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Images of African-American Masculinity in Hip Hop Music

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Zásady pro vypracování:

Hip hop jako významný nejen hudební, ale i kulturní fenomén, se dostává v posledním desetiletí do popředí odborného zájmu. Je jednak výrazem určité subkultury, jednak se stal součástí i širšího kulturního mainstreamu. Cílem práce proto bude nahlédnout hip hop jako specifický fenomén, který reaguje na některé stereotypy, ale jiné naopak podporuje/ předává. V úvodu práce studentka definuje pojmy, s nimiž bude pracovat, charakterizuje hip hop jako hudební a kulturní jev a zasadí jej do širšího kontextu. Jádrem práce pak bude analýza hudebních textů se zaměřením na často se opakující témata a motivy, především ty spojené s prezentací maskulinity a afro-americké mužské identity. Závěrem se studentka zamyslí nad tím, zda se určité stereotypy v hip hopových textech vyskytují, jaký obraz maskulinity vytvářejí, případně odkud vyrůstají. Studentka se rovněž může pokusit objasnit důvody vlivu hip hopu mimo rámec afro-americké subkultury.

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Abstract

The thesis deals with depictions of African-American masculinity in hip hop music. It analyzes the ways black masculinity is portrayed in hip hop and what stereotypes the images generate. The analysis essentially targets the lyrical content of commercial rap as it reaches a mass audience. The initial part focuses on rap's recurrent themes and attempts to identify the stereotypes it supports. The following chapters try to explain the origin of the narrow portrayals, considering both American and African-American socio-cultural background. Although the work merely draws upon mainstream artists and their songs, it also includes lyrics of publicly less visible artists to illustrate the complexity of the subject matter.

Keywords

hip hop culture, hip hop music, rap, African-American masculinity, stereotypes, African-American culture, music industry

Souhrn

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá vyobrazením afro-americké mužské identity v hiphopové hudbě. Analyzuje zbůsoby, jakými je afro-americká maskulinita v hip hopu prezentována a jaké stereotypy tato vyobrazení vytvářejí. Rozbor se primárně zaměřuje na obsah písňových textů komerčního rapu, neboť disponuje mocí ovlivňovat širokou veřejnost. Úvodní část soustředí pozornost na často se opakující témata hiphopových písní a pokouší se identifikovat stereotypy, které tyto motivy podporují. Následující kapitoly se pokouší osvětlit původ těchto zúžených představ v rámci amerického a afro-amerického socio-kulturního prostředí. Ačkoli se práce opírá především o tvorbu komerčně úspěšných interpretů, pro ilustraci komplexnosti celé problematiky zahrnuje i texty méně viditelných umělců.

Klíčová slova

hiphopová kultura, hiphopová hudba, rap, afro-americká maskulinita, stereotypy, afro-americká kultura, hudební průmysl

Contents

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, hip hop has grown into a global phenomenon. Originally confined to the African-American community residing in the Bronx, New York City, the cultural form first reached national recognition in the 1980s only to gain an international acceptance in the following decades. As a powerful cultural expression, it has shaped the identity, worldviews and values of young generations around the globe. In the course of its evolution from local to global, hip hop has been assimilated into mainstream culture and its rapidly growing popularity turned it into a lucrative commodity. The process of commercialization has not only had an impact on the shape of hip hop. Given the genre's popularity and visibility, it has molded public perceptions of the culture hip hop represents. Despite the multiethnic nature of contemporary hip hop, the genre is still considered to be an art form dominated by males of African-American origin. The performance of black masculinity has always been and continues to be hip hop's central creative force.

The primary focus of this work is to analyze the way African-American masculinity is portrayed in hip hop music and what stereotypes the genre generates. It attempts to identify the stereotypical images and explain their rootedness in both African-American and American socio-cultural setting. Drawing upon rap lyrics as the main source, the analysis chiefly targets "mainstream" or "commercial" hip hop produced in the United States since it reaches and thus affects a mass audience. The thesis uses these two terms to describe artists and music promoted by corporate record companies and aired on commercial radio stations and television. However, the work also includes lyrics of alternative and publicly less visible artists to illustrate hip hop's complexity. The term "hip hop" is commonly used to refer to a genre of music although it covers a set of cultural expressions as will be explained in the initial chapter. Throughout this work, "hip hop" and "rap" are employed interchangeably, both referring to music since it is the main concern of the thesis.

The first chapter places hip hop culture in proper historical and cultural context and briefly describes each of the four elements it encompasses. The following section focuses on the lyrical content of hip hop music. It first gives a short overview of the genre's transformation into a commercial commodity and examines the changes in

lyrics the commercialization brought along. The core of the chapter analyzes songs by the best-selling music artists, providing examples of the ways the themes are portrayed in the lyrics. It also discusses the impact of the themes on the notions of black masculinity. The third chapter examines the parallels between the past images of black males in American popular culture and those that dominate contemporary mainstream hip hop. The rootedness of the representations in the cultural heritage of African-American community is looked at in the following part. The fifth chapter centers on the concept of “authenticity” and its role in the construction of black masculinity in the realm of hip hop. The final chapter presents the work of alternative artists or marginalized songs and ponders the future direction of hip hop.

2. Hip Hop Culture

2.1. Historical and Cultural Background

Hip hop culture, according to Tricia Rose, one of the foremost scholars to address the topic, emerged in the South Bronx in the 1970s, in an era of severe socio-economic changes that tremendously affected the post-industrial urban landscape and communities (Rose 1994, p.41). In his study of American ghettos, Sudhir Venkatesh describes the socio-economic context of the period:

> The economy was stagnating and employment rates for workers at all educational levels were falling as a result of mechanization, plant closings and relocations, and recessions.[…] With high unemployment, welfare rates near 70 percent, and half of its school-aged population dropping out, the housing development was an extreme case of the growing disenfranchisement of inner-city African Americans from societal institutions. (Venkatesh, p.45, p.66)

These factors, together with the omnipresent racial discrimination, contributed to the disintegration of African-American urban communities, prompting a number of destructive social ills such as hustling, drug dealing, gang violence, prostitution, and dropping out of school (Rose 2008, pp.43-51). In this disadvantaged environment, hip hop emerged "as a source for youth of alternative identity and social status" (Rose 1994, p.34). Scholars agree that, because of the disadvantages in their communities, black youth created an oppositional culture as a form of protest to oppression (Ogbar; Perry; Neal). Afrika Bambaataa, one of hip hop's pioneers, commented on the process of hip hop's formation and its role as follows:

> When we made Hip Hop, we made it hoping it would be about peace, love, unity and having fun so that people could get away from the negativity that was plaguing our streets (gang violence, drug abuse, self-hate, violence among those of African and Latino descent). Even though this negativity still happens here and there, as the culture progresses, we play a big role in conflict resolution and enforcing positivity. (http://theuniversalzulunation.tribe.net)

The social background gave shape to "neighborhood crews," groups comprised of hip hop fans, artists, musicians and dancers, which functioned as "a local source of identity, group affiliation, and support system" (Rose 1994, p.34). The cultural expression of

these “alternative families” shared several common features, such as strong ties with urban space and an innovative approach to the use of it, competitiveness, rebellious, anti-establishment attitude, and emphasis on style as a way of identity formation (ibid., pp. 34-36).

2.2. The Four Elements of Hip Hop

Although the definition of hip hop culture has later grown to include other components, such as specific fashion style or slang, it basically consists of four major elements: MCing (rapping), DJing, graffiti (writing) and b-boying (breakdancing). In hip hop, the four cultural activities came together, overlapping, inspiring and enriching one another. Breakdancer Crazy Legs describes the interconnectedness of the four cultural practices in the initial period of hip hop development:

> Summing it up, basically going to a jam back then was (about) watching people drink, (break) dance, compare graffiti art in their black books. These jams were thrown by the (hip hop) D.J….it was about piecing[1] while a jam was going on. (in Rose 1994, p.35)

2.2.1. Breakdancing

Breakdancing emerged in response to disco dances that in the 1970’s dominated dance floors across the United States (Rose 1994, p.47). While disco dances and music focused on camouflaging or reducing breaks between the steps and single tracks, breakdancing, on the contrary, seizes and extends these breaks. DJs would take the breaks (the part of a dance record in which all sounds apart from the rhythmical section drop out) and join them to create a rhythmic base. Rose observes that “At these break points in the DJ’s performance, the dancers would ***breakdance***, executing moves that imitated the rupture in rhythmic continuity as it was highlighted in the musical break” (ibid.).

Style Wars, one of the earliest documentaries about hip hop subculture, gives a view into the development of breakdancing. It shows that the style, originally only a set of several moves and specific footwork, quickly progressed and a number of various moves were added, including head spins, handstands, freezes, back flips and other techniques. In the spirit of hip hop’s competitive character, crews from different

[1] the act of graffiti making (www.urbandictionairy.com)

neighborhoods used breakdancing as a means to challenge each other. The competitive nature of breaking forced individual dancers to improve and constantly work on their own style. (*Style Wars*)

2.2.2. Graffiti

In spite of being a component of hip hop, and hence African-American and Latino culture, modern graffiti has its origins in a tag of a Greek teenager who, working as a messenger, travelled through the New York city on a daily basis, writing his name tag "Taki 183" on subway train cars and walls (*Style Wars*). His manifestation of exclusivity and individualism triggered a wave of creative response among his contemporaries. Many followers embraced this unique mode of expression as an opportunity to arouse public notice; a technique which, at the same time, fitted into hip hop's concept of opposition to established authority, desire for self-expression, and competitive spirit (ibid.).

Tagging quickly developed into a more complex form and simple tags were gradually replaced by larger, elaborate graffiti of various colors, patterns and shapes that sometimes resulted from a cooperation of several artists belonging to the same crew. As Rose suggests, "Group identity and individual development are equally central to graffiti writers' practices" (Rose 1994, pp.43-44).

2.2.3. DJing

In the initial period, DJs' performance was essential for hip hop's development as they "supplied the break beats for breakdancers and the soundtrack for graffiti crew socializing" (Rose 1994, p.51).

The art of a hip hop DJ lies in the manipulation of multiple turntables to produce original sound and music. As opposed to a regular DJ, who selects and plays different records, hip hop DJs create distinctive layers of sound and rhythm by touching and moving vinyl records with their hands, often employing special techniques, such as scratching.

The origins of DJing are connected with the prominent figure of Clive Campbell, better known as Kool Herc, who, influenced by huge sound system outdoor parties in Jamaica, began hosting parties in his Bronx neighborhood (Rose 1994, p.51). Rose

highlights his innovative technique of creating unique collages of break beats, which drew upon a large variety of musical styles, from disco to jazz (ibid.). Occasionally, Kool Herc would insert short raps in his DJ performances. Eventually, DJs started inviting other DJs to excite the audience lyrically. In order to distinguish themselves from the DJs, they began calling themselves MCs. (*Style Wars*)

2.2.4. MCing

Stemming from the initials for "Master of Ceremonies," emceeing or rapping is the art of delivering words or rhymes over a beat. Although it evolved later than the other elements (Rose 1994, p.51), its position within the culture rapidly changed and rapping has become the most prominent and visible aspect of hip hop. As a result, the term rap is nowadays often used interchangeably with hip hop.

The art of rap drew on a rich African and African-American oral tradition of storytelling, including West-African poets called griots, blues and jazz poetry, Jamaican tradition of toasting, or politically charged poetry of The Last Poets (Rose 1994, p.55). According to Rose, since the beginning rap has vocalized "the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America" (1994, p.2).

In terms of form, MCs exploit a range of rhyme schemes and stress patterns, often using alliteration and other poetic devices, such as repetition, wordplay, metaphor and simile. Additionally, it contains a lot of slang expressions, as well as some of the typical features of African American Vernacular English. Like all elements of hip hop, rap holds an aspect of rivalry, which is particularly manifested in rap battles between two artists, but also in the boastful nature of rap lyrics.

3. Up from the Underground: *From "Oldschool" to "Gangsta" Rap*

Whenever a genre achieves mainstream popularity both admirers and critics put it under scrutiny. The terms "mainstream" and "popularity" signify that the genre receives a large amount of media exposure and hence targets a wide audience. While celebrated by admirers its easy availability and substantial visibility are often questioned by the critics who focus on the genre's negative features, as well as effects it has upon the consumers. In contrast to mainstream, marginal music styles (often referred to as "underground") rarely generate heated public debate. The evolution of hip hop music demonstrates the analogy between gradual commercialization and increasing public criticism of a music genre.

In terms of fame and recognition, hip hop's rise bears a resemblance to the evolution of jazz. As Tricia Rose observes, hip hop began as a commercially peripheral music confined to a subculture of local artists and restricted fan base, "characterized by smaller production and promotion budgets" (2008, p.14). In the late 1980s, hip hop's rising popularity together with a new boom in technology moved the genre into the mainstream. Jeffrey Ogbar pinpoints three significant moments that contributed to the transition. In 1986 Run DMC'S *Raising Hell* became the first rap album to reach the top of the Billboard chart. Second, music became a visual medium as two music television networks were launched in 1988: MTV and BET (Black Entertainment Television) both introduced rap-oriented video programs.[2] Along with the *Source*, which later became "the first national hip-hop magazine", and rapid development of hip hop radio stations these factors had a profound impact on the growing recognition of rap music (p.107).

As opposed to the East Coast, which is considered the cradle of the hip hop movement, the release of the album *The Chronic* by Dr. Dre in 1992 helped establish the commercial success of a subgenre called West Cost Hip Hop, referring to music that originates in the Western region of the USA— especially California. The decade saw an immense expansion of the hip hop market, reaching its peak in 1998 when, as Ogbar notes, apart from rock "hip hop records outsold every other genre of music in the USA" (38). Following the success of the 1990s, rap record sales continued to rise persistently

[2] "BET debuted "Rap City", and MTV followed by launching "Yo MTV Raps" (Ogbar, p.107)

at the beginning of the new millennium. In the 2008 Consumer Profile, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) disclosed the record sales rates across all music genres. Between 1999 and 2008, rap constitutes around 10 percent of music sales in the United States, ranking second (behind rock) among 12 other genres. (http://www.riaa.com)

One of the most successful rappers, Ice T, commented on the hip-hop's development as follows, "We come from a time when rap used to agitate the mainstream, now it represents the mainstream." (http://www.artsandopinion.com) Ice T's observation reflects not only the genre's transition in terms of popularity; it also implies a transformation with regard to lyrical content. Many scholars agree that early hip-hop mirrored the tradition of black artistic expression as part of "oppositional culture" and as a "force for social change" (Ogbar, p.39, Rose 2008, pp.243-44, Watkins, p.22).

In general, the first phase of hip-hop's history, often labeled as "old-school" hip-hop, is widely considered to have been a driving force that exposed social injustice via capturing the harsh background in urban African American working-class communities. A legendary song "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five gives a graphic account of life in the ghetto:

Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise no more
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with the baseball bat
I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far
Cause a man with a tow-truck repossessed my car.

However, hip-hop took a different course at the threshold of the 1990s. The socially conscious songs and light-hearted, playful topics were gradually overshadowed by lyrics that explored violence and crime in an explicit and aggressive way. Brutal, cruel, and boastful "urban tales" surpassed depictions of deplorable ghetto conditions (Ogbar, p.108). The narratives usually contain no social message and lack regret for actions taken, as illustrated in the 1988's song "Gangsta Gangsta" by N.W.A.:

I got a shotgun, and here's the plot
Takin niggaz out with a flurry of buckshots
Boom boom boom, yeah I was gunnin'

And then you look, all you see is niggaz runnin'
and fallin' and yellin' and pushin' and screamin'
and cussin', I stepped back, and I kept bustin'.

N.W.A.'s album *Straight Outta Compton* pioneered the subsequent blooming of a subgenre eventually coined as "gangsta rap". The Source magazine journalist Greg Tate identifies the music style as "a reflection and product of the violent lifestyle of American inner cities afflicted with poverty and the dangers of drug use and drug dealing" and adds that "the romanticization of the outlaw" being the central theme of most gangsta rap attracts largely edgy and culturally unconventional suburban youth (http://www.britannica.com). According to W. E. Perkins, gangsta rap grew from the gang culture of South Central Los Angeles, Compton, and Long Beach, as well as from the revival of the pimp lifestyle of East Oakland (in Kubrin, p.361).

With the release of successful songs of West Coast artists such as Snoop Dogg, Ice Cube, 2Pac, Ice-T and others, the subgenre crossed over into the mainstream. As Tricia Rose observes, the rise of gangsta rap in the 1990s paralleled the increasing record sales (2008, p.4). Interestingly, she associates that with the growing appeal of "stories of black ghetto life" to whites. Figures collected by Mediamark Research Inc. support her assertion showing that between 1995 and 2001, white customers constituted 70-75 percent of the hip hop records purchasers (ibid.).

4. "As Nasty As They Wanna Be": *Recurring Themes in Mainstream Rap*

The more media exposure rap music gained, the more controversy it provoked. Opponents and supporters from outside—as well as within the hip hop community—began to question the shape rap music was taking. While the advocates worried about stereotypical portrayals it created, the opponents scrutinized the negative impact on the audience. As a result of commercial success, gangsta rap has become the main target of criticism for recurrent themes of violence, misogyny, drugs, materialism and overall negativism.

4.1. Drugs

Drugs are an integral part of the outlaw culture that is embodied in the gangsta figure. Thus rap music abounds with drugs references. While in the 1980s, during the crack epidemic, the lyrics largely spoke against drug abuse, glorification of drugs has dominated the songs ever since the 1990s (Hess, p.53). A *Daily Mail* correspondent David Derbyshire reports on a study conducted by Denise Herd which confirms the shift. Covering 341 lyrics from the most popular songs, the research revealed that "songs with references to drugs increased six-fold" between 1979 and 1997 (http://www.dailymail.co.uk).

The range of ways the subject is mentioned is wide, so is the scope of slang terms for single substances, which have the role of codes. For instance, *skunky*, *funky*, *doobie*, *pot*, *homegrown*, *sin-semilla*, *Maui-wowie*, *Thai sticks*, *roach*, *indica*, *Mary Jane*, *mad-izm*, and many others stand for marihuana. When Ludacris sings that he "got a lil bit of Blueberry Yum Yum" and that he would have never thought "they could eva taste this good", he is not raving about a blueberry jam but about a marihuana cigarette ("Blueberry Yum Yum"). Some artists appreciate cannabis as a source of inspiration. Channel Live are eager marihuana users because it encourages their creativity:

> *Wake up in the mornin' got the yearnin' for herb*
> *Which loosens up the nouns, metaphors, and verbs*
> *And adjectives, ain't it magic kid what I'm kickin'*
> *[…] Now the high starts to settle*
> *Kickin' fat lyrics that rocks, like heavy metal*
> *[…] Spark the izm, my expertism, is lyricism*

My flow will take you over, like I was hypnotism. ("Mad-Izm")

In "Smoke and Get High", Project Pat describes the physical and psychoactive effects the drug produces. After "blazing" (smoking) some "fire" (marihuana), he feels "paranoid like on crack"[3] having "eyes lit like a match." Cocaine - *coke, Angie, candy cane, snow white, dream, sneeze, line*-and crack cocaine,[4]dubbed as *base, bass, stones, issues, rock, raw, mist, dip, The Devil, Roz,* or simply *crack,* represent the kinds of hard drugs frequently mentioned in rap lyrics. In "Everyone Nose", the group N.E.R.D. compares seductive power of cocaine to an attractive woman:

You got something boys can't deny
It's like apple pie
Cut ya open and you're just white
You ain't tired
You are the cause of riots
Who could say no to you?
Wait till they get a load of you…

Styles P "gets chills" when the topic of "hustling Gs" (distributing grams of illegal drugs) is only raised in conversation. For that reason, he always tries to be "where the powder be at" bragging that he can "blow five bricks[5] to ten in an hour" and "rap full time and still pump bass on the weekend" ("Dope Money"). In "Part Time Mutha" the artist 2Pac captures a dysfunctional family background through the eyes of a female drug addict:

I grew up in a home where no-one liked me
Moms would hit the pipe, every night, she would fight me
Poppa was a nasty old man, like the rest
He's feeling on my chest, with his hand in my dress
Welfare checks never stepped through the front door
Cuz moms would run to the dopeman once more
All those days, had me fiending for a hot meal
Now I'm a crook, got steel, I do not feel.

In a song about heroin ("I Know") Jay-Z represents the drug when he sings: *"Cold sweats occur when I'm not with her/ My presence is a must- must- must,"* describing one of the withdrawal symptoms the drug addict experiences.

[3] One of the side effects of marihuana and crack is paranoia.
[4] Wikipedia defines crack cocaine as "the free base form of cocaine that can be smoked".
[5] The term "bricks" refers to a large quantity of drugs packaged in a brick

Apart from drug abuse, the rappers frequently cover the subject of drug dealing. In the song "Ten Crack Commandments", Notorious B.I.G. explains ten rules a crack dealer should follow in order to avoid trouble. For instance, one should remember to "never let no one know how much dough [money] you hold" because wealth generates jealousy. He advises "not to get high on your own supply" and always "keep your family and business separated". Also, according to the rapper a successful dealer should "never trust nobody", including his own mother. Rick Ross gives an account of dealing practice as a source of wealth while recollecting his childhood role models: *"I'm cooking a brick which is my signature dish/ Time to feed all my niggas this Columbian fish […] I grew up watchin' Columbian drug lords/ Who ever knew I would afford cologne by Tom Ford"* ("Fire Hazard"). In a similar manner, Eazy-E finds his career as a "dopeman" highly lucrative claiming that although unemployed he has become extremely rich, his "pocket's getting bigger" while his customers continue "smoking that rock" ("Dopeman"). Selling drugs as a definite means of financial gain is likewise depicted in the song "Early This Morning" in which Jay-Z describes his every day practice:

I woke up early this morning
Same routine: I'm running game to fiends
Exchanging cash for crack rocks
Back and forth to my stash box
Hundred dollars a week.

Kanye West's "Crack Music" presents a different concept of trafficking, which views hip hop music as a drug itself, a commodity circulated from the ghetto to the masses. He points out that "this dark diction" (rap) has come to be "America's addiction" and has to a large degree hooked American white listeners.

4.2. Violence

Drug use and trade are extensively connected with illicit activities often involving violence. A drug addict (without financial means) is impelled to commit a violent crime (e.g. robbery) in order to secure money to buy the drug. Moreover, drug distribution implies management of relations in the drug trafficking system such as reprisal for violation of transaction rules. Rap lyrics basically comprise two chief forms of violent expression. The first-person narrators either attack their rivals verbally, or use

physical violence to discredit, injure, or kill the challengers. For this purpose, self-proclaimed "gangstas" frequently use a firearm, in songs referred to as *glock, gat, nine, AK, 12 gauge, Mac, strap, pump, heat, 4 pounda, 44, biscuit, ruger*, and others. The rhymes of artists such as 50 Cent or The Notorious B.I.G. illustrate the inevitable junction of drugs and violence. 50 Cent loves "to pump crack" and "to stay strapped"("Blood Hound"); Biggie had to obtain guns to ensure his business runs smoothly getting rid of informers who try to ruin his success: *"Used to sell crack so I could stack my riches/ Now I pack Gats to stop all the snitches/ From stayin' in my business"*("Machine Gun").

Motifs of aggression and violent acts are proven to be pervasive in rap music. A study conducted by Charis E. Kubrin highlights the centrality of violence in rap lyrics. The survey examines lyrical content of albums that had hit platinum status[6] from 1992 to 2000. It is important to note that it isn't limited solely to gangsta rap albums, but considers all albums which fall into the category of rap music. Analyzing a random sample of 632 songs, Kubrin identified violence as the most frequently referenced theme (65 percent of the songs), followed by references to material wealth, objectification of women, and nihilism. From a qualitative point of view, Kubrin suggests that violent imagery in the songs has certain expressive functions. He indicates that violent themes in the narratives are used to "establish social identity and reputation" and subsequently to gain and maintain respect.

In order to build a reputation, the rappers portray themselves as tough and dangerous, referring to themselves as "thugs, killas, gangstas, hustlers, outlaws, and assassins" (Kubrin, p.369). Notorious B.I.G. is "[K]ickin' niggas down the steps just for rep" labeling himself as a "savage" who will do "your brain cells much damage" ("Ready To Die").

Lil Wayne insists: *"You're nobody till you kill somebody"* ("Playing with Fire"). 50 Cent believes that "respect come from admiration or fear," therefore he recommends you to admire him unless you want to "catch one [bullet] in your wig". He lets you choose: *"Get the message from my lines or get the message from the 9's"* ("I'll Still Kill"). C-Murder bolsters his violent identity rapping that he will "smoke [shoot dead] a motherfucker like it ain't no thing" ("DP Gangsta") while Young Buck "loves the sound

[6] Platinum, according to RIAA's certification, means the album had sold over 1,000,000 copies.

of gunfire" demonstrating his passion for gunplay ("Blood Hound"). To reinforce dangerous reputation, the artists also describe themselves as mentally deranged. For instance, DMX warns: *"I'm gonna come with the shovel/ Hit you on a level of a madman whose mind's twisted/ Listed as a manic depressin' with extreme paranoia,"* and he concludes, *"So if you wanna say peace, tame the beast!"* ("Fuckin' with D"). Similarly, Snoop Dogg stresses his insanity as means of intimidation:

> *I never should have been let out the penitentiary*
> *Snoop Dogg would like to say*
> *That I'm a crazy motherfucker when I'm playing with my AK*
> *Since I was a youth I smoked weed out*
> *Now I'm that motherfucker y'all read about*
> *Smoking you and your crew, taking a life or two.*
> ("DP Gangsta")

Threats often concern potential ulterior motives of the enemy. Any hint of deceit will ultimately result in punishment: *"I'm the type of nigga who's quick to blast/ Fuck with me or C and I'll blast your ass"* (Snoop Dogg, "DP Gangsta"); *"I know you bitches know that I ain't to be played with/ Don't have no picks and chooses who gets they head split/ They die quick fuckin' with Turk"* (Turk, "Hope You Niggas Sleep"); *"I'll tell you one thang don't play about mine/ I be bangin' on your front door wit da nine"* (Ace Hood, "Cash Flow"). Dr. Dre has no other choice but to retaliate: *"You fucked with me, now it's a must I fuck with you"* ("Fuck wit Dre Day"). Likewise, acting as an informer is unacceptable and followed by instant vengeance. 2pac had "many dreams, and plenty wishes, no hesitation in extermination of these snitches" ("Runnin'(Dying to Live)"); Project Pat, after he had found out that a person snitched on his friend, "didn't hesitate, caught him in the projects one day, sent him to his grave" ("Cheese and Dope").

For some, thuggish lifestyle is the main source of income. They are not reluctant to use violence in order to get by or become wealthy: *"Money on the mind, murder in the plans/ Disturbin' if you may, but it's dinner for the fam"* (Lil Wayne, "Damage Is Done"); *"It's all about paper, that's my issue/ Fuck peace, you can have a piece of the pistol"* (Ja Rule, "Die"); *"I need all my dough, not a dolla short/ And if you don't have it then you gotta go"* (Ace Hood, "Cash Flow"); *"I'm a self-made Millionaire/ Thug livin', out of prison/ Pistols in the air"* (2Pac, "Hit 'Em Up"). In general, rap lyrics approve, applaud, and thus justify the violent identity of the protagonists. Moreover,

some of them view violence as a natural part of their true self. Big Tymers are "banging" and "slanging" because it is in their "nature" (Hope You Niggas Sleep"); expect Jay-Z "to buck" (shoot) as "it's in his blood" ("Trouble); M.O.P. are "packing blue steel, keeping it real" since they were simply "born to kill" ("Born 2 Kill").

Despite the prevailing glorification of thuggery in rap lyrics, some artists express discontentment with the way of living. 2Pac's song "My Block" conveys a desire to break the vicious circle of violence:

> *Fearing jail but crack sales got me living well*
> *And the system's suicidal with this Thug's life*
> *Staying strapped forever trapped in this drug life*
> *God help me,'cause I'm starving, can't get a job*
> *So I resort to violent robberies, my life is hard*
> *Can't sleep cause all the dirt make my heart hurt.*

In a different song, 2Pac questions the meaning of such existence: *"Why am I fighting to live if I'm just living to fight? / Why am I trying to give if no one gives me a try? / Why am I dying to live if I'm just living to die?"* ("Runnin' (Dying to Live)"). In a like manner, Rapper Butch Cassidy contemplates his condition, *"How much dirt have I done/ My life has just begun/ I sleep with my gun/ My problems weigh a ton"* ("Another Day"). Jay-Z has resigned to his fate asking God for forgiveness, *"Father forgive a nigga, I'm never gonna change"* ("Trouble").

In summation, violence is ranked among the most repetitively occurring themes in rap lyrics; its depiction takes various forms depending on its single expressive function. Apart from the fact that the violent narratives, to a certain extent, portray the socioeconomic background of inner-city youth, they constitute a means how to establish a social identity. Boastful references to gun possession, images of mentally disturbed individuals, and perpetual threatening are used to gain respect and to earn a "tough-guy" reputation.

4.3. Misogyny and Materialism

An act of violence typically involves an aggressor and a victim. In the realm of hip hop, women are commonly targets of prejudice and hatred. One of the possible ways to display (and justify) misogyny is to objectify women. A study done at University of Illinois examined the content of 109 rap music videos aired on TV

throughout the year of 2006. The results identified misogyny and materialism as most often featured themes. The research also revealed a substantial difference between male and female characters in the videos. While male characters are generally connected with a variety of themes, "female characters are more likely to be placed in positions of objectification" (Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang, p.149). According to Mary Crawford, female objectification includes "perceiving women as sexual object—focusing on attributes such as physical attractiveness, sex appeal and submissiveness while disregarding their personal abilities," hence holding them to be inferior to men (p.35).

Degradation of women in popular rap music has become a standard practice; it applies to both music videos as well as to the lyrical content. Chauvinist attitude in rap lyrics is conveyed by several means— ranging from verbal to physical assault. In regards to verbal attack, rappers often use misogynist labels, referring to women as prostitutes. Snoop Dogg's line *"[b]itches ain't shit but hoes and tricks"* ("Bitches Ain't Shit") and Big Tymers' rhyme *"I treat a bitch like a hoe/ a hoe like a slut/ a slut like a nut/ 'cause I really don't give a fuck"* ("Pimpin'") serve as examples. Using three synonyms for a female the authors imply that whatever the label is used for a woman does not matter because she is a man's possession and should be at his disposal.

A song containing a female character almost inevitably suggests a sexual connotation of the lyrics. Some rappers imply sexual intercourse metaphorically. Lil Jon appeals to a woman, *"Now can I play with your panty line?"* ("Get Low"); Notorious B.I.G. remarks triumphantly, *"I got you all pinned up"* ("Fuck You Tonight"); Kaine threatens, *"I will beat that cat with a dog"* ("Wait (The Whisper Song)"). A majority of artitists, however, incline towards explicite depiction of the sex act. The song "Lollipop" details a sexual encounter between rapper Lil' Wayne and a girl he met at a club. Lines include *"I get her on top, she drops it like it's hot/ She wanna lick me like a lollipop."* Kurupt instructs how a woman should be treated: *"Fuck a bitch, don't tease bitch, strip tease bitch"* ("XXPlosive"). Big Boi forced "a ho" to perform oral sex on him, *"I made her eat my meat while I was rubbin' her coochie"* ("We Luv Deeze Hoez"). The sex act, within these conceptual patterns, is separate from intimacy and emotion. It is often portrayed not only as an object but also as an object and an act of violence at the same time. For example, Too Short's domestic sexual encounters begin when he whips "ass like a world champ" ("No Love From Oakland"); the group D12

has lyrics stating that they are "slappin' the hell out of hoes" simply because they "can" warning them about the dangers of misbehavior:

> *And don't be asking me, all kind of questions*
> *All harassing me, calling stressing*
> *Or I may have to release some aggression*
> *Beat you to death and teach you a lesson.* ("Pimp Like Me")

In some cases, the theme of assault escalates into the act of rape: *"[I] keep that bitch up in the storage/ Rape her and record it, then edit it with more shit"* ("French!").

References to low intelligence and negative character traits further accentuate the inferior status of women depicted in hip hop. In terms of mental capacity, a woman can be labeled as "old punk ass bitch, old dumbass bitch" (Outkast, "Roses") or "stupid bitch" (Lil' Jon, "Get Low"). Too Short met a "bitch so dumb" that he "named her misdemeanor" because "it had to be a crime to be that dumb" ("Cocktales"). Regarding their personality, women are presumed to be untrustworthy, calculating, two-faced "tricks". Females deserve nothing but distrust because the only thing they desire in a man is his money and possession. Jay-Z is suspicious of women as they "wanna put Jigga fist in cuffs" and then "divorce him and split his bucks". Hence he advises to "thug 'em, fuck 'em, love 'em, leave 'em" but under no circumstances "feed 'em" since that is a sign of dependence and responsibility ("Big Pimpin'"). 50 Cent accuses a girl of greed because of her preference for mass-market luxury brands, and assures the listener that such "a bitch can't get a dollar out of" him ("P.I.M.P.").

Women in rap are generally taken for deceitful and, in addition, exploited as a means and an opportunity to acquire wealth. The figure of "pimp" or "mack", who solicits for prostitutes and lives off the earnings, is widely spread in the genre. Nelly has got a prostitute "payin' the bills and buyin' automobiles" ("Tip Drill"). Bun B. from the band UGK describes himself as "a million dollar mack" who, in order to get rich, needs "a billion dollar bitch". He displays his poetic side when recruiting prostitutes:

> *Baby you been rollin' solo, time you get down with the team*
> *The grass is greener on that other side, if know what I mean*
> *I show you shit you never seen, the Seven Wonders of the World*
> *And I can make you the eighth if you wanna be my girl*
> *When I say my girl I don't mean my woman, that ain't my style*
> *Need a real street stalker (stalker) to walk a green mile.*
> ("International Players Anthem (I Chose You)")

Too Short openly glorifies the profitability of the pimping lifestyle: *"I used to fuck young-ass hoes/ Used to be broke and didn't have no clothes/ Now I fuck top-notch bitches/ Tellin' stories 'bout rags to riches"* ("I'm a Playa"). The theme of macking as a social ladder to personal success proliferates in rap lyrics. Once they achieve an elevated social status, "pimps" begin to fear losing it. DJay "got hoes on tray" because he "gotta stay paid" so that he may "stay above water" ("It's Hard out Here for a Pimp"). In "Sweetest Girl" rapper Akon expresses resentment that *"[P]impin' got harder 'cause hoes got smarter."*

As illustrated above, the lyrical content of gangsta rap lacks any recognition of women as equal partners. Instead it centers on discrediting and treating them as an article that provokes and deserves abuse, and as a commodity through which one can build wealth.

To conclude, the lyrical content of rap music has undergone notable transformations in the last two decades. After it had entered the mainstream in the mid 1990s it has earned an unfavorable reputation for recurrent themes of violence, drug use/dealing, misogyny, materialism and nihilism. The continuous exploitation of these themes affects the public perception of what being a black male represents. Not only does it narrow the notions of black masculinity, but it also fosters the limited representations.

Nevertheless, these street figures—thug, pimp, and hustler—had been part of the hip hop music long before it reached the top ten on the Billboard pop charts. According to Tricia Rose, however, those icons were rather "complex and ambivalent" holding a certain "social and political significance" (2008, p.2). The increasing commercial value of rap music devolved the figures into "apolitical, simple-minded, almost comic stereotypes" (ibid.). The following chapters examine the aspects of how and why these stereotypical images are anchored in American society and culture.

5. From Sambo to "Gangsta": *The Evolution of the Black Image in American Society and Popular Culture*

Public criticism usually points to a culprit that is most visible in the mass media. Due to its enormous popularity, the critics target hip hop as one of the main sources of negative effect on the younger generation. This unfavorable judgment, however, repudiates or marginalizes the complexity and historical circumstances of the way the unflattering images of Afro-Americans have developed throughout the past two centuries. Some scholars contend that the representations of Blacks in rap music and mainstream media as a whole are more or less rearticulations of old stereotypes firmly anchored in the complicated racial terrain of the United States (Bogle 2001, Ogbar 2007, Rose 2008). This chapter attempts to demonstrate the persistent analogy between the past caricatures of Blacks in American popular culture and present depictions of black males in mainstream hip hop music.

5.1. The Sambo and the Coon

One of the first black figures, the Sambo, emerged during the period of enslavement. Sociologist David Pilgrim notes that Sambo was identified as a cheerful, "loyal and contented servant"[7] who was "not capable of living as an independent adult" ("The Coon Caricature"). Besides the role of a servant or slave, the blacks were expected to entertain. In his work *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* Jan Pieterse recognizes performing as an essential part of slave existence. Entertainment, according to him, served as a means of "reducing friction" and "keeping rebelliousness at bay" (p.132). In addition, slave holders forced their slaves to sing and dance for their own entertainment. The phrase "dancing the slaves" refers to the cruel act of a forced performance, which often involved whipping (ibid.). According to Pilgrim, the fundamental function of the "merry Sambo" stereotype was to excuse and defense slavery. The argument was based on the premise that if a slave is contended then the institution of slavery could not be cruel or inhuman (Pilgrim).

[7] In this respect, the Sambo and the Uncle Tom figures overlap.

As opposed to Sambo, the coon was a more complex caricature. Although acting childish, the coon expressed dissatisfaction with his status but was too lazy or simple-minded to change his position. As Pilgrim points out, "the coon was a Sambo gone bad" (ibid.). The change reflects how the perception of blacks transformed. Thomas Nelson Page illustrates this metamorphosis in *The Negro: The Southerner's Problem* published in 1904. He writes:

> Universally, they [White Southerners] will tell you that while the old-time Negroes were industrious, saving, and not misled, well-behaved, kindly, respectful, and self-respecting, and while the remnant of them who remain still retain generally these characteristics, the "new issue," […] are lazy, thriftless, intemperate, insolent, dishonest, and without the most rudimentary elements of morality. […] they report a general depravity and retrogression of the Negroes at large in sections in which they are left to themselves, closely resembling a reversion to barbarism. (in Pilgrim)

The post-Civil War culture portrayed the coon either as a chicken-loving rural buffoon or as an urban black, wearing flamboyant clothes and speaking debased English to point to his lower intelligence (Pilgrim). The coon's only ambition was relaxation that he spent "strutting, styling, fighting, avoiding real work, eating watermelons, and making a fool of himself" (ibid.). In terms of physical appearance, typical features included "lips like watermelons, eyes like saucers, wild curly hair and elongated bodies" (Pieterse, 135). These depictions of coons appeared on the sheet music covers whose function was to attract the public to buy so-called "coon songs"—a genre of music that gained wide popularity in the 1980s (ibid.). The songs portrayed Blacks not only as lazy clowns but also as a social threat to the white American majority. As James M. Dormon maintains, "blacks began to appear as devoid of honesty or personal honour, […] making money through gambling, theft, and hustling, rather than working to earn a living" (http://www.jstor.org). Nathan Bivins' song "Gimme Ma Money" from 1898 serves as an example:

> *Last night I did go to a big Crap game,*
> *How dem coons did gamble wuz a sin and a shame…*
> *I'm gambling for my Sadie,*
> *Cause she's my lady,*
> *I'm a hustling coon,…dat's just what I am.*
> (https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu)

If compared with Jay-Z's "In My Lifetime", the two songs bear a striking resemblance although separated in time by almost a century. In a similar manner to Bivins', Jay-Z's song embraces the hustling/gambling lifestyle:

> *I'm shooting to Vegas, gambling green-o at the casino*
> *Schoolin' the dice like Vinny Barberino*
> *Welcome back, the '94 version of the mack*
> *As soon as these ladies see me they don't know how to act.*

The coon and the Sambo caricatures and their variations were two common stock characters of minstrelsy (Pilgrim). The emergence of the minstrel show dates back to late 1820s when white performers began to imitate black culture, specifically slavery. The theatrical performance involved wearing a black make-up, singing comic songs, dancing and doing skits. Minstrelsy, according to Pieterse, originated in the Northern states as an analogy to the performing black slave in the South, and became a popular form of entertainment for Northerners who had to cope without slaves (p.132). One of the pioneers of the genre— Thomas D. Rice— created a famous role known as the "Jim Crow" character after he had seen a black slave perform in the South. Although the white minstrel performers drew inspiration merely from African musical elements they refused to recognize the African roots of the genre. The minstrel songs were simply considered "primitive" and viewed as "America's own music *par excellence*" (pp.133-134). Robert Toll, the author of *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-century America*, describes the entry of African Americans onto the minstrel stage. He notes that despite the explicit anti-abolitionist tone and white dominance in the genre, African Americans began to perform in minstrel show in the middle of the nineteenth century (p.206). On the one hand, they acquiesced to public demand reinforcing racist stereotypes. Nevertheless, Toll considers that to have been a unique and pioneering opportunity for black dancers, musicians and actors to perform publicly and to make a livelihood (p.228). The minstrel show had a large impact on musical theater, such as vaudeville, which was later supplanted by movies.

The technological progress at the beginning of the twentieth century made it easier to promote the coon stereotype. The 1929 films such as *Hearts in Dixie, In Old Kentucky* or the 1934 *Stand Up and Cheer* featured legendary actor Stepin Fetchit who was both condemned and acclaimed for popularizing the "arch-coon" in the film

industry (Pilgrim). A cinema historian Daniel J. Leab observes that the Stepin Fetchit character "became identified in the popular imagination as a dialect-speaking, slump-shouldered, slack-jawed character who walked, talked, and apparently thought in slow motion" (in Pilgrim).

Growing concern about the images of black males in hip hop documents the fact that the legacy of the Sambo and coon image still persists. Voices from within the hip hop community have reflected upon the issue, expressing disapproval in the media or through the song writing. Chuck D from Public Enemy, for instance, alludes to Stepin Fetchit in "Burn Hollywood, Burn," threatening to retaliate for years of disrespect and ridicule:

Make us all look bad like I know they had
But some things I'll never forget yeah
So step and fetch this shit
For all the years we looked like clowns
The joke is over smell the smoke from all around
Burn Hollywood burn.

At the beginning of their music career, the two members of the group The Eastside Boyz adopted names Big Sam and Lil Bo, directly linking their rap identities to the Sambo caricature (Ogbar, p.31). The act evoked indignation within the hip hop circle. Rapper Mos Def, in disbelief, questioned the consequence of the idea: "What are we supposed to tell our kids? After Malcolm [X], Martin [Luther King] and [W.E.B.] Du Bois we got Sam-Bo?" (in Ogbar, p.32). The Boston group the Perceptionists denounces the way mainstream artists keep following the "coon pattern" that proved to bring financial success and fame at the expanse of their own dignity:

But does that mean we should be shucking and jiving
Fucking and kniving just to keep our bank accounts thriving
See I walked the path my elder laid out
Cause acting like a monkey for white folks is played out
I get my own money, on my own turn
Got heat for everybody, watch the microphone burn.
("Black Dialogue")

The Columbus-based hip hop duo Soul Position equates popular rappers to Sambos in the song "Hand Me Downs":

My momma gave me Donny Hathaway
"Young, Gifted, and Black"
I miss the positivity,

I wanna bring it back
But Rap nowadays is by a bunch of ignorant cats
No "Young, Gifted and Black"
Just guns, bitches and crack
I react by turning off BET
And Sambos telling me what blackness is supposed to be.

Not only the rappers, however, worry about the "infectious" coon imagery. Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* gives a clear message about the state of black male representations within popular culture. Lee's controversial satire follows the story of a frustrated African American TV writer who decides to develop a modern-day minstrel show believing the network will dismiss it for its conspicuous racism. To his amazement, the show becomes tremendously successful. Throughout the film Lee uses irony to criticize the perpetuation of racially charged images in the media, as well as in gangsta rap itself.

In a similar vein, the Stop Coonin Movement, established in 2006 by a group of educators, artists and activists, aims to encourage people to think more critically about the ways black people are portrayed in various domains of popular culture, including hip hop. The movement's webpage reads that their "business philosophy" is to "Hustle Consciousness." The core of their campaign lies in the distribution of "thought provoking" T-shirts designed in such a way so as to spark discussion. Profit from the sale is used for educational purposes (http://stopcooning.com). The fact that a group of people felt an urge to initiate such a project, together with concerned musicians and artists, demonstrates the continuous presence of the Sambo and coon prototypes in the American pop-culture, including hip hop.

5.2. The Black Brute

The emergence of the black brute figure in popular culture, according to Pilgrim, coincides with the end of the Emancipation and Reconstruction period ("The Brute Caricature"). Based on general assumptions that slavery restrained the animalistic predispositions of blacks, some observers argued that without slavery blacks were reconnecting with their supposedly true—"savage" and "criminal"—selves (ibid.). Towards the end of the century, white writers began to portray black males as brutal beasts. Charles S. Smith, for instance, described a black male as "the most brutal and merciless creature upon the earth;" Charles Caroll, along with Thomas Nelson Page,

associated blacks with rape, writing that "mulatto brutes were the rapists and murderers of his time" (in ibid.). Accusations of sexual assault were used as a motive for lynching. Pieterse points out that from 1989 to 1899 "a person was lynched every other day, and nine cases out of ten the victim was a black who had been accused of rape" (p.177). While Pilgrim contends lynching was used as "a social control mechanism" to implant fear in blacks and to discourage them from voting, Pieterse claims it resulted from anxiety and jealousy of black male virility (p.177).

Moreover, Darwin's theory of evolution helped disseminate the assumption among whites that black people were physically and mentally very close to animals. As Mia Bay notes, Darwinists "assigned blacks a very low place on the ladder of evolution—often midway between man and beast" (p.147). This belief was reflected in popular art at the turn of the century depicting blacks "as ape-like figures in political cartoons, […] and advertising" (ibid.). D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* epitomized all the major anti-black caricatures, including the Brute, also identified as the "Black Buck" archetype. In his work *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*, David Bogle describes bucks as "big, baadddd niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh" (pp.13-14). Bogle also calls attention to the film's impact on the audience. He believes that due to the cinematically inexperienced public, the terrified viewers perceived the character's sociopathic portrayal as reality (p.17).

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960' affected the way black race was portrayed in popular culture. The brute figure was no longer convincing and was replaced by distinguished, elegant, sophisticated characters, the most famous impersonated by Sidney Poitier. However, as the Black Power movement grew stronger and more radical, the intimidating violent buck archetype returned in the 1971 blaxploitation[8] films such as *Shaft* and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. (pp.175-234) Bogle presents the main character as a self-possessed alpha-male who, taking in account the film's huge success, proved that "audiences were ready for a sexual black movie hero" (p.235). The Sweetback figure appealed especially to black youth, who perceived his violent retaliation as a triumph over the oppressive white system. The

[8] *The Free Dictionary* defines the term as follows: "A genre of American film of the 1970s featuring African-American actors in lead roles and often having antiestablishment plots, frequently criticized for stereotypical characterization and glorification of violence."

idealization of the blaxploitation villains glamorized the poverty-stricken ghetto life, and consequently elevated the "pimp/outlaw/rebel" to a heroic celebrity among the urban youth (p.236).

If we focus on visual aspects of hip hop's presentation in popular culture, the image of the black boastful, menacing hypermale seems to be omni-present, reaching from music magazine and album covers to hip hop videos. Watching rapper DMX posturing, making threatening gestures, topless to expose his dark muscular body in the "Ruff Ryders' Anthem" music video evokes associations of the wild beast or the black buck stereotype. In lyrics, the artists often bring forth their animalistic tendencies. Lil' Wayne does so in several songs: *"She a monster, but I'm a beast/ Take her clothes off, with my teeth"* ("Popular"); *"I'm from New Orleans nowhere near peace/ Pure Beast, Fear Free, Dear Grief"* ("Sportscenter"); *"Everybody got tools, so you will need a hammer/ I'm a pill poppin' animal, syrup sippin' nigga"* ("The Rapper Eater"). Similarly, 50 Cent fosters his intimidating thuggish reputation in "Till I Collapse (Remix)": *I'm like an animal with it when I spit it, it's crazy/ Got semi-autos and put holes in niggas tryna play me."* Fresh Kid Ice highlights his animal instincts describing himself as "a dog in heat, a freak without warning" ("Me So Horny"). LL Cool J pays homage to the violent Shaft character when he boasts, *"Listen to my gear shift/ I'm blastin', outlastin'/ Kinda like Shaft, so you could say I'm shaftin'"* ("Mama Said Knock You Out").

Apart from blaxploitation movies like *Shaft*, echoes of Brian de Palma's gangster film *Scarface* from 1983 often reverberate through the lyrics. The film follows the rise and fall of a Cuban refugee who becomes a powerful drug lord ("Scarface"). Given the plentiful references to the main protagonist in lyrics, a number of rappers have regarded Tony Montana (aka Scarface) as an influential role model. In an interview for the cable television Vh1, rapper Fat Joe speaks about the impact of *Scarface* on the hip hop community:

> Everyone felt like if Tony Montana could come up they can come up too. […] Ya, it's crazy but ya know Scarface the movie it's like the code of the streets man. Everybody who thinks they gangsta or are gangsta live by that movie, word. (http://www.vh1.com)

In "N.Y. State of mind", rapper Nas compares himself to the Scarface character:

Musician, inflictin' composition
Of pain I'm like Scarface sniffin' cocaine
Holding a M-16, see the pen I'm extreme
Now, bullets holes left in my peepholes
I'm suited up in street clothes
Hand me a nine and I'll defeat foes.

Big Punisher demonstrates his feeling of kinship with the hero: *"Packing the ones, magnums, cannons and Gatling guns/ It's Big Pun! The only son of Tony Montana"* ("The Dream Shatterer"). Lil Wayne dubs himself "Scarface with diamond teeth" ("Scarface"). Finally, rapper Scarface ostensibly pays a tribute to the film by choosing to perform under the name of the main character. Ultimately, a parallel can be drawn between popular rap and the film. A mainstream rapper and the outlaw Scarface resemble in several ways. They both display indulgent wealth (or desire to attain it), blatant machismo, as well as refusal to ever be compromised.

Nevertheless, the film industry is not the only force that has helped to shape and foster the image of an aggressive "macho" black male in popular culture. Some black athletes and professional boxers in particular have embodied the black brute stereotype. In *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, Imani Perry considers Muhammad Ali to be "one of the forerunners of hip hop" because he introduced "black language styles and traditions" into the mainstream (p.58). Indeed, Ali's ostentatious exhibition of skills, oppositional attitude and arrogant demeanor coincides with the badman style of hip hop artists. Likewise, the former heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson promoted the brute impression in the public eye. As Joyce Carol Oates noted, "Tyson suggests a savagery only symbolically contained within the brightly illuminated ring" (http://jco.usfca.edu).

References to both Ali and Tyson appear in hip hop lyrics. The two sports icons are often used metaphorically to symbolize the MC's skills and to confirm their masculinity: *"When I rhyme, something special happen every time/ Something like Ali in his prime"* (50 Cent, "Many Men Wish Death"); *"Spoke my mind and didn't stutter one time/ Ali said even the greatest gotta suffer sometime/ so I huff and puff rhymes, lyrics so sick wit it"* (T.I., "No Matter What"); *"I'm like Tyson, icin' I'm a soldier at war/ Got concrete rhymes, been rappin' for ten years and/ Even when I'm bragging, I'm being sincere!"* (LL Cool J, "I'm Bad").

Despite the fact that the artists themselves bolster the hyper-masculine thug imagery in commercial rap, its roots reach further into the past. As illustrated above, social values and assumptions reflected in various domains of culture such as art and sports grounded the stereotypes before they proliferated in rap. As Bogle notes, the growing hip hop subculture in the late 1970s reflected and drew inspiration from the badman trope (p.236). However, the rise of gangsta rap, along with its emphasis on violence and undeniable impact on hip hop as such, continuously amplifies the obscuration and reduction of black male masculinity to an arrogant, oversexed caricature.

5.3. The Pimp

In the same way the blaxsploitation film wave of the 1970s glamorized the outlaw character, it glorified the pimp figure. Films like *Super Fly, Dolemite* and *The Mack* elevated the pimp to the status of a hero among the urban street cultures (Bogle, p.240). Rapper Too Short recalls the lingering effect of *The Mack* in 1980s Oakland:

> When I moved up here, I noticed that a lot of people looked like pimps, yunno, they were dressing like pimps, acting like pimps, talking like pimps, wanting to be pimps, a lot of them weren't, but it was a pimp thing. People were looking at the movie *The Mack*. It was filmed in Oakland and everybody had a relative that was in the movie that they had a story about, the day they were on the set or some shit. It was like pimp pride in Oakland, people were proud of the pimp heritage. (www.riotsound.com)

The black urban culture was also influenced by the literary work of Iceberg Slim aka Robert Beck who, to a great extent, drew from his own rich pimping experience (Watkins, p.238). In the preface to one of Beck's books Ice-T recounts the popularity of the author among his peers:

> Even before I knew who Iceberg Slim was, I knew the man's words. Ghetto hustlers in my neighborhood would talk this nasty dialect rich with imagery of sex and humor. My buddies and I wanted to know where they picked it up, and they told us, "You better get into some of that Iceberg stuff! (*Doom Fox*, Introduction)

In his study, *Can't Knock the Hustle: Hustler Masculinity in African American Culture* Garnes, when focusing on their status within the Afro-American community, describes

the subcultural pimps as acclaimed and highly respected figures because they earn a rich living "solely from the work of others" (p.13). In ghettos—a community associated with chronic unemployment—such lifestyle easily becomes a symbol of upward mobility (p.11). As Too Short's and Ice-T's claims reveal, the pimp enjoyed a high reputation and black urban youth were inclined to imitate the icon's style, attitude and slang. Growing up from the subculture, hip hop seems to have absorbed the trend and the pimp stylization has become an integral part of a hip hop artist's image. The enduring heroization of the figure is especially apparent in mainstream hip hop's display of conspicuous materialism in lyrics and music videos.

Aside from luxurious lifestyle the pimp's appeal lies in his control over female body, which he uses as an object of his sexual prowess or as a commodity. Female subjugation thus results from perceiving women as inferior to men. Pieterse maintains that throughout American history, black women were traditionally assigned the lowest position in the social hierarchy (p.178). According to him, the black woman was "the cheapest item on the labour market, manipulated as a sexual object or as servant" (ibid.). Within the African American community itself, viewing women as subordinate can be traced to the Jazz period. Burton Peretti, the author of *The Creation of Jazz*, comments on the situation on the 1920s: "In their relations to women, many jazzmen were conditioned by their high exposure to prostitutes, dancing girls, and other women who functioned in northern entertainment centers as commodified sex objects" (p.124). In connection with pimping, Peretti describes the wide-spread desire among musicians at that time to be pimps because it was seen as the easiest way to avoid the label of an unemployed man and thus to "elude the police's strict vagrancy laws" (p.36).

The social recognition of women shaped two principal stereotypes about black women. Analogous to the male stereotypes of asexual Sambo and virile brute are "the desexualized mammy"—and its opposite—the "sexually available" and uncontrollable Jezebel or Sapphire (Pieterse, p.178, Rose 2008, p.152). While the former has generally vanished, the second has become ubiquitous, to a great extent on account of the commercialization of hip hop (Rose 2008, p.153). Scantily clad women in music videos and their degradation in rap lyrics have become a norm. The commodification of pimping style even caused the word itself to permeate other spheres of mainstream pop-culture, such as the MTV *Pimp My Ride* show. Based on the flamboyant appearance of

the pimp figure, the verb in the title of the car-customizing show means to make a car look cool and flashy—like a pimp. In 2003 rapper Nelly incited controversy when he launched his new energy drink called Pimp Juice. The product was condemned by several culture groups for its alleged glorification of a pimp lifestyle ("Pimp Juice").

In conclusion, despite the fact that hip hop participates in promoting stereotypical images of black masculinity it did not create them. The notions of Sambo, coon, Brute Negro and pimp had been determined historically and socially before they proliferated in hip hop. As Tricia Rose points out, "Commercial hip hop […] represents a new fascination with old and firmly rooted racial fantasies about sexual deviance (pimps and hoes) and crime and violence (gangstas, thugs, hustlers)" (2008, p.229).

6. "The Signifying Rapper": *Legacy of Black Folk Tradition in Hip Hop Rhetoric*

As explained previously, mainstream hip hop rearticulates and fosters racially charged stereotypes about black males that considerably distort the notions of black masculinity. However, in order to fully understand the presence of these images in rap it is also necessary to consider if and how they are rooted in the culture they represent.

Rappers' style and the images put forth in the lyrics have roots in African American oral tradition, especially in the folktales of tricksters (Perry, p.30). Originally from West-African mythology, the trickster figure was transmitted to African American folklore in the nineteenth century. For instance, Brer Rabbit—the central character in *Uncle Remus* stories— is an "incarnation" of the African tricksters Anansi and Esu (ibid.). In his study *The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey* American literary critic Henry Louis Gates describes Esu as the "messenger of gods", "divine linguist" and "master of style" who represents "the mystical barrier" between the divine and the profane world (p.4). Generally, the African American tricksters demonstrate dominance over language which they use to outwit a physically stronger opponent (Perry, p.31, Gates, p.5).

6.1. Toasts

Trickster folk tales were antecedents of *toasting* (Perry, p.30), a genre of black oral practice that markedly mirrors in rap. As John Szwed explains:

> The most likely candidate for a direct forbearer of modern rap is the toast, the rhymed monologue, an African-American poetic form that typically recounts the adventures of a group of heroes who often position themselves against society both as so shrewd and powerful as to be superhuman, or so bad and nasty as to be sub-human (in Perry 66).

Similarly, in his analysis of Philadelphia street folklore *Deep Down in the Jungle* (published in 1963), Roger D. Abrahams identifies two basic hero types found in toasts: the tough, strong badman who tends to gain dominance through violence; and the

cunning, manipulative trickster, seeking mastery through mental and verbal dexterity rather than through physical strength (pp.66-70).

The African American folk legend *Stagger Lee*[9] embodies the quintessence of the Abraham's badman archetype. In his book *Stagolee Shot Billy* Cecil Brown traces the origins of the legend and the hundreds of songs and versions of the ballad based on it. Since its birth the folk tale has inspired numerous musicians ranging from blues to rock or hip hop artists. Toast tradition invariably yielded to the charms of the undaunted cold-blooded killer. Interestingly, Brown observes how toast performers modified the perspective from which the story was told. The original version of the ballad had the form of a third-person narrative. After the rise of toast tradition, the black inner-city youth began preferring first-person point of view when telling the story of Stagolee (178). As Brown notes, "[…] the speaker performed Stagolee, taking on the hero's character along with the role" (ibid.). By the means of toast, young men established and affirmed their reputation as feared, yet respected, "badmen" among their peers (ibid.). The following dialog is a sample taken from a toast, unfolding from Stagolee's point of view:

> *I said, "Bartender, you don't know who I am."*
> *He said, "Frankly motherfucker, I don't give a damn."*
> *I said, "Well, you'd better look up and see,*
> *'Cause I'm that bad motherfucker, my name's Stacka Lee."*
> *He said, "Well Stack, I heard you was down this way,*
> *But I meet bad motherfuckers like you each day and every day."*
> *Well, two seconds later, that motherfucker lay dead,*
> *'Cause I done put a hole in his motherfuckin' head!* (p.66)

Stacka Lee's uncompromising attitude and self-proclaimed "badness" resound in much of today's hip hop. Some rappers convey their toughness in the titles of the songs alone: "I'm Bad" (LL Cool J); "I'm Raw" (Fabulous); "I'm Ill" (Red Cafe). Big L gives a warning, *"Protect ya fuckin' neck nigga/ Not a role model, I'm a bad figure"* ("Da Graveyard"). Lil Wayne claims to be "a bad boy obviously", who is "popping at your Ivy League" ("Stuntin'"); and Tim Dog is "so bad" that he will "whip Superman's ass" ("Fuck Compton"). Moreover, rap and toasts share the narrator's identification with the hero. In both forms, the performer pretends that the hero's deeds are his own. This

[9] The spelling of the name varies.

particularly applies to rappers' violent tales that describe in detail physical assault or homicide.

One of the most well-known toast trickster figures is the *Signifying Monkey* (Perry, p.60). In spite of occurring in many versions, the story line basically centers on three stock characters: the Monkey, the Lion, and the Elephant. The Monkey convinces the Lion that the Elephant has been tarnishing his image. The Lion, angered at the insult, insists on apology from the Elephant, who rejects it and eventually trounces the Lion. The Lion realizes his mistake was to take the Monkey's words literally while failing to recognize that the Monkey was signifying (Gates, p.7). Gates interprets *signifying* as "a trope that subsumes other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony […], and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis" (p.3). He concludes that within vernacular discourse the term denotes "modes of figuration itself" (p.4). Below is an introduction of one of the tale's version as recorded by Abrahams in Philadelphia:

> *Deep down in the jungle so they say,*
> *There's a signifying motherfucker down the way.*
> *There hadn't been no disturbin' the jungle for quite a bit,*
> *For up jumped the monkey in the tree one day and laughed,*
> *"I guess I'll start some shit."*
> *Now the lion come through the jungle one peaceful day,*
> *When the signifying monkey stopped him and this what he started to say.*
> *He said, "Mr. Lion," he said, "a bad-assed motherfucker down your way."*
> *He said, "Yeah! The way he talks about your folks is a certain shame.*
> *I even heard him curse when he mentioned your grandmother's name.* (p,113)

Here the Monkey figures as a troublemaker who, out of boredom, decides to poke fun at the king of the jungle. Aware of his inferiority in terms of status and physical strength, he uses his verbal skills to challenge the Lion. In the song "Signifying Rapper", Schoolly D adapted the tale, changing the setting of the story to a ghetto:

> *Way, way down, in the ghetto Tee*
> *The badass pimp stepped on the signifying rapper's feet*
> *And the rapper said, Nigga can't you see*
> *You're standin' on my motherfucking feet?*
> *The badass pimp said, Sure I ain't heard a cocksucking word*

you said
You say some more, I'll be standin' on your motherfucking head
Yeah that's what he said
Cause every day, when the sun go down
The badass pimp come and kick that rappers ass all over ghetto town
But the rapper got wise, started using his wit
And said man, I'm gettin' tired of this kick-ass shit
So early, early early the very next day
The rapper said, mister pimp, mister pimp I got something to say
There's this mean, big bad faggot comin' your way
He talk about you so bad, turn my hair gray

In his version of the tale, Schooly D substitutes the animal characters by ghetto figures. As opposed to the previous variant, the Monkey (the rapper) employs his wit in order to fight an oppressor (the badass pimp), who constantly tyrannizes him. In both versions though, the Monkey leans on his brains to challenge authority as if to ridicule their status of power. The Monkey simply aims to upset the established hierarchical system. From this point of view, ***signifying*** denotes what Abrahams calls a "technique of indirect argument or persuasion" (p.52), which here is used to confront a member of hierarchically higher group. Still, Abrahams argues that the term "can mean any of a number of things," for instance, "to carp, cajole, needle and lie;" "the propensity to talk around a subject;" "making fun of a person or situation;" and "speaking with the hands and eyes" (p.54).

Abrahams' interpretation of the technique resembles descriptions of ***macking***, which is synonymous with ***pimping***. The ***Urban Dictionary*** defines the verb "to mack" as follows: "To hit on, flirt with, or seduce a female by using verbal or sometimes physical means of persuasion" (urbandictionary.com). The pimp tends to tease, flatter and persuade a female in order to gain sexual (and secondarily material) dominance. It is the rhetoric skill and persuasive power that connects the Monkey and the pimp figure. Correspondingly, rappers, who often assume pimp personae, epitomize verbal mastery.

Another feature that directly connects rappers and toast performers refers to the way they both use discourse as a source of pride and self-admiration. The act of boasting usually involves humiliation of the rival. A section of a different toast registered by Abrahams illustrates the Monkey's narcissism. After the Elephant beats him, the Lion is confronted by insults from the Monkey. He first calls the Lion a "chump" and then disputes his privileged position in the jungle:

You call yourself a real down king
But I found you ain't a goddamned thing.
Get from underneath this goddamned tree
'Cause I feel as though I've got to pee. (p.116)

Apart from contemptuous remarks, the Monkey (the rapper) unscrupulously brags in Schoolly D's song:

He said, damn somethin'smells
He said, mister badass pimp, you look like you've been through hell
As I told one of my hoes before you left
I should've kicked your ass my motherfucking self

Braggadocio and slurring was a part of toast tradition and later permeated the realm of rap. Abrahams believes these modes of expression represent a significant facet of vernacular verbal strategy. On the grounds of his observation, he found out that black inner-city youth employ boastful and degrading language to establish, strengthen or exhibit their masculine power (p.59).

6.2. Dozens

Insults are central to another element of African American oral tradition known as *dozens* (Abrahams, p.49) Variously called "playing the dozens," "playing," "sounding," and "woofing," the practice involves two competitors who take turns insulting one another until one of them has nothing to say in return (ibid.). The insults commonly target the family members of the opponent, particularly the mother, or the competitor himself. A collection of black street poetry by Onwuchekwa Jemie provides plentiful illustrative examples:

Your mama is lower than whale shit—and that's at the bottom of the ocean.
Your father is so low he has to look up to tie his shoes.
You're so low down you need an umbrella to protect yourself from ant piss. (Yo mama!, p.4)

Based on his research among Philadelphia urban youth, Abrahams considered the dozens to be an instrument for releasing from anxiety and aggression, as well as for affirmation of their masculinity (p.58). The influence of playing the dozens is especially

apparent in the practice of "battling" in hip hop. Rap battles, whether face to face or on record, are verbal sessions in which two men disparage one another's masculinity. The subject matter in battles usually consists of bragging, threats to the opponent's security, challenging his rapping skills or questioning his sexual orientation. The lines from Immortal Technique's song "Diabolical" include all:

> *Can't freestyle, you're screwed off the top like bottle caps*
> *Beneath the surface, I'm overheating your receiver circuits*
> *By unleashing deeper verses that priests speak in churches*
> *But your preach is worthless*
> *Fist fucking a pussy's face, holding a hand grenade*
> *So if I catch you bluffin'*
> *Faggot, you're less than nothing*
> *I just had to get that stress off my chest like breast reduction*
> *You motherfucker are nothing, you cannot harm me.*

Technique's verse manifests the heritage of African American oral tradition in rap music: challenging a rival through offensive language being the fundamental principle of the dozens; threatening and display of fearlessness embodied in the badman figures like Stagger Lee; and finally outspoken conceit and verbal dexterity including use of figurative language as representative features of the mischievous Signifying Monkey.

7. "Keeping It Real": *The Construction of Authenticity in Hip Hop*

The recurrent themes in rap lyrics, which help promote the distorted notions of black males, are also closely connected with the concept of authenticity in hip hop. "Realness" and the process of its affirmation are central to a rapper's approval within the hip hop community as they have a direct relationship with the artist's credibility. As Ogbar aptly puts it, "[w]hether gangsta or conscious, being a real nigga has currency in rap" (p.43).

Although the principle of what is considered to be authentic in hip hop is rather dynamic, critics agree that it is fundamentally associated with the socio-economic background of the hip hop's founders (Perry, p.87, Ogbar, p.39). According to Ogbar, authenticity in hip hop suggests "an intimate familiarity with the urban, working-class landscapes that gave rise to hip hop in the 1970s" (p.39). In other words, this criterion requires a rapper, who desires to be recognized as "real," to demonstrate profound knowledge of the life in a ghetto. Thus a rapper who claims to be "keeping it real" is expected to tell stories about being a part of that life, which he uses as a means to prove he intimately knows the environment, and thereby he enhances his credibility as an artist. Nevertheless, as Perry points out, this authenticating instrument "does not disallow fiction," nor "imaginative construction" of hip hop's storytelling. The phrase rather demands that the artists use a set of "symbols" through which they assert their loyalty to the community (Perry, p.87).

Ghetto-centric expression dominated the genre before it entered the mainstream. Nevertheless, as Ogbar writes, with the rising popularity of gangsta rap the rappers began to focus their attention not only on portraying but primarily on promoting the black inner-city criminal lifestyles (pp.42-43). The commercialization of hip hop turned drug dealing, gang banging and pimping into the glorified aspects of street-based lifestyle in gangsta narratives. Thugishness, pimping and violence became symbols of the *'hood*. To a large extent, this fact also changed the notion of authenticity in hip hop. "Realness" was no longer connected exclusively with working-class urban pedigree and with reflection of miserable ghetto conditions, but at the same time became synonymous with proclamation of violence and illicit activities and with celebration of the thug

lifestyle itself. "Thug," as Ogbar notes, "has become synonymous with being a "real nigga" (p.43).

The following examples show a variety of ways rappers affirm their credibility in the lyrics. In a remix of the song "I'm So Hood," several artists illustrate some of them. Lil Wayne's verse confirms the inter-related dependence of authenticity and one's affiliation with the black neighborhood: *"I'm so good, I'm so straight, you so fake/ I'm so real, I'm so hood."* Fat Joe takes on the role of a drug dealer and labels himself as a direct product of the environment's forces: *"Youse a crack baby that means your momma paid me/ You can't even blame me, that's what the hood made me."* Ludacris adheres to the norms of gangsta rap expression, portraying the place he wants to be associated with as a life-threatening arena which one should not enter without carrying guns: *"In my hood/ Everybody come equipped with bangers, throwin' up our middle fingers/ And you know I don't slip, so I gotta keep/ Ten in the clip and one in the chambers."*

In a similar manner, references to law violation or prison give rappers' narratives stamp of approval and credibility. Obviously, if a rapper has a criminal record it only adds to his authenticity. In "Real as It Gets" Jay-Z rhymes: *"I rap and I'm real, I'm one of the few here,"* acknowledging "all [his] east coast niggas that hustle to live" and "all [his] niggas up north that's doin' a bid." In the following part of the song, Jay-Z declares that he will send a luxurious jet for his imprisoned friends after their release. In spite of becoming wealthy and spatially removed from the ghetto, Jay-Z affirms his place in the framework of authenticity by binding himself to people who actually are involved in illicit activities. Also, the line *"I used to duck shots but now I eat quail"* should remind the listener of his Brooklyn pedigree and experience (his affluence notwithstanding), which thus makes his rhymes legitimate in the "keep it real" game. The cover of the album *The Truth* by Beanie Sigel features the rapper standing in a grim prison corridor. In one of the album's song Beanie raps:

Niggas wanna know if Beanie Sigel life is real
Niggas twenty-five to life is real
I get a body, take me right to jail,
I know what it's like in the hell
I did a stretch in a triflin' cell
And you talkin' about your life is this, your life is that
Your life ain't shit, your life is whack

Man you listenin' to the realest nigga
("What Your Life Like")

The whole song gives a detailed account of anguish one has to endure while in prison. By the means of seemingly autobiographical prison experience Beanie Sigel equates himself with "the realest nigga." Conversely, he implies that those who lack such experience deserve an inferior status. Viewed from this perspective, the song embraces imprisonment as a rite of passage for masculinity.

Forasmuch as underground economies involve macking and hustling, both these illegitimate practices also become a part of the "keeping it real" process. Young Jeezy calls "niggas" who "ain't never sold the weight" "phonies" and "fakes" while he is "the muhfuckin' realest" because of his proficient drug dealing skills ("The Realest"). T.I. lauds his hustling talent when he raps: *"Put the crown on the hustle/ I could show you how to juggle anything/ And make it double/ Weed, blow, real estate, liquor store/ With no trouble"* ("Rubberband Man"). In his self-aggrandizing style, Lil Wayne affirms his authenticity through the role of a misogynist pimp:

I'm gettin' stacks, these bitches is really rats
I fuck 'em and give 'em back, yeah
I really mack, how real is that
You love him, you really wack
I hustle and bend my back, my muscle is in tact
My biceps and triceps is aye yes
("Mo'Fire")

T.I.'s verse from "No Matter What" sententiously describes the quintessence of the way "realness" is constructed and affirmed in hip hop: *"I'm officially the realest, point blank, period/ Whether I still live in the hood or just visit/ Whatever you can do in the hood I done did it/ That's why the dope boys and the misfits feel it."* T.I.'s words demonstrate how rap prioritizes artists' allegiance to the mythical locale of hip hop's birth. The manifestation of loyalty functions as a code of validation that enhances rappers' credibility. Owing to the vast popularity of gangsta rap the code became more or less synonymous with glorification of violence and promotion of illegitimate lifestyles.

7.1. "*Just* Keeping it Real"

Given the controversial themes of mainstream hip hop, the more media exposure rap gained the more attention it attracted. With the rising sales rates critical voices began to question a possible negative impact of its violent and sexist content. Rose maintains that the phrase "keeping it real" has become an excuse for the destructive imagery in hip hop, used by both the rappers, who create it, and those who are involved in promotion of the images in the media and market (2008, p.134). According to her, the claim aims to confirm rappers' role as "reality troubadours," which is misused "as a catch-all defense of everything that comes out of a rapper's mouth" (p.134 and 137). In an interview for MTV, 50 Cent commented on the content of his lyrics, as well as on his position as a role model:

> I'm giving them a photograph, a direct indication, of what this is about, what the actual story is and then allow their imagination to go a step further. […] I see myself as a role model because I've been taking advantage of all the options and opportunities that have been created for me. They may not consider me as a role model because I write about harsh realities—the things that actually go on in the environment that I came up in—and I ain't going to change that. But what I say to the kids is, 'Watch what I do, not what I say.'(mtv.com)

50 Cent's statement is problematic for several reasons. First, he is emphasizing and defending his role as an arbiter of truth while downplaying the force of his words at the same time. It is naive to expect the fans to ignore what he says and to emulate his deeds instead since it is for the most part the lyrics and interviews presented by the media that shape his public image. His utterance also indicates that he is aware of the negative aspects his lyrics promote but avoids taking responsibility for the possible impact on the listeners. Still, he claims to be a mediator of ultimate truth not only to maintain his credibility as an artist but also justify the violent nature of his lyrics. Second, although his songs allegedly mirror "harsh realities" of the life in a ghetto, they reflect only some of the issues that poverty-stricken communities face, centering principally on tales about drugs, violence and pimping. This trend, according to Rose, dominates much of commercial hip hop. Rose finds the "just keeping it real" argument rather tenuous as in reality it refers to portraying a "narrow slice of black urban life," which, repeatedly exploited, creates the impression that "black street life is black culture itself" (2008,

p.138). If mainstream hip hop was "really keeping it real," she observes, then the motifs of the genre would reach beyond the stereotypical portrayal of thug life (p.139). Absent or rare are themes involving the apprehension and aftermath of incarceration, the hardship of single-mother parenting and lack of job opportunities, the destructive "intergenerational effects of drug addiction," the anger about discrimination and "police brutality," as well as stories about "loss and fear" and "romantic love and vulnerability" (pp.139-140). Rose calls attention to the consequences of the lack of thematic diversity in mainstream hip hop:

> From listening to too much commercialized, highly visible hip hop, one could get the impression that life in the ghetto is an ongoing party of violence and self-destruction with "style," that street culture is an all-consuming thing, that poor black folks have chosen to live in the ghetto, and that they have created the conditions under which they live.(p.141)

In his documentary, *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, Byron Hurts explores the images of masculinity, as well as the representations of sexism and violence in contemporary hip hop. At one point during the film, a white female fan recounts her perception of hip hop:

> I've never been to the hood. I've never been to a ghetto. I grew up in, you know, upper middle class, basically white suburbia. We had a very small minority in our town and that was it. And to listen to stuff like that is a way for us to see almost a different cul—well a—completely different culture. It's something that most of us have never had the opportunity to experience. I've never had to worry about drive-by shootings and the stuff in the music. It appeals to our sense of learning about other cultures and wanting to know more about something we'll never probably experience.

Her words support Rose's argument that consumption of mainstream hip hop contributes to distorted assumptions about disadvantaged African American communities. The fan appreciates the music genre because it, as she claims, gives her an opportunity to gain knowledge of black culture. In other words, she regards the images it produces as true accounts of what it takes to live in a ghetto. Such reading of hip hop is particularly harmful when the listener lacks awareness of both the African American cultural tradition and the historical background that gave rise to ghettos.

Moreover, her reflection conveys a certain amount of fascination with what is passed off as black authenticity. In his article on minstrelsy, Mark Anthony Neal, a noted scholar of African American studies, explains the effort of black performers to give the impression of being authentic. Neal mentions two of the most successful African American minstrel performers—Bert Williams and George Walker— who, in order to compete with white performers, started to market themselves as "Two Real Coons" (http://www.blackvoices.com). Neal observes that these black performers and many of their followers "have come to realize […] that white mainstream interest in blackness is often predicated on their belief that what they are consuming is "authentic," whether they are capable of discerning black authenticity or not" (ibid.). Neal concludes, "black artists have often found it financially lucrative to give white audiences the "real" that they so desire" (ibid.). 50 Cent accurately puts it when he sings: *"America got a thing for this gangsta shit, they love me"* ("Hustler's Ambition").

The concept of authenticity in hip hop is complex. First, it adds to rappers' credibility, which hence amplifies the interest of audience. Second, its intrinsic connection to ghetto, with an emphasis on portraying the negative aspects, promotes stereotypes about black culture. Finally, the phrase "just keeping it real" is sometimes used as an argument to silence the critics of hip hop. This concerns not only the artists themselves but also people responsible for producing and marketing the music. The following chapter examines the strategies of music industry and the way they mold the public image of hip hop.

8. The Corporate Monster: *Business Strategies of the Music Industry*

In our consumer-driven society, if a product aspires to be successful it has to achieve mainstream attention. The term "mainstream" indicates that the produced article intends to target as many recipients as possible. It does not necessarily need to aim low, but it must aim at an average of taste. This also applies to commercial music that is intended for the mass market. Hand in hand with general taste goes trend. To predict which record fits current music trends and thus attracts most consumers is one of the key strategies of profit-oriented companies. Once certain sound or a lyrical pattern have proved successful, the labels search for artists whose expressive style matches one of the most recent hits and the pattern is used repetitively until it is replaced by another one. In terms of commercial music and its availability, the most common way people learn of a new artist is via mass media—the internet, music magazines, TV and radio stations. Therefore, the main goal of major record labels is to gain as much media exposure as possible for the artist they promote because it determines their profit.

There is no doubt that hip hop has turned into a commercial product. Moreover, it is no longer only the music that is being marketed. A number of rappers, including Diddy, Jay-Z, Big C or 50 Cent, have become successful entrepreneurs, starting their own clothing lines and merchandizing other secondary products. Rose confirms hip hop's marketable potential: "No black musical form before hip hop—no matter how much it "crossed over" into mainstream American culture—ever attracted the level of corporate attention and mainstream media visibility, control, and intervention that characterizes hip hop today" (2008, p.8).

Rose argues that the corporate media regulation substantially affects the shape of mainstream hip hop. Considering the sources of the power, she examines the implications of "large-scale media consolidation" (2008, p.17). With regard to record labels, 4 corporations (each of them comprising numerous record companies)—Warner music, EMI, Sony/BMG, Universal—"control about 70 percent of the music market worldwide and about 80 percent of the music market in America" (p.18). In terms of radio stations, the structure of ownership considerably changed after the Telecommunications Act of 1996 which triggered a wave of consolidation within the

radio industry (ibid.). Quoting a survey conducted by the Future of Music Coalition from 2002 Rose reviews its consequences: "Ten parent companies dominate the radio spectrum, radio listenership and radio revenues […] Together these ten parent companies control two-thirds of both listeners and revenue nationwide"(in Rose 19). According to the study, with 1,240 radio stations in possession Clear Channel is the most powerful one (ibid.). Focused purely on radio stations whose format consists of hip hop and R&B, Clear Channel has control over "hot urban" stations in most major U.S. cities, followed by Radio One which owns fifty-three hip hop oriented radio stations (p.20). Rose points out that the massive consolidation had a significant impact on black radio, leading to increased homogeneity of playlists, high rotation of songs chosen by the record label, and to a severe cutback of local news (pp.19-21).

In addition, Rose describes corrupt promotional practices known as "payola," a wide-spread method in record industry used to ensure a certain song or record gets maximum airplay (p.22). Rose interviewed a representative of Industry Ears, "an independent organization that focuses on the impact of media on communities of color and children," who formerly worked as a radio programmer and as program director for BET (ibid.). Paul Porter gives first-hand account of his experience with payola:

> During my first week as program director at BET, I set up a playlist, deciding which videos would be played and how often. I cut the playlist from four hundred titles to a mere eighty because they had been playing any videos a record company sent over. Some industry executives were elated because their videos got more airplay; the others were furious. And if you were a record label executive, you needed to make sure I was happy. […] It started small, with sending you and your girl to Miami for the weekend first class, nice hotels, tickets to Knicks playoff games, offers to big tickets concerts in Europe. Then it just became money, flat-out straight money. […] Almost everybody in this industry takes money. If they have the power to put a song on the radio or a video on television, they've been offered money to do it—and they've taken it. Maybe it's only been once or twice. But they've done it. (in Rose 2008, p.23)

In this way, record labels literally buy exposure for artists they beforehand assess as lucrative. If they prove to be profitable, their style might be used as a successful formula for what is going to be promoted next. Recording industry thus reinforces repetition of certain styles and themes at the expense of diversification. Simply put, they choose

certainty over risk for the sake of profit. Subsequently, these strategies affect the overall shape and content of music songs and videos aired on television and radio. Referring to hip hop, Rose maintains that "[p]owerful corporate interests […] are choosing to support and promote negative images above all others—all the while pretending that they are just conduits of existing conditions" (p.24). In Byron Hurt's documentary, Carmen Ashhurst-Watson, former President of Def Jam Records, confirms the impact of corporate production on hip hop's content:

> The time when we switched to gangsta music was the same time the majors bought up all the [independent] labels. And I don't think that's a coincidence. At the time that we were able to get a bigger place in the record stores, and a bigger presence because of this major marketing capacity, the music became less and less conscious.

At the same time, the artists themselves have accepted the corporate manipulation and have taken part in promoting the unflattering stereotypes. As these provocative edgy images keep the sales rate high, rappers who want to succeed in the popular market are pushed to "redefine themselves to fit the models" (Rose 2008, p.143). In one scene, Hurt listens to young aspiring performers in the street rapping stereotypically about bitches and violence. In response to Hurt's remark that gangsta-style is what he hears everywhere he goes, one rapper freestyles a thoughtful well-composed verse about his future prospects. He then says, "That's nice, but nobody wanna hear that right now. The industry usually don't give us deals when we speak righteously […] they think we don't want to hear that."

In "Can't Forget About You" Nas rhymes about what counts in the hip hop machinery: *"Heinous crimes help record sales more than creative lines."* Similarly, Jay-Z openly admits the extent of creative compromise in the song "Moment of Clarity:"

> *I dumbed down for my audience to double my dollars*
> *They criticized me for it, yet they all yell "holla"*
> *If skills sol, truth be told, I'd probably be*
> *Lyrically Talib Kweli*
> *Truthfully I wanna rhyme like Common Sense*
> *But I did 5 mill'– I ain't been rhyming like Common since*

Not only within the hip hop community, the rappers Talib Kweli and Common are considered lyrically talented without achieving commercial success. Jay-Z suggests that

he could write sophisticated lyrics but ever since he realized they do not sell well he prefers to follow a time-proven pattern that boosts his wealth. Kweli, in an interesting manner, responds with an altered version of Jay-Z's rhyme, contrasting his and Jay-Z's artistic priorities:

> *If lyrics sold then truth be told*
> *I'd probably be just as rich and famous as Jay-Z*
> *Truthfully I wanna rhyme like Common Sense*
> *Next best thing I do a record with common sense*
> ("Ghetto Show")

As noted previously, aspiring artists, whose aim it is to reach mainstream popularity, hardly succeed without having to conform to the concept of major labels executives. Conversely, the industry is disinterested or reluctant to promote projects that depart from the established norm. In 2000 Kweli and Mos Def organized a project titled ***Hip Hop for Respect*** to manifest disapproval of massive incarceration and police violence toward people of color (Ogbar, p.71). Involving a number of like-minded artists, the collaboration resulted in an EP of the same title. Kweli comments on the reluctance of major labels to participate in the campaign:

> If this was gunbussing, drug dealing, how-many-niggas-can-I-kill rhymes, this joint would have been out for our people to soak in a long time ago. But when we talk about defending ourselves and direct our energy toward the real enemy, not each other, then there is a hesitation on the part of these corporations that get rich off of our culture to put out positive music. Everyone wants to stay away; it's too political. (in Ogbar, p.172).

Similarly, Rose observes that corporate labels deliberately avoid supporting acts which have the potential to agitate against American public opinion and government (2008, p.143). Rose describes the situation in the mid-1990s when a lot of artists vented their anger at police and racial discrimination in their lyrics. According to her, the songs created "a great deal of real social pressure that eventually shut down the commercial promotion of stories that included killing cops or contained strong social critique" (p.144). Afraid of governmental regulation, which could lead to decrease in profit, corporations pushed artists in a different direction. As opposed to lyrics directed at white majority and authority, themes of black-on-black violence and misogyny continue to proliferate in mainstream hip hop because they constitute a threat neither to the

establishment, nor to the record sales (ibid.). On the contrary, these images have proved appealing to the general public and hence profitable.

Corporate interests of the music industry control and significantly shape the content of hip hop that reaches an enormous mass of consumers. Portrayals of African American males as boastful, sexist, violent, and vicious villains markedly outweigh positive imagery of masculinity in popular hip hop that together with expressions of social criticism or resistance remain peripheral. As rapper Paris insightfully outlines:

> Do you know how much good material is marginalized because it doesn't fit white corporate America's ideals of acceptability? Independents can't get radio or video play anymore, at least not through commercial outlets, and most listeners don't acknowledge material that they don't see or hear regularly on the radio or on TV. (in Rose 2008, p.24).

9. Alternative Voices: *Progressive Themes and Positive Messages in Hip Hop Lyrics*

Capitalist mode of production dominates and affects popular music, including hip hop. Profit-driven record companies tend to promote styles that prove lucrative and thus hinder diversity of images and messages transmitted by the mass media. Notwithstanding this fact, hip hop is a rich and complex music form, encompassing a wide range of styles and an equally wide range of worldviews. The following section aims to demonstrate that besides the narrowed images promoted in commercial outlets hip hop offers a diverse spectrum of themes and perspectives.

Witnessing hip hop's transformation into a profitable product, many rappers openly criticize the corrupt music industry, media machinery, and their fellow artists who take part in the scheme. In "Turn off the Radio," Dead Prez warn against the brain-washing effects and manipulative intent of the ubiquitous commercial radio airplay:

What's on the radio, propaganda, mind control
And turning it on is like putting on a blindfold
Cuz when you bringin' the real you don't get rotation
Unless you take over the station
And yeah I know it's part of they plans
To make us think it's all about party and dancin'
Platinum don't mean it gotta be hot
I ain't gotta love it, even if they play it a lot
You can hear it when you walk the streets
How many people they reach, how they use music to teach
A "radio program" ain't a figure of speech
Don't sleep, cuz you could be a radio freak

Focused merely on hip hop, Nas verbalizes his disappointment with the state of the genre, comparing it to a deceased loved one: *"Everybody sound the same, commercialize the game/ Reminiscing when it wasn't all business/ It forgot where it started/ So we all gather here for the dearly departed"* ("Hip Hop Is Dead"). Similarly, in "I Used to Love H.E.R." Common likens hip hop to an estranged childhood love, which has changed completely throughout the years:

I met this girl, when I was ten years old
And what I loved most she had so much soul
Original, pure untempered and down sister
Boy I tell ya, I miss her […]
Now she's gangsta rolling with gangsta bitches

Always smoking blunts and getting drunk
Telling me sad stories, now she only fucks with the funk
Stressing how hardcore and real she is
She was really the realest before she got into showbiz

Tim Fite approaches the subject matter through satire and irony. In "I've Been Shot, Fite mocks commercial rap, advising aspiring artists that the key to success in the rap game is being shot over and over again. He rhymes, *"Raised up out the dust like a blood lust phoenix/ It seems the more bullets that I catch I get the greenest."* In a like manner, Talib Kweli denounces the obsession of gangsta rappers with money and violence, using a brilliant metaphor of slavery: *"These cats drink champagne and toast death and pain/ Like slaves on ship talking about who got the flyest chain"* ("Africa Dream"). A verse from Lupe Fiasco's "Daydreamin'" ridicules stereotypical rap videos:

Now come on everybody, let's make cocaine cool
We need a few more half naked women in the pool
And hold this MAC-10 that's all covered in jewels
And can you please put your tities closer to the 22s?
And where's the champagne? We need champagne
Now look as hard as you can with this blunt in your hand
And now hold up your chain slow motion through the flames
Now cue the smoke machines and the simulated rain

Rather than glorifying criminal lifestyles and violence, many songs warn against involvement in it and focus on encouraging, positive messages. Ice Cube depicts the ghetto as a perilous pitfall: *"The ghetto is a nigga trap, take the cheese/ Soon as you do it here come the police/ Invented and designed for us to fail/ Where you gonna end up, dead or in jail"* ("The Nigga Trap"). In "Hood Mentality" he emphasizes that in order to alter the wretched state of affairs a change of mindset in necessary: *"If you don't wanna shake the hood mentality/ How the fuck we supposed to change our reality?"* Nas depicts the pain and suffering of gangsta life from the point of view of an outlaw trapped in the vicious circle of violence and drugs: *"(I'm crying gangsta tears) Only if you could feel my pain/ (I'm crying gangsta tears) Only if I could show you/ (I'm crying gangsta tears) Only if you was in the game/ (I'm crying gangsta tears) You'd feel the whirlwind blow you"* ("Gangsta Tears"). Immortal Technique's "Dance with the Devil" denigrates criminal style and warns the listener that it will not earn you respect, on the contrary, it ruins your life. Also, he implies that the danger of becoming a "fallen angel"

looms over everybody, referring to John Milton's poem *Paradise Lost,* in which the author depicted Satan as a fallen angel. Technique rhymes:

> *Dance forever with the devil on a cold cell block*
> *But that's what happens when you rape, murder and sell rock*
> *Devils used to be gods, angels that fell from the top*
> *There's no diversity because we're burning in the melting pot*
> *He could be standing right next to you, and you wouldn't know*
> *The devil grows inside the hearts of the selfish and wicked*
> *White, brown, yellow and black colored is not restricted*
> *You have a self-destructive destiny when your inflicted*
> *So when the devil wants to dance with you, you better say never*
> *Because the dance with the devil might last you forever*

In his anti-drug song "I'm Your Pusher," Ice-T insists that one should give priority to his music over drugs as a means of stimulation: *"I know you're loving this drugs as it's comin' out your speaker/ Bass thru the bottons, highs thru the tweeters/ But this base you don't need a pipe/ Just a tempo to keep your hype."* Lupe Fiasco's "Coming From Where I'm From" is a subtle analysis of the impact of growing up in a ghetto. The song captures the fear, pain and insecurity of a man caught in the vicious cycle of crime, concluding with a hopeful message to the audience: *"You ain't have to move a pack, you ain't have to shoot a gat/ And you still took your momma and moved her from here/ You ain't dropped out and you figure the world out/ Can survive bout anywhere learned how to do it in here (your mind)."* The main protagonist of the story depicted in "Thug Holiday" by Trick Daddy draws inspiration and motivation from his faith:

> *And I lost my brother in the struggle, and Tata Head lost his mother*
> *And I was thinking if I lose mine, who's gonna raise my brothers*
> *Not to be a thug, stay in school, don't use drugs*
> *Who'll teach them right from wrong and show them boys true love*
> *So I pray for the better days, face the bomb and run-a-ways*
> *And I put my guns away and I pray for peace on Sundays*

Similarly, DMX pleads for God's guidance though his troublesome life: *"I'm still going through it, the pain and the hurt/ Soaking up trouble like rain and the dirt/ And I know only I could stop the rain/ With just the mention of my savior's name"* ("Lord, Give Me a Sign").

Despite the prevalence of misogynist lyrics in hip hop music, there are songs that appreciate women and celebrate femininity, even though these are rather

exceptions. Several artists seize the opportunity to express gratitude to their mothers. 2Pac's "Dear Mama" is a sentimental thank-you to his mother for raising him on her own. In a similar vein, Kanye West's "Hey Mama" and Jay-Z's "Blueprint (Momma Loves Me)" describe their affection and appreciation for their mothers for leading them through hardship and instilling values in them. Rapper N.O.R.E. underscores the necessity to cherish the mother under all circumstances in the chorus of his song "Love Ya Moms:"

Love your moms and hate the streets
Love your moms and hate the heat
Love your moms while resting in peace
Love your moms while she still here
Hug your moms when she shedding a tear
Protect your moms from her worst fears

Instead of a cool macho pose, some artists are not afraid to show their vulnerable and sensitive as well as passionate side when referring to love and relationships. Common vents his feelings in "The Light:" *"At times when I'm lost I try to find you/ You know to give me space when it's time to/ My heart's dictionary defines you, it's love and happiness/ Truthfully it's hard tryin' to practice abstinence."* In "Mind Sex" stic.man of Dead Prez expresses admiration for his woman, comparing her to a "black rose [that] stands tall and stronger than any other plant" and "that never loses petals, and blossoms all year round." In a sensual way, the artist describes their intimate moments:

It's like walking the hot sands and finding an oasis
Opposites attract that's the basis
Our sex is the wind that separates the yin from the yang
The balance that means complete change, our aim
Is to touch you in a delicate spot
And once we get it started I ain't trying to stop

Kanye West's "Love Lockdown" captures how difficult it can be to leave a dysfunctional relationship: *"I ain't lovin' you the way I wanted to/ See I wanna move, but can't escape from you/ So I keep it low, keep a secret code/ So everybody else don't have to know."* 2Pac's "Keep Ya Head Up" clearly condemns domestic abuse and violence committed against women, asking *"I wonder why we take from our women/ Why we rape our women, do we hate our women?" Instead he suggests that "it's time to kill for our women/ Time to heal our women, be real to our women."* Finally, the

"Long Hot Summer" by Talib Kweli radiates a light-hearted, harmonious energy of a summer day while admiring feminine grace and beauty:

I hit the corner store, I had a taste for strawberry quick
Seen the broad, very tall, very thick, licking her lips […]
Bumping "Renegade" by Em and Jay
Symmetrical braids, incredible edible legs
Just to track her down, I went on a ghetto crusade
Serenade this angel like Cyrano de Bergerac
The lightness of her being was unbearable

Regardless of the impression the mass media reinforce, a number of artists adhere to the legacy of rap's roots, which they manifest in their bright reflective lyrics, embracing the role of outspoken social commentators. Kweli's powerful song "Ballad of the Black Gold" recounts the devastating effects of oil industry on local economy and society in Nigeria, targeting the collaboration of corporate oil companies with the corrupt Nigerian government, as well as the environmental and human damage. The final verse summarizes the main idea behind the "curse" of natural resources in developing countries:

The oil shit is slicker than preachers
It makes the problems in the region amplify like victory speeches
Poison the water and lead the boys to the slaughter
Go in somebody country and rearrange the order and destroy the borders
You see them dancing through the fields of fire
World domination—their real desire
The devil is still a liar

Immortal Technique is known for his sharp commentary on global issues, including oppression, exploitation, global politics, poverty and racism. In "The 4th Branch" he directs his criticism at U.S. politics: *"Guantanamo Bay, federal incarceration/ How could this be, the land of the free, home of the brave?/ Indigenous holocaust, and the home of the slaves/ Corporate America, dancin' off-beat to the rhythm."* Mos Deaf humorously remarks on American society's obsession with cell phones in a song called "Mathematics" that interestingly approaches sociological statistics: *"40% of Americans own a cell phone[10]/ So that they can hear everything that you say when you ain't home/ I guess Michael Jackson was right: 'You Are Not Alone.'"* In other parts of the song, he

[10] Provided that the song was released in 1999, the percentage of cell phone owners has obviously increased since.

touches on various (still topical) social issues from high black male incarceration rates to racism:

Stiffer stipulations attached to each sentence
Budget cutbacks but increased police presence
And even if you get out of prison still living
Join the other 5 million under state supervision
The system break man, child, and women into figures
2 columns for "who is" and "who ain't" niggas
Numbers is hard and real and they never have feelings
But you push too hard, even numbers got limits
Why did one straw break the camel's back? Here's the secret:
The million other straws underneath it: it's all mathematics

In "All Black Everything," Lupe Fiasco creates a utopian world where people are not discriminated on the basis of race or creed. He compresses the milestones of African American experience into one verse while using irony and absurd examples of what the world might have looked like if there was no slavery and racial or religious bigotry:

[…] and we ain't get exploited
White man ain't feared so he did not destroy it
We ain't work for free, see they had to employ it
Built it up together so we equally appointed
First 400 years, see we actually enjoyed it
Constitution written by W.E.B. Du Bois
Were no reconstructions, civil war got avoided
Little black sambo grows up to be a lawyer
Extra extra on the news stands
Black woman voted head of Ku Klux Klan
Malcolm Little dies as an old man
Martin Luther read the eulogy for him
Followed by Bill O'Reilly who read from the Quran
President Bush sends condolences from Iran
Where Fox News reports live
That Ahmadinejad wins Mandela peace prize

The song, however, closes with a rational, yet positive rhyme that reads: *"Now we can do nothing about past/ But we can do something about the future that we have."*

Fiasco's message refers to the prospects of African-Americans, nevertheless, it could equally apply to the direction hip hop will head in the near future. Generally speaking, the internet has changed the way music is consumed, purchased and distributed. The powerful medium has had a tremendous impact on music's accessibility, giving music fans an opportunity to find and download (legally or illegally) a song or a whole album within minutes. At the same time, the age of

electronic media gives exposure to any artist who desires to share his creativity with the rest of the world. Therefore, talented artists no longer have to rely on major labels and their promotion. This concept of music's democratization significantly diminishes the power of corporate supremacy and encourages the genre's diversification of content and styles.

Moreover, the rising popularity of innovative artists such as Kanye West or Lupe Fiasco might suggest that hip hop audience have grown tired of the violent, sexist, materialist and often hollow lyrics and wish a change. It may indicate that for some hip hop fans the tough "cool pose" embodied in gangsta rappers such as 50 Cent has lost its appeal. Viewed from this perspective, another chapter of hip hop is coming to a close.

10. Conclusion

The lyrical content of rap music has undergone notable transformations since it entered the mainstream in the mid 1990s. Hip hop's striking growth in popularity coincided with the rise of gangsta rap, the most controversial subgenre of hip hop that focuses primarily on negative aspects of black urban life. On account of its commercial success and heavy promotion in the mass media, hip hop music has become a target of criticism for recurrent themes of violence, drugs, misogyny, materialism, and overall nihilism. As illustrated by plentiful examples of song lyrics, mainstream hip hop tends to continuously perpetuate these themes in the songs, which negatively affects the conception of black masculinity in the public eye.

In contrast with the reflective approach of early rap, the form of story-telling promoted by mainstream hip hop verges on glorification of illicit life styles inherent in the impoverished African-American communities. Along with the persistent objectification of women and ostentatious display of sexual prowess and wealth, the lyrics portray an African-American male as a boastful, menacing, hyper-masculine thug who pursues a career as a hustler, drug dealer or pimp. The imagery substantially narrows the notions of black masculinity and fosters the already existing stereotypes about black males and about African-American culture. Hip hop's lyrics and its presentation in the mass media correspond with stereotypes embodied in the figures of Sambo, coon, Brute Negro and pimp whose existence had been determined historically and socially long before hip hop was born. Thus, despite the fact that commercial hip hop participates in promoting stereotypical representations of black masculinity, it did not create them.

Moreover, some features of rap's distinctive style have their roots in African-American folklore. Boastful and degrading language, verbal expression of threats, coolness and pride stem from the oral tradition of playing the dozens, toasting, as well as from folk and trickster figures, such as Stagger Lee and the Signifying monkey. These modes of expression represent a significant aspect of vernacular verbal strategy, by means of which black males establish and affirm their masculinity.

The reiteration of stereotypical images in hip hop is also associated with the emphasis the genre places on authenticity and credibility. Rappers are pressured to

“keep it real,” which means to repeatedly demonstrate their allegiance to the ghetto, the mythical cradle of hip hop. Owing to the dramatic rise in popularity of gangsta rap, this manifestation of loyalty has become equivalent to glorification of violence and illegitimate life styles.

Apart from the indisputable responsibility of the artists themselves, the form of hip hop is to a large extent shaped and controlled by corporate interests of the music industry. Profit-driven record companies produce and promote styles that have proved lucrative and, conversely, hesitate to support projects that deviate from the profitable formula. Aspiring rappers have little chance of success unless they fit the approved format. Given this context, the popularity of gangsta rap explains the prevalence and perpetuation of negative images of black males in mainstream hip hop while positive imagery and messages remain at the margins.

Nevertheless, outside the reach of corporate control, hip hop continues to be a dynamic and vibrant music genre. In addition, the democratization of music distribution, prompted by the boom of social networking sites, substantially undermines the power of corporate manipulation and simultaneously stimulates heterogeneity of styles and themes. Amplifying progressive voices of less visible artists could represent a turning point in the further development of the genre. Hip hop is most likely on the verge of entering a new era.

11. Resumé

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá fenoménem hiphopové hudby v americkém socio-kulturním kontextu. Primárně se zaměřuje na prezentaci afro-afroamerické mužské identity v písňových textech. Práce má podobu kvalitativní studie a je založena především na rozboru hiphopových textů.

Z globálního hlediska lze v současnosti hip hop označit za jeden z nejpopulárnějších hudebních žánrů , který formuje a ovlivňuje postoje, názory a styl mladé generace po celém světě. Přestože se termín „hip hop“ původně používal jako synonymum pro specifickou subkulturu zahrnující několik způsobů kulturního vyjadření, které se navzájem prolínaly, s rostoucí popularitou rapu postupně tento pojem splynul s označením pro hudební žánr. Hiphopová hudba, která v sobě snoubí verbální, zpravidla veršovaný, projev (rap) a reprodukovanou hudbu (Djing), postupně zastínila graffiti a breakdance, jež v počátcích tvořily základní pilíře hiphopové kultury. Sekundárně lze hip hop také chápat jako určitý druh životního stylu, který může sloužit jako prostředek pro vyjádření příslušnosti k dané referenční skupině.

Úvodní část práce nastiňuje historické a socio-kulturní pozadí zrodu hip hopu a stručně charakterizuje jeho základní prvky. Počátky hip hopu se pojí s prostředím ekonomicky a sociálně znevýhodněných afro-amerických a afro-karibských komunit, pro jejichž členy se hip hop stal alternativním prostorem pro konstruování vlastní identity a společenského postavení. Tento způsob kulturního projevu odrážel zkušenost mládeže žijící v chudobou zasažených postindustriálních městských částech Ameriky, a tudíž byl do jisté míry i formou protestu vůči útlaku majoritní společnosti. Sociální podmínky, touha po sebevyjádření, kreativita a inovativní přístup vyústily v originální fúzi jednotlivých prvků této subkultury, která později vešla do všeobecného povědomí pod názvem hip hop. Zatímco ostatní elementy ustoupily do pozadí, hiphopová hudba se stala součástí kulturního mainstreamu.

Druhá kapitola se věnuje samotné hiphopové hudbě a obsahu písňových textů. Nejprve se snaží identifikovat a následně demonstrovat změny, které s sebou přinesl proces asimilace tohoto hudebního žánru do mainstreamové popkultury. Nárůst popularity hip hopu spadá do období na přelomu osmdesátých a devadesátých let. Rostoucí zájem o tento styl ovlivnily rychlý rozvoj a žánrová specializace hudebních

médií na konci osmdesátých let. Zásadní zlom přišel v podobě informačních systémů a databází, které umožnily sledovat prodejnost jednotlivých hudebních nahrávek a získaná data statisticky zpracovávat. V polovině devadesátých let z analýzy trhu vyplynulo, že hip hop zaujímá přední místa v prodeji desek napříč hudebními žánry. Ve stejném období významně zesílil vliv „gangsta" rapu, který se tématicky soustředí na negativní aspekty života v ghettu. Narozdíl od reflektivního či kritického přístupu má však tendenci tyto stránky oslavovat a aktéry příběhů z ghett heroizovat. Gangsta rap se stal komerčně nejvýnosnější kategorií hip hopu a v druhé půli devadesátých let zcela ovládl americkou hudební scénu.

V důsledku rapidního nárůstu mediální popularity gangsta rapu se hip hop zároveň ocitnul pod drobnohledem kritiky, primárně z důvodu obsahové stránky rapových textů. Jak dokládají jednotlivé studie a rozbor písní komerčně nejúspěšnějších umělců, vlivem rozmachu gangsta rapu začaly v hip hopu převažovat násilné, misogynní, materialisticky orientované texty s drogovou tématikou. Opakující se motivy užívání a distribuce drog, fyzické násilí, výhrůžky, dehonestace žen, kuplířství, důraz na materiální hodnoty a všudypřítomné chvástání se společně s vydatnou mediální propagací podílejí na vytváření a podporování stereotypů o afro-americké komunitě. Jelikož je hip hop z kreativního hlediska elementárně dominantou mužů, tento negativní dopad se týká především prezentace mužské identity. Komerční rap vykazuje tendenci vyobrazovat afro-amerického muže jako machistického, násilného, hyper-maskulinního gangstera, který ostentativně dává na odiv své bohatství nabyté ilegální činností, nejčastěji kuplířstvím či prodejem drog. Stylizace rapperů do těchto rolí a silná mediální podpora následně mohou negativně ovlivňovat představy majoritní společnosti o afro-americké mužské identitě.

Následující kapitoly si kladou za cíl osvětlit původ těchto stereotypů, ilustrovat jejich přetrvávající přítomnost v americkém kontextu a identifikovat faktory, které se podílejí na jejich upevňování.

Stereotypní obrazy afro-americké maskulinity sahají hluboko do historie amerického kulturního povědomí. Karikatury „Sambo" a „coon" se začaly objevovat ještě v době nevolnictví . Tím, že Afroameričany degradovaly na prostoduché, líné, nesvéprávné klauny, sloužily jako prostředek k obhájení smysluplnosti otroctví, a zbavovaly tak zodpovědnosti za nehumánní jednání. Kombinace obou karikatur se

hojně využívala jako typ herecké postavy v populárních kabaretních představeních „minstrel show.“ Později k její propagaci přispěl rozvoj kinematografie, především filmová postava Stepina Fetchita, která ztělesňovala stereotyp směšného, lenivého, zaostalého primitiva, jehož hlavní funkcí bylo bavit bílé obecenstvo. V této souvislosti se nabízí paralela se světem hip hopu, neboť poplatnost přáním majoritní společnosti, potažmo hudebnímu průmyslu, na úkor sebeúcty se stala terčem kritiky vně, ale i uvnitř hiphopové komunity. Mnozí méně mediálně známí umělci ve svých textech otevřeně kritizují způsob prezentace mužské identity v mainstreamovém rapu, který přirovnávají k novodobé „coon show.“

Obdobně komerční hip hop posiluje pevně zakořeněný archetyp násilnického „černého samce.“ Rasově předpojatá americká společnost po dlouhou dobu vyobrazovala Afroameričany jako nevyzpytatelné, divoké, zvířecími pudy ovládané bytosti. Ačkoli hnutí za občanská práva šedesátých let změnilo způsob, jakým byla rasová problematika veřejně diskutována a vyobrazována, vlna blaxploitation filmů z počátku let sedmdesátých stereotypní představy o násilnické podstatě afro-americké maskulinity opět oživila. Hlavní protagonisté snímků blaxploitation žánru, jejichž děj se zpravidla situován do prostředí černošských ghett, byli často vykreslováni jako neohrožení, chladnokrevní „nadsamci,“ kteří se svým počínáním zřetelně staví do opozice vůči bílé většině. Některé z filmů také nápadně idealizovaly kuplířství a životní styl spojený s touto činností. Vedle filmové produkce tyto kulturně podmíněné představy umocňovala divoká image úspěšných afro-amerických sportovců, především v oblasti profesionálního boxu. Četné odkazy na tyto a filmové postavy v hiphopových textech, opakující se motivy násilí, demonstrativní projevy mužnosti a způsob rétoriky rapperů podporují kulturně zažitý obraz afro-amerického muže jako „černé bestie.“

Za účelem lepšího pochopení celé problematiky je nutné zohlednit pozadí afro-americké kulturní tradice jako takové, neboť mnohé prvky, pro hip hop charakteristické, vzešly z jejího odkazu. Postava raráška, která figuruje v ústní lidové slovesnosti západoafrické kultury, pronikla do praktiky známé jako „toasting,“ jež je obecně považována za předchůdce rapu. Typickým rysem afrického raráška je jazyková obratnost, kterou dokáže přelstít silnějšího protivníka. Nejznámnější z nich—„Singnifying Monkey“—vyzraje nad králem džungle a svým vítězstvím se okázale vychloubá. Výraz „signifying“ popisuje významný aspekt afro-americké řečové

strategie, která se vyznačuje metaforičností a obskurností jazyka, gestikulací, chvástáním, případně zesměšňováním oponenta.

Druhým klasickým archetypem toastingu je postava neohroženého desperáta, která čerpá z afro-americké lidové legendy „Stagger Lee.“ Nekompromisní image obávaného zabijáka rezonuje v hiphopových textech, v nichž se rappeři často stylizují do role nebezpečného padoucha.

Urážlivý jazyk a soutěživost pak mají původ v další ústní tradici afroamerického folklóru nazývané „dozens.“ Tato zvyklost je verbální formou souboje, jejímž prostřednictvím si účastníci navzájem nejen testují jazykové a improvizační dovednosti, ale také upevňují pozici v rámci své referenční skupiny. Tradice dozens se zrcadlí primárně v rapových duelech, proslulých jako „freestyle battles.“

Opakující se motivy v textech také úzce souvisí s otázkou autenticity, na niž se soustředí čtvrtá kapitola práce. Autenticita a její deklarování je jedním z klíčových konceptů v říši hip hopu, neboť se od ní odvíjí umělcova důvěryhodnost v rámci hiphopové a následně i posluchačské komunity. Kritérium nebo požadavek autenticity v hiphopové kultuře vyjadřuje fráze „keep it real,“ která je souborem určitých kulturních symbolů. Mezi jeden z ústředních symbolů patří důvěrný vztah se socioekonomickým prostředím, z něhož hiphopová subkultura vzešla. Rapper tuto loajalitu ve svých textech deklaruje prostřednictvím znaků charakteristických pro prostředí černošského ghetta a potvrzuje si tak vlastní věrohodnost. Nárůst popularity gangsta rapu v polovině devadesátých let se promítnul i do konceptu autenticity. Tématická orientace gangsta žánru způsobila, že tato koncepce víceméně splynula s glorifikací negativních společenských jevů, jež provází život v chudobou zasažených afro-amerických komunitách. Z tohoto hlediska se kritérium autenticity podílí na podporování zúžených představ o černošské maskulinitě.

Zásadní úlohu v posilování těchto kulturních stereotypů hrají marketingové strategie hudebního průmyslu. V důsledku své popularity se v devadesátých letech hip hop stal lukrativní komoditou. Transformace hip hopu v komerční produkt a finanční zájmy korporací nevyhnutelně poznamenaly tvář tohoto hudebního žánru. Oblíbenost gangsta rapu vedla k tomu, že velké nahrávací společnosti orientované na maximální zisk se zaměřily na propagaci umělců, kteří odpovídali formátu „gangsta rappera.“ Mediální prostor ovládnul prototyp hyper-maskulinního gangstera a tématický obsah

hudebních textů se více homogenizoval tak, aby se přiblížil osvědčenému formátu. Texty devalvující ženy, oslavující násilí a materialismus převládly nad pozitivně motivujícími sděleními a dokumentárním stylem textů, které reflektovaly nepříznivou životní situaci afro-americké komunity.

Éra nových elektronických médií a rozkvětu sociálních sítí však výrazně transformuje mechanismy hudebního trhu, který se z velké části přemístil do virtuálního prostoru internetu. Alternativní mediální kanály přinesly nové formy propagace a distribuce hudby a závislost úspěchu interpreta na velkých nahrávacích společnostech podstatně klesá. Proces demokratizace šíření hudby podporuje různorodost hudebních stylů, neboť otevírá možnost uspět komukoli. Hip hop, jak ilustruje závěrečná část práce, je rozmanitý dynamický hudební žánr. Alternativní či méně komerčně úspěšní umělci demonstrují tuto bohatost ve svých textech, které překračují rámec zavedeného komerčního vzorce, naopak jej mnohdy podrobují ostré kritice. Ve světle změn na poli informačních technologií jejich hlas nabývá na síle a jsou předzvěstí toho, že hip hop vstupuje do další fáze svého vývoje.

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