

## **Don't Sweat the Technique: Rhetoric, Coded Social Critique, and Conspiracy Theories in Hip-Hop**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Conspiracy theories are once again a topic of heated debate in both popular and scholarly media. Critics on one side of this debate often take for granted an “underlying assumption that conspiracy theories should be subdued if not eliminated” (Uscinski 444). Other scholars have expressed concern over the ways the “conspiracy theorist” pejorative stifles dissent and regulates political rationality (Rankin; deHaven-Smith). Bratich argues that social anxieties about issues like emerging technology and race “get managed” through the public debate about conspiracy theories as an “object of concern” (160–61). This paper asks, what are the consequences when “conspiracy panic” spreads beyond concerns about dubious claims by government officials and political pundits and begins to shape the critical response to artistic productions? An answer to this question can be found by examining the relationship between conspiracy theories and hip-hop. As a genre, hip-hop has a longstanding interest in conspiracy theories, particularly among artists known for their engagement with social issues (Beighey and Unnithan; Gosa). I start by contextualizing the conspiratorial lyrics of two historic MCs: Rakim and Tupac Shakur. I then examine a recent release by the rapper Nas. Several critics cited the perceived conspiracism in Nas’s lyrics as reason for their lukewarm response to it. I offer a counter-reading that situates the lyrics in question within Nas’s broader rhetorical strategy of giving “voice to things to which nature has not given a voice” (Quintilian 161). Ultimately, this paper makes two claims: first, hip-hop artists deploy conspiracy theories as a rhetorical technique for addressing social and political anxieties; and, second, by adopting a strict literalist frame for interpreting lyrics, we echo earlier attacks on the genre and risk undermining hip-hop’s legitimacy as a genre and as a powerful tool of what Shane Miller calls “coded social critique” (40).

**Keywords:** classical rhetoric, hip hop, popular culture, conspiracy theories, social justice

In the wake of the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories have played an increasingly prominent role in American public discourse. While scholars engaging the issue often take for granted an “underlying assumption that conspiracy theories should be subdued if not eliminated,” others express concern over the “conspiracy theorist” pejorative’s role in stifling dissent and regulating political rationality (Uscinski 444; Rankin; deHaven-Smith). Bratich argues that social anxieties about issues like emerging technology and race relations “get managed” not through conspiracy theories themselves, but through “conspiracy panics” in which conspiracy theories are viewed as “object[s] of concern” (160–61). What are the consequences when “conspiracy panic” spreads beyond concerns about dubious claims by government officials and political pundits and begins to shape the critical response to artistic productions? This paper seeks an answer to this question by examining the rhetorical use of—and critical response to—conspiratorial ideas in hip-hop lyrics.

While politics, economics, science, and technology are often at the center of the recent conspiracy panic, less attention has been paid to conspiracy theories in and about popular art. Yet, from the “Paul is dead” and the “Elvis is alive” theories of the 1960s and 1970s to more recent theories about Avril Lavigne’s clone and Jay Z’s and Beyoncé’s role in the Illuminati, popular music and conspiracy culture have long intersected (Sheffield; Chan; Estatie; Maine; Chen). Few genres have engaged with conspiracy theories more directly and more frequently than hip-hop. Songs that touch on conspiratorial themes span the history of hip-hop. In the unambiguously titled “Conspiracy,” Gang Starr’s Guru raps that the government “created crack and AIDS / got the public thinking these were things that Black folks made” (0:25-0:32). In “Georgia... Bush,” Lil Wayne alludes to conspiratorial claims that Black areas of New Orleans were sacrificed to protect more affluent white areas in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (1:26-1:35). Several rappers have expressed interest or belief in conspiracy theories outside of their music, as well. B.o.B., for example, made headlines after he tweeted about his belief that Earth is flat (Said-Moorhouse). And, before him, artists like Ol’ Dirty Bastard and Prodigy of Mobb Deep vocalized their admiration for infamous conspiracy theorist Bill Cooper (Jacobson).

Hip-hop artists’ interest in conspiracy theories has also occasionally garnered scholarly attention. In an empirical study of “oppositional resistance” in rap lyrics, Catherine Beighey and N. Prabha Unnithan examine lyrics from 1980s and early ‘90s rap songs, finding that rappers from that period touched on themes of incarceration, police violence, and “racial genocide conspiracy” in about 44 percent of lyrics sampled (44). More recently, Travis Gosa suggests that “hip-hop likely plays a role in propagating conspiracy theory” but, he cautions “against simply dismissing this discourse as crackpot theorizing by fringe groups” (188). Gosa traces hip-hop conspiracism to the genre’s deep seated entanglements with Five Percenter ideology and other early influences on the genre. For Gosa, hip-hop conspiracy should be understood, at least in part, “as responses to real structural shifts and social problems in American life” (200). Gosa speculates that “future researchers will find these ideas concentrated in the subgenre of more ‘political’ or ‘socially conscious’ hip-hop” (201). I hesitate to draw a hard line of distinction between “conscious” hip-hop and other subgenres, but there does seem to be a correlation between conspiratorial lyrics and artists who frequently address social issues. This paper seeks to further explore that connection. Rather than dismissing entire projects because they are conspiratorial, this paper examines the rhetorical role played by conspiratorial lyrics in hip-hop music. I explore lyrics from prominent artists from the genre’s history: Rakim, Tupac, and Nas. Ultimately, this paper makes two claims: first, hip-hop artists deploy conspiracy theories as a rhetorical technique for addressing social and political anxieties; and, second, by adopting a strict literalist frame for interpreting lyrics, we echo earlier attacks on the genre and risk undermining hip-hop’s legitimacy as a genre and as a powerful tool of what Shane Miller calls “coded social critique” (40).

## THE PROBLEM WITH HIP-HOP LITERALISM

At the center of the issue of hip-hop conspiracism is a long-standing disagreement about the lyrical content of hip-hop music—a disagreement with implications for the genre's artistic legitimacy. When a critic conflates a rapper's mention of conspiratorial ideas with an endorsement of conspiratorial views, the critic collapses author and speaker and thus denies the lyricist's ability to explore perspectives beyond their own—a fundamental function of art. Such a view is rooted in a bias against hip-hop as a genre, a bias no doubt embedded in the racial politics surrounding the genre and its history. When Johnny Cash sings that he “shot a man in Reno just to watch him die,” few question whether Cash himself is speaking literally (00:42-00:49). Yet, the extent to which hip-hop lyrics should be interpreted literally is a debate that has raged for decades, with various figures taking up the mantle for both sides. In 1992, then Vice President Dan Quayle called Interscope Records to pull Tupac Shakur's debut album from the shelves, asserting a causal link between the album and the death of a Texas state trooper. The alleged killer was said to be listening to Shakur's debut album, *2pacalypse Now*, when the trooper pulled him over, leading Quayle to declare that the album “has no place in our society” (Broder). In another incident, the FBI infamously sent an “intimidating” letter to N.W.A. and the group's label following the release of the group's album *Straight Outta Compton*, and then-President George H.W. Bush denounced Body Count's “Cop Killer” as “sick” (Grow; “Bush Calls Cop-Killing Lyrics ‘Sick’”). Countless other examples from the period exist, but I won't belabor the point. In short, much of the early and ongoing debate about rap in mainstream American discourse centers around the idea of whether hip-hop can or should be taken literally and whether hip-hop artists should be granted the same affordances as artists working in other genres.

Beyond harsh words from politicians, pundits, and law enforcement groups, the debate over literalism in hip-hop can also have other serious consequences. In the Summer 2019 trial of Tekashi 6ix9ine (a trial fraught with controversy for a variety of reasons, most of them unrelated to the subject of this paper), prosecutors asked the rapper about his lyrics and their relation to the 6ix9ine's real-world gang affiliations and alleged criminal activities (Younger). Music videos and song lyrics have been entered into evidence in several other courtrooms as well, including the separate cases of Tay-K, YNW Melly, and Drakeo the Ruler. These cases are all very recent, but the courtroom use of rap lyrics has long been controversial among legal scholars. Writing in 2005, for example, Sean-Patrick Wilson reviewed several cases of lyrics being used against their composers in the courtroom, arguing in part that American culture struggles to see rappers in a similar light as “the horror authors and other producers/composers of criminally- inspired popular artistic creations in America” (376). More recently, scholars have argued that the use of rap lyrics in courtrooms violate federal rules about the use of evidence and “adds to the criminalization of race while simultaneously running the risk of chilling free expression” (Lutes et al. 132). In short, whether rap lyrics should be interpreted literally or given the same license as other artistic productions is a debate with far-reaching material consequences and legal implications.

To be clear, the stakes for literalism in hip-hop conspiracy are somewhat different than the examples cited above. As far as I'm aware, no one is filing lawsuits, pulling records from shelves or off streaming services, or making public statements from the Oval Office because of rappers' conspiratorial musings. Nevertheless, the critical reception of conspiratorial lyrics may suggest that, after over 40 years of the genre's existence, American culture still hasn't quite figured out how to *read* hip-hop and still does not view it the same way it views other mediums of artistic expression. Adrienne Brown argues that hip-hop scholarship suffers from “a long tradition of cultural critics that insist on reading hip-hop strictly within the limited registers of the realist or the memetic” and who hold the genre “to a standard which few other cultural imaginaries have had to aspire to be considered and close read” (266). As Brown suggests, hip-hop is often treated unevenly, with even academics holding the genre's artists to standards that are rarely applied when dealing with other

genres and media. Moreover, the extent to which hip-hop lyrics should be read literally is a central point of conflict in public understandings of the genre. As such, it must be at the center of any discussion about hip-hop conspiracy, from how it's deployed by rappers themselves to how critics understand its function within the genre.

A recent example of this hyperliteralist way of reading hip-hop can be seen in the response to *Nasir*, a recent studio album by the rapper, Nas. Critics were virtually unanimous in their lukewarm reception of *Nasir*, considering it a failure of an album—at least by Nas's standards—and citing the rapper's flirtations with conspiracy theory as a key contributing factor. One critic lampooned the album, saying Nas sounds “like an online commenter shitposting in search of a jolt of entropy” (Kearse). According to another critic, Nas is “turning into the middle-aged Black equivalent of a credulous Fox News viewer, falling down one YouTube wormhole after another and receiving conspiracy theory as fact” (Breihan, “Nas Sounds Tired”). A *Guardian* reviewer's primary critique of the album centers around Nas's “mixing of social justice and conspiracy theory” (Petridis). There are a few problems with these reviews. First, they suggest that conspiracy theories are a major presence on the album, but in reality, the lines in question are confined to only half of a verse from a single song. More importantly, there is little to suggest that Nas is endorsing the “anti-vaxx” conspiracy theories he evokes. The assumption that Nas raps these lines to advance an anti-vaccine position is reductive. As I will argue shortly, the lines in question are part of a broader rhetorical strategy that Nas frequently uses to address social issues. Moreover, Nas is far from alone in engaging in this kind of “mixing” of conspiratorial imagery and social justice. Rappers frequently blur the lines between conspiracy and social justice. Breihan's review is particularly insightful in this regard, namely because he begins his review of *Nasir* (on which Nas collaborated with Kanye West) by comparing it to a similar collaboration between Rakim and Dr. Dre. Elsewhere, Breihan speaks glowingly of Rakim, calling him a “poet” and a “scholar” and crediting him with “revolutionizing” the genre (“Rakim Vs. Big Daddy Kane”). He's right, of course, about Rakim's contributions to hip-hop; Rakim is a giant of the genre. But it is an ironic comparison for Breihan to make, considering that Rakim occasionally delves into conspiratorial topics—sometimes making claims that are far more outlandish than anything Nas raps on *Nasir*.

## HIP-HOP CONSPIRACY AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Sometimes called The God MC, an allusion to his Five Percenter beliefs but also to his technical contributions to hip-hop, Rakim's influence on the genre is undeniable. But that influence is also inseparable from his poignant social and political commentary, which in turn, is frequently bound up with his use of conspiratorial themes. Take, for example, “Teach the Children” which opens:

No more time to pass time cause these are the last rhymes  
 Cause we're living in the last times  
 They wanna go to war, more wars to come  
 But most of us fight more wars than one  
 Discrimination in the racial nation  
 While they destroy our strong foundation. (Eric B. & Rakim 0:08-0:22)

Rapping in 1992, just after the Gulf War and at the tail end of both an economic recession and 1980s-'90s crack epidemic in the rapper's hometown New York, Rakim's lyrics here are urgent, forceful, apocalyptic and unmistakably political. Rakim wants to talk about racial dynamics in the United States, “the racial nation.” Listen up, there's no time to waste; we've avoided this conversation for long enough, and we are going to talk about it now, right now. In what follows, Rakim lists several grievances about geopolitical turmoil (“they wanna fight for more oil and gold”), as well as the more individualized turmoil of economic insecurity

(“Unemployment, I got laid off / The streets is the last resorts to get paid off”) before making an appeal to the powers that be (“Maybe I should ask the president / Somebody get me the president / But he don't want to hear it, it's out of the question”). Rakim's speaker struggles with life in a country at war both overseas and on the home front. At the start of the second verse, Rakim introduces conspiratorial imagery:

They're corrupt, and their time's up soon  
 But they'll blow it up and prepare life on the moon  
 Sounds like Total Recall  
 But who gotta spaceship, you get it, we fall. (1:59-2:09)

Rakim self-reflectively acknowledges the seemingly outlandish nature of these lyrics, noting they resemble science fiction, but he nevertheless stands by them. In a hyperliteralist reading of these lyrics, we could say that Rakim's speaker believes in “breakaway civilizations,” a conspiracy theory which holds that economic and political elites are planning to (or have already initiated a plan to) escape Earth and set up a colony either on a space station of some sort or on a new planetary home.

Breakaway civilization theory is actually a set of related theories that are a hybridization of the “shadow government” and “secret space program” tropes in conspiracy culture. According to some versions of breakaway civilization theory, the rich and powerful will either destroy the planet deliberately, or they will destroy it incidentally through war, disease, industrial pollution, and over-exploitation. In others, these elites don't destroy the planet entirely, but rather install a system for the continuous extraction of resources, leaving behind a working class that endlessly toils under increasingly dystopian conditions. Yet other theories contend that, instead of escaping to space, these elites will escape somewhere below the surface, to the center of a hollow earth through an opening near Antarctica. Alex Jones sees breakaway civilization as a way for political and corporate elites to “do whatever they want, and play God, and enjoy fruits of human intellect and human development” (03:22-03:45). Rakim's allusion to breakaway civilization theory predates Alex Jones's discussion on the topic, so the point here isn't whether the rapper is propagating Jones's ideas. Neither Jones nor Rakim is the first to float the idea that powerful people plan to leave for a new home after effectively destroying this one. Moreover, economic elites themselves have made statements that lend at least *some* credence to the idea: Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos have both publicly stated their desire to use space colonization as a kind of backup plan to save humanity in the face of climate catastrophe (Mosher and Dickerson; Levy). It may be conspiratorial to believe that breakaway civilization is already underway, as the theory's adherents like Jones apparently do, but it may be equally naïve and utopian to believe that Musk and Bezos genuinely envision an escape plan that would benefit all (or even most) of 7.8 billion people on the planet. Breakaway civilization theories may be largely outlandish, but they speak to real anxieties about environmental collapse, seemingly endless war, and classism.

For Rakim's speaker, that's largely the point: breakaway civilization doesn't need to be historically accurate or scientifically feasible, since “they” have already left you behind. Powerful people may as well actually be in space, since politically, socially, and economically, they already seem to be living in a different reality than the rest of us—particularly someone speaking from the position of Rakim's speaker. The president can turn a cold shoulder to the appeals of his constituents because “he don't wanna hear it,” and that's enough of a reason. The song's hook emphasizes self-reliance in the face of being left behind. As the song's refrain asserts, “We gotta teach the children, keep a song / show them the light, teach them right from wrong / make some sense so they can carry on.” For the speaker, it should be abundantly clear by now that powerful individuals and institutions will not provide that kind of education. Toward the end of the song, Rakim again flirts with conspiracism, this time making an even more explicit connection between the conspiracy he sees and its antidote, knowledge:

Education, the kids need a sculpture  
 Teach them the abacus and their culture  
 And that'll help stop the robbing, raping and killing  
 Poison neighborhoods are illing  
 But they import more keys from across seas  
 A drug disease hits the streets with ease. (2:35-2:49)

While breakaway civilization theory is one of the more “out there” conspiracy theories, Rakim’s conspiracy theorizing is perhaps a bit more grounded in this final verse. Through a more direct connection to knowledge of self and of culture, and through a more intensive, more intimate, and more community-based form of education, the “ills” of post-industrial city life—violence, theft, and drug-related crime—can be overcome. Here, Rakim points to a conspiracy often cited in hip-hop lyrics, one holding that the same “they” who start wars for gold and oil and who plan to escape to more livable conditions off-planet are also importing drugs to Black neighborhoods in a deliberate attempt to poison those neighborhoods.

The conspiracy Rakim alludes to here is referenced often in hip-hop songs by some of the genre’s biggest names. For example, Tupac Shakur raps the following lines on his critically acclaimed posthumous single, “Changes” (2pac). Like Rakim, Shakur did not shy away from conspiratorial topics (and, ironically, his death would inspire several popular conspiracy theories, including claims that he faked his death). As Eithne Quinn argues, Shakur “mobilized themes of paranoia and narratives of conspiracy” in part to “[interrogate] the operations of cultural power” (178). In “Changes,” he alludes to topics frequently discussed in online conspiracy theory circles, namely that federal agencies (especially the CIA) traffic guns and drugs to predominantly Black neighborhoods as a way of increasing violence in these areas, sustaining the prison-industrial complex, and, more generally, to sow discord in African-American communities. It’s a “conspiracy theory” in the broadest sense of the term. It accuses a US government agency of acting in secret against the interests of the public, resulting in profound damages against members of that public; moreover, it’s an explanation of events that the agency in question denies. In a 1998 statement to the House Intelligence Committee, CIA inspector General Frederick P. Hitz said that, while “the CIA worked with a variety of people to support the Contra program,” an internal investigation “found no evidence in the course of this lengthy investigation of any conspiracy by CIA or its employees to bring drugs into the United States” (“Allegations of Connections”). Hitz’s investigation was in response to “Dark Alliance,” a three-part series published in August 1996 by *The Mercury News*. The journalist behind the series, Gary Webb, has become something of an icon in the online conspiracy theory community (in part because of the reporting itself, but also because he later died in what conspiracist theorists view as a highly suspicious suicide) with posts about Webb appearing frequently on conspiracy forums like Reddit’s *r/conspiracy* (u/x23b1 23; u/Venus230; u/CHRISTINEitsDAVEpmME).

While Shakur does not refer—either directly or indirectly—to Webb or his “Dark Alliance” reporting (the song was recorded before Webb’s published on the topic), the rapper’s lyrics are situated within a broader discourse of suspicion about high-level government agencies’ and their involvement in what amounts to violence against Black communities. Interestingly, a few days after the most recent post about Webb appeared on *r/conspiracy*, a user posted a recording of “Changes” to the same forum in a post titled “Very Sad how Tupac’s ‘Changes’ is Still Very Relevant Today” (u/raobj280). While the post garnered significantly fewer upvotes and comments than the Webb post, it is clear that the forum’s users were engaging not only with the more explicitly conspiratorial lines in Shakur’s song, but with the broader, more critical message of the song. One commenter calls it “a great song” and expresses frustration that “nothing has gotten better for DECADES” (u/-1\_). When another commenter questioned the relevance of the post and dismissed Shakur’s “gangster rap schtick,” the original poster responded by calling attention to Shakur’s willingness to “[speak] out about police brutality, injustice, government corruption” (u/raobj280). It’s worth noting here that the post in question was

created during the nationwide protests following the killing of George Floyd by members of the Minneapolis Police Department. This crucial bit of context was undoubtedly on the minds of at least one commenter, who wrote, “Heard this song today, I’d forgotten how powerful it is. This should be the anthem of 2020. We need changes” (u/PseudoWarriorAU). This user’s comments are interesting, particularly in a time when it’s common to cast conspiracy theorizing as a predominantly right-wing activity (Roberts; Andersen; von Rennenkampff). It is beyond the scope of this paper to address any potential connections between conspiratorial tendencies and specific ideological positions, but it is worth noting how Shakur’s decades-old lyrics operate as “coded social critique” (Miller), creating an opportunity for a discussion of racial injustice, the effect of the War on Drugs in inner city communities, and the ways in which both issues are connected to US imperialism in the Global South—all in a community that is so often written off as a right-wing digital space.

### PLAYING WITH POWER: PROSOPOPOEIA AND THE VOICELESS

As we can see, some of hip-hop’s most historic figures have long evoked conspiratorial imagery as a starting point for social critique. Before returning to the discussion of Nas’ “Everything,” we should examine a rhetorical device that the rapper frequently deploys in his lyrics: *prosopopoeia*. For Medieval rhetorician Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *prosopopoeia* is a way of endowing entire communities and cultures with human characteristics. It “gives voice [t]o a thing which has no power of speech” (513). For Quintilian, *prosopopoeia* allows rhetors to “invent persuasions, or reproaches, or complaints, or eulogies, or lamentations, and put them into the mouths of characters likely to utter them” (161). Modern texts often treat *prosopopoeia* as interchangeable with personification (“Prosopopoeia” [OED Online]; “Prosopopoeia” Merriam-Webster; “Prosopopoeia” *Silva Rhetoricae*; Butler and Quintilian). But the term was initially more closely tied to *ethopoeia*, a word derived from *ethos*. In the Greek tradition, *ethos* is the rhetorical appeal through which a speaker demonstrates their good moral character. It’s a demonstration that is always something of a performance or mask. Similarly, “*prosopopoeia* derives from the Greek word *prosōpon*, meaning “face” or “mask” (Alexander 99). *Prosopopoeia* allows rhetors to temporarily don on a mask and speak for the voiceless. With *prosopopoeia*, a rapper can take on not just one persona but several, and those personas can include themselves, other specific people, entire groups of people, or non-human objects and ideas.

When it comes to *prosopopoeia*, few rappers use the device more effectively—or more frequently—than Nas. In “I Gave You Power,” a song from his 1997 album, *It Was Written*, Nas addresses gun violence by rapping from the point of view of a pistol. Notably, Nas emphasizes the gun’s lack of agency: its inability to decide what happens to it, who picks it up, or who it’s used against. As Nas says in the song’s intro, people:

Just use me for whatever the fuck they want  
I don’t get to say shit  
Just grab me, just do what the fuck they want  
Sell me, throw me away. (“I Gave You Power” 0:01-0:17)

This theme of powerlessness is one that Nas returns to throughout his discography. In “I Gave you Power,” the rapper traces the gun’s “life” cycle from being created “to kill,” through its travels “through so many towns / Ohio to Little Rock to Canarsie, living harshly” and its use in various robberies and murders. The gun “mighta took your first child, scarred your life, and crippled your style,” but it nevertheless “gave you power.” The gun is conscious of its paradoxical role in the lives of people who use it: the gun is a machine designed to murder (specifically, Nas raps, “my creation was for Blacks to kill Blacks”), but at the same time, it gives its owner a sense of empowerment that would be difficult to obtain elsewhere. Throughout the song, the gun becomes increasingly disillusioned with its position in the world. Eventually, the owner grabs the gun to use in a street fight. The gun is taken outside, and the owner pulls the trigger. But, instead of firing, the gun resists: “He

squeezed harder, I didn't budge, sick of the blood / Sick of the thugs, sick of wrath of the next man's grudge." In the meantime, the owner's would-be victim draws his own weapon—"a newer me in better shape"—and kills the owner. Lying on the street, the gun hears witnesses screaming and running from the scene, as well as the approach of police sirens. The gun is momentarily relieved—relieved that its violent existence is all over, that it can stop being used as a tool for murder. But, again, the song takes a turn: "Now I'm happy, until I felt somebody else grab me. / Damn." The beat drops out as Nas delivers this final line, his voice dripping with disappointment and resignation. At this point, it's clear to both the gun and the listener that the cycle will continue. Before the police arrive, the gun is seized by someone, a witness or a passerby, and the gun realizes that it will be used again.

Nas takes a similar rhetorical approach to other songs throughout his catalog, using prosopopoeia to address various social and political issues. In "Blood Diamonds are Forever," he raps from the point of view of a piece of jewelry reflecting on its role in the exploitative system of the diamond trade, musing introspectively about how first-world luxuries come at the expense of real human lives in the Global South (Nas, "Blood Diamonds Are Forever"). In "Last Words," Nas raps as a prison cell, reflecting on the hopelessness, recidivism, and the need for prison reform (Nas, "Last Words"). In yet another song, "Project Roach," Nas speaks from a roach's point of view about racial politics in the United States (Nas, "Project Roach"). He draws parallels between the treatment of Blacks and the way most people would treat the insect. At first glance, the song seems offensive in how it compares Black people to a creature typically regarded as a pest, but by the end of the song, it becomes clear that the parallel Nas really wants to draw is centered on the bug's reputation for resilience: "You can't win, you can't stand the crunchy sound I make / If you squash me, learn to live with me." In short, far from being a one-time curiosity, prosopopoeia has long been a central feature of Nas's work. It is a technique that the rapper uses frequently to broach complex topics that other rappers may address through more straightforward means. Perhaps more importantly for the purposes of this paper, it's a technique that should give listeners and critics pause when considering whether or not to advance a hyperliteralist interpretation of Nas's lyrics.

When it comes to conspiratorial lyrics, however, critics assume the lyricist and the speaker are one-and-the-same. Much of the controversy surrounding the release of *Nasir* focuses on the song, "Everything." In addition to the *Pitchfork*, *Guardian*, and *Stereogum* reviews of *Nasir* previously mentioned in this paper, other outlets weighed in on the issue, as well. Writing for the popular site *HipHopDX*, Daniel Spielberger sought to "fact check" Nas's lyrics, writing that "anti-vaxxers—like many conspiracy theorists—don't necessarily care about facts ("Those 'Nasir' Anti-Vaxx Hot Lines"). Specifically, Spielberger and the other critics took issue with the first half of a single verse from a song. Interestingly, in these lines, Nas makes no claims of "fact" beyond those based entirely on subjective human experience. Additionally, the lines aren't merely a small selection used to illustrate a broader trend of "anti-vaxx" sentiment on the album; nowhere else in the song or on the rest of the album does Nas take an anti-vaccination position. Moreover, these cited lines, on their own, hardly constitute a "position" at all. When read in context, the lyrics seem to be suggesting something beyond the simplistic notion that "vaccines are harmful," a reductive conclusion that reviewers seem convinced Nas made.

Like "Project Roach," "Blood Diamonds are Forever," "Last Words," and "I Gave You Power," however, the lines from "Everything" are part of a broader technique the rapper uses to speak for the powerless. In the first part of the lyrics at issue, Nas raps:

From the birth of a child, the world is foul  
Excursions of a searchin' child  
Should learn to take nothin' personal  
A parent hates to watch his baby's face  
Takin' his first immunization shots, but this is great. ("Everything" 03:00-03:13)



For Nas, the child's pain is visceral, beyond the child's own comprehension. Whether vaccines are beneficial or harmful, or whether they're necessary, isn't addressed here; what matters to Nas is that the child's experience of that pain is intense and confusing, and more importantly, that it shapes their relationship to themselves, their loved ones, and the larger world around them. Sometimes, the world is "foul," and perhaps even more tragic, sometimes that foulness is delivered by people who are supposed to protect you. It's "nothing personal." The physical pain of an injection, a pain that exists on a purely physical level for an infant—someone who has no understanding of the personal and public health implications of vaccination—is what's important here.

That early sense of pain and suffering, for Nas, helps prepare a child for the harsh realities of the world. Nas states this pretty explicitly when he raps, "but this is great." It's possible to read a hint of irony in this last line, but it requires a certain level of presumption on the part of the listener. There's no conclusive evidence that the rapper meant the statement ironically. Nas's vocal inflection and his body language in the music video both seem to suggest that he meant "this is great" to be taken earnestly (Nas, "Everything" 3:07-3:29). Nevertheless, the following lines build on the assessment that the pain of vaccination is "great" by spelling out why:

The child's introduction to suffering and pain  
Understands without words, nothin' is explained  
Or rushed to the brain, lookin' up at his parents' face  
Like, "I thought you would protect me from this scary place?"  
"Why'd you let them inject me?"  
"Who's gonna know how these side effects is gonna affect me?" ("Everything" 03:13-03:29)

For Nas, the pain of vaccination helps the child understand something about the harsh realities of life. It's an interesting maneuver, particularly in its use of prosopopoeia. First, Nas gives a voice to the voiceless after explicitly calling attention to their lack of voice. The child who "speaks" is pre-linguistic; they are vaccinated sometime shortly after their birth, and the lesson they learn comes "without words," with "nothin'... explained." Here, Nas points to the child's language-less perception of the world. What follows is just as interesting: The child only obtains a voice after experiencing the sting of betrayal, after realizing that the very parents responsible for their birth would be unable, or unwilling, to protect them from painful experiences.

Insofar as it describes negative effects of vaccinations, the only line that takes anything close to a clear-cut "anti-vax" position is the child's last spoken line, and even that isn't as clear cut as it might seem. In a strict literalist reading of "Everything," the line, "Who's gonna know how these side effects is gonna affect me?" does, in fact, seem to take a negative view of vaccinations. But only if we are to count questioning a medical treatment's side effects as being "anti" that treatment. In addition, remember that at this point in the song, the rapper is fully immersed in prosopopoeia. While earlier lines feature Nas narrating the incident (presumably as a fully grown adult), in these particular lines he speaks as the infant. Moreover, Nas calls potential negative symptoms following vaccination "side effects," a tacit acknowledgement that such symptoms are, in fact, "side" effects—not "primary" or "intended" effects, as anti-vaxxers and dyed-in-the-wool conspiracy theorists sometimes assert.

Rather than challenging, or even questioning, the medical practice of vaccination, Nas actually does something far more interesting: He plays with the very meaning of vaccination. In the second half of the verse, when he raps, "Who knew I would grow to meet presidents that respect me?" it's clear that Nas himself is the vaccinated child: Nas has visited the White House to meet with Barack Obama, and the President calls himself a fan of the rapper (B. Jones; Newell). Nas follows that line with:

If Starbucks is bought by Nestlé, please don't arrest me  
I need to use your restroom and I ain't buy no espresso  
Soon enough, assume the cuffs, the position

Not new to us, since back on the bus sittin'  
 Said, "Screw that bus!" – boycotted that bus outta business  
 The future's us, yet every citizen's in prison ("Everything" 03:28-03:47)

Throughout the verse, Nas shifts his point of view at least four times. He begins by speaking as himself (as the rapper/narrator), then moves to the view of a parent making decisions about the health and well-being of their child, then speaks as the child, then back to himself as rapper/narrator reflecting on his own accomplishments. Finally, the song ends with him speaking as a representative of "us." Here, Nas seems to be making an argument about a sense of powerlessness shared by the members of his community—regardless of their age or the level of success in their careers—and the need for a shared sense of resilience. It's a point Nas has previously sought to address, like when he told an interviewer that "a nice watch" and "a nice day on a yacht with rich friends couldn't make me forget about" issues of racism (McLaughlin). Far from being a song about the merits of anti-vaxx positions, "Everything" uses *the initial, lived experience of being vaccinated* as a larger commentary on social issues. That is, through prosopopoeia, Nas uses vaccination to draw an extended metaphor about how life treats marginalized people. If the function of a vaccination is to inoculate someone against an invisible danger, the lyrics extend that function beyond the realm of disease and into social, economic, and political realities of life for children—particularly Black children—in America.

## CONCLUSION

Despite now being widely regarded as the "biggest" musical genre in the United States (Ryan; McIntyre), hip-hop is still regularly subjected to standards that are rarely applied to other artistic forms. While it is not as common as it once was to see national politicians hold press conferences to denounce rappers and their lyrics, reactionary attitudes toward the genre persist. From the ongoing use of lyrics in courtroom proceedings to accusations by cable news pundits that "hip-hop has done more damage to young African-Americans than racism in recent years" (Ramirez), American culture regularly shows that its relationship with the genre is uneasy. A recent manifestation of this attitude can be seen in the way critics respond to conspiratorial references in hip-hop lyrics. As the critical response to *Nasir* suggests, even mere hints of conspiracism can lead to hyperliteralist readings in which the artists' words are taken at face value. It's especially concerning with a genre that emphasizes the subversion of dominant discourses through creative wordplay and witty poeticism. It is not uncommon for a rapper's spoken lines to conflict with their personal attitudes and beliefs. And, while hip-hop lyricists like Nas make particularly creative use of prosopopoeia, there is nothing new about rappers speaking through eyes that are not their own. From its earliest history, the imaginative and seamlessly heteroglossic character of hip-hop is what makes the genre so compelling and so important. Tricia Rose writes that hip-hop "voices many of the class-, gender-, and race-related forms of cultural and political alienation" and "articulates many of the facets of life in urban America for African Americans situated at the bottom of a highly technological capitalist society" (184). It is through the rhetorical device of prosopopoeia (and related devices like personification, imitation, and ethopoeia) that much of this work is done. By speaking as prelinguistic children, as inanimate objects like diamonds and guns, or as entire communities, rappers follow Quintilian by giving "a voice to things to which nature has not given a voice" (161).

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