From Page to Stage to Lyrics to Database to Page: BreakBeat Poets, Lyrics Databases, and the Textual Capacity of Hip Hop Verse

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As a multimedia artistic movement, Hip Hop is known for its contributions across the arts, from music to dance to graphic arts. However, Hip Hop is also a form of poetry, which we can call Hip Hop verse, and it is rooted in performance but also exists in the world as a textual art. While scholars have analyzed Hip Hop’s contributions to the world of poetry, there has yet to be a proper accounting for Hip Hop’s function as a textual poetry that is regularly consumed by Hip Hoppas. Accordingly, this study is focused on Hip Hop’s role as a textual art by focusing on two phenomena, the rise of lyrics databases and the emergence of BreakBeat Poetry. These two parallel developments help to illustrate the resonance of Hip Hop verse as a textual art form. By focusing on the rise of BreakBeat poetry and the role Hip Hop lyrics databases as sites for the reading of Hip Hop verse, this article demonstrates that Hip Hop verse, as a textual art that springs from its Afro-diasporic roots as a performance art, holds an important role in shaping Hip Hop culture by offering an avenue for expanding the culture’s discourse and aesthetics through poetry.

Setting up the Conversation

Hip Hop changed poetry forever. While that may seem like a startling statement, when we consider Hip Hop’s influence on spoken word, lyricism, and the creation of poetry in the twenty-first century, this statement does not seem that far-fetched. The most searched for lyrics on lyric databases on the internet are the lyrics of rap music and not those from other popular genres such as pop music, even though pop stars such as Taylor Swift have record breaking sales, a presence in the 2024 NFL Playoffs and Superbowl and sold out concerts around the world. While Hip Hop lyrics are more widely read than those from pop’s biggest stars, the potential consequences of the dissemination of Hip Hop lyrics are quite real. For example, when Jeffery “Young Thug” Williams went to trial, they used his lyrics, the text of his poetry, as evidence. When we carefully consider the reach and impact of Hip Hop lyric databases, Hip Hop’s influence on poetry is undeniable.

In the 2022 issue of The Journal of Hip Hop Studies (JHHS), “Funk What You Heard: Hip Hop Is a Field of Study,” the editors made clear that “Hip Hop is an African diasporic phenomenon, not bound by space and time.”1 Hip Hop is energy. Hip Hop is movement. Hip Hop provides the ability for silenced people, carrying the weight of oppression, to rise up and have a voice. Hip Hop is everywhere. While we can find Hip Hop across a range of artistic media, with graphic arts, dance, and music being three of the most prominent, “Page to Stage to Lyrics Database to Page” focuses on Hip Hop poetics. Rhetorical practices such as the game known as the Dozens, the folk songs of the blues, and the early spirituals which W.E.B. Dubois called “Sorrow Songs” form the

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1 Harris et al., “Funk What You Heard: Hip Hop Is a Field of Study,” 7.
roots of Hip Hop poetics, which go all the way back to the griots of West Africa.\(^2\) Poetry is the lyrical content of Hip Hop that we can call “Hip Hop verse.”\(^3\)

We still have only begun to appreciate the reach of Hip Hop poetics. Alexis Pate in his book *In the Heart of the Beat: The Poetry of Rap* (2009) insisted that Hip Hop’s poetry is the “literary manifestation of this culture”\(^4\) and in *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* (2009), Adam Bradley writes that Hip Hop “has a poetic structure that can be reproduced, a deliberate form an MC creates for each rhyme that differentiates it, if only in small ways, from every other rhyme ever conceived.”\(^5\) The wide reach of Hip Hop’s poetry compelled scholar Derik Smith, in his book *Robert Hayden in Verse: New Histories of African American Poetry and the Black Arts Era* (2018), to ask “if rap is poetry and MCs are poets, a primary scholarly question would have to be: Has human culture ever been more deeply steeped in verse?”\(^6\) And the answer to Smith’s question is simple: no it has not. Accordingly, one of the ways for us to account for contemporary culture’s fascination with Hip Hop verse is by analyzing the impact of Hip Hop’s textual imprint.

When we consider the imprint of Hip Hop as text, it becomes clear that Hip Hop verse is one of the primary ways that poetry is conveyed to people in contemporary society. Granted that rap music is one of the most popular music genres, it is nevertheless a common practice for listeners to go to lyric databases in order to understand what emcees are rapping. Rap music in contrast to other genres has the unique quality of allowing emcees to express raw emotion through wordplays, similes, and metaphors. This mixture of emotion and rhetorical skills draw readers as well as listeners. In *The Anthology of Rap*, Bradley and his coeditor Andrew DuBois note that “whether MCs are scribbling in a rhyme book, tapping out lyrics on a Blackberry or iPhone, or just composing in the mental journal in their heads,” Hip Hop’s poetry is a “fusion of the written and the oral.”\(^7\) This specific project came under criticism from more than one angle. Some argued that Hip Hop is not sophisticated enough to be considered poetry, while others argued that labeling Hip Hop as poetry is just an attempt to make it palatable to a more high-brow audience.\(^8\) In fact, it might have been the criticism of that project that led Macklin Smith and Aurko Joshi in their book *Rhymes in the Flow: How Rappers Flip the Beat* to write that “we remain relatively uninterested in the textuality of rap lyrics.”\(^9\) Reading this quote out of context might


\(^3\) Verse has traditionally referred to a line of poetic composition but has come to mean a section of a poem or even an entire poem. It is not a coincidence that a section of Hip Hop lyrics is also called a verse because the term in music descends from a time when poetry and music were not seen as entirely separate. While some people refer to the poetry of Hip Hop as rap, since I am focusing on Hip Hop poetics, I refer to the lyrics in rap music as Hip Hop verse. Hip Hop verse applies to my analysis of rap music because emcees spit verses of Hip Hop culture.

\(^4\) Pate, *In the Heart of the Beat*, 2.

\(^5\) A. Bradley, *Book of Rhymes*, xi.


\(^7\) A. Bradley and Dubois, *The Anthology of Rap*, xxxiv.


lead one to think that Joshi and Smith are trying to denigrate Hip Hop’s poetics but that is not accurate. Instead, they are attempting to elevate Hip Hop’s performed poetics, noting that Hip Hop verse is “made to be heard.”10 And yet, in the process of constructing their analysis of Hip Hop’s performed poetics, they admit that they “often consulted internet-published lyrics, using these to verify our transcriptions.”11

In an essay entitled “Getting Off at the 13th Floor: Rap Genius and Archiving 21st-Century Black Cultural Memory,” Regina Bradley points to the impact and meaning of Hip Hop’s textual capacity, writing that “Hip Hop’s digital imprint is ripe for investigation as a site of its shifting cultural aesthetics and performance.”12 When we consider Hip Hop’s digital and, in this instance, textual imprint, we are getting closer to understanding the ways that Hip Hop poetics informs the cultural aesthetics of Hip Hop discourse. Accordingly, my article focuses on Hip Hop’s existence in the world as text and how audiences specifically desire to read the lyrics of Hip Hop because of its unique appeal as text. While the editors of *JHHS* note that “the predominant method of Hip Hop studies is lyrical analysis”13 and I don’t want to continue this overdone tendency towards analysis of lyrics, an article that is focused on accounting for the textual capacity of Hip Hop verse will empower scholars to move beyond simple lyrical analysis in order to more closely examine the intricate poetic decisions of emcees. Ultimately, I argue that Hip Hop plays a prominent role in the creation of poetry in the twenty-first century. Emcees write badass poems. Other Hip Hoppas in the culture, avid listeners and fans of rap music, read these poems. This energy and movement throughout the culture inspire a new generation of poets to write their own poems and, thereby, creates a whole universe of Hip Hop poetics and poets.

Some scholars may bristle at the idea that we should focus our attention on the text of Hip Hop, presuming that such an effort would serve to somehow elevate written communication over the spoken form. Before I continue, I would like to dispel any notion that this article means to suggest the primacy of written text over oral speech. It is well known, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. observed, that there has been a longstanding tradition within Western critical thought which has viewed writing as “alone among the fine arts as the most salient repository of ‘genius.’”14 And, as he further noted, writing was “the principal measure” by which Black peoples’ very “capacity for progress” was judged.15 Therefore, elevating written text over performance based speech would no doubt continue such a legacy. However, there is no rule that says we cannot both analyze a Hip Hop text and acknowledge the primacy of the spoken performance in Hip Hop verse that gave birth to said text. Although other scholars have suggested that Hip Hop is not even poetry precisely because of its existence as a

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10 M. Smith and Joshi, 3.
11 M. Smith and Joshi, 8.
15 Gates Jr.
performance art,\textsuperscript{16} this is an uninformed position that does not take into account the history of poetry. Poetry scholars with a full perspective on poetry’s history understand “that poetry was first and foremost an oral form and rhyme and meter central elements of oral poetry.”\textsuperscript{17} Here, Robert McPhillips, paraphrasing poetry critic Dana Gioia, illustrates that poetry for most of human history has been a performed art. Hip Hop is part of a long tradition of performing poetry that has become readable text. Reading it as such serves to emphasize the reach and scope of Hip Hop’s performed poetics but, also, potentially provides an opening for scholars to move beyond mere lyrical analysis by focusing greater attention on the poetic projects of Hip Hop’s emcees, but more on that in a moment.

**Reading Hip Hop as Text**

The influence of Hip Hop’s text came into focus in May 2022, when the well-known emcee Jeffrey “Young Thug” Williams and his crew Young Slime Life (YSL) were indicted for racketeering under Georgia’s RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations) laws. As the case unfolded in November of 2023, Fulton County Superior Court Judge Ural Glanville “ruled that 17 specific sets of lines from the music of Young Thug and other YSL artists could be used” by the prosecution in Williams’ trial as evidence of criminal activity.\textsuperscript{18} To say that his lines of music were being prosecuted is, of course, inaccurate. The prosecution were not using the beats to his music as evidence; they were using the text of his rhymes. His lyrics were being treated as evidence “to prove the nature of YSL as a racketeering enterprise — the expectations of YSL as a criminal street gang,” according to Fulton County executive district attorney Mike Carlson.\textsuperscript{19} Williams’ lawyers assert that this attempt by the prosecution is “racist and discrimination because the jury will be so poisoned and prejudiced by these lyrics/poetry/artistry/speech.”\textsuperscript{20} In other words, the prosecution would have been using Williams’ poetry to essentially prevent him from receiving a fair trial. Imagine if the judicial system attempted to prosecute Allen Ginsberg for the homicide of “twelve secretaries” based on the text of his poem “Howl.”\textsuperscript{21} While the idea of a prosecution of Ginsberg for his poetry is a joke, the absurdity of such a scenario illustrates how many people don’t stop to consider that Hip Hop is poetry and that lyrics databases are venues for reading poetry. While it is clear that the text of Young Thug’s Hip Hop verse has real-life implications in the courtroom, I would argue that one of the reasons his lyrics were able to used against him is because not enough people recognize that Hip Hop is poetry. Accordingly, I maintain that an important function of Hip Hop scholarship is to make clear the fact that Hip Hop is a form of poetic verse, and perhaps one of the clearest ways to do that is by examining the impact of Hip Hop’s textual art.

\textsuperscript{16} Robert Pinsky, *Is Hip-Hop Poetry?*
\textsuperscript{17} McPhillips, *The New Formalism*, x.
\textsuperscript{18} Coscarelli, “Young Thug Lyrics Will Be Allowed.”
\textsuperscript{19} Coscarelli.
\textsuperscript{20} Coscarelli.
\textsuperscript{21} Ginsberg, “Howl.”
Williams’ case demonstrates that while Hip Hop is an orally performed poetry, this does not mean that this poetry does not also function as text. Standard Hip Hop verse, which is a rhymed poem performed over a beat that the typical listener would recognize as Hip Hop, also exists in lyric databases, which function as the digital libraries for Hip Hop’s poetry. In fact, the entire lyrics database industry has come to be because of people’s specific interest in seeking out the texts of Hip Hop verse in order to better understand the strategies of emcees or just to solve arguments over “what did she just say in that verse?”22 If we think of Hip Hop’s lyrics databases as sites for the reading of Hip Hop verse, it is clear that Hip Hop is some of the most read poetry in human history. Nikki Minaj’s “Bigfoot” after only three weeks of existence reached a million views.23 Anyone who studies the lyrics of Genius.com understands that this is not uncommon. Audiences are specifically invested in the text of Hip Hop lyrics and devote more time to reading lyrics from this genre. Kendrick Lamar’s lyrics are read more consistently than lyrics by Taylor Swift despite the fact that she has a broad fanbase of young people who are very plugged in online and has sold significantly more albums than Kendrick.24 Millions of readers flock to Hip Hop texts on lyric databases but on the flipside poetry books only have to achieve sales in the tens of thousands to be considered highly successful.25 To put it simply, Hip Hop verse from lyrics databases is more widely read than most contemporary poetry. At the same time, a phenomenon that parallels the rise of lyric databases is the fact that Hip Hop has also become a textual art in the world of literary poetry. Poets who are focused on writing poems for the page have been influenced by Hip Hop extensively and have begun publishing at a rapid pace. In this instance, we are not talking about standard Hip Hop verse, rather we are talking about verse that brings varied aesthetic markers of Hip Hop verse to the page.

In order to illuminate the reach of Hip Hop verse, this article is broken into two sections. The first section, BreakBeat Poets: Hip Hop for the Page, examines the rise of Hip Hop verse in published literary poetry. It should not be shocking that Hip Hop has been one of the chief poetic influences for a newer generation of poets, who grew up listening to Hip Hop verse and reading Hip Hop verse on the internet. I call these bards (poets) “BreakBeat poets” as a nod to the 2015 volume *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop*. The *BreakBeat Poets* editors understood that their anthology was not simply a collection of written works but was defining a new era in poetry. The second section of this article, Back to the Page (or Device Screen): Lyrics Databases and Hip Hop Books, deals with a different aspect of Hip Hop verse’s textual capacity. Audiences seek out Hip Hop verse on lyrics databases and debate and discuss the meaning of these texts, which makes these databases a primary space for the reading of Hip Hop’s poetry.

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22 Jost, “For the Record: RapGenius.Com Stole My S#!T.”
23 Nicki Minaj, “Bigfoot.”
24 Genius.com, “Lyrics/All Time Charts.”
25 Brooks, “Poetry Sales Boom as Instagram and Facebook Take Work to New Audiences.”
Ultimately, this article explores the dual dynamics of Hip Hop verse, unraveling its influence both as a widely consumed textual art within lyrics databases and books and as a transformative force shaping contemporary literary poetry. Neglecting the textual dimension of Hip Hop risks undermining its profound impact, as it has evolved into a significant poetic form that reimagines traditional boundaries of poetic expression. By dissecting the emergence of BreakBeat poets and the rise in Hip Hop lyrics’ publication, this study contends that Hip Hop, rooted in its Afro-diasporic origins, holds a pivotal role in shaping contemporary discourse and culture through its underappreciated textual manifestations. In short, as Rakim said, “I love to be read.”

**The BreakBeat Poets: Hip Hop for the Page**

Influenced by *The BreakBeat Poets-New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop*, I have decided to call poetry made by Hip Hoppas “BreakBeat poetry.” In the anthology, editor Nate Marshall writes an essay entitled a “Blueprint for BreakBeat Writing” in which he provides seven coherent points that he describes as “not perfect, but ... intended to gesture toward the foundational ethics that I’ve observed in my generation of makers born directly into hip-hop.” Three of his points seem particularly valuable for understanding what BreakBeat poetry is. First is “the necessity for poems to live in multiple media.” This makes poetry more accessible and visible to audiences, but also more accessible to artists and echoes the multimedia nature of their chief influence, Hip Hop. BreakBeat poetry also channels Hip Hop by providing a “democratic cypher” which discourages the “privileging (of) high intellectual or artistic pedigree,” emphasizing that all means of creating and disseminating poetry are “valid until proven wack.” This democratization puts the teenaged poet who posts a rhyme on Instagram on equal footing with the MFA-holding poet who wins an enviable literary award. The democratization of poetry makes space for another important point from Marshall: “we believe in art that invites, acknowledges, and celebrates the voices of poor people and other disenfranchised people.” In this regard, the BreakBeat poets continue the legacy of their inheritance from Hip Hop by providing a platform and voice for poor, marginalized peoples.

As noted above, Marshall essentially tells us that BreakBeat poets create an accessible, democratic cipher for uplifting the voices of oppressed people. With this in mind, I assert that BreakBeat poetry is poetry that hears the break beat and, in some fashion, brings that beat to the page. Further, as I will discuss later in this article, BreakBeat poetry is transgressive; it announces itself and does not care if, in the process, it is breaking rules; in fact, it hopes it is breaking rules. When challenging convention, BreakBeat poetry fights for the democratization of poetry and uses a broad range of media to build a wide platform for its artists, many of whom are from marginalized

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26 Breihan, “Status Ain’t Hood Interviews Rakim.”
communities. In short, BreakBeat poetry is democratically oriented, transgressive, multimedia poetry that prioritizes marginalized voices while bringing the break beat to the page.

One of the ways to track the developments of BreakBeat poetry is via the numerous anthologies which have published this poetry. Many of these anthologies were published long before the emergence of the term BreakBeat poets. One of the first books was In the Tradition: An Anthology of Young Black Writers (1992), edited by poet and original The Real World cast member Kevin Powell and by Ras Baraka, the current mayor of Newark, NJ and the son of Black Arts icon Amiri Baraka. Aloud: Voices From the Nuyorican Poet’s Café (1994) was another influential anthology and was likely the most significant in terms of establishing the merging of published literary poetry and Hip Hop.\textsuperscript{31} Because the cafe that produced the anthology had been home to a previous generation of performance poets, in the words of scholar Urayoán Noel, The Nuyorican “opened its doors to younger generations of poets attuned to hip-hop.”\textsuperscript{32} These two anthologies from the 1990s were followed later in the decade by Listen Up! An Anthology of Spoken Word (1999), and in the early 2000s by \textit{bum rush the page: a def poetry jam} (2000), and \textit{The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip Hop, and the Poetry for a New Generation} (2001). These newer-generation collections further embraced the dual relationship between Hip Hop and spoken word. Now established for some time, the poetics of Hip Hop and spoken word began to crystallize in more recent collections like Chorus—A Literary Mixtape (2012), \textit{It Was Written-Poetry Inspired by Hip Hop} (2017), and \textit{The BreakBeat Poets-New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop}. Newer collections keep emerging including several follow-up editions of \textit{The Break Beat Poets}, \textit{The End of Chiraq: A Literary Mixtape} (2018), and \textit{Turn it Up: Music in Poetry From Jazz to Hip-Hop} (2020). All of these collections have shown that there is a home for Hip Hop on the page and have foreshadowed its future influence on literary poetics.

What these collections share in common is that they contain the work of poets who are willing to engage Hip Hop poetics on the page. The number of poets who engage with this type of work is now legion enough to establish a tradition of BreakBeat poetry. There are a large number of poets who I am calling BreakBeat poets, but most of these poets do not walk into a room and announce themselves as “BreakBeat” poets. However, most of the poets who were included in the first BreakBeat Poets anthology were aware that the purpose behind the project was to encapsulate a new area in poetry and account for a new school of poetics. In this regard, we can surmise that these poets cosign the label to some degree. Within this milieu of poetics, there are many worthy poets who could be discussed, but, for the purpose of this article, I have chosen to highlight a group of these poets, in hopes of offering a representative sampling of the types of works which encompass this new school of poetry. The works of these artists represent three decades of Hip Hop poetics on the page. These poets’ work—along with

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Somers-Willett, \textit{The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry}, 97; Aptowicz, \textit{Words in Your Face}, 9.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Noel, \textit{In Visible Movement}, 124.
\end{itemize}
those of many others—illustrate that Hip Hop will continue to find space on the page of literary works in the years to come and, quite possibly, for generations to come.

Before I discuss some of the poets in the first *BreakBeat Poets* anthology, I would first like to offer a brief accounting of some of the single-authored texts that have helped to establish the tradition of BreakBeat poetry. Most likely, the first single-authored poetry collection of what we can now call BreakBeat poetry was Paul Beatty’s *Big Bank Take Little Bank* (1991), which, not coincidentally, was published by the Nuyorican Poets Café. Another poet who spent time at the Nuyorican Poets Café is former New York State Poet Willie Perdomo. His first book, *Where a Nickel Costs a Dime* (1996), speaks to the connections that Afro-Boricuas have with Hip Hop culture, a connection that stems from the relationship developed between Puerto Rican and African American youth that scholar Raquel Z. Rivera describes as “an alliance of survival” born on the streets of New York.33 Another foundational text by a poet who spent time at The Nuyorican, *The Dead Emcee Scrolls: The Lost Teachings of Hip Hop* (2006), by Saul Williams, stands as one of the only texts in this milieu that tries to replicate the Hip Hop form directly on the page, as Williams’ stated goal was to write “the greatest Hip Hop album never recorded.”34 Since the 2000s, there has been an enormous amount of single-authored collections published. The following is an attempt to produce a representative list of these texts, though I’m sure many deserving works have been omitted.

A foundational text of BreakBeat poetry is Terrance Hayes’ *Hip Logic* (2002); while much of his work fits this milieu, his first collection, published in 2002, set the stage for the influx of Hip Hop-inspired poetry. Most of John Murillo’s work could be called BreakBeat, but *Up Jump the Boogie* (2010) stands as one of his shining examples. Another impressive book is Adrian Matejka’s *Mixology* (2009), which won the National Poetry Series award and paved the way for Matejka’s successful writing career. Some of these BreakBeat texts are more experimental, like Latasha N. Nevada Diggs’ *Twerk* (2013). I remember my students weren’t grasping how much this book was infused with Hip Hop until I read them Diggs’ poem “Have You Forgotten Any Personal Property” out loud. Douglas Kearney’s *Black Automaton* (2009) is another experimental work and he engages with Hip Hop by manipulating text to approximate the sonic force of the break beat. Erica Dawson engages the epic form in her book *When Rap Spoke Straight to God* (2018). Most of Hanif Abdurraqib’s work could be called BreakBeat poetry, but his first collection *The Crown Ain’t Worth Much* (2017) is a particularly stunning example. Other poets explore Hip Hop in more traditional forms, like Chinaka Hodge who wrote couplets for 2Pac in addition to her haikus for Biggie Smalls, in her book *Dated Emcees* (2016). Stephen Cramer, the editor of *Turn it Up—Music in Poetry From Jazz to Hip-Hop*, also dialogues with Hip Hop in traditional form in *From the Hip* (2014), and Taylor Byas also plays with form and Hip Hop in *I Done Clicked My Heels Three Times* (2023).

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34 Pride, “Book Review: The Dead Emcee Scrolls.”
Of course, many poets are also emcees. Two such poets, Jamaal May and Nate Marshall, produced written poetry while also recording and performing music. May’s *Hum* (2013) was an impressively lyrical offering for this genre. Marshall’s *Finna* (2020) is a deeply personal but astutely grounded tribute to his life experience and his city of Chicago. As I mentioned before, Marshall is also one of the editors of *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop*, so his contributions to this new poetic school go beyond his role as one of its poets.

The list of works that could be categorized as BreakBeat is overwhelming. There’s Mahogany Browne’s *Swag* (2010), Josè Olivarez’s *Citizen Illegal* (2018), Jonathan Moody’s *Olympic Butter Gold* (2015), Tracie Morris’ *Rhyme Scheme* (2012), Tara Bett’s *Arc and Hue* (2009), Marcus Wicker’s *Silencer* (2017), Joshua Bennett’s *The Sobbing School* (2016), Morgan Parker’s *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé* (2017), Angel Nafis’ *BlackGirl Mansion* (2012), Danez Smith’s *Homic: Poems* (2020), 35 Roger Reeves’ *King Me* (2013), Fatimah Asghar *If They Come For Us* (2018), Aziza Barnes’ *i be, but i ain’t* (2016), Michael Cirelli’s *Lobster with Ol’ Dirty Bastard* (2008), Sarah Blake’s *Mr. West* (2015), and Michael Mlekoday’s *The Dead Eat Everything* (2014). Several additional poets could be added to this list, not to mention that most of the poets I have noted have multiple books which in some way could fit under the milieu of BreakBeat poetry.

The poets I have listed have published these books in traditional poetry publishing venues, but many poets have written poetry books outside of the literary poetry publishing sphere. While there are countless examples of self-published and small press poetry collections in the BreakBeat tradition, one noteworthy example is the book *Climbing Poetree* (2014), written by and taking its title from the performance duo of the same name. There are also poets who are transforming the world of Young Adult Fiction and expanding the publishing realm for Hip Hop poetics by reframing the epic as a verse-novel infused with Hip Hop, such as Mahogany Browne, again, with *Chlorine Sky* (2021). Three other poets of note in this vein are Kwame Alexander with his *Crossover* series, Jason Reynolds with *Long Way Down* (2017) and his many other works, and Elizabeth Acevedo. Acevedo’s *Poet X* (2020) is of particular note because it tells a semi-autobiographical story of a young poet who belongs to a fictionalized version of the spoken word poetry community that helped give birth to the poetry I have been discussing in this article.

Now that there are so many works in the milieu of BreakBeat poetics, we can begin to accurately label this poetry as its own poetry tradition. However, labeling traditions can be challenging, so it will be helpful to take a step back, momentarily, and add some voices to the conversation.

A Canon of Hip Hop Poetics?

When we think about a tradition in Hip Hop poetics, it is helpful to take a look at a cipher that Latasha N. Nevada Diggs convened for the Poetry Foundation in 2013.

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Diggs, one of the more recognized poets of the Hip Hop generation, facilitated a series of conversations for the foundation titled “DWYCK: a Cipher on Hip Hop poetics.” In these free-flowing conversations, the artists grappled with issues in Hip Hop poetics. A pertinent conversation they approach is the question of what a canon of Hip Hop poetics would look like. Diggs presents this question to the group, proposing that “there is a canon of rap lyrics agreed upon by academics and the street. In fact, it is quite likely that academics take their cues from the street as to what constitutes greatness. That said there doesn’t appear to be a ‘classics’ one can refer to for hip-hop poetry. Is this a fair assumption?” While I would argue that Reg E. Gains’ “Please Don’t Take My Air Jordans” would fit the bill of a genre classic, the group doesn’t discuss which works would be included in such a canon, but rather whether the establishment of a canon should even be attempted in the first place. Poet Doug Kearney gets at this concern, “and the discourse—yes discourse—around this canon creates and articulates notions of a poetics. As such, a theoretical model of what one can do to achieve canonization.” It seems Kearney’s hesitation regarding the establishment of a canon of Hip Hop poetics comes from a desire to avoid being prescriptive and therefore limiting in scope while also acknowledging that canons themselves can be problematic. The founder of Anti-Pop Consortium Kyle Austin, aka High Priest, clarifies, “the terms Hip Hop Poetics is ‘PR’ talk and I don’t know anyone who would define themselves in that way, so to create a formal canon, we first have to collectively label it—From my own subjective standpoint, the said canon would consist of artists of the period and the things that inspired them.” It seems a canon for Hip Hop poetics could be assembled but it’s something that to a degree is determined by the artists of the genre and period. Furthermore, for academic purposes, this new group of poets would have to be “labeled.” In this case, the BreakBeat poets seem to be the most fitting label.

While I would also hesitate to establish a canon for Hip Hop poetics, I do feel as though, in the years since this cipher was convened in 2013, the number of published texts in Hip Hop poetics has swelled — so much so that we can begin to productively discuss the shared characteristics between these newer texts, while also considering the texts that were published earlier. This is why I have chosen to label these poets of Hip Hop poetics on the page the BreakBeat poets. As I said earlier, the term BreakBeat is a shout out to the BreakBeat Poets New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop but also as an acknowledgement of the ambitious objectives of the conveners of the anthology. While the first book is the only one to be dedicated exclusively to Hip Hop, the subsequent issues in the series all contain works that engage Hip Hop poetics. While we do not have to establish a canon per se, by naming this new phenomenon in American poetry we can begin to learn what is at stake in this poetry by analyzing the shared characteristics between the pieces in this tradition.

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37 Diggs, “DWYCK.”
38 Diggs.
Leaders of the New School: The BreakBeat Poets

When I discuss BreakBeat poets, I am not referring to performance poets from previous eras, like the Black Arts Movement or the Nuyorican Poets of the seventies and before, though both movements are undeniably forebears to the BreakBeats and many works from the artists of these movements engage some of the same poetic styles we find in Hip Hop verse. The newer school poets of today share one distinct difference from their performance poetry forebears; the literary poetry of the past thirty years that engages with Hip Hop does so while fully aware that it is in conversation with a specific, established multi-media genre and cultural phenomenon, Hip Hop. Earlier works were engaged in a tradition of Afro-Diasporic rhetorical practices which are part of a long tradition, but the genre of Hip Hop had yet to be named as the phenomenon it is. These newer artists engage directly with this phenomenon and therefore are invested in the larger social conversations that Hip Hop is also engaged in. With the break beat in their heads, these new poets have written to and for the poetry of their times, hence the name BreakBeat poets.

I am labeling this new group of poets BreakBeat poets because the editors of The BreakBeat Poets, New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop very much saw the project as reflective of a new school of poetry:

The writers we present in these pages are the offspring of Clifton and Biggie … Phyllis Wheatley and Lil’Kim … Essex Hemple and Queen Latifah. The Dark Room Collective and the Wu-Tang Clan … James Baldwin and 2Pac Shakur. Nikki Giovanni and Kendrick Lamar. Li-Young Lee and MC Lyte. The Native Tongues and the Nuyoricans. We are many.

The words above from editor Nate Marshall reveal that the editors of the anthology understood that Hip Hop is part of the poetic heritage of this era. Because Hip Hop is a poetic form in its own right, its impact on poetry has been specifically poignant; today’s poets engage their poetry influences in conversation on the page.

Consider these two lines by Jamila Woods from the collection: “My Daddy’s forehead is so big, we don’t need a dining room table…Tyra Banks burst into tears when she seen my Daddy’s forehead.” Woods finds an opportunity on the page to employ a reversal to the verbal game called the Dozens, transforming the game from gendered yo mama jokes into an opportunity to confront a challenging relationship to a father. In this sense, poetry is an opportunity for processing wounds. Joshua Bennett is also able to use BreakBeat poetry to confront his relationship to his father. “I either claim the South Bronx by maternal bloodline (a tactic commonly known as the Boogie Down Bandwagon Maneuver) or…the word Yonkers sounds like a rare breed of pest…I am my father’s son. I cannot claim what I do not love.” Hip Hop does for these poets

41 Joshua Bennett, Coval, Marshall, and Lansana, 220.
what it did for its youth community in the South Bronx in the seventies. Hip Hop inspires these writers and empowers them to find their voices. For Bennett and Woods, it provides a platform for confronting their fathers but also a space where our experiences are shared with others.

We can surmise, then, that the BreakBeat poets are transforming American poetry, via the poetics of Hip Hop. In the case of Lemon Anderson, he engages Hip Hop by making references that only the Hip Hop audience will understand, which extends poetry’s readership by speaking to new readers:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Where Dead Prez} \\
\text{Will be in charge} \\
\text{Of the people’s army of the United States} \\
\text{Latifah will be the first lady} \\
\text{Ladies first} \\
\text{And what do you know} \\
\text{Eric B. will be President}\end{align*}^{42}
\]

Anderson imagines a new world in the image of Hip Hop culture. While in the process of engaging new readers, he draws on BreakBeat poetics to help reframe the future. Similarly, for Fatimah Asghar, BreakBeat poetry provides a space for reclaiming power. She challenges the canon in an intergalactic sense with these lines:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{& the other planets? I fucked their orbits} \\
\text{I shook the sky. Chaos like a motherfucker.} \\
\text{Today, I broke your solar system.} \\
\text{Oops. My bad}\end{align*}^{43}
\]

Viewed collectively, these poems represent a mixtape of Hip Hop sensibility, filled with introspection, bravado, and hopefulness.

The break beat is intertwined with poetic form in these rhyming couplets from Kristiana Colón: “This is for the marching bands and girls at quinceñeras / The skater and the writers whose moms are eloteras.”\(^{44}\) We find the break beat blending with poetic form as well in the twenty-four haiku by Chinaka Hodge, including one that she dedicates to Biggie Smalls: “well, we scour the sky / we mourn tough, recite harder / chant you live again.”\(^{45}\) While Hodge gently, defiantly mourns with the break beat in those lines, Tara Betts chooses anaphora instead of rhyme in the following lines but still finds harmony with the break:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If you be the needle}
\end{align*}
\]

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\(^{42}\) Lemon Anderson, in Coval, Marshall, and Lansana, 130.

\(^{43}\) Fatimah Asghar, in Coval, Marshall, and Lansana, 244.

\(^{44}\) Kristiana Colón, in Coval, Marshall, and Lansana, 212.

I be the LP. 
If you be the buffed wall, 
I be the Krylon. 
If you be the backspin, 
I be the break. 
If you be the head nod, 
I be the bassline. 

Betts goes on to write, “if you be Sharpie, / then I be tag.”[47] This visual analogy is vital because one might argue that many poets wish for their poems to be seen. However, by invoking the tag, aka graffiti, Betts suggests that the BreakBeat poets don’t merely want to be seen but want to be seen in a specific way.

The tag, which refers to an individual piece of graffiti art, represents a desire to be seen via a transgressive act. Transgressive like the way Franny Choi rearranges Lil’ Wayne’s “Pussy Monster” by ending with four lines straight of: “pussy, pussy, pussy, pussy, pussy, pussy, pussy.”[48] Transgressive like these introspective questions from the Black Jewish poet, Aaron Samuels: “Said he loves countin’s stacks / is that black? / jewis?”[49] Self-reflectively transgressive like this stanza from José Olivarez: “I loved white girls / as much as I hated / being lonely and Mexican.”[50] Or, painfully transgressive and open to interpretation, like these closing lines from Morgan Parker: “I’m on that grown woman shit before I break / the bottle’s neck I pour a little out: you are fallen.”[51] These poems demonstrate a desire to be seen but on their own terms; for marginalized communities, sometimes there is no other way to be seen.

As the poetry within the BreakBeat tradition continues to grow, it may become the dominant style in contemporary literary publishing because the underlying influence of BreakBeat poetry is Hip Hop, a highly popular verse form. Accordingly, Hip Hop culture is poised to permeate the world of contemporary poetry because, as the selections above from The BreakBeat Poets, New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop demonstrate, HipHop is one of the chief sources of poetic inspiration for an entire generation of poets. Such a phenomenon not only advances the legacy and reach of Hip Hop but also demonstrates that Hip Hop’s text is exceptionally influential to the development of contemporary poetics. Therefore, Hip Hop will likely continue to influence poetry on the page for years to come. However, there is one more way that Hip Hop’s poetry will impact the page.

**Back to the Page (or Device Screen): Lyrics Databases and Hip Hop Books**

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I imagine the poets in future generations, ones who are primarily concerned with the written word, will continue to bring Hip Hop back to the page, as have the writers discussed in the previous section. However, one of the reasons future writers may come back to Hip Hop texts is the prevalence of the lyrics database. Many people are familiar with lyrics databases. They are often used to answer contentious arguments or confusion about a given song lyric. Today, lyrics databases contain more than just song lyrics, from complete novels like Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) to entire plays like Euripides’ *Medea* (431 BCE). The most famous of these sites is the lyric annotation site Genius.com. Some may forget, however, that Genius got its start as a site dedicated exclusively to Hip Hop lyrics, known then as RapGenius.com. The original aim of Rap Genius was simply to transcribe as many Hip Hop lyrics as possible, but the people at Rap Genius were not the first to try this. Regina Bradley in her essay, “Getting Off at the 13th Floor: Rap Genius and Archiving 21st Century Black Cultural Memory,” noted that “the formal work of documenting hip hop’s poetry—rap lyrics—takes place in lyrical archives like OHHLA (Original Hip Hop Lyric Archive) and Rap Genius.”

Rap Genius built on the work of OHHLA with an updated design and was reflective of the twenty-first century Internet, in contrast to OHHLA’s ‘90s chic internet look. Another reasonable interpretation would be that Rap Genius “bit” their entire idea from the OHHLA site. Regardless, Bradley notes that there is one crucial element of Genius.com that sets it apart from many previous lyrics sites, OHHLA included:

Rap Genius extends OHHLA’s model of lyrical archiving by encouraging users to provide social-cultural context to the lyrics via annotations … However, OHHLA’s genesis and documentation of hip hop parallels early stages of the Internet’s popularity. Rap Genius’ founding reflects hip hop, the Internet, and the Web’s maturation as a site of popular culture and race and identity politics.

Hip Hop at its inception was a democratic platform for artists to share their work in publicly accessible spaces. Rap Genius extended this project of democratization by allowing those who view rap lyrics to also offer annotations. These annotations provide a discussion platform for members of the Hip Hop community to discuss the meaning of various references in particular tracks. While only some visitors will create accounts and offer annotations, many others will peruse the lyrics and read these annotations and the conversations they spur. Bradley explains that “situating online hip hop lyrical archives as digital jukeboxes is useful in working through the construction of digital hip hop poetics. Their heavy reliance on crowdsourced transcription and interpretation doubly repurposes hip hop lyrics as public sites of personal and collective remembrance.” The democratic nature of the crowdsourced discussion of Hip Hop texts brings Hip Hop verse back to its public origins.

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52 Bradley, “Getting Off at the 13th Floor,” 88.
53 Jost, “For the Record: RapGenius.Com Stole My S#!T.”
54 Bradley, “Getting Off at the 13th Floor,” 90.
55 Bradley, “Getting Off at the 13th Floor,” 89.
Another unique and democratizing element of lyrics on Genius.com is the presence of many artists themselves, who offer verified commentary on their own lyrics. Current stars like Kendrick Lamar, timeless figures like Snoop Dogg, OG legends like Rakim, and underground luminaries such as Jean Grae all have verified accounts on Genius.com. At Hip Hop’s birth, people could come to a party in a rec room and hear the poetry from their favorite performer. Today, in addition to being able to view these performers on YouTube or Instagram, fans can go to Genius.com and read the artists’ explanations of their own lyrics. In this sense, the lyrics database brings Hip Hop’s poetry back to the level of intimacy of its roots. However, the rise of lyrics databases also demonstrates the value of Hip Hop as a textual art, and, accordingly, these texts will make their way to the page.

**Bringing it to the Page**

With his poetry book *The Rose that Grew from Concrete* (1999), 2Pac cleared the way for the poetry of other rappers to appear in print. *The Rose* was not simply Tupac taking his lyrics and transcribing them; in fact, his work in this book really fits in the milieu of BreakBeat poetry. *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* (1999) recognized the literary value of 2Pac’s work and included one of his poems in the anthology, as did Ishmael Reed in his *From Totems to Hip-Hop* (2003). Among this diverse group of poets, Reed also includes the Hip Hop group, Dead Prez with their track “Police State,” which in many ways prophesied the cries to “defund the police” that swept the nation in 2020.66 Queen Latifah, Jay-Z, and Nas among others are featured in the third edition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*.67 The more that Hip Hop is viewed within the tradition of poetry, the more this publishing trend will continue.

The first published compilation of Hip Hop lyrics was *Rap: The Lyrics* (1992)—which came to be in response to the issue of censorship, a major issue in Hip Hop at the time.68 That project was followed by *Hip-Hop & Rap: Complete Lyrics for 175 Songs* (2003), which makes the argument that Hip Hop verse “when stripped to its core it is essentially nothing more than an incredibly raw form of poetry.”69 But the first collection to attempt to publish lyrics under the explicit guise of creating a poetry anthology was *The Anthology of Rap* (2011) edited by Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois. This book was “the first anthology of lyrics representing rap’s recorded history from the late 1970s to the present in 2010, when the collection was published.”70 The anthology covered Hip Hop across four decades and contains works from most of the significant emcees over that time period. The anthology attempted to show that in “reading rap lyrics, one comes to understand a rap song not simply as a music, but also

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66 Reed, *From Totems to Hip-Hop*, 454.
69 Spence D, “Preface,” iii.
70 *The Anthology of Rap*, xxix.
as a lyric poem.”\(^{61}\) DuBois and Bradley clearly see Hip Hop as part of a new American tradition of poetry and want to archive it as such.

The accuracy of lyrics themselves can also be a source of contention when it comes to the transcribing and publishing of Hip Hop rhymes.\(^{62}\) However, one place where lyrics have found a home and where we can presume they are accurate is in the various books published by the authors themselves. Jay-Z’s Decoded (2011) is a particularly well-known example; part memoir, part selected works, Decoded contains lyrics from some of his most famous songs along with analyses and commentary from the artist himself. Rakim’s Sweat the Technique (2019) is a similar project created by one of the most respected emcees of any period. Then there’s Chuck D, Lyrics of a Rap Revolutionary (2020), a book which follows the complete works model. This one in particular seems to be the type of project that will be repeated as the scions of the genre continue to age. What all three of these projects have in common is that the artists don’t mind having their words printed on the page. It’s clear that they see their art as existing across a range of artistic media and recognize the printed page as yet another proper place for their artistry to reside.

**Outro**

One of the reasons that I believe the study of Hip Hop poetics is so important is because I maintain that Hip Hop is the most significant American poetic form ever invented. This is in addition to being a global poetic form that has been as influential as the sonnet or the haiku. I note the global reach of Hip Hop’s poetry because when I refer to it as an American form, I do not mean to imply that Hip Hop is somehow exclusively American; rather I am acknowledging the scope and influence Hip Hop has had on American culture and that many of its pioneers were born within the parameters of American empire. At the same time, Hip Hop is an African diasporic phenomenon and manifests as a diasporic poetry with reach across the globe. As scholar Charlie D. Hankin notes, Hip Hop’s poetry becomes “a shared poetic project that echoes across geographic and linguistic borders.”\(^{63}\) Therefore, as a global poetic phenomenon, Hip Hop sits at the global crossroads between the dominant and popular cultures, which reach well beyond the borders from which it manifested.

In his essay, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” scholar and social theorist Stuart Hall attempts to mediate our understanding of two poles of cultural discourse—the pull of the dominant culture’s attempt to manipulate popular culture and popular culture’s resistance to this attempted manipulation:

I think there is a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle, by the dominant culture constantly to disorganize and reorganize popular culture...This is the dialectic of cultural struggle. In our times, it goes on

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\(^{62}\) Devlin, “Fact-Check the Rhyme…”

continuously, in the complex lines of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation, which make the field of culture a sort of constant battlefield.\textsuperscript{64}

In many ways I believe that Hip Hop functions as this battlefield that Hall describes. How much is Hip Hop a force of resistance and how much has it been coopted by the powers that be to serve the aims of the powerful? Renowned Hip Hop activist Rosa Clemente explained that without Hip Hop “there would be no Black Lives Matter movement.”\textsuperscript{65} Accordingly, the fact that Hip Hop is still viewed as a force of resistance speaks to both the nature of resistance at the heart of the genre’s birth and its power as a tool for young people to find a voice. We cannot debate the fact that the dominant culture has sought to appropriate Hip Hop for the business of making profits and has privileged the pursuit of those profits over the needs of the community that gave birth to Hip Hop. However, we also must acknowledge that Hip Hop, as an artistic tool of resistance, has continued to serve as a platform for young people of color, particularly those of the African Diaspora, to shout poetry in the studio, at the club, and on the page. And so, to some degree Hip Hop—as a popularly recognized art form of the people and, also, as a for-profit tool of mass production controlled by major corporations—sits at the crux of the “the dialectic of cultural struggle” that Hall describes.

If a poetic form can be as popular as Hip Hop, then Hip Hop’s poetry is situated in the crosshairs of the constantly shifting dialectical pull between the forces of resistance and manipulation. Considering this dialectic, perhaps some people fear that by analyzing Hip Hop as poetry, scholars of Hip Hop poetics are trying to serve the dominant culture’s desire to make Hip Hop fit within the dominant culture’s own preferred cultural forms, or, as critic Kelefa Sanneh puts it, we are “trading up.”\textsuperscript{66} While I am sympathetic to those concerns, I counter that Hip Hop simply is what KRS One said it is: “it’s poetry!”\textsuperscript{67} In fact, it constantly returns to its poetry, in my estimation, because, at the heart of Hip Hop is a poetics of resistance. We can hear this resistance in our headphones, and we can hear it at a live concert, but we also can read this resistance in lyrics databases and hear it on the page because poets have brought Hip Hop verse to the page. Ultimately, I am convinced that poets will continue to bring Hip Hop onto the page, to live performances, and to other media long into the future, leaving a lasting and continuing imprint on American poetry and poetry across the globe.

\textsuperscript{64} Hall, “Notes from Deconstructing the Popular,” 187.
\textsuperscript{65} Flanders, “After 50 Years, What’s Left for Hip Hop to Teach?”
\textsuperscript{66} Sanneh, “Word.”
\textsuperscript{67} KRS One, “Poetry.”
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