

Politics that Matter in Nas's *Illmatic*¹

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Abstract

This essay focusses on a single, seminal piece of American hip-hop music: Nas's *Illmatic*. Taking prompts from ANT and new materialism, and from Bruno Latour more specifically, I argue that *Illmatic* can and should be read as an exploration of the specific urban ecology from which it originated. This ecology is one of the urban landscapes of New York's housing projects as much as of the social practices of their inhabitants. At the same time, it is a concrete articulation, to borrow Latour's famous phrase, of the racist policies that those who planned and oversaw its construction aimed to enforce. Though Nas's music is often thought of as not as explicitly political as that of Public Enemy or KRS-One, a reading of it in this context reveals that it has no less political potential. Throughout the album, there is a detailed and complex engagement with the housing projects and how they contain and modify the possible mental landscapes of those who inhabit them. Incarceration, a central question for both Nas and Black America, must then be thought of as something that is not limited to the milieu of the prison. Instead, it is the prevailing condition in the urban ecologies of the housing projects. This imprisonment Nas understands in two ways: materially and mentally, working on bodies and working on minds. The very possibilities of thought are limited and formed by the ecologies of concrete that they take place in. Ultimately, through a close and careful reading of *Illmatic*, it becomes clear that the oppression of African Americans is not simply a social one: it is material. The housing projects themselves are an attempt to construct an urban environment that constrains thought, to make impossible the imagination of an alternative.

Keywords: Nas, *Illmatic*, hip hop, materiality, urban ecology.

Resumen

Este ensayo se centra en una obra fundadora de la música hip-hop estadounidense: *Illmatic* de Nas. Tomando como base las propuestas teóricas de ANT y del nuevo materialismo, específicamente las de Bruno Latour, argumento que *Illmatic* puede y debería leerse como una exploración de la ecología urbana específica desde la cual se originó. Esta ecología es aquella del paisaje urbano de la planificación urbanística de la ciudad de Nueva York tanto como la de las prácticas de sus pobladores. Al mismo tiempo, es una articulación concreta, tomando prestada la famosa frase de Latour, de las políticas racistas de aquellos que la planificaron y supervisaron con el fin de reforzar una situación que les convenía. A pesar de que la música de Nas no se percibe como política en primera instancia, por lo menos no tanto como la de Public Enemy o KRS-One, se revela con un similar potencial político cuando se hace una lectura en este contexto. En todo el álbum hay un detallado y complejo compromiso con la planificación urbanística y con la manera en que se incorporan y modifican los posibles paisajes mentales de aquellos que habitan esos lugares. El encarcelamiento, un tema central para ellos y la América Negra, debe ser considerado entonces como algo que no se limita al mundo de la cárcel. En lugar de eso, afirmo que la prisión es la condición predominante de las ecologías urbanas relacionadas con la planificación urbanística. Nas entiende el encarcelamiento de dos maneras: material y mentalmente, como un trabajo de cuerpos y mentes. Las propias posibilidades de pensamiento están limitadas al tiempo que formadas por las ecologías de hormigón en las que tienen lugar. En última instancia, a través de una atenta y cuidadosa lectura de *Illmatic*, se revela de manera clara que la

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opresión sufrida por los afroamericanos no es únicamente social, sino también material. La propia planificación urbanística es un intento de construir un medio ambiente urbano que limite el pensamiento con el fin de hacer imposible imaginar una alternativa.

Palabras clave: Nas, *Illmatic*, hip hop, materialidad, ecología urbana.

Hip hop scholarship focused on the Golden Age, especially in the historical or sociological traditions, shows a degree of ambivalence towards its object. Hip hop, so the argument goes at times, has failed to connect with the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black power struggle, has moved away from political and social issues towards a masturbatory celebration of itself and the material wealth it yields, or has become, to put it charmingly simply, part of the problem rather than the solution.² As a counterpoint, groups and artists such as Public Enemy, dead prez, KRSOne, Sister Souljah, or even NWA are among those invoked as representatives of what some call “message rap” (Allen 159) and others “socially and politically conscious rap” (Alridge 230). Debates of this kind, often normative, over what African American art is supposed to be like, where on a spectrum ranging from *l’art pour l’art* to political propaganda it should be located, precede hip hop by years and decades, with the scholarship cited above tending towards the latter pole.³ While more overtly political hip hop is certainly not the only hip hop to have entered academic discourse, it more readily offers itself as the object for readings interested in political potentials. Despite these tendencies, reading the record treated in the following, Nas’s 1994 debut *Illmatic*, as political is not breaking news to anyone. It is rather the way in which it holds political potential—that is, the ecological dimension of the record rather than questions primarily concerned with representation, documentation or identity—that I aim to shift into focus here.

Throughout *Illmatic*, Nas does not try to directly articulate a political position or even a political analysis. The angle he takes is a more indirect one. In an inversion of Bruno Latour’s famous phrase “articulated in concrete” (*Pandora’s Hope* 186), Nas articulates concrete. Throughout the album he is concerned with the materiality and geographic specificity of the oppression of African Americans. His poetics attempt to make the housing projects themselves speak of policy, rather than him having to do so. From there, Nas also approaches the difficulty of understanding the connection between this materiality and the seeming immateriality of thought, of what one might call a project mentality. Taken as a whole then, *Illmatic* constructs a complicated mapping of the relations and interactions between materiality, urban space, and thought to ultimately trace what might be called an urban ecology. Further, Nas’s poetry draws a line from the individual to the communal and offers something akin to a pedagogy.

² See, for example, Allen 159–91, Alridge 226–52. Though these texts may never make their bias explicit, the disregard for any form of hip hop that is not openly and singularly political (and even sometimes for hip hop that is) is a rather easily legible subtext. Outside of academic scholarship, the pathologizing of hip hop as turning its listeners, especially young black men, into violent criminals is so common as to not need reference. For an overview of the arguments commonly fielded against hip hop, see Rose 33–131.

³ These debates are far too complex to be easily recapped with any brevity. Still, for two prominent and somewhat paradigmatic parts of this ongoing debate, see Du Bois 60–68, Baldwin 11–18.

To make this argument, I will not only provide a careful reading of passages from *Illmatic's* songs but will first briefly sketch a theoretical framework to aid in conceptualizing the relation between social forces, politics, and materiality. To do so, I will draw on one of the most important and likely the most famous names in what has come to be known as new materialism, Bruno Latour. Though an adequate assessment of the totality of Latour's material sociology is far beyond the scope of this essay, two key elements of what is commonly referred to as actor-network theory will provide me with a sufficient framework to enter into dialogue with both Nas's poetry and the surrounding scholarship.

Latour challenges what he thinks of as mainstream sociology—a “sociology of the social” (*Reassembling* 8)—in a seemingly simple way: by taking materiality seriously. Objects, things and matter are ignored in sociology, so he contends, in favor of a kind of social constructivism that finds its explanation in itself: society is constructed socially; social factors construct society. Latour does not break with the constructivist argument that “power and domination have to be produced, made up, composed” (*Reassembling* 64) and are not natural or unalterable forces. He argues, however, that while society is constructed, that construction is not a social one, but rather a material one. Society is made of concrete, steel, glass, and other forms of matter. This is how, his argument goes, society has come to be durable at all. To maintain a construction that really is purely social in the sense of subject-subject relations without any mediation through objects takes tremendous effort, as it requires the constant repetition of rituals and performances to install and maintain the order of that society. Drawing on the studies by Shirley Strum of baboons and the social constellations they form, Latour exemplifies this: the apes have no material means of maintaining social relations, thus these relations must be enacted again and again to continue to exist (*Reassembling* 64–70). This continuous repetition of the performance of the social also renders it unstable. Any ritual can change or be disrupted, in fact any purely social society is in a constant process of decay that the constant social construction of that society can only delay but never stop.

What holds society together then, is “the power exerted through entities that don't sleep and associations that don't break down [...] and, to achieve such a feat, many more materials than social compacts have to be devised” (*Reassembling* 70). Material things are what shield any society from the rapid decay that a purely social one experiences constantly, as the baboon example illustrates for Latour. For this reason, these things are things only in a specific sense,⁴ as making the distinction between humans and things, active subjects and a world of passive objects, may otherwise suggest a general asymmetry in the distribution of agency that does not exist. Human actors exist in a world of non-human actors, living and non-living. All actors are capable of making other actors, human or non-human, act, which is to say that all actors have agency. This does not impose a total symmetry between humans and non-humans in which any actor is as important in society as any other. But it allows for an understanding of the social as not only made up of the agencies of human actors, but also of those of non-human actors.

⁴ For Latour's own distinction between the two terms and the implications of this distinction, see “Why Has Critique” 225–48.

Society is social only insofar as the domain of the social is extended to include materiality and the interactions between humans and non-humans. How much materiality comes to bear or how important it is varies from situation to situation, and any assessment of non-human actors thus always has to be time and site specific. To exclude materiality from any study of society is to make an artificial separation that does not correspond to the entanglements of humans and non-humans in the world.

One of Latour's most well-known examples illustrates how the process of delegation, the process of moving purely social interactions (interactions between human actors) into the realm of materiality, works (*Pandora's Hope* 186–88). The policeman observing that the speed limit be obeyed by watching the drivers of the passing cars (human/human interaction) is replaced with a sign spelling out the speed limit for the drivers to see and adhere to (human/non-human interaction). And then, finally, the process involves no human actors anymore, at least not directly: a speedbump is installed. What takes place now is no longer an interaction between the driver and anything at all; rather, the imperative of observing the speed limit is directed at the car itself. If the car goes too fast over the bump, so be it, but the damage done by the interaction of the materials will serve both as punishment and to make the car stop. There is of course a difference here: for an interaction that involved policemen or signs the imperative to obey the speed limit was a moral one to not break the law. Now the imperative is a more coercive one: submit or break your car. Yet from the point of view of an observer, there is no difference: the speed limit is adhered to. This is precisely why objects have agency without there being an “absurd ‘symmetry between humans and non-humans’” (*Reassembling* 76) in how agency is employed: what matters for Latour is less the question of consciousness, but rather the question of what can make something or someone else act.

Thus, the speed limit is “articulated in concrete” (*Pandora's Hope* 186). It is still spelled out, perhaps more clearly than ever, and Latour's formulation is of great importance. Somehow, language and materiality seem to intersect at this point. The relation between the speed bump and meaning is a strange one: meaning exists clearly in the imperative to not go too fast over the bump, but this meaning no longer resides in the realm of language, but in that of materiality. To shift intentions, policies, and plans into the realm of the material and out of written or spoken language is the other part of what it means to delegate a task of any kind to objects. Though they are absent both spatially and more importantly temporally, those who put the speed limit into law and those who planned and built the speed bump are present within it. Materiality has made their intentions durable in a way that a purely social construction could not have done. To delegate means not only to shift agency towards non-humans, but also to bridge time and space.

What a careful study of non-human actors attempts then is “to produce *scripts* of what they are making others—humans or non-humans—do” (*Reassembling* 79). An account of materiality can reveal which routines of behavior (*scripts*) it dictates, what it is making other actors do and not do. To obey the speed limit is the script that the speed bump forces drivers to enact and so it is with the entirety of materially constructed

society: humans and non-humans exist in a world of scripts that are given to them to enact. The writers of these scripts may be long gone, but their imperatives continue to exist in what they left behind. In this sense Latour's theory is an ecological one: it replaces the human subject as center of the world with an infinitely complex web of relations between humans and non-humans, neither of which hold an a priori privileged position. This means that he replaces acting subjects and passive environments as parameters of analysis with a milieu of interrelated humans and non-humans, where there is no position of being absolutely outside.

That materiality, understood through these conceptual lenses, is of extreme importance to an art form as urban as hip hop comes hardly as a surprise.⁵ With *Illmatic*, this relation is made explicit in more ways than just the lyrics: both the cover and the LP as object emphasize the link to materiality and a geographically specific urban context. The image on the cover is composed of two superimposed images: a photograph of the Queensbridge housing project in Queens, New York City, and a photograph of Nas himself as a young boy. The two images cannot be easily hierarchized; neither of them seems consistently more important or more in the foreground than the other. While in the lowest quarter of the image the child might be said to be more dominant, as mouth and chin obscure the image of the blacktop, this distinction cannot be made as easily anymore once the middle of the cover is considered. Here, eyes and nose are at best on the same level as the parked cars and the vanishing point of the street, but they might also be seen to be receding behind them. The point here is not to make a clear distinction, but rather to point towards the impossibility of making that distinction in the first place. The child is in the landscape, but the landscape is just as much in the child. Queensbridge is Nas and Nas is Queensbridge. Yet any heroism or triumph that such a claim might imply is squashed right away by the facts of the image: he is a child and not a grown adult; his look is somber at best and neither triumphant nor possessive. This is not a claim to ownership, but one to an origin. And already in this headshot of the child in which the architecture of the project seems to imprint itself both figuratively (in terms of the semiotics of the image) and literally (in terms of its material production) there resides a tension that the songs will go on to explore at length. The head as the place of the brain, the locale of thought, is filled with the concrete of the projects. The question the cover asks is already an ecological one: how does this (built) environment influence and constitute thought?

The record itself is, quite obviously, also material. The sound is engraved, made manifest materially, on the disc. Whatever device is used to play it reverses that process; it moves from materiality to sound. But materiality here matters more than this bit of technological trivia: the two sides of the record, instead of simply being named the A and B side, are called 40th Side North and 41st Side South, which are "the two streets that divide Nas's beloved Queensbridge, the largest housing project in the United States" (Daulatzai 6). Thus, already before listening to the record, it is to be understood as a geography, a mapping even, of Queensbridge. The record is located firmly in the very specific urban

⁵ For a historical account of the origins of hip hop in New York, see Perkins 1–45. For a more contemporary complication of hip hop's urban origins, see Jeffries 706–15.

milieu of a housing project in New York. This is something that any reading of *Illmatic*, even before getting to the songs themselves, must contend with: materiality, especially the materiality of a specific urban environment, is central to whatever will unfold in the songs.

At the center of *Illmatic*'s lyrics, as Matthew Gasteier argues throughout his study of the album, lie paradoxes. These, for him, are constituted by Nas's negotiation of two seemingly mutual exclusives: individual/community, fantasy/reality, and faith/despair. Gasteier argues that on *Illmatic* these binaries are shown to be anything but exclusive, but rather that Nas's poetry finds one in the other. From the individual perspective that is presented in, for example, the passage of first-person narrative in the first verse of "N.Y. State of Mind," Nas moves to writing a communality of experience that unites those who grow up and live in New York's housing projects. The outros of two songs are indicative here: "The World is Yours" and "Represent." In the former, the title of which is another of the paradoxes which are maintained and never resolved on *Illmatic*, Nas ends by shouting out Queensbridge, but moves on to mention uptown, Brooklyn, Mount Vernon, Long Island, Staten Island, and South Bronx. The move here is from the specificity of a single milieu, that of Queensbridge, to a generality that combines all these places, what one might call the metropolitan area around New York City. It is simultaneously a reportage on the reality of life in the environment of the housing projects and an imagining of a utopian community.⁶ "Represent" concludes with another way of conceptualizing the movement from individual to community.⁷ "This goes out to everybody in New York / That's living the real fucking life and every projects, all over" (2:58-3:06) is followed by a long list of shout-outs, but this time not to geographically determined communities as with "The World is Yours," but to single individuals. This is precisely the paradox at hand: the individuals in the geography, the geography in the individuals. One song is not a correction of the other, but they exist parallel to each other; both versions must be thought simultaneously. They cannot be resolved, as Gasteier argues about the dichotomies that he takes as guides for his reading, to be simply one in the other, a situation that would best be described as a truce. There is ultimately no reconciliation of these contradictions: it is their maintained adversity that makes them paradoxes and that, further, constitutes their poetic potential.

Alas, this argument for the centrality that paradox has in relation to poetry comes as no surprise. Paradox, as Cleanth Brooks argued long before hip hop, let alone hip hop

⁶ Dara Waldron argues that these two imperatives, of documentary realism and of utopian imagination constitute the two poles between which the texts of *Illmatic* constantly oscillates. In this back and forth, so his argument goes, lies the political potential of Nas's art: to imagine a different and better place that is not (the two meanings of utopia) and to grapple with the realities of life in the projects. See Waldron 1-19.

⁷ "Represent" is also part of a history of songs that aim to represent Queensbridge, especially against attacks in song form from Bronx artists. This history of dispute makes the last shout-out of the song, the one to South Bronx, even more remarkable. In spite of a tradition of conflict, one that Nas is very well aware of as the song's title and references to some of the Queensbridge musicians that preceded him make clear, "Represent" moves from the representation of just Queensbridge to that of a wider community. For the history of the back and forth between Queensbridge and South Bronx see Glaude 179-94. Glaude also offers a short cultural history of the Queensbridge housing project. For a more detailed historical view of housing projects in the U.S. up to the 1980s, see Wright, especially, though not exclusively, 220-39.

scholarship, is the defining feature of poetic language. Ordinary language is inadequate to the uses that poetry wishes to put it to and thus the “poet, within limits, has to make up his language as he goes” (Brooks 8). What a poem attempts to capture is the inherently contradictory nature of its object and in order not to reduce that contradiction to triviality, language can only resort to paradoxical constructions. The juxtaposition of images and metaphors that appear unconnected, the revitalization of dead language through alien contexts, or seeing the single in the multiple and the multiple in the single are the most prominent examples Brooks notes for this property of poetry. Ultimately, “it apparently violates science and common sense; it welds together the discordant and the contradictory” (Brooks 17). By the deliberate use of paradox that remains—unlike in Gasteier’s reading—unresolved, poetry allows thought to go in new directions: it writes complexity where there was simplicity, but this is a complexity that does not replace simplicity, but rather coexists in constant tension with it.

This point has already been made in connection to Nas in service of a very different argument by Graham Chia-Hui Preston. For him the paradox central to *Illmatic* is “Nas’s self-construction as a writer exactly through participation in and mastery of an oral culture—[this] is not an example of incoherence but should be seen as a fundamental feature of Nas’s poetry” (263). From the position of observer of African American reality inside a housing project and the documentation thereof, Nas creates himself as a writer and poet first and foremost. This places him also in a tradition of African American poets grappling with what Henry Louis Gates calls “the paradox of representing, of containing somehow, the oral within the written” (144). Indeed, Gates’s discussion of paradoxes and contradiction serves as a timely corrective for Brooks: what is extraordinary about (good) poetry for the latter is in Gates’s reading an integral component of African American literature. Working within this paradox is why Nas’s songs follow vectors towards the communal: as an individual he is on the outside, attempting to capture in poetry the lives of those he observes. The pen, Preston argues further, is the central metaphor through which this is manifest in the lyrics. The oral culture of hip hop can only be channeled through the act of writing, and, in turn, the writing only manifests itself as the spoken word on the record, a word that, all too often, speaks of writing. In this way, Nas constructs himself as an authorial figure, as a poet-subject. Among the many examples he cites, the one from the opening of the first verse of “N.Y. State of Mind” is likely the best: “Musician, inflictin’ composition / Of pain, I’m like Scarface sniffin’ cocaine / holdin’ an M16, see with the pen I’m extreme” (0:26-0:33). The point here is that Nas is extreme exactly when he is with a pen, when he is writing. The comparison of himself to Scarface is thus partially moved into the realm of irony: Nas only writes it with his pen, he does not fully embrace it. At the same time, the pen then takes on a parallel roll to the gun: it becomes a weapon, moving away from irony.

Yet, Preston’s argument misses an important aspect of the pen metaphor. Pen is not pen; behind the homophony there is not only a writing instrument, but also one of many words for prison. It is at this point that I return to materiality. Within the metaphors of writing and authorship there is a subtext of incarceration, iron bars, and concrete walls. In fact, the first words that Nas speaks on “N.Y. State of Mind,” the first song of the entire

album save for the introductory “The Genesis,” set the stage for a reading both of the ambiguity of the pen and of the import that materiality has for the entire album: “straight out the fuckin’ dungeons of rap / where fake niggas don’t make it back” (0:11-0:17).⁸ Ambiguity here abounds: are these dungeons where rap is made or where rap is imprisoned? What does it mean to be fake or real here, and to where can one make it back? By the end of *Illmatic*, on “It Ain’t Hard to Tell,” few of these questions are answered. Nas concludes the song with “My poetry’s deep, I never fell / Nas’ raps should be locked in a cell, it ain’t hard to tell” (2:41-2:46). This cyclic structure begins and ends in dungeons, cells, imprisonment. But something else does change from the beginning to the end: where at the start Nas appears to be the one coming out of the dungeons, at the end he has removed himself from the equation. Now it is all about his rap, his poetry. From here on, understanding the framing of the entire album as a journey from and to states of imprisonment, my inquiry into the relation of the materiality of the project environment, incarceration, and thought can begin in earnest.

“Memory Lane” is the song that is most exclusively concerned with the relation between Nas’s poetry and his milieu. Not only does the first verse open with a semi-ironic ethnographic survey of both Queensbridge and Nas’s audience along with repeated mentions and shout outs to Queensbridge, but the song is also filled with the kind of urban documentary that appears again and again throughout *Illmatic*. What is more interesting than the narrative content of the song, however, is the ways in which language is employed. In passages such as

Sentence begins indented with formality
My duration’s infinite, moneywise or physiology
Poetry, that’s a part of me, retardedly bop
I drop the ancient manifested hip hop straight off the block (0:36-0:47)

or in Nas describing himself as “disciple of streets” (2:30-2:31), the connection between hip hop and it’s milieu, the asphalt and concrete of the streets and blocks of Queensbridge, is spelled out to an almost didactical degree. Moving from “sentence” to “poetry” to “hip hop” and concluding in “off the block” marks the movement from contextless language to contextualized language-as-poetry to further contextualized hip hop, the difference being that poetry here is simply a form that language takes, while hip hop is already part of a socio-political context—that of the block in which the passage concludes. Poetry then can only have become part of Nas because he is the disciple of the street, matter his teacher. The point is the stress on the—at least partially—causal relation between hip hop and the urban ecology that its creator is part of. The non-human actors of this ecology work on the lyrics; their powers to shape are felt in Nas’s lyrics.

But there is another mechanism at work in the language of the song: the revitalization of metaphor. Not only is the song’s namesake metaphor one that has been thoroughly exhausted, to the point of entering everyday language, but the lines that make up the chorus are also sampled, in a sense making them a double derivative. Yet, with the end of the last verse, “memory lane” is moved into a new context, a new way of utilizing

⁸ For an exploration of how “The Genesis” locates *Illmatic* in both hip hop culture in general as well as in Nas’s artistic history see Nama 13–31.

the words, revitalizing it: “True in the game, as long as blood is blue in my vein / I pour my Heineken brew to my deceased crew on memory lane” (2:51-2:57). Besides shifting himself from disciple into the realm of royalty (possibly to be read in connection to “The World is Yours”), Nas makes matter resurface in language. The lane of memory becomes a material place, one of the lanes of Queensbridge. The image of the memory lane is thus recovered from the realm of cliché. Not only does this revitalize the expression itself, it also allows for thought to go into a new direction, much in the way that Brooks argued paradoxical constructions in poetry do. It suggests a parallelism between matter and thought. Memory is a lane, memory can be manifest in a street. Remembering, even thinking, happens in relation to matter, to non-human actors. It is the lane that makes one remember, that makes remembrance possible in the first place. The paradox posed here is then the ecological question of how thought can be personal, individual, and ephemeral like the bits and pieces of memory that the song goes through, but can at the same time be material: tied to the stone, concrete, asphalt, steel, and so on of its environment.

It is this paradox that is brought to an extreme in other moments of *Illmatic*. With the line “Even my brain’s in handcuffs” (3:22-3:23), “The World is Yours” already suggest a kind of mental incarceration. This line of thought is soon taken further on “One Time 4 Your Mind”: “My brain is incarcerated / Live at any jam, I couldn’t count all the parks I’ve raided” (2:37-2:43). For the first part of this couplet, there are two possible directions a reading can take. First, to claim that the brain is always already in prison documents the reality of mass incarceration in the 1980s, 1990s and onward until today, with arrest rates for young black men, especially in the parts of New York that Nas is both from and writing about, being far higher than any other demographic. The potential for arrest is always there, just around the corner—anyone living in such a milieu must be mentally prepared for that potential to be realized at any moment. The other direction is both more literal and more abstract: the brain itself is incarcerated. An object, a part of the body is in prison. As it was with the head on the album cover, the brain is the material stand-in for immaterial thought. Thought itself, the imagination of anyone living in this environment, Nas suggests, is always already in prison. Thus, prison dictates the kinds of thoughts that can be thought. It is at this junction that Latour again becomes highly valuable in order to understand the dynamics at hand: the scripts that a non-human actor such as a prison dictates to inmates, but also to those whose relatives are inmates or those could-be inmates usually called free citizens, take over their brains and thoughts. In and around the prison, one can only think as if in prison. Indeed, if Nas’s argument here is taken to its conclusion, there are no potential inmates at all: everyone already is an inmate, if not bodily then mentally.

The second part of the couplet then might be taken to serve as a contrast to the image of the prison, with the park as a place of community and free movement. But this optimistic reading is immediately denied: raiding a park is arguably not generally an image of peace yet might be argued to require a reading in the context of public music making important to hip hop culture at the time. But a reading of this kind is preempted by the rhyme scheme: the rhyme of incarcerated-raided marks the intimate connection

between the two. In the omnipresence of imprisonment, a place of utopian freedom becomes an impossibility.

The part of *Illmatic* that is most clearly dedicated to pondering and articulating these dynamics of thought and imprisonment is "N.Y State of Mind." In accord with the theme of omnipresent and possibly internalized incarceration, the song provides a few more lines of stark social commentary: "Cops could just arrest me, blamin' us; we're held like hostages" (3:26-3:30) makes the relation of the inhabitants of the housing projects and the dedicated housing police (with whom Nas mentions having a "beef" [1:36-1:37] on "The World is Yours") or the police in general clear. This always-present tension between a malevolent and powerful police force and the seemingly helpless inhabitants of Queensbridge is further spelled out in the opening of the second verse. Four lines of braggadocio are followed by one line tearing down of all the glorification just built up. After "But just a nigga, walkin' with his finger on the trigger" (2:38-2:41) there is little room left for self-aggrandizement. But the most brutal depiction of the milieu of the housing project follows shortly after. When Nas rhymes that "each block is like a maze / full of black rats trapped plus the island is packed" (3:00-3:04), he is not only in the realm of the metaphorical, likening the African American population to lab rats and invoking moments of American history such as the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. He is also again documenting the material reality of Queensbridge. The main innovation of the housing project upon its construction were the interconnected Y-shapes of the buildings. Any aerial-view image of the project thus quickly dispels the notion that calling it a maze or trap could only be a metaphor: the layout of the blocks is labyrinthian, a certain aura of no-way-outness is part of the buildings themselves. This notion is further reinforced by invoking the image of Long Island being packed with Black people. Questions of real space and of overpopulation cannot be avoided here. Again, metaphor and materiality coexist in these poetic descriptions, stressing the importance of the latter for any understanding of the former.

Another dimension, this one more metaphysical than physical, is to be found at a different point in the same song. Nas ends the first verse with

It drops deep as it does in my breath
I never sleep, cause sleep is the cousin of death
Beyond the walls of intelligence life is defined
I think of crime when I'm in the New York state of mind (2:05-2:16)

The paranoia of dying in one's sleep is constructed, a little later on, as parallel to the entirety of New York: "The city never sleeps, full of villains and creeps" (3:46-3:49). The fear of death is a property not of the human subject by itself, but is rather projected onto and by the city around that subject. This is precisely what the line following abstracts and thinks further. Intelligence, the mind, thought itself is walled in and only beyond those walls can life in any defined form exist. What this means is that if life can only be defined outside the walls, then being outside of these walls is the precondition for life. This is the vision of African American existence that Nas constructs. Trapped by the walls of American society, culture, politics, and architecture, by all those policies and scripts of

racism articulated in concrete, by an entire urban ecology skewed against them, African Americans are from the very beginning excluded from life.

Yet the last line, from which the song takes not only its name but also its chorus, moves again into the realm of unresolvable paradox. The question posed is, put simply, between an upper-case or a lower-case s. Is it a New York state or a New York State of mind? Is there a New York mode of thinking, in the sense that the city of New York itself determines the thoughts of those living within it, or is New York State here an entirely fictional place, one of the mind and not of matter? Put differently, the tension is between matter and space determining thought or thought creating matter and space. This tension, as is the point of paradox in poetry, cannot be resolved. Both are the case simultaneously. The link between materiality and thought is unresolvable, to a point that a place beyond the walls of intelligence becomes an impossibility only one line after it has been raised. The conclusion, however, remains the same: no matter if mind or matter is given primacy, all that can be thought of is crime. There is no good or bad option here; neither lends itself to escaping the dystopian scenes of New York that the songs portraits at length. The impossibility of resolving the paradox is what the slight change of the lyrics at the end of the second verse speaks to: "I lay puzzled as I backtrack to earlier times / Nothing's equivalent to the New York State [state?] of mind" (4:03-4:10). This puzzlement is the only possible reaction in the face of the logical conundrum that the poetics of *Illmatic* construct.

It is here, by way of conclusion, that one can speak to the political potential of Nas's poetry. In raising the question of materiality and of its possibly deterministic force in the life of African Americans, Nas opens up novel lines of inquiry into the sociopolitical situations in the milieus he rhymes about. This newly possible mode of analysis is precisely one that thinks of the projects and their inhabitants as comprising an urban ecology. Instead of subjects whose personal responsibility can endlessly be appealed to (or whose lack thereof can be pathologized), the situation of the project's residents must be understood as preconditioned by their environment and the great number of scripts materially encoded within it. Here, the environment of the housing projects itself prefigures the carceral nature of the prison. Crucially, this ecology consists not only of the materiality of the urban environment and the scripts and policies embodied by it, but also of the practices of those who live within it. In the case of *Illmatic*, hip hop itself takes on this role. This is the point of the community making that is present throughout the songs: even though the specific milieu of Queensbridge is extremely important for Nas in both personal and artistic terms, there is a certain communality in the experience of their (urban) environment that African Americans have which he is aiming to articulate.

Through Nas the projects then become legible in much the same way that the speedbump becomes legible through Latour. In both, history and politics continue to be present materially in the built environment while the individuals responsible for its construction are long gone. In these examples, Nas and Latour each describe a very different situation in terms of political magnitude, but they share the same ecological perspective. This perspective is not one of serene pastorals, but instead one which understands that in an analysis of any given social situation, an entire ecology of

materiality and the scripts embodied therein has to be taken into account. In this sense, the ecology of concrete that Nas articulates throughout *Illmatic* can well be termed socially deterministic. For him, the urban ecology he describes and analyzes supplies the very infrastructure for thinking within it. In a carceral environment, thought can only be carceral too. To truly understand the question of why America's famed upward (or perhaps rather outward) mobility seems to fail so many of those who grow up to live and die in the housing projects of New York City but ultimately all of America, one has to take into account an entire ecology of redlining, housing discrimination, and racism in urban planning—beginning with the projects themselves, with their material reality, with what they are making their inhabitants do and think.

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