

## Giving You a Black I: L. L. Cool J's Rap and Video "Mama Said Knock You Out"<sup>1</sup>

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The music of L. L. Cool J has been called "soft rap."<sup>2</sup> Not to be confused, of course, with soft rock, that easy-listening-I-love-you-forever music, soft rap hits like a ton of bricks: no break-it-to-me-gently here. Soft rap is the name given to a style of rapping in which the author/performer boasts relentlessly of his or her own strengths and talents, both sexual and vocal. L. L. Cool J's music can be classed entirely within this subgenre, leaving "message" and "rock-the-house" raps<sup>3</sup> to the likes of Public Enemy as in "Fight the Power" and the Funky 4 + 1 in "That's the Joint," respectively. In this article, I will explore how L. L. Cool J's rap song and video "Mama Said Knock You Out" typify this genre of hip-hop<sup>4</sup> and how L. L.

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1. Among many faculty and friends, I particularly wish to thank Katherine Bergeron for her faith and criticism, Tony Tauber for his bibliographic help and general wisdom, and Greg Tate for "getting this party started."

2. Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace, *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present* (New York, 1990), 26.

3. Elizabeth A. Wheeler, "'Most of My Heroes Don't Appear on No Stamps': The Dialogics of Rap Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 195.

Cool J uses traditional semiotic play as semiotic warfare, creating a verisimilar reality in which he has complete authority.

In conducting a reading of a rap song, we must consider three fundamental elements: the words, their vocal delivery, and the D. J.'s sampling, which provides accompaniment. As for the video, we must examine the iconographic field and the rhythmic delivery of images. In both the song and the video, we must also pay careful attention to the unique semiotic play that is so integral to the art form of rap music. At all points of the analysis, we can find examples of the sorts of deconstructive and reconstructive signification that are typically found in African-American art.

Rap, as an African-American product, emerges from a rich oral tradition in which stylized verbal display is key. In a review of David Toop's *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-Hop*, Greg Tate lists the different dimensions of this tradition discussed by Toop: "Gulla abusive poems, Yoruba song contests, and the vocal virtuosity of those West African verbal assassins known as Griots—as well as such Afro-American language rituals as the dozens."<sup>5</sup> Rap is only one of many contemporary African-American art forms that build on and borrow from this tradition. The dozens are referred to particularly in the scholarly work on hip-hop and African-American literary criticism:

The dozens contests were generally between boys and men from the ages of six to twenty-six—a semiritualized battle of words which batted insults back and forth between the players until one or the other found the going too heavy. The insults could be a direct personal attack but were more frequently aimed at the opponent's family and in particular at his mother. According to linguist William Labov, who studied these verbal shoot-outs in Harlem in the 1960s, . . . the dozens seem to be even

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4. Wheeler describes hip-hop as the broader artistic movement "that also encompasses breakdancing and more recent dances, graffiti art, fashion, and figures of speech"; *ibid.*

5. Greg Tate, *flyboy in the buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York, 1992), 155.

more specialized, referring to rhymed couplets of the form: *I don't play the dozens, the dozens ain't my game, but the way I fucked your mama is a god damn shame.*<sup>6</sup>

As for the words themselves, Elizabeth Wheeler remarks that "rap takes conversational performance and stylizes it even further into professional performance."<sup>7</sup> One way this highly stylized conversation practice manifests itself in rap is in the form of "dissing," or disrespecting. A "dis" is often directed at another rapper, and it often includes derogatory references to his or her mother.

Another element of stylistic language evident in rap is the extensive use of metaphor. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reminds us that

the Afro-American tradition has been figurative from its beginnings. How could it have survived otherwise? I need not here trace the elaborate modes of signification implicit in black mythic and religious traditions, in ritual rhetorical structures such as "signifying" and "the dozens." Black people have always been masters of the figurative: saying one thing to mean something quite other has been basic to black survival in oppressive Western cultures.<sup>8</sup>

This type of semiotic reconstruction has been integral to the survival of many oppressed cultures as it creates community through a common language, and serves as a system of nonviolent, that is, nonphysical, resistance. In graffiti, for example, words are respelled, and the alphabet is deconstructed so that it speaks to a specific group of readers. The threat felt by outsiders with rap music is that the signs are not as secretive. Graffiti art is not consumed by audiences the way rap music and videos

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6. *Ibid.*, 155-56.

7. Wheeler, "Most of My Heroes," 194.

8. Tate, *flyboy*, 147. Tate has taken this quotation from Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s "Criticism in the Jungle," which appears as the introductory essay to *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York, 1990).

are. Instead of being the language system of a localized community, like graffiti, rap walks the line between speaking the dominant discourse (what bell hooks calls "white-supremacist culture") and its own language, hence forcing a white audience to witness the violence of this polysemy, to take it in the ear. This "walking the line" is a form of resistance, as it challenges the meanings imposed on a subculture by the ruling class.

Aside from the words themselves, the vocal delivery of the lyrics is a locus of much creativity. Through original uses of rhythm, a rapper gives life to the words, surprising the listener with unique, often contorted phrasing.<sup>9</sup> A rapper makes 4/4 time conform to the needs of his/her rhyme. The result is that the body dances to the beat and the mind loosens up to receive "the Word" handed down by the rapper. In this manipulation of rhythm, we find another example of semiotic deconstruction, and again it serves as a type of resistance. In a system that tries to "beat" him or her down, the rapper fights back, creating a here-and-now, a space to move freely, to exercise the body and the right to freedom of speech.

The impact of the lyrics is achieved through rhythmic manipulation as well as through the power of the vocal cords themselves. The absence of melodized text in rap music allows for the sharpest, most direct declamation of "the Word." Contrary to traditional Western vocal practice, which values the submission or masking of the body for the sake of melodizing, rap strips away melody, re-embodying the voice, valuing instead the presence of the body in the production of vocal material. The voice is given free rein, fueled by the body's physical production of the words, and the message flows straight into the microphone. No melody glamorizes or detracts from the message of the words; there are no obstacles in the voice's way.

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9. For a discussion of such rhythmic devices in African music, see John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago, 1979).

As a backdrop for the rapper's voice, a mobile of sound is laid out electronically by the D. J.:

[The D. J.'s sampling provides the] krush groove, and the "sound carpet," i.e. a kind of electrical aural environment, a chaos behind the rapper's rhymed order, a digitalized blend of snippets, squeaks, screams, sirens, snatches from pop media, all mixed and splattered so that the listener cannot really listen but only feel the mash of "samples" that results.<sup>10</sup>

Whether the "snippets" are drawn from past grooves, political speeches, or any other prerecorded sound, D. J.s deconstruct and reconstruct music to create a totally fresh sound. This dismantling of previously whole musical objects challenges traditional Eurocentric artistic notions. As Elizabeth Wheeler correctly notes, "since the Hellenist revival during the Renaissance, Western critics have privileged the 'well-wrought urn,' the closed-off work that erases signs of its predecessors."<sup>11</sup> It is debatable whether this aesthetic code applies to African-American art. What is certain is that this type of sound quotation, whether considered theft, homage, or creative recycling, is integral to rap music.

The words, their vocal delivery, and sampling are fundamental to every rap song. The way in which an artist manipulates these elements determines his/her individual style. As stated above, L. L. Cool J's raps are boasts. They all work to create a superman (or a super ego). L. L. has mastered these elements of his genre in such a way that the listener's only choice is to believe that L. L. speaks the Truth. His metaphors, phrasing, and sampling extinguish any hope of fantasy or escape. For example, his metaphors lose their fanciful or "poetic" value as he masterfully coordinates them with other elements within a piece. Instead they acquire the quality of being literal, and therefore achieve the desired effect for L. L. Cool J—that is,

10. Costello and Wallace, *Signifying Rappers*, 25.

11. Wheeler, "Most of My Heroes," 199.

they make us believe that he speaks from a position of authority. The result is a raw and exposing sensory experience.

Typical of soft rap, the lyrics of "Mama Said Knock You Out" are replete with references to the rapper himself (this particular short rap contains more than sixty). The whole song efficiently constructs L. L. Cool J as a larger-than-life person. L. L. goes further than the typical "me, myself, and I" material. He creates a "self-mythology" by placing himself in a historical continuum ("I've been here for years"), referring also to his past raps ("Mr. Smith" and "The Ripper"). This continuum leads to further references that establish a social identity, as he compares himself to Muhammad Ali, or to the title character in "Shaft," the so-called blaxploitation film of the 1970s. He mentions Old Gold and Old English, two of the malt liquors that are popular and marketed solely in neighborhoods like the one L. L. is from. He alludes to "homeboys" of his own neighborhood when he calls out, "Farmers!" (referring to the residents of Farmer's Boulevard in Queens, New York). L. L.'s New York roots are as evident in these fragments of speech as they are in his accent. Consider the rhyme "What makes you forget that I was RAW, but now I got a new TOUR." With these references, L. L. creates a specific social and geographic environment, and as we follow his "signposts," we enter his world. Also, all these signs function to create a sense of audience that brings together his allies, the so-called competition, and black youth. Women are invoked only as potential victims of L. L.'s polysemic violence. The white audience is presumed to be present, as the airwaves and record companies that carry L. L. are largely white-owned and therefore prepared to sell commodities like L. L. to white teenagers.

At any point in the rap, a dis can be directed at any audience, although because of some of the language play, certain messages perhaps directed at a specific audience are not immediately decipherable as such. For example, because of the narrative context set up in the first verse, in which it appears that L. L.'s competition is other rappers, the listener can be led to

believe that the “you” of the second verse refers to the same competitor (see table 1).<sup>12</sup> However, as the narrative pace picks up verse by verse, the connotative multiplicity of signs increases as well, so that the “you” of verse 2 in “Why do you mess with me?” can now be read as referring to other rappers *and* other people in general. In this verse, L. L. locates himself geographically and socially and thereby evokes a whole new community to bear witness (“Watch me bash this beat like a skull!”).

In “Mama Said Knock You Out,” L. L. repeatedly refers to the “competition,” an Other, “you,” speaking his opponent into being so that he can “slice and dice” and “dis” him or her. Throughout the rap, L. L. commands this Other with grammatical imperatives: “Don’t you dare,” “You better move,” “Don’t you call,” “Get ready,” “Don’t dick with me,” “Listen,” “Just groove,” “Don’t you never!” As the audience or the “you” of this rap is repeatedly invoked, it is also necessarily at the mercy of L. L., its creator. Once the broad audience is firmly established, it gets “taken out” with endless put-downs, only to be called up again. For without the audience, L. L. remains faceless, unidentified.

The biggest dis of the rap is the rap’s title/chorus/mantra, “I’m gonna knock you out/Mama said knock you out!” There

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12. Because rap is a music primarily concerned with speech, rhythm, and meter, I felt it would be misleading to use staff notation as a means of presenting the song’s lyrics, as the emphasis would appear to be placed on the pitches. The use of “proportional notation” for the presentation of the lyrics and images of this rap song is particularly appropriate because in rap music, it is the way words are delivered through time that makes them come to life. This method of representation was suggested to me by Katherine Bergeron and was developed as a result of her study of John Cage’s lectures in “proportional notation.”

is no let-up, no chance for a witty comeback. L. L. delivers this chorus with solid punches, each word on a beat:

1	2	3	4
I'm	gonna	knock you	out! (Ugh!)
Mama	said	knock you	out! (Ugh!)

There are four very deliberate beats per measure, heard together with their subdivisions, as L. L. hammers out the phrases as if to control even the weaker half of the beat. And while the spoken phrase uses up only six of the eight beats, on the big fourth beat he supplies the sound of this Other getting punched (“Ugh!”). No room for retreat. Greg Tate suggests that this type of violent declamation is what makes a rap lyric successful:

The mordant wit hip-hop likes to show off with these days not only makes it our [African-Americans'] most quotable pulp, but the only one whose exegesis requires ballistics. The dope measure of a new jack lyric is whether it blows into the ear like a dum-dum bullet, indelibly stains the brain, and frequently exits the victim's mouth in the form of a conversation piece.<sup>13</sup>

This rap is delivered like a bullet to the head. Tate's word is “ballistic”; Toop refers to the whole linguistic style as a “verbal shoot-out.” The terms are particularly appropriate to this not-so-soft soft rap, since L. L. Cool J repeatedly uses terms of warfare to describe his strength. When he speaks of his “jammy,” he means his gun and his penis and his voice (none of which is soft): together they represent for the “white-supremacist culture” all that is frightening about a young black male. L. L. brings to the foreground that the few things he does have—freedom of speech, a gun, and his masculinity—can “slay.”

13. Tate, *flyboy*, 134.

With his voice he “drop[s] these lyrics” like a bomb. He warns the listener not to disrespect him because he’s a “maniac” who might pull out his “jammy,” which might, accidentally, go off. L. L.’s use of the common, almost trite, penis/gun/male ego metaphor is deliberate. Because it is so familiar, its meaning cannot be missed, yet because it is a metaphor, L. L. maintains his authority as artful rapper.

When he says, *“I’m gonna tie you up and let you understand that I’m not your average man when I got a jammy in my hands. Damn! Ooh!”* he creates a rape scenario. Playing on the worst fears of his white audience, L. L. reclaims a stereotype as a strength, holding it over our heads, making us cower. Here, “jammy” means gun, then the possible fate is death. If “jammy” means penis, then the fate is being tied up and raped by an above-average man, read: a maniac, a black man with an above-average-sized penis.

L. L. Cool J figuratively develops his persona as he compares himself to the unpredictability and strength of the forces of nature. Here he employs a dramatic manipulation of meter to signify his power further: “[I’m] makin’ the tears rain down like a monsoon,” with the jolting effect of “-soon” smashing the downbeat:

1	2	3	1	4
Makin’ the tears	rain down	like	a	mon-
<b>soon!</b>				

“Startin’ a hurricane, releasin’ pain,” he calls himself “insane”: L. L. succeeds in presenting himself as ruthless. He appears to have no conscience; like nature, he punishes indiscriminately, terrorizing whatever or whomever lies in his path. He promises to take “this itty-bitty world by storm,” like some kind of storm trooper.

Thus, we begin to see how this rap evokes violence through the lyrics' reinforcement of and tension with a strong main beat. L. L. warns, "Don't you call this a regular jam," this is a "funky rhyme"—but here being "funky" and "in the groove" are not about dancing, they are about being the ultimate wordsmith. Many of the words are slammed on the beat. L. L. forces time to conform to his message. By deconstructing typical grammatical phrasing, L. L.'s message is understood as a threat to the establishment. It is not only his words that inflict terror and mayhem but also his reorganization of time. The beat and message are under his control, and as a result the listener, too, is forced to take an aural beating:

1	2	3	4			
Ripper	will	not	al-	low		
you	to	dick	with	Mister	Smith	will
riff						

The result is "damage." L. L. here takes charge of standard time, punching in on his own time clock as if to fulfill Houston Baker's prophecy about rap:

What time is it? It is the beginning of the decade to end a century. It is postindustrial, drum machine, synthesizer, sampling, remix, multi-track studio time. But it is also a time in which *the voice* and *the bodies* of rap and dance beat the rap of technologically induced (reproduced) indolence, impotence, or (in)difference.<sup>14</sup>

L. L. fights back, sucking in his audience with a grooving beat, and bodyslamming them with his "funky rhyme."

14. Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Hybridity, the Rap Race, and Pedagogy for the 1990's," *Black Music Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 222.

The samples in "Mama Said Knock You Out" are difficult to decipher. The most prominent sample in the song is a four-note phrase that repeats through all the verses of the song, with one note per beat. I have been unable to trace its origin. (Someone has suggested to me that it may be a riff from the Isley Brothers.) To be sure, in "Mama Said Knock You Out" there are no musical or verbal quotes from Martin Luther King; the only homage paid in this rap is to L. L. Cool J himself.

The four-note phrase moves nowhere harmonically; it makes no traditional "progress." Its stasis keeps the listener locked in place, taking a beating. Occasionally the riff drops out, but the relief generally lasts for only a half beat. Most of these breaks create an upbeat to a brutal downbeat, that is, they are agogic accents:

1	2	3	4
I	gotta	thank	'cause
he	gave	me	the
		jam	to
			rock [BREAK]
<b>HARD!</b>			

With each new chorus the aural punishment inflicted on the listener becomes harsher. More scratching is added, more crying, more screaming, police whistles, cameras flashing. All of this underscores L. L.'s straight-shooting, hard-hitting delivery of the words "I'm gonna knock you out/ Mama said knock you out!"

As I move to a discussion of the video, it is important to consider the ways in which the iconography and rhythmic presentation of visual images correspond to the textual narrative and its rhythmic delivery. This correspondence in the video is largely responsible for the ultimately violent impact the rap has on its viewer/listener. The starting point for such an analysis is an understanding that L. L. Cool J is the author of the film. While we know he is not a film director, it is strikingly evident

that he "calls the shots." This video is as much about L. L. as the song is. In this video, we are forced to look at an angry L. L.; for most of the video he is the only person presented. As the narrative progresses, his victims appear: one black man and one white. And finally, toward the end, the camera flashes on awed and impressed spectators.

The field of action is a boxing ring. L. L. stands hooded at the announcer's microphone. The choice of a boxing ring as a scenario for the video makes sense given the words of the song, particularly the chorus. By choosing the obvious signified of his lyrics, L. L. again turns metaphor into literal representation. And instead of creating a fantasy land for his viewers like most pop music videos, L. L. manipulates the iconography to portray a reality in which he is the authority. The video milieu becomes for L. L. another place to tell it like it is. He is not interested in storytelling, but rather "black-and-white" representation.

L. L. says in an interview that "boxing is the only sport that shows true aggression. Truly a display of everyman's ego."<sup>15</sup> L. L. and Mike Tyson have often been compared to each other because of their physical strength, their color, and the inconsistency of their careers. L. L. feels that all boxing and rap have in common is that the performers are always in "poverty."<sup>16</sup> I would add that two of the ambitions white society allows black male youth are to become a musician or an athlete. Boxers and rappers are heroes in many poor black neighborhoods. In the boxing ring, the black male body *appears* glorified and well paid, not oppressed.

In an interview L. L. explained that it is "groove" that makes rap threatening. He emphasized his point by crooning, "I'm bad"—imitating Michael Jackson—and then "grooving,"

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15. Scott Poulson-Bryant, "The Rebirth of Cool," *Spin* 7, no. 4 (July 1991): 40.

16. Virginia Liberatore, "Mike Tyson and L. L. Cool J," *Spin* 6, no. 10 (January 1991): 56.

"I'm bad!"<sup>17</sup> In the video, L. L. shouts as if he's arguing for his life; he stands at the mic, blowing words into it with a spray of saliva, chewing up syllables and spitting them out. His physical energy and verbal insistencies are reminiscent of a preacher instilling the fear of God into his congregation. Any time he raps in the video, we see L. L. at the mic, center ring. Houston Baker says that "the voice is individual talent holding the mic for as long as it can invoke and evoke a black tradition that is both preexistent and in formation."<sup>18</sup> For most of the verses and most of the chorus, we see just that: L. L. relentlessly delivering his rap, making himself into a legend, while evoking the legacies of Ali and Tyson.

Because the video is shot in black-and-white, it has the appearance of a documentary. It is as if we were witnessing the fame of L. L. Cool J going down in history. (The video is reminiscent too of Martin Scorsese's "Raging Bull," a film about the downfall of a white boxer.) The stark contrasts of black-and-white photography create a bleak and violent landscape. It also allows us to see the shadows and light of L. L.'s muscles, straining as he lifts weights, emphasizing his powerful masculinity.

In the weightlifting segments and at the mic as well, we are shown only pieces of L. L.'s physical being. At the mic he stands enshrouded in a sweatshirt hood. L. L. is always wearing a hat: "It's my trademark. Secondly, all your energy is contained in your head. You notice, in a lot of religions, holy men wear things on their heads. It's my crown."<sup>19</sup> I would argue, however, that L. L.'s face in the shadow, with only his nose and lips visible, makes him a "hood," threatening to his audience. We can't see his eyes so we can't read his soul or his intentions.

The rest of L. L.'s body is revealed to us in segments. In a basement, as he warms up for the fight, we get glimpses of

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17. Poulson-Bryant, *Rebirth*, 40.

18. Baker, *Hybridity*, 221.

19. Poulson-Bryant, *Rebirth*, 40.

stomach, arms, hands, and legs, each depicted separately. Here, L. L. reclaims the beautiful black body that throughout history has been simultaneously coveted and feared by whites. Elizabeth Wheeler states that "with the atrocities white people have inflicted against black bodies, the love of one's own black flesh is an act of self-defense."<sup>20</sup> Referring to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the "grotesque body" as a "body in the act of becoming," Wheeler asserts that this type of segmentation and celebration of the black body is a form of resistance:

In popular festive language, body imagery effects a "transfer of the upper to the lower bodily stratum; the body turns a cartwheel." Grotesque images exaggerate "the genital organs, the buttocks, belly, nose and mouth." This carnal impulse creates not negative satire but festive affirmation. It is "far removed from cynical nihilism. The material bodily lower stratum is productive. It gives birth, thus assuring mankind's immortality. All obsolete and vain illusions die in it, and the real future comes to life." The body's cartwheel turns the social order upside down, making room for renewal and change.<sup>21</sup>

Because it is apparent that L. L. is the author of the images in the video, they can be seen as reclaiming and glorifying the black body. It is also possible that, as is typical in music video, these snippets of L. L.'s body leave the viewer/consumer wanting more.

The rhythmic delivery of images in the video emphasizes the lyrics as it is constructed in much the same way as the rap song (see table 2). With few exceptions, the images change directly on the beat of the music. As in the music also, most of the nonrapping action occurs during the chorus and "break-down" section. Likewise, narrative development and the rate of images accelerate with the progress of the song.

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20. Wheeler, "Most of My Heroes," 201.

21. Wheeler, "Most of My Heroes," 199. The references are to Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 373, 321, 378.

During the first half of verse 1, we see L. L. in the ring at the microphone. On the last beat of measure 4, on "BOOM!", L. L. opens a cellar door and begins to descend the stairs. In the cellar, he prepares for a fight, taking off his sweatshirt. Later in the verse, we see L. L. in the corner of the ring with a towel on his head. When the shot returns to him at the mic, it is apparent that L. L. is playing two roles: a rapper and a fighter. He is commenting on himself. L. L. plays a dual role, so that if we missed the message coming from L. L. the rapper (but how could we?), we could still get knocked out by L. L. the fighter. In this verse, L. L. warns us not to "stare," but we can't help it: we have no choice because he's the only person on the screen.

This first chorus shows L. L. again at the mic. On the fourth beat of every measure, emphasizing the "Ugh!" of the vocals, we see a shot of part of L. L.'s body in the cellar as he gears up for the fight. We see his hands grinding in an anxious display of mad energy. We see that these are the instruments of destruction, and they are raring to go.

The second verse shows different shots of L. L. in the ring as a rapper. He leaves the mic to pace the ring, appearing anxious and tired of being caged. At the mic, his gestures become more animated, emphasizing the building up of an energy that will soon be released. The rhythmic layout of the second chorus is the same as the first, though this time L. L. lifts weights in the cellar. After this chorus there is a musical "interlude." During this "breakdown" we see L. L. in various stances, playing all the roles. In the corner of the ring, he takes a drink and spits it out, showing that he has no patience for the competition: "I'll devour!"

In verse 3, another character is introduced, a black opponent. We see his face straight on getting punched by a gloved hand from the side. This image accompanies a vocal "Ugh!" On the fourth line, we infer the "Ugh!" as the man gets hit again right on the beat. In the third chorus, the action picks up. Now we have a white victim also getting blindsided. Again

with the fourth beat “Ugh!”s, the white and black men alternately take a beating.

In verse 4, at the mic again, we get a close-up as L. L. “rip[s] and kill[s] at will!”—saliva blowing out of his mouth in an angry spray. Here we are allowed to see just how mad L. L. is. The saliva is not edited out as it typically would have been in a different pop star’s video, where the strived-for aesthetic is typically a Barbie Doll perfection. This video and performer appear raw. Toward the end of this verse, L. L. addresses the stands, calling out to his homeboys, “Farmers!” They respond, urging him on, “Get down!” Then we see flashes from the darkness outside the ring. We imagine the spectators and press, half terrified, being commanded to take notice of the spectacle before them. When he says “I explode!”, L. L. grabs at his crotch and then, when he says “my nine is easy to load!”, he makes a gun-loading gesture with his hands. Here, in one gesture, L. L. enacts both meanings of “jammy,” acknowledging the oldest double meaning in the book.

Chorus 4 closes the narrative. We see L. L., the narrator, at the mic, but again on that deadly fourth beat the victims appear, their images interspersed with those of L. L. pumping iron. On the ultimate beat of the song (before the fade-out), the white man is officially knocked-out, K-O’d. He is shown in slow motion, eyes closed, hitting the mat, his head bouncing up slightly from the impact, and finally resting there. During the fade-out, a collage of images is re-presented, and the narrative is run through one more time, as if our lives are flashing before our eyes. (This relatively fast delivery of visual images does not detract from the music, because the rap is over.) And finally, L. L. stands, arms in the air, victorious as boxer and as rapper. A sample is mixed in from a past rap: “I excel, they all fell!” L. L. includes himself in the pastiche of sampling, paying homage to himself.

This video is remarkable for its relatively sparse image-field. Most pop music videos over-indulge in flashy scenery, props and funhouse camera shots—they paint a fantasy land,

based on the viewers' (teenagers') need to escape reality, and tease us into feeling that we are the first person or the star of the scenario. Pop videos tend to cover a lot of visual territory, suggesting movement or traveling, constantly enticing the viewer to go along for the ride.

L. L. Cool J, on the contrary, supplies us with an incredibly narrow view. The tight, up-close camera shots lock us in place, leaving no room for fantasies of escape. We get an earful and eye-ful of an impatient L. L. Cool J. The video's starkness and darkness consume the viewer. We become claustrophobic and cannot resist. Furthermore, by delivering images right on the beat, a verisimilitude is created, enhancing the effect that what the rap depicts is reality. The rap video cannot be viewed as a descriptive epithet to the rap song; it seems to be integral to, and inseparable from, its content. This ensures that we view L. L. as a reporter of fact rather than an actor in fiction.

This video and rap song derive their power from L. L. Cool J's authoritatively deliberate and parsimonious meting out of signs, together with the rhythmic delivery of words and images. L. L. has mastered his medium. With full knowledge of its signification, L. L. designs his own iconographic environment, whose presentation he controls; he creates a place where no one can contend with him. Every camera move, every phrase and frame has an explicit structural significance. The video's narrative topography is more like a pornographic story than a romantic novel; that is, it gets right down to business and drives its point home—nothing is left to the imagination. No time is wasted dwelling on nuances or delaying gratification.

To make this point even clearer, let me turn to another, very different performance of L. L. Cool J's "Mama Said Knock You Out," a performance that aired as a part of "MTV Unplugged." "MTV Unplugged" can be described as a series, created and hosted by MTV, designed to present popular artists making music in a relatively intimate and "real" setting. "Unplugged" features acoustic performances aspiring to a back-to-

basics ideal. Musicians and their music are featured in a plain studio, without the elaborate effects of fancy electronics and overly spliced-and-diced videos. The setting is a stage surrounded by a small crowd of maybe 200, some in chairs, some on their feet dancing. Generally this has been an extremely successful format as many performers subsequently market their "Unplugged" sessions as singles or live albums. This format has given new life to the careers of some older rockers, whose first fans craved sincerity and demanded authenticity from them. Anyone who has listened to a pop radio station or been in a shopping mall recently cannot have missed Eric Clapton's new, laid-back version of his hit "Layla," or Rod Stewart's oh-so-sincere "Have I Told You Lately That I Love You," both recordings marketed as so-called "Unplugged" performances.

Certainly L. L. Cool J is a far cry from Rod Stewart or Eric Clapton. However, he too has been featured with other rappers on a set of "MTV Unplugged." One has to wonder what MTV had in mind when they imagined producing acoustic rap. While rap began unplugged on the streets and is derived from a centuries-old tradition of verbal play, contemporary hip-hop, and soft rap in particular, cannot possibly actualize their practitioners' authority without the tools of technology. Aside from the rapper's vocals, the sound is created on a turntable, electronically weaving recycled samples, drum beats, chord progressions: the entire accompaniment. It follows, then, that rap is also a music that is totally comfortable with a high-tech video accompaniment. Rap depends on and celebrates recorded sound and technological mastery. As Wheeler acknowledges, "hip hop musicians have fought back with technology, being among the first artists to grasp the texture of life in the media age."<sup>22</sup> Rap is a modern popular music that looks toward the future—a complete art form that regrets nothing and that certainly does not long for the "good old days."

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22. Wheeler, "Most of My Heroes," 195.

When technology is removed from soft rap, so is much of what signifies power within the genre. Because of this, "Rap Unplugged" could be appropriately retitled "Rap Disempowered" and L. L. Cool J's performance retitled "MTV Knocked You Out," because he becomes the victim. L. L. appears completely out of his milieu: we see him stripped of the tools of his trade and consequently of his strength and masculinity.

L. L. is presented on stage with a band consisting mostly of white studio musicians. The instruments are a drum kit, two acoustic guitars, and piano. The drummer and one guitarist provide the rhythm section. The other guitarist plays the four-note phrase that repeats throughout the piece. The pianist also plays the phrase, providing flourishes as he feels appropriate. L. L. begins by shouting "Don't call it a comeback!" and the band responds with a tutti downbeat. L. L. repeats and begs "More energy! Don't call it a comeback!" The band responds again with a big beat; after three tries, L. L. decides to just get on with the rap.

The vocal performance is pulled off with relative success since the words and their rhythmic delivery remain intact. As for the accompaniment, the band is racing; the musicians are delirious with the energy that L. L. finds lacking. The pianist glissandos his way into Steinway heaven. The rhythm guitarist, playing the same chord throughout, forgets himself and tries to woo the camera in his direction for a moment of fame. And the drummer, probably the most capable of the band members, misses fills that would have kept the performance under control. L. L. tries not to rely on the band for his cues and consequently loses count on a couple of choruses, doing only six of the eight lines. In the breakdown section, L. L. interjects, trying to make a connection with the band. He then warns them, "Here we go!" back into the next verse, but he cannot feel where to come in; confusion is visible on his face (not hooded this time, but still shrouded by a leather hat). He comes in anyway and the band doesn't seem to notice, it just keeps "grooving."

As for the performance as video, it is clear that L. L. is not the author here, but the subject. The camera strays from him to spotlight the white/blonde young woman bumping and grinding in the stands. It returns to catch L. L. in weak moments such as the post-breakdown breakdown, and later, when he struggles with his underwear (his "boxers"), apparently to keep its contents under control. There is no rhyme or reason to the camera shots. It is as if the camera crew is overstimulated by all the excitement and bodies in motion. The result is that we, as viewers, feel we are watching a three-ring circus.

The well-ordered determination of L. L.'s rap song and video is totally absent in the "Unplugged" version. L. L. loses his authority as he is stripped of the artifices that are the signs of his genre—signs that, as we have seen from the previous analyses, unapologetically and implicitly signify resistance to the dominant discourse. Without the presence of these signs, L. L. is disarmed. The potential for violence is removed, and therefore there is no strength or venom in the performance. He appears transplanted, a traveler in a strange land. He has even lost control of his "jammy." Ultimately, he is emasculated.

In the end, L. L. acknowledges the uniqueness of the setting, telling the crowd, "this is a private party," and using the opportunity for call-and-response: "C'mon now, leave that crack alone!" And we know that isn't authentic L. L.: he does soft rap, not message rap. But here, under a different set of laws and aesthetic values, stripped of all that is rap, L. L. is subjugated, disarmed, and just plain dissed. He is forced to wear the clown's clothes of a genre and a system that his rap aims to expose and destroy.

Through his rap and video, L. L. Cool J establishes himself as having significant and complete authority. We are led to believe, via his incredibly artful manipulation of the tools of his trade, that his story is true. He covers every beat, appearing to control even time itself. This is the purpose of soft rap: to identify oneself as number one, and to depict that as an indisputable truth. The biggest dis in the genre is to be defaced, to have

the mask torn off and to be exposed as a system of artifice. So, while authenticity is highly valued for a performer of soft rap, we have seen that it is precariously composed. And, in much the same way that L. L. calls up and shoots down his opponents in the ring of his rap, he too is ultimately the product and sometime victim or "Other" of an even bigger reality.

Table 1: Lyrics to "Mama Said Knock You Out"

beats:	1	2	3	4
Verse 1				
1	come back		I've been here for	Don't call it a
2	I'm rockin' my	peers with	somehin'to	years,
3	Makin' the tears	rain down	like a	fear,
4	soon!	Listen to the	bass go	mon-Boom!
5	Ex- plodin'		over-	powerin'
6	over the	com- pe- ti-	tion I'm	towerin'
7	Black kids	shot	when I	drop these
8	lyrics that'll	make you	call the	cops!
9	Don't you	dare	stare	you better
10	move	don't	ever com-	pare my
11	beats to the	rest that'll	all get	sliced and
12	diced	compe- tition	payin' the	price!
Chorus 1				
1	I'm gonna	knock you	out	(Ugh!)
2	Mama said	knock you	out	(Ugh!)
3	I'm gonna	knock you	out	(Ugh!)
4	Mama said	knock you	out	(Ugh!)
5	I'm gonna	knock you	out	(Ugh!)
6	Mama said	knock you	out	(Ugh!)
7	I'm gonna	knock you	out	(Ugh!)
8	Mama said	knock you	out	(Ugh!)
Verse 2				
1	Don't you	call	this a	regular
2	jam,	I'm gonna	rock this	land,
3	I'm gonna	take this	itty bitty	world by
4	storm	and I'm	just gettin'	warm,
5	Just like	Muhammad A-	li they	called him
6	Cas-	sius	watch me	bash this
7	beat like a	skull	don't you	know I have
8	beats with		Why do you	mess with
9	me,	a mani- ac	psy- cho	and when I
10	pull out my	jammy get	ready 'cause it	might go
11	Blow!	How'dyou	like me	now?
12	The Ripper	will not al-	low	
13	you to	dick with	Mister	Smith will
14	riff		Listen to my	gears shift
15	I'm	blast- in'	out-	last- in'
16	kinda like	Shaft so	youcould say	I'mshaft- in'
17	Old	Eng- lish	fills my	mind
18	and I came	up with a	funky	rhyml

beats:	1	2	3	4	
Chorus 2	I'm	gonna	knock	you out	(Ugh!)
2	Mama	said	knock	you out	(Ugh!)
3	I'm	gonna	knock	you out	(Ugh!)
4	Mama	said	knock	you out	(Ugh!)
5	I'm	gonna	knock	you out	(Ugh!)
6	Mama	said	knock	you out	(Ugh!)
7	I'm	gonna	knock	you out	(Ugh!)
8	Mama	said	knock	you out	Breakdown!

[breakdown: eight four-beat measures]

Verse 3	Shadow	boxin'	when I	heardyouonthe	ra-	di-
2	o,		Ugh!	I just don't	know	
3	What	makes	you for-	get that	I	was
4	raw,			but now I got a	new	tour
5		I'm	goin' in-	sane	startin' a	
6	Hurricane		releas- in'	pain		
7	lettin'	you	know	you can't take	or	main-
8	tain		unless you	see my	name	
9	Rippin'		killin'	kickin' and	drillin' a	
10	hole,		Pass	the Old	Gold!	
Chorus 3	I'm	gonna	knock	you out	(Ugh!)	
2	Mama	said	knock	you out	(Ugh!)	
3	I'm	gonna	knock	you out	(Ugh!)	
4	Mama	said	knock	you out	(Ugh!)	
5	I'm	gonna	knock	you out	(Ugh!)	
6	Mama	said	knock	you out	(Ugh!)	
7	I'm	gonna	knock	you out	(Ugh!)	
8	Mama	said	knock	you out	(Ugh!)	

beats:	1	2	3	4	
Verse 4	Shot	guns	blast the	herd	when I
2	rip		and kill	at	will
3		the	man of the	ho- ur	tower of
4	pow- er			I'll de- vo- ur	
5	I'm gonna	tie you	up and	let you	
6	un- derstand	that I'm	not your	aver- age	
7	man,	when I got a	jam- my	in my	
8	hands			Damn!	
9	Oohl		listen	to the way I	
10	slay—			just groove!	
11	Dam- age!	Oohl	Dam- age!	Oohl	
12	Dam- age!	Oohl	Dam- age!	Oohl	
13	Destruction	terror		and may- hem	
14	Pass me a	sissy so	sucker I'll	slay him	
15	Farmers!	(What?)	Farmers!	(What?) I'm	
16	ready (We're	ready!) I	think I'm gonna	bomb a	
17	town	(Get down!)		Don't you	
18	never	ever	pull my	lever,	
19	'cause	I ex—	plode—		
20	and my	nine is	ea- sy	to load!	
21	I	gotta thank	God	'cause	
22	he gave	me the	jam to	rock	
Chorus 4	Hard!	knock you	out	(Ugh!)	
2	Mama said	knock you	out	(Ugh!)	
3	I'm gonna	knock you	out	(Ugh!)	
4	Mama said	knock you	out	(Ugh!)	
5	I'm gonna	knock you	out	(Ugh!)	
6	Mama said	knock you	out	(Ugh!)	
7	I'm gonna	knock you	out	(Ugh!)	
8	Mama said	knock you	out	(Ugh!)	

Table 2: The video of "Mama Said Knock You Out"

beats:	1	2	3	4
Verse 1				
1	LL Cool J, hooded, at microphone in boxing ring, black and white			
2	"			
3	"			
4	"			opens cellar door
5	descends stairs			
6	"			
7	"			
8	"			
9		sits in cellar		takes off sweatshirt
10		LL in ring		
11				in corner of ring
12	with towel on his head			
Chorus 1				
1	aerial shot of LL in ring			cellar; torso+fists
2	"			fist grinding hand
3	"			"
4	"			wringing hands
5	LL at mic	bicep		"
6				stomach muscles
7				pectorals
8				wringing hands
Verse 2				
1	LL at mic			
2	"			
3	"			
4	"			
5	"			
6	"			
7	aerial			aerial of LL in corner standing
8	"			
9	"			
10	at mic			LL at mic
11	"			
12	"			
13	"			
14	"			
15	"			
16	"			
17	"			
18	"			

beats:	1	2	3	4
Chorus 2				
1	aerial of L.L. standing in corner			lifting free weights
2	"			"
3	"			L.L. in corner
4	"			"
5	"			"
6	"			"
7	"			"
8	"			"
Breakdown				
1	L.L. standing in ring			corner: towel on head
2	"			", drinking
3	L.L. at mic			", spitting
4	"			L.L. at mic
5	"			sitting in corner
6	close-up of hand running up his thigh-----			
7	L.L. in ring			
8	"			
Verse 3				
1	L.L. at mic			
2	"	black boxer's face hit from side		
3	"			
4	"	black boxer punched		
5	"			
6	"			
7	"			
8	"			
9	"			
10	"			
Chorus 3				
1	L.L. in ring			white boxer punched
2	"			black boxer punched
3	"			white boxer punched
4	"			L.L. in ring
5	"			black boxer punched
6	"			L.L. in ring
7	"			white boxer punched
8	"			L.L. in ring

beats:	1	2	3	4
Verse 4				
1	LL. at mic			
2		saliva spray from L.L. at mic		
3	"			
4	"			
5	"			
6	"			
7	"			
8	"			
9	"			
10	"			
11	"			
12	"			
13	"			
14	"			
15	LL. holding onto ring rope addresses the stands			
16	"		LL. at mic	
17	"			
18	aerial in ring: cameras flashing from darkness of stands			
19	"		grabs at crotch	
20	"			gunloading gesture
21	LL. at mic			
22	"			
Chorus 4				
1	LL. punches the air			
2	LL. in ring			white boxer punched
3	"			bench press
4	"			pecs + crossed fists
5	"			black boxer punched
6	"			pumping iron
7	"			white boxer punched
8	"			white boxer KO'd / dead
Fade-out				
	LL. with towel on head says "Damn!"			
	LL. drinks and spits in corner			
	LL. in ring			
	dead white boxer			
	bicep—pumping iron			
	LL. raises arms victorious to the stands / cameras			
	cameras flashing			
	bench press			
	victorious			
	towel on head			
	aerial, hooded in ring			
	at mic, "They all fell!"			