

THE ANTHOLOGY OF RAP

Edited by

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Foreword by **Henry Louis Gates, Jr.**

Afterwords by **Chuck D** and **Common**

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HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

The first person I ever heard “rap” was a man born in 1913, my father, Henry Louis Gates, Sr. Daddy’s generation didn’t call the rhetorical games they played “rapping”; they signified, they played the Dozens. But this was rapping just the same, rapping by another name. Signifying is the grandparent of Rap; and Rap is signifying in a postmodern way. The narratives that my father recited in rhyme told the tale of defiant heroes named Shine or Stagolee or, my absolute favorite, the Signifying Monkey. They were linguistically intricate, they were funny and spirited, and they were astonishingly profane.

Soon the stories became familiar to me and I started memorizing parts of them, especially striking couplets and sometimes an entire resonant stanza. But every time my dad recited a version of one of these tales, he somehow made it new again, reminding me of all that a virtuosic performer possessed: an excellent memory, a mastery of pace and timing, the capacity to inflect and gesture, the ability to summon the identities of different characters simply through the nuances of their voices.

My father and his friends called their raps “signifying” or “playing the Dozens,” a younger generation named them Toasts, and an even younger generation called it “rapping.” But regardless of the name, much about the genre remained the same. Since anthropologists tend to call them “Toasts,” we will employ that term here. Toasts are long oral poems that had emerged by World War I, shortly after the sinking of the *Titanic*, judging by the fact that one of the earliest surviving examples of the genre was called “Shine and the *Titanic*.” And the fact that the French words for “monkey” and “sign” are a bit of

a visual pun (*singe* and *signe*, respectively) also points to a World War I origin of the genre as it would have been revised by returning black veterans from the European theater of war. (My father recalls meeting southern black soldiers at the beginning of World War II at Camp Lee, Virginia, who were barely literate but who could recite “acres of verses” of “The Signifying Monkey,” underscoring the role of the military and war as a cross-pollinating mechanism for black cultural practices. And of these various forms, none would be more compelling, more popular, more shared than signifying.)

All of these subgenres emerged out of the African American rhetorical practice of signifying. Signifying is the defining rhetorical principle of all African American discourse, the language game of black language games, both sacred and secular, from the preacher’s call-and-response to the irony and indirection of playing the Dozens. These oral poets practiced their arts in ritual settings such as the street corner or the barbershop, sometimes engaging in verbal duels with contenders like a linguistic boxing match. These recitations were a form of artistic practice and honing, but they were also the source of great entertainment displayed before an audience with a most sophisticated ear. And though certain poems, such as “Shine and the *Titanic*” and “The Signifying Monkey,” had a familiar, repeated narrative content, poets improvised through and around this received content, with improvised stanzas and lyrics that might address a range of concerns from social and political issues to love, loneliness, heartbreak, and even death. The Dozens and the Toasts were, first and foremost, forms of art, and everyone on the street or sitting around the barbershop knew this. Rapping was a performance, rappers were to be judged, and the judges were the people on the corner or in the shop. Everyone, it seemed to me as I watched these performances unfolding even as a child, was literate in the fine arts of signification.

As I listened to my father delighting us in the late fifties with tales of the Monkey and old Shine, I knew at once that there was something sublime, something marvelous and forbidden and dangerous about them. And it was easy to recognize variations on rapping that started emerging in rhythm and blues and soul music in the sixties. I am thinking of James Brown’s nine-minute rendition of “Lost Someone” on his *Live at the Apollo* album in 1963, or Isaac Hayes’s paradigm-shifting version of “By the Time I Get to Phoenix” from his *Hot Buttered Soul* album of 1969. And H. Rap Brown’s emergence as one of the leaders of the younger black militants of the Black Power movement brought the word “Rap” and the lyrics of the

Dozens to a generation of black students because he included his most original raps, as a point of pride in his own artistry, in his autobiography, *Die, Nigger, Die*. (Unfortunately, Mr. Brown did not write as well as he rapped!)

A few years later, I would hear echoes of all of these formal antecedents in the early Rap songs hitting the airwaves in the late seventies and early eighties. Melle Mel's verse on "The Message":

A child is born with no state of mind
Blind to the ways of mankind
God is smiling on you but he's frowning too
Because only God knows what you'll go through

echoes across the decades back to these lines from the toast called "Life's a Funny Old Proposition":

A man comes to birth on this funny old earth
With not a chance in a million to win
To find that he's through and his funeral is due
Before he can even begin

Despite all that is different about them, these two verses are bound together by both sound and sense. They each insist upon an unstinting and unflinching confrontation with reality, while somehow staving off despair. Great art so often does this, offering expiation and transcendence all at once. As an art form, Rap is defined, like the Toasts before it, by a set of formal qualities, an iconoclastic spirit, and a virtuosic sense of wordplay. It extends the long-standing practice in the African American oral tradition of language games. Simply put, Rap is a contemporary form of signifying.

By the time I began my first job teaching at Yale while still a graduate student in the mid-1970s, I began to hear about a new music coming out of the Bronx. It was simply called Rap—an old word for those familiar with black slang, but a new form that combined rhythm and rhyme in a style all its own. Like all art—vernacular or high art—it took the familiar and made it unfamiliar again. Rap's signature characteristic is the parody and pastiche of its lyrics, including "sampling," which is just another word for intertextuality. Rap is the art form par excellence of synthesis and recombination. No one could say that Afrika Bambaataa or Grandmaster Flash was not creating something new, but each would be quick to acknowledge his formal debts to other artists, especially to old school musicians from the past.

As we have seen, Rap is the postmodern version of an African American vernacular tradition that stretches back to chants, Toasts, and trickster tales. It connects through its percussive sensibility, its riffs, and its penchant for rhyme, with a range of forms including scat singing, radio DJ patter, and Black Arts movement poets like Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and Jayne Cortez. Its sense of musicality, both in voice and beat, owes a great deal to performers like Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets, as well as to funk and soul artists like James Brown, Isaac Hayes, George Clinton, and Sly Stone. Rap is, in other words, a multifarious, multifaceted tradition imbedded within an African American oral culture that itself shares in the rich history of human expression across the ages.

At its best, Rap, though a most serious genre, doesn't take itself too self-consciously or try to overburden its lines with rehearsed wisdom, or the cant of ideology. It complicates or even rejects literal interpretation. It demands fluency in the recondite codes of African American speech. Just like the Toasts before it, Rap draws strength by shattering taboos, sending up stereotype, and relishing risqué language and subject matter.

I learned this last lesson firsthand more than two decades ago. In the spring of 1990, after I had published an editorial on the case in the *New York Times*, I was called to testify as an expert witness before a Florida court in the obscenity trial of the 2 Live Crew. The group's 1989 album, *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*, with its provocative single "Me So Horny," had inspired such heated response from civic leaders that copies were burned in the streets. At stake was not simply the songs of one group of young black men, but the very freedom of expression at the core of all artistic creation. In my testimony, I stated that in the very lyrics that some found simply crass and pornographic, "what you hear is great humor, great joy, and great boisterousness. It's a joke. It's a parody and parody is one of the most venerated forms of art."

Rap has always been animated by this complexity of meaning and intention. This is by no means to absolve artists of the ethics of form, particularly in the artist's capacity as a role model for young people, but rather to point out that there's an underlying value worth fighting for in defending Rap—or any other form of art for that matter—against those who would silence its voice. One of the hallmarks of a democratic society should be ensuring the space for all citizens to express themselves in art, whether we like what they have to say or not. After all, censorship is to art as lynching is to justice.

As we have seen, it is not difficult to trace a straight line between the

marvelously formulaic oral tales like “Shine and the *Titanic*” and “The Signifying Monkey” and Rap, and, in terms of literary history, it is a short line, too. Rappers often make direct allusions to vernacular culture, as we see on songs like Schoolly D’s “Signifying Rapper” and Devin the Dude’s “Briar-patch.” Even when the connection is less explicit, it is no less apparent. It’s impossible not to hear echoes of H. Rap Brown’s signifying virtuosity when reading the lyrics to Smoother da Hustler and Trigg da Gambler’s “Broken Language.” And there is undoubtedly something of that swaggering folk hero Stagolee in someone like 2Pac, or of that trickster the Signifying Monkey in someone like Ol’ Dirty Bastard.

Given Rap’s close connection to the African American oral tradition, it should come as no surprise that it also carries with it much of the same baggage. Misogyny and homophobia, which we must critique, often mar the effectiveness of the music. But as with practices like the Toasts and the Dozens, these influences are by no means absolute. Perhaps one of the most bracing things about reading this anthology is the way that it complicates our assumptions about what Rap is and what Rap does, who makes it and who consumes it. In this anthology, we see Yo-Yo going head to head against Ice Cube in a battle of the sexes, or female MCs like Eve and Jean Grae calling attention to issues like domestic violence and abortion that often get left out of Hip-Hop discourse, and artists often associated with gangsta personas or “conscious” perspectives revealing the full range and complexity of their subjectivity.

The Anthology of Rap is an essential contribution to our living literary tradition. It calls attention to the artistry, sense of craft, and striking originality of an art form born of young black and brown men and women who found their voices in rhyme, and chanted a poetic discourse to the rhythm of the beat. This groundbreaking anthology masterfully assembles part of a new vanguard of American poetry. One of its greatest virtues is that it focuses attention, often for the first time, upon Rap’s lyrics alone. This is not a rejection of the music, but rather a reminder that the words are finally the best reason for the beat.

One finds in this anthology many lyrics that complicate common assumptions about Rap music. And as we might expect, the reader encounters the brutal diction of Gangsta Rap, but also its leavening humor and parody. One finds instances of sexism and homophobia, but also resistance to them. One finds words seemingly intended to offend, but also, sometimes, the deeper meanings of and motives for this sort of conscious provocation. Rap’s tradition is as broad and as deep as any other form of poetry,

but like any other literary tradition, it contains its shallows, its whirlpools, and its muddy waters. Our task as active, informed readers is to navigate through the tributaries of Rap’s canon, both for the pleasure that comes from the journey as readers, but also for the wisdom born of traveling to any uncharted destinations of the mind. Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois’s superbly edited, pioneering anthology makes such a journey possible.