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ARTICLE

Time Capsule: Nas's *Illmatic* (1994) as an Iteration of Utopian Time

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Queensbridge is the largest government-housing scheme in the US. The building opened in 1939 to house lower income families. In terms of its initial architectural structure, Queensbridge is designed to capture natural sunlight, and is a modernist state-funded venture typical of its time. This article considers the formative modernist design of Queensbridge as a backdrop to the hip-hop artist Nas's 1994 masterpiece *Illmatic*. *Illmatic* is the focus of recent academic studies, many of which hail Nas for the formal ingenuity of his lyrics and his songs' implicit socio-political content: the content of which deals with the systematic perpetration of criminality among black youth in the post-Reagan period. Nas's quasi-realist account of growing up in Queensbridge, his immersion in a life of crime, to his discovery of hip-hop as an art form, has since assumed legendary status. The article considers *Illmatic* from the perspective of 'time' in two specific contexts. The first takes empirical reality as its concern, exploring the album's coming-of-age narrative as a story about growing up in the poverty of the New York ghetto. A second iteration, the second strand, concerns anti-eschatological renderings of time. Taking this second strand to be an iteration of 'utopian time,' the analysis turns to Lucy Sargisson's transgressive utopianism. *Illmatic*, I argue, instantiates the coming-into-being of Nas as subject and furnishes the tools to critically transgress categorical binds involved in representing subjectivity. *Illmatic* is an album about representation and its utopian critique.

I don't believe in that shit, your facts are backwards,

Nas, *Represent*.

Illmatic is the 1994 debut album of the Queensbridge rapper Nas (Nasir Bin Olu Dara Jones). Nas rose to prominence on the East Coast hip-hop scene in the early nineties. In his early teens he secured a prestigious record contract that saw him team up with some of the most innovative producers working in New York City at the time: Large Professor, Pete Rock, Q-Tip and MC Serch (just some of the noteworthy contributors on an album that has been hailed as the greatest hip-hop album of all time). The content of Nas's lyrics however, in addition to the 'flow' of his lyrics, is as innovative as the near cinematic rendering of Nas's home in Queensbridge, the oldest social housing project in the history of US social policy.

Queensbridge is therefore a site of historical import, a product of the US government's social housing policy (the project opened in 1939 for lower income families). The building is 'Y' based in its design and is intended (in its innovative architectural form) to capture sunlight. It is also future-oriented in its concern with

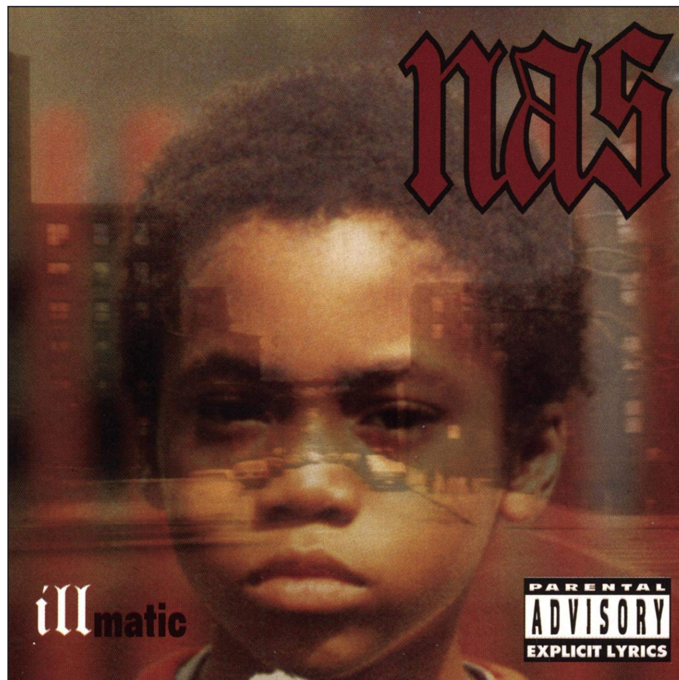

Figure 1: Nas's Illmatic (album cover), New York: Columbia Records, 1994.

heat efficiency and health (Giurgiulescu, 2013). The now iconic cover photograph for *Illmatic* is an image of a child Nas against the looming Queensbridge projects (**Figure 1**). The cover is intended to underscore the potential criminalization of the child Nas (the mugshot) as an adult, while documenting a soon to be subject *of* New York City's social housing projects. The Queensbridge project is, therefore—as a building and a place within New York City—writ large over the multi-layered textural fabric of *Illmatic.*

Queensbridge is the focal point of *Illmatic.* The album reads as a series of commentaries on growing up in in the projects, the allure of crime and drugs, and the violence that is formative to such black US communities. In the tradition of coming-of-age novels such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953)—and from the Biblical referencing on the opening track 'The Genesis,' to the parting shot reference to the religious group Five Percenters in the final song 'It Ain't Hard to Tell'—*Illmatic* is a visceral account of ghetto life (an environment defined by an intersection of illegal drugs, gangs and crime). Indeed, *Illmatic* has been championed as a realist text: a harrowing account of the projects in the aftermath of a drug epidemic: in the late 80s, crack cocaine infiltrated black working-class communities to an unprecedented degree.[1] In 'Who's Using and Who's Doing the Time: Incarceration, the War on Drugs and Public Health' (2008), an essay exploring drug-abuse and prison in black communities such as Queensbridge, Lisa D. Moore and Amy Elkavich make the following claim:

> In 1996, Blacks constituted 62.6% of drug offenders in state prisons. Nationwide, the rate of persons admitted to prison on drug charges for Black men is 13 times that for White men, and in 10 states, the rates are 26 to 57 times those for White men._People of color are not more likely to do drugs; Black men do not have an abnormal predilection for intoxication. They are, however, more likely to be arrested and prosecuted for their use. (Moore and Elkavich, 2008).

[1] Matthew Gasteier's text on *Illmatic* (see above in references) offers a comprehensive historical timeline for the production process of *Illmatic*. In addition, the text contexualises the album's importance to the hip-hop genre.

This study bears upon *Illmatic* as a document of the nineties; of a time when the violence in black communities reached crisis levels. The album therefore reads as an account of growing up in such harrowing conditions (indeed it reads as an auto-ethnographic account of a life). Looked upon as a document of the ghetto as researched by Moore and Elkavich, *Illmatic* reads as a realist text, designed to immerse the listener in the reality of Queensbridge (borne of an empirical understanding of place). However, given the focus on time over the course of the album, *Illmatic* also reads as an album on which there are multiple iterations of time. This article explores two such iterations. On the one hand is, I argue, empirical time—Nas's time growing up in Queensbridge—a time measured according to a common state rubric 'visualisin' the reality of life in actuality' (Nas, 1994). Nas must push against the tides of conformity to represent a world contrary to the given ('the facts'). Time, seen in this case as a rubric of state oppression, is the subject of 'One Love' and 'N.Y. State of Mind,' and most explicitly the melancholic 'Life's a Bitch.' Time, in these instances, manifests as a struggle to survive in the ghetto.[2] As Clyde Woods points out, 'the creation of education wastelands; the denial of access to subsistence programs; the failure of subsistence programs to meet basic needs…the spatially/racially contingent application of the law; mass incarceration; occupational segregation' (Woods 2002; 64) are problems endemic to African-American communities like Queensbridge, and need to be classified as human rights violations. These rhymes, about the mass incarceration Woods sees as human rights violations, present 'doing time' as a default position for those who live in the Queensbridge ghetto: 'I set it off with my own rhyme, cause I'm as ill as a convict who kills for phone time' (Nas, 1994). Time, in this iteration, concerns the struggle to live and survive the ghetto; the struggle involved in representing the subjects of Queensbridge.

[2] Foucault's concern with modern forms of subjugation as a 'bio-politics' is particularly apt in this regard, given that much of *Illmatic* is concerned with physical oppression experienced in incarceration or in drug-use. 'Life's a Bitch' is perhaps the most visceral example of this on the album, with its bleak view of life expectancy in the projects.

A second iteration of time runs concurrent to the first. Where the first involves reporting on the conditions of the Queensbridge projects in an attempt to represent the subjects of Queensbridge, it concerns a time transgressive of categories of representation. It is a time that opens new possibilities for representation: 'time is illmatic' (Nas, 1994). This article focuses on these iterations of time. *Illmatic* is first explored as a realist coming-of-age narrative about growing up in Queensbridge, before the discussion is oriented towards an analysis of *Illmatic's* time in the context of the utopian. Taking the realization and representation of subjectivity as the premise of the realist strand, the second iteration focuses on time in relation to the messianic and utopian. I explore the 'subject' in the first section as a contingent subject. However, in doing so, I read *Illmatic* as a text concerning the impulse to represent the subject *of* Queensbridge—contingent to a place and time—running alongside a utopian concern with transgressing representational categories in poetic processes (the utopian, in this instance, transgresses pre-existing representational categories).

In the first comprehensive collection of essays on the legacy of *Illmatic, Born to Use Mics*: *Reading Nas's Illmatic* (2009) (and the first text in a series dedicated to hip-hop as a legitimate subject of academic critique), Sohail Daulatzai notes 'there is something about *Illmatic* that transcends the categories that have ever existed about hip-hop. Something complex about its simplicity, something elusive that we felt we wanted to explore' (Daulatzai & Dyson 2009; 3). Daulatzai draws on the 'illusive' for a certain sensibility not yet classified as official knowledge and hence resistant to naming or definitive conceptualization. His comment, however throwaway it might seem, intrigues. He identifies in *Illmatic* something that resists rudimentary attempts to classify the album.

Ronald A.T. Judy, meanwhile, offers two ways to situate *Illmatic* within contemporary developments in hip-hop. On the one hand, *Illmatic* is part of a new turn in the 'morally legitimate tradition of resistance' (Judy 1994; 216). The tradition in question is black emancipatory politics. On the other hand, and offering a pre-echo of Daulatzai's argument, Judy finds 'a kind of utopian historicism that is grounded in the concept of the morally legitimate tradition of African American resistance to

dehumanizing commodification' (Judy 1994; 216). Both observations offer important contexts for *Illmatic*, in that the album can be seen to reflect 90s black American culture in its implicit concerns with time. From the late 80s accelerationist-infused Detroit Techno—designed for a future-less perpetual present—to the Afro-Futurist literature of the 1990s, a strand of black American culture was focused on temporality, or at least alternate experiences of time.[3] The concern with time outside dominant expressive forms finds its way into hop-hip culture too, most forcibly, I argue in Nas's work of this period. *Illmatic*, I argue in the following sections, crystalizes this concern with time into two explicit strands: the realist and utopian.

The Realist Imperative

It is near customary to look upon *Illmatic* as intrinsically realist; an observational document of inner city ghetto life. In his book on *Illmatic* as part of Bloomsbury's 33⅓ series of texts on 'classic albums', Matthew Gasteier deploys terms such as 'local reportage' and 'popular realism' to describe *Illmatic*, suggesting Nas invokes explicitly the contradictions of late-capitalism (Gasteier 2009). The realist strand invoked by Gasteier takes the form of first-person reportage.[4] Nas discovers the 'pen,' reporting on his escape from an economy based on drug and gun crime. He reports on a lack of opportunities other than selling drugs 'on the dime,' on corners within 'enemy territory.' Nas's infamous retort 'sleep is the cousin of death' (Nas, 1994) on 'N.Y. State of Mind,' is a disturbing evocation of the turmoil of ghetto life.[5] The song itself

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[3] Benjamin Noys has written extensively on accelerationism in relation to Detroit Techno, coining the term 'cyberpunk phuturism' to account for the direction that house music took in its manifestation as Detroit Techno (Noys 2014; 49). The eradication of voice, and the insistence on the machine as pure generator of sound, is directed at a future time. Time becomes, in this instance, the key criterion of a new machine aesthetic. Hip-hop, in contradistinction, accelerates the transformation of language into new lyrical forms. The coming together of voice and machine, in this instance, is wedded to a utopian impulse to transform language from within.

[4] Linda Williams's exceptional study of the HBO TV series *The Wire–On the Wire* (2014) makes a similar against-the-grain point about the series. Williams argues against common sense perceptions of *The Wire* as a critically evaluated realist text, in favour of viewing the series as a classic instantiation of melodrama. Her text is particularly interesting in that *Illmatic* is often noted as an influence on *The Wire*.

[5] There is a peculiar correlation between this now infamous lyric and passages of the Jewish, Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1972); a novel about Weisel's ordeal during World War II. Wiesel writes

reports on the warzone-like conditions of the projects; when children sleep with one eye open, ready to be attacked at any time. *Illmatic* is, in this sense, a first-person account of growing up in Queensbridge that strives to represent the conditions there. On this reading the album is premised on Nas, as writer and rapper, observing reality; reporting on life in an aesthetic formulation that takes street poetry or hip-hop form (as in the vernacular).

Research into ghetto projects such as Queensbridge has gathered pace in the years since *Illmatic* was released. In *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (1997), Robin D.G. Kelley calls this scholarly activity 'constructing the ghetto. For him, a scholarly industry has evolved based on dissecting ghetto life; work undertaken from a safe critical remove. He references studies with an overt focus on the pathologies of the ghetto life they report on, which he argues lack substantial insight into definitive aspects of community life (Kelley, 1997). Kelley is concerned with the question of academic studies adequately representing the subaltern experience in these communities. Kelley, in this sense, complements Gayatri Spivak's exploration of the subaltern in her classic essay 'Can The Subaltern Speak?' (1993) In this, Spivak's focus is the desire to represent heterogeneous experiences under the banner of a group experience. Her essay poses the question as to whether this desire reorients a violence implicit in the formative construction of group identity (Gayatri Spivak, 1993). Both take the limits of subaltern experience as a focus of representation to task, asking if representation can indeed extend to the subaltern.

In the context of such formative critiques, *Illmatic* can still be approached as a first-hand account of subaltern experience. Nas leaves school at thirteen and becomes involved in petty crime before reflecting on this experience. He writes from a position of radical social exclusion. He rhymes about growing up in Queensbridge on 'N.Y. State of Mind,' reporting on the hardship in surviving the crack-infested

'God knows what I would have given to be able to sleep a few moments. But deep inside, I knew that to sleep meant to die. And something in me rebelled against that death. Death, which was settling in all around me, silently, gently (Wiesel, 1972; 89). Nas, like Weisel, associates sleep with death.

tenements ('and claim some corners, crew's without guns are gonnas' [Nas, 1994]).[6] He later turns his attention to the possibilities afforded hip-hop, and indeed poetry, to represent the subjective 'when I attack there ain't an army that can strike back' (Nas, 1994), as part of a song that also brings to the fore the album's implicit concern with temporality. *Illmatic* emerges, in both of these instances, as a portal into the subaltern experience of growing up in the ghetto. Nas discovers a critical disposition towards his subjective experience; his pen assumes a 'mechanical movement' (Nas, 1994). His pen aspires to the status of a machine, observing and dissecting what is close at hand.

Rather than understanding such songs as providing straightforward factual observation, however, we can approach them as expressions of *parrhesia*, the Greek tradition of 'fearless speech,' as taken up by Michel Foucault. Against the strict correlation between realism and objective truth, *parrhesia* is both subjective *and* true: reportage that comes about from real empirical experience. Nas speaks truthfully about his life growing up in Queensbridge because he is *from* Queensbridge, as shown on the album cover; he believes what he knows is true, and knows what he believes is true.

> To my mind, the *parrhesiastes* says what is true because he *knows* that it is true; and he *knows* that it is true because it is really true. The *parrhesiastes* is not only sincere and says what is his opinion, but his opinion is also the truth. He says what he *knows* to be true. The second characteristic of *parrhesia*, then, is that there is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth. (Foucault, 2001: 140)

[6] Biggie Smalls (The Notorious B.I.G) captures the changes in African-American communities in the aftermath of the crack wars with lazer-like precision (his death, along with Tupac Shakur, inventive hip-hop artists, make for two of the biggest tragedies of late 20th century American cultural life) on the second track of his groundbreaking album *Ready to Die*: 'Things Done Changed.' Biggie rhymes 'remember back in the days when niggas had waves, cazal shades and corn braids,' before revealing some of the social changes to impact these communities 'turn your pages to 1993, niggas is getting smoked, G, believe me, talk slick, you get your neck slit quick.' (The Notorious B.I.G, 1994)

Nas is a subject bearing witness to life in Queensbridge (a point that explains his reflection on the death of friend Ill Will, a particularly affecting moment on the album).

Illmatic advances towards an awakening of the subject, Nas taking it upon himself to represent Queensbridge; emphasised by the refrain 'representing is illmatic' on the album (Nas, 1994). Representation is the main focus of the album's second last song 'Represent,' on which Nas sets empirical details out in the form of *parrhesia* (when he discovers the pen and the powers of representation). In his striving to truthfully represent the Queensbridge subject, 'Represent' is the point at which Nas is empowered to do so. It is the point when a subjective impression of reality meets an objective truth imposed on the subject. Nas rhymes 'I don't believe in any of that shit, your facts are backwards' (Nas, 1994) before a group chorus sings out, in the moment of affirmation, 'represent, represent' (Nas, 1994). 'Backwards' facts are presented as disfigured truths, giving precedence to empirical knowledge over an epistemology that is imposed in the form of objective knowledge. By asserting that the facts are backwards Nas is able to distinguish between lived empirical knowledge and state sanctioned knowledge. This distinction is most apparent on 'Represent,' the second last song and point on the album when Nas presents his own subjective knowledge as true. We can, the lyrics suggest, furnish our own truth, concerning our own experience, and speak truthfully regarding what *we* believe and *know*. We can 'represent' our own empirical reality, furnishing a knowledge consistent with our belief. To grasp the significance of this moment, it is important to underscore the placement of 'Represent' on *Illmatic*. 'Represent' follows two songs referencing the 'time' of Judaeo-Christian eschatology: the opening 'The Genesis' and the hard-hitting midpoint 'Halftime.' Inferences to Biblical chronology are made on both songs, all the while investing something of the messianic in the songs.[7]

[7] In the years that followed *Illmatic* Nas identified more and more with the messianic, assuming the moniker God's Son in jest. The album he recorded directly after *Illmatic, It Was Written* (1996), makes a whole swathe of references to the messianic tradition; particularly in relation to the inscription of the holy word.

Running counter to a subjectively true form of representation on *Illmatic* is a strand that invokes the utopian as a transgressive feature particular to hip-hop poetry, and which critiques the particularity of subjectivity as a concept of representation in itself ('black rats trapped'). Nas follows a track marked by the discovery of representation—'representing is illmatic'—with a song confirming a new point of critique: 'time is illmatic' (Nas, 1994). To engage this strand, this second movement, as critical, transgressive and ultimately utopian, we need to first of all consider theorisations of time that will help bridge the messianic and the utopian imagination.

Time *of* time

In the period between World War One and World War Two, a number of German-Jewish thinkers developed theories and philosophies of time that bring Biblical renderings of chronological time into dialogue with the messianic. Walter Benjamin's messianic turn, in addition to Ernst Bloch's philosophy of time, are vital reference points in this regard. Both are significant points of reference for engaging this second strand of time. In addition to a number of German-Jewish philosophers and writers who rose to prominence after World War One (Theodor Adorno, Eric Fromm, and Franz Kafka), they elaborate upon the eschatological and messianic outside a temporality delineated as a strict measurer of progress; time considered as harbinger of capitalist expansion. For this particular group of secular Jewish philosophers, the messianic is a more purposeful way of approaching the imbroglio of a 'time' aligned to the vacuities of an everyday capitalism. Perhaps the most well-known intervention of this kind is found in the work of Walter Benjamin, who contrasts the 'empty time' of capitalism with that of 'messianic time.' Rhiannon Firth and Andrew Robinson unpack the nuances of a time now considered Benjaminian:

> Benjamin argues that homogeneous empty time is rooted in capitalism, and closely connected to the exchangeability and equivalence of commodities and the repetitive cycles of consumerist fashion through which the system varies its contents but remains formally the same. It is linked to boredom,

> the dominant affect of the capitalist era. (Benjamin 1999 [1930–5]; 104) (Firth and Robinson 2013; 4)

Benjamin confronts the boredom referenced by Firth and Robinson. His concept of 'messianic time' involves a fastidious exploration of the links between capitalism, fascism, and the modern bourgeois temporality of progress. He instills in 'time' a messianic reorientation of the 'now,' moving the 'now' away from its tendentious position as an 'after.' To read Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940) in this regard is to push against the grain of an historicism understood as rendering the past in terms that are subservient to the now. Taking a fragmented form (perhaps a precedent for the plateaus Deleuze and Guattari delineate as spatiotemporal alternatives to the progression of the linear chapter), the *Theses* is designed to counter the sense of linear time in both its content and form. For Benjamin, the secular Jew, the redemptive impulse, perceived as the 'messianic', is defined as a non-dialectical relation to the past; a departure from an understanding of history that 'contains time as a precious but tasteless seed' (Benjamin 1999; 254). Benjamin invigorates, perhaps even revolutionizes historicism. He encourages the historian of the fragment to grasp the 'constellation his own era has formed with a definitive earlier one' (Benjamin 1999; 255). He confronts the 'now' as a radical break with the past which nonetheless affirms the revolutionary potential that is already immanent in the 'past.'

Benjamin's messianism positions time as that 'absolutely singular' *at once* moment that connects both past and future. He goes on to explore the redemptive role of this 'now' in more explicit terms in *The Arcades Project* (2002), a text which references the utopian as a standstill dialectic image characterising the fullness of time. In this, he rejects Christian understandings of time as 'empty' that dominated Marxist writings at the time. In these, time consists of a linear movement of moments, each cut off from the other and emptied of purpose by the dialectical historian all too focused on the Big Things thought to have Historical value. For Benjamin, who turns to the Arcades for those forgotten 'things' of the past, the dialectical method

finds a delimiting continuity in time: the *past* has little bearing on the present other than as an empty reference.

Bloch also locates the relationship between utopia and time in messianic thought; a mode that allows past and future to be held together. As for Benjamin, the theoretical impulse is thus to transform dominant understandings of time from that of an empty form to that which is 'full;' to assert the now as pregnant with past and future. It is here that Bloch introduces the category of hope. He finds in the 'principle of hope' something of the messianic Benjamin celebrates.

Both Bloch and Benjamin, however, maintain a certain degree of mistrust for dialectical historicism in that they consider it an offshoot, at least theoretically, of Judaeo-Christian eschatology. Hostile towards dialectical materialism, Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' takes issue with the linearity of classic historical development. Bloch, however, maintains the link, remaining wedded to dialectical materialism. Bloch's 'not yet' is not, however, to be confused with the 'inevitable' of History. It is perhaps better understood in terms of the social 'dream,' as interpreted by Wayne Hudson in the following terms:

> The materialist dialectic is not based on conceptual realism; nor does it take a syllogistic thesis-antithesis-synthesis form. Nor is it a dialectic that lays out content present from the start. On the contrary the materialist dialectic is the dialectic of the developing *novum*: a dialectic of unrest based on the unsuitability of the at hand to the possible new, which mediates with the future as well as the past … It is emergentist, expansive and discontinuous: a dialectic process of transmission, full of interruptions, disparities, breaks and sudden leaps, to genuinely new contents (*nova*). (Hudson 1982; 128).

Bloch's Marxism takes form over the course of three volumes of his major philosophical text *The Principle of Hope* (1996). A theory of time emerges which finds in the utopian an immanent relationship between cause and effect. Bloch,

however, considers hope a direct provision of the 'possible new,' which emerges from the principle of time. The first volume of *The Principle of Hope* turns to the 'dream' as that potential persisting below the surface of social formations, by way of developing the 'not yet' as the temporal principle of hope (Bloch 1986). The 'dream' is not, in this sense, the manifest unconscious, but a coming into being of that which is there but has not come to consciousness—*yet*. Genesis, the Biblical beginning, is now considered–in temporal terms–to mark both the beginning and end:

> True genesis is not at the beginning but at the end and it starts to begin only when society and existence become radical, i.e grasp their roots. But the root of history is the working, creating human being who reshapes and overhauls the given facts. Once he has grasped himself and established what is his, without expropriation and alienation, in real democracy, there arises in the world something which shines into the childhood of all and in which no one has yet been: homeland. (Bloch 1986; 1375–1376)

For Bloch (not unlike Benjamin), messianic time is a radical march into the future affirming—in the same moment—the past. That is, time is a grasping of past and future in the very vestige of the now. Bloch is quick to associate this understanding of time with an overcoming of alienation, reversing the temporal fixity of genesis. Genesis, crucially, is that beginning that is also an opening to the future; characterised by *that* utopian impulse which has the capacity to disrupt the facticity associated with 'time.' Bloch therefore sees the utopian as an effort to overhaul given facts; to make the alien familiar, and to make of our often hostile surrounding a new homeland. That which 'shines into the childhood of all' is, for Bloch, time itself: the utopian impulse associated with building a homeland *for all*.

The link between genesis and the utopian (as a disruption of facticity) in Bloch is echoed in the iteration of time on *Illmatic*. As noted above, Nas critiques externally imposed, 'objective' facticity when striving to truthfully represent the projects of Queensbridge. In doing so, he invests in Queensbridge the hope of a genesis that

is futural in form: a new homeland. This investment is apparent from the album cover, compositing an image of the child Nas with an image of Queensbridge.[8] Nas, the prodigy, stares in a profile not unlike a mugshot; an image that nonetheless evokes numerous semiotic readings. We can read the image as harking back to Nas's childhood *and* an image that offers a glimpse of a childhood to come. The cover image, in this latter sense, looks to a new homeland: the album as genesis. Genesis, in this Blochian sense, is a radical grasping of now, defined by the concept of childhood.

Illmatic's opening song is 'The Genesis.' The album's time, at first, appears Biblical, which is to say that it appears to assume linear form. This is continued by 'Halftime', situated at the album's midpoint. Yet the 'end time' never arrives. Instead, the final song 'It Ain't Hard to Tell,' the most formally and lyrically complex on the album, breaks with the linear style brought about by 'The Genesis'—'Halftime' continuum. It is the album's most lyrically inventive, ambitious song. It is also markedly more upbeat, resulting from the sample of Michael Jackson's 'Human Nature' and reference to the Five Percenters (a scattergun religion claiming an Afro-centric Asian Allah as the true God).[9] A shift in tempo makes apparent the lack of an orchestrated 'end.' The coming-of-age narrative, the coming-into-being of Nas as a subject of Queensbridge, reaches a critical apex on 'Represent.' By 'It Ain't Hard to Tell' Nas, now integrated into hip-hop culture, is representing Queensbridge. Rhymes such as 'the brutaliser, Buddha sizer, the kind of nigga who'll be pissing in your elevator' captures the coming to consciousness of Nas as subject of Queensbridge. The break, then, with 'It Ain't Hard to Tell' is more pronounced as a result.

In this article's final section I want to pursue this break further, looking in more detail at why 'full-time', which suggests a linear end, a final 'moment' in the

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[8] David M. Bell's recent text *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect* (2017) offers an illuminating discussion of utopia and futurity in the context of recent political developments. Bell's analysis is helpful for further exploration of *Illmatic's* messianic utopian emphasis on 'now' in the context of Queensbridge as an existing place.

[9] The essays in Mark Fisher's edited volume *The Resistible Demise of Michael Jackson* make some reference to the utopianism of disco in its peak years, as manifest in Jackson's masterpiece *Off the Wall* (1979). Fisher, in his easy for the volume 'And when the groove is dead and gone: The end of Jacksonism,' writes 'up to and including *Off the Wall*, Michael Jackson's music belonged to that old dream–music as leisure-convalescence, a utopianism confined to time off work'. (Fisher 2010; 12)

anticipated rosary bead chronicle is never revealed to have arrived; why, instead, Nas ends *Illmatic* with a song designed to amplify the 'other' strand and thereby resolve difficulty posed by the operative nature of the two strands. This next section offers a number of concluding reasons why an album that reports—with such intensity—on the impoverished conditions of the ghetto is infused with utopian hope.

The Utopian Imperative

It is something of a myth, Matthew Gasteier notes, that 'It Ain't Hard to Tell' is the first recording of the *Illmatic* sessions (Gasteier 2009; 95). The song has a backstory, in that, mythologised as the first recorded song, it is last on the listings. From a Blochian perspective, 'It Ain't Hard to Tell' is a song that challenges facts—already deemed backwards—from a more radically temporal point of view; in this case, as a new creative genesis. The sampling of Michael Jackson's disco track 'Human Nature' is significant. Jackson, the inveterate 'king of pop,' comes into the mix after 'Represent,' a song that heralds the realisation of subjectivity as that which can be represented while alluding to the transgression of petty street crime: 'if it wasn't hanging out in front of cocaine spots, we was in the candy factory, breaking the locks' (Nas, 1994). Following 'Represent' *Illmatic* therefore transitions into a song implicitly concerned with transgressing the same existing representational categories. The second iteration of time is now readily apparent. Nas shifts the focus from the coming to consciousness of the contingent Queensbridge subject to lyrics which concern a 'time' of transgression per se. As such, the album moves from the lyrical celebration of transgressive criminal activities in the past—the activities that typify the day-to-day reality of living in Queensbridge—to a 'now' that is indicative of the transgressive potentiality of time itself. This 'now' is neither explicit as past nor future, but what makes both possible. 'Now,' understood through the lens of Blochian time, is that genesis that marks the first song that is now explicit in the last.

'It Ain't Hard to Tell' brings the coming-of-age narrative of *Illmatic* to an end. The narrative concludes with Nas discovering representation. 'Represent' concerns Nas's discovery of rap lyricism as a form of poetry and a subsequent vehicle of representation. The song's chorus, made up of a group shouting the words 'represent, represent,'

is the coming to consciousness of the subaltern group in rhymes that reach a dizzying crescendo. The song is about representing the Queensbridge underclass Nas identifies with, with Nas himself assuming the mantel of king rapper for this group. The high tempo, hard-hitting beats give way to the lower tempo sample-infused 'It Ain't Hard to Tell.' In addition, Nas takes a different point of critique: 'they analyze me, surprise me, but can't magnetize me' (Nas, 1994). Having discovered the power of representation, Nas now discovers a time of its inveterate critique 'scanning while you're planning ways to sabotage me, I leave 'em froze like heroin in your nose, Nas'll rock well, it ain't hard to tell' (Nas, 1994). Time, in this iteration, takes the form of a 'now' transforming what has already come to consciousness; utopian as a genesis for 'as yet' unformulated categories (in terms of the representational process). 'It Ain't Hard to Tell' therefore marks the second iteration of time; an iteration that runs in a complementary fashion to the realist strand.

'It Ain't Hard to Tell' also differs in tone from 'Represent'. The lyrical flow, coupled with the disco-infused sample of Michael Jackson's 'Human Nature,' is hence rhythmically different. Nas now contends he 'is like the Afro-centric Asian, half-man half-amazing' (Nas, 1994), referencing the Five Per Centers' conviction that they are chosen, while transgressing racial categories inscribed in 'Man,' 'Asian,' and 'Afro.' Poetry, as hip-hop, relies on categories of representation, while inculcating new modes of subjective being. Nas claims on 'It Ain't Hard to Tell' that 'niggaz is frozen,' before saying that he'll 'begin like a violin and end like Leviathan' (Nas, 1994). The leviathan is a reference to a mythical sea creature, which has Biblical resonance in fashioning order from chaos at the end of time. Hip-hop poetry can have a defrosting effect, in breaking up representational categories, all the while transgressive of these same categories.

This understanding of poetry shares similarities with the utopianism of Lucy Sargisson, expressed in her text *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression* (2000). 'The function of trangressive utopian thinking,' Sargisson states, is 'to both provoke and permit paradigm shifts in consciousness: thus enabling real sustainable change to be conceivable' (Sargisson 2000; 67). Sargisson's utopianism is a call to open up transgressive spaces of critique, and is given form by Nas's instantiation of representation and critique of it (the changing consensus on the album from

representation as illmatic to time as illmatic). Time, in this second iteration, is transgressive, in Sargisson's sense of the term, in that it overhauls representational categories contingent to place and time ('black rats trapped'). It is the genesis, utopian in this regard, that Bloch invests in a time involved in fashioning a homeland for *all*. For this reason, Queensbridge, the key reference point on the album, is both the ghetto that traps the young Nas and the futural homeland Bloch associates with the utopian.

This second iteration therefore complements *Illmatic*'s coming-of-age story, making explicit two of the album's iterations of time. Songs such as 'N.Y. State of Mind' and 'One Time for Your Mind,' just two examples, focus on the lived reality of the Queensbridge projects. They communicate what it is like to be a subject in the dangerous and often-treacherous reality Woods calls 'racially defined zones of destruction' (Woods 2002; 63). To grow up in zones like these is to sleep with one eye open. The second iteration, in tandem with this strand of time, is indicative of the 'now' of transgression. It is an iteration, this article has argued, of a time that overhauls representational categories contingent to a place and time. *Illmatic* is, no doubt, an album concerned with discovering the power of representational categories. However, it is also an album that amplifies the paradigm shifts required to make a genesis of 'past' and 'future;' one that qualifies as a homeland, or a homeland for *all*.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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