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# On Some Serious Next Millennium Rap Ishhh

Pharoahe Monch, Hip Hop Poetics, and  
the Internal Rhymes of *Internal Affairs*

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By examining the Hip Hop poetics on Pharoahe Monch's album, *Internal Affairs* (1999), this article demonstrates the linguistic inventiveness and innovativeness of contemporary African American lyricists. As poets, Hip Hop MCs (rhymers) have both built on and expanded far beyond the American poetic tradition, using a form that is highly intertextual and that demonstrates multilayered poetic complexity. While Hip Hop MCs draw upon alliteration and assonance and other traditional rhyme forms, they also employ new rhyme strategies that require new categories of knowledge, such as compound internal rhymes, primary and secondary internal rhymes, chain rhymes, back-to-back chain rhymes, and bridge rhymes. Hip Hop MCs also employ various literary techniques, such as wordplay, simile, metaphor, narrativity, flashback, role-play, suspense, irony, and imagery in their lyrical compositions. Often constructing these rhymes in a multirhyme matrix, Hip Hop MCs offer a vast corpus of literary and linguistic texts to be analyzed.

**Keywords:** *poetics; language and literature; rhyme; Hip Hop culture; African American Language*

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I'm talking about *any* artist who takes grave integrity to their painting, their ink drawings, their charcoal paintings, their jazz music, their poetry, you know. For some people it comes easier. For some people, they sit down, and it's really from

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Lyrics reprinted from the album *Internal Affairs* (Pharoahe Monch, 1999) are used by permission. The song "Intro" is ©1991 Falferious Music (Reprinted by permission).

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the heart. . . . In these artists [including Pharoahe Monch], you have people who take their craft seriously.<sup>1</sup>

—Unpublished interview with Pharoahe Monch (Alim 2000)

Hip Hop is a relatively new area of scholarly inquiry. In recent years, academics have begun to examine this complex art form, to deconstruct its aesthetics, and to develop means of analyzing this increasingly popular literary and linguistic form. This article is designed to explicate aspects of Hip Hop poetics by focusing on sound/lyrical production (commonly known as “rappin”). I have chosen Pharoahe Monch’s CD, *Internal Affairs* (1999), because it provides a uniquely diverse body of contemporary poetic expression as creative as it is complex.<sup>2</sup>

Given my familiarity with various forms of African American lyricism, I have come to view Hip Hop lyrics/poetics as literature—something like what rapper Ice-T once called “Power Poetry” or a “Hi-tech Combat Literature”<sup>3</sup> (Spady, Lee, and Alim 1999, 114). I am aware that Hip Hop poetics, like Hip Hop culture in general, is a cultural phenomenon that remains highly misunderstood and marginalized by those who do not, or cannot, grasp the linguistic-cultural aesthetics, traditions, and ideologies that both govern and mediate this culture-nation-world (Smitherman 1997; Morgan 2001). By excavating the rhymes found on Pharoahe Monch’s *Internal Affairs*, along with other Hip Hop lyrics, I wish to reveal both the complexity and creativity of Hip Hop lyrical production. In revealing this literary and linguistic creativity, we will see that despite mainstream American society’s *confusion* regarding Hip Hop music and lyrics, Hip Hop lyricists are using multiple rhyme strategies that operate in what can be called a poetic system of *organized konfusion*. This innovative form of verbal art requires an equally innovative, analytical schema to deconstruct its aesthetic, and this article takes the first step in constructing that analytical schema.

Pharoahe Monch is chosen, in particular, because he is one of the most prominent and respected Hip Hop artists within the global Hip Hop community, yet he remains largely unknown to the general public. He is but one example of the talent that lies just beyond the reach of the limelight of popular programs like MTV’s *TRL* (*Total Request Live*). Pharoahe Monch is one-half of the critically acclaimed Hip Hop duo, Organized Konfusion (with his partner Prince Poetry). Together they have recorded three albums: *Organized Konfusion* (1991), *Stress: The Extinction Agenda* (1994), and *The Equinox* (1997). Like many artists that receive a great deal of mass exposure, Pharoahe takes his art and his writing very seriously. In a recent conversation with Pharoahe, he explained his brand of Hip Hop and how it relates to other art forms (see opening quotation). *Internal Affairs* is Pharoahe Monch’s first solo release after his nearly decade-long career as one-half of Organized Konfusion. For his first solo album, Pharoahe gives listeners an in-depth look into his life, hopes, dreams, philosophies, multiple personalities, and personal dilem-

mas as he flips *madd styles and skillz*.<sup>4</sup> This article will closely examine the Hip Hop poetics of this skilled lyricist/street linguist comin up outta Southside Queens.<sup>5</sup>

Southside Queens ain't no joke. It is important to note that Pharoahe operates in a Hip Hop-saturated environment where there is stiff competition among lyricists to devise unique ways of communicating thoughts, emotions, and everyday realities (Alim in press). Succinct statements with multiple meanings are highly valued. In introducing his album on "Intro," Pharoahe flexes one of the most remarkable aspects of his rhyming—his ability to squeeze an incredible number of syllables into a short amount of time.<sup>6</sup> Leading us into the rhyme, Pharoahe launches a polysyllabic attack and hits us with

- (1) 1 Cuz she's feelin the flow best believe I'm drillin the hole  
 2 [Singing] Heads hi-igh, kill 'em wit the low  
 3 Revealin, chillin, fillin up positioned to be killin the show  
 4 Stop illin I'm top billing plus I'm grillin the dough  
 5 For a couple of million or so I'll be willin to blow  
 6 Pharoahe look up in the air and a million niggaz are feelin 'em on the low

Example (1) (containing eighty-eight syllables) is loaded with assonance and various rhyme forms. Pharoahe is engaging in what I call *multirhyming*, the poetic equivalent to multitasking. We have a string of quadruple rhymes throughout the verse. Check it:

Feel	in	the	flow
Drill	in	the	hole
Kill	in	the	show
Grill	in	the	dough
Will	in	to	blow
Feelin	'em on	the	low

The pattern of this series of quadruple rhymes consists of four positions (phonetically): [ɪ . . . ɪn . . . də . . . o]. We notice in line 2 that Pharoahe mixes things up a bit and borrows a line from a famous dancehall song. He not only borrows the line but the exact intonation as well. When we get to line 3, we are overwhelmed by numerous examples of assonance (discussed later in greater detail). Pharoahe repeatedly hits us with the [ɪ] sound and, in addition, continues the [ɪ] sound found in the quadruple rhyme. Pharoahe spits eleven [ɪ] syllables in line 3 alone and continues the assonance with *feelin*, *million*, and *niggaz*. We have a string of the [ɪ] sound combination with (orthographically) *fillin/billieue/drillin/kill/rivillin/chillin/fillin/killin/illin/billin/grillin/mill/willin/mill/fillin*. In addition, we have an internal rhyme (explained later) in line 1 with "feelin the flow" and "drillin the hole." And conse-

quently, in the middle of all of this verbal intricacy, the meaning is communicated quite profoundly.

Line 6 then leads us into the following rhymes where Pharoahe further displays his multirhyming skillz, where rhymes/rhyme tactics are imbedded within rhymes/rhyme tactics.

- (2) Every syllable of mine is an umbilical cord through time  
 For the **sick typical** niggaz who choose to **pick pitiful** rhymes—to spit  
 Shit, it's more *dimes to git*  
 More higher levels of spirituality to reach  
 And I'm tryin to win.

He continues the [ɪ] sound assonance and engages in several new rhymes. Reread the lines, and it becomes clear that “syllable” rhymes with the last three syllables of “umbilical” and with “typical” and “pitiful.” Imbedded within that rhyme series is the additional two-word rhyme of “sick typical” and “pick pitiful.” Furthermore, another rhyme combination is “rhymes to spit” and “dimes to git.”

Before we excavate the rhyme tactics of Hip Hop lyricists, it is important to note that even now, approximately three decades after Hip Hop's birth, these skilled lyricists/poets/rhymers/street linguists remain almost entirely unexamined.<sup>7</sup> Is it not time (shoot, it *been* time) to explore the high level of verbal virtuosity displayed by African America's street linguists on some serious next millennium rap ishhh? F-f-f-f-f-f-follow me for now. . . .

### Rhyme Tactics

Pharoahe's acrobatic rhyme tactics are just one way he displays his verbal gymnastics. In poetry, whatever the form, three main types of full rhyme are recognized: masculine, feminine, and triple. A masculine rhyme simply refers to a one-syllable rhyme, such as **sink/pink**, **defeat/eat**, and **sleep/creep**. Feminine rhymes are rhymes that involve two syllables, with the first syllable of the rhyme being the accented one: **drilling/grilling**, **reparation/nation**, and **quiet/riot**. Triple rhymes, as the name suggests, are rhymes that consist of three syllables. The stress is on the antepenultimate syllable: **da<sup>r</sup>ingly/gla<sup>r</sup>ingly**, **stea<sup>d</sup>ily/rea<sup>d</sup>ily**, and **auda<sup>c</sup>ity/tena<sup>c</sup>ity**.

Masculine, feminine, and triple rhymes can be found throughout Hip Hop lyrics. In addition, Hip Hop artists employ quadruple, quintuple, and even sextuple rhymes. On the album *Internal Affairs*, one finds several examples of this polysyllabic rhyming. Take this verse:

- (3) 1 Get ate like cannibalism and sliced **surgical**  
 2 In any *extremity* y'all get *infinity* **vertical**  
 3 Every line to word of mine will be verbally placed to **murder you**

- 4 The master, flippin **convertible** flows **irreversible**
- 5 Unobtainable to the brain it's unexplainable what the **verse'll do**
- 6 Pharoahe's the sperm your mind is the egg I'm **burstin through**
- 7 Y'all heard of me, I pack macs and crack vertebraes
- 8 Leave niggaz with third degree burns and back surgery
- 9 Mics, guns, knives, pick, *declare which object*, flip
- 10 Have niggaz on the run like *the Blair Witch Project*

In this verse, the bold words represent triple rhymes that follow this phonetic pattern: [ɜr . . . ə . . . u].<sup>8</sup> The underlined words represent another set of triple rhymes that follow the phonetic pattern [ɜr . . . ə . . . ey]. Pharoahe stretches the pronunciation of every word in that rhyme sequence to rhyme with “vertebraes,” so that “heard of me” sounds like “heard of may,” and so on. This changing of pronunciation is deliberate, unlike the previous rhyme, and serves as an example of the primacy of sound over orthography in Hip Hop poetics. Pharoahe is using poetic license in order to achieve a near-perfect match. The italicized words represent a quadruple rhyme that is near perfect. The italicized bold words represent a perfect quintuple rhyme that follows the phonetic pattern [də . . . er . . . hwɪtʃ . . . a . . . jɛkt]. The full complexity of this verse will be explored in a later section.

Busta Rhymes, whom Pharoahe admires for his lyrical word games and for his incredible work ethic, appears alongside Pharoahe on a song appropriately titled “The Next Shit.” Busta rhymes **credible** with **schedule**, **federals**, and **pedestal**, creating a triple rhyme (and double internal rhyme) that follows the phonetic pattern [ɛ . . . ə . . . l]. Note that Busta pronounces “schedule” in such a way as to make it fit into the perfect triple-rhyme match. Brick City’s Redman joins Pharoahe, Busta, Method Man, Shabaam Sadeeq, and Lady Luck on the “Simon Says Remix” and adds his own series of triple rhymes with **barrel up**, **Arab bus**, and **karat cut** that follows the phonetic pattern [æɪ . . . ə . . . ʌ].

In “Behind Closed Doors,” Pharoahe strikes again with a series of “off tha wall” triple rhymes:

- (4) 1 Cut off his hands and send his girl multiple finger **sandwiches**
- 2 If she **manages** to do **damages**, put her in **bandages**
- 3 The **amateurs**—**bananas** is the **unanimous** way we choose to live **scandalous**
- 4 Even with doorknobs you couldn't **handle this**
- 5 Pharoahe's the host, the audience, and the muthafuckin **panelist**
- 6 My mic's equipped with laser sights so that the **man'll miss**

The phonetic pattern here is [æ . . . nasal (either n or m) . . . ə . . . ɪs]. This series of eleven triple rhymes occurring in only six lines is so highly compacted as to suggest that Pharoahe's main purpose was to create this incredible rhyme string. However,

the six lines fit meaningfully into the first and last part of this verse (not shown) in which Pharoahe gains verbal advantage over other rappers by claiming that he is a “high evolutionary rebel” in the rap game.

Talib Kweli, one-half of the critically acclaimed Black Star (with partner Mos Def) and also the lead lyricist of Reflection Eternal (with DJ Hi-Tek), joins Pharoahe and Common on “The Truth.” Check the verse:

- (5) 1 Check it, on my neck I still got marks from **the nooses**  
 2 The truth it **produces** fear than got niggaz on the run like Ca-arl  
**Lewis.**  
 3 **The truth is my crew is the smoothest** bits of saliva **juices** like **the**  
**roots is**  
 4 More organic than **acoustics**  
 5 Heavenly . . . set you free and kill you in the same **breath**  
 6 That shit you gotta get off your chest before your **death**, unless  
 7 The way you speak is lighter than a pamphlet  
 8 Cuz the truth give the words the weight of a **planet goddammit**  
 9 I **ran wit** what God **planted** in my heart and I **understand it**  
 10 To be to **bring the light to the dark, breathe some life in this art**  
 11 This must be the truth (“why?”) cuz we keep marchin on (“true”)  
 12 The truth lay the foundation of what we rockin on (“true”)  
 13 You can’t see it if you blind but we will always prevail (“true”)  
 14 Life is like the open sea, the truth is the wind in our sail  
 15 *And in the end*, our names is on the lips of *dying men*  
 16 If ever crushed in the earth, we always *rise again*  
 17 When the words of *lying men* sound lush like the sound of a *violin*  
 18 The truth is there, it’s just the heart you gotta *find it in*

A close examination of Talib’s methodology reveals multiple levels of intricacy. In line 1, there is the beginning of a recurring assonance with the [ɛ] sound. This [ɛ] is repeated several times in lines 1, 5, and 6. Line 1 is also the starting point for a series of triple rhymes that follow the phonetic pattern [ə . . . u . . . ɪs]. In line 3, we have a series of five triple rhymes, three of which are back-to-back chain rhymes (to be discussed later). *The truth is* rhymes with **ma crew is**, **tha smoothest**, and **tha roots is**. These rhymes also match perfectly with two unexpected rhyme matches: (1) the last syllable in *saliva* and the word *juices*—**a juices**—and (2) Talib splits the name “Carl” into two syllables, “Ca-arl,” and uses the last syllable to continue the triple-rhyme pattern with Ca-arl **Lewis**.

Talib continues with a series of feminine rhymes, pairing up some unlikely suspects with **planet**, **goddammit**, **ran wit**, **planted**, **understand it**. All of these rhymes follow the phonetic pattern [æ . . . nasal (either n or m) . . . ɪt]. In line 10, Talib employs a rare sextuple rhyme as he describes his Hip Hop mission to be to

“bring the light to the dark, breathe some life in this art.” This sextuple rhyme is accomplished by the use of parallel phrasing in which the poet matches up like categories across the parts of speech. For instance, the parts of speech in this rhyme flow like this: verb—modifier—noun—prep—modifier—noun. Phonetically, the rhyme is nearly perfect: [brɪ . . . ə . . . aɪ . . . ə . . . ɑr].

Lines 15 through 18 contain another set of triple rhymes that follow the phonetic pattern of [aɪ . . . ə . . . ɪn]. What makes this verse even more interesting—besides the beauty of the truth being spoken—is that Talib begins line 15 with “And in the end,” which serves multiple functions. Not only is this phrase referring to a final moment in history, “the end,” but it is also cleverly signifying the beginning of the end of the verse. In addition to this, Talib says “in the end” in such a way as to almost prepare us for the triple rhymes that are to follow. The intonation is what glues this phrase to the triple-rhyme series.

Talib is also working some serious play on words in lines 4 and 5. “The truth is my crew is the smoothest bits of saliva juices like the roots is more organic than acoustics.” What Talib is doing here is referencing a Philly Hip Hop group, The Roots. So, not only are roots considered organic in the herbal sense of the word, but the phrase here is big uppin The Roots for producing good music. The word *organic* is also used here in a play on *organ* and *acoustics*. Further, an additional esoteric piece of Hip Hop knowledge adds to the play—The Roots released an independent LP entitled *Organix* in 1993.

In line 16, Talib references a famous line by the poet William Cullen Bryant (1837) from his poem “The Battlefield,” which reads as follows:

Truth crushed to earth shall rise again,—  
The eternal years of God are hers;  
But Error, wounded, writhes with pain,  
And dies among his worshippers

The first line of this stanza has been used by many African American religious leaders, including Minister Louis Farrakhan and the Reverend Jesse Jackson, although the phrase is most associated with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King. Talib has taken this line and expanded its application to refer to him and his crew (and, by extension, his people). “If ever crushed in the earth, *we always rise again*.” The substitution of *truth* with *we* brings the truth that much closer to heart. It’s like Philly rapper Beanie Sigel say, “I be the truth!”

Given all of this multilayered poetic complexity, the meaning of the verse shines through clear as day. In fact, one can say that the meaning is *enhanced*. Talib is giving us his understanding of “the truth,” which of course is subjective. “The truth” to Talib is the pure unbridled power of Hip Hop—the beats, the rhymes, the content, the vibe. “The truth lay the foundation of what we rockin on.” The truth will always

remind one of one's own history (in this case, the days when African Americans were lynched for the enjoyment of whites—*100 Years of Lynchings* by Ralph Ginzburg [1962]), as well as protect one's own history (truth must be protected from the “words of lying men”). Talib uses the phrase “the truth” several times, invoking new meanings each time. And in classic Hip Hop call-and-response fashion, we see that the theme of “the truth” is reaffirmed by the clever and also classically Hip Hop affirmation “True” (as sung by Talib's crew in lines 11, 12, and 13). This verse is worthy of an entire paper alone.

Pharoahe's verses are loaded with examples of quadruple rhyme, as noted above. On “No Mercy,” with M.O.P., Pharoahe spits<sup>9</sup> a complex series of triple and quadruple rhymes:

- (6) 1 Fuck the **trinity**, inseminate the earth now take its **virginity**  
 2 In my **vicinity rap** is like **energy pack**  
 3 **sendin me back** behind enemy line to rap to melodic  
 4 melodies never melodramatic but hypnotic like cellos fo fellow fanatics

We have multiple tactics being displayed here. There is a triple-rhyme effect with **trinity**, **virginity**, **vicinity**, **energy**, and **sendin me**. Line 1 ends with “virginity,” which is a near-perfect quadruple rhyme with “vicinity,” due to the alliterative similarities. In line 2, we have the beginning of another quadruple rhyme set beginning with “vicinity rap.” It's best shown like this:

cin	i	ty	rap
en	er	gy	pack
send	in	me	back

This quadruple rhyme follows the phonetic pattern [ɪn . . . ɪ . . . i . . . æ]. In line 3, we have the beginning of a series of words starting with [m], followed by another series of words beginning with [f]. (Alliteration is discussed later). Finally, in line 4 we have feminine rhymes ending with *-atic(s)*.

In yet another example of quadruple rhyme in the same verse, Pharoahe modestly tells the world that his rhymes are

- (7) 1 The **epitome** of lyrical **epiphanies**

Also in the same verse, Pharoahe and M.O.P. perform a call-and-response quintuple rhyme:

- (8) 1 I fiend for, who FUCKS WIT, **inappropriate**  
 2 Fill 'em with so much lead I'll call  
 3 [M.O.P. shouts] **Berger and Associates!**

The phonetic pattern is [ɪn . . . ə . . . ɒ . . . i . . . ɪts].

On “The Next Shit,” with Busta Rhymes, both MCs drop some quadruple rhymes and quintuple rhymes. Busta Rhymes spills a perfect quadruple rhyme in the midst of a four feminine rhyme series. The perfect quadruple rhyme (**hibernation** and **hyper nation**) is enhanced by the presence of the additional feminine rhymes (**moderation** and **situation**). The phonetic pattern follows the pattern of [hay . . . bilabial (either b or p) . . . ɜrneyʃɪn].

In his verse on the same song, Pharoahe analogizes his flow with a baseball player’s game as he drops a near-perfect quintuple rhyme:

- (9) 1 The **last batter ta hit, blast shattered ya hip**  
2 Smash any splitter or fastball, **that’ll be it**

The quintuple rhyme follows the phonetic pattern [æst . . . ædə . . . ɪ]. Following right behind the quintuple rhyme pair is “that’ll be it,” which rhymes with the last four syllables of the rhyme pair.

Pharoahe kicks several other quadruple rhymes on his album. The next two come from “Rape” and the “Simon Says Remix,” respectively:

back	to	tha	case
slap	in	tha	face
crack	in	a	safe
hap	pens	ta	base
	— — — — —		
spec	tac	u	lar
ver	nac	u	lar
mir	ac	u	lous
im	mac	u	late

While the last set is not perfect, the rhymes still show Pharoahe’s creativity with matching four-syllable words. Two sets of perfect quadruple rhymes from “Behind Closed Doors” follow:

- (10) 1 *How I made it* you **salivated** over my **calibrated**  
2 Raps that **validated** my ghetto credibility  
3 *Still I be* packin agilities unseen  
4 Forreal-a my killin abilities unclean facilities

In these four lines, we have two sets of quadruple rhymes:

sal	i	vat	ed
cal	i	brat	ed
val	i	dat	ed

Note that line 1 begins with the phrase “How I made it.” While this is not a perfect four-syllable rhyme match with the others, it serves to prepare us for what lies ahead. The next set of quadruple rhymes follows:

a	gil	i	ties
a	bil	i	ties
fa	cil	i	ties

As with the phrase “How I made it,” this quadruple rhyme begins with “Still I be,” which prepares us for the upcoming quadruple set by rhyming with the last three syllables.

Prince Poetry, Pharoahe’s partner from Organized Konfusion, gets in on the action and spits a perfect quadruple rhyme in “God Send.”

- (11) 1 . . . Stray bullets continue **shatterin dreams, batterin spleens**  
 2 I’m **gatherin schemes** had only cream just as bad as a fiend

shat	ter	in	dreams
bat	ter	in	spleens
gat	her	in	schemes

In addition to this perfect set of quadruple rhymes, Prince Poetry rhymes two additional four-syllable phrases, but this time only the first and last syllable rhyme with the quadruple rhyme set.

In “Simon Says,” Pharoahe perfects a quintuple rhyme by reducing “you” to [yə]:

- (12) 1 You all up in the Range, then your shit’s **inebriated**  
 2 Phased from your original plan, **ya deviated**  
 3 I **alleviated** the pain with a long term goal . . .

in	e	bri	at	ed
ya	de	vi	at	ed
al	le	vi	at	ed

Rapping on “The Truth,” Common writes a remarkable set of three sextuple rhymes that exhibit parallelism in the first two instances:

- (13) 1 See the truth in **the thighs of a stripper, the eyes of my nigga**  
 2 If it’s only one, **then why should it differ?**

The phonetic pattern here is [ə . . . ay . . . ʌ . . . ə . . . I . . . ə]. The last phrase does not fit the sextuplet perfectly because it does not continue the parallelism witnessed in the

first two rhymes. Nonetheless, this is an impressive display of polysyllabic rhyming.

### Compound Internal Rhymes and Chain Rhymes

Some of the rhymes we have seen above are end rhymes, simply meaning that they are positioned at the end of a line. End rhymes, if used cleverly, can be quite complex. In this example, Pharoahe's end rhymes are all feminine rhymes that follow the phonetic pattern of [i . . . əm]:

- (14) 1 [Yo, where you at?] Uptown let me **see 'em**  
 2 Notorious for the six-fives and the **BM's**  
 3 Heads give you beef, you put 'em in the **mausoleum**  
 4 And the shit don't start jumpin til after 12 **PM**  
 5 Ungh, ignorant minds, I **free 'em**  
 6 If you tired of the same old everyday you will **agree I'm**  
 7 The most obligated . . .

Whether the end rhyme consists of a verb + pronoun, a two-letter abbreviation, the last two syllables of a four-syllable word, or the last syllable of a verb + pronoun contraction, the end result is always the same: [i . . . əm].

Internal rhyme is often used to add a level of complexity to the typical end rhyme. A simple internal rhyme may sound like this: "I spit rap **poetics** like energy **kinetic**/Can't keep up with the flow cuz it's madd **frenetic**." While there are three rhymes, the internal rhyme is between **poetics** and **kinetic** since **poetics** falls in the middle of the line. Pharoahe often creates an astonishing effect by using a series of internal rhymes. For example, we return to example (3) (labeled 15 below), but this time we will focus only on the use of internal rhyme:

- (15) 1 Get ate like cannibalism and sliced surgical  
 2 In any extremity y'all get infinity vertical  
 3 Every line to word of mine will be *verbally* placed to murder you  
 4 The master, flippin convertible flows irreversible  
 5 Unobtainable to the brain it's unexplainable what the verse'll do  
 6 Pharoahe's the sperm your minds the eggs I'm burstin through  
 7 Y'all heard of me, I *pack macs* and *crack* vertebraes  
 8 Leave niggaz in third degree burns and *back* surgery  
 9 Mics, guns, knives, pick, declare which object, flip  
 10 Have niggaz on the run like the Blair Witch Project

We see a diverse and effective usage of internal rhyme in these ten lines. Pharoahe uses the typical internal rhyme, in which the rhymes are positioned in the middle

and end of the line (as in lines 4, 8, and 9). He also uses a type of internal rhyme in which none of the rhymes fall in the end position (as in lines 1, 2, 3, and 5). Line 5, for example, ends in “verse’ll do,” which rhymes with “irreversible” in line 4. However, Pharoahe places three rhymes in between those end rhymes with “unobtainable,” “brain,” and “unexplainable.”

In addition to these two types of internal rhyme, Pharoahe also uses what I call *compound internal rhyme* (CIR) (as in line 7). A compound internal rhyme can be described as a poetic construction where an internal rhyme is embedded within another internal rhyme. The internal rhyme on the outer edge is the *primary internal rhyme* (PIR), and the internal rhyme on the inner edge is the *secondary internal rhyme* (SIR). Line 7 of example (18) reads, “Y’all heard of me, I *pack macs* and *crack* vertebraes.” The PIR is with heard of me and vertebraes, while the SIR is with *pack, macs*, and *crack*. The complexity of Pharoahe’s internal rhyme tactics can be overwhelming, especially when one looks at line 8 in conjunction with line 7. Pharoahe continues the rhyme with the phrase “back surgery,” which is a quadruple rhyme with “crack vertebraes.” Further, in line 3 he places the word “verbally” in perfect position to accentuate the [və] sound in the rhymes of **vertical**, **convertible**, **irreversible**, and **verse’ll do**.

In this next verse, Pharoahe provides another example of CIR:

- (16) 1 Yo, I stick around like hockey, now what the *puck*  
 2 **Cooler than fuck**, maneuver like Vancouver **Canucks**

This CIR is so intertwined that the separation between the PIR and the SIR is almost indiscernible. However, a closer listen reveals that **Cooler than fuck** plays a dual role. Not only does “fuck” rhyme with the previous “puck,” but the entire phrase is a quadruple rhyme with **couver Canucks**. This quadruple rhyme serves as the PIR, and maneuver rhyming with Vancouver is the SIR.

### Alliteration and Assonance

Pharoahe enhances his intricate rhyme schemes by exploiting two fairly commonly known poetic techniques: alliteration and assonance. It is Pharoahe’s decision to use these techniques with precision, making surgical incisions like a verbal physician. In fact, the use of these two techniques is often what makes a listener be like “Yo, that sound ill right there!” In other words, these techniques are sought in poetry to create euphony: a harmonic, *dope*-sounding musical effect. This effect is highlighted by the proximity of the words/sounds and by the timing and flow of the sound patterns.

When these two techniques are used in a witty way, they can sneak into your subconscious without you even realizing what just happened. At the same time,

though, the techniques can also be used in an “in yo face” type of way as a means of displaying one’s verbal ingenuity. Alliteration is a technique that Pharoahe adopted early on before he was signed as a member of Organized Konfusion (the alliterative verse on their demo tape actually helped to clinch their record deal). On his solo debut, *Internal Affairs*, he returns to this technique almost as a way of signifying a new beginning as a solo artist.

In this next verse, we follow Pharoahe as he flexes his phonetic skillz fiercely on a fly freestyle flow:

- (17) 1 F-f-f-f-f-f-f-follow me for now  
 2 For no formidable **f**ights I’ve been **f**ormed to **f**orget  
 3 For **Ph**aroahe **f**ucks **f**amiliar **f**oes **f**irst  
 4 **B**efo **f**ondling **f**emale MC’s **f**iercely  
 5 **F**ocus on the **f**act that **f**acts can be **f**abricated to **f**orm lies  
 6 My **p**honetics alone **f**orces **f**eeble MC’s into defense on the **f**ly  
 7 **F**eel me, **f**orreal-a

In line 1, Pharoahe gives us fair warning for what’s about to fall upon us by forming the first syllable in a stuttering format. “F-f-f-f-f-f-f-follow me for now,” he begins, as he takes the listener on an alliterative ride. Alliteration is normally used in word pairs, such as “word warrior” or “hip-hop head” and is often a subtle technique. Yet Pharoahe’s complex and creative use of alliteration here is performed “in yo face” style.<sup>10</sup>

This “in yo face” style of alliteration has been used by the more creative Hip Hop poets and provides for a poetic effect that keeps the listener dangling off of the MC’s every word. Rapper Gift of Gab from California’s Blackalicious (1999) provides one of the more memorable examples of this alliterative style on “A2G.” He rhymes seven stanzas, starting each stanza with a single sound. For example:

- (18) 1 We’re going to learn to hear words with the vowel **A** sound . . . Listen  
 with care  
 2 I be the **a**nalog **a**rsonist **a**imin at your **a**rteries  
 3 **A**ll-seeing abstract, **a**nalyze everything  
 4 **A**dding on, **a**bsolutely **a**bolishing  
 5 **A**verage **a**mateurs’ **a**rsenal, just **a**stonishing . . .  
 6 I be the **b**ig **b**ad **b**ody rock in **B**ombay to **B**oulevard **b**ully **B**ACK  
 7 **B**atter **b**ring a **b**omb to the **b**attlefield  
 8 **B**loody **b**lack **b**eats **b**ringing **b**ottoms of **b**oom  
 9 **B**asically **b**uild **b**arriers, **b**ewilder **b**uffoons

The rhymer continues with this alliterative rhyme technique until he reaches the sound [g], where he begins to play on his name, “Gift of Gab.”

Aside from alliteration, Hip Hop headz are skilled users of assonance as well. We witnessed an example of Pharoahe's use of assonance with the [ɪ] sound earlier. In the next verse, Pharoahe hops from the rhyme sounds of [i] followed by a nasal to [ey] followed by a nasal, alliteration with [f] and [m], and various internal rhymes.

- (19) 1 My exterior serene with the potential of a killin machine  
 2 Ex-marine you drag queen, we tag team  
 3 Queens finest the alliance defiant we bag fiends  
 4 The fuck you lookin in my face fo nigga?  
 5 I mace mics and then lace the bass with figgas

The interplay of assonance, alliteration, and internal and end rhymes in this verse constitutes a *multirhyme matrix* while making the poet's point perfectly clear. Pharoahe challenges MCs to "bring it on if you think you can hang."

Pharoahe's album is laced with assonantal and alliterative gems. In many instances, the assonantal rhymes are loaded with humor:

- (20) 1 "Hell'll be froze over when I celebrate celibacy, case closed"—  
 Pharoahe Monch  
 2 "Shabaam Sadeeq, injure your fleet into delete/Y' all crabs are weak,  
 frail like a fiend's physique/I stay on the street, stay on the beat, stay  
 with the heat"—Shabaam Sadeeq  
 3 "Like when British civil servants pass secrets to the Soviets"—Busta  
 Rhymes  
 4 "Never you devils, my level's that of a high evolutionary rebel"—  
 Pharoahe Monch  
 5 "Then I'm gonna let it hang, and sit it on/the desk of any redneck  
 record exec"—Pharoahe Monch  
 6 "Every line to word of mine was like a rhyme I wouldn't lie I swear"—  
 Pharoahe Monch

### Back-to-Back Chain Rhymes and Mosaic Rhymes

As we have seen thus far, Pharoahe employs various types of rhymes and rhyme styles in his Hip Hop poetry. Earlier we saw an example of a *chain rhyme*, where the distinction between internal and end rhymes is nearly obliterated because of the frequency and positioning of the rhymes in the multiple rhyme sequence. Another type of chain rhyme used by Pharoahe is what I call the *back-to-back chain rhyme*. In this type of chain rhyme, Pharoahe strings several perfect rhymes together consecutively. For example, in "Simon Says," the chorus contains the following lines:

- (21) 1 New York City gritty committee pity the fool that  
 2 Act shitty in the midst of the calm the witty

The bold words represent the six rhymes in these two lines. The back-to-back chain rhyme consists of four links: “City gritty committee pity.”

In another example, Pharoahe creatively uses three links to make perfect rhymes out of seemingly “unrhymable” words:

(22) 1 I **scatter data that’ll** hammer niggaz . . .

When Pharoahe fires this line in his rapid spit-fire flow, he forms a perfect back-to-back chain rhyme effect:

scatter → scatta, data → datta, and that’ll → thatta,

In the previous example, we also see what has been called a *mosaic rhyme*. A mosaic rhyme is “a feminine or triple rhyme in which at least one element is composed of more than one word” (Steele 1999, 24). Mosaic rhymes are highly complex in that they allow the poet to vary the parts of speech that he or she chooses to rhyme. Steel (1999, 24) continues, “Since rhymes please most when the words included make unexpected yet persuasive connections between ideas, objects, and qualities, good rhymers often match different grammatical categories—nouns with verbs, verbs with adjectives, adverbs with nouns, and so forth.” I think Bay Area rapper E-40 would agree. Like he says, it’s all about “the element of surprise.”

Pharoahe and other Hip Hop rhymers take mosaic rhyming to “da next level” by putting together some of the most unlikely rhyme candidates. Pharoahe exemplifies this technique in these four lines from “Behind Closed Doors”:

(23) 1 The amateurs—bananas is the unanimous way we choose to live  
**scandalous**  
2 Even with doorknobs you couldn’t **handle this**  
3 Pharoahe’s the host, the audience, and the muthafuckin **panelist**  
4 My mic’s equipped with laser sights so that the **man’ll miss**

This series of perfect triple rhymes follows the phonetic pattern [æ . . . nasal (either n or m) . . . əl . . . ɪs]. This mosaic rhyme catches the listener off-guard because the rhymes consist of four different parts of speech: (1) an adjective (**scandalous**), (2) a verb + pronoun (**handle this**), (3) a noun (**panelist**), and (4) a noun + contraction + verb (**man’ll miss**).

In another surprising mosaic rhyme combination, Pharoahe pieces together a triple rhyme set that follows the phonetic pattern [a . . . stop . . . ɪ . . . ɪl]:

(24) 1 Truth had me up against the ropes and semiconscious with no **boxing skills**  
2 Fear of it makes hair on my neck grow like **minoxidil**

- 3 Watchin the **clock is ill** when faced with the truth
- 4 Parallels observing, amateur video tapes of
- 5 Twenty one top notch NYPD **cops git ill**
- 6 Fill they minds **not to kill**, still son, never revealed
- 7 True feelings, we speakin on the truth right now in itself is healing

The noun phrase **boxing skills** rhymes with the last three syllables of the word **minoxodil**, which rhymes with the following three word phrases: **clock is ill**, **cops git ill**, and **not to kill**.

Two more examples of Pharoahe's use of mosaic rhymes are in the following lines:

- (25) 1 The master, flippin **convertible** flows **irreversible**
- 2 Unobtainable to the brain it's unexplainable what the **verse'll do**
- 3 Pharoahe's the sperm your mind's the egg I'm **burstin through**

In the following example, Pharoahe rhymes three separate words with one four-syllable word:

- (26) 1 I told you I'd **hurt the music**
- 2 Travelin back . . . before Christ was **persecuted**

### Next-Level Poetry: The Bridge Rhyming Technique

Taking a closer look at Pharoahe's Hip Hop poetics, the lyricists and the dope MCs know "from the git" that he doin some serious next-level poetry ishxx in his music. A prime example of this next-level poetry is what I call the *bridge rhyming technique*, which is widely used in Hip Hop poetics. In musical terms, a bridge is a transitional passage that connects two subjects or movements. The important point here is that the bridge is *transitional*, allowing two seemingly disparate or distant objects/movements to coalesce into one.

Pharoahe and his crew of Hip Hop collaborators use this bridge rhyming technique in a variety of ways to form a continuous highway of rhymes that connects two seemingly "unrhymable" words/verses. The smooth transition, when done skillfully, is noticeable only on a subconscious level. In Talib Kweli's verse on "The Truth," we notice an intricate use of bridge rhyme:

- (27) 1 The way you speak is lighter than a pamphlet
- 2 Cuz the truth gives the words the weight of a planet goddammit
- 3 I ran wit what God planted [in my heart] and I understand it
- 4 To be to **bring the light to the dark**, **breathe some life in this art**

In the first three lines, we have six rhymes with the pattern [æ . . . it]. The bridge is built in line 3 when Talib drops the phrase [**in my heart**] among the [æ . . . it] rhymes. This phrase acts as a bridge to set up the next sextuple rhyme and to complete the thought. This bridge rhyming technique is incredibly complex, and in this case, the effect works so much on the subconscious level that the transition flows like water.

Pharoahe takes the subtlety of this technique even further in this next verse:

- (28) 1 How I made it you salivated over my calibrated  
 2 Raps that validated my ghetto [**credibility**]  
 3 Still I be packin agilities unseen  
 4 Forreal-a my killin abilities unclean facilities  
 5 For more than [**military**] tactics obscene, extreme confidential  
 6 My exterior serene with the potential of a killin machine

In these five lines, we see two bridges built on assonance alone. That is, the foundation of the bridges stands on the fact that key sounds contained within them are present in previous lines. This makes the transition between very different rhymes far less bumpy and allows for a smooth ride.

The word [**credibility**] is full of sounds that occur in the previous rhymes (like [d] and [b] and the repetition of the [ɪ] sound). This places [**credibility**] in a connective position that binds lines 1 and 2 with the rest of the verse. The rhymes immediately following [**credibility**] rhyme with the last three syllables of the bridge. In line 4, the second bridge is built by the use of the word [**military**]. This bridge contains a crucial sequence of sounds that are found in the previous rhymes: **ilit** (as we see in **credibility**, **agilities**, **abilities**, and **facilities**). The precise positioning of this bridge allows it to serve as the connective tissue that links the line to the remainder of the verse.

Perhaps the most widely used type of bridge is one that places a rhyme in the first part of the line, when it is expected to be an end rhyme. This method allows the poet to switch direction and still stay on course. For example:

- (29) 1 Some might even say this song is sexist-es  
 2 Cuz I asked the girls to rub on their breast-eses  
 3 Whether you ridin the train or in Lexus-es  
 4 This is for either or Rollies or Timex-eses  
 5 Wicked like [**Exorcist**], this is the *joint*  
 6 If you holdin up the wall, then you missin the *point*

The rhymes begin following the pattern [ɛ . . . ks . . . ɪs . . . ɪs] (if we substitute [s] for [ks] in line 2). Pharoahe uses [**Exorcist**] here, which follows the same pattern, to switch directions entirely and lead us into the chorus.

Pharoahe's ability to strategically place these bridges is remarkable. This bridge rhyming technique gives the Hip Hop poet's lyrics a melodic, musical quality. The voice is played as instrument, and the musical bridge analogy is fully realized. The arrangement of these lyrical bridges not only holds the verse together, but it also allows the poet to be far more creative and expand beyond the standard rhyme format. This new rhyming innovation demands further study.

### Wordplay, Metaphor, and Narrativity

In the last example of the bridge rhyming technique, Pharoahe is also exhibiting humorous wordplay. Notice how he forces the rhymes in that sequence to match "breast-eses," which is how some African Americans pronounce words with the final cluster [st]. (You might hear something like "tesses" instead of tests or "artisses" instead of artists.) This particular word, "breast-eses," has been a popular source of Hip Hop humor ever since the Wayans brother used it on the once popular television comedy show, *In Living Color*.

There are numerous verses where Pharoahe plays with words, and he even dedicates an entire song to wordplay, "Official." In the song, he uses an infinite number of sports and athletic references in a three- to four-minute string of wordplay. The song opens up with

- (30) 1 My style make the whole crowd say, Owwww!  
2 Like number 55 on the Chargers

Pharoahe is making a reference to the hard-hitting linebacker, Junior Seau, of the San Diego Chargers football team. Note that Seau is pronounced "say-ow," with the last syllable rhyming with "wow." This "Owww!" is a commonly heard call at Hip Hop concerts and parties, especially for the Sistas. A Hip Hop DJ can be heard saying, "Ladies, say, Owwww!" while the ladies respond "Owww!" Later on in the song, Pharoahe continues,

- (31) 1 Not Allen Iverson, forget crossin-over shake men  
2 Similar to Troy, I bring the pain destined to ache men  
3 Break men off, take men out, make me wanna slander  
4 Prime Time, my rhyme defense beyond Deion Sanders  
5 I walk this earth with my rod in this strict land  
6 Promise people thought I was Thomas Hearns the way I hit, man

These six lines are jam-packed with wordplay based on professional athletes. Line 1 plays on the NBA's Allen Iverson, whose claim to fame is his incredible crossover dribble that shakes his opponents. Line 2 plays on the quarterback for the once-champion Dallas Cowboys football team, Troy Aikman. Line 4 not only men-

tions the football player Deion Sanders, but it also tells you his position (*defense*) and his nickname (*Prime Time*). Line 5 contains a well-hidden double entendre that references the NBA guard Rod Strickland and the Biblical/Qur'anic story of Moses walking in Egypt with his rod. And, finally, line 6 is a play on the professional boxer Thomas Hearns a.k.a. "The Hit Man."

In addition to wordplay, Pharoahe often employs metaphor in his work or, as many Hip Hoppers say, "word-pictures." He draws these word-pictures as he spits some of the most *wickedest* and *bangin-est* metaphors in the game. As he did with wordplay, he dedicated an entire song to metaphor titled "Rape," which is a song about a rapper who is fed up with the "million MC's who ain't sayin nuthin" (as Pharoahe borrows a line from legendary Philly rapper Schoolly D). In the story, Pharoahe sneakily stalks the beat while it plays on, oblivious to his presence. Working the metaphor so that it appears almost too real, he raps

- (32) 1 I'm obsessed with multiple nude photographs of the beat in  
my room on the wall  
2 Pondering the verses, fondling my balls  
3 Witness a nigga who will take rap and chase it  
4 Through unoccupied dimly lit staircases and rape it  
5 Grab the drums by the waistline [the record scratches]  
6 I snatch the kick, kick the snares, sodomize the bassline  
7 Never waste time . . .

The song is actually an "ego-trippin" song, where rappers/poets boast about their unique skillz in the game. As Pharoahe puts it, there are "too many impotent MC's in this God forsaken city." In other words, he is using this metaphor to express a critical commentary on the state of Hip Hop MC'ing, as he sees it. The metaphor is fully realized when one places his rhymes in the broader, in-group, evaluative discourse among Hip Hop headz. Hip Hop headz often criticize wack (unskilled) MCs for "raping" Hip Hop, that is, writing rhymes that fall beneath the aesthetic "standard" for the sole purpose of *gittin paid*, while forsaking the culture.

In "Rape," Pharoahe's rhymes unfold in story format. Undoubtedly, his narrativity is at its peak when he engages in personal reflection. Personal narrativizing is a technique many Hip Hop artists use to draw the listener closer to their words and their way of viewing the world (Smitherman 1977, 112). Some examples that stand out in most Hip Hop headz' minds right now are Raekwon's verse on "C.R.E.A.M.," Tupac's "Dear Mama," Jay-Z's "You Must Love Me," Dr. Dre's "The Message," and Ghostface Killah's "All That I Got Is You."

Pharoahe uses personal narrative in a variety of ways. On "God Send," with Prince Poetry, Pharoahe's vibe is highly spiritual. He begins in a moving tone:

- (33) 1 My momma's in the bedroom, cryin again  
 2 Sister's on the street corner, lyin again  
 3 Just heard about another one of my niggaz dyin again  
 4 I'm tryin again to make mooooooves . . .  
 5 I'll be damned if we go hungry  
 6 Ever since my pops passed the responsibilities belonged to me  
 7 This song you see is like an ode to God  
 8 That he bless my last breath to be Allah U Akbar!

Pharoahe tells the story of what happened after his father passed. This sets him on a spiritual quest for guidance in a higher power—Allah. (“Allah U Akbar” is an Arabic phrase often invoked by Muslims, meaning “God is the Greatest!”) In the chorus, Pharoahe reflects upon his life experiences and spills a summary of his worldview (while making several Qur’anic and Biblical references):

- (34) 1 I seen it all through the eye of the needle  
 2 Depletion of the planet, brainwash of a people  
 3 Niggaz’ll never learn, shit, we just concerned about  
 4 Who’s fuckin who, when time is of significance  
 5 Ghost, we disregard the Most Magnificent  
 6 Eat of the fruit that is poisonous and lethal  
 7 Stuck in the crux of the spell with the evil  
 8 Credits about to roll and Hell is the sequel

In another example of personal narrativizing, Pharoahe rhymes about the day “Donovan” got murdered in Southside Queens, his hometown. The story begins with Pharoahe introducing us to Donovan and describing him as an “astonishin” basketball player. Years down the road, after the school system failed to educate him, he finds himself in the streets, the father of three children. Still he had time to play ball and saved money for brand new kicks (sneakers). One day, his mother decides to confront him about his suspicious activities. In the following verse, Pharoahe takes on the characters of both Donovan and his mother:

- (35) 1 His mama said, “Donovan, why are you on the corner of Linden?”  
 2 He got all rude, he said, “Mama, listen close I’ma tell you one time  
 3 You’re killin my high. Plus I got a nine  
 4 So you can get a brand new dress for Church  
 5 I know the devil lurks outside, man it’s cold  
 6 But I don’t wanna get paid slow, and grow old  
 7 Like poppa—plus I’m on parole, I gotta  
 8 Get paid off these streets, to make ends meet.”  
 9 With the back of her hand she smacked him in the face  
 10 Walked outta the crib . . .

Pharoahe takes on the characters in the song and tells the story with Donovan's voice. After his mother confronts him, Donovan replies, and his mother slaps him on the face. This altercation leaves Donovan pissed (angry), but still he thinks

(36) 1 Thinkin, "This time, next year, mom'll be able to . . . Ohhh, shit!"

Donovan is interrupted in mid-thought about buying his mother something special next year. In a drastic turn of events, Pharoahe weaves the last portion of the story together:

(37) 1 From across the street, niggaz approach—slow  
2 Well, get the metal out, too late, the guns flash  
3 In the melee they wet him like Reggae Sunsplash  
4 Son dashed with the quickness, back into the ride  
5 With a smile on his face, the picture of pride

Donovan's street enemies shot him up in the street ("wet him like Reggae Sunsplash") and made a getaway, smiling with pride. Pharoahe continues:

(38) 1 Blood comin from his mouth, now I'm at his side  
2 Kneeling over Donovan's body before he died  
3 Eyes—flutterin up and down in his head  
4 And with his last breath, this is what he said  
5 He said, "Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy, whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy???"  
6 Then I closed his eyes . . .

As we can see, Pharoahe uses several techniques to narrate a story about the murder of his friend, Donovan, including flashback (when he recounts the days Donovan used to ball on the courts), role-play (when he performs the dialogue between Donovan and his mother), suspense (right before the shooting), imagery (the description of Donovan's fluttering eyes and bloody mouth), simile and wordplay ("they wet him like Reggae Sunsplash"), and voice inflection (in his heartfelt search for an answer, "Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy, whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy???"). The literary techniques employed by Pharoahe are too numerous to discuss in this article and are the subject of future research.

### **On Some Serious Next Millennium Rap Ishhh: Watch Out!**

The next millennium rap now everybody listen  
Condition yourself to be knocked outta commission  
Watch out! Cuz this is a new world transmission  
Permission to shine now our time to glisten

The next shit!  
 The next shit!  
 Th-th-th-the next shit!

Like Busta and Pharoahe's rhyme on the chorus of "The Next Shit," now is the time for Hip Hop poetics to glisten. Hip Hop poets be bringin that next, next, other, new, different ishhh that's revitalizing poetry as we know it. Whether stringing together multiple polysyllabic rhymes, or endless assonance and alliteration, or creating compound internal rhymes, or back-to-back chain rhymes, or multiple mosaic rhymes, or building bridge rhymes, Hip Hop poets/MCs offer a vast body of literary and linguistic data. We have only begun to explore the intricate ways that Hip Hop headz weave words together—we are simply scratching the surface. There are numerous other factors that remain unexplored. Check the rhymes of Snoop Dogg,<sup>11</sup> Eminem, and Fabolous,<sup>12</sup> for example. There are various other factors that have to be taken into account such as flow, delivery, vocal texture, range, timing, style, and other Hip Hop aesthetic elements.

Take this example from Biggie (the Notorious B.I.G. [1997]) where the notorious one boasts about his sexual prowess by rhyming **spec—tacular** with **neck to yo back then ya**. The spectacular aspect of this rhyme is how Biggie times it. The pause in **spec—tacular** is done in such a way as to match the phrase **neck to yo back then ya**. It's easier to see when it's laid out like this:

spec	— —	tac	u	lar
neck	to yo	back	then	ya

By adjusting his timing, Biggie is using *ghost syllables* (temporal adjustment via the use of space-filling silence) to make his rhyme complete. Manipulation of the *flow* (the temporal relationship between the beats and rhymes) constitutes an area for future investigation. For a preliminary, yet illuminating analysis, see Wood (1999).

One quick listen to the new albums by Blackalicious, Mos Def, or Ludacris lets us know that we got a ways to go. Hip Hop headz are moooovin FAST and time travelin at hi speeds. And Pharoahe and his crew *definitely* on some serious next-level poetry ish, and the next millenium rap *is* some next-level poetry. No doubt! I ask again: Is it not time (shoot, it *been* time) to explore the high level of verbal virtuosity displayed by African America's street linguists on some serious next millennium rap ish? Can the scholarly world keep up with these highly skilled street linguists? Or, like my man Pharoahe say, will it condition itself to be knocked outta commission?

In the realm of Hip Hop poetics, future studies are required to further examine the polysyllabic rhyming, parallel phrasing, wordplay, metaphor, narrativity, irony,

and various other literary techniques employed by Hip Hop MCs, as well as the use of ghost syllables and other means of manipulating the flow. For now, Hip Hop *floetics* gon flow, flow on. . . .

### Notes

1. Unpublished interview conducted by the author in San Francisco, 2000. Pharoahe Monch had just performed in Maritime Hall, and we were in conversation after his performance.

2. All lyrics from Pharoahe Monch that are discussed in this article come from the album *Internal Affairs*. Pharoahe's most recent biography on [www.rawkus.com](http://www.rawkus.com) reads as follows: "Anyone remotely familiar with Organized Konfusion's much-lauded triumvirate of albums . . . will readily attest to Monch and partner Prince Poetry's penchant for sophisticated, relentlessly expressive wordplay and grand, state-of-the-art production."

3. These phrases come directly from an interview with Ice-T in Spady, Lee, and Alim (1999). The book is the third volume in the *Umum Hip Hop Trilogy*; the first two books in the series were Eure and Spady (1991) and Spady, Lee, and Dupres (1995). Spady, Lee, and Alim (1999) deal extensively with Hip Hop artists as writers/poets by examining the writing processes and the creative processes of the artists through direct interviews. Also useful in this regard is Spady (2000), who connects the Hip Hop Movement with the poetry of the Black Arts Movement.

4. *Skillz* is spelled this way in Hip Hop Nation Language to designate lyrical deftness.

5. This article is written in both academic language and Hip Hop Nation Language (which includes elements of African American Language) in order to represent that language as one capable of transmitting a wide range of expression. One of the main goals of this article is to present the complexity of Hip Hop poetics, which often rely heavily on the use of African American Language.

6. In this respect, Pharoahe rides neck and neck with lyricists such as Busta Rhymes, Mystikal, and E-40 (who probably holds the world record for syllables spit per second).

7. Clearly, the Hip Hop poetics of headz like Pharoahe Monch, JT the Bigga Figga, San Quinn, Common, Chino XL, Xzibit, Ras Kass, Saafir, Canibus, Black Star, Redman, Method Man and the entire Wu-Tang Clan, Bone Thugs N Harmony, Kool Keith, Eminem, Goodie Mob, Outkast, Bahamadia, Black Thought, Rakim, Jubwa, KRS-One, Supernatural, Jay-Z, Zion I, and several others offer scholars a vast body of data.

8. You'll note that in African American speech, word-final [əɪ] is often pronounced [u]. See Baugh (1983) and Rickford (1999) for features of "Black Street Speech" and "African American Vernacular English."

9. *Spits* means *raps* in Hip Hop Nation Language. Verbs like *spits* and *spills* are used because they are associated with liquids—and the dopest MC's raps flow like water. Some rappers are described as having a "liquid flow."

10. An interesting fact about poetry is that prior to the fourteenth century, alliterative verse was the preferred technique just as rhyming is today (rhyming wasn't always in style) (Steele 1999). This style of verse was simply alliterative and did not rhyme at all. This provides a greater sense of appreciation for what Pharoahe is doing by combining alliterative verse (every word in line 3 begins with [f]) and rhyme (lines 5 and 6).

11. Although we mentioned the *parallelisms* at work in Hip Hop poetics, the full complexity has not been revealed. For instance, when Snoop Dogg rhymes on "Bitch Please II" with Xzibit, Dr. Dre, and Eminem, what's goin on? Now, you would have to listen to this yourself to see how Snoop measures the syllables to "ride the beat" here, but the parallelism in timing and phrasing is striking. The rise and fall of Snoop's voice between the first and second half of his lines match perfectly, and this enhances the rhyme tremendously. In fact, it's the main feature here. Snoop often extends the theme of parallelism by picking up the pace and firing off a string of triple rhymes with the same three-word phrasing.

12. Eminem, "the great American white hope" (as Snoop jokingly calls him), and Fabolous are experts at this technique of parallel phrasing. Check Eminem out on his album, *Marshall Mathers* (2000), where his use of parallel intonation and timing is nearly overwhelming. He often splits his lines into two segments, with each segment containing numerous syllables and ending in polysyllabic rhymes. He can be heard spittin *octuple rhymes*, I guess one would call them. The aural effect of this parallel phrasing is amazing. Fabolous, a new, young rapper on the scene, is perhaps one of the most advanced users of parallel phrasing. His verse on "Trade It All," found on the *Barbershop* (2002) soundtrack, contains a string of *fifteen* sextuple rhymes! These two artists' use of parallelism and polysyllabic rhyming constitutes a future study in and of itself.

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