
“Rap is poetry” (xii). To any avid fan of the genre, it is a statement that seems obvious. The words could easily be the musings of a listener first introduced to the art form, not the focal point of an entire work of contemporary criticism. Yet in *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*, Adam Bradley’s primary focus is this very point, the recognition of traditional poetic elements within rap music. With the global cultural and economic phenomenon that hip hop has become, it is easy to forget that the style of music is barely thirty years old, that scholarly criticism of it has existed for only half of that time. When viewed within this relatively new arena of scholarship, the importance of Bradley’s text is clear. He attempts to lay the foundation for future work, to provide a formal language of lyrical and performative analysis. It is for this achievement that we must recognize *Book of Rhymes* as a landmark text, despite the somewhat surface treatment it applies to its subject.

Bradley divides his work into two sections, beginning with the formal or structural elements of rap music, namely, “Rhythm, Rhyme and Wordplay,” and ending with the thematic or representational components, classified as “Style, Storytelling and Signifying.” The first section is the decisively stronger of the two, based around carefully chosen examples and meticulously broken down lyrics. The Rhythm chapter offers a complex consideration of poetic meter applied to rap lyrics, emphasizing the ability of the beat to set a standard metric line and the MC’s ingenuity to both work within and creatively rupture this restrictive space. The chapter on Rhyme features his finest source analysis, rife with playful literary comparisons, such as the similarities evident in Lord Byron and Big Daddy Kane’s use of multi-syllabic broken rhymes. This section illuminates the intricacies of hip hop’s lyrical art, showcasing the skilled manner in which MCs utilize internal and transformative rhymes, assonance and consonance, alliteration, and so on. Finally, Bradley discusses Wordplay, focusing primarily on the use of simile and metaphor. His analysis of the opening bars to Immortal Technique’s “Industrial Revolution” does a fantastic job of showing the detail and meticulous referential material present in a pristine verse, while noting the immense amount of cultural knowledge required to appreciate such a creation at its fullest.

As thorough and rewarding as Bradley’s close reading can be, it is this sole focus that becomes problematic in *Book of Rhymes*. He stays on the surface, privileging the discussion of linguistic elements over cultural impact. He begins his wordplay chapter with an anecdote about a friend who
disapproves of the misogynistic and violent elements of the Notorious B.I.G.’s lyrics, a qualm addressed by Bradley in a customary manner: “It’s not what he’s saying, it’s how he’s saying it” (86). Bradley is partially correct; how he’s saying it is the aesthetically appealing aspect of hip hop, the reason millions of people around the world enjoy the music. But what he’s saying is the more compelling aspect. The environment that produced the attitudes reflected in hip hop, the source of Biggie’s misogyny and violent imagery, must be given its proper treatment in order to understand rap music on deeper levels than the beauty and complexity of its poetic structures.

This surface treatment becomes more apparent in the second part of the text. The chapter on style largely avoids the problem, aside from a somewhat rushed explanation on the effect of geography. Most notably, the chapter features revelations about rap music’s ghostwriting phenomenon that are among the text’s finer points. But in the following Storytelling and Signifying chapters, his attempts to classify the typical narrative structure and content of hip hop lyrics fall remarkably short. His brief treatment of battle rap invokes Shaquille O’Neal, a lyricist in no one’s mind, freestyling about Kobe Bryant, but fails to mention the surging Grind Time movement, a global showcase of battling talent that fits perfectly into Bradley’s models of competitive dissing and braggadocio he places such high importance on. He glosses over the narrative potential of the art form, seemingly content to show that rappers can tell a variety of stories in a variety of ways. His praise of the clever techniques that a rapper like Nas uses does not give enough credit to the far more revolutionary narrative forms already abundant in hip hop. Nas taking on the voice of a gun seems like a rather simple technique when compared, for example, to Sage Francis weaving a sprawling metaphor for the problems of capitalism and organized religion through the account of a DJ battle between the sun and the moon.

Whether intentional or not, it is the avoidance of underground artists such as Sage Francis and his fellow Anticon, Rhymesayers and Def Jux label mates that make some of the conclusions Bradley draws about the thematic range of rap seem wholly misguided. When he speaks about hip hop’s “invulnerability” (197) or notes that the greatest challenge for the future of rap is “finding the expressive range to deal with the complexity of human experience” (201), he is ignoring a sub-genre of the music that has existed for over a decade. Artists such as Aesop Rock, Atmosphere, El-P and Brother Ali have made successful careers by dealing exclusively with their personal vulnerability and crippling self-doubt. Bradley’s refusal to acknowledge such artists leaves him longing for a thematic revolution that has long passed him by.
Despite these weaknesses, what *Book of Rhymes* accomplishes is opening the spectrum of analysis. As he notes in his epilogue, the purpose of the text has been “to help bring us closer to a language for talking about rap as art” (207). It is a work that seeks to educate listeners and inform scholars, to allow rap a higher degree of sophistication. He invites us to consider the depths of the art form, the true beauty it is capable of achieving. By providing such a language, Bradley opens the door for the type of analysis that hip hop culture demands. Reading work like this makes a future where a feminist critique of Common’s song “A Film Called (Pimp)” could exist, where a Marxist analysis of El-P’s album “Fantastic Damage” could earn praise. It’s a step forward in the legitimization of an art form that has long been ignored by literary academic culture. The occasional slips into a didactic form, a juvenile treatment of his subject, can be excused when recognizing Bradley’s greater purpose. This is hip hop. Fans and scholars alike can knock their heads to that.

ALEX GURNHAM