If today the griot is reduced to turning his musical art to account or even to working with his hands in order to live, it was not always so in ancient Africa. Formerly “griots” were the counsellors of kings, they conserved the constitutions of kingdoms by memory work alone; each princely family had its griot appointed to preserve tradition; it was from among the griots that kings used to choose the tutors for young princes. In the very hierarchical society of Africa before colonization, where everyone found his place, the griot appears as one of the most important of this society, because it is he who, for want of archives, records the customs, traditions and governmental principles of kings. The social upheavals due to the conquest obliged the griots to live otherwise today; thus they turn to account what had been, until then, their fief, viz. the art of eloquence and music.

D. T. Niane, Preface, Sandiata: An Epic of Old Mali

Another important aspect of African music was the use of folk tales in song lyrics, riddles, proverbs, etc., which, even when not accompanied by music, were the African’s chief method of education, the way the wisdom of the elders was passed down to the young. The use of these folk stories and legends in the songs of the American Negro was quite common, although it was not as common as the proportion of “Americanized” or American material grew. There are however, definite survivals not only in the animal tales which have become part of this country’s tradition (the Uncle Remus/Ber’er Rabbit tales, for example) but in the lyrics of work songs and even later blues forms.

Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Blues People

But then there’s something else about that, about Watts and rap. Watts has always been [a] very, very vocal community. Maxine Waters is a rapper. People that come from out there talk good. I don’t know why, those people have always been very, very vocal, and it’s always been a rapping thing.

Anthony Hamilton of the Watts Prophets, in Brian Cross, It’s Not About a Salary

Rap has always been here for many years. When God talked to Moses and any other prophets, he was rappin’ with them. If you look at the 30s and the 20s with Cab Calloway—Hi-De-, Hi-De-Ho, the bebop—they were also having they style of rap. If you look at the dozens where you talk about yo mama or yo papa, that was dealing with rap.

Afrika Bambaataa, in The Show

Representin’. That’s what the Hip hop community calls it when someone, especially a Hip hop artist (be it graffiti writer, break boy/girl, deejay, or emcee), gives “authentic” voice to the attitude, style, and collective identity of his or her hood and peoples. For instance, West Coast rap group South Central Cartel (the S.C.C.) might say “We representin’ South Central, LA”; Bronx rapper Fat Joe might declare “I represent that Latin flavor of Bronx Hip hop”; or, as rapper and No Limit Records CEO Master P put it down after recently receiving an American music award, “New Orleans, Third Ward representin’, you heard?” A problematic concept perhaps for its essentializing impulse (as if any community or people could be singularly represented), the term nonetheless is an excellent example of the unpredictable way in which the Hip hop community appropriates the language of the American mainstream and invests it with its own unique vibe. That’s why the word is representin’ and not representing or representation, though the differences between each form are slight.

Though I’m no rapper (not in rhymes anyway), in this chapter I want to do a little representin’ of my own. Naw, I don’t mean representin’ South Park in Houston, Texas, where I spent a critical part of my childhood; and besides, Ganksta N-I-P, South Park Mexican, Lil’ Keke, and them got that part of H-town pretty much sewed up. Since I call myself a rhetorician—one who conceptualizes and critiques discourses like rap—here I want to represent rhetoric—represent, that is, the verbal art of
rappin’ as definitive of rhetoric in the African American vernacular. Not that black vernacular rhetoric ain’t already been represented, for some years ago African American literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., posited “signifying(g)’ as the rhetorical principle in African American vernacular discourse. Excerpting Gates’s chapter on the rhetoric of “signifying(g)” in their groundbreaking anthology *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, rhetoricians Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg clearly endorse Gates’s conceptualization of African American rhetoric. I give Bizzell and Herzberg mad props for being the first to recognize, in a formal way, black vernacular discursive practices as part of the Western rhetorical tradition. Most anthologies, canons, and histories of Western or American rhetoric scarcely even mention the long tradition of African American formal oratory (speeches by Henry Highland Garnet, Mary Church Terrell, and Richard Allen, to name a few) let alone African American vernacular discourses (such as signifying, storytelling, toasts, or the dozens). Theirs is a model of the work that rhetoricians have yet to do—that is, to reconceptualize or reconstruct Western rhetoric so that it more accurately reflects historical reality.

But in spite of the authors’ pioneering effort to inscribe African American discourses into the rhetorical history books, I am concerned about how they represent the black vernacular rhetorical tradition. Specifically, I wonder about their selection of a single text that posits the African American trickster figure as the sum total of black vernacular rhetoric or, as Henry Louis Gates puts it, as the *homo rhetoricus Africanus*, man of African rhetoric. Of course, Gates is right to suggest that the West African trickster, Esu-Elegbara, or rather his African American cousin, the Signifying Monkey, is one of our most prominent discursive forbears; but is the monkey or the mythic trickster figure worthy of the designation *homo rhetoricus Africanus*? If so, then that ascribes a whole lotta rhetorical weight to one little mischievous simian and makes signifying the sine qua non of black vernacular discourse. And yet, how can that be if one of Gates’s primary sources in support of his proposition doesn’t deem it so? Surprisingly, Gates fails to acknowledge H. Rap Brown’s proviso that “before you can signify you got to be able to rap.” The verbal art of *rap* or *rapping* (usually pronounced *rappin’*) is absent from Gates’s conceptualization of African American vernacular rhetoric.

Not unlike Gates’s “signifying(g)’,” rappin’ can be linked to African oral traditions, particularly the West African discursive tradition of the griot. Ultimately, like the griots of old, African American rappers preserve tradition—preserve, that is, the African American vernacular tradition through the art of eloquence and music. Or as Geneva Smitherman puts it in an essay on communicative practices in the Hip hop Nation, “The rap music of the Hip-Hop Nation simultaneously reflects the cultural evolution of the Black Oral Tradition and the construction of a contemporary resistance rhetoric.” In this chapter, then, I look at rappin’ as key to understanding rhetoric in the African American vernacular. By drawing connections between the oratory of West African griots, the discursive practice of rappin’ among African American street talkers, the Spoken Word poetry of the ’60s and ’70s, and contemporary rap poetry/music, I propose to show that African American vernacular rhetoric is best represented by what one might call the *power of the rap*.

**Traces of Signifying from South Africa to Mali to Afro-America**

Ironically, this line of critical inquiry came to me rather serendipitously while I was engaged in presenting a paper on signifying discourse at the First African Symposium on Rhetoric in Cape Town, South Africa, in the summer of 1994. Based on a tip about a book on South African history I received from Albie Sachs, an African National Congress party leader at the time and a keynote speaker at the symposium, I stumbled upon a brief reference to a certain black South African (pre-Apartheid) discursive practice that seemed strangely familiar to me. The book is titled *The Mind of South Africa: The Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, and in it the author, Allister Sparks, describes a certain war ritual among the Nguni, one of two black African language groups that settled in southern Africa perhaps as early as AD 300–800 but more definitively, Sparks assures, before the first Dutch settlement in 1652. Apparently, at times of war (which were not often major skirmishes) the Nguni code required a formal declaration of war consisting of taunting and dancing before battle. Sparks states that “the armies would line up to giya, as it is called in the Nguni languages, which meant to prance before one another and exchange taunts and gestures of bravado. Women and children would turn out to cheer on their men.”

What amazed me about this Nguni ritual is that it appears to be consistent with the traditions of Africans relatively far removed (in space and time) from the Nguni. Specifically, it occurred to me that there is an account of just such a ritual in *Sundjata*, the epic of thirteenth-century Mali. The exchange of taunts and gestures of bravado between the epic’s two main characters were so vivid to me as I read Sparks’s account. But not wishing to fall prey to the essentialist trap, I was prompted to query how a war ritual in southern Africa could also be a common practice in West Africa. Since the term *giya* (or an equivalent of Sparks’s translation of the term) doesn’t appear in *Sundjata*, it’s unlikely that the ritual is practiced by Africans universally. Historical accounts reveal, though, that migrations in sub-Saharan Africa were fairly common from the fourth
century on. Most notably, the Bantu-speaking peoples migrated from West Africa to Central Africa, gradually expanding to southern Africa. Still, this doesn't entirely explain the link between the Nguni and the inhabitants of Mali, as Mali, even during the vast empire of the thirteenth century, sits well north and west of the Cameroon-Nigerian seaboard boundaries of the Bantu language family.

In any case, the South Africa–Mali discursive connection appears at least partially accurate, and it suggests, I believe, something about discursive or rhetorical practices in Africa. Here, for example, is the ritual exchange—the formal declaration of war—between Sundiata, the would-be king of Mali, and Soumaoro, the Soso king who usurped the throne from Sundiata’s elder brother. Notice the exaggerated boasting and elaborate use of metaphor beginning with Soumaoro’s second statement below.

“Stop, young man. Henceforth I am the king of Mali. If you want peace, return to where you came from,” said Soumaoro.

“I am coming back, Soumaoro, to recapture my kingdom. If you want peace you will make amends to my allies and return to Soso where you are king.”

“I am king of Mali by force of arms. My rights have been established by conquest.”

“Then I will take Mali from you by force of arms and chase you from my kingdom.”

“Know, then, that I am the wild yam of the rocks; nothing will make me leave Mali.”

“Know, also that I have in my camp seven master smiths who will shatter the rocks. Then, yam, I will eat you.”

“I am the poisonous mushroom that makes the fearless vomit.”

“As for me, I am the ravenous cock, the poison does not matter to me.”

“Behave yourself, little boy, or you will burn your foot, for I am the red-hot cinder.”

“But me, I am the rain that extinguishes the cinder; I am the boisterous torrent that will carry you off.”

“I am the mighty silk-cotton tree that looks from on high on the tops of other trees.”

“And I, I am the strangling creeper that climbs to the top of the forest giant.”

“Enough of this argument. You shall not have Mali.”

Unfortunately, Sparks’s account of the giya doesn’t include a similar example from the South African Nguni. Yet, he points out that the Nguni practiced the giya war ritual even up to the early nineteenth century. In fact, were it not for the renowned Zulu militarist Shaka Zulu, who despised these “paltry” ritualistic displays, it might have remained so well into the twentieth century. In the case of Mali, however, the formal declaration of war was clearly a common ancient practice, for according to Mamadou Koyate—the griot of the 1960 version of Sundiata (originally translated from Mandingo to French)—“just as a sorcerer ought not to attack someone without taking him to task for some evil deed, so a king should not wage war without saying why he is taking up arms.” The striking thing for me about the giya, though, is not so much the sociopolitical circumstances that gave rise to it (or its downfall, in the case of the South African Zulus) but the peculiar banter between the combatants, this penchant for battle with words before (and at times in lieu of) arms.

Though some seven-hundred-plus years later and a whole continent apart, those familiar with contemporary African American folk culture will easily recognize this kind of combative exchange. Generally, it’s what we call in the United States the dozens (if yo mama or other relatives are the target) or signifying (if the comic insult is hurled at you), though today’s Hip hop generation is likely more accustomed to the term snaps or snapping. Three books and corresponding audiotapecs on snaps appeared in the mid-'90s, some featuring recognized Hip hop artists. Back in the day (the late ’70s), though, Geneva Smitherman had already dropped some knowledge about snaps (signifying exchanges) on the urban and rural street corners of Black America. Here’s an example she gives of two bloods playfully snapping on each other in the ’70s:

“If you don’t quit messin wif me, uhma jump down your throat, tap dance on your liver, and make you wish you never been born.”

“Yeah, you and how many armies? Nigger, don’t you know uh huh so bad I can step on a wad of gum and tell you what flavor it is.”

However, an even better example of this kind of boastful snapping or signifying can be found in the very lines that Gates cites from H. Rap Brown’s autobiography, Die Nigger Die! In those lines, Brown (now Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin) describes how a signifying session typically began and then how he, being Rap Brown, would respond. Now, it is street talk, the province of machismo, so the rhymes tend to be sexually explicit, sexist, and full of ego—just so you know.
A session would start maybe by a brother saying, “Man, before you mess with me you’d rather run rabbits, eat shit and bark at the moon.” Then, if he was talking to me, I’d tell him:

Man, you must don’t know who I am.
I’m sweet peeter jeeter the womb beater
The baby maker the cradle shaker
The deerslayer the buckbinder the women finder
Known from the Gold Coast to the rocky shores of Maine
Rap is my name and love is my game.
I’m the bed tucker the cock plucker the motherfucker
The milkshaker the record breaker the population maker
The gun-slinger the baby bringer
The hum-dinger the pussy ringer
The man with the terrible middle finger.
The hard hitter the bullshitter the poly-nussy getter
The beast from the East the Judge the sludge
The women’s pet the men’s fret and the punk’s pin-up boy.
They call me Rap the dicker the ass kicker
The cherry picker the city slicker the titty licker
And I ain’t giving up nothing but bubble gum and hard times and I’m fresh out of bubble gum.
I’m giving up wooden nickels ‘cause I know they won’t spend
And I got a pocketful of splinter change.
I’m a member of the bathtub club: I’m seeing a whole lot of ass but I ain’t taking no shit."12

Interestingly, the lines that follow closely resemble the nature metaphors in the Sundiata-Soumaoro exchange:

I’m the man who walked the water and tied the whale’s tail in a knot
Taught the little fishes how to swim
Crossed the burning sands and shook the devil’s hand
Rode round the world on the back of a snail carrying a sack saying AIR MAIL.
Walked 49 miles of barbwire and used a Cobra snake for a necktie
And got a brand new house on the roadside made from a cracker’s hide,
Got a brand new chimney setting on top made from the cracker’s skull
Took a hammer and nail and built the world and calls it “The Bucket of Blood.”
Yes, I’m hemp the demp the women’s pimp
Women fight for my delight.
I’m a bad motherfucker. Rap the rip-saw the devil’s brother ’n law.
I roam the world I’m known to wander and this .45 is where I get my thunder.
I’m the only man in the world who knows why white milk makes yellow butter.
I know where the lights go when you cut the switch off
I might not be the best in the world, but I’m in the top two and my brother’s getting old.
And ain’t nothing bad ’bout you but your breath.”13

Clearly, signifying ain’t lost a beat on the bumpy ride from Africa to America. In fact, it seem like brohas been sigging since they stepped off the boat. But as revealing as the Sundiata-Soumaoro exchange is about early and modern African ritualized discourse (for example, forms of signifying) and the survival of this discourse in the contemporary United States, in itself the exchange represents a relatively small portion of Sundiata. For in its entirety, Sundiata is the griot’s epic tale of old Mali. The “signifying” exchange in Sundiata, in other words, represents at best one of many discursive practices the griot reveals in the epic. In fact, in the case of the aforementioned exchange, it’s not even the griot himself who signifies; rather, as teller of this particular version of the Sundiata narrative, Mamadou Koyate simply gives his auditors a rundown or report of the “signifying” session, or giya, that occurs between the epic’s main characters, Maghan Sundiata and Soumaoro Kante, the day before battle. Thus, in the narrative, neither Koyate or Balla Fasseke, who actually appears as Sundiata’s griot in the epic, engages in signifying per se. What one finds in the speech of these griots is not signifying but rather a narrative form of oratory that in the African American vernacular one might call storytelling or, more loosely, rapping.

Now some may chide me for making what seems to be a gigantic leap here, but if we can accept Brown’s assertion that one’s ability to rap precedes his or her ability to signify, then, it seems to me, we can also concede that the griot’s oratory precedes or supersedes the discourse of the Signifying Monkey. I am assuming here, of course, definite, verifiable links between West African griots (ancient and modern) and African American soul brothers like H. Rap Brown who have developed the black vernacular tradition of rapping. In what follows, I trace some of these links.
CHAPTER 2

THE GRIOT: MASTER OF THE WORD

But before I do so let me first give some background on the griot, for even though the term has been often cited by Afrocentrists and rap music critics, the various griot types and functions in African societies aren’t as often acknowledged or explored.

Though the precise origin of the term griot is unknown, Malian specialist in oral traditions A. Hampaté Bâ explains that griots (a French term), or rather dielis (in Bambara and Mandingo), are a special caste of West African poets, musicians, singers, and magicians who bear responsibility for “entertaining the public and for enlivening the proceedings at official or private ceremonies.”14 Bâ further points out that while some griots (probably those of low status) are said to have double tongues—that is, have the right as entertainers “to misrepresent the truth and invent lies”—others such as the royal griots (dielis-faama) are virtuous men who adhere devoutly to the truth.15 He thus classifies griots into three broad categories: 1) musicians, singers, and composers; 2) ambassadors attached to royal courts or to individuals; and 3) genealogists, historians, and composers of oral texts.16

Thomas Hale, an American scholar of African literature, gives an even more complex account of the term griot and the various functions griots perform in society. In his excellent book Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire, Hale delineates the various terms for griot in West African societies. In addition to the Mande term jele (alternatively gauulo), the term for “the lowest class of griots who insult people to obtain rewards,” there is the Wolof term for praise singers, geewel.17 Drawing on the work of Gordon Innes, Hale notes that the Gambian Mandinka use the term jalo for griot, but they qualify it to indicate certain special classes such as danna jalo for the hunter’s griot, mbo jalo for the itinerant entertainer, and fimo jalo for “griots whose perspective is more deeply rooted in Islamic studies.”18 The Soninke use the term jesere or kusatage for ordinary griot and Jesere-dunka for master griot.19 “Among the Fulani in the Fouta Toro region,” Hale reports, “the generic term for bard is gauolo or, less often, mabo, but farba designates master griot, while the awulbe knows the genealogy and praises for a particular family and the nyamakala is simply a wandering singer and instrumentalist.”20 Farther east, other terms for the griot include bendere among the Mossi and marok’a among the Hausa.21

According to Hale’s classifications, then, jele or griot Mamadou Kouyate, the narrator of Sundiata, appears to be among the lowest class of griots—a jele or gauulo in Mande-speaking societies. However, by his own account, Mamadou Kouyate professes himself a master griot—a jesere dunka (Soninke) or farba (Fulani) perhaps; he is a member of the Kouyate family that has served as royal griots to the Keita princes since ancient Mali. Perhaps because of his royal status, then, he describes himself as no mere musician or historian but a “master in the art of eloquence.”22 In addition, he states that he and his forefathers are “vessels of speech,” “repositories which harbor secrets many centuries old,” for they are the “memory of mankind” and “by the spoken word [they] bring to life the deeds and exploits of kings for younger generations.”23

By the end of the epic, Kouyate reveals how he acquired the knowledge of a griot. As a kind of itinerant pupil, he traveled from village to village throughout Mali to learn from the great masters in the art of speaking. The translator of Kouyate’s epic tale (into French from Mandingo), D. T. Niane, gives even keener insight into the griot’s technical training. In a note on the text, Niane explains that

Griot traditionists [sic] travel a great deal before being “Belen-Tigui”—Master of speech in Mandingo. This expression is formed from “belen” which is the name for the tree trunk planted in the middle of the public square and on which the orator rests when he is addressing the crowd. “Tigui” means “master of.”24

Thus, from these statements we can see that at some level the griot (some of them at any rate) is a kind of orator, a master in the art of eloquence. But just what kind of eloquence is he master of? Is he a master of signifying, say, in the order of H. Rap Brown, or perhaps Sundiata and Soumaoro? Niane calls the griot’s craft the art of historical oratory, but elsewhere he also refers to it as the art of circumlocution because the griot “speaks in archaic formulas, or else he turns facts into amusing legends for the public, which legends have, however, a second sense which the vulgar little suspect.”25 In a sense, then, especially if we accept Gates’s claim that circumlocution and indirection are essential components of signifying (that is, the metaphoric variety described by Claudia Mitchell-Kernan in Language Behavior in a Black Urban Community), the griot is perhaps a master in the art of signification. However, because signifying plays a relatively minor role in Sundiata, I’m apprehensive about this assertion. Again, signifying (or something quite like it) may constitute part of the griot’s eloquence, but it’s not the sum total of his art.

A sample of the griot’s actual oratory, in fact, comes just a few lines after the Sundiata-Soumaoro “signifying” exchange. I quote the entirety of the griot’s speech here to illustrate the structural and substantive components of griot oratory. To incite Sundiata for battle the next day, his personal griot, Balla Fasseke, reminds him of Mali’s history:
Now I address myself to you Maghan Sundiata, I speak to you king of Mali, to whom dethroned monarchs flock. The time foretold to you by the jinn is now coming. Sundiata, kingdoms and empires are in the likeness of man; like him they are born, they grow and disappear. Each sovereign embodies one moment of that life. Formerly, the kings of Ghana extended their kingdom over all the lands inhabited by the black man, but the circle has closed and the Cisses of Wagadou are nothing more than petty princes in a desolate land. Today, another kingdom looms up, powerful, the kingdom of Sosso. Humbled kings have borne their tribute to Sosso, Soumaoro’s arrogance knows no bounds and his cruelty is equal to his ambition. But will Soumaoro dominate the world?

Are we, the griots of Mali, condemned to pass on to future generations the humiliations which the king of Sosso cares to inflict on our country? No, you may be glad, children of the “Bright Country,” for the kingship of Sosso is but the growth of yesterday, whereas that of Mali dates from the time of Bilali. Each kingdom has its childhood, but Soumaoro wants to force the pace, and so Sosso will collapse under him like a horse worn out beneath its rider.

You, Maghan, you are Mali. It has had a long and difficult childhood like you. Sixteen kings have preceded you on the throne of Niani, sixteen kings have reigned with varying fortunes, but from being village chiefs the Keitas have become tribal chiefs and then kings. Sixteen generations have consolidated their power. You are the outgrowth of Mali just as the silk-cotton tree is the growth of the earth, born of deep and mighty roots. To face the tempest the tree must have long roots and gnarled branches. Maghan Sundiata, has not the tree grown?

I would have you know, son of Sogolon, that there is not room for two kings around the same calabash of rice. When a new cock comes to the poultry run the old cock picks a quarrel with him and the docile hens wait to see if the new arrival asserts himself or yields. You have come to Mali. Very well, then, assert yourself. Strength makes a law of its own self and power allows no division.

But listen to what your ancestors did, so that you will know what you have to do.

Bilali, the second of the name, conquered old Mali. La-
tal Kalabi conquered the country between the Niger and the Sankarani. By going to Mecca, Lahibatoul Kalabi, of illustrious memory, brought divine blessing upon Mali. Mamadi Kani made warriors out of hunters and bestowed armed strength upon Mali. His son Bamari Tagnokelin, the vindictive king, terrorized Mali with this army, but Maghan Kon Fatta, also called Nare Maghan, to whom you owe your being, made peace prevail and happy mothers yielded Mali a populous youth.

You are the son of Nare Maghan, but you are also the son of your mother Sogolon, the buffalo-woman, before whom powerless sorcerers shrunk in fear. You have the strength and majesty of the lion, you have the might of the buffalo.

I have told you what future generations will learn about your ancestors, but what will we be able to relate to our sons so that your memory will stay alive, what will we have to teach our sons about you? What unprecedented exploits, what unheard-of feats? By what distinguished actions will our sons be brought to regret not having lived in the time of Sundiata?

Griots are men of the spoken word, and by the spoken word we give life to the gestures of kings. But words are nothing but words; power lies in deeds. Be a man of action; do not answer me any more with your mouth, but tomorrow, on the plain of Krina, show me what you would have me recount to coming generations. Tomorrow allow me to sing the “Song of the Vultures” over the bodies of the thousands of Sossos whom your sword will have laid low before evening.26

In spite of a few indirect references (for instance, metaphoric expressions like the old and new cocks), the griot here doesn’t appear to engage in any particular aspect of signifying. Instead, griot Balla Fasseke is direct, even hortative in his appeal to the young warrior. According to Hale, such exhortations or inciting of listeners to action is “one of the least known functions of the griot,” though evidence of it dates as far back as the fourteenth century.27 In one of the first written accounts about griots, medieval Islamic travel writer Ibn Battuta reports that the griots in the royal court of Mali would “stand before the sultan . . . and recite their poetry,” which they considered to be “a kind of preaching.”28 Hale concludes from this and the preceding Balla-Fasseke example that
the griot is, above all else, "a master of the spoken word"—a word that is in fact "endowed with an occult power, known as nyama among the Mande-speaking people."  

So if the griot isn’t here signifying and yet he’s considered to be a master of the spoken word, then how could one best describe his eloquence in terms of the African American vernacular? Some folklorists and linguists assume, perhaps rightly, that griot historical narratives like Sundiata closely resemble the African American toast in that they share conventions of the traditional epic poem. Roger Abrahams, Bruce Jackson, and William Labov have each noted the epic qualities of toasts like “The Signifying Monkey and the Lion,” “Shine and the Titanic,” and “Stag-O-Lee.” British and American researchers Viv Edwards and Thomas Sienkewicz have even drawn explicit parallels between epic poets in Eastern Europe, West African griots (jeli), and African American “toasters.” In Oral Cultures Past and Present: Rappin’ and Homer, the authors write:

In a similar vein, Lord (1960: 21–6) talks of the varying levels of performance in Yugoslav singers of heroic epics; and Johnson (1986: 24) notes that in West Africa only some jeli achieve the status of master singer and then only after many years of apprenticeship. Abrahams (1970b: 93) estimates that within any Afro-American neighbourhood there will be perhaps half a dozen accomplished “toasters” or performers of epic verse.

From these statements, it would appear that the griot’s eloquence is none other than the black vernacular toast, the rhyming folk poem that presumably originated in the 1940s or ‘50s as a later development of the African American folk song and ballad. But Edwards and Sienkewicz’s work ultimately goes a step further. In fact, the central premise of the book is that because of their highly developed oral skill, audience/speaker dynamics, and communal role, the Greek rhapsode (singer of epic tales) is analogous to the contemporary rap artist.

It is interesting to speculate further on possible links between the classical rhapsode and the contemporary rapper. In the absence of any documentation on the origins of the term “rap,” we might do a great deal worse than falling back on to folk etymologies (Hardwige, personal communication). To sustain the imagery of the sub-title of this book, it could be argued that Homer was, in fact, a rapper.

The authors somehow seem to have missed Clarence Major’s denotation of rap in Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang (which I will discuss), but even so they clearly see a link between epic poets, griots, and modern-day rappers. Such associations lead me to propose that the griot be considered a master of rapping—that is, as I see it, a master of African American vernacular speech (which may include—or at least enable one to engage in—signifying, toasting, the dozens, loud talking, the whole nine). But what specifically connects contemporary rap to ancient griot oratory? Or put another way, how do we get from Belen-Tigui, master of speech in Mandingo, to master of the power of the rap?

FROM BELEN-TIQUI TO THE POWER OF THE RAP

To answer this question, we first gotta get schooled on the history of rapping, 'cause some of y'all probably think the term was invented by the Sugarhill Gang when they released “Rapper’s Delight” in 1979. Yes, rap music started about that time—well, actually earlier, when Kool DJ Herc started mixing records and some vocals around 1973–74—but see, we was rappin’ when I was a kid back in the ‘60s and even before that. As far as I can tell at this point, Clarence Major seems to offer the best historical account of the term rap or rapping. In Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang, he points out that the term rap has long-standing origins in African and European cultures that may have converged among African American speakers in the 1940s. For instance, as a verb, rap has been used in Sierra Leone since the 1730s to mean “to con, fool, flirt, tease, or taunt.” On the other hand, as a noun in European usage it has come to mean any number of things, such as a false oath, the theft of a purse, or a cant since the seventeenth century. Interestingly, Major notes that the term has meant “to talk or converse” since the 1870s, well before it was ever adopted by African American speakers. African Americans picked up the term, Major purports, in the late 1940s when rap came to mean “to hold a conversation; a long, impressive, lyrical social or political monologue; rapid, clever talk; rhyming monologue; conversation as a highly self-conscious art form.” Major’s definition is, therefore, broad enough that it could perhaps easily support my assertion about a direct, rhetorical link between rap and the griot’s unique oratory, especially his point about rap being a “lyrical social,” “political,” and “rhyming” monologue.

In her own lexicon titled Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner, Smitherman likewise associates rap with talk—that is, “any kind of strong, aggressive, highly fluent, powerful talk.” However, she contends that rap became “talk” only after it crossed over from its original meaning: “[R]omantic conversation from
a man to a woman to win her affection and sexual favors."¹⁴ Thomas Kochman had earlier noted this romantic aspect of rapping, but, unlike Smitherman, he doesn't suggest that this meaning has any priority over rapping as casual conversation. In fact, for Kochman rapping is primarily talk, only not mere "ordinary conversation" but rather "a fluent and a lively way of talking, always characterized by a high degree of personal style."¹⁵ Because one characteristically raps to rather than with someone, Kochman further claims that "rapping is to be regarded more as a performance than verbal exchange"; that is, "rapping projects the personality, personal appearance and style of the performer."¹⁶ Now keep in mind this notion of rapping/conversing as performance because it'll come up again in the section on rap poetry and music.

Based on his ethnographic work in Chicago, Kochman identifies three distinct kinds of rapping: rapping or narrating to your peeps about something in the past, rapping (sweet talking) to a honey when you're on the make, and rapping or throwing down some con to a lame outside the hood when you're hustling for money or some other material good. Put in Kochman's own words: 1) "To one's own group, rapping may be descriptive of an interesting narration, a colorful rundown of some past event"; 2) "Rapping to a woman is a colorful way of 'asking for some pussy'"; and 3) "When 'whupping the game' on a 'trick' or a 'lame' (trying to get goods or services from someone who looks like he can be swindled), rapping is often descriptive of the highly stylized verbal part of the maneuver."¹⁷

Kochman gives some helpful examples of each of these types of rapping, but since the first type most closely resembles the griot's oratory (though some West Africans like Manthia Diawara might propose instead a resemblance to the third type of rap, that is, contemporary griot speech as "'whupping the game' on a gullible public"), I'll only cite the example of that variety. (I should also mention, though, as Kochman himself points out, the best example of rapping, especially as a kind of persuasive discourse, can be found in the romantic variety as it's expressed in the person of the sweet-talking pimp. We'll check him out later when we peep chapter 4, "The Player's (Book) Club.") In the rap-as-narrative example below, a Chicago gang member relays to a youth worker how his gang was organized.

Now I'm goin tell you how the jive really started. I'm goin to tell you how the club got this big. 'Bout 1956 there used to be a time when the Jackson Park show was open and the Stony show was open. Sixty-six street, Jeff, Gene, all of 'em, little bitty dudes, little bitty . . . Gene wasn't with 'em then. Gene was a cribbin (living) over here. Jeff, all of 'em, real little bitty dudes, you dig? All of us were little.

Sixty-six (the gang on sixty-sixth street), they wouldn't allow us in the Jackson Park show. That was when the parky (?) was headin it. Everybody say, If we want to go to the show, we go! One day, who was it? Carl Robinson. He went up to the show . . . and Jeff fired on him. He came back and all this was swelled up 'bout yay big, you know. He come back over to the hood (neighborhood). He told (name unclear) and them dudes went up there. That was when mostly all the main sixty-six boys was over here like Bett Riley. All of 'em was over here. People that quit gangbangin (fighting, especially as a group), Marvell Gates, people like that.

They went up there, John, Roy and Skeeter went in there. And they start hubbuggin (fighting) in there. That's how it all started. Sixty-Six found out they couldn't beat us, at that time. They couldn't whup seven-o. Am I right Leroy? You was a cribbin over here then. Am I right? We were dynamite! Used to be a time, you ain't have a passport, Man, you couldn't walk through here. And if didn't nobody know you it was worse than that."¹⁸

Not exactly a precise rendition of Balla Fasseke's speech, I admit, but the point is that with rapping, ordinary conversation becomes a performance, one no less central to the maintenance of African American social life than the griot performances were and still are to West African societies. Besides, my sense from H. Rap Brown's concept of rapping is that the term is synonymous with the clever use of words—that is, with the ability of the speaker to use language effectively rather than with a particular discourse genre or form. In this respect, then, Bizzell and Herzberg actually got it right when they defined rapping as a "general ability to use rhetorical devices."¹⁹ Like the griot, one could say, the rapper is a master of the culture's many rhetorical devices. But judging from Roger Abrahams's treatment of rapping in "Black Talking on the Streets," the term can claim no such universal application. In fact, unlike other discourse forms such as signifying and sounding, rapping doesn't even appear in his taxonomy of black street speech. In a glossary of terms at the end of the article, Abrahams reasons

With many informants in the last ten years there has been the feeling that the term rapping was the appropriate one
for this public (street) talking—a perspective seemingly shared by Kochman when he noted that “Rapping [is] used ... to mean ordinary conversation.” ... But when asked whether terms like sounding or shaking were a kind of rapping, informants’ responses are usually an initial giggle and then an “I guess so.” I think that the reason my informants laughed when I asked them whether such terms are kinds of rapping was that while on the one hand rapping means “just talking,” on the other hand in its most common use it refers to interactions somewhat less public than the larger playing contest activities. That is, rapping in its more pointed use is something generally carried on in person-to-person exchanges, ones in which the participants don’t know each other well; it is often therefore a kind of out of the house talking which is primarily manipulative.9

Abrahams may have a point about this distinction between public/private uses of the term rapping, but I don’t think that it necessarily negates Kochman’s, Smitherman’s, or Major’s definitions of the term and its function in African American vernacular culture. Clearly, as a descriptive term used in many urban communities, rapping can have a variety of meanings, broad and narrow. For my own purposes, I opt for the broad version because, as I’ve stated, rapping appears to be the most direct link between griot oratory and African American vernacular discourses in toto. Smitherman, in fact, infers such a link when in Talkin and Testifyin she relates what she calls the “power of the rap” to the traditional African concept of Nommo, “the magic power of the Word.”10 After she cites the Sundiata–Soumaoro exchange as an example of the workings of Nommo in traditional African culture, she explains how Nommo manifests itself among African American speakers.

Even though blacks have embraced English as their native tongue, still the African cultural set persists, that is, a predisposition to imbue the English word with the same sense of value and commitment—“proppers,” as we would say—according to Nommo in African culture. Hence Afro-America’s emphasis on orality and belief in the power of the rap which has produced a style and idiom totally unlike that of whites, while paradoxically employing White English words.11

As Smitherman breaks down what this means in practice, notice how she identifies each of the various verbal performances as kinds of rap.

We’re talking, then, about a tradition in the black experience in which verbal performance becomes both a way of establishing “yo rep” as well as a teaching and socializing force. This performance is exhibited in the narration of myths, folk stories, and the semiserious tradition of “lyin” in general; in black sermons; in the telling of jokes; in proverbs and folk sayings; in street corner, barbershop, beauty shop, and other casual rap scenes; in “signifying,” “capping,” “testifying,” “toasting,” and other verbal arts. Through these raps of various kinds, black folk are acculturated—initiated—into the black value system. ... Black raps ain bout talkin loud and sayin nothin, for the speaker must be up on the subject of his rap, and his oral contribution must be presented in a dazzling, entertaining manner. Black speakers are flamboyant, flashy, and exaggerative; black raps are stylized, dramatic, and spectacular; speakers and raps become symbols of how to git oveh.12

“Orality and belief in the power of the rap” have, from this perspective, created the black vernacular style of speech, a distinctively Afrocentric style of English verbal performance exhibited in various types of rap, from signifying to toasting to testifying. Whether Smitherman means by this that rap is to be considered the architec tonic term for African American vernacular rhetoric, as Gates proposes with “signifying(g),” is not entirely clear. But construed as, in effect, the African American equivalent of Nommo, the power of the word, the rap or rappin’ evidently represents a fundamental rhetorical principle in African American vernacular speech. And yet this is only half of the story, for the griot’s oratory is best expressed through poetry and music. Thus, in what follows, I consider how rapping, the power of the rap, has spawned Spoken Word poetry and music.

FROM THE POWER OF THE RAP TO THE SPOKEN WORD

In a now out-of-print book on Los Angeles Hip hop titled It's Not about a Salary: Rap, Race, and Resistance in Los Angeles, Brian Cross gives a rather detailed account of the history of black Spoken Word poetry on vinyl. His account centers primarily on the period just after the Watts Rebellion of 1965, when, among other cultural developments like the café culture of South Central, a Hollywood philanthropist by the name of Bud Schulberg set up the Watts Writer’s Workshop.13 According to Cross, the Workshop showcased many African American poets, including the Watts Prophets (whom I discuss later), and established two distinct forms of
grassroots poetry: "one that was concerned with expanding the tradition of the toast, and another mainly concerned with finding verbal analogies for the instrumental experiments of John Coltrane, Archie Shepp, Ornette Coleman, Horace Tapscott, and Eric Dolphy." As a result of the Workshop, the Spoken Word poetry developed in LA at the time was either toast oriented or what an analogous group of poets in New York, the Last Poets, later dubbed "jazzpoetry." Though somewhat subtle, this distinction is important because it explains why, on the one hand, toast master Rudy Ray Moore is considered by some the godfather of rap and, on the other hand, groups like the Last Poets (who recorded around the same time as Moore) are regarded by others as the first rappers. However, Cross doesn't elaborate on the distinction. Fact is, he doesn't even mention Moore or any of the Workshop poets who might have put their toast-oriented poetry on wax. I suspect that a few of these recordings might exist because in 1972 one of the Last Poets, Jalal Nuriddin (as Lightnin' Rod), did a toast album called Hustlers Convention and in, I believe, 1976 author and ex-pimp Iceberg Slim (Robert Beck) recorded some toasts on his Reflections LP. Like Moore's, their toasts were set to music, some sort of jazz or blues rhythms, and reflected various aspects of black ghetto hustling culture. Of course, long before these dudes, even Moore, blues musicians and jazz artists sang toast ballads like "Stag-O-Lee" and the "Signifying Monkey" on record.

But Rudy Ray Moore may be solely responsible for the popularity of the toast, taking it from the street corners to records and even to the big screen. This may explain why biographers David L. Shabazz and Julian Shabazz consider Moore, among other things (such as folklorist, comedian, rapper, singer, and overall entertainer), "a modern grio," because Moore is "a walking history book in our midst full of Black literature and culture." Moore refers to himself simply as the "King of the Party Records" and, as I said, the "Godfather of Rapp." Moore was (and still is) an adept teller of toasts. Although his first records were straight-up comedy routines—Below the Belt and Let's All Come Together in 1961 and Beatnik Scene sometime later—around 1965 he began doing toasts in his club acts. As Moore tells the story, some ol' wino name Rico inspired him to do toasts: "A wino named Rico used to come to the store. I guess Rico was 65 or 70 years old, and he'd recite old Black folklore toasts. He'd come in and tell these tales and the people would fall out from laughter. So I said to myself if Rico can do that and people are laughing at him and he's not professional, what will they do if I do it professionally and put it on a record?" Eventually, Moore did put these routines, or what he calls his "raw-soul poetry," on wax, and voila, rapping on records was born! Dolemite, I mean Rudy Ray Moore, sets straight the history in the lines that follow.

Professing the Power of the Rap

So far as the recording edge of it, I probably am the beginning of rap today because it wasn't on record before me. Now the late Louis Jordan did a few things some years ago like "Brother Beware." He did a rap in the 40's and then Dusty Fletcher did a thing called "Open the Door, Richard."

"Richard, why don't you open that door? The Landlady done locked me out. She said I owe her some back rent, want to know when am I gon' pay her?" He said "She did good to get some front rent!"

According to Moore, then, the history of "rap" records began in the 1940s with jazzmen like Louis Jordan and Dusty Fletcher and was picked up by him in the late '60s. Moore conveniently skips over a whole lot of history and recording artists between the '40s and the '60s (some of whom I will discuss) to dub himself the originator of rap records, but, hey, I ain't mad at him. His toast performances on wax and on film clearly had some influence on rappers in the late '70s and the '80s (even now in the new millennium). Moore's first so-called rap album, Eat Out More Often, didn't actually appear until 1970, a year after the Last Poet's debut and the H. Rap Brown autobiography I cited earlier. The album includes well-recognized toasts—"Dolemite," "Great Titanic" (that is, "Shine" or "Shine and the Titanic"), and "Pimpin' Sam"—and some jokes, set to some jazzy rhythms but a far cry from the jazz-oriented poetry that began to proliferate at this time.

This form of Spoken Word poetry, it seems, has a long history, even before the writers workshops in Watts and Harlem came along. Though the records of many of these early performance poets are little known today, there probably wouldn't have been a Spoken Word movement in the late '60s and early '70s were it not for their influence. Cross lists a few of the artists who made "spoken word" (or rap, depending on your definition) records from the 1930s to the early '60s: literary giants like Langston Hughes (who actually began public readings of his jazz-oriented poems with jazz accompaniment in the late 1920s and recorded his 1920s Weary Blues poems to music in 1958), James Baldwin, and Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) (Black & Beautiful...Soul and Madness, Sonny's Time Now, and whose poems, even today, often include onomatopoeic jazz expressions); jazz legends Archie Shepp (the song "Malcolm, Malcolm-Semper Malcolm" on Fire Music and his Live in San Francisco al-
Proffesing the Power of the Rap

other '70s recordings, though the copy of the CD I recently found at a Cambridge, Massachusetts, record store isn’t dated. More recently, many of the poets of the Black Arts Movement (Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, who formerly as Don L. Lee has a record called Rappin’ & Readin’, Wanda Coleman, and Sonia Sanchez) are featured on a CD recorded live at the 1989 National Black Arts Festival. This unique contemporary recording of Black Arts poetry is called A Nation of Poets and was released in 1990, but it’s about as easy to find as Brer Soul.

Speaking of Brer Soul, that is, Melvin Van Peebles, his Brer Soul album is described by blaxploitation film critic Darius James as follows:

“Backed by minimalist Mingus-like music, it is ‘spoken-word’ performance at its raw best.”

James’s reference to “Mingus-like music,” of course, implies Van Peebles’s use of a jazz sound, but what he means by “raw best” performance of Spoken Word is anyone’s guess. Perhaps the album sounds a bit like the soundtrack Van Peebles later did in 1971 for his movie Sweet Sweetback’s Badassss Song. The movie’s theme song is titled “Sweetback Getting It Uptight and Preaching It So Hard the Bourgeois Reggin Angels in Heaven Turn Around.” The constant verbal exchanges between Sweetback and the chorus of black angels in the song, however, makes it sound less like a Spoken Word poem than a call-and-response session in Reben So-and-So’s church. Interestingly, though, the call-and-response format mixed with alternating hymn singing and jazz rhythms seems to foreshadow the practice of sampling in rap. His 1972 (or possibly 1973) recording What the ... You Mean I Can’t Sing? may more closely approximate the raw Spoken Word performance of Brer Soul, except that it substitutes the Mingus-like sound for an alternative musicality appropriate for singing. In an unexpected re-release of that rare album in the summer of 2003, Van Peebles relates how songs like “A Birth Certificate Ain’t Nothing But a Death Warrant Anyway” could be “straight rap” were it not for the song’s more musical orientation. If this song and others off the album like “Save the Watergate 500” resemble his earlier recordings, then Van Peebles’s style of rap is raw all right—the raw, improvisational conversation among brothas on the block.

The most widely acclaimed of the Spoken Word poets is, undoubtedly, the Last Poets, originally a collective of seven poets who took part in The East Wind, a black writers workshop in Harlem, New York, in 1968 that included Abiodun Oyewole (who left the group for a while after the first album to serve time in jail for robbery), Sulieman El-Hadji (who first appeared on the third album as Oyewole’s replacement), Alafia Pudim (who later changed his name to Jalaluddin Mansur Nuriddin), Omar Ben Hassen (who left the group after the first two albums), David Nelson, Gylan Kain, and Felipe Luciano. Due to some creative differences and/or other such dissension, Nelson, Kain, and Luciano left the group and

Chapter 2

42

b. Charles Mingus (his album Symposium on Jazz), Oscar Brown, Jr. (particularly “But I Was Cool” on his 1960 album Sin and Soul), and Slim Gaillard in the ‘30s and ‘40s; and other artists like Babs Gonzalez, Scatman Cruthers, Jon Hendricks, Eddie Jefferson, and, just like Rudy Ray Moore said, Louis Jordan. Except for the work of jazz artists like Shepp, Mingus, Brown, and Jordan, these early Spoken Word recordings are difficult to find and, thus, to classify. The Smithsonian Institution’s Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies houses a vast collection of Spoken Word recordings by Langston Hughes and other poets and has released them on its Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings label. Still, one can generally assume that this early stuff is a mixed bag of poetry (from the writers), scats (from Gaillard and Cruthers), and jazz/talk compositions (from the jazz artists), all in one way or another ushering in the watershed period of Spoken Word poetry in the late ’60s.

In the late ’60s and early ’70s, riding high on the revolutionary tide of the post–Malcolm/King era, in what is dubbed the Black Power and Black Arts Movements, young African Americans began taking up the cause through poetry. From Harlem, New York, to Watts, California, writing workshops sprang up to channel the immense energy and talent in America’s inner cities. Cross’s account covers a good number of the artists who put out Spoken Word poetry on wax. These include the Last Poets, the Original Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, Brer Soul (aka Melvin Van Peebles), Nikki Giovanni, Stanley Crouch, and the Watts Prophets. Since I’ve yet to find the rare recordings of Van Peebles (Brer Soul and As Serious as a Heart Attack) and Crouch (Ain’t No Ambulance for Niggers Tonight), I can’t say exactly what kind of Spoken Word poetry these artists recorded relative to the others I will describe. I suspect, though, that the work of Crouch (as a writer) may resemble that of Nikki Giovanni, except that she uses black gospel music in many songs (see Like a Ripple on a Pond or Truth Is on Its Way) and an upbeat party sound for “Ego Tripping” (Truth Is on Its Way). Since the ‘60s, Jayne Cortez has also performed poetry backed by a blues sound provided by a live band. One of her earliest collections is, I believe, Celebrations and Solitudes (1974), but I haven’t seen any available copies of it. However, a recent recording of hers with the Firespitter Band (1996) called “Endangered Species List Blues” appears on the compilation Our Souls Have Grown Deep Like the Rivers. Poet and professor Dudley Randall provides a discography of these poets and more in an anthology called The Black Poets, though it’s not clear whether each of the classic recordings he lists includes percussion, jazz, or blues rhythms to accompany the poetry. One poet not included in his discography but whose record Black Ivory clearly falls under the rubric of Spoken Word is Wanda Robinson. The music she recites her romantic soliloquies to is a mellow jazz sound that is reminiscent of
performed separately under a similar name but with a slight variation, calling themselves the Original Last Poets. I’m aware of only one major record they released as a group— that is, the soundtrack to a documentary film on the Last Poets (presumably on just the three of them) called Right On! The poetry on this album is quite similar to that of the other Last Poets, except Luciano gives this “original” bunch some nice Latin flavor in songs like “Un Rifle/Oracion-Rifle Player” and “Puerto Rican Rhythms.” But David Nelson’s “Die Nigger!!!” is probably the most famous piece on the Original Last Poets’ album, especially since a few lines from it were sampled in 1991 by a then quite popular (and intact except for Ice Cube) N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit Attitude) on a track called “Real Niggaz Don’t Die.” According to an interview Nelson did in S. H. Fernando, Jr.’s book The New Beats: Exploring the Music, Culture, and Attitudes of Hip-hop, he wasn’t too happy with N.W.A.’s perverted use of his words. But as I wrote in an essay on the song a few years ago, N.W.A. simply exploited the various connotations of the term that some black folk use with great frequency. Yes, the brothers’ use of the term reinforces some negative stereotypes about black folks, but in doing so they also take a few swipes at white racism and black elitism. Nuff said on that, though, lest somebody accuse me of calling them out their name.

In 1985 (though likely not the first time), journalist Sean O’Hagan dubbed the Last Poets the “first rappers,” “the voice of ghetto anger and fiery jazoetry.” That was probably a bit of media hype, since over the years so many artists have been credited with having originated what has come to be known as rap music. Nevertheless, the Poets themselves apparently see their craft as rooted in the rapping tradition I’ve been describing, specifically “the jail toasts and street raps.” Perhaps the strongest evidence of this influence is Nuriddin’s 1972 solo joint, Hustlers Convention, in which he—as his street alias Lightnin’ Rod—performs a rather personal toast about his days as a street hustler (see the next joint for a fuller description).

In any case, the Last Poets are best known for their scathing criticism of black apathy and white racism. Their self-titled debut album in 1969, for instance, presents a rich mix of socially conscious raps with brash titles like “Run, Nigger,” “Niggers Are Scared of Revolution,” “Black Thighs,” “Wake Up, Niggers,” “Jones Comin’ Down,” and “When the Revolution Comes.” As an example of their brand of poetry, I often play for my rap class one of the Poets’ most memorable poems, “Niggers Are Scared of Revolution” (led by Omar Ben Hassan). Much like Nelson’s sentiment in “Die Nigger!!!” Hassan considers “niggers” to be lames when it comes to revolution. Hassan’s closing verse manifests some compassion and empathy for these “niggers,” but still the zealot’s critical ire. Some readers may recognize from the piece a few lines sampled on a N.W.A. song called “Niggaz 4 Life.” Most of my students haven’t heard of the Poets (just as I hadn’t until a white colleague from Chicago hipped me to them when we were in Italy about ten years ago; funny, I’ve had to learn a lot about black creative production that way, serendipitously in unimaginable places and from unpredictable sources), and so they have no idea that stuff like this was around long before, say, Kurtis Blow and Run-D.M.C. Anyway, I want to cite some lines from one of the Poets’ early poems to give you a sense of their style. Obviously, you won’t be able to hear the percussion—the conga drums—in the background and Jalal Nuriddin’s flow, but I think you’ll quickly see why O’Hagan considers them rappers. The poem is titled “Wake up Niggers,” and it appears in the Last Poets’ print collection Vibes from the Scribes. The following are the opening lines of the piece.

Night descends
As the sun’s light ends
And black comes to blend again
And with the death of the sun
Night and blackness become one
Blackness being you
Peeping through the red the white and the blue
Dreaming of boss black civilizations
That once flourished and grew
Hey! Wake up niggers! Or y’all through!
Drowning in a puddle of the white man’s spit
As you pause for some draws in a mist of shit
And you ain’t got nothin’ to save your funky ass with
You cool fool
Sipping on a menthol cigarette ‘round midnight
Rapping about how the Big Apple is outa sight
You ain’t never had a bite

Clearly, these are some trillin’ “niggers,” or rather some black folk who are in a mighty stupor. In this sense, the Poets are like the biblical prophets who speak in order to incite (what they perceive to be) a crooked and perverse generation.

By the early ’70s such poetic expression had become commonplace for the Poets, releasing some three albums between 1971 and 1974. Their style changed somewhat on their third album, Chastisement (released in ’71 or ’73, according to the contradicting sources I have), adding more jazz instrumentation and coining the phrase “jazoetry,” which denotes a fusion of the black oral poetry tradition and freeform jazz. Interestingly, on this third release, the Poets, mainly Nuriddin, do a song that
closely resembles the rap music that emerged a few years later in the mid-'70s. Called "E Pluribus Unum," the song is more fast-paced than most other Last Poet songs; that is, Nuriddin's lyrics are more in sync with the rhythms of the conga drum beats. Whether this was an aberration (experimentation?) or a new trend, I can't say, but at least one other Spoken Word poet that I'm aware of recorded a song in a similar style. The poet: Gil Scott-Heron; the song: "No Knock," off of his 1972 album *Free Will*. The song is a perfect example of what rap music was to become, only with a totally different kind of musical arrangement (for example, no punch phasing, scratching, or sampling, as became customary in rap music).

Heralded on his debut album cover as a "New Black Poet," Scott-Heron burst onto the music scene in 1970 with an album (and a book of poetry) called *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*. Reportedly, Scott-Heron was inspired by a Last Poets' performance he witnessed in Ohio, but he doesn't specifically acknowledge their influence in any of the statements Nat Hentoff quotes on the liner notes of the album. But his poetry deftly has much in common with the Last Poets, varying only perhaps in his use of the piano and his singing on certain tracks. In a collection of his poetry published in the United Kingdom by Payback Press in 2000, Scott-Heron makes clear that the contribution he made to the rap genre was largely musical: "that there was music in certain poems of mine, with complete progressions and repeating "hooks," which made them more like songs than recitations with percussion." Somewhat like the Original Last Poets, Scott-Heron's first album has a strong performative quality to it as he introduces each poem or song to a live audience. Though "No Knock" (on *Free Will*) sounds more like rap—albeit Old School—within the Hip hop community Scott-Heron is best known for the classic line from his poem "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (on *Small Talk*). Chicago-based rapper Common (Lonnio Lynn) is one of many artists who has appropriated and revised Scott-Heron's famous line (see "The 6th Sense"). In the Scott-Heron original excerpted below, note the series of negations, first of '60s cultural icons and then of American commercial or consumer culture. In their many skits, excerpts from TV and movies, and references to material culture, rappers similarly offer critical reflection on American commercialism in their raps. Accompanied by conga drums, the last two stanzas of this poem read:

There will be no highlights on the *Eleven O'clock News* ....

The revolution will not be right back after a message about a white tornado, white lightning, or white people. You will not have to worry about a dove in your bedroom.

Professing the Power of the Rap

the tiger in your tank or the giant in your toilet bowl.
The revolution will not go better with Coke.
The revolution will not fight germs that may cause bad breath.
The revolution will put you in the driver's seat.
The revolution will not be televised
will not be televised
not be televised
be televised
The revolution will be no re-run, brothers.
The revolution will be LIVE."*

Finally, I now turn to a group of Spoken Word poets who made their connection to the rapping tradition crystal clear. Rising from the ashes of the Watts riots, like I said before, the Watts Prophets debuted in 1971 with an album titled *Rappin' Black in a White World*. The four members of this group—Dee Dee McNeil, Otis Smith, Anthony Hamilton, and Richard Gedeaux—obviously recognized the connection between the emerging Spoken Word poetry and street-corner rapping. Yet it's difficult to gauge precisely the degree of their influence on the recording scene since they were only able to produce one album before, Cross reveals, the FBI COINTELPRO (counterintelligence program) infiltrated the group and ended their promising career. Consequently, Hip hop fans aren't too familiar with the Prophets. Folks who don't know the Last Poets surely don't know the Watts Prophets. Their album—which is all that and a bag of chips—isn't as widely available as the Last Poets' or Gil Scott-Heron's records. In fact, I was fortunate to stumble on one at a local record shop long ago. It cost me a nice sum of money, but even though I didn't own a turntable I just had to cop that album. It's a classic, baby, a gen-u-wine classic.*

The Prophets crafted a form of performance poetry rather different from that of Scott-Heron and the Last Poets, their sound tending perhaps more toward the dramatic than the musical. Heavy on call and response and at times even conversational in tone ("What It Is, Sisters"), listening to the Prophets is sort of like witnessing a three-act play (or eavesdropping on some bros conversating 'round the way). Add to this the fact that roughly a third of the songs on the album have no musical accompaniment whatsoever. And those that are accompanied by musical instruments consist of a string bass and/or piano, instead of the usual conga drums or other percussion instrument.

The Prophets' songs also differ structurally from New York Spoken Word poetry. Several of the songs are designed as either a series of related short poems or as a single long poem with different subtitles performed by each member of the group. For instance, the album opens with a brief
introduction of the group's name and album title. The Prophets then begin chanting "rappin' black, rappin' black" while McNeil raps the first title, "Sell Your Soul"; Smith follows with the second, "Take It"; Hamilton then presents the third, "Instructions"; and Dedeaux closes with the fourth, "Amerikkkka" (a title that, perhaps not coincidentally, foreshadows rapper Ice Cube's solo debut, Amerikkkka's Most Wanted). This kind of format is repeated in another selection called "What Is a Man." This time, though, McNeil literally sings in another selection while Smith raps on "A Pimp"; Dedeaux on "Tenements"; and Hamilton on "The Master"—the three titles listed after "What Is a Man" on the album cover. Perhaps, at least in the case of this last example, the idea is for each of the Prophets to give his response to or perspective on the ontological question.

As for the content or subject matter of the Prophets' poetry, it covers much the same material as other Spoken Word poets—politics, war, poverty, racism, self-hatred, to name a few. However, the Prophets seem to address these matters less like the polemicist or fiery orator and more like the wise seer or dialectician, often opting for example and narrative over direct accusation and ridicule. The lyrics to Hamilton's "Pain," I believe, work to some extent this way. The excerpt below is a subtle reflection on the irony of American capitalism and progress. Again the indented lines represent responses given by other members of the group.

Pain!
Pain!
Of people going to the moon
While little brothers in Watts hustle hard all night trying to eat
Hand me down hats, hand me down shoes, everything used
And then you sick peckerwoods wanna know why we don't follow rules
Pain!
There are two little brothers that I know
Who would someday like to go to a show
Yeah! Just a plain old fifty-cent show
How much did you say that last moon shot cost?

Some of the best Prophets poems, I think, are those that diss not so much white folks but blacks themselves, especially uppity, middle-class blacks. Hamilton does this quite humorously with a punctuated refrain in "What It Is, Sisters." Dee Dee McNeil also does it in "There's a Difference between a Black Man and a Nigger," only she specifically gets on the case of middle-class black men. I'm not sure how the Prophets reconciled this poem with Smith's rather misogynist "Pimp" rap on the A side, but Ms. McNeil is kickin' some mad feminist (or perhaps womanist) vibes in this poem. I suspect that it's because they see pimping in the broader context of the game America has run on black people since the slave ships, which I discuss in the fourth chapter of the book. Anyway, check out McNeil's flow in the opening and closing lines.

Honey, what's this Black world coming to?
This matter-of-fact-middle-class-Black-bourgeoisie-ass-wish-I-was-rich-class-nigger man
Nigger man
Honey, there's a difference between a Black man and a nigger
Sho is
Nigger he look at me with hungry eyes
Tries to take me by surprise
With his fancy title, conservative dress
Whitney's man is at their best
Oh, how he lays it on
Opens the door, takes my arm, shows me off with the maximum charm
Haircut close against his head
Thinks he's alive when he's really dead
Fooled into believing white lies instead of the black truth . . .

Black Men preaching that they care
Sitting there proud to be Black with their natural hair
Rappin' Black!
And they say: Ain't it a fact that Black women today are
overdemanding, selfish, and spoiled
Misled into using the pill and the coil
Complaining that Blackness means hard work and pain
Not knowing their place
Too much crap on their face
Dress is too short, too tight
Rap on!
In fact, nothing about this proud Black woman seems right
To hear them tell it
Teach
Well, I'd rather sell it
Than give it away
What you say?
Any day to somebody whose always got something to say
Like you ain't nothing no way, bitch
Bitch
Oooh we, that's hot! And that's just a small sample of it. Of course, reading the lines don't compare to hearing McNeil rap it, nuances of inflection and all. That is why I say that the Prophets' poetry is dramatic, like brothers and sisters rappin' outside the house on the porch ("garret," Big Mama used to say) or out on the co'na. So, I would argue that their poetry is an extension of the toast tradition and the closest link between Spoken Word and rap.

I have covered many Spoken Word artists (some in detail) and their contributions to a poetic movement that clearly presages rap poetry and music. Needless to say, though, my account isn't exhaustive; depending on how one defines "rap" or even "spoken word," there's a great deal more recorded and unrecorded material worth mentioning. Case in point, recently when I listened to Marvin Gaye's 1971 album What's Going On, I discovered that on the song "Save the Children" he raps or talks with his own vocals and music in the background. Then there was Isaac Hayes's "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" on Hot Buttered Soul, as well as Parliament's now-classic and heavily sampled jams "P Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)" and "Chocolate City" (1975). In 1979, Isaac Hayes performed a duet with Millie Jackson on the album Royal Rappin' and just about every black person who lived through the '70s know how Ms. Jackson can rap. But the best early examples of the beats and rhymes of rap are the Last Poets' "E Pluribus Unum," Scott-Heron's "No Knock," and Clarence Reid's (a.k.a. Blowfly) "Blowfly's Rapp," a funky scatological brand of rapping that must have been the inspiration for Too Short, 2 Live Crew, and Akinyle. And as any good student of rap will readily admit, homage must also be paid to the American radio deejays who introduced R&B and their deejay skills to Jamaican listeners, and to the Jamaican deejays (such as U Roy) of the '60s and '70s who, in turn, developed toasting (chanting 'pon the mike) as a form of deejaying. They, perhaps, are largely responsible for Spoken Word poetry entering into the phase of pastiche—artistic innovation through imitation and collage.

FROM POETRY TO PASTICHE

With such socially conscious lyrics and powerful messages as the preceding, it's easy to see how Spoken Word artists could be the contemporary African American equivalent of the West African griot, entertaining and inciting the black urban poor with their righteous rhetoric. But how could anybody in his right mind equate rap music artists, even the relatively clean-cut, Old School rappers, with griots? After all, rap music initially had little to do with inciting people to action or teaching folks about their history. In fact, back in the day when I was a freshman in college (’79-80) and we was jammin' to rap tunes like "Rapper's Delight" (Sugarhill Gang), "Freedom" (Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five), "Funk You Up" (the sequence), and "The Breaks" (Kurtis Blow), 'bout the only action we was incited to do was, you know, that rump shakin' kind. Ah man, we got down at our little frat parties and...uh, oh yeah, let me quit reminiscing. Anyway, rap (including deejaying) in those early days was all about gettin' everybody hyped to par-tay. This changed somewhat in '82 when Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five came out with "The Message," a stark reality tale about coming of age in ghetto America.

Perhaps because of rap songs like "The Message," critics were quick to label rap artists the offspring of Spoken Word poets, the next generation of griots to voice the frustration and anguish of America's urban ghettos. One of the first critics to anoint rappers in this way was British journalist and musician David Toop (first in The Rap Attack in 1984, and again in a revised edition, Rap Attack 2: African Rap to Global Hip Hop, in 1991). In Rap Attack 2, Toop traces rap's roots from disco and funk back to the griots of Nigeria and Gambia:

Rap's forebears stretch back through disco, street funk, radio DJs, Bo Diddley, the bebop singers, Cab Calloway, Pigmeat Markham, the tap dancers and comics, the Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, Muhammad Ali, acapella and duo-wop groups, ring games, skip-robe rhymes, prison and army songs, toasts, signifying and the dozens, all the way to the griots of Nigeria and the Gambia.87

More recently, in The New Beats, S. H. Fernando, Jr., claims that rap and reggae "represent an extension of the African oral tradition of the griot, or storyteller, who recited the history of his tribal community—sometimes to the accompaniment of talking drums.88 Not to front, but initially I balked at such seemingly glib assertions. As much as I had come to admire rappers and to receive inspiration from them, I found the connection between them and West African griots gratuitous and reductive. But given griots' function as not only oral historians but also public entertainers—as those who bear the onus of delighting as well as instructing an audience—I can see how, in spite of some contradictions in their messages and public personas, rappers have become, as Michael Eric Dyson puts it, "urban griots dispensing social and cultural critique." And besides, griots aren't (or weren't) always the godly messengers we often romanticize them to be. Hamb'té Ba says that "[some] griots have no particular responsibility towards the words they utter and are not even under any obligation to exercise discretion or to have absolute respect.
They can sometimes tell brazen lies without being held to account.” So whereas Toop seems to think that “hip-hop message and protest rappers” have their “ancestry in the savannah griots” and, on the other hand, “the Bronx braggarts, boasters and verbal abusers” descend from the “black American word games known as signifying and the dozens,” Ba’s griots aren’t limited strictly to rappers on the social or political tip. Among contemporary rap artists, then, a griot can be Dead Prez, KRS-One, or Too Short; Goodie Mob as well as UGK or the Liks; Lauryn Hill, Rah Digga, or even Hip hop’s premier seductress, Lil’ Kim. That’s not to say that they all are equally gifted or inspiring on the mic; it simply says that just because they boast about sexual exploits, beat downs, or cream don’t necessarily make them any less griots. They just ain’t the kinda griots you associate with epics like Sundiata or the royal courts of ancient Mali. For griots of that ilk in Hip hop, Toop’s message/protest rappers may be the best example: late ’80s to early ’90s era prophets of rage like Public Enemy, KRS-One, Kam, Brand Nubian, Paris, X-Clan, members of the Native Tongues posse (A Tribe Called Quest, Jungle Brothers, De La Soul), and others that critics like Tricia Rose (Black Noise), Nelson George (Hip Hop America), and S. H. Fernando, Jr. (The New Beats), have all (especially Rose) written deftly about.

One would, however, be hard-pressed to find the same kind of griot rapper in this new millennium, except for maybe Dead Prez, the Roots, and underground acts like Blackalicious. Generally absent the rage and straight-up political approach of that era, the message griots of this new generation from east to west are coming at us with some mad mystical, mathematical, metaphysical flows—as Rakim so eloquently puts it in “It’s Been a Long Time” (The 18th Letter). Claiming to bring back the soul of Hip hop to rap music, Rakim, Pharoahe Monch, Common, Lauryn Hill, Black Star (Mos Def and Talib Kweli), Jurassic 5, and Black Eyed Peas (among others) are setting the standard for today’s righteous griots. And as they do so, they are spawning a renaissance of the 1960s–70s era Spoken Word poetry. Why they’ve even inspired great intellectual minds like Cornel West to record a Spoken Word CD (Sketches of my Culture). As if to suggest that the mantle has been passed to this new breed of griots, the rapper Sonia Sanchez graces a cover of Black Issues Book Review (March–April 2000) with rapper extraordinaire Mos Def. And inside the issue, contributor Kalamu ya Salaam supplies an annotated discography of essential Spoken Word CDs, from Hughes’s Weary Blues to Rakim’s The 18th Letter/Book of Life (that’s the two-CD set). Among the ten listed are recent albums by old timers the Last Poets (Holy Terror) and Gil Scott-Heron (Spirts) and by contemporary Cormier-style poet Kamau Daood (Leimert Park) and Jamaican dub poets Mutabaruka (The Ultimate Collection) and Linton Kwesi Johnson (In Concert With the Dub Band). Finally, a compilation CD of New York Spoken Word artists (including some rappers, for example, Mos Def) called Eargasmns: Crucial Poetica Vol. 1 appears ninth on the list of Spoken Word recordings. Abiodun Oyewole of the Last Poets appears on the CD, providing the intro and outro. Not listed in the Black Issues article but another poetry record spawned from rap’s influence is Flippin’ the Script: Rap Music Meets Poetry (1996). The record comprises live club performances between 1993 and 1995—juxtaposing rappers (like Kool Kim of the UMC’s, Seventeen, Essence Donn, Murder One) and poets (such as Bob Holman, Sonja Sohn, who performed with Saul Williams in the 1998 film Slam, and Sekou Sundiata) for what producer Bill Adler calls a collision of sensibilities, “the don’t-give-a-fuck world of rap” and “the politically-correct world of poetry.”

The distinction between poetry (writing) and rap/spoken word, I should point out, is rather problematic—for as Tony Medina suggests in his introduction to Bum Rush the Page, serious poets who perform well on stage and write to effect social change shouldn’t be ghettoized as merely urban, oral, street, and not as real writers.” The poems in the book could, in fact, easily work as both written text and oral performance. Though set to a beat, so could many of the tracks on Eargasmns, such as Rha Goddess’s “My Pen,” Saul Williams’s “Twice the First Time,” and Jessica Care Moore’s “My Caged Bird Don’t Sing.” In fact, Williams and Moore, in particular, have committed their poetry to paper just as much as they have done so to wax. Williams’s She and Moore’s The Words Don’t Fit in My Mouth complement their work on records like Eargasmns or Amethyst Rock, Williams’s latest CD. Of course, any rapper worth his salt is as much a writer as he is an oral performer.

**It’s All Good**

Although they don’t mention griots specifically in their statements, the last word on this matter of roots or origins of rap should go to the undisputed innovators of Hip hop, Kool DJ Herc (Clive Campbell) and Afrika Bambaataa (given name publicly unknown). According to a statement quoted in Steve Hager’s book, Herc’s list of rap’s roots or original influences extends to just two main sources: to James Brown and to Lightnin’ Rod’s Hustlers Convention—in other words, soul/funk music and the street toast. But in Michael Small’s Break It Down: The Inside Story from the New Leaders of Rap, Bambaataa does just the opposite; he gives what may be the most comprehensive list of rap’s origins to date. The portion of the list after bebop I find particularly interesting for the way that it suggests various subgenres of rap:
African call and response music

The Dozens: African-American call and response insults
Scat singing: Call and response, as in Cab Calloway's "Minnie the Moocher," 1930s to present
Bebop: Improvised nonsense syllables with jazz (Dizzy Gillespie), 1940s to present
James Brown: Soul rap, 1950s to present
Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan: Knowledge rap, 1960s to present
The Last Poets: Political awareness rap, 1960s to present
Muhammad Ali: Boast rap, 1960s to 1970s
Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez: Poetry rap, 1960s to present
Jamaican toaster: Reggae rap, 1960s to present
Shirley Ellis: Wordplay rap, as in "The Name Game," 1965
Pigmeat Markham: Comedy rap, "Here Come the Judge," 1968
Issac Hayes: Love rap, 1960s to present
George Clinton: Funk rap, 1960s to present
Blowfly: Sex rap, 1960s to present
Barry White: Love rap, 1970s to present

Now, I'm not about to challenge or question either of these august brothers on the way the history went down, but personally I prefer something in between these two extremes. Then again, Bambaataa's list sort of confirms my point about rap or rappin' being the rubric for African American vernacular rhetoric, as, for example, Muhammad Ali-style boasting (an important aspect of signifying) is just one variety of rap.

In this chapter, I have traced what I believe to be the main lines of descent from the ancient West African griot tradition to rapping (as talk) to Spoken Word poetry (including toasting) and finally to rap (as music). Though this trajectory has, in a way, been articulated before, few scholars make the claim, as I do here, that the verbal art of rappin' (not signifying or toasting per se) is likely the earliest African American antecedent of rap music and the strongest discursive link between medieval West African griot oratory and contemporary African American vernacular rhetoric. The field of African American Studies being what it is, virtually no African American Studies scholars, not even Gates, place rap at the center of an African American rhetorical tradition. For me, then, that makes the griot (not the Signifying Monkey or his great cousin, Esu Elegbara) the homo rhetorius Africanus. The Monkey's signifying, in other words, is subsumed by the oratory or rappin' of the griot. Today, among youths worldwide (whether they are aware of this earlier oral tradition or not), rappin' clearly is the preferred rhetorical mode, bar none. Through rappin' (and of course Hip hop music and culture generally), youths from Armenia to New Zealand, Cuba to Korea, South Africa to Germany, Mexico to Senegal are learning how to use language, the vernacular, to represent self, community, and nation. So, it's all good, yo. Whether we rhetoricians get it straight or not, Hip hop is mad representin' black vernacular rhetoric.