do that" (37). Nas declares himself "half-man half amazing" as he is half human and part...
historical condition. He is "ill plus matic" resulting in the neologistic "Illmatic" emcee that creates a creative and resistant dialogic voice much like Black Power did a generation earlier.

Hamilton and Carmichael note "from now on we shall view ourselves as African-Americans and as black people who are in fact energetic, determined, intelligent, beautiful and peace-loving" (38). At the same time a new identity is being formed old structures should also be destroyed as "the advocates of Black Power reject the old slogans and meaningless rhetoric of previous years in the civil rights struggle. The language of yesterday is indeed irrelevant: progress, non-violence, integration, fear of "white backlash," coalition" (50). We can see all of these previous postulates dismantled in contemporary hip-hop discourse as the struggle now will be rhetorical, physical, and decidedly postmodern as many emerging notions of identity and political discourses emerge. Situated within this emergence is the postmodern rhetoric of Nas and the larger movement hip-hop.