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Hip Hop Parody as Veiled Critique

1 Introduction

Inherently intertextual, parodies involve the use of semiotic practices indexically associated with the subject of parody, in some cases a particular person or socially-recognizable personae.¹ Parodists employ these indexically-linked semiotic practices in an exaggerated fashion, to ridicule indirectly the parodied subject. In the domain of hip hop cultural production, artists marginalized by institutionally-sanctioned systems of distribution use parody to interrogate the naturalness or desirability of prevailing norms which tie semiotic practices to characterological qualities. These parodies involve recognizing norms shared in dissonance, norms regarding authenticity and indigeneity, essentializing discourses which render adherents to opposing norms deviant. Though in this sense discursive formations such as authenticity constrain social action, it is through recognizing and interrogating the normativity of such discourses that social actors – in the case examined here a small population of MCs from Houston, Texas – exercise some measure of agency (Butler 2004, Carter 2007), portraying those who police dominant norms negatively, as less skillful, materialistic, and disingenuously sociopathic.

Hip hop parodists achieve this social end by leveling a veiled critique at popular artists. To succeed in their critique, these MCs exploit prior texts (i.e. songs) by transposing strategies popular artists use in styling their personae. For example, in order to communicate a sense of rootedness in a particular neighborhood,² hip hop artists often employ what I term metastylistic discourse, that is, speech about style. By referring to contextually-bound stylistic practices such as “getting smoked out” and “jammin Screw”³ in the ’hood with their friends, artists establish a connection to place indexically, evoking subterranean, characterological qualities associated with lived experiences of their neighborhoods.

These qualities are linked to a spatialized, classed, racialized, and gendered experience of place (hyper-local, working-class,⁴ Black, and male), fleshing out the “G”⁵ or street-hustler figure, a social relation reified through a number of partially-overlapping labels⁶ and thus made intertextually available for future recontextualizations. This G

¹ See Hall (2005) for kotis’ challenge of hijra authenticity, or Holmes & Schnurr (2006:33) for subverting hegemonic notions of femininity

² What Rose (2008) and other scholars term “representing,” a common word in hip hop parlance.

³ A style named for its creator in which music is considerably slowed down, purportedly to compliment the use of marijuana and “syrup,” a codeine-laced beverage.

⁴ A nebulous concept, I find it nevertheless useful.

⁵ I explain this concept later in the text.

⁶ (O)G (i.e. original gangsta), playa, hustla, gangsta, hood nigga, etc.

figure self-affiliates and roots himself⁷ in socio-geographic space. Take for instance the following passage from Houston artist Lil' Keke's⁸ song "It's Going Down:"

Lil Keke: "It's Going Down"

- 1 It's goin' down, yeah I'm talking to you,
- 2 H-Town, smoked out jammin' Screw,
- 3 Tell your crew it's '97, it ain't no refusin',
- 4 We got 'em to the bottom now they all lovin' Houston.

Here, Lil' Keke explicitly connects place and practice, marrying the spatial with a lifestyle or "taste culture" (Thornton 1995) grounded in its concrete environs. Through frequent reference to social practices constitutive of a collective experience of place, popular artists play a key role in the sedimentation of stylistic norms. The result is a durable, intertextual framework for "doing local;" that is, evoking not simply a socio-geographic connection, but rather a socially-positioned, interest-laden experience of place comprising stylistic practices, aesthetics, and values. Collectively, the norms connecting place with style and values function as a "regime of representation," (Hall 1997) linking social images with discourses of authenticity and indigeneity. Importantly, through the support of institutions such as record labels and corporate-owned radio stations, established artists find themselves uniquely positioned to circulate essentializing images of indigeneity, narrowly reducing the range of practices and experiences which "count" as authentically local in the field of hip hop cultural production locally.

Considering the multiplicity of lived experiences in Houston's predominantly Black neighborhoods, we can begin to appreciate the marginalized position that artists who do not identify with prevailing norms find themselves. Established rappers claim to "represent" (Rose 2008) not only their streets and neighborhoods, but also the whole of Houston and Texas. In other words, in the fourth-largest city in the U.S.,⁹ a handful of popular rappers present to the world a relatively singularizing vision of what it means not only to claim affiliation with place as an artist, but also – more broadly – to take up the role of MC¹⁰ in the cultural field of local hip hop.

Responding to these norming processes, artists marginalized by the essentializing rhetoric of popular hip hop opt to resist or reframe through performance, creating parodic hip hop songs circulated virally on the internet. These songs trope on local norms which tether the MC subject position to the G or hustler figure, characterized by a do-it-yourself (DIY), sometimes criminal approach to achieving social goals, including the accumulation of wealth and material signifiers of success (such as a platinum "piece and chain," i.e. a necklace and medallion).

Finding their values and aesthetics at odds with the G subjectivity and hustler lifestyle, hip hop parodists produce songs through which they temporarily adopt the voice and style associated with popular Houston rap music, juxtaposing their assumed G identity with "self"-directed ridicule and veiled critique. To put it differently, these

⁷ I choose this pronoun as all the artists in my study happen to be men.

⁸ Lil Keke self-categorizes himself as a "G" openly in his song "I'm A G"

⁹ At the time I write this.

¹⁰ MC is used in the paper interchangeably with the terms rapper and (hip hop) artist.

parodists cloak themselves in the semiotic trappings of popular local artists to critique them from “the inside out,” simultaneously voicing the subject of parody while retaining and (indirectly) asserting the parodist’s own take on what it means to be a “real” MC in the Houston hip hop scene. It is in this way that we observe a nuanced type of double-voicing (Bakhtin 1984) through the juxtaposition of an assumed style and persona with the parodists’ typical, on-mic personae, contextually-present for in-group audiences to whom the veiled critique is aimed.¹¹

Key here is the idea that social actors in the Houston hip hop scene share norms in dissonance, and that these norms connect rhetorical strategies and texts¹² to dominant stances, aesthetics, and values. These short texts crystallize into transposable chunks of language, themselves semiotically complex and multilayered. For instance, the commonly-recontextualized phrase, “Swangin’ [sweɪnɪn] through the South [sa:Φ],” referentially depicts a social practice linked directly with place, i.e. driving one’s car from side-to-side (‘swangin’) through the streets of Houston’s South side. This practice becomes tethered not simply to place, but rather an experience of place, fleshed out by qualities popular artists portray themselves as possessing, such as street-sensibility, aversion to “outsider” systems of social regulation (e.g. police), and hyper-masculinity. Furthermore, as illustrated through the broad transcriptions of the words “Swangin’” and “South,” this entextualized (Bauman & Briggs 1992) stretch of discourse contains the environments for /ɪ/ lowering pre-engma and /aw/ monophthongization, respectively. Thus, prior texts such as the one under discussion contain words which provide artists with what Coupland (2007: 124) terms “phono-opportunities,” that is, the possibility of choosing one phonetic variant over another to manage personae through vocalic variation (Coupland 2001a, 2001b).

It is in part through the recontextualization of texts containing environments for locally-significant phonetic variation that the embedded variables become indexically linked to the stances taken up by popular artists, producing cultural norms. To illustrate, consider the word “South:” This word contains the variable /aw/, which exhibits variation in pronunciation along the dimension of monophthongization, such that two approximate targets exist – a diphthongal variant /aU/ and a monophthongal variant /a:/. In popular Houston rap music, established artists commonly use the monophthongal variant,¹³ realizing words including “South” as [sa:Φ] in culturally-salient texts such as “Swangin’ through the South [sauΦ].”

Worth noting here is the semiotic nesting doll relations in play, involving variables embedded in words which, co-occurring with other elements of language, constitute culturally-significant texts. These texts are employed in order to achieve rhetorical ends, such as taking a stance regarding affiliation with a taste culture, evoking social qualities associated with a subject position (such as the G figure of popular Houston rap), or representing one’s ‘hood,. For example, ‘Swangin’ through the South’ connects artists to a particular, socially-meaningful experience of place. Drawing on Woolard’s (2008:447) notion of a “semiotic house that Jack built,” I suggest that the phonetic variables bootstrap off of the cultural salience of words and phrases comprising reiterable texts or textual strategies. By virtue of their embedding in such texts, vocalic

¹¹ That is, the musically-socialized audience sensitive to the political economy of local hip hop culture.

¹² In the sense of Agha (2007).

¹³ I establish this in other work, Taylor (2008) e.g.

variables come to index stances taken through rhetorical positioning, including the use of metastylistic discourse.

Returning to speech about style, metastylistic discourse plays a crucial role in fleshing out the social-semiotic boundaries of a local hip hop subjectivity. This rhetorical strategy brings material elements of culture into the process of essentializing style, by selectively positioning certain practices as central to the semiotic articulation of localness and realness in Houston hip hop. Among these practices, metastylistic discourse figures centrally, indexically evoking qualities of the subjects who commonly use this boundary-construction strategy.

In this chapter, I propose that hip hop parodists exploit metastylistic discourse not only to comment on the centrality of this social practice among rhetorical resources available to MCs, but also to critique the established artists who frequently employ metastylistic discourse. Through lyrical performances and constructed dialogue, parodists challenge the skill, social logic, and authenticity of popular local hip hop artists, indirectly highlighting the socially-constructed nature of stylistic norms. I argue that the artists who parody Houston's status quo denaturalize local stylistic norms by ostensibly adhering to them, utilizing metastylistic discourse and adopting phonetic variants normatively associated with the collective voices of established rappers in Houston.

It is in this way that the parodic critiques leveled at Houston's hip hop establishment are veiled, as parodists must convince the audience that they are indeed voicing – and thereby taking up – the hustler, thug, or G subject position. However, the parodists' lyrical content reveals that what is taking place amounts to more than imitation; critical hyperbole and “self”-directed insults aimed back at the performer create a gap between the parodic performances and the songs which inspire them. It is through examining these intertextual gaps (Bauman and Briggs 1990) that we begin to uncover which specific norms and practices are being interrogated.

Gaining these insights sheds light on the following questions, which underpin the research reported on here. First, what social-semiotic norms do established artists construct and maintain through their lyrics? Second, how do artists marginalized by these norms address an inequitable social arrangement through parody-as-social-action? Finally, what insights do we stand to gain from analysis of (hip hop) parody regarding the conventionalization of stylistic practices, in terms of both form and meaning (Sclafani 2009)?

The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows. In §2 I briefly discuss one example of hip hop parody from a scene outside of Texas, in order to show that the problems faced by marginalized rappers in Houston are not entirely unique, but rather symptomatic of the commercialization of hip hop culture in the United States. The example comes from work on hip hop which takes a historical angle to examine the discursive production of authenticity in rap music (Ogbar 2007).

In §3 I introduce what I and others consider the status quo in popular Houston rap music. To this end, I describe scenes and lyrics from the critically-acclaimed video for the track “Still Tippin’” by local artist Mike Jones. In this section, I discuss processes of (semiotic) norming which arise in part from essentializing rhetoric which aims to frame Houston as a scene distinct from other regional scenes competing in the national hip hop market. I present an analysis of Houston hip hop parody in §4, focusing on a track

circulated on the internet by an artist using the oxymoronic alias “Lil’ Big Yung.” Concluding remarks follow in §5.

2 Parody in Hip Hop: Critiquing the Status Quo

The example of hip hop parody described below comes from Ogbar’s (2007) historically-oriented work on hip hop and authenticity. One recurrent theme in this work is the discursively-constructed – and often contested – nature of authenticity in rap music. Regarding the contestation of authenticity, Ogbar (2007: 113) cites qualities of popular rap music which have drawn negative critical attention from artists who question and reject the lifestyle portrayed in hip hop, both lyrically and visually, through songs and the medium of video. Of these qualities, the author focuses in detail on the rise and enduring appeal of conspicuous consumption and materialism in popular rap music. Images of expensive cars, gold and platinum jewelry, and designer clothes have had their place in the aesthetics of hip hop (at least) since its commercialization. But this emphasis on the material is not shared by all artists.

A small number of MCs, including Philadelphia-based group “The Roots,” have taken critical aim at the personae and hypermaterialistic lifestyle of the hip hop artist portrayed in popular rap music and videos. As Ogbar (113-115) notes, during the mid-nineties

The Roots...unleashed a barrage of rhymes criticizing the gaudy fantasy world of some rappers in their sophomore LP, *illadelph halfllife* (1996). In the video for “What They Do,” The Roots parodied the ubiquitous materialism of rappers. With a tip of the hat to De La Soul...The Roots derided the make-believe world of their peers. The video opens with a shot of a mansion, with a caption that reads, “The Goldstein estate, day rental.” In one scene, the lead rapper sits on a bed with three beautiful women. “Yeah, right,” the screen reads. Sitting in front of high-priced automobiles, the caption asks, “Can we afford this?”

In the video to which Ogbar refers, The Roots criticize popular artists who portrayed themselves as larger than life figures, in a rags-to-riches tale, who came to enjoy the material and social trappings of the uber-wealthy. However, as the video seeks to make clear, even among those rappers who have succeeded and have a budget to shoot a video, the opulent lifestyle involving expensive cars, three-storey estates, and conspicuous consumption more often than not proves to be a façade, a show put on to construct personae and portray a lifestyle unattainable not only by most hip hop fans, but also by the artists who circulate these fantastic images of the successful rapper’s life.

Key to the parodic critique leveled by The Roots at hip hop’s then status quo, the artists take up the generic conventions of popular hip hop (videos), in this case specifically the excessive displays of material success and all that comes with it (women, wealth, etc.). For example, as Ogbar mentions, the video begins with a shot of a luxurious estate where, presumably, one of the artists from the video lives. This opening sequence puts The Roots video in dialogue with other, prior hip hop videos set at an elaborate estate or exotic location. However, The Roots’ video turns this portrayal of the hip hop

artist as tremendously affluent on its head, by juxtaposing images of opulence with captions which pull back the curtain, revealing the reality behind many similar videos: Though they attempt to portray the rappers as the wealthy elite, much of this is appearance only, as the captions make clear.

As a deauthenticating strategy, these captions prove central to the critique being leveled, as they stand in stark contrast with the images of excess in the video (shaking up and pouring out champagne bottles, e.g.). In fact, by considering the visual language and lyrics of the video vis-à-vis prior popular videos, we see both continuity and rupture, seams and gaps. As already mentioned, continuity is achieved by exploiting established conventions for visually constructing larger-than-life personae. However, this semiotic continuity is disrupted by the juxtaposition of images ostensibly portraying the outcome of hip hop success with captions which function to deauthenticate the lifeworld portrayed in the video.

It is here that we benefit from Bauman and Briggs' (1992: 149) notion of intertextual gaps. As the authors propose,

On the one hand, texts framed in some genres attempt to achieve generic transparency by *minimizing* the distance between texts and genres, thus rendering the discourse maximally interpretable through the use of generic precedents. This approach sustains highly conservative, traditionalizing modes of creating textual authority. On the other hand, *maximizing* and highlighting these intertextual gaps underlies strategies for building authority through claims of individual creativity and innovation... resistance to the hegemonic structures associated with established genres, and other motives for distancing oneself from textual precedents.

Here, drawing on Bauman and Briggs' terms, we may view the multi-modal video as the text, and the genre of the popular hip hop video as a normative framework. In the case of rappers seeking to maintain the status quo of popular hip hop, directors and artists craft videos and songs which "minimize the distance" between text and genre. However, in the case of parodic hip hop performance, artists seek to maximize and openly highlight intertextual gaps, as in the case of The Roots song and video "What They Do?" Specifically, The Roots combine the use of captions which deauthenticate images of opulence with lyrics which openly critique the materialism of the status quo in popular rap, as in the following example:

The Roots: "What They Do?"

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 | The principles of true hip-hop have been forsaken |
| 2 | It's all contractual and about money makin |
| 3 | Pretend-to-be cats don't seem to know they limitation |
| 4 | Exact replication and false representation |

In this passage, Roots front man Blackthought actually calls attention to the minimization of intertextual gaps by popular artists in Line 4, where he alludes to "exact replication," seemingly of generic semiotic norms for popular hip hop videos, which he

immediately goes on to disparage as “false representation[s].” Returning to the process and goals of maximizing intertextual gaps, we observe that Blackthought and his group level their critique lyrically and through captions while visually establishing some continuity between this video and the genre of videos under critique. It is here that we encounter a disjunct between conventionalized generic norms and the production of a multi-modal text which calls attention to and criticizes these norms. Thus, by maximizing the intertextual gap between their song and songs circulated by the popular artists under critique, The Roots manage to mount “resistance to the hegemonic structures associated with [an established genre],” (Bauman and Briggs 1992: 149) in this case the rags-to-riches genre of popular hip hop music.

This example puts into play several key concepts drawn on in the analysis presented later, in §4. Foremost among these concepts is the notion of intertextual gaps, specifically the effects of minimizing and maximizing gaps between the performance of a text and the generic set of norms with which it is associated. In the following section, I describe what I and others view as the status quo in Houston hip hop. Regarding intertextuality, in §3 I discuss how popular, established artists maintain a stylistic monopoly on indigeneity and authenticity by minimizing the intertextual gaps between the performance of (authoritative) hip hop texts and generic norms linked to the performance and construction of these texts.

3 Some Perspective: Maintaining the Status Quo in Houston

In talking about generic norms vis-à-vis Houston rap music, I propose that social actors involved in local hip hop orient to such norms, even if in dissonance for example, to reject or subvert them. These norms sediment over time, as established Houston artists continue to essentialize indigeneity and authenticity through lyrics crafted to distinguish local hip hop culture from cultural forms associated with other geographically-bound scenes. For example, established local artist Mike Jones speaks openly about what he thinks about when asked to reflect on what makes Houston distinct. In an interview with Matt Sonzala in widely-read hip hop magazine *The Source*, Mike Jones says the following regarding his album *Who Is Mike Jones?*: “*Who is Mike Jones?* was simple. It was about me being fly...I’m from H-Town. I sip lean. I ride candy paint. Grills in the mouth, diamonds shining. I love where I’m from. I’m proud of that.” (Sonzala 2006:61) Here, Mike Jones appeals to a number of social practices portrayed as essential to Houston hip hop culture, including those associated with car culture (riding “candy paint”), drug culture (sippin’ lean), and fashion (wearing “grills,” custom fit, diamond-encrusted jewelry worn over one’s teeth).

Jones’ comment speaks to the ideas artists and other people involved in the production and consumption of Houston rap music have regarding what hip hop in Houston sounds and looks like, what social practices are closely linked with a rhetoric of indigeneity in the music, as well as what social personae or “figures of discourse” (Agha 2003) are portrayed as representative of hip hop cultural production locally. In other words, Jones’ comments shed light on what it means to “do Houston” for both locals and nonlocals, putting on display the collective repertoire of social practices and symbols for which Houston has become well known. Importantly, such reflexive commentary in an internationally-distributed hip hop publication further cements the utility of specific

social practices as a conventionalized framework for playing up a particular connection to place, a socio-spatial relation constructed through a rhetoric of indigeneity which essentializes place identity in Houston rap music.

The result of such essentializing discourse is, for some cultural commentators (Serrano 2008) and subculturalists, the crystallization of a stereotype, a narrow, interest-laden vision of Houston indigeneity in hip hop. Here, what is at issue is the emergence of a (sub)cultural center, that is, a repertoire of signifying practices and the connection to their practitioners, both of which are portrayed as distinctively local. Regarding the emergence of a stereotype or cultural center, local artist Fat Tony echoes Mike Jones' comments in the following excerpt:

C Do you think there's a stereotype for Houston rap music?

FT Hell yes I think there's a stereotype.

C What is it? How would you describe it?

FT Just the whole, scene of like you know, candy cars, grills, stuff like that. Like cuz like that was what was presented first for like Houston rap music. Like when that was from the, the Still Tippin' video came out, that was what the whole country thought of just Houston rap music, period. Like that was, so, so, they just look at that and like obviously every-everybody would sound like that to them, you know? That's a, a big problem.

Here Tony notes the significance of Mike Jones' release *Still Tippin'* – which features Mike Jones, Slim Thug, and Paul Wall – in distinguishing Houston hip hop in the national market. The song cited and its accompanying music video feature numerous references to local social practices, such as “tippin’ on four vogues” (i.e. four vogue brand tires) and “barre sipping, car dipping grand, wood grain gripping,” (barre refers to codeine, and wood grain referring to the materials from which the steering wheel is made).

Established artists produce continuity with prior texts such as “*Still Tippin'*” by recontextualizing rhetorical boundary construction strategies, such as metastylistic discourse. This particular strategy links artists with an experience of place, of which a given stylistic practice – such as “tippin’” – is partially constitutive. What accretes over time and across performances are generic norms which link rhetorical strategies, including metastylistic discourse, with the performance of hip hop texts in the Houston rap music scene. These generic norms not only link rhetorical strategies to the performance of a locally-oriented hip hop text, but also they position centrally, in terms of indigeneity, the social figure who engages in the social practices rapped about through metastylistic discourse.

In short, this rhetorical strategy enables established artists to position certain stylistic practices centrally among the repertoire of signifying acts utilized in establishing one's indigeneity in popular Houston rap music. As Fat Tony points out, “[t]hat's a, a big problem,” particularly for MCs who do not fit the stylistic mold created by minimizing the intertextual gap between established artists' use of metastylistic discourse. That is, by recontextualizing recurrent ways of talking about and framing localness and indigeneity in popular Houston rap music, established artists minimize the intertextual gaps between performances which focus on localness and authenticity. As Bauman and Briggs (1992:

149) note, it is through “*minimizing* the distance between texts and genres” that social actors sustain “highly conservative, traditionalizing modes of creating textual authority.”

In the case of Houston hip hop, established artists minimize intertextual gaps potentiated by generic norms for asserting one’s authenticity and indigeneity, norms which involve the deployment not only of rhetorical strategies, but also short stretches of discourse (i.e. texts) which become entextualized through their recontextualization by other artists. Established rappers maintain discursive authority regarding issues of localness and authenticity by re-using these texts, often verbatim, across performances. The transportability of such texts is exemplified by Mike Jones’ response to the question posed by Sonzala, cited above. In his response, Jones claims to “sip lean” and “ride candy paint,” two social practices communicated by conventionalized, culturally-salient phrases (i.e. short texts).

Oftentimes, as discussed in §1, these short, re-usable texts contain socially-significant phonetic variants, including monophthongal /aw/ (e.g. [da:n] = ‘down’) and lowered /i/ pre-engma (e.g. [Φeɪŋ] = ‘thing’). These linguistic variables add an additional dimension of calibration regarding the minimization (or maximization) of intertextual gaps. That is, in texts which contain the environment for variation, phonetic differences enter into the equation, yielding an opportunity for rappers to further minimize the intertextual gaps between current and prior performances. Rappers may do so by exploiting pronunciation variants generically and stylistically associated not only with the production of authoritative texts such as “Still Tippin,” but also (more broadly) with the construction of street-oriented, on-mic personae.

Along similar lines, subversive artists – those who might side with Fat Tony’s assessment of the “Houston stereotype” – exploit intertextual precedents for communicating senses of authenticity and rootedness in order to voice the subject of their critique. MCs who take on this role of parodist both minimize and maximize intertextual gaps in their performances. These artists minimize gaps, for example, in the replication of phonetic variation and the (re-)use of metastylistic discourse. By minimizing intertextual gaps along these dimensions, parodists ostensibly “take up” the subject position associated with the stylistic practices in question – metastylistic discourse and phonetic variation. However, artists engaged in parody must also maximize intertextual gaps, for example, through rhetorical strategies which render the content of metastylistic discourse questionable, in some way undesirable. In the next section, I examine how parodists minimize intertextual gaps to take on the voice of the critiqued subject, while maximizing intertextual gaps along other textual dimensions in order to criticize and denaturalize the textual authority of established artists.

4 Hip hop parody: A qualitative view of veiled critique

The material which serves as the basis for my analysis comes from a song circulated on the internet in 2008, titled “My Swag,” performed by an artist who calls himself Lil Big Yung. This artist is, in fact, King Midas of Houston-based hip hop group “H.I.S.D.”, and “My Swag” is Midas’ parodical take on popular rap in Houston (and beyond). What makes this song significant from a theoretical perspective, among other things, is the fact that it has been mistaken as imitation and not parody by listeners, as evidenced from a

long discussion on an internet hip hop forum.¹⁴ This “misinterpretation” begs the following questions: In which ways is Midas’ song parodical, and how does the audience recognize it as such?

To address these questions, I shall first reproduce the lyrics of the song, transcribed in full below. Following the transcription, I describe ways in which Midas has taken up a G persona conducive to generic norms in popular Houston rap music. Specifically, I examine semiotic strategies the parodist employs to minimize intertextual gap(s) between “Lil Big Yung’s” performance and the prior performances of established artists. As I shall argue, minimizing these gaps allows Midas to construct the social persona(e) associated with intertextual precedents. However, what follows is far from straightforward imitation of these precedents for self-portraying a “hard” (extremely tough and self-reliant), neighborhood-rooted, street-hustler image. On the contrary, by maximizing semiotic gaps between “My Swag” and the intertextual series (Hanks 1986, Hill 2005) comprising similar prior performances, Midas presents a veiled commentary on the naturalness and desirability of the subjectivity portrayed as unequivocally local and “real” in popular (Houston) hip hop discourse.

Lil Big Yung: “My Swag”

1 Yo, yo,
2 I got my shades on
3 I got my J’s on
4 I got these niggas crunk when I say “Mayne” [mei:n] ho
5 it be my swag nigga, I’m so crazy
6 I’m such a pimp nigga hold on pay me
7 what they say nigga, they wanna battle who?
9 I spit so loud I write rhymes in capitals
10 nigga my fitty don’t fit I’m the shit
11 my medallion is the license to spit bitch,
12 I got my skateboard, I got my vans on,
13 my crotch kinda tight feel like a tampon,
14 I make it rain bitches, I got fifty cars,
15 I’m sippin lean, eatin chicken in a titty bar
16 nigga I kill you, and then I kill me
17 and then I press it up and put it on a CD

[chorus]

18 I’m gon live it how I spit it I’m keepin it tight
19 Every city sittin pretty he keepin the mic
20 Lil Big Yung and livin that luxury life
21 I got a cup nigga drankin it every night
22 I got them keys that can open like every door
23 Fifty cars, every plane that’s ever been known

¹⁴ At the time I write this, the discussion can be found at
<http://www.rappersiknow.com/2008/10/27/lil-big-yung-my-swag/>

24 Onion booty girls feelin my underoos [end chorus]

25 I got my head cocked, I got my shirt tucked
26 just in the front nigga posin like its MURDA,
27 I'm Lil Big Yung, I'm iced down [da:n] baby,
28 I got that block hot, four pits with rabies,
29 I got my chest right, I got my stomach rippled
30 I got four broads, big booties with no dimples
31 I got a new gang, we rockin polka dots
32 We fashionable thugs, whatchu boys talkin bout [b:at]
33 Nigga I sign you, just to drop you
34 And diss you, to get pressed into projects I do
35 Its Lil Big Yung, fuck them old niggas,
36 they bout them lyrics but we all about them tones nigga
38 Them niggas stackin paper, I got a million quarters,
39 I got a professor in the lab makin fumes with water
40 It's lil big yung and the king so don't front
41 cuz new niggas is here given 'em what they want (check the swag)

[repeat chorus]

[begin outro]

Check ths out, so like every Tuesday mayne I go to the store right, you know going to get groceries and shit mayne, he be comin to me talkin bout mayne you know, "I see what you doin, tryin to get yo paper but, Nigga you can't rap dog, like you doin music but you ain't really sayin nothin mayne you just repeatin words and shit like that," you know all that shit old niggas be talkin bout, talking bout getting grown and shit like that mayne...

As I suggested earlier, to parody someone or a type of person, one critiques the parodied subject from "the inside out." In other words, the parodists must adhere to some of the generic norms which guide the critiqued subject's performance and construction of persona(e). In doing so, rappers who perform parody put on the mask of "the other," the person or social type being critiqued. It is only by putting on this mask, by adopting stylistic practices associated with popular rappers, that Midas can level a "self"-directed critique at the status quo of Houston hip hop. Below, I briefly describe five semiotic strategies Midas and his producer exploit to put on a parodic mask, beginning not with lyrics, but with the instrumental music over which the parodist raps.

As journalists have noted (Frere-Jones 2005, Sonzala 2006), Houston has become distinctive and well-known in part for the "Screwed down" sound of popular, locally-produced music. What makes this music (both the instrumental beat and vocals) distinctive involves adhering to precedents set by one of the progenitors of Houston's unique sound, DJ Screw. Championed by many locals as the catalyst for Houston's growing notoriety as a hotbed of hip hop talent in the mid 2000's, Screw's signature

was¹⁵ to record artists rapping over instrumentals, then slow the completed track down considerably in post-production. The result became a seemingly homologous soundtrack to thousands of Houstonians “swangin’” their “S.L.A.B.s”¹⁶ slowly, side to side, through the streets of local neighborhoods.

Slowing down or “Screwing” tracks became generically associated with locally-popular hip hop. That is, changing the tempo of the finished musical product got swept up in the emergence of generic norms for communicating a socially-positioned experience of place. In this way, Screw and the artists with whom he worked set intertextual precedents for communicating their indigeneity through a specific semiotic tactic – slowing down or “Screwing” the music. Midas and his producer adopt this strategy by manipulating the speed of the finished product, slowing it down to match the pace of Screw’s music. In doing so, the artists achieve continuity with prior popular hip hop performances bearing the same, trademark sound. It is through this strategy that Midas minimizes the gap between his performance and existent, popular local hip hop music. Thus, through adopting Screw’s slowed-down style, the artist takes one step toward putting on a parodic mask, adopting semiotic strategies associated with popular local artists.

Beyond the instrumental framing of the performance, Midas employs a number of tactics in order to voice or style his parodic persona. For example, the artist adopts colloquial terms frequently used by popular rappers, terms which not only evoke spatialized experience, but which also refer to practices constitutive of this experience. For example, in line 4, Lil Big Yung¹⁷ says “I got these niggas crunk, when I say ‘Mayne’ ho.” Here, the key word is “mayne,” a phono-lexical variant of “man” which, in popular Houston hip hop parlance, can be used to express positively the rappers active engagement and unfolding stylistic craftsmanship during an improvisational rap or “freestyle.” Though used outside of Houston, the term “mayne” is strongly tied to the tradition of improvisational rap built around DJ Screw and the hip hop culture of Houston’s South side.

Thus, indexically linked to specific people, particular performances, and a collectively-portrayed lifestyle-of-an-MC, the recontextualization of “mayne” in Lil Big Yung’s performance functions to create continuity, to minimize the gap between “My Swag” and authoritative texts such as the enduringly-popular mixtapes for which DJ Screw became famous. It is in this way that the parodist cuts a discursive figure (Agha 2007), one which bears a resemblance to already-known artists and culturally-recognizable social types – including the social relation of “thug” – in the field of hip hop.

By speaking other people’s words (Bauman 2001; cf. Bakhtin 1984), the parodist evokes a subject position already-constructed through the lyrics and visual images of popular Houston rap songs and videos. In using and drawing focus to the culturally-charged word “mayne,” Midas effectively puts on the mask, as it were, of the person(ae) he aims to critique.

Rhetorical strategies, such as metastylistic discourse and self-categorization, also function in Midas’ service to create continuity between Lil Big Yung’s performance and

¹⁵ Regrettably, DJ Screw passed away November 16, 2000.

¹⁶ “Slow loud and bangin,” slang for a car with loud speakers and aftermarket accessories.

¹⁷ When in character, I refer to Midas by his performance name.

popular local hip hop songs. Established artists use both of these strategies to connect personae, place, and practice lyrically, in order to flesh out their on-mic personae. By employing metastylistic discourse, these artists communicate a distinctive experience of place, an experience tethered to the rhetoric of realness and authenticity in popular rap music. In portraying Houston as distinctive among other scenes in the hip hop market, established artists engage – intentionally or not – in a form of social-semiotic boundary construction. Specifically, by presenting a narrow range of social practices as central to the lived experience of a Houston rapper, MCs with major record deals take the reins in representing the city, what it means in social-semiotic terms to be a Houston rapper.

Through metastylistic discourse, popular artists such as Houston local Big Moe weave stylistic practices together with place identity and self-identification, portraying a lifestyle and referring to those who live (or claim to live) it by using terms for reified social positions. Such positions include the “G” figure in line 5 below. Shorthand for “gangsta” (but not necessarily coextensive with this term), a G is the (street) hustler *par excellence*: “On the grind,” credible in the streets, and in control (of himself or whatever affairs in which he is involved). In the following passage, artist Big Moe portrays himself engaged in the practice of drinking a codeine-laced beverage “drank” and then he “represents,” or lays claim to, the city he calls home. The passage ends with Moe self-identifying as a G.

Big Moe: “City of Syrup”

- 1 It's Big Moe drank baby
- 2 I done came down,
- 3 I done came down,
- 4 Up out H-Town,
- 5 Up out H-Town,
- 6 And you know I'm a throwed G...

This excerpt illustrates how popular rappers, in crafting their personae, utilize metastylistic discourse to evoke a lifestyle of which “sippin’ drank” is only partially constitutive. This is the lifestyle of a G, the colloquial label which reifies the gendered and classed social position of a drank-sippin’, wood wheel grippin’ rapper who “shows love to,” represents, and anchors himself to his city. Through acts of self-presentation, such as Big Moe’s excerpt above, established local artists link social types – such as the G figure – to an indigeneity made tangible through reference to social practices partially constitutive of the G lifestyle.

It is through the construction of reified social relations such as the G that artists, including Big Moe, set intertextual precedents for taking on the G persona. These precedents partially comprise a conventionalized, generic framework for “doing local” – as well as “being real” – in Houston hip hop. This framework includes the five semiotic strategies discussed so far: (1) adoption of Screw’s slowed-down style; (2) adoption of socially-charged linguistic variants, generically linked to the performance of popular local rap music; (3) adoption of colloquial terms and the recontextualization of prior texts; (4) the use of metastylistic discourse to emplace, authenticate, and communicate a

lived experience of place; and (5) taking up a subject position in the social landscape through the rhetorical act of self-identification.

By adopting and recontextualizing each of these genre-specific strategies, Midas voices or, to put it another way, takes up the socially-recognizable and available subject position of the G, a discursive figure constructed in and through popular hip hop music. Using generic semiotic strategies associated with this figure allows Midas to put on the parodic mask, minimizing intertextual gaps between Lil Big Yung's performance and prior authoritative texts. It is in these ways that Midas portrays the lifestyle of a fictive hip hop G, Lil Big Yung.

However, what the artist achieves rhetorically cannot be reduced to mere imitation. Creating continuity with popular prior texts by minimizing gaps is necessary in order to make the audience aware of what is being parodied. Minimizing these intertextual gaps is only part of the parodic process though. For the performance to take on the generic quality of parody, Midas must both minimize and maximize intertextual gaps, as doing so creates a necessary tension in the performance between rhymes that adhere to local generic conventions and tactics for troping on these conventions. Below I describe two of these tactics, beginning with what I term critical hyperbole.

It is not uncommon for rappers to make use of hyperbole in the service of self-aggrandizement, as we see in line 9 of the Lil Big Yung passage. Here, the artist says "I spit [i.e. rap] so loud I write rhymes in capitals." However, hyperbole in hip hop performance may have other effects, especially when what is being exaggerated or brought into focus effectively portrays the artist in a negative light. In such cases, certain genre-specific norms and those who adhere to them come under attack. These norms include beliefs shared by hip hop artists and fans regarding which subject positions are perceived as locally authentic, in line with the essentializing discourse of Houston rap music. The subject position of interest here is that of the G.

As a genre, (popular) Houston hip hop limits the range of subject positions rappers may successfully take up while simultaneously laying claim to a spatialized authenticity. This generic framework for "doing local" in popular Houston rap music is in a continuous state of "becoming," (Volosinov 1986) (re)produced by established artists who orient to intertextual precedents for self-presentation. These precedents include portraying oneself as a G lyrically, emphasizing characterological qualities such as toughness, self-reliance, physical prowess, and an up-for-anything outlook on resolving conflicts to save/maintain face. In "My Swag," Lil Big Yung portrays himself as a G while highlighting the absurd lengths some artists go to lyrically in order to demonstrate how "hard" they are. "My Swag" achieves this metacommentary on the naturalness or desirability of being a G by using hyperbole to attack this subject.

For example, in lines 16-17, Lil Big Yung claims "Nigga I kill you, and then I kill me / and then I press it up and put it on a CD." Here, the parodist brings into focus the kind of hyperbole used by popular artists to bolster their bravado. In this case though, Lil Big Yung stretches the use of hyperbole to absurd, undesirable limits. For instance, in lines 16-17 of "My Swag," the artist evokes the threats of violence that popular artists issue in the service of self-aggrandizement. However, Lil Big Yung undermines the rhetorical force of these on-mic threats by portraying them as nothing more than ploys to sell more music, claims to power with no basis in reality (i.e. rappers cannot "press up" music and sell it on a CD after they have killed themselves). In this way then, the parodist

maximizes the intertextual gap between “My Swag” and local songs which use hyperbole differently, to exaggerate positive qualities of the rapper or negative qualities of other rappers. In our case, Lil Big Yung’s use of hyperbole functions as veiled commentary on the desirability of exaggerated threats and the type of rappers who issue them.

This veiled commentary relies on contextual knowledge possessed by the audience. As suggested earlier, not all listeners share the local knowledge requisite to know what interpretational frame (parodic/non-parodic, e.g.) is being keyed through performance (Bauman 2001a, Goffman 1974). For instance, to fully appreciate Midas’ critique, the audience must be familiar not only with popular local rap music, but also with the music of marginalized hip hop culture(s) in Houston. The disparities between local hip hop social formations are not unfamiliar to Midas, nor the artists he works with, nor their fans. Mutually-calibrated in some measure then, these subculturalists co-construct the veiled critique described in this chapter by participating in activities – ranging from attending shows to playing rap music in the minivan – that both circulate stances and socialize participants.

In part, this socialization consists in becoming familiar with points of contention among local hip hop cultures, including what sort of personae – the thug or the laid-back lyricist – should represent Houston through rap lyrics and videos. Knowledge of this issue deepens one’s understanding, for example, of the following instance of ironic, “self”-directed critique. The scare quotes around “self” hint at the fact that the artist has put on the parodic mask of the other, so by aiming critical commentary at himself, Midas critiques the other; that is, he takes aim at artists like Lil Big Yung. In lines 31-32, the artist-in-mask forces a collision between two social domains familiar in hip hop, the thug lifestyle and the world of fashion: “I got a new gang, we rockin’ polka dots / We fashionable thugs, what you boys talkin’ bout [ba:t].” Though style is central to articulating identities in rap music, bringing into focus trendy clothing and fashion while simultaneously claiming to be a thug in a gang opens a window onto Midas’ perspective on the rhetoric surrounding the subject position of a G or a thug.

By juxtaposing a hyper-masculine, street-oriented social type with a love of polka-dotted clothing (and fashion more generally), the parodist invites us to examine the fit between two social constructs: “Thug-ness” and “trendiness (in clothing).” I propose that bringing together these two constructs evokes some measure of contradiction, which is grafted onto the type of artist Lil Big Yung represents. In this way, Midas manages to portray the G or thug as problematically obsessed with self-image, a quality which undermines the “harder” characterological dimension of being a thug. Thus, through “self”-directed ironic critique, the parodist challenges the social logic of being a thug through metacommentary, a social end achieved not through lyrics alone, but also by exploiting the target audience’s local knowledgeable of the thug or G figure.

Furthermore, by undermining his own social status as a thug, Lil Big Yung maximizes an intertextual gap along the dimension of self-aggrandizement, a rhetorical strategy normatively associated with the genre of popular Houston rap music. In doing so, the parodist creates discontinuity across texts, raising flags for those attuned to the discord between popular local rap and the competing hip hop culture in which Midas undeniably participates. Thus, by highlighting an intertextual gap based on a generic norm regarding self-aggrandizement, Midas as Lil Big Yung mounts “resistance to the

hegemonic structures associated with established genres [i.e. popular Houston rap],” “...distancing [himself] from textual precedents.” (Bauman and Briggs 1992: 149).

These two preceding examples of veiled critique thus involve strategies for inviting the audience to co-construct a reflexive critique of overlapping subject positions strongly associated with one local hip hop social formation. In the first example, we saw how hyperbole can be used critically to question the primacy of being “hard” in hip hop discourse. The second example illustrates how irony and “self”-critique can function to undermine the social logic which gives shape and meaning to the thug subject position. In the third and final example of veiled criticism, the parodist again uses a kind of ventriloquism, in this case, constructed dialogue between Lil Big Yung and an older hip hop fan.

This example differs from the second in that, instead of voicing his critique through Lil Big Yung, Midas crafts a more direct attack on the lyrical abilities of popular Houston rappers by having an antagonistic “other” openly question and disparage Lil Big Yung’s skills. The parodist places this more explicit commentary at the end of the performance, in a short narrative about an encounter Lil Big Yung has with an older fan of hip hop. In some measure, this final act of critique encapsulates a core criticism of the thug or G subject position, namely, that those artists who claim to be a G possess less skill than artists who reflexively focus on lyrical adroitness, hip hop tradition, and artistry – in other words, rappers like Midas.

To achieve this final critique, the parodist constructs a dialogue in which Lil Big Yung speaks with an older fan of hip hop, who plainly says the following: “I see what you doin, tryin to get yo paper [i.e. money] but, Nigga you can’t rap dog, like you doin music but you ain’t really sayin nothin mayne, you just repeatin words and shit like that.” In this excerpt, instead of “self”-directed critique, the parodist employs a form of ventriloquism to voice his opinion: Artists like Lil Big Yung do not skillfully rap.

Central here is the clash between the values and aesthetics of many popular Houston rappers and a loosely-knit social formation of local artists who build on and localize traditional elements of hip hop, a non-indigenous musical form in historical perspective. This clash largely revolves around differences in classed perspectives on materialism, consumption, and what it means to be both “a man” and an MC in the context of Houston hip hop. By embedding critique through constructed dialogue in the parody, Midas takes a position on the conflict between what some locals call “mainstream rap” and a counter-current in the Houston hip hop scene. This current or social formation comprises young, college-educated Black men whose current middle-class lifestyle and enduring commitment to hip hop as an art form meshes poorly with the G subject position championed by many popular local rappers. Though these two fluid social formations clash along a number of dimensions, Midas chooses to close his critique by ridiculing the lyrical abilities of popular Houston rappers. I propose that this choice speaks to the significance of valuing hip hop as art more than as a form of hustling to the social formation Midas elevates at the expense of popular local rap.

5 Conclusion

Through examining some of the strategies underpinning hip hop parody in this chapter, I have sought to throw light on how social actors draw on shared cultural knowledge to

critique the aesthetics and values of a dominant social formation. This shared knowledge in part comprises normative ideas regarding generic, intertextual precedents for taking up a G subject position in the field of popular Houston hip hop. Key here is the social history of discourse, particularly the prior, authoritative texts produced by established rappers with access to institutionalized channels of circulation and distribution. These artists, as I suggested at the outset of the chapter, make use of a practice I term metastylistic discourse in order to fashion a G persona, connected to the 'hood, and possessing characterological qualities associated with this subject position (resolve, physical prowess, being "down for anything" when conflict arises, etc.). Thus, rapping about stylistic practices enables artists to flesh out personae by describing the lifestyle of which these practices are partially constitutive. In this way and through explicit labeling, established rappers reify the G subjectivity.

This process involves repeated reference to a narrow range of social practices and personal qualities, portrayed as central to and distinctive of local, lived experience. It is through this type of semiotic boundary construction that popular artists establish a semiotic framework for self-portrayal as a G. This framework, or fluid set of intertextual precedents, gets swept up in the work of representation, through which the thug or G experience of place becomes discursively naturalized in and through Houston hip hop. This naturalization of style and (locally-available) personae yields, as Fat Tony's excerpt indicates, a problematic situation for artists whose personal biographies, values, and lifestyle mesh poorly with the stereotypical image of a Houston rapper.

This hegemonic social image and a collective recognition of its existence disadvantage those artists who do not identify with the G or thug subject position. It is in this way that "local rap" becomes political, as certain social perspectives stand at the margins of an essentializing rhetoric. In the interest of staking out a unique place for themselves in the local scene, rappers whose perspectives are marginalized take aim at the aesthetics and values of popular Houston rap music. Though in some cases these artists directly challenge prevailing norms regarding self-presentation in local hip hop cultural production, they also level veiled critiques at popular rap(pers) through parodic songs, such as "My Swag" by Lil Big Yung (more commonly known as King Midas of the group H.I.S.D.).

Through parody-as-social-action, artists such as Midas launch an indirect critique of popular rappers who claim to represent the city in which they all live. To effectively manage this parodic critique, Midas "stylizes" (Bakhtin 1984, Chun 2007 Coupland 2001a) or recontextualizes extant stylistic practices associated with popular local hip hop, practices in which the parodist does not normally engage. It is through recontextualization of such practices that Midas minimizes intertextual gaps between Lil Big Yung's performance and prior, authoritative texts. Doing so allows the artist to temporarily put on a parodic mask, taking up the subject position of "the other" by styling the G subject position Midas aims to critique. By orienting to and reproducing intertextual precedents set by popular rappers, such as the use of metastylistic discourse and socially-charged phonetic variants, Midas positions himself to critique popular rap music indirectly, "from the inside out."

Identifying stylistic practices adopted by the parodist to minimize intertextual gaps yields insights regarding shared knowledge of generic norms which mediate the production of local hip hop. These norms include a collective orientation to the range of

socially-differentiable personae associated with and representative of popular local rap, such as the thug, hustler, pimp, or G. In self-identifying as both a thug and a pimp, Lil Big Yung highlights one target of Midas' critique, specifically, rappers who identify with these subject positions. Moreover, by selectively rapping about particular stylistic practices and characterological traits, Midas provides us with insights regarding which practices and qualities a musically-socialized audience associates with the construction of (legitimate) personae in popular local hip hop.

To arrive at this conclusion, we must appreciate the collaborative role of the (target) audience in co-constructing Midas' parodic critique. Some measure of mutual calibration regarding generic hip hop norms undergirds the performance and makes the parody possible, since interpreting "My Swag" as parodic depends in part on an audience knowledgeable of competing hip hop cultures in Houston. This claim is supported by the online debate, mentioned in §4, regarding whether Lil Big Yung is "for real" or an artist-in-mask, taking a shot at the status quo. Arguably, the fact that some people who listened to the song posted remarks indicating that they did not perceive "My Swag" as parodic suggests that these listeners lacked the shared knowledge that Midas exploits to level his critique. This observation speaks to the socially-distributed, fragmented nature of discourse: In the case of the online debate, people sensitive to the political economy of local hip hop pointed out that the rapper in "My Swag" was actually somewhat of a ventriloquist's dummy, enabling Midas to put his words in the mouths of constructed characters, such as Lil Big Yung and the old person who disparages him in the outro of the song.

Interpreting Midas' performance as a parody also depends on rhetorical cues, intertextual gaps which help key a parodic frame of interpretation. By maximizing particular gaps between prior texts and Lil Big Yung's performance, the parodist creates discontinuity with authoritative texts, calling attention to what is said to maximize the gap. In part, it is in this way that Midas cues his audience to listen "between the lines," to examine the performance as veiled critique.

For example, regarding the generic normativity of self-aggrandizement, the parodist juxtaposes "self"-directed critique with the generic use of metastylistic discourse, through which Midas attacks Lil Big Yung and rappers like him. We see this strategy in line 24, in the chorus, where the parodist describes well-endowed women ("onion booty girls") intimately touching his "underoos," a type of made-to-match underwear worn by children. Here, Midas undermines Lil Big Yung's masculinity by portraying him in "little boys'" underpants. It is through this type of juxtaposition that Midas breaks with intertextual precedents for self-aggrandizement and invites the audience to read the text not as a "straight" performance, but as the type of performance in which ridiculing oneself makes sense. Coupled with shared knowledge of the Houston hip hop scene, these cues lead musically-socialized listeners to a parodic reading of the text, as evidenced by the number of online listeners who identified "My Swag" as a vehicle for critique.

Finally, I propose that Midas' parody speaks to the issue of agency in language use. Specifically, "My Swag" exemplifies how social actors draw on presumed shared knowledge of generic and stylistic norms in order to bring convention and the status quo into focus and critique them. As Carter (2007) suggests (citing Butler (2004)), though our actions may be mediated by historical precedents which sediment as norms, we exercise

some form of agency in recognizing these norms and calling them into question, as Midas does through hip hop parody.

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