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PUNCHLINES IN NORTH-AMERICAN RAP MUSIC

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado ao Instituto de Letras da Universidade Federal da Bahia, como requisito para a obtenção do grau de bacharel em Letras.

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this writing is that of contextualizing, defining and analyzing punchlines in North-American rap music, as well as making clear what their importance is. To do so, first, a selection of important moments to the emergence of hip-hop and then, second, rap music have been selected to help in a better comprehension of the information contained within the punchlines here analyzed and also to give punchlines a sense of context, for they are strongly connected to the culture in which they gained form. Next, a selection of rappers is made, in terms of reducing the enormous quantity of punchlines that there are to a size that is possible to be analyzed at the same time of providing a variety concerning the types of punchline that there are. Lastly, and more importantly, a definition of the moment and environment in which punchlines were created is made, followed by a definition of what punchlines are, what leads them to the analysis per se of punchlines and their division into categories, categories which are defined by the way punchlines are constructed.

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1 FIRST WORDS

To believe in ideas (may them be historical ones, religious, philosophical, and all the sort of ideas that there are) is, in some inevitable way, to believe in a version of an ideal truth (that may or may not exist). Apart from the persons who work precisely in the process of doing some kind of mix of all the versions of the truth that there are (if something like this is even possible) trying to reach what one may consider the essential truth, most people will reproduce the versions of the truth that corroborate their own personal beliefs. It is just natural, to search for confirmation to what we believe in. However, few are the people who re-educate themselves to search also for versions that go against what they already believe in, and this way test-proof their own ideas in search of making these ideas stronger. Keeping this in mind, the process of trying to write something that is at the same time accurate as it stands for what we believe in is a difficult one; since one cannot tell with precision and hardly one can determine what is necessarily true, but anyone informed enough can tell what is a lie — or, at least, incorrect. And when we reach this point, of deciding if we call it a lie or an incorrect information, I believe, we reach what matters most when it comes the time to break the silence and talk about the things that move us: the names that are given, or, better yet, the ideas that are attributed to what you’ve done.

During my time in this world, I noticed that, just as it happens when they are trying to inform themselves (and some are just trying to find the information that will supposedly prove that they are correct about something they believe in and thus lead them to “victory”, that is, what they see as a victory — the victory against the other), when people find themselves in front of you (even if metaphorically) in life, they already have, too, an idea about you that from that moment on they will start searching for "prove" (confirmation) that will show that they are right, that their judgment about you was right. If not for everyone, this may apply for most people, and, again, it is only natural, to formulate opinions about the world, to try to create a diagnostic about situations and people, so we know how to deal with this and that, so we know when to be kind with someone or when to be careful, when to be formal and when not to be, when to talk in one way and not another, and so it goes. It is alright. The problem lives
in the moment when this analysis that you’ve made becomes already a truth to you, and from this moment on you have no space in your mind nor imagination left to give to the new, to be able to understand and consider all the other options that there are, the other versions of the truth that haven't ceased to be possible still. In other words, I refer to the moment in which you close your mind, or, even worse, the moment in your life that your mind becomes so closed that for some there isn't even a way to go back. And I am calling this a problem because, to me, this path almost always leads to one direction: prejudice.

It happens very easily, and I believe that most of the time people don't take it as seriously as they do in other instances. Do you want to see an example? This may not be true for every one of you, and this certainly isn't (at some point) for those who know me. However, surely, from the title of this work — increased by the fact that this writing is being presented to the federal university of Bahia —, a portion of you took it for granted that I am a black person, and even more when I reached the point of talking about prejudice (for prejudice is something that black persons are, very probably, more constant victims of than, for instance, white persons). Now, this same portion who had supposed this surprisingly realizes that I may be a white person (what is true), and all the interpretation you had until now from what I've been saying may have changed. Come on, try it; read it again from the start and see if you still react to what I've been saying in the same way you did. You see, if you read things differently now, to me this is called prejudice. It doesn’t stop there, however. Because with the intervention I just made, many of you may be finally really thinking about what I've been calling your attention to from the start, about forming opinions based on what you think you know (but don’t really know). However, if I would, now, guess from what I believe, I would say that a bigger portion of you that are reflecting about what I just said about prejudice are thinking only about how a white person possibly is being taken more seriously (or more something else) than a black person would be. And probably, when it comes to a certain type of people, you may be right (and a portion of you may be already judging me as racist for stating this possible truth, but let's keep focused). I am sure, however, that very few of you may have thought of the contrary, of what I even got to hear people call it "reverse" racism, of me, as a white person, being taken less seriously (or less something else) than a black person would be for talking about rap music — something
that is seen by some as if a property of black persons. To me, if you don’t even consider a possibility like this, this is all (the same) prejudice.

As I said, it happens without you even noticing, and for some it works more as a matter of judging from probabilities, of thinking about the things you know and see, of thinking only about what you've been conditioned, educated to think of. This is not the problem. The problem is, as I stated before, when you stop thinking about the other possibilities to the point that you become blind to them. For those of you who may have got lost, I am not saying that it isn't justifiable that we think this way, since prejudice against black persons probably happens more frequently than prejudice against white persons, and we have historical factors to back that up. What I'm saying is that both are — yes — equally important, for we, as human beings, are not fighting only one type of prejudice, but prejudice itself, racism itself. And as long as we don't see them as equals or simply ignore this or keep applying double standards for the manifestations of prejudice, prejudice itself will never be over. Fighting prejudice being prejudicial in the process is as paradoxical as fighting violence with violence. We should fight it, instead, with comprehension, enlightenment, knowledge, and those of us who have this kind of knowledge bear this responsibility more than anyone else.

In the mean time that prejudice isn't still over, and there are still prejudicial persons (almost everyone, as I see it), it is comprehensible that at one side people have to be so careful with what they say, and that at the other side there are people so worried and judgmental with what people say. For many people still mean to cause harm to others, to preach prejudicial ideas, versions of the truth that seduce those who want to think like this and that. For, also (I believe), many people do not know that they are being prejudicial, they don't know nor understand the harm that they are causing or how their ideas lead to a way of thinking that may be harmful to someone. And I hope not, but it is always possible that this may even be my case at some stage of this writing, for I still have a lot to learn and inform myself, about this world, about people, about myself. However, as I brought this topic up, I worry, and here I am trying to prevent people from associating the wrong ideas to what I am doing. That difference I talked about earlier between what are lies and what is only incorrect information, or sometimes just ideas that weren't expressed through the most appropriate or precise words, or even the possibility that I believed not in the best ideas or point of views and was, thus, mistaken (through some points of view).
As a white person, but I say this here above anything else as just a person, I am tired of suffering from prejudice too. I am tired of being interdicted and questioned every time I want to talk about this that I love, that is rap music. I am tired of having to worry all the time that people may take my words in the worst way possible, all because I am white, because this is what some people expect from me, to be racist, and they search and search for confirmation to this idea, that lives anywhere but on my mind. I just want the same right that every human should have to talk with pleasure, not fear, about the things that I love, the things that move me, that take me by.

So, this time, this is what I am going to do here. I am going to tell you a little bit about how impressive and how important it is this that I love, without fear. And, after all this being said, if you are still here prepared only to judge and look for the worst, look for confirmation to the poor ideas that live on your mind, be advised: you are not welcome here, this is not a place for you. This is not a place for someone who judges a person not for his or her ideas, but rather for his color of skin, or for his sex or sexuality, or anything else that doesn’t really matter. This is a writing of love, of only positive intentions and of sharing — thoughts, ideas, stories, information. This is a place for persons who look rather for what really matters, for those who look for growth, may it be mine, yours, of others. With this writing, all I look for is to show the great value and possibilities that I see that lie inside of this musical genre that I love. If you can’t respect this, there’s nothing I can do for you. However, if this not you case, with your heart in the right place, be very, very welcome. Believe in nothing and in everything you read.

*Man, I got Summer hatin’ on me ’cause I'm hotter than the Sun*

*Got Spring hating on me ’cause I ain’t never sprung*

*Winter hatin’ on me ’cause I’m colder than y’all*

*And I would never, I would never, I would never Fall*

*I’m being hated by the seasons*

*So fuck y’all who hatin’ for no reason*

Lil’ Wayne¹

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

*I made something outta nothing, thanks for nothing*

Lil' Wayne

Punchlines in American rap music are still an unknown stylistical device for those outside of hip-hop culture or those who simply don’t pay that much of attention to the lyrics in the songs. For those immersed in it, however, it comes as somewhat of a shock the realization that someone in the world may not know about it, what it is or what it does. If you go on and check any respected dictionary, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, the best you are going to get on a definition of what a punchline is goes as

The final phrase or sentence of a joke or story, providing the humor or some other crucial element. In extended use: a conclusion, especially a striking one; an outcome.

which resumes the definition contemplated by most dictionaries, such as the *Merriam-Webster*, the *Cambridge Dictionary*, among others, and even by the openly editable encyclopedia that Wikipedia is. And even though this definition reaches, in some way, some of the possibilities of what punchlines may be or do, it is still far away of being a precise definition, even if you consider the part where it says "or some other crucial element", that is as good as a definition as stating that a literary trope provides some kind of literary effect. It is ridiculous and, the way I see it, an absurd and a waste, considering the possibilities that the realization of punchlines bring (even though, in some way, punchlines use in their construction many things that are already known,

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2 The method of reference utilized in this writing is that of the Vancouver Style.
maybe with some other terminology, or in other platforms or media, as it will become clear with the development of this writing)

The fact that you cannot find (as I couldn't) any books nor academic works about it and that in very few places on the internet you may get informed about punchlines (mostly informal sources within hip-hop internet culture), and even something as Wikipedia, that opens itself to be constructed and modified at anytime by any-who, do not even have a definition and is still far from being capable to describe and instruct people about punchlines, represents at least 30 to 40 years, approximately, of ignorance about something that can be seen as a new literary (or other platform, media) device. Punchlines are already used (to some degree) in American and even Brazilian culture, maybe others, and maybe people even gave it a different name, but only rap music (and, now, even some American pop music, by influence of hip-hop) is exploring it consciously. The intent of this work is, thus, to shed some light on this stylistical device.

*You, girl, you right there, you look like you like this shit*

*How'd I know, how'd I know? That's me on some psychic shit*\(^5\)

Drake

To reach our final destination, however, some stops will have to be made, so we can be completely armed of all the information necessary to comprehend as best as possible what we are seeing, for punchlines in rap music are strictly attached to hip-hop culture (and what in the world isn't attached to culture?) and rappers. The way punchlines started and developed in rap music has a deep connection to hip-hop and rap music history, and by going through (what is possible, in terms of the size of this work) this history, many things, in the end, will not need much explanation, for its reasons will be clear from the stories that are going to be brought. As I said right from the start, these stories will not be presented as necessarily true, or the unique history of hip-hop and rap music, but I am going to bring them as a consensus that seems to exist in the culture that these are the stories that combined testify the situations and conditions that in the end

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led to the emergence of what started to be understood as hip-hop culture. It is important, however, to keep in mind that this, first, is not a work that in its size allows me to go through the whole history (or stories) of hip-hop — a history that it is important to note that I am only familiarized to by what I've read in books, watched in documentaries and listened to in songs — and, second, that the main focus of this work is to, finally, study and give somewhat of a definition and contextualization to what punchlines are, and for that not all of hip-hop history will be needed and not everything will be approached.

In a second moment of this writing, once again keeping in mind the extension of material that can be approached in the size of this work, after a quick contextualization of rapping in hip-hop history, a number of six rappers are going to be introduced in order to later have their punchlines analyzed. Those rappers are Jay Z, Eminem, Lil' Wayne, Kanye West, Nicki Minaj and Drake. The number of rappers may be short, but the criteria of choice tried to contemplate (within my personal interest too) the variety necessary to provide as many examples as possible from different contexts of self, that is, a division in between generations of rappers, sexes, skin color and the rappers’ subject matter, that is what each rapper decides to rap about. So, to do this analysis, first, it is going to be necessary to go through some points of what is known, what is believed and what is represented as the history of each rapper and their history within hip-hop, along with the conditions of rap music on the moment of hip-hop history that each rapper came along. This analysis will be important to understand in which ways the representation, the persona of each artist affects or not the final effect of punchlines, and to what extent each manifestation of this stylistical device is free for use to each of these rappers — that is, if different rappers can all use the same types of punchlines, and if not, why not, and to what degree the persona, the idea that each one of them represent gives a limit to the type of content they are able to produce. This process of analysis will constitute of two moments; first, the already described contextualization of each rapper alongside with the idea or image that they represent (idea that will not be completely free of my own opinion, that certainly affects my own interpretations); and next, an analysis of what punchlines are and a division of punchlines by type, created, here, by me, as well as the use of each of these punchlines by each rapper.

Lastly, one secondary objective of this writing is to demonstrate how punchlines work as a part of the construction of identity of rappers, as their use and content affect directly rappers’ images and the ideas that revolve around them for how important they
are, as they steal listeners attention. To do this, reviews and commentaries on internet websites are going to be brought to represent sides of the truth of how the public reacted to what each rapper produced, and how this reaction, finally, reflects back on the artists images. To realize this task, help from the website genius.com (former rapgenius.com), a website in which users can come by themselves and offer explanations and interpretations to rappers lyrics and other users can vote on whether they agree or not with these interpretations and also offer their own, is going to be of great use and play a big part on this work, may it be for reference of lyrics (as artists themselves can come and correct, explain lyrics, as some of them do) or for reference of publics reception and interpretation.

The final and primary objective of this writing is to give a more appropriate definition of what punchlines are, at least in rap music, hip-hop culture, so from this moment on people can have this as a starting point to help analyze the construction and effects of punchlines, that seem to be as infinite as culture is. Secondly, and fatally, this work intends to show, also, the cultural importance of punchlines, as they share a deep connection with culture and the construction of identity of individuals, artists, and they affect too in some way even how people consume art and entertainment. And thirdly, in here may be proved also the importance of punchlines as a probable new literary device or a stylistic device for any other media, or even as simple and plain entertainment form. So, here we go, let's Jack the Ripper this.
2 TELLING STORIES

They rewrite history, I don’t believe in yesterday\(^6\)

Kanye West

As I previously made clear, to better understand what punchlines are and how they work it becomes relevant and convenient to know a bit from hip-hop history, for punchlines do not stand by themselves alone nor came from nowhere. So, first, let's distinguish: rap music, as opposed to what some may think, is not necessarily the exact same thing of hip-hop music, even though both coincide on a certain degree. In reality, rap music is only one of the kinds of hip-hop music that there are. And to get this information straight already, even though later on I'll go further on this subject, rapping (this specific type of hip-hop music) actually is only one of the four main elements that constitute what is considered the hip-hop culture (while the other three are considered to be DJing, break dancing and graffiti writing).\(^7\) Culture, not music, may this be clear. That is, if we were to put it in mathematical terms, rap music would belong to hip-hop music which in its turn belongs to hip-hop culture, which is a group defined by 4 elements, one of which is rapping.

Anyways, the way I see it, the history of punchlines, rap music, hip-hop (as any other history) is not and couldn't be even if I wanted a linear one, but it is rather a mix of stories that were already in a collision course\(^8\) for some time. To say that this (hi)story, even as a mix of many, is the one and only story that there is would be either precipitated of me or either would be a lie, for the circumstances that led to the emergence of hip-hop could only be fully described and joined in a single story by an omniscient being who could’ve seen everything that happened through every point of view, and then see everything that made a difference. However, since I don't believe

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\(^8\) Just as in Benjamin Button, the movie, nah mean?
that a common, limited human being can really tell what, exactly, are these important moments, and trying to pick up all the pieces may be a crusade without an end of going through different points of view, different perceptions and thus stories, allow me to do my best to collect the information that, at least, comes as more relevant to the present writing and will provide you with enough information about the beginnings of hip-hop. Be warned, thus, that I never said that this was going to be the true and only story on the myth of creation of hip-hop, so feel free to feel as if something important is missing here (because very probably a lot of things will be).

2.1 (HI)STORIES

Here we are, then. In some way, there are two beginnings for this story, beginnings that already begin on the middle (or beginning, or end, or a third from the start, or a quarter to the end) of stories that had already began, if you follow me. So, what I am going to do is, first, I am going to play you one side of this vinyl that I have and then, next, I play you the other side, so, this way, later we can have a chat and discuss how these two sides in some way complete each other and create the visual musical explosion we see (that may look to some, however, I prevent you, as a mere fire burning, as explosions only really happen through the eyes of the ones who look back on the past and are able to realize and most of all feel the magnitude of what was happening at that moment). How does this sound to you? Well, let’s do it, then. Let’s blow these speakers up.

2.1.1 Side A

Concrete shoes won’t help in a river

I don’t care if you’s Michael Phelps, my nigga

Lil’ Wayne

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In our first stop, we find ourselves at the northernmost borough of the five of New York City, in the U.S. state of New York, the Bronx, to where are credited the origins of rap and hip-hop culture. In 1929, however, none of those, either rap or hip-hop, existed yet. What there was, actually, was a plan, designed by the New York Regional Plan Association, of transforming Manhattan into a center of wealth connected directly to the suburbs through a network of highways that would traffic right through the heart of neighborhoods in the outer boroughs. The Cross-Bronx Expressway; a road that would allow people to traverse the Bronx from New Jersey through Manhattan to the Queens in fifteen minutes. Not an easy road to be built, but through the eyes of Robert Moses, the most powerful modern urban builder of the time, the road only seemed as a shot for immortality. The only little problem in building it was the 60,000 Bronx residents, African-American, Puerto Rican and Jewish families caught in the middle of it, who, in 1953, when the project came to reality through the use of urban renewal rights to condemn entire neighborhoods, had to move from their homes to public housing in the east Brooklyn and South Bronx.

So, as African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino families moved into what had been until then Jewish, Irish and Italian neighborhoods, violence practiced by mostly white youth gangs against these ones who were arriving, that were strangers, the different to them (with too few space in their minds for the different, for the new), increased to the point when it finally got corresponded by the black and brown youth (as many wanted), at first moment as a movement of self defense, but then things grew in proportion and became motivated by power, while to some it became a great new way of distracting themselves from boredom and having fun. Like this, the hearts and minds of the youth of the Bronx became territory for dispute, where at one side were the gangs, who wanted and needed (and could afford the luxury of not having to go after) recruits, and at the other were the youth “organizations”, political-in-some-way ones, which tried to teach knowledge and peace for this youth. Either way, were you part of a gang or organization, to the police all of them started to seem as criminals who needed to be controlled, generating confrontations that many times would end up in death.

I say fuck the police, that's how I treat 'em

We buy our way out of jail, but we can't buy freedom

Kanye West

By the 1960s, one question that revolved around the minds of African-Americans in there was that of whether they should've been fighting for their nation, to change what needed change, or building their own nation, and give up on this mission of saving what could've been already lost — in another words, a doubt of whether they should try to save the country or themselves. The rest of the 60s would've been marked by protests over education and poverty, and even more clashes between white police and black youths. And with the death of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X came together the death of faith and idealism in the imaginary of the time, what meant that for the future generations one couldn't expect much from movements against violence — they had lost their leaders, the ones who were the guides for those who wanted to create change in a way better than violence.

As for the gangs, they, at the same time, represented violence and peace for people. They mostly were violent in their actions or even, you may say, in their own existence; but there were also gangs that had a genuine intention of creating drug-free, safer neighborhoods, and fight ideological battles, for freedom, against racism, etc. For the most of the youth, it is true, to be a member of a gang represented only an opportunity to escape boredom and have reckless fun, or protection, as the growing violence at the Bronx didn't open exception for kids. To be wearing the colors of a gang meant that one would at least think twice before getting into trouble with you, and this was a protection that even (or especially) the police was far from offering to the people of the community. On the other side, nevertheless, there were those who joined gangs with an intent of peace and desired to create a safer neighborhood for themselves and their families, those who wanted to create real change in the society they lived in, that wanted to fight racism and create union. But, regardless the path they walked in, one thing was the same for every gang member: they lived by their own rules, the only ones that they had an actual sense of respect for. "You know that one percent that don't fit in

and don’t care? We were living our lifestyle”, said Felipe "Blackie" Mercado, leader of The Savage Skulls.\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{center}
\textit{I'm a gangsta by choice, I hope my sons choose wiser}
\end{center}

\begin{center}
\textit{And don’t call me Sir, call me survivor}\textsuperscript{16}
\end{center}

Lil’ Wayne

However, in spite of any bad or good that the gangs could had done, the consequences of Moses’ act of “urban renewal” were inevitable for the South Bronx, as the rate of unemployment was hitting critical numbers, specially for the youth. The decay of the neighborhood, thus, was simply a matter of time. For the lack of money, apartment buildings started being passed into the hands of slumlords, who were only interested in making money no matter what, coming to point of exploiting people by refusing to provide them the basics, such as heat or water, or by withholding property taxes from the city, and finally burning buildings down for the insurance money.\textsuperscript{17} “In housing, the final stage of capitalism is arson”, stated Joe Conason and Jack Newfield, who investigated the arson patterns in New York City.\textsuperscript{18} A fireman would say that the way slumlords acted was that they would explore people until the point in which they couldn't profit anymore from them and then people would move out, reaching a point in which you could find entire blocks with no one living there. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a New York's senator decided to interpret this information in some other way — he saw in this situation the idea that the people of the South Bronx didn't want housing, or else they wouldn't be burning theirs down.\textsuperscript{19} In face of this situation, there wasn’t any incentive for banks, insurance companies or anyone else to invest in building or rebuilding there at fair prices, so the fires at the South Bronx represented the abandonment of the neighborhood too.

\textsuperscript{15} Chang J. Herc K. Can’t Stop Won’t Stop. New York: St. Martin’s Press; 2005. p. 94. (13)
\textsuperscript{17} Treaster JB. 20% Rise in Fires Is Adding to Decline of South Bronx. New York Times. 1925 May 18. (15)
In 1977, after dark on July 13, the city fell under a blackout and with it people went to the streets looting in the ghettos of Crown Heights, Bedford-Stuyvesant, East New York, Harlem and the Bronx. Graffiti writer James TOP told historian Ivor Miller that it worked as an opportunity for the people from the communities to rid themselves from the people who were there exploiting them, mostly shopkeepers, but not only.\textsuperscript{20} People's reaction to the blackout worked as a message to the government, a message saying that they had a problem with the people in the inner cities. However, only after reporter Bill Moyers, for a CBS report, called the government out for its inaction on what Moyers called "the death of the Bronx" that there were some palpable activity from the part of the government. "So the Vice President travels to Europe and Japan, the Secretary of State to the Middle East and Russia, the UN ambassador to Africa. No one of comparable stature comes here", he said.\textsuperscript{21} Finally, Moyers appeal worked and brought the president in validity at the time, Carter, to the South Bronx to see what still could be saved. In the mean time, the gangs at the Bronx had already went on war, created a peace treaty among themselves (in the presence of the media, social workers and teachers), became political organizations (at least some of them) working for peace and equality, broken the treaty and went on war again, and, finally, started decaying, but not to a disappearance, but rather to a change into something else — one other option to canalize all of their creative energy.

\subsection*{2.1.2 Side B}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{Cassius in his prime, coloring out of the line}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{Cause they don’t want nobody that’s colored out of the lines}\textsuperscript{22}
\end{flushright}

Kanye West

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{21} Moyers B. The Fire Next Door. CBS Reports. 1977 Mar 22. (19)
\end{flushleft}
In our second stop, we find ourselves at Kingston, the capital of Jamaica, where rap's elder kin, reggae, grew up, and to where are attributed the roots of hip-hop for being also the place where DJ Kool Herc grew up, who is considered the originator of hip-hop music. Kingston, however, is important for this story which I tell for other reasons too, such as its politics and the movements that during the 1970s reggae, represented by Bob Marley and the roots generation, started there, as well as for the cultural elements of the city, which later would come up as being one of the key elements to the culmination of hip-hop.

Edward Seaga, a member of the leading Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) stated once that in Jamaica it was hard to tell where the politics ended and the music began. Seeing politics exhausted, people channeled their energies into culture, pulling global popular culture into the Third World. The ideas of Rastafarianism would be, too, a prelude to hip-hop generation, with its black nationalism, giving the cause of "black supremacy" spiritual, political and social dimensions. Through Rastafari, also, and more specifically through Burru drumming (an African art that had survived from the days of slavery and had come to the Kingston ghettos after slavery was abolished), rap would inherit its attitude of protest and defiance, which were characteristic of Burru. Over reggae instrumentals, rappers (not in the terms of today) of the time — through the mid-60s —, that were called DJs in Jamaica, had learned to repeat what they saw on Burru. Also, Jamaican musicians had started mixing the rhythm-and-blues, another great influence for rap music, with elements of folk mento, jonkanoo, kumina and Revival Zion styles into a new kind of sound.

However, even though Rastas’ thought began to spread across the country, DJ Kool Herc recalls that they were still being portrayed as bizarre cultists, and that those who had their hair twisted up were seen as badman by society. Still, in 1966, Rastas began to move from being marginal to mainstream in Jamaican society, and in 1973, through film, music, and most of all the debut of Bob Marley and the Wailers' first album, reggae became reference as rebel music, representing also a different kind of black authenticity. Catch a Fire, the Wailers' first album, only sold 14,000 copies, but still was a landmark moment in the globalization of Third World culture. And even

though reggae didn't get much airplay in radio, when this choice came to the hands of the people this figure changed, as it happened when it came to sound systems in the popular yard parties that had became part of the culture of Kingston.

Sound systems, basically, represented the music that people wanted. They had became popular to the point of obscuring even live musicians, since at these parties people could listen to the music they were asking for, as well as exclusive songs, that very few had access to. In an attempt to become popular and gain people's preference, many travelled to America to come back with exclusives that would distinguish themselves. The musical genre that would later be known as dub had its birth at a sound system party, where the sound system head Ruddy Redwood one day accidentally forgot to pan up the vocals on a track and the public approved the accidental innovation. Producers saw on Dub an opportunity to double their income, as with only one studio session they were able to do a B-side to tracks, with which the musical engineer himself became the performer, experimenting with levels, equalization on and effects (as in an early form of the current concept of what a DJ is). These versions — that basically were dub music — became, too, a space for people to create new versions of the original songs, versions telling their own stories, their beliefs, which would usually be told in rhymes by DJs. So, as Dub became more and more a way of people telling their own stories and spreading their ideologies, every Jamaican politician knew that the sound systems were crucial to their success and the message in the music started becoming roots and radical. Even the resistance to reggae music was retreating, as people wanted to listen on the Jamaican Broadcasting Corporation (JBC) radio to songs that they were listening to at yard parties. As for Dub, it started moving to far away of what it was — a (literally) voiceless music —, becoming increasingly the music that represented — literally and metaphorically — the other side, as singers and DJs offered their words, stories, boasts and sufferers moans to the music.

The musical innovation in Kingston, in some way, changed politics, as it represented progression, of meaning, of time, as dub distorted what people thought they knew, and left everything under the instance of the moment, as the performance a musical engineer did was happening at that exact moment, and might not repeat itself again ever. But most importantly, dub gave a voice to the nation to express what they

couldn't until then. And as violence was about to take over again in another election year in Jamaica, Bob Marley and the Wailers gave a performance in which Marley called the political leaders onstage and asked them to show the people they were going to unite, making them give each other a handshake. Through music, Marley was changing politics and restoring unity. Culture, then, was finally being able to do something that even politics couldn't do — it was changing society.

2.1.3 One, Two, Three, Four… Hip, Hop, Hip, Hop

*I ain't play the hand I was dealt, I changed my cards*

*I prayed to the skies and I changed my stars*

*I went to the malls and I balled too hard*

"Oh, my god, is that a black card?"

*I turned around and replied "Why, yes*

*But I prefer the term African American Express”*

Kanye West

Now, finally, this is the part where everything starts to make sense as we get to the point where these two stories meet. DJ Kool Herc, who had grown up in Kingston watching everything happen in there, watching from distance the sound system parties in which he was too young to be allowed in, brought his culture with him when his mother brought him and his family, chasing better conditions of living and education, to live in the United States — more specifically, in the Bronx. At the time, however, he wasn't known yet as DJ Kool Herc, but just as Clive Campbell, who was still a kid. His mother, Nettie, would bring him with her to house parties she frequented. There, Clive would learn his notion of what people wanted to listen to, as he watched people dancing, girls complaining for songs that weren’t being played, and guys rapping to get their attention. So, soon, he started his own house party business, borrowing the sound

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system that belonged to his father, Keith, who was a sponsor for local bands as well as a sound man.

At the Bronx, people wanted to hear what was called the breaks, that is, soul and funk, and that's how Clive got popular real quick. It hadn't been always like that, however, as when Clive first got to America being Jamaican wasn't still fashionable, and at times violence would be even exclusively directed to Jamaicans. He, however, was learning how to lose his accent and thus creating a new identity for himself, what would late culminate into a new name. Kool Herc, "Kool" as a result of a cigarette commercial he had seen and "Herc" for people were calling him Hercules for being big and strong. He, however, wasn't the only one to be creating a new name for himself, as graffiti was becoming popular, and even starting a new culture. Until then, all that there was were gangs and their territories, that no one would cross, even gang members. The graffiti writers, however, would not only cross these turfs, but also leave their aliases on the wall, in one move calling attention to their presence and also showing how they didn't care or have respect for anyone, any rules — might them be rules from society or gangs. They didn't do this, however, in a political move, but more as a strike against their generation's invisibility. On contrary of the gangs’ movement that represented the collective, they were doing this to give power to the daring, originality and style of an individual, themselves — being, thus, one early origin for hip-hop’s strong sense of individuality.30

After an accidental fire burned down the Campbell's house, Herc and his family joined all the black and brown families who were moving from the South to West Bronx with government assistance. There, he started playing in clubs, where the music that DJs were playing was what was known as "four-on-the-floor" disco or the breaks, as James Brown.31 Even people's dance moves were elaborations of James Brown's style, and usually they waited for the drum solo part (the break) of the songs to show their best moves, such as the two minute solo we have on "Get Ready". So, while James Brown was being discarded by many in the mainstream, in the club his music possessed now a new appeal, to the point of when his song "Soul Power" was played, the members of the gang named Black Spades would change it to "Spade Power" as they sang it.

The presence of gangs in the parties, however, created an unsafe atmosphere, which was setting the club parties into decline with time. People needed a new place to party, and, with his friend Coke La Rock and his crew, by 1974 Herc gave them what they wanted in form of block parties, a distinction to Herc from the other DJs with a help of the sound system vibe from Kingston. As Kool Herc’s father was someone respected by many, his presence at the parties made people be present on them with respect, and so no one had to worry about violence. People came only to have fun. And after studying the people that danced, Herc noticed that many would be waiting until a specific part of the songs to go and give their all on it — the instrumental brakes. To people, it wasn't about the chorus or the melody, but about the energy that specific part of the song held, and about keeping that vibe. Herc, then, started searching songs specifically by their brakes, and, by advice of his father, he wouldn't give the name of the songs he played, so the songs would be his signature, not songs that any DJ would be playing — the same competitive ethic and top-this attitude from hip-hop.

From that moment on, gangs would start dissolving into crews, DJ crews, break-dancers crews that would maintain their business all about music, but that still had the violent attitude for anyone who messed with them. Just like it happened with the old gangs, the new crews wanted to make a name for themselves, to become known and distinguished, but this time around they would do it by showing their skills rather than fighting with their opponents. People started coming to Herc parties with this objective. There would be even those who would be there only for the break, waiting for that specific moment and going crazy when it finally happened. To Herc, these were the break boys — or simply, b-boys. As the parties got even more popular and many people would frequent them, others saw in them an opportunity to advertise their own business, mostly of selling weed. Thus, many would come to Herc and ask him to make announcements on the mic. These types of announcements, first, started simple, mostly as jokes or warnings to people who were ready to start violence. With time, however, they would develop and become more complex, and people would later come only to listen to Herc rhyme on the mic, or else Coke and his crew rap announcing Herc. Violence didn't have ended completely. Herc, however, had created a new hierarchy concerning what was cool, and instead of gang members wearing the colors of their gangs, people wanted to show off their crew and their abilities as DJs, dancers, and, later, as rappers. So, just like Kingston, a lot of creative energy started being released
and produced by those who were at the margin of the American society, those who until then were invisible.

By 1977, Herc had generated, too, new kinds of turfs in the Brox, and in place of the gang turfs, now, in the South Bronx you had Grandmaster Flash and his Casanova Crew as the new celebrity; in the South-east, there were Afrika Bambaata and Zulu Nation; in the North, DJ Breakout and DJ Baron; and, finally, in the West Bronx neighborhood and East Bronx clubs there was Herc. Later, Kool Herc's time would pass, but the new culture that had emerged around him would remain there, not still, but evolving, with the imagination of that youth that he had captured then who would be the ones responsible for carrying on hip-hop from that moment on.
3 RAPPING

The last thing you want to do

Is have me spit out a rhyme and say “I was writing this and I thought of you”"32

Eminem

So, as I had stated before, with these stories I didn’t really intend to tell the one and only history of hip-hop’s birth, but rather, my intention was to give you a mix of some stories, in a resumed fashion, which, on one point of view, culminated in what is known today as hip-hop culture. This, however, isn’t necessarily the beginning of hip-hop or rap, for were many the things that happened before these stories I presented you with, and many other factors and people may have played an important role in this process. Hip-hop or, at least, rap may have existed way before all that, on some other form, under a different name — maybe we could trace it back to Jamaica, in where they already had some kind of rappers who were known as DJs, or even we can go further than that, back to the oral tradition of poetry, or earlier than that. Who knows exactly? What is actually important here is understanding that hip-hop, as everything in the world, wasn’t invented (like “poof!”), even less by a single person, out of nowhere, but that all the specific circumstances, social context, people involved, and every single detail contributed to the conception of this idea as something, as hip-hop (even though at the time it didn’t have this name yet).

For example, take what I said earlier, about hip-hop culture being constituted by four elements, rapping, DJing, break dancing and graffiti. Firstly, this statement does not imply that there isn’t more to hip-hop or that hip-hop is only this and nothing else — on the contrary, there’s a lot more; simply put, there’s a culture before all that —, and, secondly, this doesn’t mean that everyone inside of what is understood as this culture agrees with everything that has been said until now, or even that they are really a part of it. Many graffiti writers, for instance, don’t see themselves as a part of hip-hop

culture; many of them were actually listening to disco or even rock at the time of the
insurgence of graffiti.\textsuperscript{33} However, they all are seen as one (culture) precisely for this
period of time and space in which hip-hop became something that people could see and
feel. They are seen as one for the attitude and ideas that permeate each type of mean of
expression inside of hip-hop, which, exactly for the social-historical context in which
they took form, are so close to one another — at the peak of DJ Kool Herc’s parties, one
could easily see these that are considered the four elements of hip-hop all at one place,
graffiti, with all the people who were interested in this form of writing and expression
there, comparing their styles and others’; the DJ, playing the songs to which the break
dancers would dance to (whole crews of them, all interested in being good at this new
type of dance); and even the early rappers, who at the time didn’t have records yet, and
maybe didn’t even have complete lyrics for a song (as many of them were improvising
at the moment), but were surely rapping. Maybe, some of them didn’t see themselves as
being part of one thing, mostly because there are always difference in between everyone
and everything, but it is in hip-hop nature, or let’s call it history, the ideas and attitudes
that live inside of everyone in it, that make all that difference seem to belong together.

3.1 NO ONE ON THE CORNER HAS SWAGGER LIKE US

\textit{Bad “WOOF WOOF” flyer than a Frisbee}\textsuperscript{34}

Nicki Minaj

Now, again, if I would continue following the whole history of hip-hop, it would
become too extensive for this specific work for there is too much to tell, too much to
analyze, so many things that are important and make a difference in many aspects.
However, again, it is a necessity of mine to select which are the things that come as
more relevant and immediately necessary for this objective that I have, that is defining
and analyzing punchlines. For that, on this last section of this work (before the analysis

of punchlines) I just need to go through some important points of the development of rap until present days, only to have some other points of these culture clearer, and also I would like to already briefly present you with the rappers with whom we are going to work on this project, so we have some contextualization on them.

So, getting on the move, after Herc’s parties, the next big happening on hip-hop was the moment when a group known as Sugarhill Gang debuted their record (defended by some as the first rap record ever35) Rapper’s Delight in 1979 — an era when rappers didn’t record songs and put records out yet — with a huge commercial success on the mainstream. The song was 15 minutes long, a length that for nowadays standards may seem too long, but that at the time was still shorter than a DJ session, that was the norm until them. The success of the songs served to open the eyes of DJs and rappers and even to break some paradigms, since at the time DJs, not rappers, were the center of the attention, while rappers were there only to introduce the DJ, to boast about his abilities, not of the rappers’ themselves (at least, not primarily). With Rapper’s Delight, however, from that moment on everything changed, and now the rapper was the center of the attention. Now, rappers weren’t only bragging36 about their DJs, but about themselves also, as well as letting the crowd know how, maybe, the rapper that came before could be kind of good, but how they were actually better. On one side, this new attention was good for most rappers, as now they, too, were artists with a name, who could make their own money without the absolute need of a DJ. On the other side, however, it was a risk too. This is what, in 1982, the rapper Busy Bee learned the hardest way, when, at a rapping contest, after bragging about himself and his skills to bring a crowd crazy — as Busy Bee was one of the most famous rappers of the time, one of the best at turning a party up —, the rapper assumed that everything was won already to him, only to after him the rapper Kool Moe Dee come on stage and diss37 him, creating rhymes on the moment by improvisation, saying how actually he was the best and how Busy Bee actually wasn’t that good — an unexpected movement that brought the house down, putting him as the new best rapper, the new center of the attention.38 This movement of

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36 From the Italian word *braggadocio*, which means “to boast”, that is, to show off — what in hip-hop can involve talking about style, clothing, physical appearance, ability to rap, skills, etc.
37 “To diss someone” is the act of talking bad about a person, attacking this person with the content of your rhymes.
Kool Moe Dee would make all the difference on hip-hop music, introducing to it one of its biggest elements: the battle rap.

Battle rapping, in my opinion, is an almost always present and crucial element of rap. Nowadays, one can say that it is even what keeps rap alive and moving, what makes it evolve, and what inspires rappers to be better rappers. The concept of “battle”, however, should not be misunderstood. Battle rap is not always beef.

*What's beef? Beef is when you need 2 Gats to go to sleep*

*Beef is when your moms ain't safe up in the streets*

*Beef is when I see you*

*Guaranteed to be in ICU, one more time*

*What's beef? Beef is when you make your enemies start your Jeep*

*Beef is when you roll no less than 30 deep*

*Beef is when I see you*

*Guaranteed to be in ICU*[^39]

Notorious B.I.G.

Even though Biggie, may he rest in peace, is not a part of this writing, I guess it is inevitable for a rap fan not to think of the hook of this song when asked the question — “What’s beef?” So, in simple words, beef is when things get serious, and the dispute goes beyond just rap, beyond a contest or a dispute for a metaphorical throne; in a rap beef things ascend to the point of you start worrying about your own security and life. Sometimes, it is just your career, but, anyways, beef is always serious. Battle rapping, however, on the other hand, is more as a match, a contest. You battle rap to show that you really have the skills you claim to have, that when it comes the moment to prove how good you are you are ready for it. It is what makes rappers get ready to prove it at any time, and to show his or her abilities on every song, to be capable of standing up for them. In some way, for many rappers this is what makes them want to do better, to be better and do better raps. So, it is, in some way, what makes rap better from time to time — if you don’t do it for yourself, you do it because at anytime someone can come and

claim your throne; anyone can do it, even a street rapper, an unknown, anyone can come and defy even the greatest, the most famous ones.

From battle rap, also, comes another big element of rap music — freestyling. This topic, however, I am going to leave for later, when we get to talk about punchlines, for there this topic is going to be more relevant and will also introduce us to the study and analysis of punchlines. For now, let’s continue.

The next big happening in hip-hop music that is relevant for this writing is the release, in 1983, of the first hip-hop song by a group called Beastie Boys, the first group formed by white persons (three white males) in hip-hop. The Beastie Boys, even with their commercial success and in some way good reception by the public, were always a motive of disagreement among hip-hop fans, as some accepted them as rappers and recognized their talent, but some would dislike them, and some would only see them as being “white boys”, and from this point on they supposedly didn’t have anything good to offer (or even, to some, the Beastie Boys were trying to steal something that belonged to black persons). In any way, the Beastie Boys were the first step of white persons inside of hip-hop, who would later be a reference that would serve as a gift and a curse for a rapper named Eminem. But for now, let’s focus. 1983 was also an important year for this was the year in which rapper Ice T would release two songs considered to be the first gangsta (i.e. the non-rhotic pronunciation of “gangster” — a person who is part of a gang) raps: Body Rock and Killers. Gangsta rap would also, later, be one of the main elements of most rap music, being a characteristic of many — to be a gangsta rapper. This type of rap would get to be known for its violent content, which would usually depict the life in the streets and the action of gang members, many times associated with the use or traffic of drugs. Gangsta rap would also be known as being hardcore, for most of the time containing strong lyrics, at times even describing murder, being misogynistic and homophobic. However, at another side, it gave a voice to those who didn’t have one until that moment, people who lived in a way that some couldn’t even imagine, and gangsta rap is always put in a place of questioning where the doubt seems to be if whether gangsta raps raises violence in America or if it only depicts an already existent violence. Anyways, gangsta rap soon brought out the hypocrisy of American society, who at one side would fetishize gangsta rappers and consume and finance their

music and at another would demonize them, portraying them as everything that was wrong until then, as if they were violence in itself, not a result of it.

In 1984, inside of only one happening, two of the next big things of rap music would have their first steps. It all started with the hip-hop group U.T.F.O. (Untouchable Force Organization) song Roxanne, Roxanne, which was all about a girl who wouldn’t give up to men’s advances. Then, a 14-year-old girl called Lolita Shanté Gooden, under the moniker Roxanne Shanté, decided to take revenge on the song and recorded a song called Roxanne’s Revenge, a response record to U.T.F.O.’s song. This would be the first time a battle in rap music would happen in exchanged records, one coming to respond another that would generate another response and another, as it happened with what would be known as the Roxanne Wars — a type of action that would become common ground in rap music, just a new level for rap battles or rap beef. But another important point of the Roxanne Wars is that it was the first time a female rapper received as much recognition as Roxanne Shanté did, since her record would become a hit. In hip-hop history, this was the first big move for women in rap music and for their recognition. For the present writing, this happening comes as important not only for its historical importance for culture itself and for women, but also for being the opening door for female rappers such as Nicki Minaj, who would blow up in the game almost 30 years later.

Two year later, in 1986, an important movement and driving force for southern rap was the formation of the group The Geto Boys. As it did for many other rappers, this would be later the opening door for the southern artist Lil’ Wayne. Not only the formation of the Geto Boys, but as well the advancement of gangsta rap represented by the group N.W.A. (Niggas With Attitude) in the West Coast with their two very successful albums in the mainstream Straight Outta Compton, in 1988, and Niggaz For Life, in 1991. N.W.A.’s member Dr. Dre would later, in 1993, attain multi-platinum status for his considered-to-be classic solo album The Chronic, another landmark for West Coast rap. One more artist that would also carve his name in hip-hop history over West Coast gangsta rap is 2Pac, who in 1991 would debut his first album, 2Pacalypse Now. Pac, together with Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg (who would only drop his first album in 1993), among others, would later initiate the famous beef of West Coast against East

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Coast, represented by another hip-hop great, the Notorious B.I.G. — who dropped his first and landmark album Ready to Die in 1994 —, as well as rapper Nas (who would debut in 1994 too) and the group Wu-Tang Clan, among others. The beef in between West and East coast was a major stone in hip-hop history for how serious it became, strongly manipulated and stimulated by the media, with energy escalating on both sides, until its final moment, where everyone came back to their senses: the assassination of 2Pac in 1996 followed by the Notorious B.I.G. on 1997 — the two biggest rappers of the time and representations of each coast, West and East, respectively.

In the middle time, however, a few other important things happened as well. In 1995, rapper Queen Latifah won a Grammy award for the Best Rap Solo Performance, being this one more big step for women in rap music, which would be reinforced in 1997 with female rapper Missy Elliot’s album Supa Dupa Fly, a mix in between rap and R&B, success. Missy Elliot would become the highest selling female rapper until then. Also, one more important happening for women in rap music took place in 1998, when rapper Lauryn Hill got nominated for 11 Grammys and won 5 for her solo album The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.

But going back to 1996, two more important things happened that year: Jay Z — a rapper from New York City — and Eminem — a rapper from Detroit — debut albums. First, Jay Z’s (at the time “Jay-Z”) Reasonable Doubt, was a commercial success as well as it was a success for the critics, who judged that Jay had an effortless cool flow, a disarming honesty, a lyrical depth, and thought that the album had great producers.42 43 The album was an account of Jay’s life on the streets until that moment, selling drugs and making his own money this way, as well as some other experiences he had until that moment, but still keeping the gangsta theme. The differential the rapper would have, however, was his charisma, as Jay didn’t attempt to portray the violent type, but rather was a person who was caught in the gangsta game. Jay Z’s mainstream success, however, only came with his next album, released on 1997, In My Lifetime Vol. 1. The rapper would, then, follow up with two more commercially successful and critically acclaimed albums, Vol. 2… Hard Knock Life (in 1998) and Vol. 3… Life and Times of S. Carter (in 1999).

I tried to teach niggas how to be kings
And all they ever wanted to be was soldiers
So the love is gone 'til blood is drawn
So we no longer wear the same uniform
Fuck you squares, the circle got smaller

Jay Z

Eminem’s Infinite, on the other hand of Reasonable Doubt, had a really minor release, more as a demo tape, and its reception wasn’t well acclaimed either by critics or by fans, who thought that Eminem sounded too much like rapper AZ or Nas. Eminem himself has said that the album was the moment when he was discovering himself as an artist and trying to find out how he wanted to sound on the microphone. The follow up to Infinite, as Eminem was already signed to Dr. Dre’s (who would be his partner in crime from this moment on) Aftermath, The Slim Shady LP, on the contrary of Infinite, was a success commercially and for the critics as well, who praised Eminem lyrical style, vocabulary and imagination, after the shock of the album’s content was passed, as some would even describe it as unapologetic outrageous. The album would be the start of Eminem’s success as well as of his alter ego, Slim Shady, an offensive, violent and crazy side of him. Eminem’s next album too, The Marshall Mathers LP, would live up to the success of the first and would even surpass it.

In the mean time, at the south of the United States, more precisely in New Orleans, a group named Hot Boys had dropped its first album named Get It How U Live, in 1997. From the whole group, however, one member would later become more successful and famous than the others, his name is Lil’ Wayne. Weezy would make appearances on both the first album of the Hot Boys and the second, Guerrilla Warfare, in 1999 — the same year in which he would release his first solo album, Tha Block Is Hot. The rapper still released two more other albums that would add to his name and fame that was growing, Lights Out (in 2000) and 500 Degreez (in 2002), but he would only really get recognition from his 2004 album, Tha Carter, which would initiate the

franchise that later would make Wayne’s name. The album was a commercial success, as well as it got praised for Wayne’s maturity in subject matter and delivery, which had developed from the rapper’s last albums while he was still young. Tha Carter was still only a prequel to what would come later from Wayne, but it already had proved to the public the potential that the rapper had.

Now, back to 2001, another landmark for rap music was Jay Z’s album The Blueprint, which would later be considered one of the best rap albums of hip-hop’s history, and that would also present the world the production of a soon-to-become rapper Kanye West, who at the time had only produced instrumentals for Jay Z. The Blueprint represented a change in style to rap music, mixing now the gangsta atmosphere that was already present in it with a new kind of class, a result of Jay’s new life as a rich man. Concerning instrumentals, the album would introduced strongly to hip-hop the use of soul samples, something that would be characteristic of his and the production of Kanye too. However, in a commercial move, two years later Jay would announce his retirement, dropping The Black Album as his last, only to come back in 2006. Eminem too, would release The Eminem Show, which would later be considered a classic album, and then in 2004 after releasing his Encore album would go into an absence of 5 years for rehabilitation.

But it’s time to exorcise these demons
These motherfuckers are doing jumping jacks now

Eminem

The rap game, however, wasn’t left alone on this time, as in 2004 the world would get to know the Chicago rapper Kanye West, with his debut album The College Dropout. The album had great commercial success and the critics judged it as having substance, social commentary, dark humor, humanism, and that it subverted hip-hop’s clichés. Kanye’s style, attitude, sonority and even fashion would, from this moment

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on, be a great source of change in hip-hop, as Kanye would subvert many of the beliefs already crystallized in rap music. The same would happen in his next album, the Late Registration, in 2005, and even more in his Graduation, in 2007, that would finally force the aesthetics of rap to a point in which there was no going back. At the same time, there was Wayne’s Tha Carter II, in 2005, which critics praised for its hookless tracks, with a vibe of freestyle to them, as well as the club singles and the rapper’s persona. Wayne’s lyricism was praised too, mostly for his witty punchlines. What Wayne had done on Tha Carter II, he only did way better in 2008 on Tha Carter III, that would later be considered a classic album too, exploring hip-hop lyricism, metaphors, more ways of creating punchlines in his own style of subversive hip-hop.

*I think you stand under me if you don’t understand me*51

Lil’ Wayne

In 2006, Jay Z came back of his retirement with an album that didn’t succeed well, the Kingdom Come. The next year, however, the rapper made up for Kingdom Come with American Gangster, in which Jay proved he could still rap as well as when he left the game. In 2009, the rapper would put out the third of his Blueprint franchise — album in which Jay would present to the game some new rappers, among them te Canadian rapper Drake. Now, just like Jay Z, Eminem too would come out in 2009 of his time away from rap with an album that also wouldn’t be well received by critics and fans, his Relapse, of which many complained, most of all, of Eminem’s abuse of fake accents. The album, however, still was a great demonstration of Eminem’s aptitude in bending words and using the sound of words, demonstrating mastery in phonetics. Still, only one year after Relapse, the rapper would compensate and even apologize for the album in his Recovery album that was, then, a success.

Kanye West, in its turn, would next put out two albums that would be as decisive for hip-hop as they would be for two other rappers. The 808s & Heartbreak, in 2008,
was Kanye’s experimentation with auto-tune and singing, in which the rapper again broke paradigms by being a rapper who was now singing (something that was in some way interdicted within rap culture, for being seen as something “too soft” for a rapper to do) — being also a rapper who couldn’t actually sing, not without auto-tune. But even though the album faced some criticism, for most, especially fans, the album was a success in what it proposed, as it was too a commercial success, especially its song Love Lockdown. From this new path that Kanye carved, many say that the Toronto rapper Drake took advantage of, as the rapper’s debut album, in 2009, So Far Gone, had a mix of rapping and singing — with auto-tune — in it. In any way, the album was a success commercially as well as with the critics who saw good on Drake’s honesty in his lyrics, as well as on the balance of the softness with which he approached subjects such as materialism, relationships problems and other hardships — a formula which Drake would continue using in his next albums, Thank Me Later (2010), Take Care (2011) and Nothing Was The Same (2013).

_I'm hearing all of the jokes, I know that they tryna push me_  
_I know that showin' emotion don't ever mean I'm a pussy_  
_Know that I don't make music for niggas who don't get pussy_  
_So those are the ones I count on to diss me or overlook me_52

Drake

Now, back to Kanye’s albums, the other album by the rapper was the 2010’s My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy, which, other than being a work of art right from the start as Kanye released the whole album as a movie to be watched, carved the way to the Trinidad and Tobago rapper Nicki Minaj, who completely stole the show — by being at the same time the beauty and the beast — on a track named Monster in Kanye’s album. Nicki’s debut album would come the same year, the Pink Friday, which would become a commercial success and would also be well received by critics, who saw success in Nicki’s mix of rap with pop music — and her sensibility to the latter —, and praised the album for her female perspective, that subverted the idea of what a woman could do.

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could do in rap music until then. In 2012, with Nicki’s follow up album, the Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded, the rapper reaffirmed to some extension her major role in nowadays hip-hop as well as in her role in pop music. Nicki became the representation of a new kind of hip-hop, breaking with the traditionalist ideas that preached that a rapper couldn’t be pop, but had to be strictly rap, utilizing herself precisely of the same “I obey my own rules” ideas and attitude of that from the beginning made hip-hop what it is today.

So let me get this straight, wait, I’m the rookie?
But my features and my shows ten times your pay?
50K for a verse, no album out
Yeah, my money’s so tall that my Barbiez gotta climb it
Nicki Minaj

3.2 PUNCHLINES

So, finally, with all the necessary stories having been told about hip-hop culture and rap music and also with all the rappers whose punchlines are going to be analyzed here already superficially contextualized and presented, this work reaches now its main point, to where everything else was just a preparation to and we were building up for — punchlines. However, one last time, before getting to the categorization and analysis of punchlines itself, there is one last stop through which we must go, that will serve as a quick contextualization to how punchlines emerged and what their importance is, by what we are going to be able to understand too the idea of what a punchline precisely is. To reach so, it is necessary to better understand the essence of battle rap and freestyling, to which punchlines are strongly connected.

The realization of battle rap, as I already stated, was something that changed greatly what hip-hop culture was and what it would get to be. Some even argue that without it, hip-hop wouldn’t really be hip-hop, and that maybe it wouldn’t have the same strength it had. I call it a “realization”, however, for everything that led to battle rap and the spirit of it had always been there, in hip-hop culture, since the beginning when DJs were trying to be the best and exclusives and, to do so, kept records to themselves, trying to be different, unique. Or else, when rappers came to introduce the DJs and lightly competed against each other already, even if there wasn’t yet any jab directed at other rappers, but rather an exaltation of themselves — mostly because rappers weren’t yet the center of the attention, but the DJ, as rappers were there only to introduce their DJs. The same thing happened with break dancers, graffiti writers. The reason to be of this competitiveness, however, doesn’t seem to me as an attempt to be primarily (nor even necessarily) better than another person, but rather to be simply the best at doing something, or to be doing something valuable, for what the DJ, rapper, break dancer, graffiti writer would be respected. In some portion, it was about style too — style that gives voice to everything that you think yourself to be and also represent, style that makes you unique. To be the one throwing the parties that everyone was going to and to be playing the music that everyone was going crazy about, or to be the one who was rapping the rhymes that everyone enjoyed listening to and to make the party happen with it, or to be the one doing the best and difficult dance moves, or to be the one with the best graffiti with your name written everywhere. Thus, competitiveness in hip-hop, as I see it, was never about the other, but about yourself (and secondarily, to some degree, to force the other to do their best too, because if they didn’t, their career would be over).

So, battle rap and competitiveness changed rap music, since from the moment that people realized battle rap on everyone had to be prepared. Obviously, the ones who had the most were, too, the ones who had more to lose. Battle rapping became decisive for the career of rappers, may it be for good or for bad — it either could put on the spotlight or straightly out of it. However, other than competitiveness, this modality of rap had also another origin, a lighter one. There was a game that was popular among those inside of hip-hop, more precisely rappers, that was called The Dozens, a game in which the participants of it would try to win against the others by insulting them with rhymes that they would come up with on the moment, insults which would usually aim
at the mother of the other participants. So, to some degree, rappers were already used to battle against each other before, even if The Dozens was just a game played among friends.

From The Dozens too, there is one more element of rap which would become definitive not only for battle rap but for rap itself, that is freestyling. For what freestyle is, however, there are two definitions. Rapper Kool Moe Dee says that before the 90’s freestyle actually was pre-written rhymes that didn’t really focus on any specific subject — and thus, was a style that was free, of theme or objective — which main purpose was to show the lyrical ability of a rapper. Until that time, the correspondent to the current idea of freestyling as improvised rap was called “to come off the top of the head”, or simply “off the dome”. Then, this modality of rap actually wasn’t respected by most rappers, and the rapper who did it was seen as someone who was not able to write (or write well, more specifically) and “coming off the dome” was seen as an excuse, since people couldn’t be too critical about an improvisation, this way giving the rapper an excuse to his or her poorly written rhymes. However, in 1991, with the formation of the group Freestyle Fellowship, who incorporated elements of jazz and more than anything else its improvisation, the conception of what the term freestyle meant changed definitively to improvised rap, being reinforced later by Eminem’s 8 Mile movie.

Freestyling, as improvised rap — as if from a stream of consciousness —, too, changed greatly rap music and its culture, as well as battle rap, as from the moment that battles on rap became common place and a rapper could expect another rapper to come and diss him or her at anytime, or simply defy him or her, rappers had to be prepared for this type of situation, and be able to show his or her abilities in responding or else be ridiculed and possibly have his or her career affected. Knowing how to freestyle, however, was not only a mechanism of defense or attack, but it was too an element of ability and distinction, since if a rapper knew how to freestyle he had something that others didn’t, and the better a rapper did it the more impressive it was. This way, it didn’t take much for many rappers start doing it, and then regular people start doing it themselves too. It could happen anywhere, at shows or at parties, but it was more

common to happen on the streets, on street corners. However, as for battle rap the judges had always been the crowd, it was necessary that there were people witnessing the battles, so their screams of appreciation and reactions would function as if points to each rapper and would decide who the winner was.

Since from the conception of rapping as a thing, rappers had been searching for ways to differentiate themselves, searching for things to say that would make them unique, as well as things that would entertain the crowd and make them enjoy the party in which they were. To do so, everything was possible; a rapper could change his or flow (i.e. the rhythms and cadence), delivery (the performance), voice, subject matter (the contents of his or her rhymes) and, what is the focus of this work, his or her techniques to deliver these contents. In here, it is important to remember how close rap is to poetry (as its name says, rhythm and poetry), as the techniques used by rappers many were literary ones (even if not consciously being used as so) — metaphors, similes, metonyms, synecdoches, ironies, hyperboles (or, all in one word: signifying\(^{58}\)), among others. However, it is equally important to remember that rap is not (only) poetry, but rather a two-sided coin, and if rap had never left its written form, it would still be just poetry, so there were, too, many techniques which were strictly attached to the oral production that rap also is — such as homophones, homonyms, homographs, heteronyms, polysemes, among others.

In the streets, however, and even more in the situation of a rap battle, it would be too difficult for a rapper to expect to gain the attention of the public and please them or even to differentiate himself of others only with literary devices that would barely be noticed by people (and at times would be noticed even by the own rapper who was using them), since not everyone had this level of education to do so, or even the level of attention or time necessary to notice this kind of details. So, rappers had to find a way to create something that was interesting, wit and entertaining as it was easy to perceive and understand. From this necessity and context (of freestyles and rap battles), punchlines emerged.


Punchlines, first in opposition to the already existing concept on comical shows, are not necessarily a conclusion or climax for something. Their development happened in the middle of battle of rhymes, in which a whole crowd who formed a circle around the rappers — as if as giving them a ring — would not applaud, but rather create commotion, screaming in appreciation to the rapper they favored and the lines that impressed them. If a rapper would wait for the end of his rhyming turn to give them a punchline, the battle could be lost for him before he even got there, as there were expectations from the crowd also, expectations which became too a part of rap battles. If your adversary said something about you that the crowd liked and made a lot of noise to, you had to answer to this same commentary, you had to come up with a response for it, or else this would be a (imaginary) point for your adversary, but if you responded the commentary the point was yours. For that, punchlines would appear in the beginning, in the middle, in the end, and at every single part of a rap that a rapper could fit it in — as well as keep inventing powerful ones. Punchlines, thus, were creators of effect, of reaction. They were the things that the public were expecting, or, even better, not expecting to hear. They could be based on the play on words, which would create an amusing and wit effect to a rhyme; or a double entendre, bending the meaning of a word by its sound; or a reference, mostly to pop culture (which was the theme that would get to most of the people, a theme which message would most probably be comprehended by anyone); or it could work just as the punchlines from comical shows, which set-up a premise that later creates the effect of the punchline; or it could be just a real good, wit response to something that your adversary said; it could be a blunt, harsh statement, that simply for being said out loud created already its effect; or it could simply be something funny that would win the laugh of the crowd — something that at times could be even more powerful and decisive than their screams.

Later, punchlines would become a part of freestyles to demonstrate ability too and to create a punchline on the moment would be one of the biggest demonstrations of ability that a rapper could do. It was, then, just a matter of time for punchlines to become also a part of records, actual lines in the songs, and become a technique through which rappers would be able to create their identity and singularize themselves, as well as to gain public, making their records more interesting, to the point of people having the desire to listen to a song only for an specific punchline (as I do, and I know many others who do so too). For punchlines are an event in themselves, they steal the show on
a rapper’s song and even make a rapper steal the show at another rapper’s song. For the
effect of punchlines is unique, incomparable even to other elements or abilities that are
worthy of being praised too. First, there is the fact that they are unexpected and there is
always a surprise when you notice them, when they finally get to you. But then, next,
you just want to hear them again, you want to listen to the way they are said, and you
want to understand the way the effect was created, how the punchline was created. How
did this rapper do this? Why is this so amusing and interesting? Why is this so funny?

This is the objective of this work. To analyze and understand the ways in which
punchlines are created, and so to dissect and see what elements, what literary tropes,
what sound-related effects, and what else, exactly, creates the effects of punchlines
making them so interesting and amusing. The possibilities of creation of punchlines,
however, seem to be infinite, as well as the categorization of them (as it depends on
how you see it, or even to the level of categorization you want to give it). Do I want to
spend hours and hours distinguishing punchlines based on metaphors from the ones
based on similes? Hell, no. Do you want to spend your time reading about this kind of
distinction? Maybe, I don’t know. The fact is, I believe that more important, for this
moment and the length possible for this work, is to distinguish punchlines in big groups,
inside of which we may run into the distinction of punchlines based on metaphors and
the ones based on similes, but this way we can have a bigger sample of punchlines
created in many different ways and still similar in a bigger aspect. So, the nomenclature
as well as the types of punchlines found here in this work don’t really exist as an
agreement, but rather were given and observed by me, in some way (since I haven’t
really created anything, but just picked concepts and conceptions that already exist).

As I really doubt it, but want to acknowledge already, it is possible that in some
other medium the concept of punchlines may already exist and be already defined —
something that I couldn’t find in my research. The sense of authorship of punchlines
that I give to rap music in this work, however, is due to the fact that no other musical
genre or even other media has based itself so strongly on punchlines as rap does, the
way I see it. The same way Kingston and its sound systems were important to hip-hop,
and the history and gangs of the Bronx, and the emergence of rap, and the realization of
battle rap, and the element of freestyle, punchlines too are a major stone for the culture
and, more than anything else, to rap music. From the moment that punchlines became
something in rap, the whole genre was changed, even if you can’t find it yet on any
history of hip-hop or rap book or else as being more than a commentary. Punchlines are always mentioned, but never explained. This happens for that those inside of hip-hop culture don’t need any explanation, it is obvious what a punchline is and only now, with the advent of the former rapgenius.com, we got to start explaining how they work — what had always been the real mystery. Again, if you search the internet for a definition of what a punchline is, you might run into something like “[sic] Its a word from HipHop. It define the last line of a rhyme, the one that bring it on point. If u bring good punch lines the crowd will scream”\textsuperscript{59}. This, with this work, is about to change, that is my intention. As I believe, the full comprehension of what a punchline is may change more than just hip-hop, but also other media, and even literature (that at times gets too boring without punchlines). Let’s get to it, then.

\textbf{3.2.1 Of wordplay}

\begin{quote}
\textit{And now I’m flying on my PJ, looking at the clouds}

\textit{Thinking about yo ass and how it look like a big smile}

\textit{I get mental flashbacks of your asscrack}

\textit{Lemme get back on track}

\textit{You say I act like I don't miss you, that's ‘cause I don't act}\textsuperscript{60}

\textit{Lil’ Wayne}
\end{quote}

Punchlines based on wordplay, or the play on words, deal, to some degree, with a kind of meta-language, that is, the language centered in itself. As it is going to be made clear, wordplay, as I see it, is not the same of a double entendre, and that is the distinction I made here in this work. While double entendres base their effect mostly on the sound of words — and, therefore, are closely related to the oral aspect of rap —, wordplay punchlines’ effect is based on language in itself, in its written form, in its


\textsuperscript{60} Carter J DM. You Song. In: Dedication 5. New Orleans: Young Money; 2013. Track 7. (54)
possibilities of interpretation. However close these two may be, I still chose to divide them into two different categories, because even if, in some way, they use the same paths (playing with meanings and interpretations) to reach a destination that is basically the same (the realization of two or more possibilities that give us two or more meanings in only one message), the way these two travel these paths are different for their essence: wordplay travels closer to the written form of rap while double entendres are closer to the sound.

So, to make this clearer, I rather let you see while we analyze each punchline, for in this way the differences and resemblances will become clear in themselves. To list which elements, exactly, come in to play in the making of a punchline based on wordplay, the way I see it, instead of helping, would actually work as a limiting choice, as I believe that the possibilities are truly infinite — there may be the use of polysemy, analogy, metaphors, similes, metonymy, synecdoche, metalepsis, irony, hyperboles, meiosis, litotes, bathos, among so many other tropes and strategies — and I rather show you the possibilities that I gathered (and this way you will see for yourself) to exemplify that. The concept of the artistic technique of ostranenie\textsuperscript{61}, however, seems to be crucial to begin the analysis of punchlines. Let me show you.

*I'm all about I, get the rest of the vowels back*\textsuperscript{62}

Lil’ Wayne

First, I want you to remember that this line, actually, is a bar, delivered in a flow (in a tempo, cadence, rhythm), in a song. So, differently from having it written, a medium in which you have time to analyze the enunciate as a whole and thus explore its meaning further and then have a final interpretation, while listening to a song you build up meaning at the same time content reaches you and goes away, so very probably to fully understand a message conveyed you would have to listen for a couple of times, or yet have the lyrics to the song with you to be able to truly comprehend the possibilities


and the meaning that was built up. Thus, let’s recreate this instance, let’s pretend this is what is happening and we are listening to the song for the first time. First, we are hit with “I am all about I”, to what some of us may have made an instinctive correction in our minds — wouldn’t it rather be “I am all about me”? In any way it may be, it is possible for us to understand that Wayne only cares about himself. But then, something happens, and he completes this bar with “get the rest of the vowels back”, and, suddenly, we are lost. Was he actually talking about the vowel I, then? What, exactly, is he trying to say? Ladies and gentlemen, basically, this is what ostranenie is.

Ostranenie may be translated as defamiliarization, that is, in simple words, the act of presenting something that is already familiar to us — such as the concept of only caring about yourself, or the vowel I — in an unfamiliar way, a way that will force us to have a second, third look into something that seems so familiar but, under ostranenie, becomes the unknown, or even the incomprehensible (at first). Does it mean, thus, that Wayne’s bar from She Will has no other intention than just getting you confused? The answer for that is no. Let’s get back to the analysis of it.

If you keep in mind the idea that Wayne only wants one of the vowels, that is the letter I, and that we can keep the other vowels to ourselves, and try to apply this idea to the other conception of the sentence, in which Wayne actually only cares about himself, we have, finally, a new meaning created, one that revolves all around this imaginary created by the rapper on this bar. So, if Wayne only cares about himself — he is only interested in the vowel I —, this implies that Wayne doesn’t care about anyone else, he isn’t interested in others — and thus, we can get the all the other vowels back. To create this punchline, Wayne played with words and letters, more specifically the letter I, exploring its meanings and possibilities of interpretation. To do so, he may have bended language a little to create the effect, choosing to say “I” instead of “me”, but it still sounds natural enough to the point of this statement, “I am all about I”, be understood without difficulty and internally accepted as a linguistic variation by listeners (even without the knowledge of linguistic variation\(^{63}\), for we have conscience of it even if we don’t fully comprehend it), this way creating the effect of ostranenie. Thus, as shown, even though this concept only enters into play after Wayne had already given us what

\(^{63}\) In simple terms, linguistic variation is the variation that may happen among speakers or a group of speakers of any language in pronunciation (accent), word choice (lexicon), or even preferences concerning grammar.
would create the effect of this punchline, without it listeners wouldn’t be able (or at least would take a longer time, and in the end wouldn’t even be able to know if Wayne did it on purpose) to see that there’s something else to be understood from this line, that there is more to comprehension.

Like this, in only one move, Wayne lets us know that there is meaning yet to be explored and at the same time we know that he did it on purpose, that it was his intention to do so — not that his intention really matters in the end. The reason being that punchlines give to rap listeners is also the comprehension that meaning can be bent, and that in the end it all depends on your interpretation of the message conveyed (since if you don’t get to realize that there is a punchline in there, to you it may sound as if Wayne is simply talking crazy and that his music actually doesn’t make any sense). It all depends on how you interpret things, and it gets to a point that listeners don’t really care about a rapper intending to say something or not, but if it makes sense to you in some way and if context allows you to interpret it that way too. If it does, this is a possibility of interpretation. This, however, obviously has led to disagreement among fans, who not always interpret lines the same way, but with genius.com nowadays this seems to be changing to rather embracing possibilities of interpretation than ignoring them. The new problem, now, seems to be when people don’t understand something and decide to judge from an ignorant point of view, as it happened with Wayne’s next punchline.

*Bitch*®, real Gs move in silence, like lasagna

Lil’ Wayne

If you google this line, you are bound to find innumerable websites condemning this punchline, and even more using it to prove how Lil’ Wayne is a bad rapper, and that he doesn’t know what he is saying, or that he only talks crazy on his songs and what he

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64 The use of the term “bitch”, in hip-hop, seems to have majorly lost its offensive and derogatory intention, being reinvented to at times mean simply “woman”, “girl”, “girlfriend”, “wife”, or even to work as if an interjection (that is the case in this line). Still, there are instances in which it is still used as an insult, in which the term may be directed to men and women, regaining its pejorative and misogynistic semantic.

says actually doesn’t have any meaning — it’s probably all the drugs he takes. For Wayne fans, however, this was the perfect situation to get back at the haters.

For those outside of hip-hop culture, I acknowledge, this bar may seem even more incomprehensible. What in hell, you may ask, the letter G has to do with lasagna? Yes, it is strange, and that is exactly the purpose of it. Ostranenie, remember? From starters, in rap music, gangstas are commonly referred asGs, and there are too those who are considered real gangstas, real Gs. Still, what do gangsters have to do with lasagna? Here, Wayne is doing something that he has done before.

*I don’t O, U, like two vowels

But I would like for you to pay me by the hour*66

Lil’ Wayne

By saying that he doesn’t O, U, Wayne is implying that he doesn’t do just the basic, the simple in his raps. The connection with being paid? Hour. Wayne doesn’t do the simple, but it is simple the method through which he prefers to be paid, by hours. The choice of hours, however, isn’t just a coincidence, for the word contains the exact two letters that Wayne had just said that he doesn’t do: O and U. Thus, Wayne had given us a preview of what was about to happen before he had done it — he makes us focus on two letters, or the sound of them since they are being pronounced, and then with the help of ostranenie he makes us think about what connection may lie in between this seemly two unrelated things. The answer being the sound of them, both O and U are contained in the words hour. So, even though Wayne doesn’t do the two letters, he still wants them, contained in “hour”, the form of payment he prefers.

Now, back to lasagna. Having analyzed the punchline about how Wayne wants to be paid, it becomes easier to understand what’s happening on the first one, about real gangsters. In the word lasagna we have the exact same letter that symbolizes gangsters, the G. Gangsters, according to Wayne, move in silence, the exact same thing that happens to the letter G in the word lasagna — it is silent. However, the only thing that is

different in this punchline from the other one that came before it playing with sounds too is that this time he makes use of a simile too to complete this punchline. So, rather than saying “real Gs move in silence, like in lasagna”, that would be a simple analogy, Wayne transforms it into a simile, “like lasagna”, upgrading the punchline to another level. It is relevant to say here that, even though these punchlines are using sounds too in their construction, they still don’t cross the limit of becoming double entendres, as it is going to become clearer on the next punchline and even more when we get to double entendres.

Fuck it a sick duck, I want my duck sicked, mommy

Eminem

In this punchline too, even though Eminem plays with sound of words, the effect of the punchline doesn’t rely on the double interpretation of the pronunciation of a word, but instead, what is being said doesn’t even seem to make sense — does Eminem have a duck that he wants someone to make it sick? This confusion appeals to the analysis of language itself, bringing the listener into thinking about the written form of language. Eminem too has demonstrated interest in playing with language, exploring its meanings and possibilities of interpretation, as well as its connections with the sound of words.

And pardon me if I’m a cocky prick, but you cocks are slick
Poppin’ shit on how you flipped your life around, crock of shit
Who you dicks tryna kid? Flip dick, you did the opposite
You stayed the same, ‘cause cock backwards is still cock, you pricks

Eminem

Back to the first punchline, however, we have something different from just playing with something that is, let’s say, already done (that is, the listener can already see the final product of the punchline just by looking at it). This time, however, we not only have a sick duck, to which Eminem doesn’t care, but also something that doesn’t even make sense — how does someone get a duck sick, if that is what “sicked” means. What is happening, however, is that Eminem cleverly makes use of spoonerism\(^69\) to mask what he is really saying: that he wants his dick to be sucked. However this bar may seem unpractical, since to finally get to the real meaning of this bar one would have to either follow his or her instincts or at least have some knowledge on spoonerism, this is common in slang inside of hip-hop culture, used to mask the content of conversations (most probably from police, initially). The use of slang is also one more element used in the creation of punchlines based on wordplay.

\[I \text{ don’t need your pussy}^{70}, \text{ bitch; I’m on my own dick}^{71}\]

Kanye West

Here, Kanye plays with the meaning of the slang expression “to be on one’s dick\(^72\)”, which can be understood as the state in which a person becomes in some way obsessed with another, becoming way too interested in him or her and starts seeing everything that this specific persons does as something good or even incredible. This meaning, however, is subverted in here, from the moment that Kanye states that he doesn’t need a woman’s pussy, thus creating two possible interpretations that in this case lead to the same conclusion: Kanye is good by himself. The first interpretation that can be made from this bar is literal, in which Kanye doesn’t need a woman’s vagina to have sex; he already does it with his own penis — this way stating his sexual auto-sufficiency. In a second interpretation, however, following the metaphorical meaning imposed by the metaphorical expression created by the slang, the message is not about

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\(^69\) The unintentional or intentional (that is the case here) switch of corresponding consonants, vowels or morphemes between two words.

\(^70\) Slang for vagina.


\(^72\) Dick being a slang for penis.
sex anymore, Kanye is actually saying that he doesn’t need the approval of a woman, he doesn’t need a woman to like his music neither to recognize his talent, he is too auto-focused, he loves himself enough to the point of not needing a woman, and we all know that Kanye knows (or thinks) that he is a genius. In the same as Kanye did, Eminem too plays with the meaning of a slang expression, “to be fucking around”, in a punchline of his own.

{quote}
Stick my dick in a circle, but I’m not fuckin’ around{quote}

Eminem

“To be fucking around”, in slang, has the meaning of “to be playing around; to be wasting time”. Eminem has always stated during his career in his lyrics how serious rap music is to him, and how he doesn’t play when it comes to being the best rapper. So, this bar serves as one more reminder that he is not in rap music to waste his time or to be playing; he always comes for the win, to show that he is the best. What creates the effect of this punchlines, however, is the fact that he starts it by saying that he can even stick his dick in a circle (a round), but still he isn’t playing here (fucking around). The strategy applied to create the effect of Kanye’s and Eminem’s punchline seems to be a resignification of common figurative speeches from slang language through polysemy working along with metalepsis, giving us one more strategy used to create punchlines.

As demonstrated (superficially still, for the matter of not producing a too lengthy writing), the possibilities for creating punchlines based on wordplay are infinite, since anything and everything can be used to create its effect. Thus, more important than defining which, exactly, are the literary tropes or uses of language that come into play on wordplay is the comprehension of what, exactly, wordplay is and how it can be created. As stated before, wordplay brings the listener’s focus to language, reinventing

75 The use of figurative speech in a new context, as if by saying “I’ve got to catch the worm tomorrow”, derivate from the common maxim “The early bird catches the worm”.
it, putting it in a space of ostranenie and calling attention to the presence of a punchline, telling you “Hey, there’s something more to these bars than it seems to be, take a closer look!” Punchlines based on double entendres, too, work in a similar way, but their essence lies in another element of language.

3.2.2 Of double entendre

*And if you fall on the concrete, that’s your ass fault*\(^{76}\)

Kanye West

Punchlines based on double entendre, just as wordplay, have their effect based on the exploration of the possible meanings that lie behind words. Double entendres, however, are not focused on language itself, but rather the sounds of it, or, more precisely, the way words are pronounced. As I said before, one could’ve easily grouped punchlines based on wordplay along with the ones based on double entendre, seeing them as only one phenomenon. I, however, believe that as close as these two may be, there is still a distinction between them, of that wordplay’s ambiguity of interpretations lie in the way words are chosen, or for an ostranenie in meaning or other element that brings you to investigate language in itself, and very probably you need the lyrics of a song to better understand what is happening; on double entendres, now, the ambiguity of meaning, the expansion of possibilities for interpretation lies more on the pronunciation of words than in the way they are written — such as by the use of homophones, homonyms, homographs, heteronyms, etc. Allow me to demonstrate.

*I gave Bruce Wayne a Valium and said: “Settle your fucking ass down I'm ready for combat, man” Get it? Calm Batman*\(^{77}\)

Eminem


Eminem himself, in this punchline, already did half of the job of explaining what the main effect of the punchline in question is. Contextually in the song, Em’ was stating his position in rap in relation to his competition. Thus, by giving Bruce Wayne (Batman’s government name) a valium — a strong sedative — and saying that he himself is ready for combat, Eminem could be stating that he doesn’t need anymore a super-hero — a metaphor to someone stronger than him or any other person — to fight his battles, he is going to fight them himself. The main effect of the punchline, however, lies in the play of “combat, man” with “calm Batman”, which are homophones. Homophones, in simple terms, are two words that regardless of their spelling share the same pronunciation, which is the case in here. Eminem can be ready for combat, but he is also ready to calm Batman, as he is giving him a sedative. So, even though there is, yes, a play on words in this punchline, the effect relies essentially on the fact that “combat, man” and “calm Batman” share the same pronunciation, and, thus, the sound of the words become the most important element for the creation of the punchline. The same thing happens in a Lil’ Wayne punchline too.

*I French kiss that pussy, like muah*\(^{78}\)

Lil’ Wayne

In this punchline, the same thing happens; the use of a homophone creates the whole effect of the punchline. This time, however, it gets even more interesting for Wayne creates a punchline based on homophones from two different languages, English and French. So, initially, we have the most obvious interpretation for the punchline, in which we have the onomatopoeia muah serving as a representation, an exemplification of the rapper French kissing a vagina. So far, nothing big, right? It gets really interesting, however, when you get to notice that “muah” is a homophone for the French word moi, point in which the punchline gains a whole new dimension and really stands out, since from this point on “like moi” stops being just a representation of a kiss and becomes a simile, due to the fact that moi in French means me, and thus the line would

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make any sense if it was literal — “I French kiss that pussy, like me”. The presence of a simile, then, becomes an extension to the mention of a French kiss, putting then to the corner the first and most probable conception of what a French kiss is — a kiss with the use of tongue —, used nowadays unrelated to the French people, and bringing it to its roots — a type of kiss which origins supposedly lie in France. Thus, the simile “like moi” becomes a direct reference to a French person, as if a synecdoche, as if Wayne was saying that he himself becomes French when it comes the time to kiss a vagina, and so he not only kiss it, he French kiss it. Lastly, when brought closely to its origins in France, one could also assume that the specialists on French kissing would be precisely the French people, and so Wayne could be saying that he kisses a vagina like a specialist in doing so. Using a synecdoche to create a simile and then adding it to a homophone, Wayne created a very amusing punchline — method which seems to be one of his favorites.

*Bad bitches*\(^79\) *I get at you, like sinus*\(^80\)

Lil’ Wayne

Now, in a close relation to homophones, punchlines can be also created with the use of paronyms\(^81\). Let me exemplify.

*I’m here, oh yeah, I promise I ain’t going nowhere*

*Okay? Here, like a hare, like a rabbit, I like carrots*\(^82\)

Jay Z

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\(^79\) To be a bad bitch is one example of an instance in which the term “bitch” has been completely subverted to the point of going from being an insult to a compliment, something good. Bad bitches, in rap music, are women who are powerful, women who have attitude, as well as women who are good in bed.


\(^81\) Paronyms are words that don’t have exactly the same pronunciation, but which pronunciation is close enough to resemble one another.

Hare, excuse me, here, Jay Z makes use of a paronym followed by a homophone to give this punchline meaning and effect. The words here and hare are paronyms, and can be minimal pairs too, so Jay goes from stating the fact that he isn’t going anywhere and still here to the idea of a hare, an animal of the same family of rabbits. The connection with a hare, a rabbit, however, is only mentioned so Jay can state the he likes carrots, as rabbits do. Carrots, by its turn, are actually a homophone to the word karats, a measurement of the weight of diamonds or the purity of gold (i.e. 24K), that in reality is what Jay Z really likes. Wayne too has a punchline based on a paronym and a minimal pair of his own. Wayne’s, however, goes a lot darker, as it is a punchline of battle rap.

Niggas ain’t satisfied until they mama missin’
Niggas ain’t satisfied until they mama miss ’em
Lil’ Wayne

Punchlines based on double entendres may be constructed too with a reference to pop culture which delineates the imaginary that gives the punchline its effect other than just its double entendre.

Tell Lady Gaga, she can quit her job at the post office; she's still a mail lady
Eminem

In the punchline in question, one cannot understand what Eminem is really saying just by looking at this line alone, nor even to the whole song. The other half of context that completes this punchline actually lies in the imaginary of pop culture. The

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83 Minimal pairs are words that are distinct in pronunciation solely because of one distinctive sound, that makes them different, without which we would have an homophone (e.g. cat and bat).
84 The meaning of the term nigga (the non-rhotic pronunciation of nigger) too, in hip-hop, has been subverted to the point of simply meaning “guy”, or “man”, or “friend” (as in “my nigga”), even though it is only socially acceptable when used by black persons.
pop singer Lady Gaga, for a long time, was believed to be a hermaphrodite, for pictures that circulated the internet of the singer with an unexplainable protuberance on where her lady parts were supposed to be. The rumor sparked so much attention from the media and people in general that a punchline like this wasn’t even at risk of not being comprehended.

The effect, here, lies on the double entendre of the homophones “mail lady” and “male-lady”. Thus, Lady Gaga could even quit her imaginary job at the post office if she wanted, because to people she would still be a mail lady — a joke on how people’s beliefs end up setting things into stone, as people were already sure that Gaga was actually hermaphrodite, that is, a male lady, and nothing would change their minds.

3.2.3 Of intertextual reference

*She got a light-skinned friend, look like Michael Jackson*

*Got a dark-skinned friend, look like Michael Jackson*  

Kanye West

As seen on Eminem’s punchline about Gaga, referencing too can be a strong element in the creation of punchlines. Both intertextual and intratextual references are commonly used in rap music, as I am about to exemplify on this and on the next item of this writing. However, differently from literature, intertextual references — that are my focus on this item — in the creation of punchlines seem to rarely fall on what is called a direct reference, quotations, since, as it happens in literature, in hip-hop and rap music the idea of authorship is highly estimated, as well as it is condemned the practice of biting — that is, using other rappers’ line as if yours. To explain why this happens, there are two factors that seem to be decisive. First, and most obviously, comes how unpractical it would be to be referencing another person on a song, where space is as valued as it is limited. In a fluid text, what’s a line or two? In a song, even more in a rap

song, it can be a lot. The reason for that is the same as the second factor of why rappers don’t quote each other: because rap seems to be the only musical genre in which writing your own lyrics is a must-have to be successful and respected. Thus, by quoting another rapper you would not only be admitting that he or she wrote something that you wish so much you could’ve written yourself — to the point of putting it on your song — (something that most rappers are too proud to do) but also you would be losing space for your own lines, space that is very precious. That’s why what Lil’ Wayne did on Dr. Carter was so unusual and misinterpreted by many, on a rare instance of a rapper quoting another and at the same time approaching the issue of doing so (a practice that Wayne makes a part of his repertoire).

Hey, kid (plural), I graduated

Cause you can get through anything if Magic made it

And that was called recycling

Or re-reciting something

Cause you just like it so you say it just like it

Some say it’s biting, but I say it’s enlightening

Besides, Dr. Kanye West is one of the brightest

Lil’ Wayne

In only one quote of Wayne, we have already two intertextual references, as well as two types of intertextual references. Let’s take a look, first, on the type of reference we’ve been discussing until now, the direct reference, that here corresponds to the two first bars of the quotation in question. The reference Wayne does, however, is not only a direct reference, or one can argue that it isn’t even a direct reference anymore, but also a

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Dionysian imitatio\textsuperscript{91}. That’s because Wayne kept the essence of it, but still adapted the original bars from Kanye West’s song Can’t Tell Me Nothing, recontextualizing them.

\textit{Oh, am I late? No, I already graduated}

\textit{And you can live through anything if Magic made it}\textsuperscript{92}

Kanye West

Differently from what Wayne had done in the past, however (quoting rappers without really getting to referencing them, leaving the realization of the reference only implicit), this time he actually addresses the issue and completes actually referencing Kanye, the true author of the bars — “besides, Dr. Kanye West is one of the brightest”, thus creating a punchline over a punchline. To realize what the final punchline is, however, it is necessary to understand, first, the first one, the original from West’s song. Magic Johnson, who is being indirectly referenced on these bars, is a famous basketball player who has been HIV-positive since 1991 but 16 years later when Kanye’s song was released (and then 17 years, when Wayne’s song was) was still healthy, and not in need of treatment. The original reference, thus, is that if someone can survive that long with HIV, than anyone can live through any other problem that may happen in their lives. In the original punchline, having already graduated had no significant connection to the second bar referencing Magic Johnson. In Wayne’s song, however, both things are directly connected, and so the punchline had been recontextualized, turning into an advice for kids. By referencing Johnson and the idea that you can get through anything, Wayne was passing a message to kids that even he himself had graduated, and so could them — as worse as it might seem to them being in school. The primary punchline on Wayne’s song, however, wasn’t this one anymore.

The primary punchline became derivate of the fact that Wayne uses himself of having quoted Kanye’s punchline to address the attitude of him quoting other rappers punchlines during his career, attitude that had been condemned from the start. To do so, the rapper basically explains the concept of what a Dionysian imitatio is, and finishes directly referencing the rapper, as if educating his public, creating thus a punchline that

\textsuperscript{91} The practice of emulating, adapting, reworking and enriching a source text by an earlier author.

would reverberate through rap music’s foundation for his beliefs and outrageousness. Kanye too, later, would use himself of a direct reference on a song of his to produce a punchline.

\[ \text{Your titties, let ’em out, free at last} \]
\[ \text{Thank God, almighty, they free at last}^{93} \]

Kanye West

In his punchline, however, Kanye doesn’t get to complete the reference and say who, exactly, he is quoting — what would have made the whole difference to the punchline, as you can only understand its effect by knowing its reference. As it may be obvious, in the context of the song Kanye is in the perspective of having a sexual relation with a woman (very probably his wife), and for being Ye, the Yeezus, he tells her to let her breasts out. The rapper, then, proceeds thanking God for this girl breasts being finally out, what would be already funny enough to create a punchline in its own. However, the real effect of these bars actually lies in the realization of the double reference in it, firstly to Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous speech I Have a Dream, and secondly to the lyrics of an African American slave song which began “Free at last, free at last/ Thank God, almighty, I’m free at last”\(^{94}\), evoking thus the reflection over black identity that is a recurrent theme on West’s songs. Adding to that the fact the rapper’s wife at the time, Kim Kardashian, was a white woman, the idea of being at last free is strongly enhanced, as for a black slave men to lie down with a white woman would be an act recriminated by society and even punished during times of slavery. Still, keeping in mind society’s hypocrisy concerning racism, as many are still covert racists, for a black man to be as rich as Kanye is, as powerful as he is and finally to be lying down with a white woman is the actual ultimate representation of being free, at last.

In a close manner to how West gave final effect to his punchline evoking the imaginary around black persons, Drake, too, created a punchline of his own using this method. The rapper, however, uses himself of sarcasm to refer to a sad experience of his

related to the absence of his father in his life. To create the effect of his punchline, however, Drake uses the literary device called meiosis\(^{95}\), making light of his rather harsh situation.

\[ \text{And my father living in Memphis now, he can't come this way} \]
\[ \text{Over some minor charges and child support that just wasn't paid} \]
\[ \text{Damn, boo-hoo, sad story, black American dad story}^{96} \]

Drake

Another method of creating punchlines based on reference is known inside of hip-hop culture as name-dropping, which basically would be the equivalent for the literary device of metonymy, as it may be exemplified on Lil’ Wayne’s punchline from Pure Colombia.

\[ \text{She said she tryna see me, bitch, that's Stevie wonderful}^{97} \]

Lil’ Wayne

So, as mentioned, the reference to the singer Stevie Wonder, in this punchline, works as, let’s say, a metonymical reference, since the singer is only mentioned to be a representation of a blind person, as Wonder is — in a way Wayne had done before too.

\[ \text{But I'm Ray Charles to the bullshit}^{98} \]

Lil’ Wayne

\(^{95}\) An euphemistic figure of speech that intentionally understates something or implies that it is lesser in significance or size than it really is.


The effect of the punchline, then, lies on the clever double wordplay and dark humor that lies inside of this bar. First, there is the interpolation of the name of Stevie Wonder in the idea of something being wonderful, thus, Stevie wonderful — first wordplay. Then, there’s the mix of the second wordplay that Wayne creates using the already known expression “to be trying to see someone” (i.e. to be trying to meet someone) and the metonymical reference to Wonder, which, together, create the dark humor that gives final effect to the punchline. So, this girl be trying to see, meet Wayne would be, as he states, something already wonderful for him, or more than wonderful, Stevie wonderful. However, of her attitude of be trying to (literally) see Wayne, would be, let’s say, very Stevie Wonderful (as it could be thoughtful, for example), since the singer himself can’t see. Touché, Weezy.

Name-dropping in rap — again, referencing someone by using his or her name —, however, not always works as a metonymical strategy. At times, the name works only and literally as a reference; its presence on a punchline, though, may have some other functions intended.

*Jeff Koons balloons, I just wanna blow up*99

Jay Z

Jeff Koon is an American artist who is known for his reproduction of banal objects such as, as it is the case for this punchline, balloon animals, produced in stainless steel with mirror-finish surfaces. For its real-like characteristics, it is really relatable the feeling of wanting to blow up a gigantic balloon. Thus, the mention of Jeff Koons works here exactly as a reference normally does, just giving the listener the mean to find out what (Jay-)HOV is talking about. However, this name-dropping isn’t there only for this purpose, but rather is there to give us listeners a taste of HOV’s new lifestyle as an art-appreciator (a long way from drug dealing on the streets, from where he came). So, for the effect of the punchline this reference may not be directly relevant (other than giving us the referential to what Jeff Koons balloons are), but for the construction of the new identity of the rapper it is.

Now, concerning what produces the effect of this punchline, Jay makes use of wordplay to explore the meanings of blowing up. As already stated, the first and more obvious meaning of this bar is that when Jay Z sees Jeff Koons balloon the only desire he has is to blow them up — what could be read too as a desire for transgression, putting this way two extremes in only one bar: at one side there is HOV’s new self, who is a new part of high society and consumes art, and at another there is his old self, which is still a transgressor. Secondly, however, there is the possibility of interpreting “to blow up” as the informal expression that means “to become famous, successful”. Thus, the mention of Jeff Koons balloons is only there to prepare the listener for the main idea — that Jay only wants to become famous and successful —, giving the punchline its final effect.

Other than quoting lyrics or referencing names, rappers commonly make reference to pop culture too, to ideas or actions existent in it.

*I wish I could give you this feeling, I’m planking on a million*100

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Jay Z

The main appeal and what creates the effect of this punchline is the reference to planking, a fad that dominated the internet from 2008 to 2011. Planking, basically, consisted on lying down with your face down and taking a picture of it, usually in an unusual or incongruous location or situation. That was basically it. Listening to Jay Z, even more nowadays, listeners may feel a little out of HOV’s vibe, as for in his last works Jay has been really into art and referencing art. This reference, however, doesn’t need explanation, or interpretation, or deciphering wordplay, nor anything else. The meaning is completed and understandable already from the start. Jay already knew it, he doesn’t have to say anything else nor elaborate this any further. He just needed the little empathy that he showed on the bar, and that was it, he was planking on a million (bonus: something so mundane that anyone could do over something completely surreal for most of us).

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3.2.4 Of intratextual reference

Weezy F and the F is for "fill in the blank"\textsuperscript{101}

Lil’ Wayne

Now, besides intertextual references, there are too those that are intratextual. The conception of an intratextual reference that I bring here, however, is not the one of a reference of something contained within the same text (song, in this case), but rather contained on the same portfolio or discourse — keeping in mind that we are not simply talking about intratextual references in rap music, but rather in punchlines, to what, as far as my memory and research could go, there are no examples within a same song for the rappers selected. So, what I bring here, some may interpret as intertextual references, for we will be dealing with references for texts that lie in another text. I, however, see it differently, and I rather see these references as an artist referring to something that he has said before, something that lies within the same discourse — interdiscursivity with the artist’s own discourse, as if on a long conversation. For instance, in the same way Wayne directly referenced Kanye on his Dr. Carter, Eminem quotes himself, more than 10 years later, in Rap God.

So I crunch rhymes, but sometimes when you combine

Appeal with the skin color of mine

You get too big and here they come trying to censor you like that one line

I said on I’m Back from the Mathers LP 1, when I

Tried to say “I’ll take seven kids from Columbine

Put ‘em all in a line, add an AK-47, a revolver and a nine”

See if I get away with it now that I ain’t as big as I was\textsuperscript{102}

Eminem


The difference between what Wayne and Eminem done, however, is that only because Eminem is quoting bars of his own that his punchline has its effect, for if they were bars of another rapper it would lose completely its main point — that his lyrics were only censored for who he was at the time he released them, not necessarily for their content, as this time his lyrics weren’t censored like before. That is the effect of this punchline, his mockery of rubbing on the face of people their own hypocrisy. Thus, it is less a reference to a punchline (that could’ve been seen as belonging to another text, and, as it, an intertextual reference) than a reference to a discourse, an idea, of Eminem exploring his right to freedom of speech, that is the core of this punchline. By doing so, Eminem not only reaffirms his own discourse and identity, but also adds more to the construction of it, by recognizing that (regardless all the difficulty that he also had to overcome for that) being white also contributed for his fame, blasting people’s prejudice in stating so.

Intratextual references, however, can also be used with a Dionysian imitatio, this way referencing yourself to upgrade your own lines, as Jay Z did on Change The Game, referencing an old line of his from It’s Hot and at the same time turning it into a punchline.

_Cris’ sipper, six dipper, wrist glitter, nigga_  
_Gat buster, ass toucher, clit licker_\(^{103}\)  
Jay Z

_Cris’ sipper, six dipper, wrist glitter, nigga_  
_Hold up, love_\(^{104}\)  
Jay Z

By themselves, the bars from Change the Game would have nothing special, and there would be almost no meaning for the second bar of the quote too. When connected,

however, when the reference is recognized, the quote on Change The Game gains new meaning, creating a not very powerful punchline, but still a punchline. On It’s Hot, Jay was the man sipping Cristal, driving a BMW 6, with a diamond watch on his wrist, who would bust a gun if necessary and still have time to be with women. One year later, on Change The Game, however, Jay has a new mentality and objectives already. He wants to change the game (i.e. rap), and for that he doesn’t have time for guns and women anymore, thus he, this time, interpolates the rhyme by telling the women to wait — on the moment, he is busy with some other things.

One more example of intratextual reference, this time of indirect references, can be seen through Lil Wayne’s portfolio. Wayne, who is also known as Weezy, likes to present himself as Weezy F. Baby. Weezy is a derivative from Wayne, a common suffix of slang in hip-hop (as Jay turns into Jeezy, Kanye turns into (Kan)Yeezy, Drake turns into Dreezy). Baby is an inherited nickname from Lil’ Wayne’s mentor Birdman, also known as Baby. The F, however, it is still a mystery to what exactly it stands for. On what depends on Weezy, however, it stands for nothing and everything (and even for phenomenal\(^{105}\)), what have became one of the rapper’s strategies on creating punchlines by constantly recreating what the F stands for.

You don't want to start Weezy ‘cause the F is for finisher\(^{106}\)

Lil’ Wayne

Weezy F Baby and the F ain’t for fear\(^{107}\)

Lil’ Wayne

Weezy F Baby and the F is for a bunch of shit\(^{108}\)

Lil’ Wayne

\(^{105}\) Yes [Internet]. [cited 2014 Oct 30]. Available from: http://rap.genius.com/Lil-wayne-yes-lyrics#note-37071 (83)


3.2.5 Of # (hashtag)

*I see you niggas got no life #SixthSense*

Lil’ Wayne

Hashtags, now, are one more type of reference that can be used in the creation of punchlines, a type which could’ve even been grouped together with intertextual references, but the reason I didn’t is because of the strength that what started being called hashtag rap gained inside of rap from its beginnings. The concept of what a hashtag is comes from the social media Twitter, which is characterized by its format of permitting posts of only 140 characters per time, obligating ideas to be reduced to their gist. Thus, hashtags were created and started working in two ways (regardless of their main purpose): grouping ideas by a theme and by doing so completing the ideas’ meaning in some way. In rap music, however, the use of hashtags was taken to another level, as a new resource in the creation of punchlines. Even if hashtags are, to some extent, intertextual references (conveyed through metonyms or synecdoches), the use of this kind of punchline represents a generation and the way this generation communicates, as hashtags now are used on other media too, such as Instagram, Facebook, Vine, among others. For this reason, then, I chose to analyze hashtags in a separate item of the one of intertextual references, for I believe hashtags surpass the concept of an intertextual reference and grow into something else, something strongly marked by internet and the people within it.

*Hear no evil, see no evil #HelenKeller*

Lil’ Wayne

This punchline of Lil’ Wayne, for instance, is a perfect example of what hashtag punchlines are. Helen Adams Keller was an American author, political activist and

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lecturer. She also was one of the most famous deaf-blind people in history. So, by name-dropping her, Wayne at once conveys two messages. First, a more literal one, in which there is a play on the fact that Keller, for being deaf and blind, couldn’t hear evil and see evil (as she couldn’t hear or see anything else too), as Wayne recommends us to do too, as Helen is a metonymical reference to deaf-blind people. Secondly, however, there is a more metaphorical message, in which Keller is an allusion to what she represented — a person who, against all odds, despite of being deaf and blind, fought for her convictions and campaigned for women’s suffrage, labor rights, socialism and other causes. Thus, Helen could’ve focused only on the bad things of her life, but rather she used her forces to fight against what she believed that was wrong (what can be seen as “evil”, in some way). The use of the hashtag, then, gave effect to the punchline by, first, completing the bar in an almost dark humor, and second by resignifying it through the context it brought to the line.

Punchlines based on hashtags, however, in general tend to be more practical in their construction and effect, mostly referring to things that can be easily connected to one another.

\[ I \text{ could teach you how to speak my language } \#\text{RosettaStone}^{111} \]

Drake

Rosetta Stone, primarily, is a reference to a granodiorite stele inscribed with a decree that appears in three scripts: one in Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, one in Demotic and one in Ancient Greek. For containing basically the same text in all three scripts, the Rosetta Stone was crucial to the modern understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Thus, it is an obvious reference from Drake when connected to the rest of the bar, which states that Drake can teach us how to speak his language — that is, to think in the way he does. However, if the reference to the Rosetta Stone itself wasn’t already obvious enough, there is now a famous software used for learning languages with the same name, making the reference even more easy to be understood (for anyone, of any age, just as the internet does). The use of ideas or representations to create

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hashtag references have been used through many other manners in rap music, and can even be produced through the use of imagery.

*Bite me #AppleSign*¹¹²

Nicki Minaj

One of the most famous examples of hashtag punchline lies in an Eminem song, for having been one of the first and well executed hashtag punchlines to be recognized by rap public in its majority, being constantly referred when hashtag rap comes into discussion. The author of the punchline, however, is Drake.

*In your city faded off the brown #Nino*

*She insist she got more class #WeKnow*

*Swimming in the money, come and find me #Nemo*

*If I was at the club you know I balled #chemo*¹¹³

Drake

In this punchline, we find many demonstrations of the possibilities for the use of hashtag to create punchlines. Firstly, there is the play on words with the use of the slang expression “to be faded off the brown”. In the state of Ontario, from where Drake is originally, liquor is sold on a brown paper bag by the Liquor Control Board of Ontario. Thus, to be faded (i.e. to be high or drunk, in slang) off the brown would be an allusion to being drunk off liquor, in which “the brown” works as a synecdoche for liquor. Now, completing the bar and creating the punchline in it, Drake name-drops Nino Brown, the drug lord played by Wesley Snipes in New Jack City, this way creating not only a wordplay with the characters’ name but transforming his last name into a metonymy too, since now “to be faded off the brown” would mean to be high off the drugs Nino


Brown sells. So, the whole effect of the line derives from the use of the hashtag reference, without which there would be no punchline. Now, moving to the next line, Drake plays, then, with a stereotype associated to women, in which girls insist that they have more class than what they are displaying at the moment to an specific guy (in this case, the guy happens to be our rapper), claiming that even though she is going to have sex with him easily, she’s not “that type” of girl. The effect of the punchline, however, comes when Drake condescendingly agrees with her, not by saying that he knows it, but that every one of us knows it. What is left implied by this line, then, is not that Drake believes this girl, but that he rather doesn’t believe not even a bit in her, for he and many others (“we”) have heard the same story over and over. This line, it is important to note, ends up appealing to a sexist idea of American society’s imaginary, in which men who easily go to sleep with women are praised, while women who do the same are condemned are devaluated for that.

The third line of the punchline makes clear analogy to the movie Finding Nemo, in which Nemo is a fish that goes missing and his father has to go looking for him. That means, Drake has so much money that he can even get lost in it, and you would have to find him just like Nemo’s father. The punchline grows even bigger, however, because of the fact that the rapper decided to use the expression “to be swimming in money”, which is another way of saying “to have a lot of money”, keeping in the imaginary of the whole bar the idea of the sea. One last point that can be observed about this line is the possible use of Verlan\textsuperscript{114} in Nemo, which in reverse can be read as “money”. Lastly, the effect of the punchline of the fourth bar lies in the use of wordplay along with the use of hashtag reference. In slang, “to ball” can mean “to be rich; or to have style; or even to be excessive in a supposed good way”. So, Drake states that if he was at the club partying people are supposed to know that he probably spent a lot of money in drinks and probably was with women alongside. The punchline, then, is based on the double-entendre of the pronunciation of “balled” happening to be the same of “bald”, which is one of the main side-effects of chemotherapy (referred as chemo) — the symptom, thus, serving as a synecdoche to the disease.

\textsuperscript{114} The inversion of syllables in a word.
3.2.6 Of premise

Now get off my dick-- dick's too short of a word for my dick

Get off my antidisestablishmentarianism, you prick

Eminem

Punchlines based on their premise, to some extent, are the ones that get closer to the definition of what a punchline is within comedy shows. In simple terms, a premise is a situation or an idea or a hypothesis that the listener is supposed to accept in order to feel the effect of the punchline. So, first, the listener is presented with an idea or context that sets up the premise which will be used to produce an effect later. Sometimes, there can be a development of this main idea or context, in order to create suspense or leave the idea on hold in a way that the listener is led to forget how everything started. And then, finally, comes the climax, the closing idea which ties everything up and gives the effect intended — that can be to produce laughter or dark humor, or to construct a social critic, or to create wordplay, among other effects. A perfect example is Kanye West’s punchline on Gorgeous.

I treat the cash the way the government treats AIDS

I won’t be satisfied till all my niggas get it, get it?

Kanye West

So, on this punchline, we are presented with an idea — that Kanye treats money the same way the government supposedly treats HIV. The effect of this punchline, then, doesn’t come from wordplay, or double entendre, or reference or any literary device. The second bar is on plain, common discourse — in the sense of not having anything

special, elaborate about it. Thus, the line only gains the effect of a punchline when we connect it to the first one, and accept and follow its premise. Kanye is comparing an attitude of his to one of the government. Kanye’s position is that of that he won’t be satisfied until all of his friends, here referred as “niggas”, get money (i.e. become rich) — the use of the term “niggas”, however, can also be referring to black people in general, as if Kanye was saying “I won’t be satisfied till all my people get it”, bringing up again what is called “black history” and the issue of the position of black identity in American society. But if this is same attitude the government has when it comes to their politics concerning prevention of AIDS, according to Kanye’s logic, they, too, won’t be satisfied until, this time, all black people get it. The effect here, thus, was created by the listener accepting a premise and following a logic through a path that apparently had no connection to the first assumption until it reached its conclusion. The punchline is so powerful, then, for its implicit social critic, since, as Kanye stated before\textsuperscript{117}, he believes that the government doesn’t really care about black people, and that politics are made in a way that strategically prejudice and leave behind those that are black.

Another possibility for creating punchlines based on a premise is that of having a situation, context as a premise to, then, build over it other elements that will help generating the effect of the punchline.

\begin{quote}
Baby, what’s the deal?

\textit{We can chill, split half a pill and a Happy Meal}

\textit{Fuck a steak, slut, I'll cut my toes off and step on the receipt}

\textit{Before I foot the bill}\textsuperscript{118}

\textsc{Eminem}
\end{quote}

For this punchline, we are presented with the situation of Eminem being with a woman and telling her that opposed to guys that normally want to impress women and

\textsuperscript{117} Bush Doesn’t Care About Black People [Video]. [cited 2014 Oct 30]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIUzLp01kxI (90)

take them to do things that they wouldn’t normally do (as paying a lot of money for an
delicious dinner, he actually prefers doing what he usually does: stay at his home
relaxing, taking pills as recreational drugs and eat a McDonald’s Happy Meal. Thus,
from this context, when Eminem continues with “fuck a steak, slut”, it can be assumed
that this woman with whom he is right now would rather go out and eat real food (e.g. a
steak). That’s the moment when the rapper ignites the punchline, which, from this
context, produces the effect of the line, creating a wordplay using the expression “to
foot the bill”, that would mean “to pay for something; to pay the bill”. So, what Eminem
does is to play with the literal and metaphorical conception of this expression, by saying
that he would prefer to cut his own toe off and step on the receipt (another word for bill)
before (literally) footing the bill — in another words, Eminem is too cheap to pay
anything for a woman and would prefer to go through way worse things over paying an
expensive meal for her. In conclusion, even if the effect of this punchline lies heavily on
the wordplay created by the rapper, it wouldn’t be possible (at least not in the same
way) without its context, the situation presented initially. This seems to be a recurrent
method of creating punchlines in Eminem songs, as the rapper himself addressed the
fact of people wanting him to create punchlines more compact\textsuperscript{119}, even though he is
really good at creating them like this.

\begin{quote}
\textit{Shorty, when you dance, you got me captivated
\par
Just by the way that you keep licking them dick-sucking lips, I'm agitated
\par
Aggravated to the point you don't suck my dick, then you're gonna get decapitated
\par
In other words, you don't fucking give me head}\textsuperscript{120}, then I'mma have to take it}\textsuperscript{121}
\end{quote}

\textbf{Eminem}

There are other strategies, however, that can be applied alongside a premise to
create a punchline.

\textsuperscript{119} Won’t Back Down [Internet]. [cited 2014 Oct 30]. Available from: http://rap.genius.com/18023 (91)
\textsuperscript{120} "To give head", in slang, is the equivalent for “to perform oral sex in a man”.
\textsuperscript{121} Mathers III MB. Fast Lane. In: Mathers III MB, Montgomery, RD. Hell: The Sequel. California:
Aftermath Entertainment; 2011. Track 2. (92)
In Crown, Jay Z works with two premises alongside the rhetorical element of conduplicatio. First, there is the idea that “niggas” — used here intentionally in an unspecified manner, this way turning the term into something general, as if “people” — always try to knock a “nigga” — now, it is possible that the term refers either to a male person, as if “people always try to knock a brother down”, probably Jay Z himself, in this case, or to a black male person (which I believe, from the context of Jay Z general discourse, that may be the case) — down, that is, try to bring down, and that it happened to Jay so many times that he uses an hyperbole to describe it, “a million times”. Next, there is the idea that Jay’s uncle told him once that he would never get to sell a million records (as he probably planned to do right from the start). These two premises, then, working along with the use of conduplicatio in repeating “a million times” and “a million records”, are brought together into creating the punchline effect in the last bar, where Jay uses a hyperbole again to say that even though people brought him down many times and that his uncle believed he would never get to sell a million records, Jay still made it. He became a successful man and rapper, and got to sell a million records as many times as people brought him down — a million. The effect of this punchline, thus, is created with the use of analogy, hyperbole and conduplicatio. The most important aspect when it comes to the final effect of the punchline, however, is the presentation of a premise in the beginning, the context, which in the end makes it satisfactory even to us, listeners, that, against what everyone believed and wanted, Jay made it.

123 The repetition of a word in various places throughout a paragraph, or, what is the case here, a stanza.
124 The use of exaggeration as a rhetorical device or figure of speech.
3.2.7 Of response

Bitch talkin’ she the queen when she looking like a lab rat

I’m Angelina, you Jennifer

Come on, bitch, you see where Brad at?²¹²⁵

Nicki Minaj

Punchlines based on response, now — the same way of punchlines based on hashtag and the ones based on intertextual reference —, could’ve been grouped together with the punchlines of premise. However, just as hashtag rap, the concept of response is so crucial to rap music and characteristic of it that I believe it has to be analyzed in a separate item, since it involves one other crucial element of rap — battle rapping.

It is important now to remember the distinction in between three ideas: to diss someone, to battle rap and to have a beef with someone. First, to diss someone can mean to talk bad things about a person, or else to make accusations about this person, or lastly mention someone in a bad way or context. Now, to diss back someone goes together with the idea of battle rapping, since if someone diss you and you diss back, you automatically are engaging in a rap battle. Battle rapping, however, can happen in two ways: it can be an element of a rapper style, that is, to use rhymes as if he or her was in a rap battle (e.g. attacking an adversary that actually isn’t a specific person); or it can be a battle between two persons, who exchange rhymes or even entire songs directed at the other, dising each other. Beef, finally, is the last stage of a rap battle, since battling in rap can even happen in a professional way, as if it was a contest, but beef is the moment when things get personal, and even dangerous. For example, Lil’ Wayne and Jay Z had had for years a dispute that involved who was the best rapper and the actual king of hip-hop. Things got serious, however, after a Jay’s line that was believed to be directed at Wayne and his mentor Baby.

I’m like "Really, half a billi, nigga, really?, you got baby money\textsuperscript{126}

*Keep it real with niggas, niggas ain't got my lady's money* \textsuperscript{126}

**Jay Z**

The line, many believed, addressed a commentary of Birdman (Baby) in which the rapper had said that he and Lil’ Wayne were the ones who made the most money in hip-hop. Jay Z’s net worth, however, already was that of half a billion dollars\textsuperscript{127}, and his wife’s, Beyoncé, certainly wasn’t far from this figure too\textsuperscript{128}. What was crucial to people and Wayne’s decision that these lines were directed at him and Birdman, however, was the mention of “baby money”, statement for which, as I see it, there are four possible interpretations. The first one involves the fact that Birdman’s label is called Cash Money Records, and thus, according to Jay, it would actually be Baby Money. This, as I see it, is the only interpretation through which Jay’s line would be directed to Birdman. The next two possibilities are that Jay was actually aiming at Wayne. To some, what Jay was actually saying is that Wayne had Baby’s money, not his own, and only for that he had so much money. These two interpretations, however, are still somewhat off, to me, as I believe that there’s a third option that seems more plausible. Affiliated to Birdman’s label, Wayne owns a label of his own, Young Money. Now, keeping in mind the long dispute among Jay and Wayne that had been occurring for years, I believe it is more probable that Jay was rather referring to Wayne’s label, saying that his money was actually younger (thus, metaphorically, shorter) than he actually stated, it was Baby Money. Lastly, there is one more option, the one in which Jay’s lines weren’t directed either for Birdman or Wayne, and that they actually were just common battle rapping bars. However the case may be, Wayne took it personally, and didn’t take much time for him to respond, in a verse full of punchlines, two of which standout from the others and deserve to be mentioned in this work. First, there was the one that made reference to Jay Z’s song 99 Problems.


Two Glock 40s, nigga you got 80 problems

Lil’ Wayne

The most powerful one, however, was the punchline that undoubtedly was a direct response — the most powerful, or at least the most outrageous way to respond to someone in rap music, without subliminal shots or allusions, but with clear and well-directed shots — to Jay Z’s lines on H.A.M.

Talkin’ ’bout baby money? I got your baby money
Kidnap your bitch, get that “how-much-you-love-your-lady?” money

Lil’ Wayne

Wayne’s response, thus, was a powerful punchline in too many ways for Jay to have a chance at responding him successfully. There was, first, the already mentioned fact of Wayne having had the courage to respond Jay without doubt left, something that in hip-hop is strongly praised, a person who has the courage to stand up for his or her own words and actions. Then, there was the way that Wayne decided to respond to Jay, the way he chose his words, keeping the discussion about money but taking it to another level: first, a dispute of ability in rapping (something that most of the time is present in rap battles, however implicit it is — you may be responding to someone, but you are still rapping, and so you have to do it well) and, second, a dispute of power. Taking a look on the side that is more immediately connected to rap, Wayne was directly asking Jay what he loved more, Beyoncé or his money. What was really clever about the way he did it, however, is the fact that his response finished with the exact same words that Jay’s bars, back in H.A.M. — “baby money” and then “lady money”. Add to that the way how Wayne transformed his question of “How much you love your lady?” into a qualitative for money (e.g. you can have clean money, dirty money, well-deserved money, and “how-much-you-love-your-lady?” money).

Out of rap, now, Wayne’s response was a powerful punchline too for, in only one move, he was both putting his adversary (Jay) into a bad position within his household, as well as obliging him to think carefully his next move. Let’s dissect that. First, there’s the fact that Wayne’s response contained a very good question. Half a billion dollars is too much for anyone, however rich you may be, and it surely isn’t easy to reach this sum — imagine, then, how would it feel to lose this sum. Thus, if he would ever come across the instance in which he had to make a choice, what would Jay Z choose? What does he truly love more? That’s a question whose answer certainly is of the interest of many, but no more than Beyoncé’s, I am sure. So, asking Jay Z this question, since the whole discussion was about money, Wayne contested what was actually more important to him, money or his wife. What takes us to the next point to be observed. If Lil’ Wayne is really capable of kidnapping someone, I guess none of us are able to tell. However, one thing that may be assumed is that it would surely be very difficult to him to do so when it comes to Beyoncé, one of the most powerful and famous woman of the world. Thus, it is plausible to assume that Wayne’s response wasn’t an actual threat to Jay Z or Beyoncé, but that the rapper was rather mentally attacking his opponent with possibilities that brought up some important points to be thought of by Jay Z. One of which being that of if the rapper, with 40 years at the time, was really willing to risk his family or his money for a rap dispute (about who makes more money, could it be more childish?). And secondly, that of if the rapper was willing to test Wayne’s limits and call his bluff. For all that, Wayne’s move had been brilliant: he had not only created a punchline that was really well thought as he had obliged his adversary to fall back, for he had too much to lose. If we are talking about war, Wayne strategy was perfect.

Jay, however, was no beginner when it comes to battle rapping. In 1999, the then, newcomer rapper 50 Cent had mentioned Jay in a song of his called How To Rob[^131^], in which 50 named the rappers he planned to rob, and Jay Z was one of them. 50 Cent, however, at the time, hadn’t even put an album out yet, and so the rapper wasn’t famous as he is today. For that, his declaration of wanting to rob, among others, Jay Z didn’t make so much noise as it would nowadays. Anyway, the song got relatively famous and got to many rappers, one of them being Jay, who decided to respond. Differently, however, from battles that Jay would face in the future, with this one he

dealt in a manner that wouldn’t be possible in any other situation than the one he was in, “battling” against a newcomer, a rapper who still wasn’t really somebody inside of rap game. To the public, however, 50 dissing Jay had to be responded, and many were expecting Jay to respond, at least in an interview. What Jay did, however, was way more clever, responding with a punchline that wasn’t necessarily a response to 50 Cent, but rather a response to the whole situation.

\[\text{Go against Jigga}^{132}, \text{ your ass is dense} \]

\[\text{I'm about a dollar, what the fuck is 50 cents?}^{133} \]

Jay Z

Another good example of a punchline of response, but this time not necessarily amongst two rappers, is the exchange of disses that happened in between the pop singer Mariah Carey and Eminem. The whole beef started back in 2002, when the rapper first mentioned (kind of dissed) Mariah in two songs, Superman and When The Music Stops, in which Eminem looked down on his quick affair with Mariah. The same year, however, in the TV show Larry King Live\(^{134}\), the singer denied having ever had a relationship with Eminem, what then started a dispute between the two. In 2003, Mariah would diss Eminem back in the song Clown, reaffirming her statement that she had never had any kind of relationship with Eminem — “You should’ve never intimated we were lovers/ When you know very well we never ever touched each other”\(^{135}\), the lyrics would say. The song, then, would spawn three more responses from the rapper, one in 2005, when he would play alleged voicemails from Mariah during his tour, one in 2006, in the song Jimmy Crack Corn, where the rapper would call the singer a liar, and one in 2009, in the song Bagpipes From Baghdad, where he would call her a whore. In the same year, Mariah would then release a whole song as a response, Obsessed, where she

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\(^{132}\) One of the nicknames of Jay Z.


would once again deny having ever had any relationship with the rapper and would also say that the rapper was actually obsessed with her.

Then, in the same year, Mariah got a response from Eminem, on a diss track called The Warning, fully dedicated to her. In the more than 3 minutes of song, Eminem would diss Carey in a way that would be felt even by those outside of hip-hop and alien to the beef, and his message was only one: this was his last warning, and if the singer kept pushing him he would release every single proof he had of their relationship, including the voicemails which he previews on the song (and cleverly uses in the end of the song, interpolating bars with Mariah’s voicemails, which were edited in a way to at times the singer complete Eminem’s rhymes and at times the rapper himself complete something the singer was saying in the message). Line after line, Eminem dissed Mariah, giving details about his relationship with the singer, describing events that happened, confronting Mariah’ new husband (who had threatened Eminem) and blasting the singer out for having lied and denied their relationship. There are many punchlines throughout the whole song — which can be seen as a whole punchline in a form of a song —, but the one that is most Slim Shady-esque is the one in which the rapper gives a supposed piece of evidence that for being so real-like and embarrassing even for the rapper himself has a sound of truth to it that can’t be easily faked, burying one more rap battle of the rapper’s collection.

Listen, girly, surely you don’t want me to talk about how I nutted early

Cause I ejaculated prematurely

And bust all over your belly and you almost started hurling

And said I was gross, go get a towel, you stomach’s curling

Or maybe you do, but if I’m embarrassing me, I’m embarrassing you

And don’t you dare say it isn’t true136

Eminem

136 Mathers III MB. The Warning. 2009. (102)
3.2.8 Of blunt statements

I just gave the city life

It ain't about who did it first, it's 'bout who did it right

Drake

What Eminem did on his diss song to Mariah, and especially in the punchline I selected for this work, brings us to the next type of punchline that can be created: the ones of blunt statements. Basically, punchlines of this kind don’t have anything really elaborate on their construction most of the time; there isn’t any literary device used to create their effect, nor wordplay, or double entendre, or reference, anything. Mostly, they are punchlines whose effect lies simply in how disconcerting they are in their frankness, realness or in how they are unshamingly stated, among other possibilities. Taking Eminem still as an example, in his song Seduction the rapper takes a moment to acknowledge that he knows how problematic of a person he is.

She’s sitting there getting liquored up at the bar

She says it’s quicker to count the things that ain’t wrong with you than to count the things that are

Eminem

Thus, as I stated, there isn’t any literary device or wordplay or anything else producing the effect in this punchline, regardless if it may feel like there is at first. Maybe, the only aspect that can be noted is that logically and commonly people choose to count things for what they are, not what they aren’t. For example, we don’t count how much money there isn’t in our wallet, we count how much there is — unless we’ve lost money. So, for a girl to prefer to count the things that aren’t wrong with you than

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counting the things that are, you must really have a lot of things wrong with you, in order that the most practical option is to count the things that aren’t. Still, this is only logical thinking, but not necessarily a literary device. For that, what really creates the effect of line is Eminem frankness in admitting so, in acknowledging something that many people already thought about him before he saying it (even though this is part of the persona that Eminem represents, being an anti-hero). One other example comes in a Nicki Minaj song.

\[
All \ these \ bitches \ is \ my \ sons, \ and \ I’mma \ go \ and \ get \ some \ bibs \ for \ ‘em \\
A \ couple \ formulas, \ little \ pretty \ lids \ on \ ’em \\
If \ I \ had \ a \ dick, \ I \ would \ pull \ it \ out \ and \ piss \ on \ ’em \\
Let \ me \ shake \ it \ off^{139}
\]

Nicki Minaj

In this punchline too, there isn’t any literary device or other element creating its effect. In reality, the whole effect lies solely in the fact that Nicki is a woman and is saying that if she had a penis she would piss on her competition. These bars, however, work as a punchline, first, for how outrageous they are and unshamingly stated. Nicki not only imaginarily piss on her competition, but also lets us know that she is shaking her penis off, a common habit of men to get the extra piss out of their penis and keep it away from their underwear. However, another possibility for why these bars have such a strong impact may be the way it plays with how many women envy how practical it is for men to pee, since women tend to have way much trouble, especially when out of their homes, when having to pee because of the risk of diseases. This way, even if imaginarily, Nicki plays with the idea of her being able to pee like a men — and even better to her, on her competition —, and in the end shake it off just like a men.

Lastly, and I believe most importantly, it is possible too that these bars impact so strongly to the point of becoming a punchline for the way they break with the views of a heteronormative, sexist society. For instance, in such way of viewing things, men are always the ones in the position of power, so, for example, in a sexual relation the idea of

\[^{139}\text{Maraj OT. Did It On ‘Em. In: Pink Friday. New Orleans: Young Money; 2010. Track 3. (105)}\]
who is in command is commonly attached to men, for they are the ones who penetrate, and the woman would only receive the men’s penis following this logic. This way of viewing things can be considered phallic-centered, as in this point of view the phallus of the man is the center of the attentions, and everything else in relation to it becomes secondary (e.g. it is the men who penetrates, not the woman who takes the men). Thus, by having a penis, Nicki in some way empowers women, making use of the idea of the phallus being the center of the attention to bring this power to her — and, this way, to every woman who sings the lyrics of her song, a woman too —, adding it to the power she already has for being a woman (having, so, the power of a man and a woman at the same time). So, it is possible, too, that the effect of these bars come from this idea, creating this way the punchline. It is also important to note that this wouldn’t be the last time Nicki would refer to herself as if having a penis, what reinforces the idea of her being a powerful woman, and not just a woman who, for having had a penis momentarily, had power once.

Now don’t you feel a-stupid, yeah, that’s egg on your face
If you weren’t so ugly, I’d put my dick in your face

Nicki Minaj

As a last example, one punchline of Jay Z takes the punchlines based on blunt statements to their most basic level, where the rapper doesn’t need his punchline to be frank or to have any other underlying meanings or interpretations. The effect of the punchline, actually, lies precisely on the fact that the truth that it states doesn’t require any interpretation and is easily comprehensible. The magnitude of the statement contained in it is so great that its simplicity in stating it ends up creating an effect even bigger for the punchline. However, the only reason it works is because Jay Z, mostly at the time, but nowadays still, has always been considered one of hip-hop greatests, so instead of remaining voiceless in a fake humility, the rapper decides to state what everyone was already thinking in a way that enhanced the fact even more.

"HOV’s a living legend and I’ll tell you why
Everybody wanna be HOV and HOV’s still alive"\textsuperscript{141}

Jay Z

Whether you agree or not with the quote’s first statement, that HOV is a legend, you have to admit at least the second part of it, that everyone wanted to be him — and we are not only talking about kids, but adults too, and rappers —, and this is the point in which lies the main effect of the punchline. I am not sure, though, if HOV’s definition of what a legend is is on point, but at least this surely is a result of legendary actions.

3.2.9 Of comical effect

"Two rights don’t make a wrong, three rights make a left"\textsuperscript{142}

Lil’ Wayne

As mentioned earlier in this work, the use of humor in rap music can play a big role in it, since in a rap battle, for instance, if your opponent ridiculed you to a point that the crowd (who happen to be the judges also) is laughing at you, the battle was very probably lost for you. However, more than just ridiculing an opponent, humor could be used, too, in your favor in another way, as gaining the sympathy of your public, as to laugh is something that I don’t believe someone doesn’t like doing, and even your body recognizes this instinct as something positive for you, as laughing can be healthy too. Thus, punchlines based on comical effect can have many functions and purposes, but what they all have in common is that their main effect is that they make you laugh, and at times this can even be their only purpose. The ways this kind of punchline can be constructed, just as it happens with wordplay, can be infinite, as one can produce laughter in very differently ways (even unintentionally), but they tend to circle around


unexpected ideas, or ridicule ones, or play with ideas that are expected to pop up on your mind when induced to think of something, among many others. However it may be, these punchlines are constructed as if jokes, but still aren’t jokes, for outside of a rap song they could have no effect at all and become not funny, thus their platform (a rap song) is crucial for their effect. For example, take Lil’ Wayne’s last bar on No Worries.

\[
I \text{ would talk about my dick, but man that shit be a long story}^{143}
\]

Lil’ Wayne

The main reason for a line like that to be funny (to some) is, first, because it is being stated on a song, while outside of it would become too vague, too short, too random to achieve the same level of effect it reaches on the song. Added to that, there is the fact that the bar was left to be the last one of Wayne’s last verse, this way adding to the effect of the bar, as the context gives more relevance to the reason why a long story wouldn’t be appropriate. This punchline could’ve been categorized too alongside the ones of premise, since the premise here is that Wayne supposedly considers with the listener the possibility of talking about his penis — which would be a long story, we may assume, for Wayne is implying that his penis is big, or else that he has a lot to talk about it —, and this is the main set-up for the humor of the bar. However, it is clear that the main intention of this bar was that of being funny, of producing laughter (as Wayne himself starts laughing on the song). Humor is a constant element of Wayne’s songs and persona.

\[
That \text{ pussy so wet it turned into a Gremlin}^{144}
\]

Lil’ Wayne

Just as in the last punchline, in this one, too, it quickly becomes obvious that Wayne intention was that of only being funny. On this one, however, Weezy uses


himself of the unexpected to create the effect of the puncline, as it is common of the rapper to be talking about random vaginas in his songs. Nevertheless, no one would’ve expected that, of all things, for being so wet it would turn into a Gremlin — a direct reference to the movie Gremlins, in which a little, cute creature would spawn other creatures, evil and destructive monsters, if it got wet. The idea, thus, is so unexpected and ridicule that it ends up being actually funny, creating the effect of the punchline.

Humor in punchlines, however, can also be created with the help of context to create its effect. Taking Eminem as an example, and the idea the rapper represents. Eminem is known for being at many times controversial, mostly for stating in his songs ideas that can be misogynistic, homophobic, or simply and plainly insensitive to others. Thus, it becomes especially funny (however preoccupying the reality of how prejudicial the rapper’s lyrics may be) when the rapper approaches the theme of having his feelings hurt, in some way acknowledging himself as an insensitive person.

You just hurt my goddamn feeling and that was the last one I had

Eminem

Another instance in which punchlines can have humorous effect is when they play with our assumptions and expectations, as Jay does on Beach is Better.

Girl, why you never ready?

For as long as you took, you better look like Halle Berry... or Beyonce

Jay Z

The context we find ourselves in, firstly, is that of Jay complaining to a girl about the fact that she takes too long to get ready to go out — as women tend to do. So, with a minimum of information about who is Jay Z, the listener is induced to think

about Jay’s wife, Beyoncé, assuming that the rapper is talking about her. The rapper, then, proceeds by saying that by the time this girl took to get ready, she better come out with the looks of Halle Berry, the actress, here being taken as an example of someone who looks great for Jay. At this point, however, the rapper makes a pause in his speech, leaving just enough time for the listener to think “How about Beyoncé?”, and wonder for a moment about how Jay’s wife would react to the line. The rapper, then, successfully completes the punchline, giving it its effect, fulfilling our expectations — and probably teasing his own wife in the middle of the process — by adding “or Beyoncé” in a jokingly tone. Here, thus, the comical effect lied half on the bar itself, and the other half on the part that the listener had to play in it for it to work.

Punchlines of comical effect, nevertheless, are not always used to produce pointless humor, as at times they can have the function of working as a tension releaser, or can be used to serve some other purpose, as, for instance, creating a social critic.

Tell me what I gotta do to be that guy

Said her price go down, she ever fuck a black guy

Or do anal, or do a gangbang

It's kinda crazy that's all considered the same thing

Well I guess a lotta niggas do gangbang

Kanye West

For this last punchline, we find Kanye supposedly talking to a girl who is a porn star (i.e. an actress of the industry of pornography) and trying to have sex with her. The girl, however, replies to Kanye that she can’t go to bed with him for the reason that he is black, because if she does it she gets devaluated in the industry. The funny part of the punchline, however, lies in the fact that the girl, then, tells Kanye that within porn industry of her to lie down with a black man would devaluate her in the same way doing anal sex or gangbang (i.e. having sex with multiple men at once) would, idea which Kanye reflects upon for a moment considering how unbelievable it is that these three

things can have all the same effect, but then dismisses the thought by ironically coming to the conclusion that it is true that a lot of black people do gang bang, and this would be then the relation between things. The comical effect of the this punchline, however, is due to the fact that “to gang bang” here is used in two distinct meanings, one as the sexual act of to do a gang bang, and another as the act of gang banging, that is, participating of a gang and its activity — a position in which historically black people are strongly present in America. The intent of the punchline, thus, more than being humorous, is to denunciate the strong racism existent within the pornographic industry.
5 CONCLUSION

Putting everything in a nutshell, then, the main objective of this writing was that of contextualizing, defining and analyzing punchlines in North-American rap music, as well as making clear their importance. To do so, it was important, too, to understand a little better what hip-hop is, and the story of its emergence, for from this story many things of rap and punchlines can be understood already without explanation — such as why hip-hop is so strongly connected to the history of black persons; why violence and poverty are so common themes within rap music, and why it seems to be common of many rappers to be part of and represent their gangs; why hip-hop has such a strong connection to politics too, as is commonly used as a way of constructing social critics; why the persons who have a voice within hip-hop are not the same ones who would normally have it within society, among other questions. It was also important a contextualization rapping within hip-hop, to make it (even more) clear the distinction of hip-hop from rapping, as well as marking some points which explain a bit from rap music of today — the presence of gangster rap in it; the role of white persons within hip-hop; the role of women within hip-hop; the importance of battle rap in rap music; the importance of freestyling in rap music; and the superficial history and contextualization of the rappers here analyzed within hip-hop history.

With these points having been made, and the distinction and concepts necessary for a better understandment of punchlines clarified, I could finally make an analysis of punchlines dividing them into categories that had been created by me, which were punchlines of wordplay, of double entendre, of intertextual and intratextual reference, of hashtag, of premise, of response, of blunt statements and of comical effect. The point of this analysis and the division into categories was that of, first, proving punchlines as a new, not defined until then, and culturally important element for creating effect (may you call it a phenomenon, or a literary device, or whatever it may be understood as), which is until then almost exclusive to rap music; second, this writing had the intent of facilitating the comprehension and the making of punchlines, for those interested in better comprehending or creating them — something that, until this moment, was a job that solely relied to an unspecific knowledge of individuals. Thirdly, this writing may have brought up the possibility for a new stylistic device that can be used within
literature, and even other media, for punchlines are not limited to be used only in music, and as this work should have proved, they certainly make things more interesting.

Finally, with this writing I had the intention of showing, too, how important punchlines may be as a cultural manifestation, as well as for the process of creating an identity for artists (or even people in general). Punchlines, as shown, have been created in a very specific environment, and for that they gained the characteristics they have now, which is the presence of culture within punchlines, and also the people to whom they have been created and by whom they have been created. Concerning the latter, given the importance punchlines gained and started representing within rap music, they became a space that can be very decisive for a rapper, as punchlines call attention to themselves and oblige the public to re-listen to them, and thus the message they carry is extra-analyzed by the public — and logically, it became the place where rappers focus the message they are trying to transmit, may it be about a certain topic or about themselves. From this idea, thus, comes the belief that I have that punchlines are, too, an important element in the creation of identity, as they are, at one side, a reflection of the ideas that revolve around a rapper, and at another they are too the space in which new ideas are created — for it is difficult to quote, reproduce a whole song, verse, but bars are way simpler, and punchlines most of the time end up stealing the show for themselves, becoming the quotation of songs.

Thus, as stated right from the beginning of this writing, punchlines are still an under-analyzed element of rap music, as it is not the same thing that is called punchlines within comedy, and here is proven to have not only cultural importance, but as well artistic importance, as punchlines certainly are changing the way the public consumes art and entertainment — if the increase in the use of punchlines isn’t, to some degree, rather a result of a change that already happened or is happening with the public for a long time, as a probable result of internet’s influence. In any way, punchlines are the new, the interesting, the amusing, the fast, the quotable, the youth in a boring, way-too-serious, not that interesting in the way that transmits its messages, almost monochromatic, old world. Punchlines, thus, can represent a renovation in entertainment and in the arts, such as literature, in a way that it becomes actually interesting — in its delivery too —, for instance, to read a book, a book filled with punchlines, instead of one that make students rather want to punch lines, or themselves, in the face, out of boredom.
REFERENCES


