

Hip-Hop in the Middle: Overcoming Outsider Status in Midwest Rap

by

Matthew Joseph Yuknas

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Dissertation Committee:

Zachary Wallmark, Chair

Juan Eduardo Wolf, Core Member

Stephen Rodgers, Core Member

Mark Whalan, Institutional Representative

University of Oregon

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Matthew Joseph Yuknas

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The history of Midwest hip-hop reflects the region's longstanding experience of cultural isolation, often defined in comparison to its coastal counterparts. As a result, hip-hop scholarship has largely centered on the most commercially visible artists from these three regions, often sidelining the Midwest. Yet despite this marginalization, Midwestern rappers have carved out a space within what has effectively become a "tri-coastal" tradition. Markers of location-based authenticity in hip-hop have forced rappers from areas considered less traditionally credible to align themselves with a broader regional identity to enhance their legitimacy and cultural standing within the genre.

Incorporating methodologies from a wide range of disparate fields, including those traditionally associated with the humanities and social sciences, this dissertation considers the role of lyrical intertextuality (literary studies), racial identity (cultural studies), and media formatting to illuminate how Midwest rappers construct credibility and negotiate belonging within a genre shaped by both regional marginalization and racialized expectations. I focus on this marginalization in the context of three case studies wherein racially and regionally peripheral artists navigate questions of legitimacy and belonging within a genre historically defined by Black, coastal, urban experience. To explore how Midwest rappers use intertextual lyrical references to build community and credibility, I look at Minneapolis duo Atmosphere. Next, examining how Midwest artists negotiate whiteness amidst hip-hop's historically Black ethos, I look at Detroit duo Insane Clown Posse in relation to the well-studied and popular rapper

Eminem. Finally, as a case study of independent label formatting strategies, I revisit Atmosphere and their label Rhymesayers Entertainment to show how the neglected, “broken” EP format was reimagined as a deliberate artistic and commercial tool.

By situating Midwest hip-hop within broader conversations about authenticity, marginalization, and cultural production, this dissertation reveals how artists from racially and geographically peripheral positions challenge dominant hip-hop narratives. It argues that these artists do not merely adapt to exclusion but actively reshape the genre’s expressive possibilities through practices that blend resistance, reinvention, and community-building. Ultimately, this work contributes to a more inclusive understanding of hip-hop’s geography and cultural logic, foregrounding the creative agency of those operating from the margins.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

If the people laugh and giggle when you tell them where you live say shhh
And if you know this is where you want to raise your kids say shhh
If you're from the Midwest and it doesn't matter where say shhh...

... And if you ain't gonna leave cause this is where you're from say shhh

—Atmosphere¹

It is tough being in the middle. Psychologist Jeannie S. Kidwell's study of family dynamics argues that the middle child "reveals a lowered sense of self-esteem as compared to firstborn and lastborn."² Kidwell further claims that the middle child's insecurity or lack of confidence is driven by a "lack of uniqueness" in which "achieving status, affection, and recognition among siblings and feeling special in the eyes of one's parents is apparently more difficult."³ This familial dynamic offers a compelling metaphor for regional hierarchies in American culture, where geography, too, can shape perceptions of status and identity.

The geographical Midwest of the United States is undoubtedly the middle child inserted between the older, responsible East Coast and the younger, cooler West Coast. Like this sibling

¹ Atmosphere, "Say Shhh...", *Seven's Travels*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 2003.

² Jeannie S. Kidwell, "The Neglected Birth Order: Middleborns," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Feb. 1982), 234.

³ Ibid.

relationship, cultural studies scholars consistently evaluate the Midwest in relation to coastal urban centers like New York City and Los Angeles: “Midwestern tropes [only] attain cultural meaning in contrast to what the Midwest is imaged not to be (i.e., global, cosmopolitan, racially diverse, Eastern, or coastal),” writes anthropologists Britt Halvorson and Joshua Reno.⁴ In this way, the Midwest’s perceived cultural marginality becomes both its burden and its creative engine—fueling distinct forms of expression that emerge precisely because of, and in resistance to, its outsider status.

Often referred to as “America’s heartland,” the Midwest region typically includes twelve states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin (Figure 1). Bordered by the Great Lakes to the Northeast and the Great Plains to the West, the Midwest occupies a central position in the national imagination, frequently associated with agricultural production, industrial labor, and a distinct ethos of pragmatism and modesty. Still, many Americans chronically overlook and undervalue the Midwest as “flyover states.” Its largest city, Chicago is nicknamed the “Second City” for its inferior status compared to New York. In 2019, Iowa Senate Finance Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley voiced his concern of the national political and economic neglect the Midwest faces, writing that “members of Congress representing Middle America have been talking about the challenges facing the Midwest for years, but our warnings have largely fallen on deaf ears ... without immediate action, the heart of the nation may stop beating.”⁵ But Midwesterners persist,

⁴ Britt Halvorson and Joshua Reno, “What is the Midwest Thinking? U.S. Regionalism and Nationalism,” Member Voices, *Fieldsights*, March 7, 2019, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/what-is-the-midwest-thinking-u-s-regionalism-and-nationalism>.

⁵ Chuck Grassley, “America Will Suffer if Problems Plaguing Midwest Aren’t Addressed by Congress,” Chuck Grassley Official Website, October 28, 2019, <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/commentary/america-will-suffer-if-problems-plaguing-midwest-aren-t-addressed-congress-senate>.

grinning and bearing their underdog status masked underneath a superficially polite “Midwest nice” attitude of non-confrontational passive-aggressiveness.

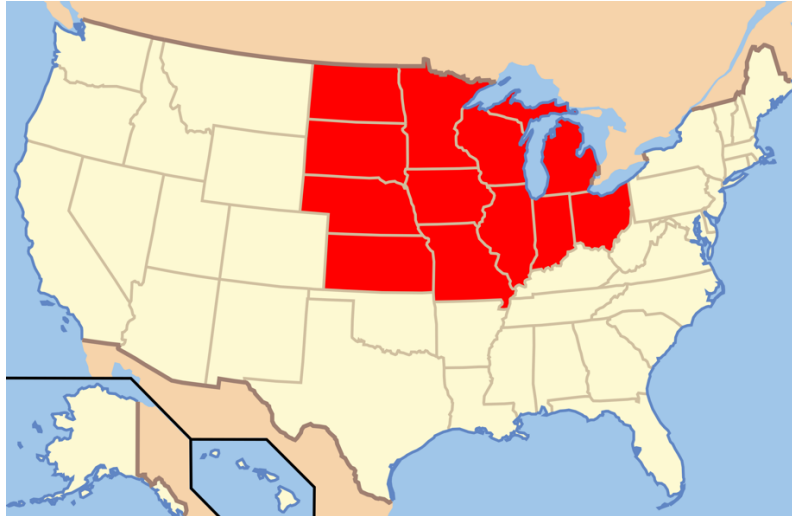


Figure 1: Map of United States of America highlighting the Midwestern states.

The history of Midwest hip-hop reflects the region’s longstanding experience of cultural isolation, often defined in comparison to its coastal counterparts. On one end stands the older East Coast sibling—New York City, birthplace of hip-hop in the 1970s and 1980s—and on the other, its younger West Coast sibling—Los Angeles, birthplace of gangsta rap and G-Funk in the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁶ Adding to this coastal dominance, the American South emerged in the late 1990s with the meteoric rise of what came to be known as the “Dirty South” or “third coast,” producing thriving rap subcultures in cities like Atlanta, Houston, and New Orleans. As a

⁶ The rise of Chicago house and Detroit techno in the 1980s positioned the Midwest as a central force in the global evolution of electronic dance music, even as it remained peripheral in the national hip-hop landscape. While house and techno gained traction in international club circuits, Midwestern rap struggled for visibility within a genre still dominated by the coasts. This simultaneous centrality and marginalization reveal a fragmented cultural geography: the Midwest was a creative epicenter for one Black musical innovation (EDM), while its contributions to another (hip-hop) were largely overlooked. Hip-hop in the Midwest thus emerged under conditions of aesthetic and industrial peripherality, developing alternative modes of distribution, community-building, and self-legitimization in contrast to the more institutionalized EDM scenes.

result, hip-hop scholarship has largely centered on the most commercially visible artists from these three regions, often sidelining the Midwest. Yet despite this marginalization, Midwestern rappers have carved out a space within what has effectively become a “tri-coastal” tradition. Why, then, have musicologists and national audiences so often overlooked their contributions? Their subservient position in hip-hop studies stems from several factors, most importantly, perceived inauthenticity of their peripheral location.

Authenticity in hip-hop has long functioned as a central organizing principle grounded in the articulation of lived experience, cultural knowledge, and community accountability. While the notion of authenticity is inherently fluid, it often operates through perceived alignment between an artist’s background and their lyrical content, style, and public persona. Scholars including Imani Perry and Murray Forman have emphasized that authenticity is not a fixed attribute, but a performative stance negotiated through language, geography, and social context.⁷ Artists signal credibility through techniques like signifyin’, regional slang, autobiographical storytelling, and allusions to local struggles. Importantly, authenticity is judged not just by commercial audiences or critics but by internal community standards in which artists are held accountable by peers and fans who share similar experiences and reference points.

The value of authenticity in hip-hop lies in its capacity to confer legitimacy within a genre historically rooted in resistance and truth-telling. As a predominantly Black expressive form emerging from marginalized urban spaces, hip-hop developed as a space where voices excluded from mainstream narratives could claim authority through the credibility of their testimony. This makes authenticity not just an aesthetic or marketing device, but a form of

⁷ Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); and Murray Forman, *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

epistemological currency: who gets to speak, and who gets to be believed. Yet, as the genre's cultural geography expanded, regional affiliation became one of its most powerful markers of authenticity. Markers of location-based authenticity in hip-hop have forced "rappers who come from less traditionally credible locations [to] link themselves to a broader region in order to establish more credibility," writes Mickey Hess.⁸ So, how do peripheral artists negotiate membership and articulate credibility in a genre still largely defined by New York, Los Angeles, and the South? This question becomes especially critical in understanding the rise of Midwestern hip-hop artists who had to develop alternative strategies of self-legitimization from outside the traditional cultural centers.

The dynamic relationship between "authenticity" and region serves as my point of departure. In the 1990s, as hip-hop entered the mainstream and regional styles solidified into marketable brands, authenticity became increasingly tethered to geographic identity. To diffuse critiques of inauthenticity, rappers from the Midwest necessitated a means to mark credibility through an established affiliation with the national hip-hop community while simultaneously articulating a distinguishable style—an unconscious artistic construct "that the audience can ultimately identify," as hip-hop scholar Adam Bradley defines it.⁹ This dual imperative—gaining national recognition while asserting local distinctiveness—shaped the lyrical content, production styles, and visual aesthetics of Midwestern hip-hop in the 1990s and beyond. Artists navigated a cultural landscape in which authenticity was not only a matter of personal narrative, but also a performance of regionality.

⁸ Mickey Hess, "Introduction: 'It's Only Right to Represent Where I'm From': Local and Regional Hip-Hop Scenes in the United States" in *Hip-Hop in America: A Regional Guide* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010), x.

⁹ Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip-Hop*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Civitas, 2017), 123.

In addition to the prevalent tri-coastal bias, hip-hop is also decidedly Black; “hip-hop is Black music, without question,” said rapper 50 Cent during an interview with YouTube’s *Music Choice*.¹⁰ Although the widely documented vital contributions of Latinos in the creation of hip-hop is acknowledged, hip-hop has been conceptually and ideologically rooted in the African-American experience since its mythologized “birth” on August 11, 1973—the date of DJ Kool Herc’s first breakbeat party in the South Bronx. The alternative identities developed within hip-hop, writes seminal hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose, “draw on Afrodiasporic approaches to sound organization, rhythm, pleasure, style and community.”¹¹ Blackness, therefore, is another important socially recognized performance marker of “authentic” or “real” hip-hop. But Rose also states that despite while hip-hop is “a black idiom that prioritizes black culture and that articulates the problems of black urban life, [hip-hop] does not deny the pleasure and participation of others.”¹² All the artists examined in this dissertation present as phenotypically white. Race-based authenticity offers an additional layer of complexity in constructions of hip-hop credibility when combined with peripheral location.

Authors have long noted how marginalized communities have negotiated themselves into the larger hegemonic culture, but few have addressed how whiteness and location in hip-hop have contributed to an alternative kind of marginalization defined in contrast to a default Blackness and tri-coastal centrality. This dissertation takes a historical approach, focusing on artists during the 1990s and early 2000s to examine how whiteness and regional identity shaped

¹⁰ Curtis Jackson, “Chronicles: 50 Cent – Respect For Eminem,” *Music Choice*, posted August 26, 2014, YouTube video, 2:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKDdmRJBcrU&t=29s>.

¹¹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 1994), 185. For more on Latinos and hip-hop, see Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005).

¹² Rose, *Black Noise*, 4-5.

participation in hip-hop’s evolving national discourse. I focus on this marginalization in the context of three case studies wherein racially and regionally peripheral artists navigate questions of legitimacy and belonging within a genre historically defined by Black, coastal, urban experience. I show how Midwest artists construct their credibility by engaging with hip-hop’s core aesthetic values while simultaneously negotiating their racial and geographic outsider status to reveal how rappers continually rearticulate authenticity in hip-hop through a dynamic interplay of signification practice, race, and distribution format. The dissertation approaches these three topics through case studies. To explore how Midwest rappers use intertextual lyrical references to build community and credibility, I look at Minneapolis duo Atmosphere. Next, examining how Midwest artists negotiate whiteness amidst hip-hop’s historically Black ethos, I look at Detroit duo Insane Clown Posse in relation to the well-studied and popular rapper Eminem. Finally, as a case study of independent label formatting strategies, I revisit Atmosphere and their label Rhymesayers Entertainment to show how the neglected, “broken” EP format was reimagined as a deliberate artistic and commercial tool.¹³

The dissertation builds on the work of hip-hop scholars exploring the intersection of authenticity and marginalization, and three models directly influence my broader thesis. Justin Williams’ *Rhyming and Stealing* (2014)—specifically his application of Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” and Stanley Fish’s theory of “interpretive communities”—prefigures one of the main arguments in the dissertation, that musical borrowing practices (e.g., sampling) play a vital role in shaping collective identity and facilitating meaning-making within hip-hop culture.¹⁴ I use Williams’ model to investigate how these practices operate not across

¹³ While this study foregrounds historical and musicological concerns, I acknowledge that other crucial axes of identity, particularly gender, class, and sexuality, remain underexplored here and merit future critical attention.

hip-hop broadly, but within smaller, self-selecting communities of listeners—what I term *imagined communities of practice*—who possess the referential knowledge to decode intertextual allusions. This framework is crucial for understanding how underground Midwestern artists engage in sophisticated forms of intra-genre dialogue that mark credibility and build symbolic affiliations with hip-hop’s historical canon.

Significant, too, is Loren Kajikawa’s *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (2015), which analyzes how hip-hop artists articulate and audibly signify on conceptions of race through their music.¹⁵ His analysis foregrounds the interplay between musical aesthetics and racial politics, demonstrating how sound itself becomes a site of cultural identity and critique. I build upon Kajikawa’s framework by exploring how white Midwestern artists strategically employ sonic elements to negotiate their racial and regional positioning within hip-hop. Kajikawa’s attention to racial representation in sound offers a crucial methodological lens for my examination of how artists sonically navigate authenticity, whiteness, and marginality in a genre historically shaped by Black expressive culture.

Finally, Christopher Vito’s book, *The Values of Independent Hip-Hop in the Post-Golden Era* (2019), develops an ethos for underground hip-hop that both challenges and reproduces mainstream hip-hop’s cultural ideologies through a lyrical analysis of independent artists from 2000-2013.¹⁶ Vito’s work is particularly useful for framing the ideological tensions that arise when independent artists seek both autonomy from and recognition within the dominant

¹⁴ Justin Williams, *Rhyming and Stealing: Musical Borrowing in Hip-Hop* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); and Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

¹⁵ Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Song* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Christopher Vito, *The Values of Independent Hip-Hop in the Post-Golden Era: Hip-Hop’s Rebels* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2019).

structures of the music industry. I draw on his framework to explore how Midwestern underground artists—particularly those operating outside the tri-coastal centers—navigate this dual imperative. By examining release strategies and branding practices, I extend Vito’s model to consider how regional marginalization shapes the values and aesthetics of independent hip-hop.

Methodology and Literature Review

Hip-hop studies is inherently interdisciplinary. Departments throughout the university have taken up the field, including musicology, ethnomusicology, anthropology, sociology, journalism, literary studies, cultural studies, and media studies, allowing scholars to engage in a level of critical inquiry that allows both rigorous and nimble approaches to subjects of great nuance and complexity. My work synthesizes analytical and sociohistoriographical methods and perspectives to address the long acknowledged “problem” of authenticity in Midwest hip-hop. Relying on insights from a wide range of disparate fields including those traditionally associated with the humanities and social sciences, this dissertation considers the role of lyrical intertextuality (literary studies), racial identity (cultural studies), and media formatting to illuminate how artists construct credibility and negotiate belonging within a genre shaped by both regional marginalization and racialized expectations. By integrating these interdisciplinary perspectives, the dissertation offers a multifaceted framework for understanding how Midwest hip-hop artists navigate questions of authenticity, not as a fixed attribute, but as a performative and contested practice shaped by historical, cultural, and technological forces.

Lyrical Intertextuality

Intertextuality is a complex subject of study due in no small measure to the profoundly interdisciplinary scope required to address it in all its many facets. In hip-hop, the challenge is even more pronounced as classic sample-based hip-hop is so deeply rooted in intertextual practices (e.g., sampling) that it becomes difficult to isolate elements that *are not* referencing something else. Defined broadly as the relationship of one text to another, intertextuality provides rappers the literary means to “link” themselves with hip-hop’s idolized predecessors through masked self-referential and intra-genre quotation in song lyrics. A distinctly African-American approach to intertextuality, *signifyin(g)* (hereafter signifyin’ or signifying), has been influentially theorized by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and others.¹⁷ Signifyin’ reimagines earlier texts through repetition with variation, a rhetorical strategy that reshapes meaning and subtly subverts dominant cultural norms. While previous scholarship on hip-hop intertextuality has largely focused on cross-genre references in sampling (especially to soul, funk, and jazz records), this dissertation centers instead on lyrical intertextuality *within* hip-hop, highlighting the nuanced ways rappers build meaning by referencing their own genre’s canon. A significant portion of the quoted lyrical material—referred to as *hypotexts*, or source texts—draws from hip-hop’s “Golden Age” and is recontextualized within new works, or *hypertexts*. Situated at the convergence of literary theory and musicology, I develop a taxonomy of signifying practices with the aim of illuminating a rhetorical strategy used by outsiders (Midwest artists on independent labels) to demonstrate their legitimacy. Classifications include what I term *schematic quotation* (following a specific framework); *new perspective cover* (alternative point of view); and *sequel cover* (continuation of a prior narrative). The appendix provides an expansive data set of examples,

¹⁷ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifyin’ Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). See also Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

which will play an integral role in the project by serving as a parallel text for readers approaching this work from outside academia. The conclusions connect with phenomenological accounts of listening and theories of authenticity and community building to develop a model for a new aesthetic theory of hip-hop.

In addition to Gates's classic *The Signifying Monkey*, there are several core sources that will be important for my argument about intertextuality. The first is Gerard Genette's *Palimpsests: Literature to the Second Degree* (1997), which scrutinizes the use of intertextuality and categories them into several different uses.¹⁸ Building from Genette's work, Serge Lacasse's essay "Toward a Model of Transphonography" (2018) applies Genette's intertextual theories to recorded popular music in what he calls "transphonographic practice."¹⁹ Lacasse expands Genette's categories to not only include music but focuses on how recorded music adds several new layers to both the compositional techniques and their interpretation/reception. Lacasse's categories will be pivotal in my own categorizations of techniques. Among these include "transfictionality," the continuation of a fictional story or characters across multiple songs, which parallels my idea of sequel covers. I differentiate simple transfictionality from sequel covers due to the hip-hop artists treatment of flow, cadence, vocal timbre, and recuperation of instrumental hypotext.

To analyze the musical transformation from hypotext (source material) to hypertext (new work), Williams adapts Lacasse's concepts to hip-hop sampling. In Williams's terminology, *autosonic* quotations refer to samples that are exact digital copies of the original recording, while

¹⁸ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*; and Gerard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature to the Second Degree*, translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

¹⁹ Serge Lacasse, "Hypertextuality and Intertextuality in Recorded Popular Music," in *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention?*, edited by Michael Talbot (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000).

allosonic quotations involve re-recorded or re-performed elements. I primarily focus on allosonic to differentiate between direct sampling practices and other forms of textual reference.

Additionally, Williams characterizes the entire “imaged community” of hip-hop as a unified “interpretive community.” I contend, instead, that such a framework more accurately describes a smaller, more specialized subset of listeners—an elite community whose deep, indexical knowledge and ability to recognize and decode subtle references, samples, and intra-genre quotations embedded within the music define their cultural capital.

Adam Krims’ *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (2000) is a foundational text for the musical poetics of hip-hop.²⁰ Krims analyzes hip-hop lyrics to understand how they signify aspects of identity for the culture, consumer, and artist. More importantly, Krims outlines new theoretical parameters for the analysis of hip-hop; his treatment of popular music as an imperative area of study has had repercussions throughout popular music and hip-hop studies. While in many ways outdated, Krims’ work was the first attempt to categorize things such as vocal technique and introduce some rhythmic-stylistic terminology for styles of flow. Although Krims identifies that tropological signification is a vital component of hip-hop, he does not expand on this idea, an omission somewhat realized by Williams.

Another writer who has built off Krims is literary scholar Adam Bradley, who has written two books meaningful to my research. The first, *The Poetry of Pop* (2017), is an in-depth analysis of popular music lyrics, how we should interpret them on an artistic level, and the cultural significance they have when paired with the audible component of music.²¹ Bradley’s *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip-Hop* (2017) takes the same concepts from *The Poetry of*

²⁰ Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

²¹ Adam Bradley, *The Poetry of Pop* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

Pop and exclusively applies them to hip-hop lyrics.²² Bradley dedicates an entire chapter to the use of signifyin' in hip-hop, yet he overlooks the musical quotation component that I explore in this dissertation. When discussing signifyin', Bradley focuses on the veridicality of storytelling in hip-hop, examining whether the narratives are autobiographically factual or fictional and exploring the implications of that distinction. Bradley also provides some initial data on hip-hop cover songs by providing a brief list. Bradley acknowledges that hip-hop artists do not utilize covers in the same way as other popular artists and goes as far to recognize the allosonic quotation used by rappers, calling them "lyrical allusions." I find this term limiting; there are many ways a rapper can lyrically allude to another song, as evidenced by Williams's and my own taxonomy of intertextual techniques. Additionally, Bradley primarily discusses these lyrical allusions within the context of live performance when an artist supplants their own material with lyrical impositions from different, well-known compositions, which functions on a much different semiotic level in subverting listener expectations.

Quotation is a specific form of intertextuality: while all quotations are intertextual, not all intertextual references involve quotation. Within hip-hop studies, this distinction is crucial for analyzing how artists construct meaning. Quotation allows scholars to trace direct influence or homage, whereas intertextuality enables a broader interpretation of cultural context and the ways listeners perceive connections between texts. David Metzger's *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth Century Music* (2003) offers a genre-spanning analysis of quotation across historical and cultural contexts, focusing on both composition and reception.²³ Particularly relevant to my work is his chapter "Black and White: Quotations in Duke Ellington's 'Black and Tan Fantasy,'"

²² Bradley, *Book of Rhymes*.

²³ David Metzger, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

which identifies signifyin' as a distinctive quotational strategy exclusive to African-American musical practices. Although Metzger does not clearly distinguish signifyin' from general quotation—a gap I am to address—his study has been foundational for subsequent scholarship on musical quotation.

Finally, Jeanette Bicknell's article "The Problem of Reference in Musical Quotation" (2001) takes a philosopher's perspective in attempting to understand the phenomenology of quotation in music.²⁴ Bicknell argues that composers shape the listener's perception of musical quotations by choosing whether to explicitly reference the original source (a "signaled" quote) or leave it unacknowledged ("unsignaled"), even if the listener is unaware of the hypotext. My research further expands on this concept but also includes the component of temporal dissonance based on the listener's experience initially consuming the hypotext or hypertext, when the recognition of the other happens, and the temporal implications of individualized chronologies of exposure.

Racial Identity and Rap "Authenticity"

Critical studies of race often treat whiteness as the societal norm—a fixed standard that underlies perceptions of sameness in American culture.²⁵ Whiteness functions as a racialized framework for evaluating the cultural characteristics of non-white ethnic groups, positioning them in contrast to an unmarked normative standard. Examining white artists within a musical genre predominantly associated with Black culture offers a unique opportunity to challenge notions of

²⁴ Jeanette Bicknell, "The Problem of Reference in Musical Quotation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 59, no. 2 (2001).

²⁵ For examples, see: Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010); and Mike Hill, *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

whiteness as invisible and to contribute to the development of critical whiteness studies. By making whiteness (hyper)visible and subject to critique, such analysis reveals how white performers navigate cultural boundaries, adopt stylistic elements, and negotiate authenticity within a space where whiteness is not the default but the exception. I provide a case study to argue that, for rappers in the late 1990s, the performance of kind of theatrical form of terror was a prominent socio-cultural marker of whiteness that functioned as a key strategy for establishing authenticity. White rappers, however, necessitated a balance between morbidity and comedy to present an authentic self to a hip-hop audience. I label this recurring persona the *crazy white boy*—a figure who performs madness, terror, and unpredictable, senseless violence. Horrorcore, a hip-hop subgenre pioneered by Black Detroit teenager Esham, is characterized by shocking lyrical content and disturbing rhetoric, often engaging with mental illness and psychological horror. When horrorcore aesthetics intersect with the performance of white rappers, the crazy white boy emerges as unhinged, chaotic, and deliberately transgressive. Unlike the structured and often socially situated violence associated with gang life and the drug trade, the crazy white boy represents a thread of arbitrary, unmotivated terror. The crazy white boy established a code for what it meant to be “hardcore” as a white rapper in the 1990s amidst hip-hop’s gangsta ethos. Expressions of volatility or “craziness” by white rappers functioned as a stand-in for the cultural capital of Black “hardness.”

There are several core sources pertinent to my research. First, Steve Garner’s *Whiteness: An Introduction* (2007) offers a comprehensive overview of whiteness as a socially constructed and historically contingent category that operations as a position of racial privilege.²⁶ The book ultimately encourages readers to interrogate whiteness as a racial position that structures

²⁶ Steve Garner, *Whiteness: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

inequality rather than treating it as an unmarked norm. His chapter “Whiteness as Terror and Supremacy,” is of specific interest as it helps position whiteness and white culture as a looming threat while grounding this notion as a central force in the reproduction of racial hierarchies. I build on a performative terror as a defining quality of the crazy white boy; however, in the context of hip-hop where white artists are in the minority, comedy becomes a necessary counterbalance.

Bakari Kitwana’s *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop* (2005) argues that Black popular culture—particularly through high-profile arenas like sports—had a profound impact on mainstream white American perceptions of Blackness during the 1990s.²⁷ He highlights the global popularity of figures like Michael Jordan as emblematic of how Black culture became increasingly visible and influential in shaping public discourse. This visibility played a pivotal role in shaping how younger non-Black, mainly white, generations understood Black identity and culture. Similarly, Amy Coddington’s *How Hip-Hop Became Hit-Pop* (2023) identifies crossover artists like Prince and Lionel Richie as key figures in fostering a broader racial coalition in popular music during the 1980s.²⁸ She suggests that this crossover success not only reflected shifting social dynamics but also helped lay the groundwork for a more racially hybrid pop culture landscape in the decades that followed. Both Coddington and Kitwana emphasize the significance of prominent Black public figures who challenged and redefined earlier generational understandings of race. These individuals played a crucial role in shaping the evolving politics of racial identity—whiteness included.

²⁷ Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wangstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005).

²⁸ Amy Coddington, *How Hip-Hop Became Hit-Pop: Radio, Rap, and Race* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023).

Loren Kajikawa's *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (2015) analyzes how hip-hop artists have articulated conceptions of race through their music. In his most influential example, Kajikawa examines how Eminem signified whiteness through cartoonish mockery of perceived racial stereotypes.²⁹ Kajikawa analyzes Eminem's portrayal of whiteness by incorporating indexical semiotics to understand his performance of whiteness (e.g., his use of nasal vocal tone, stereotypes of "trailer trash," etc.). While Kajikawa acknowledges Eminem's unpredictable turn towards the horrorcore aesthetic and his engagement with the cultural trope of the "cold-blooded psycho killer," his analysis of the transition from *Infinite* (1996) to *The Slim Shady LP* (1999) largely overlooks the crucial intermediary *Slim Shady EP* (1997). Building on Kajikawa's theoretical framework, I argue that Eminem's successful articulation of whiteness hinged on his fusion of comical absurdity with the crazy white boy horrorcore model of excessive violence modeled by fellow Detroiters Insane Clown Posse.

Media Distribution

Major record labels incentivize mainstream hip-hop artists to produce singles and full-length "long play" albums (LPs) to access major platforms (e.g., radio, Grammys, MTV). However, due to the Midwest's peripheral position in the music industry, rappers from this region have, out of both necessity and choice, embraced an underground or independent rap ethos. Within this context, underground artists and their independent labels often favor a smaller format—the "extended play" record, or EP—as a strategic alternative to traditional LPs. I provide a case study to argue that independent label Rhymesayers Entertainment attempted to outmaneuver the mainstream market by embracing a format essentially outside the national music industry.

²⁹ Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*.

Atmosphere and Rhymesayers strategic use of the EP reveals how artists based outside hip-hop's dominant coastal hubs established credibility and visibility through alternative means. Their approach also reflects a conscious effort to challenge and reshape the structures of the mainstream music industry from a peripheral position.

There are two primary sources I will be building from. Kwame Harrison's book *Hip-Hop Underground: The Integrity and Ethics of Racial Identification* (2009) will be integral to my research because this is the first thorough study conducted on underground hip-hop.³⁰ Providing an ethnographic lens, Harrison embeds himself in the culture of underground/independent hip-hop in the Bay Area by working at a local record store and regularly attending, and occasionally participating in, local showcases. *Hip-Hop Underground* is indispensable in that it offers an alternative perspective from which to view hip-hop through the independent and underground scene. Unlike its mainstream cohabitant, the imagined community of underground hip-hop views itself as more communal and nurturing of artistic talent instead of a commercial commodity; "art for the sake of art" instead of art for financial gain. Harrison's in-depth account of underground Bay Area hip-hop is applicable to underground scenes across the nation.

Christopher Vito's book, *The Values of Independent Hip-Hop in the Post-Golden Era: Hip-Hop's Rebels* (2019), expands on Harrison's work on underground hip-hop.³¹ Through a close analysis of lyrics produced between 2000 and 2013, Vito interrogates whether these artists truly resist dominant industry values or, paradoxically, end up reinforcing the very ideologies they seek to oppose. His study reveals the tensions inherent in underground hip-hop's claims to authenticity and resistance, ultimately complicating the binary between mainstream and

³⁰ Anthony Kwame Harrison, *Hip-Hop Underground: The Integrity and Ethics of Racial Identification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

³¹ Vito, *The Values of Independent Hip-hop in the Post-Golden Era*.

underground while highlighting the nuanced ways in which alternative artists both disrupt and participate in the broader cultural logic of hip-hop.

Chapter Overview

Chapter II examines the function of intertextuality in hip-hop as a mechanism for constructing credibility, fostering community, and engaging in self-canonization. Focusing on Minneapolis-based underground hip-hop duo Atmosphere, I argue that intra-genre references enable artists operating from marginalized racial and geographic positions to align themselves with the legacy of hip-hop's late 1980s and early 1990s "Golden Age." Building on theories of signifyin' and intertextuality, this chapter demonstrates how lyrical citations initiate an *imagined community of practice* among informed listeners and serve as coded markers of credibility. Ultimately, the chapter contends that hip-hop has developed into a form of culturally contingent expression that privileges the historically and musically literate listener, transforming musical engagement into a hermeneutic act.

Chapter III directly builds upon a theoretical framework of whiteness developed by Loren Kajikawa, who asserts that the commercial and crucial success of Detroit-based rapper Eminem was partially due to his open confrontation with his white identity through mockery and parody of common tropes and stereotypes of whiteness. Although scholars such as Kajikawa, Carleton S. Gholz, and Edward G. Armstrong have extensively studied Eminem, I argue that when situating Eminem within the history of Detroit hip-hop, his fusion of terror and comedy emerges as a crucial element in his artistic negotiation of whiteness.³² This fusion had a clear, though

³² Carleton S. Gholz, "Welcome to tha D: Making and Remaking Hip-Hop Culture in Post-Motown Detroit," in *Hip Hop in America: A Regional Guide*, edited by Mickey Hess (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010); and Edward G. Armstrong, "Eminem's Construction of Authenticity," *Popular Music and Society* 27:3 (2004).

undertheorized, precedent in Detroit rap. It was the lacing of comical absurdity with the horrorcore model of excessive violence, provided by fellow white Detroit hip-hop duo Insane Clown Posse (ICP), that was crucial to Eminem's monumental success.

Chapter IV returns to Minneapolis via Atmosphere and their independent label Rhymesayers Entertainment to examine how they were able to market themselves and distribute their music beyond their local scenes. This chapter examines the historical development of EPs and their intended role in music marketing, focusing on how Rhymesayers and Atmosphere strategically adapted the format to serve their unique goals of distribution and artistic expression. Much like Chapter II, where intertextual references are employed to establish legitimacy and cultural belonging, and Chapter III, which offered new perspectives of whiteness, the EP emerges as a site through which Midwest artists engaged a marginal format to simultaneously assert their distinctiveness and claim affiliation with the broader, nationally recognized rap community.

CHAPTER II

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY THROUGH INTERTEXTUALITY AND INTRA-GENRE QUOTATION: A CASE STUDY OF MINNESOTA HIP-HOP GROUP ATMOSPHERE

The Rhymesayers collective [a Minnesota independent hip-hop label] distance themselves from the majors by creating an alternative culture embodied by the moniker: “for the love of hip-hop.”

— Christopher Vito³³

Easter morning is full of youthful anticipation as children eagerly wake their parents at the crack of dawn, rushing downstairs to begin scouring the house or garden for hidden eggs. Finding the Easter egg is dually rewarding; locating the egg achieves a sense of accomplishment reinforced by the small candy or coins within. Now, you may be wondering why I am talking about Easter eggs in a dissertation about hip-hop. The term has returned to popular culture, particularly thanks to the unprecedented cinematic web of storytelling in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Eager to better understand the semiotic layers and references to comic book lore, new comic book enthusiasts seek out the interpretive knowledge of comic book veterans; their catalog of knowledge becomes a valuable commodity that elevates their social status, a feat thought impossible only fifteen years ago. The same can be said for self-appointed hip-hop heads, as

³³ Christopher Vito, *The Values of Independent Hip-Hop in the Post-Golden Era: Hip-Hop's Rebels* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2019), 62.

evidenced by the immensely popular website WhoSampled.com, who are positioned as “the world’s most comprehensive, detailed and accurate database of samples, cover songs, and remixes, covering the entire history of music spanning over 1,000 years.”³⁴ The intertextual web of hip-hop music allows for those who have consumed large amounts of popular culture including movies, television, and music to apply their knowledge towards recognizing and identifying subtle references, or Easter eggs.

In this chapter I situate the process of referential identification within hip-hop lyrics to explore how rappers interpolate lyrical tropes from hip-hop’s late 1980s and early 1990s “Golden Age.” This era marked a pivotal shift in hip-hop, as MCs (or emcees) supplanted the DJ (or deejay) as the central figure of the music. Unlike earlier styles, the emcees of this period embraced increasingly complex poetic techniques (e.g., enjambment, slant rhyme, mosaic rhyme) transforming rap into a competitive art form where lyric dexterity became a measure of status. These artists were not only technically skilled but also exuded a cultural coolness that inspired emulation among youth worldwide. Iconic figures of the 1980s including Rakim, Kool Moe Dee, and Kool G Rap left a lasting imprint on the genre, shaping its aesthetic and directly influencing the next generation of emcees, particularly those within the emerging underground hip-hop movement. Soon these emcees began calling themselves rappers.

Authors have long noted the signifying potential of words and samples on the past, but few have addressed how rappers intertextually signify *within* the closed world of hip-hop. Intertextuality, defined broadly as the relationship of one text to another, provides rappers the literary means to link themselves with hip-hop’s idolized predecessors through masked self-referential and intra-genre quotation in song lyrics. This practice resonates with prior notions of

³⁴ “About Us,” WhoSampled, accessed January 2025, <https://www.whosampled.com/about/>.

signifyin' (discussed later); however, in the context of Midwest rap, the outsider now transmits encrypted language to articulate their relationship toward the hip-hop canon for the insider audiences defined not by region or race, but by the depth of their “love of hip-hop”—the rap intelligentsia.³⁵ Intra-genre *signifyin'* allows marginalized artists to mark credibility and establish an affiliation with the national hip-hop community, who symbolically structure authenticity along the lines above.

In the following, I taxonomize intertextual signifying techniques used by rappers to argue that intra-genre *signifyin'* does three things: (1) provides an important method of practice for the artist, (2) highlights a deep knowledge of hip-hop practices that initiates an imagined community of practice among listeners, and (3) develops an insider discourse that results in self-canonization. Classifications include what I term *schematic quotation* (following a specific framework); *new perspective cover* (alternative point of view); and *sequel covers* (continuation of a prior narrative). Unlike projects that consider practices of musical borrowing as simple allusions, this chapter shows how the phenomenology of listening and the process of identification enrich listener understanding of the music and make it more interesting and engaging, which in turn fosters an intimate and communal form of listening. As a case study, I focus on Minneapolis underground hip-hop duo Atmosphere—whose mixed-race background and peripheral location distanced them from the rap mainstream of the late 1990s, when they launched. Employment of intra-genre intertextuality from hip-hop’s Golden Age asserts Atmosphere and similar artists membership into the broader hip-hop community and becomes coded language for the listener that, when properly deciphered, grants access to its *imagined community of practice*. In sum, I show how hip-hop has become, for Atmosphere, music for the

³⁵ That is not say this technique only articulates Blackness, but “insiderness” more generally. In the context of hip-hop this insiderness has specific racial and regional components (i.e. Black and NYC/LA)

“learned”: a cultural practice where belonging is earned not through region, race, or class, but through a deep familiarity with a network of predecessor works. Full participation in this community is defined by shared “raplove,” where intertextual knowledge becomes the primary marker of authenticity.³⁶

Musical Quotation in Hip-Hop

Musicologist David Metzger defines musical quotation as “the placement of [brief excerpts] of a pre-existent piece in a new composition or performance.”³⁷ This definition, while ideal for Western Classical musical analysis, is insufficient for considering hip-hop; the borrowing and manipulation of pre-existent recorded material, or sampling, has defined hip-hop music since its celebrated birth on August 11, 1973. At this mythologized “first hip-hop party” in a South Bronx apartment building rec-room, DJ Kool Herc introduced partygoers to what he called the “merry-go-round technique,” performing two-turntables with duplicate records to extend and loop the breakbeat for people to dance.³⁸ This unique approach towards musical performance, isolating and repeating small sections of previously recorded music, became a focal point for live hip-hop performance and its subsequent transition into studio production. Because the fundamental scaffolding of hip-hop music is dependent on the borrowing of brief excerpts of pre-existent material to create a new composition, Metzger might consider hip-hop an infinite pool of musical

³⁶ The idea of music for the learned comes from Anna Zayaruznaya, *The Monstrous New Art: Divided Forms in the Late Medieval Motet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); there, she argues that intertextual references in medieval French motets cater towards the learned—those who can readily identify the intended reference. Charlie Hankin uses the term “raplove” to describe the inward-directed poetics of rapping about rap. For more see Charlie Hankin *Break and Flow: Hip-Hop Poetics in the Americas*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2023).

³⁷ David Joel Metzger, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4.

³⁸ The breakbeat refers to an instrumental section of a song when all the instruments are at rest except for the drums and sometimes bass

quotation. However, J. Peter Burkholder further clarifies that musical quotation can never be “the main substance of the work, as it would be if used as a cantus firmus, refrain, fugue subject, or theme in variations.”³⁹ When a quotation becomes endemic to the music’s architectural framework, the compositional integrity subsumes prior semiotic or nostalgic functions of musical quotation. Therefore, components of hip-hop composition such as the breakbeat is *not* an example of musical quotation. Sampling, that is, is not synonymous with quotation. For example, the famous breakbeat from James Brown’s “Funky Drummer” (1970) as it is used compositionally in Boogie Down Productions’ “South Bronx” (1987), Eric B. & Rakim’s “Lyrics of Fury” (1988), Big Daddy Kane’s “Mortal Kombat” (1989), and LL Cool J’s “Mama Said Knock You Out” (1990)—to name only a few—must not be considered an instance of musical quotation.

This is not to say that all aspects of hip-hop instrumentals and production lack musical quotation, and there are certainly instances that remind us that the distinctions between sampling and quotation are not categorically fixed. Punch-phrasing, a DJ technique defined by André Sirois as “essentially playing a guitar lick or horn stab over another record” complicates these delineations when incorporating a brief sampled segment only once throughout a performance or composition.⁴⁰ Grandmaster Flash’s punch phrase of Jackson Beck’s “The Decoys of Ming the Merciless” (1966) in “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel” (1981) might be considered a musical quotation due to the single usage in the song, but also could be understood as too integral to the overall composition, despite its brevity. This and many other examples are entirely situational and dependent on positional perspective.

³⁹ J. Peter Burkholder, “Quotation,” *Grove Music Online*, 2001.

⁴⁰ André Sirois, *Hip-Hop DJs and the Evolution of Technology: Cultural Exchange, Innovation and Democratization* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 8.

Still, there are instances of blatant musical quotation in hip-hop instrumentals, such as Missy Elliott's "Work It" (2003) when the beat at 4:02 suddenly shifts to a sample of Bob James' "Take Me to the Mardi Gras" (1975) as an homage to Run-D.M.C.'s "Peter Piper" (1986), which substantially relies on this sampled breakbeat. Because of sampling ethics, which disavows the "biting" of material, defined by Joseph Schloss as "the appropriation of intellectual material from another hip-hop artist," producers generally distance themselves from material that has been previously sampled.⁴¹ One of the few exceptions to this rule, however, is if the use of the sampled material is incorporated in a new and unique way that would, in this case, resist associations to Run-D.M.C. while being mindful of their artistic integrity.⁴² Therefore, because Missy Elliott (and producer Timbaland) do not include any alterations to the Bob James sample, this quotation must be understood as a nostalgic echo of Run-D.M.C. and the Golden Age of hip-hop in which they are associated.

Towards a Theory of Hip-Hop Semiotics

In the 1980s literary theorist Henry Louis Gates Jr. developed the concept of *signifyin(g)* to articulate how and why African-American's strategically engage with the "revision and repetition" of prior texts.⁴³ To cope with the continued white suppression of Black progress following the First World War, Gates argues that African-Americans did not retreat to the old spirituals because they no longer found them relevant to their situation. Instead, they "began to

⁴¹ Joseph Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 106

⁴² For example, TLC's "Ain't 2 Proud 2 Beg" (1991), DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince's "Hip-Hop Dancer's Theme" (1988), and Heavy D and the Boyz's "Nothin' but Love" (1994).

⁴³ Henry Louis Gates, "The 'Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 4, (1983): 685–723; and Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifyin' Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

master and to deform the minstrel mask with disingenuousness of fronting and the phonetic display of Signifyin(g)” inspired by ‘The Signifyin’ Monkey’ Toast.⁴⁴ The monkey from this story, explains Gates, became a symbolic representation of the urban trickery needed to cope with diverse types of white oppression. Musicologist Samuel A. Floyd Jr. further clarifies signifyin’ as “a reinterpretation, a metaphor for the revision of previous texts and figures; it is tropological thought, repetition with difference, the obscuring of meaning—all to achieve or reverse power, to improve situations, and to achieve pleasing results for the signifier.”⁴⁵ The juxtaposition of various texts allows for a dense semiotic layer of interpretation to emerge that mask the intended message and challenge the hegemonic mainstream from a safe distance. Signifyin’ permits African-Americans to say one thing and mean another or, to put it differently, say two things at once, without fear of repercussion.⁴⁶ Because of this calculated ambiguity, signifyin’ refuses a single translation of meaning, thriving on the “indeterminacy of interpretation” that invites endless possibilities of perceptual and situational understanding.⁴⁷

Scholars from a variety of humanistic disciplines have applied Gates’s concept of signifyin’ to various African-American art forms including literature, visual art, and music, allowing an enormous range of methods to accomplish the “revision and repetition” technique.⁴⁸ Music is particularly thick with semiotic implications in this respect: engaging with the listener aurally, visually, and physically allows the artist to disguise their intentions with multiple layers

⁴⁴ Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1997), 94.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 95.

⁴⁶ This concept of speaking two things at once has roots in the African trickster Esu, often depicted as having two mouths.

⁴⁷ Gates, *The Signifyin’ Monkey*.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

of interpretation through abutment of the senses. Ethnomusicologist Ronald Radano, however, criticizes the over-application of signifyin' theory by academics, suggesting that the formalism embedded in musicological practices has subverted the doubleness engaged with African-American art through over-simplification. Equally problematic are instances where musicologists reduce the crucial potency by appropriating literary devices, or literary scholars who “play to the mystification of black music in order to reinvigorate textual criticism.”⁴⁹ In short, signifyin' can become an overused framework that tempts music and literary scholars into stretching interpretations to the point where the concept risks losing its clarity and impact.

While the saturation of signifyin' in musical criticism can be problematic more generally, its application to hip-hop is riskier than other genres. In preface for the 25th Anniversary edition of *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates praises hip-hop as being “signifyin' on steroids” and credits sampling as one of the most innovative and impactful practices of signifyin'.⁵⁰ Theoretically, the sampling of classic funk and soul artists of the 1970s is the epitome of signifyin' in that DJs transform prior works through repetition and revision. But Gates inadequately accounts for the intentions of many DJs. To paraphrase hip-hop scholars Loren Kajikawa and Joseph Schloss, hip-hop artists typically select a sample because it “sounds good,” without necessarily providing a commentary on the sampled source.⁵¹ If we consider every sample within a hip-hop track to be an indication of signifyin', then it is not clear what elements in the practice of sampling is, indeed, *not* signifyin'. The iconicity of sampled music does not always necessitate an interpretation, or the presumption of authorial intent.

⁴⁹ Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 38.

⁵⁰ Gates, *The Signifyin' Monkey*, xxix.

⁵¹ Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Song* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); and Joseph Schloss, *Making Beats*.

To be clear, though not all sampling practices in hip-hop are an instance of signifyin', they are *always* intertextual. The repeated use of a sample may initially function as signifyin' by invoking, critiquing, or recontextualizing the source, but once that aesthetic becomes established or conventionalized, its critical or subversive weight may diminish, shifting the function of the reference. A misleading synonymy has developed between signifyin' and intertextuality that has perpetuated misguided applications of signifyin'. Gates notes that "intertextuality represents a process of repetition and revision, by definition" thereby perceiving intertextuality and signifyin' as interchangeable.⁵² However, Julia Kristeva's coinage of the term "intertextuality" in 1966 never mentions the subversion of power dynamics, only that "the idea invites the reader to interpret a text as a crossing of texts.... For [Kristeva] it is principally a way of introducing history into structuralism: the texts ... allow us to introduce history into the laboratory of writing."⁵³ Musicologist Lawrence Kramer appears to agree, writing that "the aim of genuine intertextual inquiry is spirals of adjacencies," not the deconstruction of social and cultural hierarchies.⁵⁴ While intertextuality *can* serve as a tool for signifyin', it is not incidental to the practice—all signifyin' inherently involves some form of intertextual reference. Signifyin' draws meaning from its relationship to prior texts, tropes, or cultural expressions. In this sense, intertextuality is not just a tool but a foundational mechanism through which signifyin' produces layered and contextually rich meaning.

To avoid any misapplications of signifyin' theory while being respectful to the aesthetics of hip-hop culture, my focus is exclusively on textual, or lyric-based applications of signifyin' as

⁵² Gates, *The Signifyin' Monkey*, 66.

⁵³ Julia Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, translated by Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 10.

⁵⁴ Lawrence Kramer, "What is (is there) Musical Intertextuality?" in *Intertextuality in Music: Dialogic Composition*, edited by Violetta Kostka, Paulo F. de Castro, and William A. Everett (London: Routledge, 2021), 17.

intertextuality. I interpret the following examples as intentional recontextualizations of earlier texts aimed at challenging hierarchies, rather than choices driven purely by aesthetic preference. For example, when Atmosphere rapper Slug says, in the song “The Two” (2002), “I’m not a player, I throw-up a lot” he is blatantly signifyin’ the infamous Big Pun line, in “I’m Not A Player” (1997), “I’m not a player, I just fuck a lot.”⁵⁵ Failing to identify this quotation does not diminish the entertainment value for the uninformed listener, but recognizing the quotation as a playful subversion of hypermasculine tropes makes the joke funnier and elicits a deeper appreciation. The informed listener discovers an Easter egg.

There is a final point to make in defense of the socio-cultural context of signifyin’ and my conceptual application of the term towards the intertextual references discussed throughout this chapter. Just as early 20th century African-Americans no longer found spirituals to be less helpful to their lived reality and turned towards the past—their African heritage and ‘The Signifyin’ Toast’—for literary and social guidance, so too did independent rappers look towards their past. In the early 1990s as hip-hop skyrocketed in popularity and became a commodity for corporate exploitation, the genre bifurcated into two paths: mainstream and underground hip-hop. Governed by major record labels, mainstream hip-hop significantly relies on its commercial success and appeal to the masses with lyrics focusing on subjects of sexual prowess, financial gain, and absorbent drug use—topics that both alienate and magnetize audiences. Independent/underground artists, however, reject this philosophy and “argue for an alternative culture predicated on the love of hip-hop music” by espousing a DuBoisian ethos that art must have a social purpose.⁵⁶ Because some rappers no longer found mainstream hip-hop to be helpful

⁵⁵ Felt, “The Two,” *Felt: A Tribute to Christina Ricci*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 2002; and Big Pun, “I’m Not a Player,” *Capital Punishment*, Loud Records, 1998.

⁵⁶ Vito, *The Values of Independent Hip-Hop in the Post-Golden Era*, 58.

or relevant to their lived experience, they looked back to hip-hop's Golden Age for direction. Golden Age hip-hop, then, functions as 'The Signifying Monkey' toast does in realigning cultural ideologies within a community.

Community

Recognizing intertextual relationships becomes analogous to an archeological dig, uncovering textual references that inform our past. These webs of references generate frequent topics of discussion among hip-hop heads, who share and compare their knowledge.⁵⁷ Deciphering the postmodern, double-coded language of intra-genre quotation becomes privileged information that signals fluency in a hip-hop vernacular. More importantly, a language developed for and by the hip-hop community invites entrance into what I call an imagined community of practice. Thomas Turino's concept of "cultural cohorts" is helpful here: rather than being organized by ethnic, regional, or generational commonalities, this community coalesces around shared symbolic competencies and modes of engagement within the genre.⁵⁸ In this sense, the imagined community of practice I theorize resembles a cultural cohort bound by interpretive fluency and aesthetic alignment rather than by geography or social background. This reframing aligns with, but also refines, earlier scholarly treatments of hip-hop as an imagined community.

Justin Williams' and Joseph Schloss' arguments on musical borrowing and sampling practices rely on their acknowledgment of the Hip-Hop Nation as an "imagined community," a large, united group with overwhelming individual anonymity.⁵⁹ But a driving factor in Benedict

⁵⁷ For more on knowledge as the fifth element of hip-hop, see Travis Gosa, "The Fifth Element: Knowledge," in *Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁵⁸ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁵⁹ Schloss, *Making Beats*; and Justin Williams, *Rhyming ' and Stealin': Musical Borrowing in Hip-Hop* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

Anderson’s influential conceptualization of the nation as an “imagined community” was the fall of Latin and the rise of individualized vernacular: “language became less of a continuity between an outside power and the human speaker than an internal field created and accomplished by language users among themselves.”⁶⁰ In the case of the nation, shared vernaculars helped populations see themselves as part of a broader collective with shared interests and symbolic reference points, even if they never met. I apply this principle to cultural production by reframing the imagined community not around geographic nationhood, but around shared semiotic fluency within hip-hop. What binds this community is not territorial boundaries or political institutions, but a common understanding of genre-specific language—coded allusions, sampled motifs, lyrical references, and aesthetic conventions. Although Williams and Schloss do not explicitly discuss a hip-hop language, Williams does acknowledge that “the self-referential nature of this imagined community is crucial to understanding the intramusical and extramusical discourses in the genre.”⁶¹ This intramusical discourse is precisely the vernacular that I aim to illuminate, a language developed through quotation in rap lyrics that allows artists to signal belonging, assert authority, and engage in dialogue with the genre’s living archive. By decoding this intertextual vernacular, we can begin to understand how imagined communities in hip-hop are built not on shared borders, but on shared knowledge.

The Hip-Hop Nation is also a “community of practice.” Drawing on anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Étienne Wenger’s theory of learning as a social and participatory process, a community of practice is a “group of people who share a concern or a passion for

⁶⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 70.

⁶¹ Williams, *Rhyming and Stealin*, 12.

something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”⁶² In the context of hip-hop, this community comprises individuals who are fluent in the genre’s evolving language, those who can recognize stylistic conventions, decode lyrical allusions, and participate in its cultural rituals. Learning in hip-hop occurs not through formal instruction but through immersion, interaction, and gradual mastery of shared aesthetic values and practices. Intra-genre intertextuality become key forms of apprenticeship, signaling one’s legitimacy and embeddedness within the broader imagined community of hip-hop. To be a practitioner in this space is not only to consume the culture but to contribute to it, demonstrating a deep understanding of its history, codes, and collective memory.

My goal in combining the concepts of “imagined community” and “community of practice” into an imagined community of practice is to theorize a more narrowly defined, elite subgroup with the broader imagined community of hip-hop; listeners who possess a deeper more intimate familiarity with the genre’s history. This hybrid concept focuses specifically on those who have developed advanced fluency in hip-hop’s referential language. These members do more than just enjoy hip-hop, they participate in it at a scholarly or insider level, able to decode lyrical allusions, recognize sampled or interpolated material, and situate new works within a long, ongoing dialogue of musical borrowing and cultural commentary. Their knowledge is both cultural and performative, positioning them as an interpretive intelligentsia within hip-hop’s imagined community—one that defines belonging not simply through shared identification, but through demonstrated expertise and symbolic literacy.

⁶² Étienne Wenger, “Communities of Practice: A Brief Introduction,” *National Science Foundation*, 2011, <https://hdl.handle.net/1794/11736>. See also Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Still, how does one enter hip-hop's imagined community of practice? How listeners access this community, and their associated temporal dissonance, has remained largely unexamined. Scholars tend to view the experience of intertextuality as timeless, where "the past and present coexist in a medium that is neither past nor present."⁶³ However, this assumes a specific unbiased intertextual encounter where the listener has no relationship with the hypotext (original work) or hypertext (new work). But what about the biased listener? How does their connection with the hypotext or hypertext distort a linear perception of history? Let me fictionalize a scenario. In 2004 a father is driving his teenage son to school, during which the kid plays the song "Clay" (1997) by his favorite artist Atmosphere, rhyming along word for word with the chorus: "what would you say as the earth gets further and further away / planets as small as balls of clay."⁶⁴

"I love that line!" says the kid. The father chuckles. "What's so funny?" the kid asks. "He didn't write that line; it was taken from Rakim's "Follow the Leader" (1988).⁶⁵

"Nuh uh, Slug (of Atmosphere) wrote that line"

"No, it was Rakim: planets as small as balls of clay / astray into the Milky Way / world's outta sight / far as the eye could see not even a satellite..."

In this scenario, we witness two separate entry points into hip-hop's imagined community of practice that indicate our experience as either a hypotextual or hypertextual listener. The father is a hypotextual listener; he was first aware of the original Rakim lyric (hypotext) before learning

⁶³ Kramer, "What is (is there) Musical Intertextuality?," 18.

⁶⁴ Atmosphere, "Clay," *Overcast!*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 1997.

⁶⁵ Eric B. and Rakim, "Follow the Leader," *Follow the Leader*, Uni Records, 1988.

how Atmosphere interpolated the lyric in their song (hypertext). The child is a hypertextual listener; they discovered Atmosphere's quote of Rakim only in retrospect. This dichotomy of the biased listener engenders two distinct experiences of historicity.

When encountering intertextual references as a hypotextual listener, initially familiar with the original work, time retains a relatively linear trajectory punctuated by small retrograde loops of nostalgia. Visually, this experience might resemble a loop-de-loop, with each loop marking a moment in which the listener is pulled back into their personal archive to reinhabit the affective and aesthetic dimensions of the past. At the point where past and present briefly intersect, time flattens: the listener simultaneously occupies both moments before being propelled forward again. In contrast, the hypertextual listener, initially familiar with the newer work, experiences time more fluidly, in a pattern closer to a lemniscate or infinity symbol, living not outside of time or in pithy reverberations of the past, but in a constant flux between the past and present. This ongoing, recursive movement between past and present obfuscates the listener's own sense of temporal positioning. This rupture not only distorts chronology, but it also short-circuits the listener's ability to locate themselves within a coherent sense of historicity. If historicity refers not just to an awareness of the past but to one's orientation in historical time and participation in historical processes, then the hypertextual experience compromises that anchor. Intertextuality, particularly when consumed in the absence of contextual cues, simulates historical experience and fabricates emotional familiarity, developing a false sense of nostalgia. This pseudo-nostalgia, or what psychologists call the "Mandela Effect," conflates our own memory with that of the collective into believing we incorrectly experienced a prior event, time, or era.⁶⁶ The effect is not

⁶⁶ Deeparsi Prasad and Wilma A. Bainbridge, "The Visual Mandela Effect as Evidence for Shared and Specific False Memories Across People," *Psychological Science*, vol. 33, no. 12, 2022, 1971-88. Coined by paranormal researcher Fiona Broome in 2009, the Mandela Effect is a theory to explain why large groups of people remember Nelson Mandela dying in prison during the 1980s, despite being released in 1990.

only psychological but epistemological: the listener begins to confuse mediated reference with direct experience, blurring the line between remembrance and reconstruction. These moments of reference become surrogates for history itself, experiential anchors that carry affective weight. As a result, intertextuality in hip-hop not only reflects history, but actively reshapes how history is felt, known, and circulated within the genre's imagined community of practice. By connecting the psychodynamics of listening to the interpretive work of decoding allusion, this theoretical framework positions intertextuality as a central mechanism through which memory is produced and historicity is destabilized.

There is a final point to make about memory regarding community, specifically Maurice Halbwach's notion of "collective memory," a socially constructed notion that defines a group of individuals that share a collective experience of a time in their lives and "binds our most intimate remembrances to each other."⁶⁷ While hypotextual listeners are able to elicit their collective memory to identify quotational references, the hypertextual listener artificially buys their way into the collective memory through extensive listening.⁶⁸ For either the hypotextual or hypertextual listener, "nostalgia [or pseudo-nostalgia] becomes an authenticating device" that alerts the imagined community of practice to subconsciously or consciously contextualize an underground artist like Atmosphere within the broader imagined hip-hop community.⁶⁹

Crucially, the imagined community of practice I outline is not driven by a desire for mainstream recognition or assimilation into dominant cultural hierarchies. Rather, its members

⁶⁷ Maurice Halbwach, *On Collective Memory*, translated by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1950]), 53.

⁶⁸ It is important to note that hypertextual listeners do not necessarily aspire to become hypotextual listeners. Cultural currency lies in their ability to recognize and interpret the relationship between the hypertext and the hypotext. For these listeners, the value is not rooted in chronological primacy, but in the capacity to trace and decode intertextual connections.

⁶⁹ Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 55.

participate in a parallel interpretive culture that defines value through intertextual literacy, historical fluency, and deep semiotic engagement with hip-hop's archival repertoire. This is not a subculture seeking upward mobility into the commercial mainstream, but a self-sustaining ecosystem that produces and polices its own standards of legitimacy. For artists like Atmosphere, engaging in quotations of canonical Golden Age lyrics becomes a strategy to inscribe themselves into the broader national narrative of hip-hop. These lyrical gestures not only signal insider fluency to listeners, but also function as acts of cultural positioning, aligning local or regional artists with a lineage of respected predecessors. The imagined community of practice, then, enables peripheral artists to transcend geographic marginality by demonstrating symbolic proximity to hip-hop's core discourses. The aesthetic priorities of this community are governed less by Billboard charts, streaming metrics, or corporate validation and more by an artist's capacity to engage meaningfully with hip-hop's dense referential network. In this way, hip-hop's imagined community of practice operates like an underground guild of archivists, practitioners, and connoisseurs, bound not by shared taste alone but by shared modes of interpretation. Its members traffic in coded citations and lyrical allusions that often go unnoticed by casual listeners but signal deep expertise to fellow insiders. By decoding these texts, members reinforce their position in a cultural economy that prizes knowledge over popularity. The power of this community lies in its refusal to collapse into the logic of the mainstream. Instead, it constructs an alternative space where credibility is not externally conferred but internally earned.

Atmosphere

The most critical markers of authenticity for rappers in the 1990s centered on race (explored in the next chapter) and location. Hip-hop turf wars began before the genre left New York City. Bronx-based Boogie Down Productions and the Juice Crew in Queens released a series of diss

tracks and answer recordings, known as the “Bridge Wars,” disputing their authenticity and right to practice hip-hop. “During this same era,” writes hip-hop scholar Mickey Hess, “Philadelphia artists stepped into the ring, with MC Breeze’s “It Ain’t New York” (1986), and Cool C’s “Juice Crew Dis” (1988), both records aimed at New York crews who saw their city as the center of the rap universe.”⁷⁰ Shortly thereafter, West Coast hip-hop developed their own harder, gangsta edge and popularity seriously challenged New York’s supremacy with the rise of supergroup N.W.A. Unlike the previous territorial dispute, East Coast vs. West Coast turned physical and violent, culminating with the murders of hip-hop legends Tupac Shakur in 1996 and The Notorious B.I.G. in 1997. As the “Coastal War” was waning, southern hip-hop artists began voicing their take on hip-hop, most notably Atlanta’s Outkast, who while accepting the award for Best New Artist at the 1995 Source Awards declared to the New York crowd: “The South got somethin’ to say.” By the turn of the century, hip-hop had become tri-coastal while ignoring everything in the middle, the Midwest.

As regional and ethnic outsiders in the 1990s, this negotiation was all important for the mixed-race Minneapolis duo Atmosphere, who have since become not only the most recognizable figure in Minnesota hip-hop but also one of the most prominent leaders in the national underground scene. Self-described as “a few types of white, Native American, and Black,” Sean “Slug” Daley and producer Anthony “Ant” Davis released their first record, *Overcast!*, in 1997.⁷¹ After receiving national attention following their 2002 album *GodLovesUgly*, the group rejected offers from major labels to build a stable, local hip-hop

⁷⁰ Mickey Hess, “Introduction: ‘It’s Only Right to Represent Where I’m From’: Local and Regional Hip-Hop Scenes in the United States” in *Hip-Hop in America: A Regional Guide* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010), xx.

⁷¹ Sean Daley and Anthony Davis, “Atmosphere’s Paint it Gold- Episode 6,” Rhymesayers Entertainment, posted March 30, 2008, YouTube video, 12:22, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ON0Q1-8JyNQ>.

community and nurture their growing independent label Rhymesayers Entertainment, founded in 1996. In a career that has spanned four decades, Atmosphere has steadily released over a dozen albums, over a dozen EPs, and various side projects, making them one of the most prolific artists in hip-hop.

Pertinent to my lyrical analysis, I must briefly highlight Slug's earliest writing process. While sitting in junior high in-school suspension, Slug and a fellow "incarcerate" began writing their own set of lyrics to Eddie Murphy's comedic 1982 song "Boogie in Your Butt."⁷² Slug continued writing songs in this fashion, imitating rappers such as Run-D.M.C. or Slick Rick and later iconic Golden Age rappers KRS-ONE, Rakim, and Big Daddy Kane. Although this early stage involved mimetic imitation, it served as a foundational exercise not to replicate these artists, but to internalize their techniques and eventually recontextualize them in his own voice. This embodied, imitative process helped Slug understand the rhythmic and poetic structures of hip-hop's most innovative emcees, but it is in the reworking of those structures, reframing familiar styles within new lyrical contexts, where the true pedagogical value emerges for rapper. In this way, signifyin' functions as a mode of learning not through repetition alone, but through the creative adaptation and transformation of prior texts. This process in turn nurtures a personalized rhythmic voice or flow, functioning as a how-to guide for the rapping novice.⁷³ Embodiment of these stock phrases are audibly present in future recordings and become building blocks for both freestyle improvisation and original composition.

⁷² Sean Daley, interview, "Microphone Mathematics: Slug of Atmosphere Part 1 of 3," *Microphone Mathematics*, FETV, posted September 7, 2010, YouTube video, 12:56, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=>.

⁷³ For more on the role of embodiment in musical experience, what Arnie Cox calls the "mimetic hypothesis," see Arnie Cox, *Music and Embodied Cognition: Listening, Moving, Feeling, and Thinking* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

Musical Examples

Richard Dyer's study of pastiche identifies two types of musical borrowing: "textually signaled" and "unsigned" borrowing or explicitly called-out references versus masked references.⁷⁴ The type of quotation I am interested in for this chapter is strictly *unsigned*, but what does that mean in the context of a lyrical analysis? To distinguish musical borrowing practices in hip-hop as either sampled or non-sampled, Justin Williams uses the terms *autosonic* and *allosonic*, respectively.⁷⁵ "Autosonic quotation is quotation of a recording by digitally sampling a prior work (digital or analogue), as opposed to allosonic quotation, which quotes the previous material by way of rerecording or performing it live (like a quote in jazz performance), rather than sampling from the original recording."⁷⁶ I am concerned only with rerecorded, or textually unsigned allosonic quotations. Signaled allosonic quotations, typically, are blatant declamations of a given reference and are often not as exciting;⁷⁷ there is less thrill in the hunt when the artist literally tells you the quotes derivation. For example, in Atmosphere's "Sunshine" (2007), Slug twice signals whom he is about quote before doing so:

... Hopped on and felt the summertime
It reminds me of one of them Musab lines like
"Sunshine, Sunshine it's fine"
I feel it in my skin, warmin' up my mind...

And later:

... Feelin' alright stopped at a stop-sign
A car pulled up bumpin' Fresh Prince's "Summertime"
"Summer, summertime"

⁷⁴ Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁷⁵ These terms derive from Serge Lacasse, who expanded Gerard Genette's theory of autographic and allographic quotation to include recorded music.

⁷⁶ Williams, *Rhyming and Stealing*, 3.

⁷⁷ Although outside of this project's scope, signaled allosonic quotations might also include strong timbral indicators that recall a specific artist.

I feel it in my skin, warmin' up my mind...⁷⁸

Preceding the allosonic quotation, Slug names the quoted artists, Musab and The Fresh Prince, to signal purposeful intent to recall the prior works, “Sunny Days” (1996) and “Summertime” (1991) before continuing the chorus with his own written lyrics.⁷⁹

Unsigned allosonic quotations, often found in the chorus or woven into a verse, are harder to discern—even for attentive, hypertextually-aware listeners to recognize. The previous illustration recognized Atmosphere’s allosonic quotation and repetition of two lines from Rakim’s “Follow the Leader” (1988) for the chorus of “Clay” (1997). When Slug employs this strategy to use quotations for his chorus, he does not simply repeat the lines but builds the energy and intensity with every repetition.⁸⁰ For example, in “Round and Round” (2005) there is again a notable difference in tone and veracity from chorus to chorus as Slug repeats “round and round, upside down / living my life underneath the ground,” taken from a verse of “Beyond this World” (1989) by Jungle Brothers.⁸¹ Still, there are more nuanced capacities to implement an unsigned allosonic quotation.

Schematic Quotation

I now return to the previous Slug and Big Pun example, which I am calling a *schematic quotation*: a lyrical structure that replicates and reworks both content and cadence from an earlier

⁷⁸ Atmosphere, “Sunshine,” *Sad Clown Bad Summer*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 2007.

⁷⁹ During the recording release of “Summertime,” Musab went by the stage name Beyond.

⁸⁰ This repetition most likely causes the listener to disregard any timbral associations they may have with the quoted artist.

⁸¹ Atmosphere, “Round and Round,” *Headshots: Se7en*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 2005; and Jungle Brothers, “Beyond this World,” *Done By the Forces of Nature*, Warner Bros, 1989.

work. This schema operates as a bipartite structure: “I’m not a player” and “I throw-up a lot.” The first part is an allosonic quotation, but the second part is a contrafactum of the hypotext, substituting Big Pun’s lyrics (“I just fuck a lot”) with Slug’s more self-effacing variation without a substantial change to the music. Through the lens of Afrodiasporic musical and literary tropes, it would be apt to describe this schema as a common call-and-response, but my perception leans towards an antecedent-consequent relationship. The hypertext develops a sense of tension missing in the hypotext causing the antecedent “I’m not a player” to feel unresolved until the consequent “I throw-up a lot” ameliorates the tension.

Slug employs similar schematic quotations throughout his discography. In “Guns and Cigarettes” (2001), for example, he raps: “rappers stepping to me, they wanna get some / but most of them should go and try to boost their monthly income,” signifying Big Daddy Kane’s boast in “Ain’t No Half Steppin’” (1988): “rappers steppin’ to me, they wanna get some / but I’m the Kane, so, yo, you know the outcome.”⁸² Slug inverts Kane’s self-assured threat into a critique of lesser-known rappers trying to make a living. Likewise, in “Trying to Find a Balance” (2003) Slug raps: “see I’m not insane, in fact of kind of rational / when I be askin’ ‘yo where did all the passion go?’” echoing Boogie Down Productions “My Philosophy” (1988): “see I’m not insane, in fact I’m kind of rational / when I be asking you, ‘who is more dramatical?’”⁸³ In both cases, Slug retains the original metrical and rhetorical framework while redirecting its thematic content.⁸⁴

⁸² Atmosphere, “Guns and Cigarettes,” *Lucy Ford: The Atmosphere EPs*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 2001; and Big Daddy Kane “Ain’t No Half Steppin’,” *Long Live the Kane*, Cold Chillin’, 1988.

⁸³ Atmosphere, “Trying to Find a Balance,” *Seven’s Travels*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 2003; and Boogie Down Productions, “My Philosophy,” *By All Means Necessary*, Jive, 1988.

⁸⁴ Although outside the scope of this dissertation, the sonic similarities between the hypotext and hypertext in instances of schematic quotation warrant further consideration. While the lyrical phrasing and rhythmic structure of the quotation may remain nearly identical to the original, changes in tempo, vocal tone, and production aesthetics

To be clear, schematic quotations are not always a one-to-one ratio and can vary from quotation to quotation. In Atmosphere’s “Like Today” (2001), for example, Slug includes a schematic quotation of Slick Rick’s iconic line from “La Di Da Di” (1985): “fresh, dressed like a million bucks / threw on the bally shoes and the fly green socks.”⁸⁵ Slug brings the contrafactum into the antecedent, altering the hypertextual end-rhyme and thereby stirring more anticipation in the listener, who anxiously awaits the resolution of a new rhyme within an established schema: “fresh, dressed like fifty cents / clean and awake now ready to commence.”⁸⁶

Schematic quotation typically embeds itself in verse, making it difficult to parse, but sometimes rappers will string together a series of schematic quotations that demonstrate an exaggeration of this technique. For example, within thirty seconds of Felt’s “Early Mornin’ Tony” (2005), Slug and Murs alternate between four separate and sequential schematic quotations of hip-hop’s Golden Age, visualized in the table below.⁸⁷

often result in a markedly different sonic affect. For instance, the slower tempo and more subdued delivery in Atmosphere’s “Clay,” as compared to Eric B. and Rakim’s “Follow the Leader,” transforms the mood of the quoted line, shifting it from assertive and commanding to introspective and reflective. These subtle sonic shifts not only recontextualize the quoted material but also contribute to the hypertext’s unique emotional and aesthetic register, further complicating the intertextual relationship between source and citation.

⁸⁵ Slick Rick and Doug E. Fresh, “La Di Da Di,” *The Show and La Di Da Di*, Fantasy Records, 1985.

⁸⁶ Atmosphere, “Like Today,” *Lucy Ford: The Atmosphere EPs*. Other rappers have similarly signified on this infamous Slick Rick line to different ends. Snoop Doggy Dogg’s “Lodi Dodi” (1993) raps: “now I’m fresh, dressed like a million bucks / threw on my white socks with the all-blue Chucks” localizing the line to reflect the dress and cultural codes of Los Angeles rap at the time (a move I later call a new perspective cover). Bay Area underground group the Coup offers another twist in “Fat Cats, Bigga Fish” (1994): “fresh, dressed like a million bucks / I be the flyest motha fucka in an afro and a tux,” playfully disrupting the original image with a politically charged juxtaposition that critiques the stereotype of Black formality and class mobility.

⁸⁷ Felt is a side project of Murs and Slug that features a different producer for each album. However, because Ant produces this album and song, for argument purposes we can consider this Atmosphere plus Murs.

Beastie Boys - “The New Style” (1986)	Felt - “Early Mornin' Tony” (2005)
...4 and 3 and 2 and 1	...4 and 3 and 2 and 1
And when I'm on the mic the suckers run	And when I'm on the mic, the women come
Down with Ad-Rock and Mike D. and you ain't	Down with A-N-T, Murs and you're not
And I got more juice than Picasso got paint...	And I got more rhymes than California got cops
Ice-T - “6 in tha Mornin'” (1987)	
Six in the morning police at my door	Nine in the mornin' police at my door
Fresh Adidas squeak across the bathroom floor...	Wonder what the fuck they want to talk to me for
N.W.A. - “Gangsta Gangsta” (1988)	
...She was scared and it was showin'	She said she wanted money for some fundraiser shit
We all said “fuck you b***h” and kept goin'...	I slammed the door in her face and said fuck you b***h
Schoolly D - “Gucci Time” (1985)	
Lookin' at my Gucci it's about that time	Lookin' at my Nixon it's about that time
For MC Schoolly D to start hummin' a rhyme...	For me to light another cigarette and settle my mind...

Table 1: Comparison of hypotext (left) and hypertext (right).⁸⁸

This excerpt places Slug and Murs in line with past hip-hop greats Beastie Boys, Ice-T, N.W.A., and Schoolly D, but the artistic choice to compose one schematic quotation after another also forces the listener to amalgamate the references into a singular block. In this way, the listener considers Felt not only in relation to the individual artists, but to the era from which they came, hip-hop's Golden Age. The selection of quoted artists appears systematically chosen to ameliorate specific notions of place by balancing two East Coast artists (Beastie Boys, Schoolly D) and two West Coast artists (N.W.A., Ice-T), perhaps symbolizing Slug's positionality in the Midwest. Still, how does this dense grouping of artists from a single era affect the experience of the hypotextual and hypertextual listener? The hypotextual listener can easily dissect the individual quotations - but their indexical knowledge compels a mental grouping to synthesize the quoted artists through a shared characteristic—being from hip-hop's Golden Age. Therefore, the

⁸⁸ Beastie Boys, “The New Style,” *License to Ill*, Def Jam, 1986; Ice-T, “6 in tha Mornin’,” *Rhyme Pays*, Sire, 1987; N.W.A., “Gangsta Gangsta,” *Straight Outta Compton*, Priority, 1988; Schoolly D, “Gucci Time,” *Schoolly D*, Jive, 1985; and Felt, “Early Mornin’ Tony,” *Felt 2: A Tribute to Lisa Bonet*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 2005.

hypotextual listener draws a stronger association of Slug and Murs with the Golden Age than with the individual quoted artists. For the hypertextual listener, however, this experience is somewhat reversed; in the absence of an identifiable unifying thread, the hypertextual listener associates Slug and Murs with the Beastie Boys, Ice-T, N.W.A., and Schoolly D individually rather than considering their unified common Golden Age ancestry.

Self-Signifyin'

My next example offers a unique instance of self-signifyin' that is almost entirely contrafactual.

Atmosphere's song "Modern Man's Hustle" (2002) opens with a short vignette:

The first time I met the devil was at a Motel 6
She left hell to spend her weekends on earth just for kicks
Sexy little b***h, shorter than expected
About 5 foot 5, getting thick in the breast and thighs
Beautiful dark eyes, a strong stare
Large lips, soft hands and long hair
I said I'll make you smile for the simple fact I'm good at it
I'll make you smile just so I can sit and look at it⁸⁹

The vignette compares a woman to the devil as Slug succumbs to her manipulations. But as the song proceeds a different narrative emerges; a ventilation for Slug's disgruntlement balancing a touring work-life with at-home romance, wishing he was there to support his partner: "and I will love you through simple and the struggle / but girl you gotta understand the modern man must hustle."⁹⁰ The devil thus symbolizes promiscuous groupies and Slug's experience of anxiety-driven carnal temptations while on tour. Slug revisits this theme and opening vignette in "Reflections" (2003) but alters the narrative to assume the role of the devil:

⁸⁹ Atmosphere, "Modern Man's Hustle," *GodLovesUgly*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 2002.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

...If you don't know the words you can make up your own
The first time she met the devil was at First Avenue
Went backstage with him into the dressing room
Sexy ego trip, taller than expected
About six foot three
Seemed to thrive on his misery
Critical, observant, big words
Sweaty hair, sunken eyes, and thick nerves
She said I'll make him smile for the simple fact that he needs it
I'll make him smile just so I can kill it, and eat it...⁹¹

The hypertextual listener embraces a superficial reading of this schematic quotation views Slug as a sexual predator, a dangerous person women should avoid. But in juxtaposition to the hypotext, a deeper meaning emerges that signifies on groupies as well as Slug's involvement with them. The excerpt's preceding line—"if you don't know the words you can make up your own"—is a stab towards pseudo-fans by mocking their lack of lyrical fluency and fabricated enthusiasm. Additionally, the hypotextual listener will understand the quotation as Slug "reflecting" on prior ideations of women and groupies: perhaps the women were never devils after all, and in fact, perhaps *he* was acting devilish. By referencing one of their own prior works, Atmosphere speaks to their imagined community of practice and simultaneously signifies on the broader community of listeners—distinguishing dedicated fans from casual followers, and hypotextual from hypertextual listeners. This layered intertextuality reveals overlapping interpretive communities that are structured by varying degrees of cultural literacy. In the context of the Midwest's relative geographic and industry isolation, such references help consolidate a smaller, independent community whose shared knowledge base becomes a form of insider credibility—reinforcing regional identity while compensating for limited mainstream exposure.

⁹¹ Atmosphere, "Reflections," *Seven's Travels*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 2003.

New Perspective Cover

Traditional cover songs in hip-hop are scarce; the performer and audience carry an implicit assumption, according to Adam Bradley, “that a rapper is delivering his or her own words, that we are hearing directly from the mind behind the voice.”⁹² The value placed on an authentic voice forces rappers to consider a hypotext through an alternative lens or viewpoint, molding the narrative to suite their personal lived reality. A *new perspective cover* allows artists whose region, race, or gender fall outside of hip-hop’s mainstream to engage with classic hip-hop songs. For example, Megan Thee Stallion’s “Girls in the Hood” (2020) flips the gendered script of Eazy-E’s “Boyz-N-Tha-Hood” (1987);⁹³ Murs’s “I Used to Luv H.E.R. (Again)” (2010) offers a transregional or West Coast perspective of Common’s infamous “I Used to Love H.E.R.” (1994);⁹⁴ and Atmosphere’s “YGM” (2007) is a transracial narrative of Big Daddy Kane’s “Young, Gifted, and Black” (1989). Rappers construct these hip-hop covers with varying levels of schematic quotation that include anywhere from a few lines to the entire song. In the case of Atmosphere’s “YGM (Young, Gifted, and Mixed),” we hear Slug begin and end their version with a schematic quotation, creating bookends to frame their cover within the respective hypotext:

⁹² Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip-Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2017), 205.

⁹³ Megan Thee Stallion, “Girls in the Hood,” *Good News*, 1501 Certified, 2020; and Eazy-E, “Boyz-N-tha-Hood,” *Eazy-Duz-It*, Ruthless, 1988.

⁹⁴ Murs and 9th Wonder, “I Used to Luv H.E.R. (Again),” *Forever*, SMC Recordings, 2010; and Common Sense, “I Used to Love H.E.R.,” *Resurrection*, Relativity, 1994.

Big Daddy Kane - “Young, Gifted, and Black” (1989)	Atmosphere - “YGM” (2007)
Rough, rugged and real, you're on standstill	Rough, rugged and raw, nobody saw
To obey okay so let the man build	So I smashed through the windows and dashed with it all
Words of rapture that you have to capture	Didn't even leave the broken glass
And I just slapped ya...	Put it all in the van and took it home to stash...
...Rappers are raggin' and taggin' and snaggin' and braggin'	...You're stealin' now give me back my style
To be on the bandwagon, but I'm the Last Dragon	How does it feel tryin' to piggyback my crowd
With the knack to attract the pack	Say it loud, break it down, take em' out
So just get back, I'm young gifted and Black	Like give me this, I'm young, gifted and mixed

Table 2: Comparison of hypotext (left) and hypertext (right).⁹⁵

Although I have not focused on instrumental sampling practices, Ant’s production on “YGM” deserves a small aside. Instead of sampling the same recorded sources as Big Daddy Kane’s producer Marley Marl on “Young, Gifted, and Black,” Ant finds a live recording of the same songs to sample. For example, the core sample of Big Daddy Kane’s version is based on the studio recording of Albert King’s “I’ll Play the Blues for You” (1972), but Atmosphere’s version is based on a live, albeit unknown, recording of the same song. “Because of the basic law of originality in hip-hop,” says Ant, “[cover songs] allowed me to tap into records I normally wouldn’t mess with and steer clear of ... we didn’t have all the self-imposed rules.”⁹⁶ Ant’s choice to challenge himself to “sample records that all have crowds in them” to differentiate Atmosphere from Big Daddy Kane forces us to reconsider the classification of Ant’s instrumentals as either autsonic or allosonic.⁹⁷ Since the instrumentals derive from previously recorded material they are certainly autsonic, but in relation to “Young, Gifted, and Black,” is it

⁹⁵ Big Daddy Kane, “Young, Gifted, and Mixed,” *It’s a Big Daddy Thing*, Warner Bros, 1989; and Atmosphere, “YGM,” *Strictly Leakage*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 2007.

⁹⁶ Sean Daley and Anthony Davis, “Atmosphere – Strictly Leakage 10th Anniversary,” December 21, 2017, accessed February 2020, <https://rhymesayers.com/blogs/news/strictly-leakage-10th-anniversary>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

not also allosonic? Because Ant rerecorded or reperformed Marley Marl's instrumentals, "YGM" demonstrates an allosonic performance of "Young, Gifted, and Black." Therefore "YGM" functions simultaneously as a signaled autosonic quotation of Albert King and an unsignaled allosonic quotation of Big Daddy Kane. This process highlights how independent producers like Ant creatively navigate and complicate established taxonomies of sampling, subtly asserting artistic individuality while engaging in layered intertextual dialogue with hip-hop's Golden Age.

Sequel Cover

Hip-hop maintains a long-standing tradition of remixing and remaking earlier tracks; however, this practice is often confined to incorporating additional artists over the same instrumental beat or updating the production while largely preserving the original lyrics, albeit with minor variations. A representative example of this is Eminem's "B***h Please II" (2000), which operates as a remix or extension of Snoop Dogg's original track "B***h Please" (1999).⁹⁸ Although the "sequel" introduces new performers, it contributes little in terms of narrative progression or thematic development. Rather than functioning as a direct continuation, it expands upon and reinterprets the mood and structure of the original. In contrast, my final example engages with what literary theorist Richard Saint-Gelais terms "transfictionality"—the continuation or elaboration of an established prior narrative across different texts.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Eminem, "B***h Please II," *The Marshall Mathers LP, Aftermath*, 2000; and Snoop Dogg, "B***h Please," *No Limit Top Dogg*, No Limit, 1999.

⁹⁹ Richard Saint-Gelais, "Transfictionality," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, edited by David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005.)

De La Soul's "Millie Pulled a Pistol on Santa" (1991) details a tragic tale about a young girl abused by her father. No longer able to withstand the abuse, Millie shows up at her father's work as a department store Santa with a loaded pistol, killing him in front of everyone.

... As I'm jettin' Millie floats in like a zombie
I ask her what's her problem, all she says is 'Where is he?'
I give a point she pulls a pistol people screamin'
She shouts to Dill 'he's off to hell cuz he's a demon'
None of the kids could understand what was the cause
All they could see was a girl holdin' a pistol on Claus
Dillon pleaded mercy said he didn't mean to
Do all the things that her mind could do nothing but cling to
Millie bucked him and with the quickness it was over¹⁰⁰

Atmosphere carries this narrative directly into their song "Millie Fell Off the Fire Escape" (2009) following the fatal firing of the gun. To ease the transition from one song to the next, Atmosphere includes a brief sample of De La Soul rapper Posdnous repeating the final word of their song "over" before Slug continues the narrative:

She dropped the gun and started running down the corridor
She found the exit to get out that department store
She reached full sprint when she hit the parking lot
She didn't see police, not even any rent-a-cops
She ran across the street and went behind the Applebee's
From there she could see those abandoned factories
Figured there's a good place for her to hide away
Knowing she could climb inside through the fire escape...¹⁰¹

Unfortunately, the tale ends in tragedy as Millie falls from a fire escape to her death following a pursuit from law enforcement. Instead of considering Millie's story through an alternative lens, Atmosphere's continuation of the prior narrative gives a wanted, or unwanted, conclusion to De La Soul's ambiguous ending.

¹⁰⁰ De La Soul, "Millie Pulled a Pistol on Santa," *De La Soul is Dead*, Tommy Boy, 1991.

¹⁰¹ Atmosphere, "Mille Fell off the Fire Escape," *Leak at Will*, 2009.

Atmosphere's venture into covering Golden Age hip-hop classics is largely confined to two of their albums, *Strictly Leakage* (2007) and *Leak at Will* (2009), both released online as free downloads. These albums, and the cover songs within them, reveal a cathartic purpose: signifying as a form of escapism, serving as both a tool for distraction and a mode of therapeutic release. At this point in Atmosphere's career, they were composing deeply conceptual songs with serious subject matter for their projects *The Sad Clown Bad Seasons* series and *When Life Gives You Lemons, You Paint That Shit Gold*. For example, "Yesterday" (2007) explores Slug's psyche as he experiences grief in his father's passing yet continues to see his face in everyday people. Composed during the same sessions as *Lemons* and *The Seasons*, the songs for *Strictly Leakage* and *Leak At Will* were "the tracks where they could just cut loose and have fun, a much-needed balance to the intensity that went into the creation of their other projects' material during this era."¹⁰² In an interview for the 10th anniversary of *Strictly Leakage*, Slug reveals:

Basically, I was making these – I don't want to say parodies – but I was making my version of songs I deemed to be classic. We were doing these 'exercises' just to sync ourselves up after making a song that was much more serious... These songs weren't made with the intention to release them, but they started coming out good... I remember Ant once saying *Strictly Leakage* was good because I had a space to say things I could never say on an Atmosphere record. The problem with an Atmosphere record is that [it tends] to take itself a little too serious. *Strictly Leakage* was a place to not worry about that.¹⁰³

Slug's statement is telling. His inclination to resist interpretation of these cover songs as parodies is apt, echoing critic John Walsh's similar understanding that "parody is defined as a satirical imitation for purposes of mockery."¹⁰⁴ At no point is Atmosphere deriding any Golden Age

¹⁰² Sean Daley and Anthony Davis, "Strictly Leakage 10th Anniversary."

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ John Walsh, "Is Pastiche Better Than the Real Thing?: Yeah Baby!" review of *Goldmember* (Warner Bros. movie), *The Independent on Sunday*, July 21, 2002, LifeEtc. section, 2.

artists, but rather showing reverence. Still, by comparing these cover songs to “exercises” Slug acknowledges the frivolity and playfulness embedded in this practice to distinguish from the “real thing” or final product—not to mention the initial intention to withhold these recordings from the public as well as their subsequent availability as a free download. For Slug, signifyin’ on Golden Age “classics” is not only a means to signal membership in a community of practice, but a foundational creative strategy—one that jumpstarts artistic output and functions as a necessary emotional purge, clearing space for the more introspective and thematically complex works that follow.

Conclusion

The end of hip-hop’s Golden Age in the early 1990s coincided with a sharp increase in legal scrutiny over sampling practices as artists came under fire for using the intellectual property of other musicians.¹⁰⁵ What had been a defining aesthetic of the genre, sampling was now being reframed as theft. A landmark case in this shift occurred in 1991 when singer-songwriter Gilbert O’Sullivan sued Biz Markie over the unauthorized use of his 1971 hit “Alone Again (Naturally)” in Markie’s track “Alone Again.” Despite the transformative nature of Markie’s version and its ironic commentary on the original, the court ruled in favor of O’Sullivan. The decision forced Warner Brothers Records to recall the album and banned all future sales, sending a chilling message to the industry. This case set a powerful legal precedent that fundamentally changed the practice of sampling in hip-hop. While it did not stop producers from sampling altogether, it did force them to become more inventive in how they borrowed from prior works. In many ways, lyrical signifyin’ began to take on the creative and referential functions previously performed by

¹⁰⁵ For more on the Golden Age of sampling, see Kembrew McLeod and Peter DiCola, *Creative License: The Law and Culture of Digital Sampling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

now-restricted sampling—circumventing legal constraints by operating through allusion and verbal intertextuality, which remains largely unregulated by copyright law.

Intertextuality plays a vital but undertheorized role in the lyrical analysis of hip-hop. By defaulting to artistic influence as the sole bearer of meaning in intra-genre quotation, we risk occluding the community building elements that serve as a potent though often unrecognized semiotic force in hip-hop. As a case study of Atmosphere, I have argued that connection to hip-hop's Golden Age recorded history by means of signifyin' can diffuse critiques of inauthenticity and negotiate membership in the hip-hop community. Applying an analytical approach to rap lyrics, this chapter traces the performance, reception and musical functions of intra-genre intertextuality, then situates these observations into the broader sociolinguistic web of reference

Atmosphere's status as racial and regional outsiders to hip-hop's hegemonic mainstream necessitated a means to contextualize themselves within the broader imagined hip-hop community, who perceived authenticity within the genre as exclusively Black and coastal. To build up their marginal positionality, Atmosphere systematically uses intra-genre intertextuality to demonstrate their own mastery of hip-hop history, "a particularly potent and pervasive strain of authenticity in hip-hop," by enlisting venerated Golden Age icons.¹⁰⁶ Identification of the masked quotational references ignite in knowing, hypotextual listeners a sense that they belong to an elite imagined community of practice, who are then able to contextualize Atmosphere alongside past hip-hop greats.

To be sure, these techniques are not exclusive to Atmosphere or underground artists; some of the most commercially successful rappers, including 50 Cent, Kanye West, and Eminem, will appropriate Golden Age lyrical schemas. For example, recent rap phenom Doechii

¹⁰⁶ Williams, *Rhymin' and Stealin'*, 46.

interpolated a schematic quotation of Makaveli's/Tupac's "Hail Mary" (1996) in her hit single "Denial is a River" (2024): "I ain't a killer but don't push me / revenge is the sweetest joy next to getting pussy" becomes "I ain't a killer but don't push me / don't wanna have to turn a n***a guts into soup beans."¹⁰⁷ Doing so allows DoeChii to embody the same level of threat and violence so strongly associated with Tupac and Death Row Records.

In closing, I would like to briefly return to the example of Atmosphere's new perspective cover, "YGM." Although the lyrics—not to mention its instrumentals—are intrinsically linked to Big Daddy Kane's "Young, Gifted, and Black," there are other intertextual elements at play that complicate the semantic content of the song. Are we to understand Atmosphere also in relation to Lorraine Hansberry's play *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* (1968)? The Nina Simone song "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black" (1969)? Or perhaps the Aretha Franklin album *Young Gifted, and Black* (1972)? The question of Atmosphere's relation to these artists is irrelevant; what matters is that Atmosphere elicits "spirals of adjacency" that bind artists across genres, eras, and mediums. Intertextuality, whether in music, film, literature, or any other form of expression, is a pervasive phenomenon we encounter everyday whether we realize it or not. Intertextuality invites us to see the world as a more unified whole, and additional excavation of these references allow us to understand and appreciate our environment more deeply. Those who see the world in this way create not only an imagined community, but an elite intelligentsia of hip-hop scholars who are a repository of specified knowledge. In this group they don't just belong—they are the real masters of the culture.

In sum, this chapter demonstrates that intra-genre intertextuality in hip-hop lyrics functions as far more than homage or stylistic flourish. It emerges as a vital tool for artistic

¹⁰⁷ Makaveli, "Hail Mary," *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*, Death Row, 1996; and DoeChii, "Denial is a River," *Alligator Bites Never Heal*, Top Dawg, 2024.

development, a gatekeeping mechanism for insider recognition, and a subtle yet powerful form of self-canonization. By highlighting how peripheral artists like Atmosphere leverage intertextual practices rooted in hip-hop's Golden Age, I argue that authenticity in contemporary hip-hop is increasingly determined not by traditional markers of region, race, or industry access, but by one's fluency in the genre's evolving textual archive. This reorientation challenges static notions of legitimacy in hip-hop, revealing how marginalized voices can strategically mobilize cultural memory to assert presence and credibility. Ultimately, this case study underscores a central premise of this dissertation: that knowledge—who has it, how it is signaled, and who can recognize it—operates as one of the most powerful currencies in hip-hop's discursive economy. Though this chapter does not consider the role of race in articulations of identity, it remains a difficult obstacle for non-Black artists to overcome. In the next chapter, I scrutinize how rappers in Michigan have overcome whiteness as a racial impediment.

CHAPTER III

NEGOTIATING WHITENESS IN 1990s HIP-HOP: A CASE STUDY OF EMINEM, INSANE CLOWN POSSE, AND DETROIT HORRORCORE

You ever be walking down the street and you see some black people walking. Not just any old black dude, ya know? We're talking, ya know, *thugs*. In the group they got one or two, sometimes as many as three white guys be with them. You ever seen that shit? Let me tell you something bout those white guys. Those white guys are the most dangerous mother fuckers in them groups. Nah, it's true! It's true man, there ain't no telling what they've done to get them black dudes respect. Them black dudes have seen them do some wild shit, I'll tell you that!

— Dave Chappelle¹⁰⁸

In a dark crowded arena, ominous organ drones and strobe lights slowly reveal a shadowy figure, a man stumbles on stage wearing denim overalls and an old hockey mask recklessly swinging a roaring chainsaw with sparks flying in every direction as though the sharp teeth are cutting against metal (Figure 2). A frightening display, yet nobody runs. On the contrary, the screams from the crowd erupt throughout the arena in thunderous applause and cheers of exuberance as the grim figure slowly reveals the face of the night's headliner, the rapper Eminem. This staged performance reproducing 1980s horror-slasher film tropes (notably Jason Vorhees of the *Friday the 13th* series) were a frequent opener for Eminem concerts in the late 1990s through early 2000s, and they provided an ideal paratextual visual aid to compliment and amplify his eerie

¹⁰⁸ *Dave Chappelle: Killin' Them Softly*, directed by Stan Lathan (2000; UrbanWorks Entertainment, 2003).

aesthetic and aural signature. These actions may seem bizarre or alienating, but they are, in fact, indicative of a broader trend among white musicians in the 1990s to attract and maintain an audience.

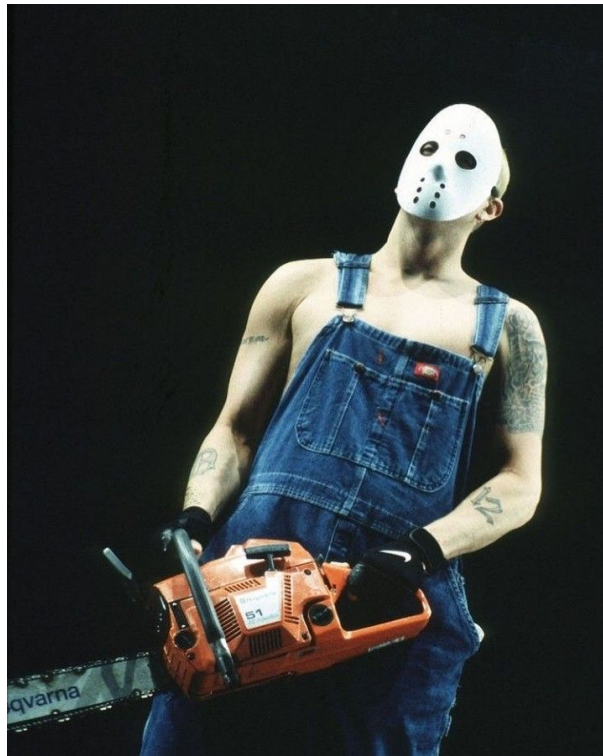


Figure 2: Eminem onstage at Vorst National in Brussels, Belgium, May 2, 2001.¹⁰⁹

Eminem's debut album *Infinite* (1996) was a commercial failure. By contrast, *The Slim Shady LP* (1999), Eminem's next album, was a runaway megahit. Musicologist Loren Kajikawa argues this success was partly due to Eminem's open acknowledgment of his white identity, which he explored through mockery and parody of common tropes and stereotypes associated

¹⁰⁹ Gie Knaeps, *Eminem 01*, 2001, Getty Images, Hulton Archives, <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/eminem-vorst-nationaal-brussels-belgium-news-photo/835350236>.

with whiteness.¹¹⁰ Building on Kajikawa's framework, I argue that following the poor reception of his debut album *Infinite*, Eminem altered his approach toward negotiating his whiteness. Combining humor with the horrorcore mode of excessive violence popularized by fellow white Detroit hip-hop duo Insane Clown Posse (ICP), who emerged in the early 1990s with a KISS-like, macabre, and carnivalesque aesthetic, paired with violent lyrics reminiscent of heavy metal. By embracing horror film tropes and masking their faces in clown makeup, ICP learned how to sidestep issues of racial authenticity. Despite scathing critical reviews (declared "the worst band of all time" by *Blender* magazine in 2003), ICP continues performing and releasing music for many loyal fans, who call themselves "Juggalos."¹¹¹ Although Kajikawa recognizes Eminem's tendency towards violence and his ability to "tap into the cultural trope of the cold-blooded psycho killer," his focus on the transition from *Infinite* (1996) to *The Slim Shady LP* (1999) neglects the intermediate *Slim Shady EP* (1997).¹¹² It is this EP that reveals Eminem's artistic evolution and propensity for disturbing rhetoric.

In this chapter, I situate ICP within this trend to explore the dynamics of whiteness in hardcore rap that, more importantly, provided the necessary social conditions and stylistic blueprint for fellow Detroit rapper and native-son, Eminem. A critical aspect of Eminem's success in a Black dominated genre was, according to Kajikawa, his ability to disarm racial critique through cartoonish mockery of stereotyped whiteness. I argue that this adopted farcical

¹¹⁰ Loren Kajikawa, "Eminem's 'My Name Is': Signifying Whiteness, Rearticulating Race," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 3/3 (2009). This article also appears as a chapter in *Sounding Race in Rap Song* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

¹¹¹ *Blender* closed in 2009 and although I was unable to find the original article, several subsequent articles support this claim. See Mitchell Sunderland, "Tears of a Clown: The American Nightmare That Created the Insane Clown Posse," *Vice*, April 20, 2015, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/tears-of-a-clown-insane-clown-posse-find-hope-after-a-life-of-struggle-and-trauma-456/>; and Louis Pattison, "Insane Clown Posse: a magnet for ignorance," *The Guardian* August 18, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2010/aug/18/insane-clown-posse>

¹¹² Kajikawa, "Eminem's 'My Name Is': Signifying Whiteness, Rearticulating Race," 357.

persona is only half of his Sock and Buskin image; the other features manic and unpredictably violent tendencies that were imperative to negotiating whiteness in hip-hop and popular music during the 1990s. Unlike white rock and metal artists could fully embrace Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the "carnival-grotesque" (e.g., Marilyn Manson, Slipknot, Gwar, and Nine Inch Nails), white rappers necessitated balance between morbidity and comedy to negotiate their identity amongst a hip-hop audience.¹¹³

ICP embraced the "carnival-grotesque" fully and unabashedly, positioning themselves in direct opposition to an older generation of white, middle-class respectability—the kind of audience that would have found their clown makeup, horrorcore lyrics, and violent stage antics morally repugnant. This generational rejection functioned as both a cultural severing and a performance of alienation, allowing ICP to align themselves with working-class and outsider identities while still exploiting whiteness as a source of ironic spectacle. I contend that Eminem achieved a more calculated balance by recuperating aspects of ICP-inspired horrorcore that were effective in diffusing critiques of inauthenticity, while lacing it with an original, caustic sense of humor. In doing so I will undertake three things here. First, I will examine how ideations of whiteness in the 1990s were complicated by philosophies of commercial multiculturalism and realistic racial integration. Then, I will dissect the aesthetics of horrorcore by way of Detroit rappers Insane Clown Posse. Finally, I will scrutinize how Eminem combined the horrorcore model with quick facetious wit and was ultimately able to transcend his identity as a token white rapper. Engaging with Eminem's artistic growth in the historical context of Detroit hip-hop

¹¹³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by H. Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). For a discussion on heavy metal and the carnival-grotesque, see Karen Bettez Halnon, "Heavy Metal Carnival and Dis-alienation: The Politics of Grotesque Realism," *Symbolic Interaction* Vol. 29, Issue 1 (2006).

allows us to further examine and understand how he “came to represent several of the major political conflicts that defined the 1990s.

Whiteness in the 1990s

What does it mean when we talk about whiteness? While there is no established definition, the social sciences consider whiteness the societal standard or fixed norm undergirding the perception of sameness in American culture; that is, a racial lens to judge distinguishing cultural characteristics of non-white ethnic groups (i.e., a negative definition that marks non-white groups as different). In recent years, scholars have spearheaded a new “critical whiteness studies” paradigm to document this phenomenon. Historian Nell Irvin Painter, for example, envisions whiteness as an ideological lens in which superficial value judgments are made to reveal historically invisible structures that have produced white supremacy and privilege.¹¹⁴

Literary scholar Mike Hill defines whiteness as “the invisible norm in the West, a transparent, yet ubiquitous frame of reference.”¹¹⁵ The supposed unmarked invisibility of whiteness make it difficult to discern characteristics of whiteness in a society that is governed by default through this framework. But is whiteness truly invisible? Sociologist Steve Garner’s book *Whiteness: An Introduction* elicits the work of Black novelist and activist Toni Morrison, who “maintains that it is blackness rather than whiteness that has been rendered invisible.”¹¹⁶ The idea of invisibility, then, entirely depends on perspective; one person’s invisibility is another’s (hyper)visibility. And if “the unmarked nature of whiteness derives from it being the center point from which

¹¹⁴ Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

¹¹⁵ Mike Hill, *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

¹¹⁶ Steve Garner, *Whiteness: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 40.

everything else can be viewed,” how do we reconcile invisibility in a post-Civil Rights society guided by multi-racialism?¹¹⁷ Studying white artists in a musical style largely marked as Black provides a unique opportunity to confront conceptions of invisibility and further develop critical whiteness studies. In contrast to most of American culture, looking at hip-hop, we need to modify the presumed invisibility of whiteness; here, it is whiteness that is hyper-visible giving minority status within that specific subculture. This reversal reveals how the presumed invisibility of whiteness is not an inherent trait but a function of its dominant position in broader society. Within rap music, white participation disrupts that invisibility, exposing whiteness as a visible, and often contested, racial identity.

Over the course of the 20th century, whiteness—once operating as an unmarked and invisible cultural norm—became increasingly visible and subject to critique, particularly as Black American culture became socially engrained into everyday life.¹¹⁸ Musically speaking, Amy Coddington credits crossover artists such as Prince and Lionel Richie for their appeal to Black and white audiences as being a catalyst in this recent coalition during the 1980s.¹¹⁹ Further, Bakari Kitwana explains how Black culture, specifically citing sports and the popularity of Michael Jordan, significantly influenced mainstream perceptions of Blackness in the 1990s

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 43.

¹¹⁸ White engagement with Black cultural production follows a long-standing pattern, most visibly inaugurated by the minstrel tradition of blackface in the late 19th century, in which white performers commodified caricatured representations of Blackness for mass consumption. Hip-hop, while part of this historical trajectory, occupies a distinct position as the first major Black musical genre to emerge in the aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, a period in which Black cultural production was explicitly politicized and closely linked to collective struggles for racial justice, autonomy, and representation. As such, white participation in hip-hop reanimates earlier dynamics of cultural appropriation but does so in a context where the stakes of racial visibility, authorship, and authenticity are newly heightened and ideologically charged. For a discussion on cultural exchange in the era of blackface minstrelsy, see Christopher J. Smith, *The Creolization of American Culture: William Sidney Mount and the Roots of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

¹¹⁹ Amy Coddington, *How Hip-Hop Became Hit-Pop: Radio, Rap, and Race* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023).

and played a pivotal role in shaping younger generations perspectives on race.¹²⁰ Coddington and Kitwana each highlight the importance of Black figures in the public spotlight who were able to challenge and transcend previous generation's conceptions of race; these were vital figures in the newly emerging politics of racial identity.

A particularly poignant example of this progressive and natural unification involves a scene from Spike Lee's groundbreaking film on racial critique, *Do the Right Thing* (1989).¹²¹ Aggravated by a coworker, Mookie (Spike Lee) pulls Pino (John Turturro) aside for a heart-felt conversation on his racially derogatory rhetoric. Mookie asks: who is your favorite basketball player, movie star, and rock star? Pino responds: Magic Johnson, Eddie Murphy, and Prince, respectively. Faced with the realization that his idols are all African-American, this introspective question forces Pino to challenge preconceived notions of racial dynamics and more importantly, confront his own identity as a white man. This interaction demonstrates an unconscious conflation between Black culture and popular culture, an integration exacerbated by the surging popularity of hip-hop. When Coddington says that "[hip-hop] is not so much part of the mainstream as it *is* the mainstream," she may as well have said that Blackness or Black culture *is* the mainstream.¹²²

Pioneering hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose states that despite hip-hop being "a black idiom that prioritizes black culture and that articulates the problems of black urban life, [hip-hop] does not deny the pleasure and participation of others."¹²³ Nevertheless, three artists in the late 1980s

¹²⁰ Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005).

¹²¹ *Do the Right Thing*, directed by Spike Lee (1989; Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2010), DVD.

¹²² Coddington, *How Hip-Hop Became Hit-Pop*, 128.

¹²³ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 1994), 4-5.

cemented the genre's symbolic affiliation with Blackness: Public Enemy, N.W.A., and Vanilla Ice. Public Enemy's politically driven lyrics and brash production exuded Black nationalism that vocalized the continuing African-American pursuit of civil rights.¹²⁴ N.W.A. and their hardcore aesthetic introduced the world to a cinematic portrayal of gang life that highlighted the tribulations of growing up Black in an American ghetto. Public Enemy and N.W.A.'s music was decidedly Black, and their popularity aligned with, or perhaps catalyzed, hip-hop's ascent into mainstream culture. Yet, ironically, it was white rapper Vanilla Ice who solidified the genre's perceived exclusive link to Blackness. In 1990 Vanilla Ice attempted to bridge radio-friendly hit-pop and the prevailing gangsta/street aesthetic—a white MC Hammer, so to speak.¹²⁵ *To the Extreme* and the hit single “Ice, Ice Baby” skyrocketed to number one on the Billboard charts and achieved RIAA platinum status, but his popularity was short-lived when the public discovered he had falsified his biography. As a *New York Times* editorial noted: “the facts surfaced around the same time that the pop duo Milli Vanilli confessed to not singing on their own multiplatinum album. In many minds, Vanilla Ice, with his sculpted hair and cheekbones, was the same kind of pretty pop figurehead.”¹²⁶ Realization that Vanilla Ice grew up in a middle-class Dallas suburb instead of an impoverished neighborhood in Miami irrevocably tarnished his reputation; appropriation (or imitation) of a common African-American experience in a way that reduced the culture to growing up in “the hood” was realized as racially negligent and insensitive.

¹²⁴ For more on Public Enemy and how they exude Black nationalism, see Charise Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It Out: Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); and Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*.

¹²⁵ Coddington, *How Hip-Hop Became Hit-Pop*.

¹²⁶ Bernard James, “Why the World is After Vanilla Ice,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 1991.

For the remainder of the decade, record executives, radio personnel, and the Black community at large were understandably hesitant to provide a platform for another white rapper. “It was a lot harder to be a white rapper when we were coming up [in the 1990s],” recalls rapper Murs in an interview on Talib Kweli’s podcast *People’s Party*.¹²⁷ Hip-hop was “one of the things that white people [were] not dominant on,” continued co-host Jasmin Leigh, “they [had] to actually work extra hard like [Black people] have to do at everything else to be considered good.”¹²⁸ In stark contrast to the rest of American society, being white in hip-hop was a liability. Eminem experienced this prejudice first-hand in 1996 when his debut album, *Infinite*, failed to garner critical or commercial acclaim. The smooth vocal delivery, production, and overall aesthetic of *Infinite* drew too many comparisons to New York City legend Nas, and therefore perceived as another imitation of Blackness à la Vanilla Ice. “People were saying that I sounded like AZ and Nas,” recalled Eminem, “for a rapper to be compared to someone, for people to say that you sound like someone else—nobody wants that.”¹²⁹ In effect, Eminem was adopting a race-neutral stance, ignoring his skin color to show his successful immersion into New York styles, yet his identity as a white man continued to be a professional impediment. To put it another way, Eminem’s supposed portrayal of Blackness rendered himself invisible in a genre marked as Black; only by clearly marking himself as white would he become visible.

In a reversal of established racial politics, white America yearned for a figure to transcend the racial boundaries of hip-hop; they needed, as referenced by Snoop Dogg, “the great

¹²⁷ Nicholas Carter, “Talib Kweli And Murs Talk White MCs, Gangs, And Lack Of Support For ‘Conscious Rap,’” *People’s Party with Talib Kweli* (podcast), posted September 16, 2019, YouTube video, 1:37:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YmVfm8JwA0>.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ “Eminem Was Upset with Nas Comparisons After ‘Infinite’ Flopped,” DJ Booth, accessed May 14, 2024, https://djbooth.net/features/2016-05-18-eminem-nas-comparisons-infinite-flopped/#google_vignette.

white American hope.”¹³⁰ Eminem’s imitative and immersive approach to hip-hop on *Infinite* had failed; perceived mirroring and/or absorption of Black culture was insufficient, forcing “Eminem and his team of producers to cultivate a musical strategy that would be capable of transforming his whiteness from a liability into an asset.”¹³¹ In 1999, with the release of his second album, *The Slim Shady LP*, Eminem emerged as a champion of lower-class white Americans and ambassador of Black culture and became an important figure in hip-hop; he was unapologetically white and unashamed about his lower socio-economic, “white-trash” status, allowing him to negotiate his way into a genre and culture long dominated by Black musicians. The commercial and critical success of this album, suggests Kajikawa, was partially due to Eminem’s open acknowledgement of his white identity through mockery and parody of common tropes and stereotypes of whiteness. Kajikawa’s analysis of “My Name Is” identifies social and musical markers of whiteness that allowed Eminem to disarm racial critique while also creating a credible place for himself within the Black hip-hop community.

Still, Kajikawa omits a significant progression in Eminem’s artistic development between *Infinite* (1996) and *The Slim Shady LP* (1999). The intervening *Slim Shady EP* (1997), discussed later, shifts towards a more violent rhetoric and grim aesthetic introducing a new murderous alter-ego, Slim Shady, that has prevailed throughout Eminem’s career. To negotiate a white identity amongst a hip-hop (Black) audience, Eminem necessitated a balance between morbidity (*Slim Shady EP*) and comedy (*The Slim Shady LP*)—his comedic front only provided the context for his psychotic turn. Eminem decisively *combines* humor with reclaimed elements of ICP-inspired horrorcore that proved effective in deflecting critiques of whiteness.

¹³⁰ Eminem, “B***h Please II,” *The Marshall Mathers LP*, Aftermath Entertainment, 2000.

¹³¹ Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Song*, 125.

Insane Clown Posse

Middle school friends Joseph “Violent J” Bruce (b. 1972) and Joseph “Shaggy 2 Dope” Utsler (b. 1974) grew up in Oak Park, Michigan, a small, lower-socioeconomic suburb on the northside of Detroit. United by a lack of familial support and alienation from fellow classmates, Bruce and Utsler spent free time showcasing backyard amateur wrestling matches and experimenting with hip-hop. Recording under the name JJ Boys, the limited available recordings mirror the heavy TR-808 drum and bass aesthetic of 1980s New York City hip-hop underneath immature lyrical content and delivery.¹³² Influenced by West-Coast hip-hop’s glorification of gang-life, Bruce and Utsler subsequently embraced the street/gang lifestyle of N.W.A., Too \$hort, and Ice T, forming their own gang of misfits, the Inner City Posse.

Following the successful hand-to-hand marketing of several basement style mixtapes, the group self-released their first official album, *Dog Beats EP* (1991). Despite featuring the in-style sonic aesthetic of gangsta rap and G-funk, local radio stations were hesitant to broadcast their music because, according to Bruce, they were white, a potentially risky rerun of the Vanilla Ice debacle. In his autobiography *Behind the Paint*, Bruce recalls when their manager, Alex Abbiss, met with the programming director for 97.9 WJLB radio:

He gave [the record] to him on a thick vinyl record that we had pressed up especially for him. “All right [sic], let’s listen to it together,” the radio guy said. He picked up on the P-Funk sample right away. “Oh, George Clinton, cool cool.... Wow, oh wow...this ain’t bad. Hey, do you, uh, have a photo of these guys or anything?” Alex pulled out the *Dog Beats* flyer with [Bruce] and the stick, and Joey [Utsler] with the high top fade, and handed it to him. His face froze. “Oh, they’re white kids? OH. Okay. Well, we’ll call you, we’ll call you.” That was it – BOOM – door behind him.¹³³

¹³² None of their music during this time was officially released but can be found with a search on YouTube.

¹³³ Joseph Bruce, *ICP: Behind the Paint* (Farmington Hills, MI: Psychopathic Incorporated, 2003), 168-9.

The lack of commercial opportunities motivated the group to drop the gang-infused persona and pivot towards an aesthetic that aligned with Black teenager and fellow Detroit rapper Esham Smith (b. 1973).

Esham's music was unique with shocking lyrical content and disturbing subject matter surrounding mental illness, frequent references to Satan, and numerous topics surrounding death, drug use, evil, and paranoia. Influenced by the dark, spooky gangsta aesthetic of Houston hip-hop group Geto Boys, Esham pushed the terror trope to its brink, painting a horrific yet cartoonish and exaggerated depiction of inner-city life. For example, in "Devil's Groove" (1989)

Esham raps:

... A homicidal vital, recital is my title
Got a serious psychological problem
Death's my idol, crucifix and tricks, to black magic
A brother named Esham, treach and tragic
The Devil's my boy and Satan's my son, the gun
Loaded up and ready so that you don't want none...

And later:

... Sacrifice your life tonight with a knife
Pray to Hell and give the Devil your life
See many of you motherfuckers don't understand it, see
How long can you listen to one man's insanity?
Prophecy: the dead has arose and
The Devil is dead and one man is chosen...¹³⁴

Narration of a fictionalized Detroit offered an escapist perspective for himself and other destitute youth struggling with socio-economic neglect. Detached from other hip-hop tropes at the time,

¹³⁴ Esham, *Boomin' Words From Hell*, Reel Life Productions, 1989.

Esham’s chilling aural imagery distinguished its own subgenre, *horrorcore*.¹³⁵ Bruce and Utsler embraced the frightful aesthetic and adopted the name Insane Clown Posse. Instead of references to Satan, however, ICP espoused a sinister, “carnival-grotesque” aesthetic inspired by Stephen King’s *It* (1986) and various horror movie tropes. Their new identity ignited compulsory recognition.¹³⁶ Donning clown makeup (Figure 3) to obscure their skin tone allowed the group to sidestep racial critique. They were no longer white rappers—they were rapping clowns.



Figure 3: Photo from *The Great Milenko* (1997) photoshoot.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ The term “horrorcore” was first heard on the album *Three Men With the Power of Ten* (1991) by the group KMC.

¹³⁶ For a discussion on why Insane Clown Posse decided to adopt the clown personas, see Bruce, Joseph and Joseph Utsler, “Insane Clown Posse on Why They Painted Their Faces (Part 2),” interview by DJ Vlad, *Vlad TV*, posted March 3, 2019, YouTube video, 7:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=erHHk02XS4Q>.

¹³⁷ Insane Clown Posse, *The Great Milenko*, Psychopathic Records, 1997.

The first release under their new pseudonym, *Carnival of Carnage* (1993), introduced the world to ICP's "dark carnival," a fictitious traveling freakshow meant to symbolize the economic dynamics and marginalization felt by those in low socio-economic neighborhoods towards the middle and upper class. The album's liner notes include a detailed manifesto with a call to arms for the socially marginalized and neglected:

If those of the ghetto are nothing more than carnival exhibits to the upper class, then let's give them the show they deserve to see. NO more hearing of this show because you can witness it in your own front yard! A traveling mass of carnage, the same carnage we witness daily in the ghetto, can be yours to witness, feel and suffer. No longer killing one another, but killing the ones who have ignored our cries for help.... Like a hurricane leaving a trail of destruction, the ghetto on wheels bxtch [sic]¹³⁸

Further, they claim this album is but one of six "faces of the Dark Carnival," and "after all six have risen, the end will consume us all."¹³⁹ This eerie statement not only foreshadows the release of five future albums but alludes to an apocalyptic, cultish finale.

To complement their scary clown aesthetic, ICP required music that would frighten unassuming patrons; a sound that captured the collective rage of 1980s horror icons Freddy Krueger, Jason Vorhees, and Michael Myers. The style of production needed to sound as though composed by Stephen King.¹⁴⁰ Amplified bass and distorted synthesizer with sporadic cacophonous interjections and jarring punch phrases of Julius Fučík's "Entrance of the Gladiators"—the piece most famously associated with the circus and their introduction of the clowns—embodies a 2:00am walk down the center of a broken-down carnival closed for

¹³⁸ Insane Clown Posse, *Carnival of Carnage*, Psychopathic Records, 1993.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Stephen King's horror novel *It* (1986) was first adapted to film in 1990. The main character, Pennywise, a demonic clown who terrorizes and preys upon children, was likely an inspiration for ICP. This must have been an inspiration. The book and TV miniseries film (starring Tim Curry) were massively popular at this time.

decades. Like 1980s and 1990s death metal, as described by musicologist Zachary Wallmark, the auditory aesthetic “provokes a range of highly emotional reactions, from fear to disgust, rage, and ridicule.”¹⁴¹ But the lyrics are what really make the skin crawl.

“Ghetto Freak Show” illustrates a late-night home invasion by a murderous clown who stabs you in your sleep:

It's three o'clock in the morning and you're sleeping
Wicked clowns in the moonlight creeping
Slide through your window under your bed
Crawl in through your ear, eat your head
Bumping into bones cause I need light
Tip-toeing down through your windpipe
Climbing down your spine was the fun part
Looky looky and I think I see your fucking heart
Uh huh so I'm stabbing like it ain't nothing
Wicked clown cut his way out your belly button
I'm like a vulture waiting in a dark place
Swooping down and I'm picking at your dead face
I'm sick but you don't know the whole deal
No one ever loved me and they never will¹⁴²

Whether Bruce is the killer, or a third-person narrator is unclear but certainly evokes an unsettling feeling for the listener planted in the middle of a horrific scenario. Notice the final two lines of this except: “I’m sick but you don’t know the whole deal / No one ever loved me and they never will,” an articulation of mental instability alluding to possible suppressed childhood trauma that has catalyzed social disaffection or estrangement expressed through infliction of pain on others. “Mr. Johnson’s Head,” from the group’s sophomore album *The Ringmaster* (1994),

¹⁴¹ Zachary Wallmark, “The Sound of Evil: Timbre, Body, and Sacred Violence in Death Metal.” In *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*, edited by Robert Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark (New York: Oxford University Press), 65.

¹⁴² Insane Clown Posse, *Carnival of Carnage*, Psychopathic Records, 1993.

amplifies what we would identify today as the isolated teenage incel (involuntary celibate) trope. Unlike the fantastical “Ghetto Freak Show,” here we see a more realistic depiction of the inner machinations of a young sociopath:

(Verse 1)

Sitting in my class with my head on my desk
Teacher’s trying to talk but I could give a fuck less
I’m staring at the freak that I know I’m in love with
But she don’t even know my name it’s always been the same
I just lay my head down and drown in my spit
Nobody even notices I’m here cause I ain’t shit
I’m hearing voices but I don’t know what they saying
Sweat is on my forehead cause my brains inside decaying
And this b***h that I love probably don’t have no idea
She’s talking to her friends, I’m in the corner and I see her
Something’s happening but it isn’t very clear
Sounds like a bell, sounds like an electric chair
Next thing I know I’m walking in the crowded hall
So many different faces that I throw up on the wall
Some are yelling ‘sick’ and the others stop and stare
But I don’t care, I’m in a hurry going nowhere
See, my head is spinning cause I’m lonely and I’m twisted
But I have a secret, everybody missed it
I’m just a nobody, and I think it’s a drag
But I got Mr. Johnson’s head in my bookbag

(Chorus)

I couldn’t stand the pressure, not another day
I didn’t like the fucker Mr. Johnson anyway
I sat up in his class, he hung a rebel flag
I cut the bigot’s head off and I stuffed it in my bag¹⁴³

ICP’s absurd rhetoric was unappealing for radio airplay and their lack of popularity avoided commercial criticism. Still, historian Carleton S. Gholz writes that ICP had accumulated

¹⁴³ Insane Clown Posse, *Ringmaster*, Psychopathic Records, 1994.

“an audience that at least in numbers was the envy of every rap group in Detroit.”¹⁴⁴ Their obsessive promotion, dynamic, high-impact stage presentations accompanied by a variety of giveaways and exclusive collectible items caught the attention of Jive Records, who signed the group for their third album, *Riddle Box* (1995).¹⁴⁵ But according to Violent J, Jive “didn’t do shit. All they did was put it out ... and wait for it to sell.”¹⁴⁶ The promotion for the album was at the core of the conflict as Jive refused to distribute their music outside of the Detroit-metro area. “They didn’t distribute it properly ... they wanted to get that quick [money] in Detroit,” recalled Shaggy 2 Dope.¹⁴⁷ After using a blindfold, darts, and a map, ICP purchased a few vans with their signing bonus and embarked on tour of Denver, Phoenix, and Dallas, as demanded by the landing location of the darts. Incorporating their previously successful hand-to-hand marketing tactics, ICP set up camp in these areas for several months, slowly building their loyal fanbase.

In 1997, Hollywood Records, a subsidiary of the Disney corporation, purchased ICP’s contract from Jive for \$1 million to partner for their fourth studio album, *The Great Milenko* (1997).¹⁴⁸ Unfortunately, on its release date on June 24th, Disney pulled the album from stores within hours of its debut. The controversial lyrics allegedly flew under the radar of parent company Disney’s senior executives and in a public statement said, “when the lyrics of the Insane Clown Posse album were brought to the attention of senior management, the decision was

¹⁴⁴ Carleton S. Gholz, “Welcome to tha D: Making and Remaking Hip-Hop Culture in Post-Motown Detroit,” in *Hip Hop in America: A Regional Guide*, edited by Mickey Hess (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010), 401.

¹⁴⁵ The album was released under the Battery Records subsidiary, of Jive.

¹⁴⁶ Joseph Bruce and Joseph Utsler, “Insane Clown Posse’s Wild Journey from Jive Records to Def Jam to Independence,” interview by Revolt, *Revolt*, posted June 27, 2024, YouTube video, 12:49, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_GeGllHxRw/.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ “Disney Pulls Insane Clown Posse Album on Release Day,” This Day in History, *History*, November 16, 2009, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/disney-pulls-album-on-release-day>.

made that they were inappropriate for a product released under any label of our company.”¹⁴⁹ However, in an interview with *The Chicago Tribune*, ICP manager Alex Abbiss believed that Disney “bow[ed] to the pressure from Southern Baptists,” who were already threatening to boycott Disney’s “anti-family” values.¹⁵⁰ Regardless of the reason, ICP was immediately dismissed from their contract and canceled their 25-city promotional tour. The album was re-issued and re-released nearly two months later by Island Records.

The moral panic surrounding ICP reached its apex in 1999 when the group received partial blame for the devastating Columbine High School shooting massacre in Littleton, Colorado. Later, law enforcement recovered a supposed suicide note from the perpetrators containing a reference to the Detroit duo. Although the letter turned out to be a hoax, the damage was done—ICP was deemed unfit for young developing minds.¹⁵¹ But free press is free press. The exposure only increased ICP’s notoriety and expanded their fanbase. Despite their rise in popularity, media scapegoating did not propel the group into superstardom in the way it did for another Detroit rapper: Eminem.

Crazy White Boy

The Detroit hip-hop scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s was essentially underground. After the closing of Motown Records in 1972, Detroit no longer housed a major record label and with the growing electro scene, hip-hop artists had two options: record and produce their own material (Esham, ICP, Awesome Dre) or participate in local hip-hop events and warehouse parties

¹⁴⁹ Lou Carlozo, “Disney Pulls Racy Rappers Off The Shelf,” *The Chicago Tribune*, June 27, 1997.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. See also, Mike Joyce, “Insane Clown Posse ‘The Great Milenko’ Island,” *The Washington Post*, August 29, 1997; and Peter Helman, “20 Years Ago Today An Insane Clown Posse Album Was Pulled From Shelves Within Hours Of Its Release,” *Stereogum*, June 24, 2017.

¹⁵¹ Richard A. Serrano and Julie Cart, “Teens Planned Assault For a Year,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 1999.

(Eminem, Slum Village, Proof). Despite a proliferation of artists, the first Detroiters to sign a major label deal was a white teenager from the racially mixed Beast Crew, Kid Rock.

“Discovered” by D-Nice of Boogie Down Productions, Kid Rock signed with Jive Records in 1990 to release his debut album, *Grits Sandwiches for Breakfast*. Despite moderate commercial success and opening for popular acts like Too \$hort and Ice Cube, Kid Rock’s career was momentarily derailed by the Vanilla Ice controversy. Unwilling to cope with the racial backlash and the apparent inability to market his explicit lyrics, Kid Rock was dropped by Jive only to emerge years later with a harder rap-rock, trailer park-pimp aesthetic under Detroit independent label Continuum.

The growing success of Esham, Kid Rock, and ICP signified a tipping point in Detroit hip-hop and, as Gholz writes, it was “clear that stylistically and culturally Detroit hip-hop was finding its legs.”¹⁵² Following a show at the legendary St. Andrews Hall in 1997, a young unknown rapper, Marshall Mathers, introduced himself to ICP by handing them a flier (Figure 4) advertising a release party for his upcoming *Slim Shady EP* (1997). The back of the flier read: “Also Invited/In the House” proceeded by a list of dozens of Detroit rappers, but at the top of the list was ICP (Figure 5). ICP was not thrilled, to say the least, when they saw a young up-start, who in their view was attempting to capitalize on their name and local momentum. In an interview with hip-hop podcast Revolt, Violent J remembers Eminem responding: “well it doesn’t say you *will* be there but that you are *invited*, and well, I’m inviting you now.”¹⁵³ It is unclear exactly how ICP responded as interviews recalling this interaction have ranged from “we weren’t disrespectful or violent, we were like ‘no we don’t wanna come’” to “hell no man, what

¹⁵² Carleton S. Gholz, “Welcome to tha D: Making and Remaking Hip-Hop Culture in Post-Motown Detroit,” 397.

¹⁵³ Joseph Bruce, “ICP Vs. Eminem Part 1,” posted by HatchetMan353, posted April 12, 2008, YouTube video, 5:17, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lfwhPfBUgg&t=10>.

the fuck? Don't be putting my name on that shit."¹⁵⁴ Insane Clown Posse, as Violent J put it, "didn't give a fuck, [they] do [their] own thing."¹⁵⁵ This tense initial exchange ignited a rap feud in which ICP and Eminem traded diss tracks for several years. Perhaps ICP's response would have been more welcoming had the clowns heard their recognizable horrorcore influence *or* fueled further hostility as an uncredited influence.



Figure 4: Front image of Eminem's flier for *Slim Shady EP* release party.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.; and Joseph Bruce and Joseph Utsler, "Insane Clown Posse Reveals Intense Eminem Beef Origins & Slim Anus Diss," interview by Revolt, *Revolt*, posted June 26, 2024, YouTube video, 9:58, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-HZuqGheVg>.

¹⁵⁵ Joseph Bruce, "ICP Vs. Eminem Part 1."

¹⁵⁶ "Rare Eminem Slim Shady Ep Release Party," *Reddit*, posted January 11, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/Eminem/comments/5o6nt5/rare_eminem_sim_shady_ep_release_party/.

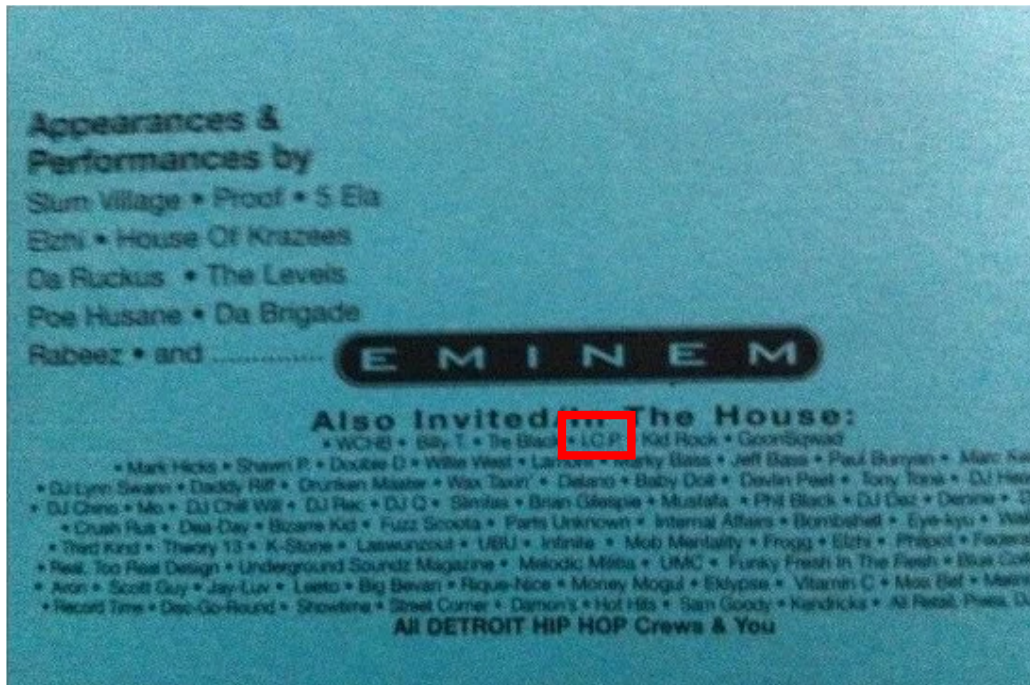


Figure 5: Back image of Eminem’s flier for *Slim Shady EP* release party. (ICP circled in red).¹⁵⁷

The previously discussed commercial failure of *Infinite* (1996) forced Eminem to abandon the lyrical topoi of hardcore New York rap and reevaluate his approach to the hip-hop industry. In *Slim Shady EP*, Eminem emerged as an entirely different artist, embracing the darkness and revealing his alter-ego, Slim Shady. The album explores ludicrously excessive violence, mental illness, instability, sexual deviance, and a broad range of exorbitant drug-use. As the album begins, ominous synthesized drones and blood curdling screams throw the listener into the horrorcore aesthetic. Eminem cries out for help as his dark alter ego, Slim Shady, emerges with a sinister voice threatening to take demonic possession of his mind, body, and soul. The presence of a staged dual personality suggests a mentally unstable individual able to disassociate from violent and erratic impulses.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

Now that the audience is acquainted with Slim Shady, the first song starts rapping the eponymous chorus “I’m low down and I’m shifty,” letting the listeners know this is an unsavory, untrustworthy, and unpredictable character. The first verse immediately warns the listener that the content is only for mature audiences, a verbal parental advisory sticker, before launching a volatile tirade on self-inflicted violence, sexual violence, drug use, and murder coerced by the voices in his head:

Warning, this shit gon’ be rated R, restricted
You see this bullet hole in my neck? It’s self-inflicted
Doctor slapped my mama, “B***h, you got a sick kid”
Arrested, molested myself and got convicted
Wearing visors, sunglasses, and disguises
Cause my split personality is having an identity crisis
I’m Dr. Hyde and Mr. Jekyll, disrespectful
Hearing voices in my head while these whispers echo
Murder-murder, red rum
Brain size of a bread crumb
Which drug will I end up dead from?
Inebriated ‘til my stress is alleviated
How in the fuck can Eminem and Shady be related?
Illiterate, illegitimate shit spitter
B***h getter, hid in the bush like Margot Kidder
Jumped out, killed the b***h and did her
Used to let the babysitter suck my dick when I was littler
Smoke a blunt while I’m titty fucking Bette Midler
Sniper, waiting on your roof like the Fiddler
Ya’ll thought I was gonna rhyme with Riddler, didn’t ya?
Bring yo b***h, I wanna see if this dick gon’ fit in her¹⁵⁸

The shift in lyrical content from *Infinite* to *Slim Shady EP* that integrates defining horrorcore characteristics demonstrate a direct artistic lineage with the group that popularized the genre, Insane Clown Posse. Eminem’s new persona piqued the interest of Interscope Records co-

¹⁵⁸ Eminem, “Low Down, Dirty,” *Slim Shady EP*, WEB Entertainment, 1997.

founder Jimmy Iovine, who “had missed the chance at signing ICP before they inked contracts with Island Records.”¹⁵⁹ Iovine then brought the EP to the attention of legendary rap mogul Dr. Dre, who subsequently signed the rapper to his Aftermath Entertainment label. Endorsement from one of the most prominent figures in hip-hop history gave Eminem instant credibility and launched him into national mainstream success. Eminem’s major label debut, *The Slim Shady LP* (1999), sold over a million copies in its first six weeks and earned a Grammy for Best Rap Album. The new album expanded on the narrative started in the EP but included one significant addition, the Dr. Dre produced song “My Name Is.” Kajikawa claims that Eminem’s mainstream success and acceptance into the hip-hop community was partially due to the comedic parodying of stereotypical tropes of whiteness and its contradiction to hardcore violence. Commenting on various components of white popular culture (nerdy, nasal voice, overly proper manners, etc.) allowed Eminem to disarm racial critique; he was able to poke fun at his stereotypical white deficiencies before others had the opportunity.

Kajikawa notes that it was primarily the comedy and mockery of whiteness that initially drew audiences to Eminem. I argue, however, that while humor may have sparked initial interest, it was the album’s darker, more introspective emotions—rage, anger, and vengeance—that truly resonated with listeners and cultivated a loyal fanbase. The absurdity of lyrics may have drawn in an audience, but it was the emotional depth beneath the comedy that kept them engaged. For instance, “Still Don’t Give a Fuck”:

I walked into a gunfight with a knife to kill you
And cut you so fast when your blood spilled it was still blue
I’ll hang you til you dangle and chain you with both ankles
And pull you apart from both angles
I wanna crush your skill til your brains leak out of your veins
And bust open like broken watermains

¹⁵⁹ Carleton S. Gholz, “Welcome to tha D,” 421.

So tell Saddam not to bother with makin another bomb
Cause I'm crushin the whole world in my palm
Got your girl on my arm and I'm armed with a firearm
So big my entire arm is a giant firebomb
Buy your mom a shirt with a Slim Shady iron-on
And the pants to match, here momma try em on
I get imaginative with a mouth full of adjectives
A brain full of adverbs and a box full of laxatives
Shittin on rappers causing hospital accidents
God help me before I commit some irresponsible acts again¹⁶⁰

Eminem's comedic front provided the context for a psychotic turn. It was the lacing of comical absurdity with the horrorcore model provided by ICP that was crucial to Eminem's monumental success. I label this common persona the *crazy white boy*, which emerged sometime in the late 1980s or early 1990s. Each term of this crazy white boy trope carries significant weight. "Crazy" emphasizes a level of hyperactivity, impulsivity, irritability, lack of restraint, and mood swings often exacerbated by drug and alcohol use; "white" points to a specific phenotype; "boy" not only denotes a youthful age, but more importantly a sense of innocence.¹⁶¹ Applying the term boy to a trope for adult males reflects a lack of maturity that subverts societal expectations of accountability. People are less likely to dismiss adult men making sexual gestures with a department store mannequin—such as in ICP's music video for "Hokus Pokus"—than they would if a 13-year-old boy did the same. The crazy white boy is not defined by socio-economic status or location, but manic unpredictability frequently combined with destruction and violence. For Eminem, the crazy white boy established a code for what it meant to be hardcore as

¹⁶⁰ Eminem, "Still Don't Give a Fuck," *The Slim Shady LP*, Aftermath Entertainment, 1999.

¹⁶¹ The term boy also has a long history as a pejorative term for Black men. For more on this, see Trina Jones, "Anti-Discrimination Law in Peril?" *Missouri Law Review* 75, no. 2 (2010).

a white rapper amidst hip-hop's gangsta ethos. White "craziness" became a substitute for Black "hardness."

Protesters were primed to vilify Eminem before he entered the public spotlight. Numerous political campaigns throughout the 1990s sought to censor vulgar rhetoric from both Black and white musicians: "This is not art. This is violence," said one protestor in response to the abundance of homophobic epithets.¹⁶² Democrat Senator Joseph Lieberman targeted gangsta rap (N.W.A.) and industrial rock/metal (Nine Inch Nails) for "[celebrating] some of the most antisocial and immoral behaviors imaginable."¹⁶³ Then chair of the National Political Congress of Black Women, C. Delores Tucker, called Marilyn Manson's *Smells Like Children* (1995) the "dirtiest, nastiest porno record directed at children that has ever hit the market."¹⁶⁴ Eminem's fusion of hardcore gangsterism and horrorcore industrial rock/metal made him another ideal scapegoat for conservative Americans.

The Slim Shady LP released only two months before the Columbine High School Massacre (April 20, 1999). Eminem's relatively new-found fame may have allowed him to dodge direct blame or criticism for the incident, but was tangentially affected by the immense backlash toward Marilyn Manson, ICP, and others who espoused a similar crazy white boy persona. "When a dude's getting bullied and shoots up his school / and they blame it on Marilyn and the heroin," raps Eminem.¹⁶⁵ White craziness became a social contagion where the crazy white boy amounted to a school shooter. Marilyn Manson and ICP embraced, rejected, or ignored

¹⁶² Christian Boone, "Eminem Protesters Few But Passionate," *MTV News*, February 2, 2001. <https://www.mtv.com/news/rd3kx8/eminem-protesters-few-but-passionate>.

¹⁶³ Michael Goldberg, "Elvis Fan Bill Bennett Attacks Rap, Marilyn Manson," *MTV News*, June 1, 1996. <https://www.mtv.com/news/7fp3pn/elvis-fan-bill-bennett-attacks-rap-marilyn-manson>.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Eminem, "The Way I Am," *The Marshall Mathers LP*, 2000.

their perceived negative influence on youth, but Eminem openly addressed his position as a fictional narrator in his next album, *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000). For example, the album's second song, "Stan," is a sad story of an obsessive Eminem fan who grows increasingly bitter when he believes Eminem is purposefully ignoring his letters. Having trouble disassociating Eminem from his staged persona, Stan insists:

I can relate to what you're sayin in your songs
So when I have a shitty day I drift away and put em on
Cause I don't really got shit else so that shit helps when I'm depressed
I even got a tattoo with your name across the chest
Sometimes I even cut myself to see how much it bleeds
It's like adrenaline the pain is such a sudden rush for me
See everything you say is real and I respect you cause you tell it
My girlfriend's jealous cause I talk about you 24/7¹⁶⁶

The story takes a sharp turn when Stan's final hate-filled letter articulates a literal reenactment of Eminem's murderous "'97 Bonnie & Clyde," driving off a bridge killing himself and his pregnant girlfriend tied-up in the trunk. This narrative epitomizes parental concern and fear: children will fail to recognize the performative nature of the crazy white boy and imitate the violent rhetoric of their music. But Eminem personally addresses this social anxiety in the final verse, a reply to Stan, expressing concern for his well-being:

But what's this shit you said about you like to cut your wrists too?
I say that shit clownin' dawg come on how fucked up is you
You got some issues Stan I think you need some counselin'
To help your ass from bouncing off the walls when you get down some¹⁶⁷

Eminem continues:

I just don't want you to do some crazy shit

¹⁶⁶ Eminem, "Stan," *The Marshall Mathers LP*, Aftermath Entertainment, 2000.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

I seen this one shit on the news a couple weeks ago that made me sick
Some dude was drunk and drove his car over a bridge
And had his girlfriend in the trunk and she was pregnant with his kid
And in the car they found a tape but they didn't say who it was to
Come to think about it, his name was, it was you¹⁶⁸

Acknowledging the performative nature of the crazy white boy, something ICP and Marilyn Manson have yet to do in their music, allowed Eminem to disarm social critique; he was able to curb the perception of his fans as school shooters (or at least abdicating himself as an advocate for school shootings). Because Eminem confronted both his white identity in “My Name Is” and his fabricated crazy white boy persona in “Stan,” he gained cultural legitimacy within hip-hop communities that are often skeptical of white participation, thereby earning the artistic license to experiment and ultimately transcend the constraints of that persona. Eminem’s next album *The Eminem Show* (2002) explored a more sensitive side that featured intimate songs about familial relationships including “Cleanin’ Out My Closet” and “Hallie’s Song.”¹⁶⁹

Conversely, the artistic development of ICP has remained stagnant and predictable for the past thirty years. Because ICP evade their identity as white men in favor of clowns, they are wedded to the crazy white boy trope and become inseparable from this aesthetic. It is disarming for critics to ask questions about race when your face is covered in make-up, but because ICP assumed the role of clowns they were constrained to fully embrace the crazy white boy trope to sidestep the burdensome task of racial critique. Since Eminem does not wear a mask or paint his face, he is forced to acknowledge and address his white identity, doing so through cartoonish

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Eminem, *The Eminem Show*, Shady Records, 2002.

mockery of stereotyped whiteness. For Eminem, lacing an original, caustic sense of humor with aspects of ICP-inspired horrorcore was effective in diffusing critiques of inauthenticity.

A final point must be made regarding the symbolic “masking” of white rappers within the context of African-American musical traditions. Since the days of minstrelsy in the mid 19th century, both white and Black performers have exaggerated physical and behavioral traits to conform to racist caricatures of Blackness—most notoriously through blackface, the intentional darkening of one’s skin to simulate a grotesque version of African-American identity.¹⁷⁰ Popular well into the early 20th century, this practice has since evolved into more figurative forms, whereby performers may adopt metaphorical “masks” that allow them to align themselves with Black cultural without a literal disguise. These acts of cultural masking are context-dependent and must always be situated within their historical and social moment. Importantly, such practices are not unique to hip-hop but rather reflect a recurring dynamic in American popular culture. While a full analysis of blackface performance in hip-hop exceeds the scope of this dissertation, a brief acknowledgment is necessary in relation to the performance strategies of white rappers in the 1990s.

Although Vanilla Ice did not wear a physical mask, his performative blackface was most evident in his fabricated autobiography, which appropriated imagined elements of the Black experience—mirroring how minstrel blackface historically appropriated Black appearance, behavior, and struggle. In the case of Insane Clown Posse, however, the dynamic is inverted: rather than being expected to adopt a form of blackface, they perform authenticity through an exaggerated expression of whiteness. Their clown makeup functions not as a mask to obscure

¹⁷⁰ For more on the history of blackface minstrelsy and the idea of masking, see Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1997); Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and Christopher J. Smith, *The Creolization of American Culture*.

race, but as a form of whiteface—a hyperbolic rendering of white identity that paradoxically legitimizes their position with a genre dominated by Black cultural norms. As discussed earlier and shown in Figure 2, Eminem, too, wore a kind of mask early in his career, a version of whiteface that became a crucial strategy for negotiating his racial identity within hip-hop’s Black cultural framework. Unlike Vanilla Ice and ICP, however, because Eminem confronts and parodies his whiteness so directly, acknowledging the constructed nature of his persona, he earns the cultural license to eventually shed the mask. Through this self-reflexive engagement, Eminem’s performance transcends the limitations of whiteface and facilitates a more complex negotiation of whiteness within hip-hop.

Conclusion

In a 2020 article for *The Guardian*, journalist Thomas Hobbs argues that white rappers in the late 2010s developed a social consciousness that was sensitive to appropriations of Blackness. Hobbs claims that white rappers Machine Gun Kelly, G-Eazy, and Post Malone have shied away from earlier trap influences (a style closely associated with Black artists from Atlanta) in favor of “a sound that speaks more honestly to their experiences,” punk rock and country (styles coded as white).¹⁷¹ Contributing to the article, hip-hop scholar AD Carson adds that “white anger and confidence is something rap audiences just don’t want to hear as much of any more ... [it] has everything to do with the current political landscape.”¹⁷² This claim that social fatigue toward angry white rappers prompted a cross-genre shift is problematic for two reasons: (1) rappers including Machine Gun Kelly, G-Eazy, and Post Malone have a minimal, tangential association

¹⁷¹ Thomas Hobbs, “‘Audiences Don’t Want White Anger’: How White Rap Grew a Conscience,” *The Guardian*, December 30, 2020.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

with hip-hop, and (2) punk rock is an aggressive subculture developed in reaction to capitalistic commercial mainstream—an alternative form of rage. Carson insists that:

the unhinged white rage Eminem had great success with in the early 2000s was an extension of a kind of repressed rage felt all across white America. Yet this rage is the same thing you now see coming out of the White House every single day. The idea of white grievance or supreme white confidence has taken the front seat over the last four years through Trump, and a lot of the audience is tired. Even if a white rapper truly came from struggle, the anger they carry might still struggle to cut through. They need to approach things differently now.¹⁷³

The combination of comedy and crazy distorts our perception of the individual. Because they constantly make jokes, are we to assume the violence is also a joke? What are we to make of this crazy white boy?

By embracing the unpredictability of the crazy white boy trope, Eminem was able to articulate something on par with the symbolic threat of Black gangsta rappers. White hardcore craziness was a strategic response to the lack of credibility white people had when trying to access the gangsta trope in the 1990s. This performance was all important not only for negotiations of whiteness, but for diffusing location-based credibility of the Midwest by subverting the stereotypical expectations of a polite and nonconfrontational culture (“Midwest nice”).

The novel approach of linking Eminem to Detroit rap predecessors Insane Clown Posse provides a theory that violence was a prominent socio-cultural marker of whiteness for musicians in the 1990s. ICP’s unabashed embrace of the “carnival-grotesque” provided a blueprint that Eminem would recalibrate by balancing morbidity with humor to navigate hip-hop’s racialized politics. This chapter has demonstrated how performances of whiteness in 1990s hip-hop

¹⁷³ Ibid.

involved more than a comedic front; they were calculated negotiations of identity, authenticity, and cultural belonging. Eminem's rise to prominence was a result of his mastery of a persona that made whiteness hyper-visible yet negotiable within a predominantly Black cultural form. Although white Midwestern rap artists discovered a means demonstrating discursive credibility among hip-hop's largely Black, tri-coastal ethos, however, they still required a marketing strategy to compete with hip-hop's mainstream record label corporations. It is this strategy that I turn to in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

THE ATMOSPHERE EPs: FORMATTING MINNESOTA HIP-HOP

Defining success is not an exact science by any means. In some ways, it's especially difficult to quantify one's success when they have a job that places them in the public eye, a position that is ripe for critique and high expectations. Perhaps those who best thrive in those scenarios are the ones who can navigate through all noise and continue to evolve and grow, both in their skill sets and as individuals.

— Rhymesayers Entertainment¹⁷⁴

Hip-hop artists in the Midwest required a means to market themselves and distribute their music beyond their local scenes. An unlikely but influential template emerged in 1997 with Eminem's *Slim Shady EP*. Although it sold only 250 copies and was a commercial failure, the EP succeeded in its primary role as a demo—a rough draft of songs intended to attract major label interest. Indeed, famed Los Angeles producer and rap mogul Dr. Dre, based on this work alone, signed Eminem to his Aftermath label in 1998. In a move resembling what I term in this chapter an *album sampler EP*, three of the EP's six songs carried over to Eminem's major-label full-length album debut, *The Slim Shady LP* in 1999 (Table 4). That album has since sold over six million copies in the United States alone. The EP thus played a pivotal role in facilitating Eminem's breakthrough beyond the Midwest. In addition to Chicago's Common, Eminem was the first

¹⁷⁴ Rhymesayers Entertainment Official Website, Atmosphere Biography, accessed November 28, 2017, www.rhymesayers.com

Midwest rapper to gain (inter)national attention. Nevertheless, he never returned to the format, instead aligning himself with major-label industry imperatives such as radio play, Grammy recognition, MTV exposure, and, most notably, the production of full-length LPs (“long play” records).

Following Eminem’s success, Minneapolis-based independent label Rhymesayers Entertainment actively embraced the EP (“extended play” record)—an underutilized physical format consisting typically of four to six songs with a runtime of 30 minutes or less, designed for singles, LP samples, or misfit song compilations—as a means of self-promotion to solicit a larger audience. The EP exists in a liminal space of the physical music marketplace: neither dignified with implied seriousness of the full-length album (typically 45-minute runtime), nor relying solely on an individual song for sales. Literary theorist Isobel Armstrong defines this kind of space as the “broken middle,” a space which represents, as musicologist Kevin Fellezs writes: “an overlapping yet liminal space of contested, and never settled, priorities between two or more musical traditions.”¹⁷⁵ The broken middle is betwixt and between, neither one thing nor another—a category crisis. I draw on Armstrong’s conception of the broken middle to theorize the EP not simply as a transitional or inferior form, but as a productive site of tension. By inhabiting this in-between space, Rhymesayers artists mobilized the EP as both a strategic tool and a creative outlet, carving a distinctive place within the national hip-hop landscape without conforming fully to either single or LP-driven industry norms.

In this chapter I explore the historical arc of EPs and their designed marketing purpose to dissect how Rhymesayers and Atmosphere manipulated the EP format to their benefit as a unique

¹⁷⁵ Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000); and Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 8. Fellezs applies Armstrong’s theory of the broken middle to the fusion of musical genres.

means of musical distribution and expression. Just as these artists in marginal scenes needed ways to show legitimacy and belonging through learned intertextual references (chapter II) and novel takes on whiteness (chapter III), the EP shows how peripheral artists used a neglected format to simultaneously differentiate themselves from the pack and show that they were members in the broader, national rap community.

Knowing that Atmosphere could not compete with major label industry imperatives, I argue that independent label Rhymesayers Entertainment attempted to outflank the market by embracing a format essentially outside the national music market, the EP. Rather than relying solely on the irregular but high-impact model of releasing a full-length LP every few years, Atmosphere maintained frequent, smaller-scale contact with their audience through a steady stream of EPs. As discussed in the previous chapter, Insane Clown Posse built a small yet loyal fanbase through prolonged, in-person engagement by establishing residencies in cities including Dallas, Albuquerque, and Denver. While Atmosphere's approach was not rooted in a physical presence, their strategy of saturating the market with regular releases fostered a similar sense of intimacy and sustained visibility—an essential tactic for Midwestern artists working to establish a relationship with a national hip-hop audience more accustomed to encountering artists through mainstream media channels.

Brief History of the EP

Created in 1887 by German-American inventor Emile Berliner, RCA Victor first made the flat recorded disc available to the public in 1903.¹⁷⁶ Standardized by record companies in the 1910s,

¹⁷⁶ Richard Osborne, *Vinyl: A History of the Analogue Record* (London: Routledge, 2016). Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in 1877, but his machine used a cylindrical record to play back sound. Berliner's competing gramophone used a flat recorded disc, which allowed for simplified mass production and distribution.

the 78 rpm record—which held about three minutes of audio per side—became the dominant commercial music format for the first half of the 20th century, shaping early listening habits and the structure of popular songs. Despite the product’s massive achievement in the reproduction of sound, the record industry struggled to turn a profit due to the brittle and exceedingly expensive substance required to produce the product—shellac, an insect resin found primarily in South-East Asia. Additionally, amidst trade disruptions and insecurity brought about by World War One and The Great Depression, consumers were adverse to making frivolous and unnecessary purchases, including records. World War II further amplified this sentiment as countries around the world fell deeper into financial despair. However, the near universal hardships did not prevent Columbia Records from advancing their technology. By 1948, after the war, Columbia had already replaced the fragile shellac material with a robust polyvinyl chloride—a sturdy yet malleable material that allowed engravings of small microgrooves onto the record to amplify the quality of sound and extend the discs durational capabilities.¹⁷⁷ Columbia Records aptly titled their new prototype Long Playing Records, or LPs.¹⁷⁸

Threatened by these new microgroove innovations, RCA Victor created their own competitive product with cutting-edge microgrooves, but unlike Columbia’s twelve-inch records, RCA released smaller, seven-inch records—the Extended Play Record (EPs). The rivalry between record producers ignited what the press called the “War of Speeds,” a battle for supremacy at 33 1/3 rpm (LP) and 45 rpm (EP). Although the temporal capacity of the EP exceeded that of its shellac predecessor, its physical size prevented the record from outlasting the

¹⁷⁷ “About Vinyl Records,” International Record Collectors Online, accessed November 28, 2017.

¹⁷⁸ Even as this microgroove technology revolutionized the album as a commercial object, the earlier 78s continued to be used well into the 1950s for shorter recordings. Particularly suited for singles due to their brief runtime, 78s remained a dominant medium for individual tracks while LPs came to define the album experience.

LP and the public deemed Columbia's LP the symbolic winner in 1950. Still, the EP format and its shorter duration found a niche in the recording industry and became the primary vehicle for releasing singles, LP samples, single compilations, and mini-LPs (also known as jukebox EPs).¹⁷⁹

The most popular application of the EPs was for single records, designed for promoting a single, typically presumed as the most popular, song of an upcoming LP with the remaining space occupied by an additional three to four songs commonly referred to as the B-sides. From a marketing perspective, the idea was that if the single record was available at a low cost, consumers who enjoyed the music were more likely to purchase the costly LP; if they did not like the product, the financial burden was less damaging. Catering to the frugality in entertainment purchases, companies also provided a cheaper alternative by dividing full-length LP albums into two or three distinct EPs sold either separately or in bundles.¹⁸⁰ This album sampler must not be confused, however, with the mini-LP records, which are comprised of a select group of songs from the associated LP and became necessary for jukeboxes around the world.

As recording technology advanced in the late 20th century, the EP—and vinyl more generally—began to fall out of favor with the public giving way to new innovations including the 8-track, cassette tape, compact disc, and mp3. (Although vinyl has made a significant resurgence in the 21st century, it is largely an audiophile format.) David Buckley notes that the punk rock movement of the late 1970s gave the EP format a short-lived resurgence as it appealed

¹⁷⁹ Richard Osborne, *Vinyl: A History of the Analogue Record* (London: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁸⁰ Popular artists, such as the Beatles catered their music to the EP format made evident in their 1967 double-EP, *The Magical Mystery Tour*.

to record labels working with new bands that often-lacked sufficient material for a full-length album.¹⁸¹ By the 1990s, however, the “maxi-CD single” superseded the concept of the EP.¹⁸²

Similar in concept to the EP, the mixtape, also favored by punk rock, serves as a do-it-yourself platform for artists to showcase a selection of tracks without committing to a full album; they often highlight emerging talent or experimental sounds, offering listeners a curated glimpse into an artist’s style or creative direction. “In the early years of hip-hop,” writes James Peterson, “mixtapes were the lifeblood of rap music that was not professionally recorded or distributed. As mixtape DJs became more prominent and the music industry realized the extraordinary promotional potential of the mixtape industry, mixtape sales became more commercialized.”¹⁸³ Despite the commercialization of hip-hop in the 1980s, the mixtape format continued to influence official studio full-length albums (LPs)—albums were essentially song compilations with no unifying conceptual thread. In my view, hip-hop albums were not concept-oriented until the late 1980s when the Native Tongues movement began focusing on themes of Afrocentrism. Still, the mixtape was critical in the development of many independent labels in the 1990s, including Rhymesayers Entertainment.

Headshots Tapes

Before Rhymesayers Entertainment became an official label there was a collective of Minneapolis hip-hop groups known as the Headshots Crew.¹⁸⁴ As the crew garnered a large local

¹⁸¹ David Buckley, “EP,” *Grove Music Online*, 2001. In the ethos of resistance present in both punk rock and hip-hop, the EP serves as a kind of “anti-album”—poking fun at the studio commercial presentation of the album.

¹⁸² Like the single, a maxi-single contains two previously unreleased songs. Unlike the single, however, a maxi-single includes an additional 2-4 songs that may or may not compliment the other two songs.

¹⁸³ James Peterson, “Dead Prezence: Money and Mortal Themes in Hip-Hop Culture,” in *That’s The Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader 2nd ed.*, edited by Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (London: Routledge, 2011), 603.

following, fans began requesting tapes, physical media to enjoy on their own. Because the group did not have a lot of material recorded, they decided to put out a mixtape of DJ cuts/mixes interspersed with freestyles recorded in their manager, Brent “Stress” Sayers’s, basement. The resulting product, *Headshots Volume 1: The Wbboy Sessions* began circulating at shows and local on August 1, 1995.

Headshots followed a similar formula for their next two mixtapes. *Headshots Vol. 2: Arrogance*, released March 1, 1996, again incorporated old freestyle sessions from Sayer’s basement, recordings of live performances from “some fuckin’ rave” in Saltwater and the well-known First Avenue venue in Minneapolis, and most importantly, a copy of the infamous West-coast rap battle between Casual of Hieroglyphics and Saafir of Hobo Junction.¹⁸⁵ By including the well-known underground hip-hop battle, Headshots (and Rhymesayers), appealed to a broader, more seasoned community of listeners (see chapter II), while placing themselves in conversation with the larger underground scene. A month later, Headshots released *Headshots Vol. 3: Compensation*, again contained recordings of the crew’s live performances, but also new 4-track recordings from Atmosphere and Beyond and bootleg recordings of a recent show featuring The Fugees, the Roots, and Goodie Mob.¹⁸⁶ Interspersing live Headshots recordings with each of the three nationally recognized artists not only enticed consumers, but also

¹⁸⁴ Members included Urban Atmosphere (Atmosphere), Beyond, Abstract Pack, Phull Surkle (Eyedea and Abilities), The Native Ones (Los Nativos), and Black Hohl.

¹⁸⁵ Sean Daley, Anthony Davis, Musab Saad, and Brent Sayers, “A Moment In Rhymesayers – Episode 3: Headshots Tapes 1-3,” *Rhymesayers Entertainment*, posted March 11, 2015, YouTube video, 8:06.

¹⁸⁶ A 4-track is a type of cassette recording devices that allows one to easily layer four separate vocal or instrumental tracks and transfer them to a cassette tape. Although the machine only allows four separate tracks, there are ways to manipulate the device to include more. For example, one could perform two lines on the same track or also connect it to another 4-track recorder, thus creating seven tracks.

seemingly elevated the Headshot Crew's status within the rap community; a less informed listener might assume that they were performing the same show with these popular artists.

After *Compensation*, the Headshots Crew started growing further apart as members Stress, Slug, Ant, and Beyond began developing the Rhymesayers label. Unfortunately, tragedy struck when Abstract Pack emcee Herbie "The Bomb Funk One Sessamilla" Foster IV (Sess for short) was killed in a car accident on October 10, 1996. Through terrible circumstances, Headshots regrouped and recorded a fourth tape in memory of Sess. While sentimentally important, interspersed with dedications and interludes showcasing Sess as a rapper, *Headshots Vol. 4: History*, released on December 1, 1996, signaled a significant maturation within the crew—an intersection of the amateur Headshots with the professional Rhymesayers. No longer relying on live performances and freestyle compilations, *History* was the first tape to substantially feature new 4-track recordings. As one anonymous Discogs review remarks: "you can clearly tell the crew is getting a better grasp on songwriting, arrangement, concepts, and things of that nature. The raw b-boy essence is still in effect, but they've injected more musical savvy into the mix."¹⁸⁷ Headshots continued to release 4-track recordings for their final two tapes, *Headshots Vol. 5: Effort* and *Headshots Vol. 6: Industrial Warfare*.

Ironically, Ant (producer of Atmosphere and other Rhymesayers artists) was unhappy with the inclusion of 4-track recordings on the mixtapes; the intention of the songs, as he puts it, were "demo ideas for going to the studio to make the best possible songs," and not meant for public consumption.¹⁸⁸ Ant's creative process heavily relies on demo tapes as sketches for ideas and initial rough drafts, which then creates further opportunity for collaboration between himself

¹⁸⁷ "Headshots - Vol 4. - History," Discogs, July 2019, <https://www.discogs.com/Headshots-Vol-4-History/release/2868447>.

¹⁸⁸ Daley, Davis, Saad, and Sayers, interview, "Episode 3: Headshots Tapes 1-3."

and the rapper. Releasing copies of demos prematurely to the public cemented these “rough drafts” in a way that Ant was not comfortable with. In fact, Ant discouraged members from putting their best material on the tapes, encouraging them “not to take these tapes so seriously ... because if only fifty people heard this shit what’s the point ... then let’s take these really good songs and make an album out of it.”¹⁸⁹ Additionally, to Ant’s dismay, the 4-track demos highlight the limitations of the recording device: poor sound quality, limited layering, and incompatibility with turntables. The final versions of songs such as Atmosphere’s “Brief Description” contain significantly more over-dubs (vocal or instrumental overlays) and hip-hop’s characteristic record scratching.

The mixtape during the 1980s and early 1990s was an essential aspect of hip-hop culture and an important means of bootleg information distribution. Before the internet facilitated instant exchange, cassette mixtapes were the fastest way to share music across the country outside of a legal purchase. Headshots, unlike other mixtapes at the time, created a *series* of tapes that both expanded their fan base while also creating consumer demand. For instance, if a listener enjoyed their copy of *Headshots Vol. 4: History*, they would be more likely to investigate the previous three tapes while also anticipating the next. Marketing the mixtapes in this way was vital in the development of the Headshots Crew, Rhymesayers Entertainment, and most notably Atmosphere, who continued to release mixtapes in a similar fashion.

Sad Clown Bad Dubs

“By the sixth release (Industrial Warfare) there were no more Headshots,” writes Slug in the liner notes of *Headshots: Se7en*.¹⁹⁰ Fueled by the internal resentment and jealousy of some members,

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

the crew's disbandment could not have been clearer to both the crew and their fans when Atmosphere assumed control of the next Headshots tape, *Headshots Vol. 7: Se7en*. Former crew members Abstract Pack, Los Nativos, and Phull Surkle felt as though Atmosphere was hijacking the momentum the Headshots' name had accumulated over the past three years. They were right; the Headshots crew and their tapes garnered a large local following and were instrumental to the foundation of the Rhymesayers record label. Perhaps to ameliorate tensions with past crew members and distance themselves from the Headshots name, Atmosphere began releasing their own series of mixtapes called the *Sad Clown Bad Dubs*.

Over the course of ten years Atmosphere released thirteen editions in this collection including tapes, CDs, and DVDs. These tapes were not meant to be taken seriously, as Slug raps in "Hungry Fuck," from *Sad Clown Bad Dub II*: "the words 'bad dub' are right in the title / so fuck your criticism of the sound quality / this is not an album / the sole intention is to eat better while on the road."¹⁹¹ The first and third *Sad Clown Bad Dub* feature unrefined 4-track recordings/productions, freestyles, and portions of live shows—much like the Headshots tapes; the fifth and sixth edition each respectively contain two previously unreleased singles each. *Sad Clown Bad Dub II*, however, more closely resembles a full-length album more than any other edition in the series with original 4-track recordings, but Slug again emphasizes in the liner notes that

this is not an album. It is a collection of four track pieces that Ant and I have recorded over the last year. We sat down and compiled on Thursday, September 21st – the first day of fall. We should've named it "Food and Fuel" but instead we decided to call it *Sad Clown Bad Dub II*, so you can save any and all criticism about the sound quality. Nonetheless, I hope you enjoy it.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Atmosphere, liner notes, *Headshots: Se7en*, recorded 1997-1999, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 0053-2, 2005.

¹⁹¹ Atmosphere, "Hungry Fuck," *Sad Clown Bad Dub II*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 2000.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, linear notes.

Through their persistent and unfiltered acknowledgment of the poor quality of their recordings, Atmosphere constructs an image of honesty, sincerity, and likely insecurity that reinforces their status as “real”—a core component of their articulation of authenticity. This raw self-presentation offers audiences a perceived unvarnished truth that implicitly casts major label artists as the phonies who would never do something so uncalculated.

Editions four and thirteen are the only DVDs in the *Sad Clown Bad Dub* Series. The fourth features behind-the-scenes footage and live performances from *God Loves Ugly* (2002) LP release parties sold exclusively at live shows and their local label-run record store, Fifth Element. Atmosphere later included the DVD with the *God Loves Ugly* re-release in 2009. Similarly, *Sad Clown Bad Dub 13*, featuring a live performance in Minneapolis at the First Avenue nightclub, paired exclusively with deluxe versions of *When Life Gives You Lemons* (2008). These DVDs not only contributed to the Sad Clown Bad Dub marketing campaign but provided consumers a means to simulate and relive Atmosphere’s acclaimed live performances. In 2017 Rhymesayers uploaded a segmented version of *Sad Clown Bad Dub 13* to YouTube, allowing commentor andycohen468 to publicly reminisce: “this was the best music tour I ever went on, just absolutely inspiring and life changing for me. Best kept secret in hip-hop history.”¹⁹³

Unlike previous iterations in the series, numbers 7 through 12 reflect a significant improvement in sound and production quality. Indicative of their growing success and established credibility in the hip-hop community, Atmosphere no longer relied on poor recording capabilities of 4-track devices.¹⁹⁴ *Sad Clown Bad Dub 7* is a dual compilation album shared with

¹⁹³ Atmosphere, “Atmosphere - In Her Music Box (Live At First Avenue),” *Rhymesayers Entertainment*, posted April 21, 2017, YouTube video, 4:20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPkLyUdZUq4&list=PL_AA8JeDxiPZjS40Mgnvxu7vHJuCPBawP&index=1.

label-mate Mr. Dibb's own DJ mixtape series, *Random Vol. 3*. The eighth edition, *Happy Clown Bad Dub: The Fun EP*, flips the script, so to speak, featuring new up-beat material as well as recycled singles from then upcoming album *You Can't Imagine How Much Fun We're Having*. In this way, *Happy Clown* is reminiscent of the album sampler EP (singles) as well as an extension of *You Can't Imagine* (new material) discussed later.

The most well-known of the series are *Sad Clown Bad Dub 9-12*, collectively known as *The Seasons* or *Sad Clown Bad Year*, released one at a time every three to four months over the course of Summer 2007 through Spring 2008. Issued in CD format, the arc of releases comprised four EPs, *Sad Clown Bad Summer*, *Sad Clown Bad Fall*, *Sad Clown Bad Winter*, and *Sad Clown Bad Spring* captures the aural aesthetics of each season in five respective songs. For example, *Sad Clown Bad Summer* is happy and upbeat with light piano samples and stories of teenage summer love and harmless delinquent activities, while *Sad Clown Bad Winter* is more depressing with stories of alcoholism and pointillistic samples as though they are moving rigidly while attempting to stay warm.

The Atmosphere EPs

Atmosphere's innovative and conceptually ambitious use of the EP format in the *Sad Clown Bad Year* series represents just one example of the group's sustained engagement with and redefinition of the EP across their career. In the following, I examine several distinct strategies Atmosphere has employed in their manipulation of the EP format. These include what I term the *album teaser EP* (a brief selection of tracks previewing an associated LP); the *compilation EP* (a

¹⁹⁴ Changes in technology during this time also made high-quality direct-to-digital recording possible. For more on technological innovations in hip-hop, see André Sirois, *Hip-Hop DJs and the Evolution of Technology: Cultural Exchange, Innovation and Democratization* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016).

curated collection of otherwise unreleased or miscellaneous tracks); the *sequel EP/truly “extended” play* (a follow-up release that extends the thematic or narrative scope of an earlier LP); and the already established double EP (two EPs packaged and distributed as a single release. Each of these variations illustrates Atmosphere’s dynamic use of a traditionally overlooked format to serve evolving artistic and strategic purposes.

Album Teaser EP

Released just months before their debut studio album, *Overcast!* (1997), Atmosphere issued an EP of the same name. Evocative of the album sampler EP popular in Europe during the 1950s through ‘70s, the *Overcast! EP* incorporates eight tracks total, six of which are featured on the LP (Table 3). By releasing the EP before the ensuing LP, Atmosphere provided a sample, a teaser to audiences that previews their upcoming album—but only a taste, a portion small enough to spark an intrigued appetite yet not enough to satiate the interested listener, who is steered toward purchasing the LP. Following the release of the full-length album, the *Overcast! EP* was subsequently removed from the Rhymesayers Entertainment catalogue having accomplished its mission. Unlike Eminem’s *Slim Shady EP*, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, which ultimately functioned as a “demo” used to attract major label attention, the *Overcast! EP*, transferred all but one song to the associated LP and did not include any re-recorded material. It is this congruity which precludes its classification as a “demo” (Table 4).

<i>Overcast!</i>	
EP	LP
1. Scapegoat	1. 1597
2. Multiples	2. Brief Description
3. Primer	3. Current Status
4. The Outernet	4. Complications
5. Scapegoat (...It's Edited For The Radio)	5. 4:30 AM
6. Sound Is Vibration	6. Adjust
7. Brief Description	7. Clay
8. God's Bathroom Floor (Stress's 4-track Fiasco)	8. @
	9. Sound is Vibration
	10. Multiples
	11. Scapegoat
	12. Ode to the Modern Man
	13. WND
	14. Multiples (Reprise)
	15. Caved in
	16. Cuando Limpia El Humo
	17. The Outernet
	18. "Untitled" (Primer)

Table 3: *Overcast!* EP and LP (tracks in bold denote identical songs).

<i>Slim Shady</i>	
EP	LP
1. Intro (Slim Shady)	1. Public Service Announcement
2. Low Down, Dirty	2. My Name Is
3. If I Had...	3. Guilty Conscience
4. Just Don't Give a Fuck	4. Brain Damage
5. Mommy (skit)	5. Paul (skit)
6. Just the Two of Us	6. If I Had
7. No One's Iller	7. '97 Bonnie & Clyde
8. Murder, Murder	8. B***h (skit)
	9. Role Model
	10. Lounge (skit)
	11. My Fault
	12. Ken Kaniff (skit)
	13. Cum on Everybody
	14. Rock Bottom
	15. Just Don't Give a Fuck
	16. Soap (skit)
	17. As the World Turns
	18. I'm Shady
	19. Bad Meets Evil
	20. Still Don't Give a Fuck

Table 4: *Slim Shady* EP and LP (tracks in bold denote identical songs).¹⁹⁵

Compilation EP

From 2000 to 2001 Atmosphere released three EPs exclusively available at live performances:

The Lucy EP, *Ford One*, and *Ford Two*. Later in 2001, however, they re-released all of them as a compilation album, *Lucy Ford: The Atmosphere EPs*, including four additional, new tracks.

Reversing the function of the previously mentioned LP sampler, Atmosphere released three individual EPs *prior* to their consolidation on a single LP instead of releasing them in tandem to monetarily benefit the consumer. Doing so builds on their *album sampler* model of the *Overcast!*

¹⁹⁵ “Just the Two of Us” was re-recorded and renamed “’97 Bonnie and Clyde,” perhaps to distance themselves from the 1980 Bill Withers song of the same name.

EP, creating not only a sense of anticipation, but affirming a sense of exclusivity for those who own the EPs. The minimal availability of the EPs prior to their compilation on the LP, reveals a hardcore faithfulness within Atmosphere’s community of fans, whereas the LP becomes indicative of a broader, more national-facing product available to the casual listener.

Atmosphere somewhat mirrored this compilation approach to the EP nearly fifteen years later for the release of *Frida Kahlo vs Ezra Pound*, a compilation of singles recorded during their sessions for *Fishing Blues* LP (2016). In an interview with Minnesota Go Radio (95.3 FM), Slug explains that the decision behind their exclusion from the final product (*Fishing Blues*) was because he felt as though those songs were outliers and did not fit with the overall aesthetic they were striving for.¹⁹⁶ But because the songs were composed in the same sessions, are we not to understand *Frida Kahlo vs Ezra Pound* as an extension of *Fishing Blues*? Or miscellaneous compilation of recycled tracks? The lack of congruity might suggest the later as there is no audible or visible linkage outside Slug’s revealing interview. In this way, the EP reflects the artistic context of the *Fishing Blues* era without serving as a direct continuation. Still, there are more blatant conceptual extensions of the EP within Atmosphere’s discography.

Sequel EP; or, Truly “Extended” Play

On Christmas of 2007 Atmosphere released *Strictly Leakage* LP online as a free download. On July 4, 2009, they again offered a downloadable free release, *Leak at Will* EP. Although no unifying conceptual thread, I consider *Leak at Will* a sequel EP in that it literally and directly picks up where the listener left off after the final track of *Strictly Leakage*. This song, “Road to Riches” (a new

¹⁹⁶ Sean Daley, “Slug of Atmosphere Talks New Album, Voting, Soundset and More,” interview by Mr. Peter Parker, *Go Radio MN 95.3*, posted June 22, 2016, YouTube video, 24:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAzhV6TcqWk&t=10s>.

perspective cover of Kool G Rap and DJ Polo's "Road to the Riches" (1989), ends with an unknown sample repeating the word "c'mon" as the song fades the silence; the opening track for *Leak at Will*, "C'mon," similarly begins with the final 2-3 seconds of "Road to Riches." By picking up exactly where *Strictly Leakage* left off, *Leak at Will* provides a seamless transition from one project to the next, a sequel that built on the momentum of the original work.

Atmosphere's most recent release, *Talk Talk EP* (2023), functions in a similar capacity as *Leak at Will*—an intentional compliment or extension of a previous LP. The title, *Talk Talk*, derives from a song of the same name on Atmosphere's LP released sixth months prior, *So Many Other Realities Exist Simultaneously* (2023). The aesthetics of "Talk Talk" distance itself from other songs on the LP and, as described by the Rhymesayers website, "exists alongside electro classics in an uncanny valley that's been warped into a sweaty nightclub, at once vaguely alien and deeply human."¹⁹⁷ Atmosphere was so impressed with the product of "Talk Talk" that they decided to conduct a deeper dive into the songs characteristic "electro" aesthetics throughout a new project, *Talk Talk EP*. I view this EP not necessarily as a sequel, but more of a *spinoff EP*, not building off the entire concept of the associated LP but expanding a small part—a single song.

Double EP

Atmosphere's vast catalogue of albums includes one double EP, *To All My Friends, Blood Makes the Blade Holy: The Atmosphere EPs* (2010). Unlike other double EPs which divide a full-length LP into two smaller EPs, such as the original UK release of The Beatles *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967), this Atmosphere double EP consists of two individual, conceptually different EPs: *To All*

¹⁹⁷ Rhymesayers Entertainment Official Website. *Talk Talk EP*. Accessed May 18, 2025. <https://rhymesayers.com/collections/atmosphere-talk-talk/products/atmosphere-talk-talk-ep>.

My Friends EP and *Blood Makes the Blade Holy EP*.¹⁹⁸ During an interview with YouTube series *Microphone Mathematics*, Slug explains that the initial conception for the project was a singular EP:

I was going to make a six song EP to accompany a ... photography book [*7 Years with Atmosphere & Rhymesayers* by Dan Monick] that follows us through seven years of touring and [Monick] wanted to include a piece of vinyl with the book. So I was like, “you know what, we’ll go and make a six song piece of vinyl for you to put with the book,” and after I finished it I sat down and was like “well I’m gonna make another EP” because I was facing the reality that our next record [*The Family Sign*] wasn’t going to be released until 2011. So, I thought, “nobody is really surprised when I throw out *Sad Clown*’s or leakers or whatever, so we should make another EP just to get out there because the book is going to be harder to find plus it’s vinyl and not a lot of people really buy vinyl or care about the vinyl anymore, so I thought as I was making this other EP, if I take both of these EPs, the one from the book and this other one I made, and put them together as one CD and made them available on tour a la *Sad Clown* ... that’s how this CD came about.¹⁹⁹

This lengthy excerpt is telling for several reasons. First, that Atmosphere experimented with the EP as new promotional marketing tactic by pairing it with an upcoming book—hardcore fans were more likely to purchase the book if it came with new, exclusive music. Second, Slug’s concern over both the visibility of the EP and the projected release date of a future LP, reveals direct insight into Atmosphere and Rhymesayers conscious engagement with fans through constant, small and large, contact. The urgency Slug places on releasing a product before an upcoming LP amplifies their steady-drip promotional approach. Furthermore, Slug’s fanbase appears accustomed to this approach “a la *Sad Clown*” and are perhaps anticipating a new release

¹⁹⁸ The release of *The Magical Mystery Tour* in the U.K. was a double EP, but in the United States it was an LP with five additional tracks.

¹⁹⁹ Sean Daley, “Microphone Mathematics: Slug of Atmosphere Part 2 of 3,” *Microphone Mathematics*, FETV, posted September 8, 2010, YouTube video, 12:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xy1WCryed_0&t=185s. In the end, the book included a compilation CD featuring several songs across the seven-year period the photos were taken.

sooner than later—not releasing new music risks both disappointing and losing the attention of established fans.

Rhymesayers EPs and Beyond

Another popular Rhymesayers Entertainment artists, Brother Ali, has also experienced the peripherality of being a Minneapolis-based rapper in addition to his unique identity as a white Muslim with albinism. Before Atmosphere's *Strictly Leakage/Leak at Will*, Brother Ali released his own sequel-like EPs, *Champion EP* (2004) and *The Truth is Here* (2009). *Champion EP*'s title, like *Talk Talk EP* derives from a title from its associative LP, *Shadows on the Sun* (2003), and similarly functions as a type of spinoff EP even including a remix of "Champion" to begin the EP. *The Truth is Here*, like *Leak at Will*, is a conceptual extension of the politically driven narrative of its companion LP, *The Undisputed Truth* (2007).

Indie rappers outside of the Midwest region who have worked with Rhymesayers Entertainment have also adopted the strategic rethink of the EP, including Murs from Los Angeles and Aesop Rock from Portland who, among others, noticed what Atmosphere was doing with the EP format and decided to apply it to their own work. Murs's large discography boasts over fifteen EPs and Aesop Rock a respectable six EPs. Although Murs and Aesop Rock have not received as much national recognition as Atmosphere or Brother Ali, their EPs have garnered a cult following. Indeed, these format innovations pioneered by Midwest acts have become widespread in the national independent rap scene.

Conclusion

A recent editorial for *Melodic Magazine* argues that the current standard means of music consumption via online streaming has caused a resurgence of the EP format within the music industry. “Shorter forms of media are simply more popular and more prevalent today,” writes author Charlie Bailey, “the music industry is more competitive than ever which, for artists, also means fighting harder for fans and listeners. Most of the time an album just isn’t viable, and that’s where the EP continues to shine.”²⁰⁰ Also, Bailey unwittingly evokes Armstrong’s “broken middle” by describing the current state of the EP as “existing in a happy middle ground” between the LP and the single. The music industry has tilted towards favoring smaller collections (EPs) rather than longer projects (LPs). Major labels now look to independent label marketing formulas of providing frequent yet smaller-scale contact with their audience. The popularity of SoundCloud rappers and their ability to reach a large audience without major label assistance threatens the corporate stranglehold. More importantly, peripheral location is no longer detrimental in artistic negotiations of place. Constant digital interaction—through social media, streaming platforms, and other online music communities—has largely subsumed traditional notions of geographic credibility. The internet has played a crucial role in flattening spatial hierarchies, enabling artists from outside traditional cultural centers to circulate their work and build audiences. Place becomes less about physical proximity and more about networked visibility.

The creative adaptation of EPs by Atmosphere and Rhymesayers Entertainment demonstrates how artists operating outside the traditional tri-coastal centers of hip-hop not only carved out legitimacy and visibility through alternative channels but also enacted a deliberate intervention into the structures of the mainstream music industry. In many ways, Atmosphere and

²⁰⁰ Charlie Bailey, “Why Are EPs More Prevalent Than Albums?,” *Melodic Magazine*, March 5, 2025, <https://www.melodicmag.com/2025/03/05/why-are-eps-more-prevalent-than-albums/>.

Rhymesayers anticipated the current pivot toward EPs, recognizing early on that shorter, more frequent releases could sustain audience engagement more effectively than infrequent, full-length albums. EPs also provided a means of grappling with the pressures and expectations of national attention between major LPs, offering a low-stakes but high-impact format through which Midwest artists could remain visible, responsive, and relevant. Operating from a geographic and institutional periphery, Atmosphere repurposed a marginal and often overlooked format to cultivate sustained engagement with their audience, thereby compensating for limited access to traditional channels of industry legitimacy such as radio airplay, award shows, and major label promotion. By privileging frequency, physicality, and direct distribution, Atmosphere and Rhymesayers constructed an alternative model of artist-fan intimacy that not only circumvented mainstream industry mechanisms but also asserted a distinct regional identity within the broader hip-hop landscape.

By embracing a neglected format and saturating the fanbase with frequent, physical musical releases, they cultivated a grassroots intimacy by exploiting the “broken middle” of the modern music industry, creating a stark contrast to the impersonal reach of mainstream industry, as embodied in the LP and its baggage of being the implied “important” format. This chapter ultimately shows that the EP became more than just a medium of distribution—it evolved into a tool of cultural positioning, allowing Midwestern artists not only to assert their presence in the national rap conversation, but also to redefine what participation and success could look like from the margins. In centering a historically overlooked format, this chapter extends the dissertation’s broader argument that peripheral artists strategically exploit underrecognized cultural forms—whether lyrical (chapter II), performative (chapter III), or material (chapter IV)—to negotiate belonging and authenticity in a genre shaped by coastal and racial hegemonies.

The EP thus emerges as a vital site of negotiation where Midwestern artists could rewrite the conditions of legitimacy on their own terms.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This dissertation interrogates the complex dynamics of authenticity, marginality, and identity in Midwestern hip-hop, a region often overshadowed by the tri-coastal dominance of New York, Los Angeles, and the South. By focusing on artists who navigate both geographic and racial outsider status, I reveal how these peripheral voices assert credibility and belonging within hip-hop's historically Black and coastal ethos. The chapters collectively argue that authenticity in hip-hop is not a fixed trait, but a fluid performative construct negotiated through intertextuality, sonic identity, and strategic marketing.

Chapter II illuminates the pivotal role of intra-genre intertextuality as a multifaceted mechanism of artistic development, insider recognition, and self-canonization. Using Minneapolis duo Atmosphere as a case study, I demonstrate how lyrical signifyin' referencing hip-hop's Golden Age becomes a vital tool for constructing authenticity and community affiliation. This verbal intertextuality fosters an elite *imagined community of practice*, where fluency in hip-hop's textual archive serves as a powerful currency of authenticity, transcending traditional markers such as race, region, or industry support. By situating these practices within a broader sociolinguistic context, the chapter reorients how we understand cultural legitimacy and marginalization in contemporary hip-hop.

Building on this foundation, Chapter III interrogates the negotiation of whiteness in Midwest hip-hop by focusing on Detroit rappers Insane Clown Posse and Eminem. I argue that Eminem's strategic adoption of the crazy white boy persona—a blend of horrorcore's violent theatricality with a caustic sense of humor—enabled him to articulate a form of white rage comparable in cultural threat to Black gangsta rap. ICP's unabashed embrace of the carnival-

grotesque provided a blueprint for Eminem’s nuanced performance, balancing morbidity and comedy to navigate hip-hop’s racial politics. This chapter reveals that performances of whiteness in the 1990s were calculated negotiations of identity and authenticity, crucial for white Midwestern artists seeing credibility with a predominantly Black, tri-coastal genre.

Chapter IV turns to the evolving modes of distribution and audience engagement by Midwestern artists, focusing on Atmosphere and their independent label Rhymesayers Entertainment’s innovative use of the EP format. At a time when major labels favored the traditional LP, Atmosphere repurposed the often-overlooked “broken middle” of the EP to cultivate sustained, intimate relationships with their audience through frequent, small-scale releases. This strategy anticipated the contemporary resurgence of EPs as a preferred format in an increasingly digital and competitive music industry. By embracing direct physical distribution and prioritizing consistent engagement, Atmosphere and Rhymesayers disrupted mainstream industry norms while simultaneously asserting a distinct regional identity. This chapter demonstrates that the EP transcended its role as a distribution tool to become a form of cultural positioning that redefined participation and success from the margins, empowered by digital networks that flatten traditional geographic hierarchies.

Together, these analyses underscore a broader argument central to this dissertation: that hip-hop authenticity and community membership are increasingly mediated through knowledge—who possesses it, how it is signaled, and who can recognize it. Intertextuality and performative identity function not only as artistic choices but also as critical forms of cultural legitimacy in a genre shaped by geographic and racial power structures. Additionally, evolving distribution strategies like the EP format enable marginalized Midwestern artists to circumvent industry gatekeepers and sustain visibility on their own terms. By revealing how these artists

harness such strategies to assert legitimacy, this dissertation challenges static notions of authenticity and expands our understanding of hip-hop as a dynamic cultural field. Ultimately, this dissertation contributes to scholarship on race, region, and identity by showing how peripheral voiced negotiate belonging in hip-hop's evolving imagined communities, creating spaces where new forms of credibility, cultural mastery, and success emerge.

APPENDIX A

Year	Album	Format
1997	<i>Overcast! EP</i>	EP
1997	<i>Overcast!</i>	LP
1999	<i>Headshots: Se7en</i>	LP
	<i>Sad Clown Bad Dub</i>	mixtape
2000	<i>Ford One</i>	EP
	<i>Ford Two</i>	EP
	<i>Sad Clown Bad Dub II</i>	LP
2001	<i>The Lucy EP</i>	EP
	<i>Lucy Ford: The Atmosphere EPs</i>	LP
2002	<i>God Loves Ugly</i>	LP
	<i>Sad Clown Bad Dub 3</i>	EP
	<i>Sad Clown Bad Dub 4</i>	DVD
2003	<i>Seven's Travels</i>	LP
	<i>Sad Clown Bad Dub 5</i>	Single
	<i>Sad Clown Bad Dub 6</i>	Single
	<i>Sad Clown Bad Dub 7/Random Vol. 3</i>	LP
2005	<i>You Can't Image How Much Fun We're Having</i>	LP
	<i>Happy Clown Bad Dub 8: The Fun EP</i>	EP
2007	<i>Strictly Leakage</i>	LP
	<i>Sad Clown Bad Summer 9</i>	EP
	<i>Sad Clown Bad Fall 10</i>	EP
	<i>Sad Clown Bad Winter 11</i>	EP
	<i>Sad Clown Bad Spring 12</i>	EP
2008	<i>When Life Gives You Lemons, You Paint That Shit Gold</i>	LP
	<i>Sad Clown Bad Dub 13</i>	DVD
2009	<i>Leak at Will</i>	EP
2010	<i>To All My Friends, Blood Makes the Blade Holy: The Atmosphere EPs</i>	Double EP
2011	<i>The Family Sign</i>	LP
2013	<i>Demosexual</i>	Single
2014	<i>The Lake Nokomis Maxi Single</i>	Maxi-single
	<i>Southsiders</i>	LP
2016	<i>Fishing Blues</i>	LP
	<i>Frida Kahlo vs. Ezra Pound</i>	EP
2018	<i>Mi Vida Local</i>	LP
2019	<i>Whenever</i>	LP
2020	<i>The Day Before Halloween</i>	LP
2021	<i>Word?</i>	LP
2023	<i>So Many Other Realities Exist Simultaneously</i>	LP
	<i>Talk Talk EP</i>	EP

APPENDIX B

Schematic Quotations				Hypotext			
Song	Album	Year	Lyrics	Artist	Song	Album	Year
"Ear Blister"	(unreleased)	1997	it's plain to see, you can't change me / I'm a b-boy for life	N.W.A.	"N****z 4 Life"	<i>Efilzaggin</i>	1991
"Choking on a Wishbone"	<i>Headshots: Se7en</i>	1999	yo, lookin at my Gucci it's about that time / for me to pawn this piece of junk and try to pay some of these fines	Schoolly D	"Gucci Time"	<i>Schoolly-D</i>	1985
"The Wind"	<i>Sad Clown Bad Dub II</i>	2000	I'm only tryna help, peace out One-Self well for all of ya'll keeping ya'll in hell / I'm only tryna help, peace out One-Self	Slick Rick and Doug E. Fresh	"La Di Da Di"	<i>The Show and La Di Da Di</i>	1983
"Running with Scissors"	<i>Sad Clown Bad Dub II</i>	2000	anything is everything and more is less protect your jimmy, keep it fresh /	Boogie Down Productions	"Jimmy"	<i>By All Means Necessary</i>	1988
"Like Today"	<i>Lucy Ford: The Atmosphere EPs</i>	2001	fresh, dressed like fifty-cents / clean and awake now I'm ready to commence	Slick Rick and Doug E. Fresh	"La Di Da Di"	<i>The Show and La Di Da Di</i>	1985
"Guns and Cigarettes"	<i>Lucy Ford: The Atmosphere EPs</i>	2001	rappers stepping to me, they wanna get some / but most of them should go and try to boost their monthly income	Big Daddy Kane	"Ain't No Half Steppin"	<i>Long Live the Kane</i>	1983
"Travel"	<i>Lucy Ford: The Atmosphere EPs</i>	2001	a few years ago an ex-girl of mine / asked me to keep her name out of my rhymes New York, New York big city of dreams / get with me when you're ready to be part of the team	Run-D.M.C.	"Sucker MC's (Krush Groove)"	<i>Run-D.M.C.</i>	1988
"The Bass and the Movement"	<i>God Loves Ugly</i>	2002	huh huh step, step, step, step, stepped on / is all you gonna get when you try to test the Sean	Grandmaster Flash and Furious 5	"New York, New York"	<i>Grandmaster Flash and Furious 5</i>	1983
"GodLovesUgLy"	<i>God Loves Ugly</i>	2002	once upon a time in Minneapolis, yo / I damn near had to steal the show	Melle Mell and Furious 5	"Step Off"	<i>Step Off</i>	1985
"Threemisphere"	<i>God Loves Ugly</i>	2002	I'm on the poverty tour with Jay Bird my man / kickin every raw soul across this desolate land	Ice Cube	"Once Upon a Time in the Projects"	<i>AmeriKKa's Most Wanted</i>	1990
"Trying to Find a Balance"	<i>Seven's Travels</i>	2003	see I'm not insane, in fact I'm kind of rational / when I be asking "yo where did all the passion go?"	Boogie Down Productions	"Award Tour"	<i>Midnight Marauders</i>	1993
"Always Coming Back Home to You"	<i>Seven's Travels</i>	2003	to all my killers and my hundred dollar billers / to emo kids that got too many feelings	Mobb Deep	"My Philosophy"	<i>By All Means Necessary</i>	1988
"Watch Out"	<i>You Can't Imagine How Much Fun We're Having</i>	2005	when the smoke clears you won't be able to suck dick	Atmosphere	"Shook Ones Part II"	<i>The Infamous</i>	1994
"Something"	<i>Word?</i>	2021	looking like Bruce Springsteen, know what I mean / it wasn't even close to Halloween	Geto Boys	"Mind Playing Tricks on Me"	<i>We Can't Be Stopped</i>	1991
				Covers			
"Jackin Yo Freaks"	<i>Sad Clown Bad Dub 7</i>	2003		Ice Cube	"Jackin Yo Beats"	<i>Kill at Will</i>	1990
"YGM"	<i>Strictly Leakage</i>	2007		Big Daddy Kane	"Young Gifted and Black"	<i>It's a Big Daddy Thing</i>	1989
"What They Sittin For?"	<i>Strictly Leakage</i>	2007		Ice Cube	"What They Hittin' For"	<i>AmeriKKa's Most Wanted</i>	1990
"The Old Style"	<i>Strictly Leakage</i>	2007		Beastie Boys	"The New Style"	Licensed to Ill	1986
"Road to Riches"	<i>Strictly Leakage</i>	2007		Kool G Rap & DJ Polo	"Road to the Riches"	<i>Road to the Riches</i>	1989
"Millie Fell Off the Fire Escape"	<i>Leak at Will</i>	2009		De-La Soul	"Millie Pulled a Pistol on Santa"	<i>De La Soul is Dead</i>	1991

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