

‘I Love The Dough’: Rap Lyrics as a Minor Economic Literature

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Whereas literary and cinematic representations of economy and management have been analyzed for some time (see e.g. Czarniawska and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Hassard and Holliday, 1998), precious little interest has been directed to similar aspects in popular music. Consequently, this paper analyzes economy as it is portrayed and disseminated in rap music. By discussing how conspicuous consumption and economic discourses are used in rap lyrics to convey the image of success and possibility, the paper attempts a reading of contemporary capitalism in a particular cultural setting through the notion of a minor literature as theorized by Deleuze and Guattari. The multidimensionality and ironical approach held to the ‘bling-bling’ thus problematizes simplified analyzes of economic language as colonizing (cf. Gibson-Graham, 1996) and instead opens up to a reading of economy as openness.

Key words: Economic Language; Hybridity; Popular Culture; Subversion; Rap Lyrics

‘I just signed my contract worth \$100 million on Friday. I ain’t worried about saving. I’m ballin’ outta control’.

Baby, CEO of Cash Money Records,
interviewed in *The Source* #158 (2002)

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, the grand narrative of economy and the market seems to hold fast, regardless of what Lyotard (1979) claimed. In an age where these notions have become both iconic and anthropomorphic, there is clearly a need for reflection regarding the ways in which we narrate the economic, and specifically in the less obvious ways in which this might be done. As has been shown by various writers on social theory, the notion of economy as merely one thing is highly suspect (cf. Bataille, 1967/1991; Baudrillard, 1996; Benedict, 1934; Derrida, 1992; Mauss, 1924/1990, among others), and in order to comprehend the complex interrelationships between culture and economy (cf. Callon, 1998; du Gay and Pryke, 2002) we need more subtle and more complex readings of economic phenomena. The feminist scholars J.K. Gibson-Graham—two co-authors writing under a penname—have argued that the common view of an economic order (read: capitalism) as totalizing is insufficient, and that the image of e.g. capitalism as a force capable of perfectly colonizing every sphere it enters is insufficiently analytic. In *The End of Capitalism (as we*

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knew it) (Gibson-Graham, 1996) they argue that our readings of economy often stumble due to our tendency to polarize the issue, where capitalism is seen as a binary issue, either not there or there as total colonization. They instead exhort us to analyze the ways in which economic ‘hybrids’ are created, cultural mixtures of capitalism and resistance where the straw-man of ‘bourgeois capitalism’ is placed in a cultural context and subsequently mutates. This text aims at analyzing one such hybrid.

In order to do so, this paper will discuss a specific economic language, and do so in an empirical fashion. More specifically, this paper deals with how narratives regarding economy and organization materialize within popular music. Whereas literary and cinematic representations of economy and management have been analyzed for some time (see e.g. Czarniawska and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Hassard and Holliday, 1998), precious little interest has been directed to similar aspects in popular music. This is interesting particularly as the argument for analyzing e.g. literary works usually has been that it gives us a perspective as to how notions of management and economy are translated into more popular depictions, and that one through this can learn something about such popularization. At the same time, popular music is far more ‘popular’ than either the novels of e.g. Martin Amis or the movies of e.g. Terry Gilliam, arguably making it a far more potent ‘mirror of production’. Consequently, we will analyze specific narratives in popular culture, ones that praise capitalism, that revel in the market economy, and that exhibit an almost rapturous attitude towards material goods. We will focus on the bling-bling.

I be that nigga with the ice on me /
 If it cost less than twenty it don't look right on me /
 [...]Diamonds worn by everybody that's in my click /
 Man I got the price of a mansion, 'round my neck and wrist
 (B.G., ‘Bling-Bling’)

The term ‘bling-bling’ refers to the gleam that is projected into the eyes of the observer when rays of light reflect and refract from jewelry and gold. As a term it arises in rap vernacular, and has now entered the language of popular culture more generally. More specifically, it refers to a particular fashion of ostentatious displays of wealth, one where oversize jewelry is the norm (cf. Codere, 1950). As the seminal and eponymous rap-anthem quoted above shows, it has to do with proving your place in the world through specific displays—such as boasting that the chains one wears around one’s neck and wrists are worth as much as a major piece of real estate. What is interesting about it in the perspective of this article is less the fashion statement it represents, and more how it shows us a narration of life under capitalism that is almost comically affirmative. In bling-bling one can find a way to *perform capitalism*, and it is this trope of re-appropriation that we wish to explore here. Whereas most writing on the use of literature to understand organization(s) has tended to be in a critical vein, and thus focus on more pessimistic texts, this article is interested in the ways in which narratives of the economic can be used in a provocative manner, as a micro-politics unto itself. We will here use some ideas from Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 1987) to read the ‘capitalist language’ in (some) rap music as political. This is done specifically to create a counterpoint to the idea that the colonization of language that capitalism is capable of could not be counteracted. The bling-bling, to us, thus represents a hybrid language, one where the accouterments of capitalism are used in a subversive fashion.

THE ART OF STORYTELLING & ROLLIN’ WITH RUSH

Back in the day a nigga used to be asked out /
 Now a nigga holding several money-market accounts
 (Busta Rhymes, ‘Dangerous’)

Rap music is a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music [which] began in the mid-1970s in the South Bronx in New York City as a part of hip-hop, an African-American and Afro-Caribbean youth culture composed of graffiti, breakdancing, and rap music. (Rose, 1994: 2)

Rap has always dealt with storytelling, and one could well say that rap *is* storytelling. Often these stories have featured the hardships and the struggles involved in coping with everyday life in 'the 'hood': with, and against, drugs, violence, poverty, an oppressive establishment, of man-woman relationships and the like. And often these stories have told of aspirations and desires of moving 'up' and perhaps 'out', socially and spatially—another classic theme in African-American cultural expressions, e.g. as articulated by Bobby Womack in *Across the 110th Street* (1972). Since rap music's first major break in 1979, with Sugar Hill Gang's hit *Rappers Delight*, which brought about an interest in the music by the mainstream music industry (for more extensive accounts of the evolution of hip-hop culture and its antecedents, and of hip-hop culture growing into an industry, see e.g. Boyd, 1997; Foreman, 2002; George, 1998; Potter, 1995; Rose, 1994), and which made hip-hop a plausible way of escaping the harsh conditions of the 'hood—Cornel West (1989, 2001) argues that the entertainment industry, especially throughout the late 20th century, has been an option of hope for 'upward' mobility for African-Americans (sports has of course been another such option)—the storytelling has often focused on money, on how one is going to get some of that 'precious green'. In the title cut to their classic debut album *Paid in Full*, released in 1986, Eric B. and Rakim fantasize about how their talent for rhyming and scratching (DJing/putting together beats) along with their contacts at the record company, will bring them pots of gold. Kool G Rap and DJ Polo further emphasize a Lutheran work ethic as a necessary foundation for succeeding (economically) in the hip-hop classic *Road to the Riches* (1989). Furthermore, songs about money—or cheese, cheddar, chips, dough, cream, cake, scrilla, green, loot, paper, dead presidents, or Benjamins to name but a few of the terms in circulation—and different aspects thereof more explicitly, have come by in great numbers. Some examples are Outsidaz' *Money Money Money* (2001), Bone Thugs-n-Harmony's *Money Money* (2002), and Ol' Dirty Bastard's *Got Your Money* (2000)—in which he lisps and slurs, perhaps partly due to his gold and jewelry capped teeth. And we could go on, and on, and on, for quite some time.

[Eric B]: Yo Rakim, what's up?

[Rakim]: Yo, I'm doing the knowledge, E., I'm trying to get paid in full.

[E]: Well, check this out, since Nobry Walters is our agency, right?

[R]: True.

[E]: Kara Lewis is our agent.

[R]: Word up.

[E]: Zakia/4th & Broadway is our record company.

[R]: Indeed.

[E]: Okay, so who we rollin' with?

[R]: We rollin' with Rush.

(Eric B. and Rakim, *Paid in Full*)

Erick Sermon and Parrish Smith, of the legendary group EPMD (acronym for Erick and Parrish Making Dollars) further accentuated the business aspect of getting into the music industry in the late eighties, making the notion of business a gimmick imbuing almost all their work. They released their first record *Strictly Business* in 1988 and followed it up with *Unfinished Business* (1989), *Business As Usual* (1990), *Business Never Personal* (1992), *Back In Business* (1997) and *Out Of Business* (1999). Moreover a number of rap classics read like manuals for the entrepreneurial youngster: The Notorious B.I.G. told of *The Ten Crack Commandments* which outline best practice in the drug trade (1997), whereas E-40 released the album *Blueprint of a Self-Made Millionaire* (1999).

What is notable, especially in the excerpt from the Eric B. and Rakim lyrics, is that rap artists in a conscious way use the cachet of being good business men and having business

contacts as a way to enhance their art. Referring to their agent, their business manager and their record company not as something to be revered (i.e. they are not forced to advertise their label), but as something that in a way belongs to them, as a part of their network, and as something they can be proud of ‘having’, implies a strategy of self-actualization through business. While referring to an agent or ones management team would seem wildly out of place in the context of a pop song [there are some counter-examples, though; for instance, Lynyrd Skynyrd recorded the track *Working for MCA* and AC/DC stated *Ain’t No Fun (Waiting Round To Be A Millionaire)*], it is part of the legacy of rap music. Making music is not only a cultural strategy, it is a form of metaphorical survival—making it in the world.

ALL ABOUT THE BENJAMINS

Rap lyricists have probably never been more inclined to talk business than they were a couple of years into the 20th century. Reading hip-hop magazines like *The Source* in 2003/2004, you will learn more about rap artists’ financial strategy and career plans, than about their music. In connection with the release of *The Black Album* in 2003, the celebrated rapper Shawn ‘Jay-Z’ Carter was featured as a super-entrepreneur in *TIME Magazine*. At that time Jay-Z declared that *The Black Album* was his farewell to the rap game. Instead, he said he wanted to be able to fully concentrate on the business empire surrounding Roc-A-Fella Records that he, Damon Dash and Kareem ‘Biggs’ Burke had built off of record sales (Tyranigel, 2003). In November 2004, these efforts resulted in Jay-Z being appointed the position as president of Universal’s Island Def label—part-owner of Roc-A-Fella Records.

Willies wanna rub shoulders, ya money too young /
 See me when it gets older, ya bank account grow up /
 Mine is one zero zero zero o’ed up...
 (Jay-Z, ‘Money Ain’t a Thang’)

Speaking of Jay-Z, it ought to be pointed out that he has not only been a rapper talking and bragging about his business endeavors in his lyrics. He has also been a full-fledged bling-bling rapper, which he demonstrates, for instance, in his 1998 lyric quoted above—a flawless example of what bling-bling might sound like. A year before Sean John Combs—performing under the name Puff Daddy (today using P. Diddy)—had declared that ‘It’s All About the Benjamins!’ in the song with the same name. And The Notorious B.I.G. sings an ode to luxurious consumption habits in *I Love the Dough*, released posthumously (only about two weeks after his death) in 1997.

We hit makers with acres /
 Roll shakers in Vegas, you can’t break us /
 Lost chips on Lakers, gassed off Shaq /
 Country house, tennis courts on horseback /
 Ridin’, decidin’, cracked crab or lobster? /
 Who say mobsters don’t prosper?
 (The Notorious B.I.G. (feat. Jay-Z & Angela Winbush), ‘I Love the Dough’)

It could easily be argued, and it has been argued, that the bling-bling attitude—here represented by Jay-Z, Jermaine Dupri, The Notorious B.I.G. and P. Diddy—in the latter part of the 1990s and in the beginning of the new century had come to be *the* dominating attitude in rap music, and in hip-hop culture. In forums designated to intellectualize hip-hop culture, such as the Internet site *urbanthinktank.org*, one can even find references to the bling-bling as an ‘-ism’, a movement: ‘bling-bling-ism’—a ‘supercilious rampage of material worship and indulgence’ (Tyson, 2001). We have no interest in proving that that is the case, we simply state that bling-bling exists.

Having said this, it might be worth pointing out that bling-bling rappers do frequently voice an attitude quite contrary to that of the homage to 'makin' it', namely an attitude bearing witness of the very harsh life one has experienced/experiences in the 'hood, and of telling things how they really are—an attitude of 'keeping it real' and of telling 'the naked truth' [unlike an establishment which often is seen as shutting its eyes for the social problems found in the 'hood, and which marginalizes, oppresses and enslaves the African-American population (see George, 1998, and the film *Letter to the President*)].

These two strategies in rap as a cultural mode of self-expression, the need to 'keep it real' and the portrayal of possibilities could be viewed as a dialectics of sorts. Whereas the first, as a textual strategy, might be seen as a form of ghetto realism, the second is closer in style to the fairy tale. Such stories, as Vladimir Propp (1968) so famously pointed out, tend to consist of a fairly simple structure: a young protagonist is given a task and solves this in a way that brings him fortune and glory (and a girl, as a bonus). As the 'realist' tales represented in rap music tend to describe a fairly dark world, one where poverty, random violence and socio-pathic behavior is rife, it follows the narrative logic that this is then juxtaposed with tales about abundance and a kind of *Scharlaffenland*. When 'keeping it real' one may talk about food stamps, government cheese, dealing drugs and going hungry, but this is countered with tales where one chooses between 'cracked crab or lobster', drinks 'Cris(tal)' (a brand of champagne) and drives a customized Mercedes-Benz. In other words, the task at hand for a young hero is—as we have seen—to go from one state to the other, to escape poverty. And as soon as this has been accomplished, to portray this escape by economic ostentation, through capitalist imagery.

This specific rhetoric regarding the market economy and organized capitalism that prevails in rap lyricism is important for two reasons. One, it presents us with a case of narrative knowledge regarding economy/organization that offers us an alternative to 'high literature'. Unashamedly part of popular culture, rap lyricism still is a specific brand of literary representation, and might show us other ways of understanding how economy can be told as a narrative. Whereas the use of literature to teach/understand organization and economy has usually focused on 'great books', the 'sticking to the rawness' and 'keeping it real'-ethos of rap does not allow for finery, and may give us an empirical counterpoint. Two, it presents us with a case where economic language is used in a positive, affirming way (regardless what one thinks of the veracity of such tales) by a subculture that is usually seen as repressed and downtrodden by the very capitalism it celebrates. This paradox, the marginalized celebrating that which marginalizes, may give us a case to specifically analyze the functioning of economy as language. Instead of observing how economy enters into narrations, we can in these cases see how economy is *performed* through narration, i.e. how one in a specific cultural setting can *do* economy.

BATTLING IT OUT, AND UP

Even though the struggles and the strategies for getting money often have been central to expression in hip-hop, another form of expression has always been present: the battle. The role of the rapper has often been to keep the party hyped by yelling out call-and-response party chants such as: 'All the ugly people be quiet!' Other times however, the role of the MC has been to battle other MCs. Battles such as those starring Eminem as Bunny Rabbit in *8 Mile*, have been one of the main characteristics of hip-hop culture from the very beginning. Entire sound system crews have battled each other out by sheer volume, DJs have battled each other out behind the turntables, dancers have battled each other out 'on the floor', and graffiti artists have been battling it out by painting subway trains in ever more difficult locations, with ever

more refined motives. And MCs have battled each other out on stage as well as on records. Hip-hop, claims Rose (1994: 36), ‘remains a never-ending battle for status, prestige, and group adoration, always in formation, always contested, and never fully achieved’.

This never-ending battle has often been manifested in MCs ‘dissing’—disrespecting, dismissing or disparaging—other MCs or entire hip-hop crews. Sometimes it has occurred live on stage and sometimes recorded—on dedicated ‘diss tracks’ or as short passages appearing on any regular track. Whatever the forum, oftentimes the disses have led to more withstanding disagreements or feuds, *beefs*. Concentrating on the abundance of feuds within hip-hop culture, the movies *Beef* and *Beef II* line up (and possibly exaggerate) such disagreements by the dozen. Disregarding the possible magnification these disputes undergo in the process of becoming entertainment, what is notable for our purposes is an idea brought forth in the film *Beef II*, namely that beefs and disses—from the time when the UFTO song *Roxanne Roxanne* was released and answered up by Roxanne Shante with *Roxanne’s Revenge* in 1985, both of which climbed the charts that same year—have been recognized and later on exploited as strategic ways of enticing listeners and boosting record sales in hip-hop culture (For accounts of the emergence of a hip-hop industry, including the dissemination of hip-hop media, see Foreman, 2002: 106–45, 213–51). Drawing a lot of (media) attention to particular artists and songs, the film suggests that the battle and the disses became means deployed strategically to reinforce record sales and increase profits.

Should this observation be valid (which seems reasonable, although we believe it would be a gross exaggeration to state that *all*, or even a majority of the disagreements between rap artists are strategic business moves), what follows in the wake of the battle in general, and the disses in particular, is an enhanced music genre fueled by internal controversies—by and large also entailing a more potent culture industry. The disputes are doing hip-hop media and films—such as *Beef* and its sequel—a big favor (if not creating the very conditions for their existence altogether), providing them with good stories to tell, to boost and to feed off of. Hence, the battle emerges as a mechanism inherent in hip-hop culture, possessing a force driving it both artistically and business-wise.

However, in a culture where such a mechanism is present and where ‘art’ and ‘business/economy’ are so inextricably linked together, the boundaries between these two spheres become blurred. In the case of the narratives, some strategically shaped (perhaps into downright attacks on other rappers’ economic status, as we shall soon see) so as to enhance sales and profits, they are turned into business endeavors, which may in turn well be the topic of yet another narrative, turned into business. Over and over again; the two being heavily intertwined, making it a futile project to attempt to distinguish the art of storytelling from the business endeavor. As an analytical tool, and as a meaningful means for making different aspects of a phenomenon distinct from one another, the two spheres of art and economy/business collapse into one another, becoming one and the same.

SHOWING OFF THE KITSCH AND THE GLAM—STILL BATTLING

The battle is not always manifested in explicit disses. Returning to the bling-bling, we can see that the use of supercilious consumption in part exists for bragging purposes – the battle has become one of posing. Assuming that most rap artists come from modest means, or at least exist in a culture where economic hardship is seen as characteristic for lived experience (‘keeping it real’), having achieved financial success is not necessarily something one would keep quiet about. Rap lyrics keep a very high profile in relation to this. Where economic success in a middle-class culture would be signaled in a fairly modest way, in the rap culture

the signaling of poverty and affluence seems to be performed *in extremis*. If we take the eponymous track *Bling-Bling*, it is recorded by a larger group known as the Cash Money Millionaires (the track is officially credited to B.G. featuring Big Tymers and Hot Boyz), a group formed in the 'Dirty South', i.e. a part of the US that still lags behind the rest of the country when it comes to economic development, and where abject poverty among the black population is widespread.

Hit the club and light the bitch up /
 Cash Money motto is to drink til' we throw up /
 Nigga point the hoe out, guaranteed I can fuck /
 Woody 'cause I'm tattooed and barred up /
 Medallion iced up, Rolex bezelled up /
 And my pinky ring is platinum plus /
 Earrings be trillion cut /
 And my grill be slugged up /
 My heart filled with anger, 'cause nigga I don't give a fuck /
 Stack my cheese up /
 Cause one day I'm a give this street life up
 (Baby rhyming on 'Bling-Bling')

A lil' nigga seventeen, playin' with six figures /
 Got so much ice you can skate on it, nigga
 (Lil' Turk rhyming on the same track)

This sheer mass of jewelry is obviously a matter of great pride. In Lil' Turks hyperbole, the 'ice'/diamonds are portrayed less like adornments and more like a rhetorical weapon—a skating rink made out of one of the most expensive materials in known existence. A medallion with diamonds, a Rolex covered in more of the same, lavish earrings, stacks of cash and gold all over your teeth [your smile is your 'grill', and a player will get this 'slugged up', i.e. fitted with caps in precious metals—according to the hip-hop magazine *The Source* #158 (November 2002), Baby's current dental embellishments are made out of platinum, since gold teeth were becoming too common] seem to represent a uniform of sorts. The track further contains references to private jets, customized cars and a helicopter with a candy-color paintjob and leather interior. Brand names are not massively present, as could be the case in the lyrics of the now deceased Notorious B.I.G., but several allusions to a particular type of 'rims' (i.e. custom rims for car tires) are made. A somewhat more 'demure' version of the same ethos can be found in the lyrics of Lil' Kim ('Big Momma Thing'):

I got lands in the Switzerland /
 Even got some sands in the Marylands /
 Bahamas in the spring /
 Baby, it's a big momma thing

And further, in a display of brand-awareness, The Notorious B.I.G. ('Hypnotize') can be found outlining his own shopping preferences:

I put ho's in NY onto DKNY /
 Miami, D.C. prefer Versace /
 All Philly ho's, dough and Moschino /
 Every cutie wit' a booty bought a Coogi

The list could be made endless: Ludacris professes to 'smelling like Burberry cologne', Snoop Dogg to owning '50 dollar socks, a hundred thousand-dollar-shoes', Tupac referred to himself as a 'self-made millionaire', and Jay-Z boasts that his new house is so opulent that 'you'd have to film *MTV Cribs* (a show that showcases the lifestyles of the newly rich and famous) for a week'. Foxy spits: 'Who could talk about that money better than me? / Who could stay so hood femininely?' Eminem has even used direct sales-figures to diss enemies – such as when he on a track compared the sales of Everlast's latest album (claiming this to be a paltry 40,000 copies in its first week) with himself 'making records break'. And so on.

Without leaving the notion of the battle (but rather using it as a bridge onto, and a tool for the next stage of the analysis), we now wish to claim that one way to understand the lyricism of rap music (keeping in mind that this is just one ‘genre’ of rap music) is to analyze it as an economic literature, with bling-bling serving as an economic language. In other words, rap lyrics can be seen as a way to convey narratives of economy within a sub-culture, so that economic success takes on a political dimension. ‘Making it’ is in such a perspective proof that the hardships presented by ghetto life can be overcome, and further (which is a more provocative statement), that one can develop a notion of success that isn’t tethered by the aesthetic notions of the white plutocracy and through this a culturally specific ‘economy’. One can, for instance, note the importance put on having and advertising a self-owned record label/company or a clothing label. To take but a few examples, Jay-Z owns (among other things) Rocawear, Diddy owns Bad Boy Records and Sean John Clothing, Master P the No Limit-group of companies, and Snoop Dogg assorted businesses. All of them frequently name-check these in their lyrics, something portrayed in both music and magazines as ‘ghetto entrepreneurialism’. Still, our point is not to claim that such an economic movement exists, nor that rap lyrics and bling-bling:ism would be a solution to the real economic problems in urban areas. Rather, it is to show how a particular kind of narrative representation can be understood in context.

Snoop Dogg is a ghetto Martha Stewart. His ultimate commodity is a way of life. Everything he sells and endorses (the Blunt Wrap tobacco tubes for smoking Buddha, the K-Nine clothing for the pimps, playas, and ho’s, the ‘Freak Line’ phone sex service, the rap music, the films, and so on) designates, validates, and delineates a specific mode of urban existence. He makes it easier to be ghetto, in the way Martha Stewart makes it easier to be bourgeois. (Mudede, 2001)

THE BATTLE AND THE DELEUZIAN COMBAT...

The combat-between is the process through which a force enriches itself by seizing hold of other forces and joining itself to them in a new ensemble: a becoming. (Deleuze, 1995: 132)

What the inherent battle in hip-hop culture (manifested in the bling-bling) reveals is not, however, an apparent battle against, say, the establishment. Nor is it a battle directed against the politics pursued by the establishment or against oppressive attitudes in society—although rap music has been prone to partake in such battles. Instead it is a battle carried out within hip-hop culture, between MCs or hip-hop crews. To borrow a concept and an expression from Gilles Deleuze (1995), it is a combat ‘between its own parts’, rather than an external combat against something exterior. Instead of trying ‘to repel or destroy a force’ repressing, subjugating or marginalizing African-American culture, the bling-bling seems—partly self-reflexively it seems, and through the battle that is carried out between Itself—‘to take hold of a force, and make it [its] own’.

And no doubt the combat appears as a combat against judgment, against its authorities and its personae. (Deleuze, 1995)

With regards to language the battle-between has (among other things) been fought with words, but it has not been a battle against an Other economic language (with a plethora of vernaculars, rules, norms and terminology)—one which one might acquire by attending a typical business school or reading e.g. the *Wall Street Journal*. In a sense, it has been minding its own business. But, whereas the disses and the old school on-stage-battling display a ‘combat-between’ with rappers attempting to subjugate one-another in every thinkable way, the bling-bling is, as we have seen, to a large extent a battle fought by out-posing one another; one of showing off and ‘looking past’, rather than one of wiping out and ‘looking down’ at one’s contestant. And doing so by using economic terminology. So, while this first type of lyrical battle might well have reinforced hip-hop’s position and status as a music

genre and as a culture industry, the internal battle that makes out the bling-bling positions hip-hop as an economic language, and as a combatant Itself, with a force of its own that is also exerted externally, working on an Other body of economic languages—hence becoming a combat against, in every sense political.

...FOUGHT WITH A LACK OF TALENT...

Sticking to the assumption that most bling-bling rappers do come from modest means, or at least exist in a culture where economic hardship is seen as characteristic for lived experience, we might further develop the idea of speaking about the economic as something which cannot be resisted. For many rappers this seems to be the case: lying at the heart of the everyday struggle, the economic has become a topic impossible not to speak about. At the same time has the culture in which the rappers exist by tradition been excluded from many a discourse regarding major economic issues and issues, and is hardly one where e.g. reading *The Wall Street Journal* is common or where attending business school is an option even to a small minority.

The cultural capital of 'sophisticated' ways in which to brag and discuss economic matters is thus less likely to be accumulated in the setting from which rap emerges. To deploy a dominant mode – i.e. mainstream, white, establishment ways – of speaking about the economic is not a plausible option, but rather an impossibility – which opens for innovation. To borrow yet another expression from Deleuze and Guattari, we might say that talent to speak about the economic is lacking in hip-hop culture. One has to take what lies at hand, for instance gangster manners, in a gangster slang, picked up on the street.

Eh-yo, the bottom line is I'm a crook with a deal /
 If my record don't sell I'ma rob and steal...
 [...]
 I'll snatch Kim and tell Puff, 'You wanna see her again?' /
 Get your ass down to the nearest ATM...
 (50 Cent, 'How To Rob')

Appreciating that bragging about economic achievements is an ubiquitous activity in Western culture, and that this mechanism might well be a major driving force in capitalism, 50 Cent demonstrates how bragging in rap music turns explicit. 'Fiddy' brags of his ability to steal, threatens 'industry niggas', and does so as the head of G-Unit Records. In a sense, the bling-bling rapper speaks about the economic, but without the 'proper' knowledge of how to do so. Hence, in a way bling-bling rap has stolen an element central to capitalism, but instead of following conventions of how to treat it, expresses it without temperance and breaks every possible rule of how to speak of such things, 'stealing the baby from its crib' (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 1986).

What is proposed here is that the forms of expression we've outlined in rap lyricism show similarities to the idea of a 'minor literature'. Deleuze and Guattari famously draw upon the works of Franz Kafka to explain what they mean by such a literature: Kafka, who was a Czech Jew, lived in Prague but wrote in German. His German was a Prague German, with a withered vocabulary and an incorrect syntax, and it was influenced by Yiddish. This made his German a rare mutation, and it 'allowed him the possibility of invention' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 20). As all minor authors, according to Deleuze and Guattari, he was a 'foreigner to [his] own tongue'.

Kafka does not opt for a reterritorialization through the Czech language. Nor toward a hypercultural usage of German with all sorts of oneiric or symbolic or mythic flights (even Hebrew-ifying ones), as was the case with

the Prague School. Nor toward an oral, popular Yiddish. Instead, using the path that Yiddish opens up to him, he takes it in such a way as to convert it into a unique and solitary form of writing. [...] He will make the German language take flight on a line of escape. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 25–6)

The Prague German in which Kafka wrote his novels had, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the power to deterritorialize the ‘high’ German. In a similar manner the bling-bling talks with one (or several) Black English(es), developed and nurtured on the streets, which makes use of a particular vocabulary, ignores grammatical rules and conventions (as specified by a Master language). The influences are numerous and the creativity seems to be flourishing—but probably moving beyond the limits of what is accepted in the realms of business. As rappers go from being exploited entertainers, coming from social groupings that usually don’t occupy a space in the economic discourse, to owning their own companies and showing it off, this street language enters into ‘larger’ and more ‘serious’ economic realms. And similar to Kafka’s deterritorialized Prague German it deterritorializes the ways in which business is being spoken and thought of.

That it is written in a major language, but from the margin, the position of a minority, is the first outlining characteristic Deleuze and Guattari attributes a minor literature. It thus changes the rules of the major language, changing it from within and is ‘affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 16). By changing the major language according to its own positions, it moves the borders of that language, changing the way in which it occupies a specific ideological/political (economic?) territory.

...AND WHICH CAN’T BE WON

Let us yet again return to the notion of the battle: as Rose (1994) points out, it cannot be won. There is no border to transgress, and which determines who the winner is. There is no judge proclaiming a winner. But since hip-hop culture is not one unified culture, there are many voices and opinions within it. Who wins and who loses is subject to an ongoing debate, but never quite settled. Media, award juries and fans—all hunger to take part in the debate, but all also hunger for new debates. The never-ending battle is perhaps best understood not as a consequence of someone’s desire to win or seize power, but a desire for something else—perhaps escaping the oppression experienced by people in the ‘hood altogether—and might best be described a ‘continuum of desire’ imbuing the entire culture (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 1986). A desire of both ‘makin’ it’ and of staying behind, ‘keeping it real’; a desire for the ‘hood and the people living there to obtain redress. But also a desire to sell another record, to top another sales list with yet another song, to win another award, and to engage in another battle, to diss another rapper for his or her fake-ness or inauthenticity.

Thus, we find ourselves not in front of a structural correspondence between two sorts of forms, forms of contents and forms of expression, but rather in front of an expression machine capable of disorganizing its own forms, and of disorganizing its forms of content in order to liberate pure contents that mix with expressions in a single intense matter. A major, or established, literature follows a vector that goes from content to expression. Since content is presented in a given form of the content, one must find, discover, or see the form of expression that goes with it. That which conceptualizes well expresses itself. But a minor, or revolutionary, literature begins by expressing itself and doesn’t conceptualize until afterward... (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 28)

Picking up on the remark made earlier on the collapse of art and business as two distinct spheres meaningful to deploy when analyzing the bling-bling, yet another collapse becomes evident when dealing with this phenomenon. As has been demonstrated above talk of the economic often make up the (form of) content of the rap lyrics. Accompanied by beats, melodies and other musical arrangements, this content is of course packeted and sold as music

(recorded or performed live), making up one of bling-bling's form of expression. Due to the nature of the content—i.e. its often provocative attitude towards other rappers—the music and its content, and what is going on around it (e.g. beefs involving economic issues), is constantly cast around, magnified and speculated upon in hip hop media (making out other forms of expression dealing with bling-bling content), with lyrics being subjected to interpretations, and rappers, fans and experts being interviewed and cross-examined. New songs are written to answer back, to what by now might be a highly distorted version of the controversy. What in one instance was a form of expression, makes out the content in the next, although perhaps this time appearing as a heated argument conducted in an unpolished language between two rappers with the benefit of pushing magazines sales.

Take for instance the beef involving the rappers Eminem (who is one of few white rappers in the industry) and 50 Cent on one side, and the rapper Benzino and the hip-hop magazine *The Source* (proclaiming to have a journalistic mission) on the other: the latter side accusing Eminem of stealing sales from black rappers has led 50 Cent (who is a protégé of Eminem) to exclaim: 'Fuck *The Source*, I'm on the cover of Rolling Stone', in the song *The Realst Killaz*. Dragging in even more parts of the cultural expressions and their contents in the feud might well enhance the profits as noted earlier, but it also creates a new situation, with new conditions—where the borders between content and expression are dissolved, turning bling-bling into what Deleuze and Guattari would call an 'expression machine' which connects wildly in any direction, and which 'begins by expressing itself and doesn't conceptualize until afterward' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 28)—which uses its connections as levers to work on its surroundings, exerting forces on e.g. the industry, using the masses as leverage, and on attitudes prevailing in the 'hood. Bragging and retaliating, becoming political in the process.

I dumb down for my audience and double my dollars /
 They criticize me for it, yet they all yell 'Holla' /
 If skills sold – truth be told /
 I'd probably be lyrically Talib Kweli /
 Truthfully I wanna rhyme like Common Sense /
 But I did five mill' /
 I ain't been rhyming like Common since.
 (Jay-Z, 'Moment of Clarity')

As Jay-Z implies in the quote above, the topics dealt with in his lyrics are not really those that he is most concerned with, but those which have proven saleable. Presumably the white middle class consumers are not as interested in rappers going on about social inconveniences and political matters that really concern those living in impoverished urban areas. For Jay-Z the bling-bling has thus become an instrument for doing something else: a way of redrawing the industry map, of moving borders and upsetting governing orders within the music industry. A means with deterritorializing powers which has enabled him as a rapper and former crack-dealer from the streets of Brooklyn to succeed in entering the industry, upsetting it from the inside.

COLLECTIVELY ACTING WITHIN A CRAMPED SPACE

According to the second characteristic Deleuze and Guattari ascribe to the minor, it is, at its very core, political. With the minor the individual becomes the social, and also thoroughly political: 'its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating in it' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 17). Over the years rap music has been prone to speak explicitly about political matters and to engage in

issues concerning societal inequalities, disenfranchisement and racism, passing/carrying on a tradition of black activism. Now, what seems to be a common reaction to the bling-bling attitude, is regarding it as a threatening counter-movement to that hip-hop music which displays a political awareness; as a sign of black politics declining in America; and as a threat to African-American culture (see Harris, 2002; Kelley, 2004; Tyson, 2001). Or, brushing it off—as the rap legend KRS One does in an interview in the film *Letter to the President*—as sheer buffoonery. Without explicitly speaking about politics, the bling-bling irritates and upsets, or is waved aside as something trivial.

Herein lies a clue to a power we posit the bling-bling to possess, namely that it ties directly to politics. Without getting caught in the criticized notion that ‘all rap is conjoined with spaces of urban poverty’ (cf. Foreman, 2002), the bling-bling attitude exists in a social context—the ‘hood—where it is inevitable not to stand out, should you show off some of that wealth. Jermaine Dupri will not go unnoticed driving down Nostrand Avenue ‘In the Ferrari or Jaguar, switchin’ four lanes, with the top down, screaming out: Money ain’t a thang’. Even dwelling in the ‘hood once you’ve ‘made it’—or returning there to visit old friends—seems to be a complicated matter (see the documentary *Black Picket Fence*). But so does moving to more fashionable areas, for the ‘hood stays with you. ‘Now we buy homes in unfamiliar places / Tito smiles every time he see our faces’, exclaims The Notorious B.I.G., supposedly referring to the servant of his new neighbors in the fashionable Hamptons. Assumedly the money is too new, the language too crude and the manners too explicit. Even taken outside its geographical boundaries, the ‘hood, as a mentality, seems to be acting within a cramped space. Again bling-ing offends, frightens, and evokes nervous laughter from the vicinity. In doing so, it is highly political.

Also in relation to the music industry—to a great extent governed by ‘white capital’ both with regards to the major customers consuming hip-hop music, and to industrial tycoons to a high degree controlling the American music industry—a rapper’s ability to navigate the industry seems limited. Recall, for instance the point just made with regards to Jay-Z’s *Moment of Clarity*. There seems to be limits to what he, being a black man from the projects, can express in his lyrics—if he wants to keep up his sales figures. The way in which he, and other bling-bling rappers who run their own record labels, seem to handle this issue—partly by exploiting the Industry and the Market on its own terms, and possibly causing a redistribution and accumulation of mainly white capital into (at least partly) African-American domains—emerges, however, as a possible inroad to the industry.

In our view the bling-bling thus becomes an economic language and a political movement which works on the industry, by attaching ever more independent record labels to it (e.g., Lil’ Kim’s Queen Bee Records, Missy Elliott’s Gold Mine, Mos Def and Talib Kweli’s Good Tree Records), run by a minority which by tradition has been excluded from the decision-making realms of trade and industry. And even if it would be naïve to believe that the (still) predominantly white music industry doesn’t also prosper from these businesses and the sales figures, it seems to us as if the bling-bling contributes to opening up the industry for outside elements, which might well go about their business in dissimilar styles, with dissimilar values, and with a dissimilar language than we are used to be seeing—moving the borders for ‘how’ and ‘by whom’ business can be conducted.

This political nature of a minor literature is further inseparable from its collective value. Deleuze and Guattari (1986: 17) explain this inextricability:

[B]ecause talent isn’t abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that ‘master’ and that could be separated from a collective enunciation. Indeed, scarcity of talent is in fact beneficial and allows the conception of something other than a literature of masters; what each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political, even if others aren’t in agreement. The political domain has contaminated every statement (énoncé). But above all else, because collective or national consciousness is ‘often inactive in external

life and always in the process of break-down,' literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of the collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation.

The excerpt above of course ties back to the notion of talent to speak and act the economic being something which is lacking in hip-hop culture. Supposedly bling-bling rappers do neither have 'proper' training in speaking about the economic, or come from a culture one would necessarily associate with business life, but rather stem from a culture which by tradition has been excluded from that which Marx would label 'the superstructure' of professional life. By this, we don't mean to imply that a knowledge of how to deal with business is an entirely alien issue in hip-hop culture—as Jay-Z points out in *Rap Game/Crack Game*, even dealing in drugs might not be all that different than navigating the music industry and selling records—but merely suggest that the languages deployed in the two trades, at least on a street level of the former, are different.

In a later section of *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari (1986: 83) pose the question: 'in what sense is the statement always collective even when it seems to be emitted by a solitary singularity like that of the artist?'. The explanation presented is that the statement 'doesn't refer back to an enunciating subject who would be its cause, no more than to a subject of the statement who would be its effect' (*ibid.*: 84). Instead, when an artist produces a statement 'it occurs necessarily as a function of a national, political, and social community' (*ibid.*: 84).

So Jay-Z speaks of the economic in the voice of a street hustler, and he speaks out of Marcy, as a function of his background in the projects. 50 Cent gives voice to 'Brooklyn' thieves. In an interview in the film *Letter To the President*, he claims to be showing off his neck-chain simply to convey the message 'I am better than you!', a desire immanent in a part of society which has a history of being marginalized and oppressed. Taking what vernaculars, values and expressions that lie at hand, the bling-bling thus turns into an airing of collective desires of 'makin' it'.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Economy, which is often read as synonymous with capitalism, is of course a language. It has its own vernacular, its own particular grammar. What this text has attempted is to highlight a specific way in which this language has been used, in practice, within a specific cultural setting. Our claim is not that we, being white outsiders, would have any greater insight into the thinking and the lived experience of urban black communities, as this claim would be dubious in any number of ways. What we have tried to do is to show how specific economic behaviors, here exemplified by 'bragging', can be understood as cultural and further as performances of the economic language—performing capitalism.

Further, what we have attempted to show is that the discussion regarding organization/economy and literature can be extended out into the popular culture and into song lyrics. As a scholar in organization theory is still far more likely to go on about the organizational implications of the at times terminally dull *À la recherche du temps perdu* than the very real economies of the at times fabulous *Anna Nicole Show*, one could make a case for the claim that the interest in literature within organization studies is mainly about scholars amassing cultural capital than analytical potential. This text can thus be seen as an extension to this, as two academics writing about the often crass, coarse and crude 'literature' they actually enjoy rather than the good literature their mothers were pushing. Of course, this invites the question whether we aren't just being wiggas (wannabe/white niggas), amassing our own cultural capital by proving that we are far more hip, cool and with it than those who would still try to dredge something out of Maurice Blanchot's poor, mangled corpse. These are difficult and

important questions. We will, though, not make an effort to sort them out here. We will, however, claim that there exists a bias towards 'high literature' within the subfield of organization/literature, and that this needs to be addressed.

This text should thus be seen as an outline of a project. By using Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'minor literature' we have not wished to show that bling-bling is a way out, a real political alternative, merely that one can read bling-bling in such a manner and that one can situate the ways in which the economic language is used. Nor do we claim that bling-bling should be viewed as a major form of bragging in a specific culture, just that it is an example of a more widespread way to talk the economic. What we do claim, however, is that rap lyrics can be seen as presenting an alternative way to address economic issues, and that this can be analyzed. Bling-bling, to us, is a hybrid. It has obviously bought into the larger capitalist project of amassing wealth, measuring all things in money, conspicuous consumption. Nevertheless, it has done so whilst retaining specific cultural markers, and part of its attitude can be seen as defiance against another form of capitalism, the racialized white capitalism that still works to keep ethnic minorities in a subjugated position. Word.

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