



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET
INST FÖR SPRÅK OCH LITTERATURER

ENGLISH

If you don't know, now you know

A study of the educational qualities of hip-hop lyrics

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C-level Linguistic Essay
VT 2012

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Abstract

- Department:** University of Gothenburg, Department of Languages and Literatures, English
- Course:** EN1C03 - English: Advanced Undergraduate Level (linguistic essay) for General Purposes. Bachelor's Degree Essay Project (C-level paper)
- Semester:** Spring 2012
- Title:** *If you don't know, now you know: A study of the educational qualities of hip-hop lyrics*
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- Aim(s):** To explore the qualities of hip-hop as an educational medium based on the close reading and in-depth analysis of its lyrics, using the lyrics to Nas' *N.Y. State of mind* to discuss and exemplify the general traits of language structure as well as historical and cultural content.
- Method(s):** Exploring the qualities of hip-hop lyrics as an educational medium based on the decoding and in-depth analysis of the lyrics to N.Y. State of mind. The analysis is carried out within the conceptual framework of hip-hop discourse.
- Material:** Lyrics to Nas's *N.Y. State of mind*.
- Main results:** The genuinely authentic language, poetic structure and historical/cultural representation in Hip-hop's lyrics resemble the explicit uncensored version of a school textbook. With critical thinking and the right interpretation it can teach us the history and culture of past and present times, from the perspective of its contemporaries, esthetically pleasing our minds with its masterful use of the many forms and shapes of language.
- Keywords:** Hip-hop, education, lyrics, decoding, Nas, *N.Y. State of Mind*.

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1. Introduction

I may read a book that's 200 pages and it may lead to only a 16 bar verse. But within that 16 bars you'll get in a concentrated amount of information, that if you was to take it and expand upon it – like how you get your iPhone and you can open up the picture bigger – that's how my lyrics is; if you open up the picture bigger, you'll see more information and more detailed knowledge and references, that are sure to inspire and spark your mind, yao. (RZA, 2012)

The essence of hip-hop in its purest form is artistic expression, whether it comes from MCing (rapping), DJing, B-boying (breakdancing) or graffiti. The essence of rap is that of poetry. Hip-hop is the movement born out of a certain culture in which the element of rap with the components of linguistic and literal (lyrical) exhibition, historic recollection (storytelling) and cultural representation come together as an artistic form densely rich in the knowledge and creativity of the man or woman behind the words – the MC (also known as *emcee* or *rapper*).

With stories authentically recited or fabricated from the MC's mind, in his own words, rap is the outlet and resort for people around the world. The extensively varied content can range from boasting or bragging to stories shrouded in complex metaphor and authentic life tales. Hip-hop in itself is as rich as the men and women who tell its stories; to those who keep an open mind and ignore the common misconception of rap as gangster music – which is just one of its many subgenres – there will always be certain songs, albums or artists which one can relate to and/or find enjoyment in.

With its explicit nature hip-hop in its many forms portrays the life and times of its individual surroundings, at its best vividly enough to tell the story of an entire generation. One can pick up a 90's East Coast album and learn the very essence of life in the New York projects not told by politicians or historians but in the very voice of its contemporaries. The same goes for Southern rappers reciting their cultural experiences living in Atlanta with its traditions and effects of racism, or the gangsta rap genre of the West Coast with its often provoking stories of street life in California.

Granted that most of the well-known stories in hip-hop are told about these essential parts of the movement in America, all giving birth to their respective forms and styles, the range of stories extends far beyond the boundaries of the US. People throughout the world speak for their peoples and spread their words in their rhymes, from Europe to Asia to the Caribbean and back.

The study of hip-hop's lyrics has long been in the works, much due to the fact that many MCs put great effort into their lyrical content which can happen to get lost in the mix (of beat

and flow). The most lyrically skilled MCs lace their lyrics so tight with metaphorical images, subtle references and hidden meanings that to completely grasp the intricacies of the MC's words a closer examination is necessary. Hip-hop lyrics lend themselves well to the page, much like classic poetry, the actual fact being that the two are not all too different in form and function; the cornerstones of poetry as far as wordplay and analogies in set structures and schemes become clearly apparent in rap transcribed on the page.

Many MCs strive to teach the youth, preach their knowledge and values, while others entertain, riddle, uplift or explain the uncensored realities of a hard-knock life, within all of these various aspects of hip-hop and rap there is always something to gain. Looking deeper into the vaults of information ready to be tapped, the realization to every hip-hop head is that of the lyrics being a verbal or literal key to a culture. Bearing this in mind a question arises: Can the great works of hip-hop be used to educate people about the world we live in, and at the same time reveal the intricacies of a language?

1.1. Aim

The aim of this study is to explore the qualities of hip-hop as an educational medium based on the decoding and in-depth analysis of its lyrics, using the lyrics to Nas's *N.Y. State of mind* (1994) to discuss and exemplify the main traits of language structure in hip-hop, as well as historical and cultural content.

1.2. The scholastic adaptation

Although there is no previous academic research with an education-oriented approach similar to this study, studies of hip-hop and rap in various academic fields is far from a new phenomenon; the Georgetown University curriculum currently offers *SOCI-124-01, Sociology of Hip-Hop - Urban Theodicy of Jay-Z* with Michael Eric Dyson, sociology professor, Princeton Ph.D., and author of several books reflecting hip-hop's impact on society, such as *Know what I mean? Reflections on hip hop* and *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic* among others. The course centers on the sociological study of Jay-Z's book *Decoded* – in which Jay-Z himself explains the intricacies of the lyrics to his most important songs – “...dealing with everything that's important in a sociology class: race, gender, ethnicity, class, economic inequality, social injustice” (Richards, 2011).

2. Method and material

2.1. Method

This study examines the qualities of hip-hop lyrics as an educational medium by means of decoding and in-depth analysis of the lyrics to *N.Y. State of mind*. The analysis is carried out within the conceptual framework of hip-hop discourse. The results are divided – according to hip-hop’s conventions – into two major groups; Structure and Content, to explore its legitimacy in the field of education. By breaking the lyrics down line by line, taking elements of language-structural, historical and cultural relevance in a general sense into consideration, the lyrics can provide evidence of great value for educational purposes.

By explaining the principles of rap – the structure of rhymes, wordplay and literary devices, content and storytelling – as well as its significance as a historical/cultural medium, and applying these to the chosen lyric, we can discuss the educational qualities in the lyrics of hip-hop.

It should be noted that to unleash the full potential of close readings of lyrics choosing the right song is crucial. In principle, any song will suffice, as there is to some extent a given amount of the previously mentioned categories in all lyrics. On the other hand, some are better suited for examination; the classic tracks from the golden age are critically acclaimed as the best examples of hip-hop in terms of lyrics and content, and therefore more satisfactory in terms of information, which justifies *N.Y. State of Mind* as the choice of lyric for analysis in this study. However, a recent lyric could also be a useful target for analysis, as the outcome is very much dependent on the objective, i.e. the choice of lyrics should be dictated by the educational requirements. Collections of influential hip-hop lyrics such as *The Anthology of Rap* (Bradley & DuBois, 2010) provide a variety of good lyrics to choose from.

2.2. Nas – *N.Y. State of Mind*

On *N.Y. state of mind*, which actually is himself expressing why things look negative to him, why he doesn’t think he’ll see tomorrow, which is what most of, yaknow, young kids think, that they ain’t going to see tomorrow, which is why they life live for just that day. (“ILLMATIC” Album Release Press Kit, 1994)

Growing up in the Queensbridge projects of Queens, NY, Nasir “Nas” Jones had experienced more realities of a hard-knock life than most adolescents, between dropping out of school at the age of 14, his dad leaving him and witnessing the death of one of his best friends at 18.

Making his way onto the scene, Nas worked hard to get one shot at the music industry, working 20 years of life experience into 10 tracks, on one album (VH1, 2005).

[The picture on my album cover] is me when I was 7 years old. That was the year I started to acknowledge everything [around me]. That's the year everything set off. That's the year I started seeing the future for myself and doing what was right. The ghetto makes you think. The world is ours. I used to think I couldn't leave my projects. I used to think if I left, if anything happened to me, I thought it would be no justice or I would be just a dead slave or something. The projects used to be my world until I educated myself to see there's more out there. (MTV, 2007)

The release of *Illmatic* in 1994 changed hip-hop lyrically. At an age of 20 Nas brought stories so vivid with imagery and rhymes so dense with wordplay that no one could deny the fact of a classic in the making; the streets were buzzing as all major hip-hop magazines placed Nas among the greats, receiving a five 'mic' review in *The Source* (Shortie, 1994):

The term "hip-hop classic" is not one we at the Source take lightly, but Nas is no lightweight. A product of the infamous Queensbridge Housing Projects, this is an MC injecting intelligence, creativity and soul back into hip-hop. Nas captures poetic grasp he takes your mind deep into the essence of surviving, maintaining and dealing with life in a vicious society. (Shecter, 1994)

Until this day, *Illmatic* still represents the epitome of hip-hop and rap. Each one of the ten tracks on *Illmatic* describing Nas's life represents a part of New York project life, but among these pieces of lyrical autobiography there is one that captures the essence and history of a culture: *N.Y. State of Mind* (see Appendix 1; see also Line Breakdown Appendix 2) is the authentic cultural inner city history told by a young man trying to make something out of his life.

"They called him the Prophet." (Markman, 2009)

3. Results

3.1. Structure

3.1.1. Rap Language

Each poet creates his own language from that which he finds around him ... thus if these poets find the language of Shakespeare or Racine inadequate to reach their own peoples, then the other choice is to re-create their original language to the point where they may express their complex emotions. (Ellison, 1994, p.29)

The meaning and character of hip-hop lyrics rests on the words, every MC contributing their own lingo; whether it is a regional accent, a certain type of slang or a totally different language, the MC represents his or her surroundings and cultures in their way with words. A culture and means of expression growing out of hard times naturally calls for a language that can portray the reality of its environment: "A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey," (Baldwin, 1979).

When Nas opens *N.Y. State of Mind* (Appendix 1, line 1-2) there is no sugarcoating, just the raw nature and pure essence of a 19 year old adolescent man speaking a language reflecting his environment and visions of the world. A common and robust result in linguistic research is that language production and variation is not only linked to style, but also closely correlated to social variables such as gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status. In *language in Society, An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (2000) Suzanne Romaine summarizes that:

It has been known for some time that differences in language are tied to social class. In the 1950s, for example, it was suggested that certain lexical and phonological differences in English could be classified as U (upper class) or non-U (lower class), e.g. *serviette* (non-U) v. *table-napkin* (U), to take what was then one of the best known of all linguistic class-indicators of England.

Even though Romaine was referring to class-indicators in England we can extend the tendencies in language differences to Nas's surroundings. The characteristic vocabulary he exhibits leaves his language authentic and imagistic; as we read the lines above we immediately come to grips with the hostility and dangerous nature of the New York projects during the 90's.

Not only did hip-hop create its own new ways of expression, the way the MCs conveyed their language and their stories familiarized the cultural movement; or as Method Man of the

Wu-Tang Clan put it in the documentary *The Art of 16 Bars*: “[The MCs] became leaders in the music revolution that brought the voice and sound of urban black youth to mainstream America” (Kennedy & Spirer, 2005).

The uncensored generic voice of urban America went from underground status to household name, represented to the fullest degree in the lyrics of its modern day vernacular poets. The original language and voice of hip-hop is that of the African-American culture. In connection with forms of musical expression such as jazz and blues, the foundation of hip-hop is the voice of survival, created by a people. The birthright lies with the originators. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge the fact that there is no one true language of hip hop – every region and nation stands out with its own variety representing culture and traditions; language is the most important tool for an MC’s identification with his culture.

Hailing from Queens, the character of Nas’s slang and wording even differs from the other boroughs within New York. However, the structure and grammar is essentially the same; coming together under the term Ebonics – African American Vernacular English – coined by Dr. Robert Williams in 1973 as a fusion of the words ebony and phonics, and later defined in his work *Ebonics: The true Language of Black Folks* as:

...linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendant of African origin. (Williams, 1975)

We can see features of Ebonics in Nas’s lyrics (Appendix 1, line 27-28): the invariant use of *be* (*high as I be*), and the use of *ain’t* indicating negatives (*game ain’t the same*). The rules and structures of African American English in all its complexity are described in full detail in Labov (1972).

Even though hip-hop contains an immense catalog of cultural and regional language variations, the hip-hop culture retains its original lingo; slang and vocabulary maintain essence and originality. With its true home on the streets, slang runs deep in MCs vocabularies – in line 10 of *N.Y. State of Mind* (see Appendix 1) Nas not only gets to the point of his reputation being known whether he is played on the radio or not, he conveys the message in a way that connects him to his people. Later on Nas passes on some advice (Appendix 1, line 73) that speaks to the inaugurated in a way more vivid than a simple reminder to be careful with Nas’s cassette tape. The MC’s words in themselves have just as strong cultural ties as the content they carry (Edwards, 2009, p. 47).

MCs use their language for what Samy Alim terms the “strategic construction of a street conscious identity,” – the most effective way of formatting their content to relate to a certain audience (Alim, 2006, p.121).

A misconception when it comes to the language of hip-hop is that it is only that of the African American community. Even though the movement rose out of that very culture “Hip-hop and rap cannot be viewed simply as an expression of African American culture; it has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world,” writes Mitchell (2001). Houston MC Devin the Dude provides his take on the subject in *How to Rap: The Art and Science of the Hip-Hop MC*:

To each his own—that’s what makes rap so incredible, man. There’s so many different kinds of raps and styles and everything, and some people feel that their life is not peaches and cream and it’s hard on the streets and the world is tough and they feel that they should kinda reflect that in their music. (Edwards, 2009, p. 11)

3.1.2. Book of Rhymes

I start to think and then I sink
into the paper like I was ink,
when I’m writing I’m trapped in between the line,
I escape when I finish the rhyme (Rakim, 1987)

The structure in rap is very similar to that of poetry, exchanging stanzas for bars – the line contained within a four-beat measure – but keeping the harmony in terms of sounds and shapes. The words in rap hold the content, arguably more so than poetry, as the first base of rap is esthetics, i.e. to sound good vocally, more emphasis is put on flow to deliver the content. When MCs talk about flow they concern rhyme schemes and patterns, the way that the lyrics are woven into the beat or delivered a cappella. Even though the beat-driven element is lost on the page we can still see these structures clearly, often clearer than on the beat, as every bar can be inspected closely without being lost in the pace of the MCs flow (Bradley & DuBois, 2010, p.xxx-xlvii).

The MC’s poetic toolbox shares many of the same basic instruments as the literary poet’s, but it also includes others specifically suited to the demands of oral expression. These include copious use of rhyme, both as a mnemonic device and as a form of rhythmic pleasure; as well as poetic tropes that rely upon sonic identity, like homonyms and puns. (Bradley, 2009, p.xvii-xviii)

Rhyme types

Perfect Rhyme (noun): Rhyme in which the final accented vowel and all succeeding consonants or syllables are identical, while the preceding consonants are different. (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2012)

The first thing we notice in rap is what words the MCs rhyme. The MC himself is concerned with the keeping the rhyme fresh – avoiding clichés and overused rhymes.

Perfect rhymes (or end-rhymes) are easy to detect and to use, though very limited as there are only so many perfect matches. Nas uses one such pair: “**block – knocked**” (Appendix 1, line 34).

Slant Rhyme (noun): A partial or imperfect rhyme, often using assonance or consonance only. Also called half rhyme, near rhyme, oblique rhyme, and off rhyme. (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2012)

When options for perfect rhymes run out, slant rhymes open up an ocean of alternatives for MCs to get creative with variations; Assonance, vowel sound rhymes (**rock – pots**, Appendix 1, line 36-37), Consonance, words with the same consonant sound but different vowel sounds (**hot - hit**) or words close enough in sound to function as rhymes without any vowel matches (**dangerous – hostages**, Appendix 1, line 66-67).

Another option for achieving rhyming coherency is alliteration – the same letter or sound linked together in the beginning of words: (**legal luxury life**, Appendix 1, line 63) (Harrison & Rappaport, 2006, p.22-49; Bradley, 2009, p.49-83)

Rhyme schemes

The most common rhyme scheme is the two bar pattern, known as a couplet. In the example below Nas links the two bars together with end rhymes, creating a visual connection:

1) So hold your stash 'til the coke price **drop**

I know this crackhead who said she gotta smoke nice **rock** (Appendix 1, line 35-36)

A simple variety that gives a higher density of rhymes is the single-liner. Here he connects two rhymes inside one bar, moving on to pick up another structure in the following bar:

2) Holding a **M-16**, see, with the **pen I'm extreme** (Appendix 1, line 7)

The multi-liner connects three or more bars in rhyme, and as there are no limits to the creative freedom when writing lyrics some MCs can keep going on the same rhyming sounds throughout whole verses (Edwards, 2009, p.95-103)

- 3) There was a snitch on the **block** getting niggas **knocked**
So hold your stash 'til the coke price **drop**
I know this crackhead who said she gotta smoke nice **rock**
And if it's good she'll bring ya customers in measuring **pots** (Appendix 1, line 34-37)

Flow

The basic rhyme is monosyllabic – a single syllable word – put at the end of a bar to note the stop in a four beat measure. What sets skillful MCs apart from the rest is flow; the combined use of dynamic rhyme schemes and various rhyme types, together with the frequency of internal and multisyllabic rhymes. Nas and the rest of the greats pack their bars with rhymes:

- 4) So hold your *stash 'til* the **coke price drop**
I know this *crackhead* who said she gotta **smoke nice rock** (Appendix 1, line 35-36)

Nas has two groups of internal rhymes in this couplet, the first mono- and the second multisyllabic, both slanted rhymes. The pair at the end is a big multi, with the first two syllables being perfect- and the last a slanted rhyme. What is so brilliant in this case, is that in between all of the wild rhyming he actually comes through to make perfect sense (Harrison & Rappaport, 2006, p.22-49; Edwards, 2009, p.81-91).

3.1.3. Liquid Swords (literary devices)

Controversy and media attention followed the MCs, as they grew in fame, creating a fearful, American public left scratching its head as to why the youth were drawn to this music form, but for exponents of rap there was no question why this phenomenon had occurred; the content of the rhymes and technique of spitting those rhymes is the skill and artistry that the MC displays in his work and this is what has drawn so many people to this music. (Kennedy & Spirer, 2005)

With the right language, wording and presentation, content will present itself to the listener or reader, but MCs usually tend to take their lyrics a step further by coding their messages.

Hidden beneath layers of analogies laced with imagery, either obvious or subtle, we get the actual meaning as intended by the MC. Most lyrics need to be thoroughly deciphered to get to this point – one of the complex tasks in interpreting hip-hop lyrics.

MCs use literary devices in the same way as literary poets; imagery, figures of speech and wordplay. Wordplay keeps expressions from getting stale and adds a fresh twist to old concepts, turning everyday normality into a new phenomenon. With a few reoccurring methods MC's pursue the ultimate goal of hip-hop: Originality.

Similies

A simile is a direct comparison between two distinctly different things, usually using like or as to connect them. (Bradley, 2009, p.93)

By transferring the value or character of one thing (the *vehicle*) to another (the **tenor**) the MC urges us to view the similarities between the two in a new light. Nas raps:

5) ...each **block** is like *a maze*

Full of black rats trapped, plus the Island is packed (Appendix 1, line 57-58)

By directly comparing his block to a maze holding African-Americans – compared to black rats – trapped, Nas paints a vivid picture of a harsh reality. Even though we know that the block is not really a maze, neither the African-Americans rats, we can see unexpected similarities allowing the comparison to function.

Metaphors

You know those lines that make your jaw drop? Those lines that are so smart you've got to rewind the track and listen to them again just to understand the intricacies? Most of those lines feature metaphors that involve wordplay. (Harrison & Rappaport, 2006, p.64)

The simile compares one thing to another, but the metaphor insists that the two are the same, making a direct connection. Nas raps:

6) My rhymin is a vitamin, held without a capsule (Appendix 1, line 71)

Nas says that his rhymes are in the pure form, stating that his rhyming is indeed a vitamin, not *like* one. The vitamin metaphor is used to represent his rhymes. This, in contrast to the simile, has us arrive to the point faster; leaving no room for interpretation, only the straight fact (Bradley, 2009, p.92-96; Edwards, 2009, p.44-46).

Metaphors might be the most creative devices in rap. Some MCs leave the format of a simple comparison to apply metaphors to whole songs, also known as a conceit. One of the most famous examples of an entire song built on a single metaphor is Common's *I used to love H.E.R.* (1994); the story about a woman losing her ways, representing the evolution of hip-hop into the mainstream.

Wordplay

In addition to analogies rap thrives on wordplay. Twists and turns of words give MCs the possibility of implementing dual meanings in their lyrics. Nas raps:

7) Now, bullet holes left in my **peepholes** (Appendix 1, line 8)

The obvious meaning is his front door having been shot at, but as we look closer we detect the homonymous (similarity in sound) quality in peepholes with another word: peoples. This is called a pun – play on ambiguity and similarity of words – in this case creating another possible meaning: Nas's friends have been shot as well (sadly, this is an actual fact).

Lastly, the most impressive form of wordplay is the double (or dual) entendre; French for double meaning or to hear double. MCs pack these in their raps with the help of puns, ambiguity, multiple meanings or contextual relations between words. Nas masters the double entendre:

8) So now I'm jetting to the building lobby

And it was *fulla children*, probably–**couldn't see as high as I be**

(Appendix 1, line 26-27)

The first obvious interpretation is that Nas enters the lobby of a project building in an intoxicated state, oblivious to his surroundings, not being able to tell whether it was full of kids or not. The words probably and **high** carry the duality, and by close observation we can note the lyrical flip: The place *was* full of children, but they were all hiding down on the

ground as Nas – standing up tall – entered the building, leaving the kids only seeing legs passing by as he was probably, literally too **high** up for them to see him.

9) Laughing at **baseheads** trying to sell some *broken amps* (Appendix 1, line 13)

Here the various meanings of **baseheads** hold the ambiguity, as the people trying to sell the broken amplifiers might be either drug addicts or sound junkies, possibly both. The message in this line is coded to only be noticeable to a certain group of people – those familiar with the slang and aware of the possible interpretations of the words. The payoff hidden inside the lines makes decoding hip-hop lyrics rewarding.

3.2. Content

3.2.1. The Art of Storytelling

This is what language, rhymes and wordplay all adds up to. Think of all the structural parts of rap as the vehicle for the content to arrive; language is its body, rhymes its wheels and wordplay its fuel, all necessary to get the content to the final destination. The structure captures the interest but the message is what makes us stay, or as Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest reflected:

Your stuff has to have substance. It's just like seeing a handsome man with a suit or a pretty girl with a dress—if it's appealing to the eye, but once you talk to them, if there's nothing inside, then it's kinda like, whatever. (Edwards, 2009, p.41)

Content in hip-hop is endless; we have the realists, the fictionists and the surrealists all under one roof. Concepts range from humoristic, casual boasting (so-called *braggadocio*) to the most detailed plots, themes and storylines. Rap encompasses everything, truth as much as fantasy. MCs play their part as narrators or fabricators – telling tales from their own or someone else's life, making up or taking on characters and outside personas to tell their stories. We have love stories, life lessons, and action adventures alongside philosophers, historians and political revolutionists (Harrison & Rappaport, 2006, p.191-198; Bradley, 2009, p.158; Edwards, 2009, p.3-19).

Concepts outline lyrics in hip-hop, structuring rhymes around the theme whether it is a simple boasting track or an entire story complete with plot, setting and characters.

It is not all story rap though, battle and boasting rhymes that focus more on structure are as common as abstract concepts or happy, humoristic party tracks. We even see these blend, creating lyrics that walk the line between the real and the surreal (Edwards, 2009, p.23-40).

In the cinematic biography on the life of Christopher Wallace, also known as the Notorious B.I.G., released in 2009 his mother Voletta Wallace narrates the final scene in a way that sums up the narrative side of hip-hop:

My son, Christopher Wallace, told stories. Some of them were funny, some of them were sad, some of them were violent, but people listened. (Barrow et al, 2009)

The storytelling side of hip-hop is certainly the most enticing, as a product of the African-American art of *signifying* – the recitation of historical stories in a format made to capture the audience. Hip-hop narration is as multifaceted as the patterns in literature – but perhaps more accurately compared to a movie, where the beat sets the scene and the MC tells the story. Patterns follow the lines of traditional story writing, occasionally twisting and turning the outline to fit certain formats.

Some MCs start from the top letting their stories run chronologically, while others mix it up with different characters and changes of perspective between verses. The piecing together of images related to the concept – that in combination make up an entity – is another setup, in which some MCs like to intertwine shorter, stream of consciousness-like stories inside concepts to paint a more vivid picture. Nas follows the latter form, when after going back and forth with shifting imagery he breaks into a stream of consciousness narrative carried from line 15 to 28 (Appendix 1).

The voice in rap is commonly that of second-person narration – where the MC addresses the audience – used in *braggadocios* and battle rhymes, or third-person dramatic employed when the MC uses the voice of a character or persona. However, the story above is told by Nas himself, in the first person. This form is less common in rap but creates a very vivid story, suitable for the type of life reflections that Nas's rhymes contain (Bradley, 2009, p.161-166).

Characters play a big part in hip-hop, allowing the MC to take on any form and shape, and create whatever personas needed to tell his stories. It is not unusual for MCs to have multiple personas to extend the range outside the boundaries of the real person; the gangsta rap subgenre is often accused of having negative effect on youth, much due to the fact that the characters or personas created by MCs like Ice Cube and Tupac are so life-like, and that

people cannot distinguish between what is reality and what is fiction. (Bradley & DuBois, 2010, p.xxx, xxxvi)

Nas's daydream imagining how he would live the life of a king-pin (Appendix 1, line 45-51) is a perfect example of the twists and turns of rap story patterns; flipping back and forth between reality, dream and fabricated realism. First, he is in his own mind declaring the story about to begin. Secondly he takes us through the dream, portrayed vividly enough to seem real, eventually stopping the narration to come into what appears to be a description of himself. This is where confusion in interpretation generally arises; what actually happens here is Nas going into character, portraying the reality of the average African-American in his projects.

Hip-hop's stories in all their forms need to be treated with a good dose of critical thinking, which will not only tell real apart from fabricated, but unlock a whole new dimension in the stories. It can – together with decoding of the lyrics – let us know when Nas opens up to show us a part of his life, when he takes the role of the people in the projects, and when he goes into character to let us follow him on a mind travel. At its best the rhymes will come to life in your mind and let you see the world through someone else's eyes.

3.2.2. In My Lifetime (Explicit history)

I believe that if you're teaching history
Filled with straight up facts no mystery
Teach the student what needs to be taught
Cause Black and White kids both take shorts
When one doesn't know about the other ones' culture
Ignorance swoops down like a vulture
(Boogie Down Productions, 1989)

When Boogie Down Productions' MC KRS-One – also known as “the Teacher” – starts the second verse of *You Must Learn* with these lyrics, then going on to continue rhyming another 18 lines of straight historical facts, he is well aware of how he is proving the informative qualities of hip-hop. He knows its capacities and communicative powers, using these to speak out on the miseducation of youth in American schools. Taking a stand through such a diverse medium his message will reach the entire hip-hop world and beyond, a feat that would never have been possible for an African-American from the Bronx in the 80's, without the existence of hip-hop. Dyson (2007) goes deep into this discussion:

...hip hop music is important precisely because it sheds light on contemporary politics, history, and race. At its best, hip hop gives voice to marginal black youth we are not used to hearing from on such topics (Dyson, 2007, p.xvi).

Dyson's argument resembles that of KRS-One; hip-hop has a justified place in popular culture, but should be receiving a much larger recognition as a viable medium of informative expression. There is no tool better suited for exploring the history of the hip-hop world than the authentic recollections from the life and the times of its contemporaries.

Deriving from a much older form of historical preservation, rap is a postmodern form of the African "griot" tradition – the art of musical/lingual performance oriented oral narrative (Alim, 2005). The modern day form has evolved with the times, into what Chuck D of Public Enemy back in 1988 described as "the CNN of the Black community" (Perry, 2009).

When colleges and universities begin to study *Illmatic*, their [professors] said listen to this album because you can't find this in the textbook," Nas said during an interview at Quad Studios in New York. "You can't find this [info] anywhere else. This is the ugly truth. This is what was happening in America during the '90s. (Nas: The ugly truth of a lyrical genius, 2010)

In his characteristic elegant simplicity Nas defined the importance of hip-hop as a historical medium, and instead of referring to *Illmatic* in its entirety he could just as well have recited the first lines from *N.Y. State of Mind* (Appendix 1, line 1-2). The rhymes are in the rawest form, yet hold so much historical significance; where imposters and outsiders were killed daily. He speaks of streets realities with a voice uncensored by authorities and unedited by historians. As we move on through the lines almost every other bar has some degree of historical significance, starting at line 28 through to 32 (Appendix 1) Nas takes take us on an even more vivid journey into the explicit reality of the dungeons. The portrayal of young kids in gangs, running the streets where the people live – and die – by the gun is pressingly realistic, the picture is painted in a way so genuine that it becomes evident that the fabric of the rhyme has been drawn from Nas's personal experiences. Only Nas and a handful other MCs can do what he did on *Illmatic* – keep it real to the point where the lyrics resemble an educational textbook written in rhyme.

One of the things is, he talks about situations that not just he's living, also that other black youth can relate to because they are living it and they can feel it from, you know, what he expressed. ("ILLMATIC" Album Release Press Kit, 1994)

3.2.3. Lifestylez ov da Poor & Dangerous (Cultural references)

With its significance in historical recollection and its storytelling qualities, rap as the carrier of the message has spread the culture of hip-hop all over the world – the dead pavement of the streets in cities from the US to Africa, Europe, and Asia has been brought to life with what James Spady termed the “dynamic and constant sense of being alive in a hip-hop, rap-conscious, reality-based world (Spady, 1991, p.407; Alim, 2005).

In relation to what both Spady and Alim stated, we realize that Nas reminiscing over his times sitting in a project stairway catching a buzz on Brandy, playing dice games on the corner and seeing the humor in the reality of drug addicts trying to finance their habits (Appendix 1, line 11-13) is not only the reflection of one man’s past, but the descriptions of a culture lived by him and his contemporaries. What Nas does with *N.Y. State of Mind* in its entirety is to piece together images of the cultural and moral attitudes of his city, to form an accurate representation of the beauty, the flaws and fallacies, the good and the bad of a life in a New York project.

At their best, these rappers are like ethnographers. You know, searching anthropologists trying to figure out the folk ways and the moral ways of the culture that they emerge from, and their spitting truth for those, witnessing for those who are left behind. (Dyson, 2007)

Coming from a culture with such emphasis on representation and keeping it real MC’s are expected to carry the torch for their people, to shed light on the issues that have been consciously avoided or overlooked by society at large. The movement of conscious hip-hop has its sole focus on this – politics and socio-cultural issues ride the rhymes of voices rarely heard in the debates of mainstream society. Defined by Michael Eric Dyson as an edifying art form in an interview for *BigThink.com* (2008), the conscious side of hip-hop provokes thought with its important and insightful reflections from the uncensored reality of a minority.

I guess hip-hop represents society in general and America, the best and worst of it. You’re not going to change things in hip-hop if you don’t change things in the world. Anything you find in hip-hop, you’re going to find in society, especially this American society. (Lord Jamar, Brand Nubian – Edwards, 2009, p.11)

Lord Jamar’s statement signifies how hip-hop represents the complete human experience. When Nas raps line 61 to 63 (Appendix 1) he is not daydreaming as much as concretizing the street dweller’s version of the American Dream, in its words glamorized but represented in the blunt, unfortunate truth.

The extensive variety in content and regional stylistics in hip-hop concerns itself with different issues and topics depending on the heritage and situation of each MC. No matter where you are in the world, MC's will speak on their culture from a personal, regional perspective, even though hip-hop as a culture of expression stays the same. The culture defines the art as much as it represents the culture of its people, or as Spady stated in *Ima Put My Thing Down*:

Hip hop is preeminently a cultural free space. It's transformatory and emancipatory powers are evident each time you see a young blood locked to the music being transmitted through the earphone. They exist in a community of expressive rebellion, in states of always always, altering what has traditionally been the culture of the ruling class. (Spady, 1993, p.95-96)

4. Discussion

The following discussion is based on the survey of structure and content in rap, presented in the results section, to show the educational qualities of hip-hop's lyrics portrayed in the form of a general overview.

"If you don't mind, please sign this before you go."

I was moved by his heartfelt compliments. He was eloquent proof that not everyone in his generation is illiterate, destructive, and materialistic. We weren't in school, and he wasn't reading my book for extra credit. Like the best students, he read for passion, and for the pleasure and pursuit of intellectual stimulation. He read because he wanted to better understand his life, his world, and why this music mattered to him the way it did. He wanted to find inspired ideas to explain his feelings. (Dyson, 2007, p.xiv)

The quote above is Dyson's own recollection of his encounter with a young African American at an airport security control. It signifies the fact that no matter how we are trying to validate the teaching of children and youth, moments like this stand as the ultimate goal – the independent, inspired desire for the pursuit of knowledge. The way there is long and has many paths, but is still so simple in theory:

We provide them with – we don't indoctrinate them – we provide them with the skills and tools necessary to unpack, interrogate, explore and explain this, again, significant cultural development... (Pinn & Freeman, 2011)

Pinn was referring to Hip-hop when he made this statement in an interview featuring himself and Bernard Freeman (Bun B) discussing Rice University's course on religion and hip-hop.

To some, the very thought of incorporating hip-hop into education causes outrage, while others thrive in its range and variety.

When we discuss the value of the use of hip-hop lyrics as legitimate educational material the determining arguments should be grounded in its relevance in the four distinct factors explained throughout the results section:

- Real world language representation
- Structural similarity to poetry
- Authenticity in historical and cultural recollection
- Basis for critical thinking

Real world language representation

The degree of authenticity of language in hip-hop has its educative quality in contributing a rich source of genuine stylistic and dialectal/accentual language variations representative of each of its cultures and regions.

The language of hip-hop is that of the world; diversity ranges from America to Africa, Asia to Europe, and each language represents its regional and cultural features. Through the use of authentic language samples such as these lyrics students are communicating their thoughts and ideas through real facts, interacting with people all over the world, which will leave them with greater language skills and an improved sense of contextualized communication. Student exposure to real world language in its natural form, communicated through a natural medium, can bring significant improvement of communicative language skills (Skolverket, 2004, p. 230).

The MC in hip-hop uses the language as a tool for justifying the content, in several cases leading to profanity and explicit language. This is a fact that should be taken in relation to the context, as it with incorrect interpretation can offend just as much as it – with the necessary teacher supervision – can intensify the language experience.

Structural proximity to poetry

Rap is rhythm and poetry, cuts create sound effects
(Rakim, 1988)

The rap element of hip-hop is the modern day, authentic, relatable, musical poetry of popular culture. Rakim's line breaks down the dual dimensional structure perfectly. Each part is significant in its own right, but together they form an indisputable unity of meaning and melody.

The poetic traits of hip-hop lie in the structure of rap and the way it shapes its content, a relationship gone into in great detail by Adam Bradley in *Book of Rhymes*, in which he – through analysis of poetic traditions and hip-hop lyrics – formulated a list of rap's characteristics defining its relationship to poetry. The title of the list is a play on the Notorious B.I.G.'s underground classic *Ten Crack Commandments*.

The Ten Rap Commandments of Poetry

1. Rap Thrives on Rhythm, Never on Monotony
 2. Rhyme Is Rap's Reason for Being
 3. Rappers Say New Things in Old Ways and Old Things in New Ways
 4. Rap Values Clarity
 5. Verbal Dexterity Is the Best Measure of a Rapper's Virtuosity
 6. Voice Matters in Rap
 7. Thematic Development Is Essential in Shaping Rap's Lyrical Content
 8. Rap Is No Joke, But It Can Definitely Be Funny
 9. Rap Can Be High Concept or Low Concept, But It's Never No Concept
 10. Rap Relies on Originality and Recycling, All at Once
- (Bradley, 2009, p.207-213)

Regardless of topic, the most creative and lyrically skillful MC's always have a way of twisting words and stories in a way that makes the old seem fresh or turns the common into a rarity. Rap as a storytelling medium is highly visual, deploying extensive plots, themes, characters and fabricated personas. The structural stylistics, literary and rhythmic devices as well as analogies and imagery lends itself well to examination. Its way of placing focus on detail and concepts all at once gives the study of rap in a poetic, literary sense great educational value.

Authenticity in historical and cultural recollection

The prerequisite for success is stimulating yet intricate and visually rich, authentic material. One of the main advantages of hip-hop in an educational context is the way the words of the MC allows the audience to see the world through the eyes of someone else, through his/her own experiences, or a story told from the perspective of someone completely different.

Hip-hop has a constant focus on keeping it real when it comes to content. Its lyrics become viable as informative sources for historical and cultural study in this authenticity, encompassing all of life's experiences portrayed in the uncensored voice of people all over the world, reflecting their respective realities.

In his revolutionary educational philosophy presented in *The Essential 55* Clark said: "...life is all about experiences, the ones you make for yourself and the ones you make for others" (Clark, 2004, p.204). Students need educative experiences in the form of relatable formats and formulations that allow them to get acquainted with the past. Hip-hop offers this as well as the opportunity to culturally engage their minds.

It's clear to me that the students see the value of this sort of investigation, students are looking for ways to critically engage their world, to critically engage the cultural production that they claimed. (Pinn & Freeman, 2011)

Basis for critical thinking

Hip-hop is criticized for its explicit ways of presenting offensive material, but the actual fact stated by Dyson is that "...some of the sharpest criticism comes from within hip hop's [own] borders" (Dyson, 2007, p.xxiv). They say that you should not judge a book by its cover; the same goes for rap: one should not judge its message and culture by the first glance at its lyrics.

The adaptation of hip-hop lyrics – which to a great extent contain explicit, uncensored material – as learner material has to be taken in relation to the purpose of the image portrayed in the lyrics. Out of context, words of profanity can have a purely offensive effect, whereas the same words, in a context where a certain manner of usage or rhetoric dictates a clear purpose for the use of these words, will justify the profanity.

Studying hip-hop's lyrics requires a solid dose of critical thinking, which the systematic decoding – combined with the right guidelines from teachers – can help promote. Not rushing to conclusions, but using an approach of critical examination will bring out the context of lines from songs that have the power to stimulate and educate.

5. Conclusion

Hip-hop's lyrics interpreted in the right way resemble the explicit uncensored version of a school textbook, ready to teach us the history and culture of past and present times from the

perspective of its contemporaries, at the same time enticing our minds with its masterful use of language. Decoding its lyrics is a stimulating means of linguistic, literal, historical and cultural examination of modern poetics that can bring out the similarities between past and contemporary issues, letting us tap into the life of others while opening up our minds to the world's increasing multiculturalism. Hip-hop's extensive catalog offers a wide range of content and stylistic, regional variations presenting almost endless possibilities for educational adaptation.

On the other hand, it can also be an interesting way of deepening ones understanding of the people living the hip-hop culture. RZA said it best:

What I mean by lyric capacity, meaning that if you can take one of our [MCs] lyrics and decipher it and from one page conform 10 to 20 pages of information, if not even a book, I've got people talking they wrote movies after listening to me, ya know what I mean, so that's because of the substance of experience and wisdom that goes into our lyrics.

(RZA, 2012)

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7. Appendices

7.1. Lyrics transcription

N.Y. STATE OF MIND

1. *Yeah, straight out the fuckin dungeons of rap*
2. *Where fake niggas don't make it back...*
3. *I don't know how to start this shit, yo...*

4. Rappers, I monkey flip 'em with the funky rhythm
5. I be kickin, musician, inflictin composition
6. Of pain, I'm like Scarface sniffin cocaine
7. Holding a M-16, see, with the pen I'm extreme
8. Now, bullet holes left in my peepholes, I'm suited up
9. With street clothes, hand me a nine and I'll defeat foes
10. Y'all know my steelo: with or without the airplay
11. I keep some E&J, sitting bent up in the stairway
12. Or either on the corner betting Grants with the cee-lo champs
13. Laughing at baseheads trying to sell some broken amps
14. G-packs get off quick, forever niggas talk shit
15. Reminiscing about the last time the Task Force flipped
16. Niggas be running through the block shootin
17. Time to start the revolution, catch a body, head for Houston
18. Once they caught us off-guard, the Mac-10 was in the grass and
19. I ran like a cheetah with thoughts of an assassin
20. Pick the Mac up, told brothers, "Back up," the MAC spit
21. Lead was hitting niggas, one ran, I made him backflip
22. Heard a few chicks scream, my arm shook, couldn't look
23. Gave another squeeze, heard it click, Yo, my shit is stuck
24. Try to cock it, it wouldn't shoot, now I'm in danger
25. Finally pulled it back and saw three bullets caught up in the chamber
26. So now I'm jetting to the building lobby
27. And it was fulla children, probably—couldn't see as high as I be

28. (So whatchu saying?) It's like the game ain't the same
29. Got younger niggas pulling the triggers bringing fame to their name
30. And claim some corners, crews without guns are goners
31. In broad daylight, stickup kids, they run up on us
32. Four-fives and gauges, MACs, in fact
33. Same niggas'll catch a back to back, snatching yo' cracks in black
34. There was a snitch on the block getting niggas knocked
35. So hold your stash 'til the coke price drop
36. I know this crackhead who said she gotta smoke nice rock
37. And if it's good she'll bring ya customers in measuring pots
38. But, yo, you gotta slide on a vacation
39. Inside information keeps large niggas erasin and they wives basin
40. It drops deep as it does in my breath
41. I never sleep, 'cause sleep is the cousin of death
42. Beyond the walls of intelligence, life is defined
43. I think of crime when I'm in a New York state of mind

44. New York state of mind [4x]

45. Be havin dreams that I'm a gangster
46. Drinkin Moët's, holding TEKs
47. Makin sure the cash came correct, then I stepped
48. Investments in stocks, sewing up the blocks
49. To sell rocks, winnin gunfights with mega cops
50. But just a nigga walking with his finger on the trigger
51. Make enough figures until my pockets get bigger
52. I ain't the type of brother made for you to start testin
53. Give me a Smith & Wesson, I'll have niggas undressin
54. Thinkin of cash flow, Buddah, and shelter
55. Whenever frustrated I'm a hijacked Delta
56. In the PJs, my blend tape plays, bullets are strays
57. Young bitches is grazed, each block is like a maze
58. Full of black rats trapped, plus the Island is packed
59. From what I hear in all the stories when my peoples come back, black

60. I'm livin where the nights is jet-black, the fiends
61. Fight to get crack, I just max, I dream I can sit back
62. And lamp like Capone with drug scripts sewn
63. Or the legal luxury life, rings flooded with stones, homes
64. I got so many rhymes I don't think I'm too sane
65. Life is parallel to Hell but I must maintain
66. And be prosperous, though we live dangerous
67. Cops could just arrest me, blaming us, we're held like hostages
68. It's only right that I was born to use mics
69. And the stuff that I write is even tougher than dice
70. I'm taking rappers to a new plateau, through rap slow
71. My rhymin is a vitamin, held without a capsule
72. The smooth criminal on beat breaks
73. Never put me in your box if your shit eats tapes
74. The city never sleeps, full of villains and creeps
75. That's where I learned to do my hustle, had to scuffle with freaks
76. I'm a addict for sneakers, twenties of Buddah, and bitches with beepers
77. In the streets I can greet ya, about blunts I teach ya
78. Inhale deep like the words of my breath
79. I never sleep, 'cause sleep is the cousin of death
80. I lay puzzle as I backtrack to earlier times
81. Nothing's equivalent to the New York state of mind

82. New York state of mind [4x]

7.2. Line breakdown

LINE BREAKDOWN

1. The New York underground, where hip hop began; far away from mainstream movement of the late 20th century.
2. Dangerous environment where imposters and outsiders need to watch their backs.
3. This line basically gives birth to Nas as an artist, as it opens the first track on his first and most revered album, *Illmatic* – widely considered as the greatest rap album of all time, with *N.Y. state of mind* as the flagship track. Rumor has it that Nas wrote the song in the studio and went in to put down the first vers in the first take, genuinely not knowing how to start off as he literally just wrote it.
4. The monkey flip is a break dance and a wrestling move; a fitting metaphor explaining how Nas handles his adversaries.
5. Wordplay on previous line, continuing the metaphor on how Nas’s lyrical skills physically damage his competition (“inflictin composition of pain”)
6. Reference to Tony Montana, the main character in the movie *Scarface*, heavily cocaine induced...
7. ...making his last stand raging with an M-16 machine gun. Nas using a pen is equally extreme.
8. Coming from Queensbridge – the largest project housing complex in North America located in Queens’s borough of New York – in the 90’s notoriously rumored for its dangerous environment. With peepholes as a homophone to peoples, the wordplay suggests that some of Nas’s friends have suffered from shootouts in his neighborhood.
9. With hip hop going mainstream in the 90s the culture made its mark not only on New York but all of America. The dress code of the streets differed slightly from that of Wall Street. The hostile surroundings spawned a survival of the fittest mentality among the less privileged living in the projects. Just like the attire, the choice of weapon reflects the individual – in Nas’s case a 9 mm handgun. With foes being closely resonant to fours – slang for a .44 caliber Magnum – the line suggests a double entendre; Nas is as skilled with the gun as with he is with the pen.
10. Nas does not care about radio play; his style known and underground reputation is already great enough for him to be considered one of the best.
11. Drinking Brandy in the stairway is a way to escape the reality of life in the projects.

12. A common way to make money as a street hustler; playing dice-games on the street corner. Nas's games roll with high stakes – Ulysses Grant's 50 Dollar bills.
13. The crack epidemic that raged through all major cities in America from the mid-80s to the mid-90s had the homicide rate among black adolescent males more than doubled, saw fetal death rates increase immensely and created economic chaos in the low standard, uneducated inner cities and projects around the country. The drug left no one untouched, but as Nas has found his path out of the misery he can laugh at the ill-fated addicts trying to sell a broken pair of amplifiers to sustain their habit. Nas even manages to pack a double entendre into this line, with wordplay on baseheads as bass-heads (sound junkies) which would explain their amplifiers being worn out.
14. There are many paths on the road to riches, easy money being one of the more tempting for the poor city dwellers lusting for wealth. A G-pack is a packed of crack with a street value of a 1000 Dollar package of crack, i.e. the product supplied to the drug dealer who distributes the product in smaller amounts. The fact that the G-packs sell out quickly justifies the imagery of widespread addiction in the line above.
15. The police department would send their task forces in attempts to stop drug dealing. Nas has had his share of experiences with the law, and recalls past memories in this line which starts a drug raid narrative following in the next few lines.
16. With the police posing a threat to the business on the streets resistance to authority was strong.
17. On another track off of Illmatic ("Represent") Nas refers to himself as a rebel of the street corner, so a revolution would mean him and his conglomerates coming together to decide their own fate. To catch a body is to kill someone. (Head for) Houston – slang for home – means to make it home safe, expression deriving from NASA's Mission Control Response in Houston, Texas.
18. Usually, the sections dealing have security measures prepared to be able to get rid of evidence whenever necessary, and lookouts to scout for police. This time they were not prepared, Nas did not have his gun within reach. He uses a metaphor describing the streets as a jungle, which is a well-known comparison found among others in the classic "the Message" by Melle-Mel; "It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder/how I keep from going under".
19. Continuing the jungle-metaphor Nas is a fast runner, plotting to kill.
20. Reaching his gun Nas is ready to swing the fight in his team's favor, having his friends move out of the way he proceeded to fire the machine gun.

21. Bullets flying all over the place hit the Task Force, one with the force to make the policeman – whilst trying to run – flip over as he was shot in the back.
22. Nas is nervous, as there are female bystanders in close reach, put in danger by his reckless shooting.
23. Ready to let off another round he pulls the trigger but he realizes that it's jammed with a failure to eject.
24. Desperately loading up a new clip Nas finds himself in a problematic situation...
25. Opening the gun up he finds himself with a typical stovepipe jam; three bullets stuck in the chamber.
26. Discarding the gun Nas flees into the hallway of a project building.
27. The building is full of children, which once again describes one of the most dangerous sides of life in Queensbridge – the stray shots that take innocent casualties. The fact that Nas is very intoxicated keeps him from noticing the children, or, in the case of a possible double entendre: The children (most likely hiding on the floor) cannot see him as he is too tall (high).
28. The story is interrupted with a question and an explanation to its metaphorical purpose; Nas wants to tell us that things have changed and how.
29. Violence among inner city project youths was skyrocketing during the 90s, as a product of the drug trade. The way to the top in the underworld business sector is by force. Young kids would utilize this by means of killing the man on top to take his place.
30. Gangs (crews) marked their territories, certain streets or neighborhoods would be their place for business – other gangs with less firepower had no chance of holding their own.
31. Things have turned out bad enough to have kids pull off robberies during the daytime. Nas or his crew may have experienced this first hand.
32. Not only do the youth commit armed robberies, they get their hands on the heaviest weapons. Nas uses the comparison of different caliber fire-arms as an analogy for how gun usage has changed for the worse.
33. Nas uses “back to back” as a double entendre for two given outcomes of off the robbers coming to steal from the gangs dealing drugs; either suffering double gun shots (known as back to back shots) from the dealers or back to back prison sentences.
34. Someone in the neighborhood was tipping off the police on people affiliated with the drug trade.
35. The fact that drug dealers are being arrested makes the streets hazardous for the dealers. With the decrease in numbers of dealers the market will be unstable, causing the prizes to

rise. Nas gives out a bit of marketing advice; wait until the cocaine price starts to drop before you sell your product, i.e. lie low until the heat is off.

36. Continuing the guidance Nas is about to explain things in the form of a story: There is a demand for crack on the streets even though the prices rise with the arrests of dealers...
37. ...and if you can supply the product the word will spread, bringing so many customers that you will be unloading measuring pot loads of crack.
38. As tempting the profits might sound Nas advises for a time out nonetheless.
39. The “snitch” mentioned in line 34 is a common cause for police infiltration that eventually will have the upper hand on drug lords, taking them in leaving their wives alone prone to develop crack habits ([free]basing – smoking) to cope with the loneliness.
40. Nas thoughts run deep reflecting on the life that he and his conglomerates live, the simile comparing his mind traveling deep as in a sleep like state, which connects with the following line.
41. “Sleep is the cousin of death” is an old African (Congolese) proverb found in many different interpretations, e.g. Homer “–There she met sleep, the brother of death.” (Iliad, XIV, l. 231 & XVI, l. 672.) where sleep is seen as state of unconsciousness related to death. Here Nas applies its meaning to the dangerous and constantly watchful reality of a drug dealer, saying that he never sleeps meaning that he always stays ready.
42. Here Nas goes philosophical on us, with a complex meaning-of-life type metaphor of several possible interpretations. One probable such – taken in relation to the following line – is a reflection on how the life the real explicit life is found outside the safe confines of the set structures and patterns created by the central intelligence; different rules apply to his surroundings where everyday life is a reminder of the survival of the fittest nature. This also translates to the theory of peoples’ minds being shackled and limited by intelligence, i.e. beyond the outlines of reasoning lies the essence of life defined.
43. Wrapping up the verse Nas expresses his thought on life in a New York City project within the elaborate metaphorical mind state empowering the song title. He is frustrated from seeing the realities of life outside the safety net of society.
44. The hook comes from the song “Mahogany” by Rakim.
45. Nas visualizes himself as a king pin mob figure persona – the American Dream of the projects – extending the picture to the next few lines.
46. The visual of Nas drinking expensive champagne supervising the transactions armed with guns symbolizes money and power he would have as a drug lord, in contrast to working on the streets selling drugs himself.

47. There are two interpretations to this: Either Nas stepped over from the illegal business branch to the stock exchange market (hinted at in the next line), or just stepped up (expanded) branching out to make his money grow further.
48. This line continues the “stepped [up]” analogy – taking territorial control of the whole neighborhood...
49. ...to command the crack sales and run the streets in a way that even the police units would not be able to hold their own against.
50. His train of thought brakes down, back to reality, realizing that he is just the average Joe (well, in this line of work maybe) making a living with his gun in hand. The vivid portrayal of desire for monetary success from business on the streets show how well Nas can relate to his contemporaries, even though his own path is already laid out through music.
51. In connection with to line above Nas describes himself as focused on becoming rich living by the gun. The metaphor used is pretty common; full pockets – wealth.
52. You do not want to mess with Nas...
53. ...because he will break out the Smith & Wesson (weapons manufacturer) to put you into submission and take everything you own (even your clothes).
54. The important things in Nas’s life: Money, marijuana and a place to call home.
55. Creative metaphor comparing Nas’s dangerous behavior when frustrated to a hijacked airplane (Delta Airlines). Delta planes were frequently hijacked during the 70s and 80s.
56. Nas’s mixtape – a collection of songs on a cassette tape primarily used for cheap music distribution – is played in the projects. The blend tape was a new form of mixtape originating in the 90s, where hip-hop is blended with R&B acapellas. The reference is probably to his ’91 demo tape, which ironically is pure hip hop. Secondly, he repeats the theme from the police raid story of the first verse: The projects suffer stray shots from gun fights...
57. ...and take little girls casualties. The maze simile symbolizes entrapment and difficulties for the people trying to make it out of the projects, wit the constant pressure from politicians workin to lock them down. The inhabitants of the Queensbridge housings were mainly black and Latino, as the predominantly white families with an income above \$3000/year were transferred to middle-income housings, making low income projects a place of struggle. This was also much due to the politicians’ efforts to keep the building and maintenance costs to a minimum.

58. Portraying life of the project inhabitants as rats fighting for survival, in connection to the maze analogy in the previous line it makes for a striking visual. In addition to being packed tightly in their homes, the Rikers Island prison (major New York prison located between Queens and the Bronx on an island after which it is named) was filled up as well. In the late 80's the it had been overflowing with inmates, which led to the complex being extended with a water bound facility in connection to the mainland to hold a greater number of prisoners.
59. Nas's friends come back to tell their stories after being released from Rikers. Black is slang for friend or man.
60. Possible dual interpretations; philosophical or literal. In a place where no hope lives, nights seem much darker than usual. With all the financial cutbacks made in building and maintenance of the projects the streetlights might not be in the best shape possible either, leaving the neighborhood engulfed in the darkness of night.
61. Another reference to the crack epidemic – the drugs tore the community apart. Nas works hard to ensure his dreams coming true, visualizing an escape from the ghetto...
62. ...to an Al Capone (Brooklyn born Mafioso running an extensive Chicago crime syndicate during the 1920s and early 30s while generously contributing to charity) like manner, making riches off of the drug trade...
63. ...or just leaving his criminal ways for a legal life in luxury, wearing rings with adorned with heaps of diamonds. Holmes is a variation of homie (originally homeboy) meaning friend.
64. Granted, Nas works in ways apart from the normal when it comes to rhyming. His inspiration takes over his mind like a mental delusion.
65. One of the most mystical lines Nas ever spit. The metaphor plays with the concept of parallel universes (alternate realities), where the neighborhood or the projects allow the existence of hell on earth. Another way to take "parallel" is as the substitute for like in a simile, making life in the ghetto equivalent to life in Hell. What is clear, though, is that Nas is determined to hold his own in the face of adversity.
66. Following the theme of the previous line he is not just out to get by, but to live and prosper, even though his criminal lifestyle is dangerous.
67. Police injustice is still a problem not just in America, but all around the world. Racial discrimination from the law contributes to the conviction of innocent people, which Nas pin-points in the "held like hostages" simile.

68. Nas takes it on himself to be the voice of his people, exposing the unjust realities of life in the project to the world through his music. This famous line also inspired the name of Micael Eric Dyson's book on Illmatic – Born to use mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic.
69. A double entendre where the play is on lesbian women (dykes) being considered more masculine than heterosexual women and therefor tougher, as well as the geological term dyke (or dike) – a sedimentary or magmatic rock foundation. In both cases the hard to the core character of his rhymes is justified.
70. At the time of Illmatic's release Nas's lyrical skill level was previously unheard of. He set the bar for mid 90s rap, taking the crown from Rakim who is seen as the originator of the more technical style of rhyming, writing with a complexity standing out among his contemporaries. The second part of the line defines his characteristic flow as slow and distinct...
71. Nas's rhymes are pure and easily digested in the raw form, just like vitamin held without a capsule, therefor translating well to all audiences while still maintaining his street credibility.
72. Just like Michael Jackson on the '87 smash hit "Smooth Criminal" Nas is smooth on the beats, though with rhymes instead of dance moves. The breakbeat was introduced into hip-hop in its early days by DJ Kool Herc, and is describes as the rhythm section of a song – where the melody is absent – used in loops played continuously on two turn-tables with the same record on. Nowadays the art has been taken to new levels with creative sampling and scratching techniques.
73. Old [boom] boxes (cassette players) were often in the habit of breaking tapes. Nas's already knows that his tape will be valuable, and therefor advices you to take care of it.
74. His hostile New York – the city that never sleeps – environment is full of lowlifes.
75. The city that never sleeps is where Nas grew up and learnt the street life and how to deal with the types of people referred to above.
76. Nas adds to the list of necessities from line 52; Sneaker shoes, \$20 bags of weed and girls with pagers (easy access).
77. Just like Nas learnt about the street life, he can teach you the ways. Portraying himself as a teacher Nas explains his street smarts.
78. Working as a callback to line 39 "it drops deep as it does in my breath", but with a twist to match the weed smoking references in the previous lines.
79. Repetition of line 40, further clarifying the dangerous nature of his life and surroundings.

80. Nas takes a moment to sit back and reflect on life in the projects, which has been thoroughly described throughout the song. Just like laying out a puzzle he takes his time to piece things together...

81. ...coming to the conclusion that there is no place like New York City.

82. See line 44.