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“Bad Nigga:” Hypermasculinity in African-American Culture

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this thesis is to analyze and interpret the hypermasculine elements of African-American performance in rap music. It shall examine the ways in which the performance works as well as its possible influence on the public; therefore, it shall also react to the widespread criticism of the genre. In order to understand the complexity of the issue, it sketches the history of African-American men struggling to attain their manhood and it points out the damage done to African-American masculinity during the era of slavery and the following period of Reconstruction. Moreover, it is necessary to trace back the inspiration that helped to constitute the hypermasculine images. To do that, we shall look into the folkloric tradition of figures such as the “bad nigger” and “badman” or “bad nigga;” and we shall see how these personas transformed into the modern figures of “gangstas,” pimps and hip hop revolutionaries.

In the next two chapters, the thesis discusses the relation of rap music authenticity and the performativity of gender, which is based on Judith Butler’s gender theory as described in her book *Gender Trouble*. Regarding authenticity, we shall dissect the term itself and its potential meaning for a work of art.

In the last few chapters, the thesis attempts to categorize hip hop masculinity and it establishes five provisional types of characters or narrators that reappear throughout the history of the genre. All of the categories shall be clearly described and illustrated on the works of numerous rap artists.

**Key words:** masculinity, rap, violence, gangsta, performativity, African-Americans, gender, “bad nigga,” “bad nigger”

## **ABSTRAKT**

Cílem diplomové práce je analyzovat a interpretovat hypermaskulinní prvky v performanci Afroamerických rapperů. Zkoumá její principy a zároveň nastiňuje možný vliv rapové hudby na veřejnost, čímž reaguje na neustálou kritiku tohoto kontroverzního žánru. Úvod diplomové práce je věnován historickému kontextu celé problematiky a popisuje narušení maskulinních rolí v Afroamerické komunitě v době otroctví a přibližuje vliv diskriminace a rasismu na chápání maskulinity. Kontext problému, který je klíčový k pochopení vývoje dnešních postav v rapových textech, je rozšířen o rozbor relevantních tendencí Afroamerického folkloru oslavující hypermaskulinitu a s ní spojené násilí a kriminalitu. Se všemi těmito prvky se setkáváme při studiu rapových textů.

V následujících dvou kapitolách je popsán vztah autenticity v rapu a performativity genderu. Poznatky v kapitole o genderu vychází z teorie Judith Butler, především pak z její knihy *Gender Trouble*. Pojem autenticity je kriticky zkoumán ve spojení s uměním obecně, později ve vztahu k rapové hudbě.

V závěrečných kapitolách se diplomová práce zabývá kategorizací maskulinních typů a popisuje čtyři základní postavy, které se opakovaně objevují v rapu. Všechny maskulinní typy jsou ilustrovány na příkladech.

**Klíčová slova:** maskulinita, rap, nasili, gangsta, performativita, Afroamericane, gender, “zlej negr”

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# I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the African-American effort to recover from the emasculation that was caused by their strivings in the past is frequently taken into extreme, one of the reasons being the fact that the African-American male was deprived of his assumed role during the slavery era and the Reconstruction period and although it happened a long time ago, America still feels the aftermath of the violent times. Since then, African-American scholars, philosophers, writers and musicians have been trying to resurrect the black male and the effort was occasionally quite radical. The effort seems to be both subconsciously rooted in African-American psyche and deliberately employed by artists.

Unfortunately, the pride and self-assurance is sometimes transformed into hatred towards others, especially women, or the quest for individual reputation harms the African-American community by ignoring the needs and cohesion of the society.

One cannot properly judge the hypermasculine elements of African-American culture without looking at the tradition of violence in American society and especially in music. Some argue that America is a country build upon crime and violence and African-American art is affected by the tradition; but it is taken even further because the voice of the people and their identity have been suppressed and limited by white oppression in the past.

Consequently, the black male has had to struggle for two important achievements, which are profoundly intertwined. On the one hand, he has to strengthen his position as a protector and breadwinner for his family, which was extremely difficult itself and the frustration of the failure has caused much trouble among blacks. Secondly, they had to be able to take a stand and face the biased society which contributed to the difficulties in achieving the first goal. What we have heard in hip hop is an extreme solution to and an extreme situation. The effort to find a satisfactory position in American society turned against itself and sometimes it seems to disseminate hatred more than a cultural pride. The discrimination and ghettoisation of blacks helped to breed a new image of a black male, the “bad nigga,” which may be perceived as a product of cultural pride as well as of internalization of derogatory images.

This thesis discusses briefly the damage that has been done to black masculinity by the effects of slavery, which is necessary to understand the images of black males that are to be seen in literature and popular culture in present times. The main focus of the thesis is to

interpret and analyze the images in African-American culture (rap music especially) that may be perceived both as subconscious overcompensation for the lost masculine identity and a new way of performing black masculinity that draws on the tradition set by people like Malcolm X, the Black Panthers or the cultural icon of Shaft. In order to understand the hypermasculine nature of black men in contemporary popular culture what needs to be dissected are the terms “bad nigga” and “bad nigger, and the way these image are conceived of in African-American culture has to be explored. The thesis also attempts to categorize hip hop narratives into masculine types that reappear throughout rap music in order to sketch the general patterns of masculinity in the genre.

## **II. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AN OVERVIEW**

The era of slavery has had ever lasting effects on African-American psychology. Scholars and historians often argue whether they can possibly be overcome. They might be overcome, they might be minimized, but they cannot be erased or ignored. If we look back in history, we will realize that any attempt to redeem the black identity is simultaneously about finding a place for the African-American male. Some historians and critics would stress how difficult it was for black women to adapt to their new lives on American continent and they would also claim that their situation was even more complicated due to the fact that they were both black and women, which, while combined, meant a very harsh living conditions since even white women's rights were limited.

One may hardly object to the opinion. Yes, being a woman slave was extremely difficult and the atrocities committed against women were incredibly cruel. Nevertheless, men's suffering was beyond imagination as well and they have not been able to recover from the effects of the slavery era yet. The usual concept of manhood was totally destroyed. The role of black men was subverted. They become powerless in protecting their wives and children; they were not able to secure their families financially, their pride was ruined, their identity devastated.

Although women suffered, they were, generally speaking, allowed to maintain their social roles. They were usually allowed to take care of children; work in households; their position in the society was preserved as much as it was possible in the given conditions. Men, on the other hand, were deprived of their role and power. They were stripped of their masculinity and they are still struggling to regain it; and in so doing they were and are unconsciously discriminating against their own kind, especially women, children and homosexuals. Therefore, African-American culture is sometimes intertwined with misogyny, homophobia; and it also sometimes turns its frustrations to other minorities such as Jews.

Patricia Phil Collins comments on the historical development of gender stereotypes in her book *Black Sexual Politics*:

For African-American men, the economic and racial oppression of chattel slavery also took gender specific forms. [...] White elites created the controlling image of the buck. This image depicted Black men as intellectually inferior to Whites and reinforced the

political status of Black men as chattel [...] In essence, domesticated African-American were the ones who had been stripped of their predilection for unrestrained sexuality and violence.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, we have to notice the characteristics of the culture that African slaves were brought into and the directions that the culture took later in the history. The emasculation was suffered in a patriarchal society whose culture is build upon strong masculine characters. The image of a strong and fearless man has always had its unshakable position in American culture. America is fascinated by male individuals, both fictional and real, who are able and willing to fight for their ideals and life, protect themselves and use any means necessary to maintain their role and reputation. We see Brom Van Brunt, Natty Bumppo, Wyatt Earp, Al Capone, John Wayne, John Rambo, Hulk Hogan, Scarface, modern football players, more recently MMA fighters and rappers. All of these fit into the tradition of vigorous male figures. What is even more interesting is that many of those people used very controversial methods to keep the aura around them and some of them were actual criminals.

Therefore, the alienation was even more difficult to cope with because of the character of American society. Nowadays, the African-American effort to reestablish the male role in American society is taken to an extreme, one of the reasons being the fact that African-American male was deprived of his role during the slavery era and, although it happened a long time ago, America still feels the aftermath of those violent times. Since then, African-American scholars, philosophers, writers and musicians have been trying to resurrect the black male and the effort was occasionally quite extreme. The important thing is that the effort is subconsciously rooted in an African-American psyche which is of course projected into art.

As bell hooks states in her book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, black women were often viewed as the breadwinners for their families and they still represent the stable part of the African-American family. bell hooks says: "Throughout the 1900s black men and women debated the issues of gender equality. White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy's refusal to allow black males full access to employment while offering black females a place in the service economy created a context where black males and females could not conform to

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Phill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 57.

standard sexist roles in regard to work even if they wanted to,”<sup>2</sup> so the usual concept of gender roles was shifted upside down and it would have worked if men had been satisfied with their position, which was obviously impossible given the cultural surroundings of the US.

hooks goes on: “It was the participation of black women in the workforce that led to the notion that black women were ‘matriarchal leaders.’” However, she also says that in reality women handed their paychecks to men who “occupied the patriarchal space of leadership in the home.”<sup>3</sup> The question is whether this division of roles provided a means of self-realization for the genders. Women were making money, they brought their salaries home and hardly anything else was expected from them; whereas men did not have their stable place in the market, they were not fulfilling the society’s expectations even though collecting paychecks from their wives was supposed to make them feel important. They handled the money but they were not the providers.

Orlando Patterson is another author who states that the fundamental differences between black men and black women prevent them from achieving progress together. In his book *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* he mentions a quote by Toni Cade Bambara: “One of the most characteristic features of our community is the antagonism between our men and women.”<sup>4</sup>

Patterson, as well as bell hooks, touches upon matriarchy. He does not think that in African-American communities matriarchy replaced a patriarchal system. However, he acknowledges that the position of black woman was different from the position of white women. He introduces his argument: “[during slavery] the role of husband did not exist [...] he could offer offsprings and his partner no security, no status, no name, and no identity. While this male emasculation did not lead to ‘matriarchy,’ it did change the position of women in relation to men, change already set in motion by the peculiar circumstances of socialization on the plantation, where “most slave girls grew up believing that boys and girls were equal.”<sup>5</sup> The problem was that while African-American women were later satisfied with their role

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<sup>2</sup> bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 8.

<sup>3</sup> hooks, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* ( Washington D.C.: Civitas Counterpoint, 1998) 10.

<sup>5</sup> Patterson, 32.

since the society did not demand more, black men were still frustrated because their position was not central enough in the context of American society and they still felt they should have aimed for more, which was unfortunately made impossible for them to do.

Orlando Patterson continues talking about fatherhood and its development in African-American communities:

Indeed, to the degree that slavery, and later racial discrimination in the employment sector, prevented them from meeting their material obligations as providers, and to the degree that their own failings and distorted masculine values prevented them from meeting their social and emotional obligations to their offspring, to that extent was fatherhood a site of shame and humiliation.<sup>6</sup>

The impossibility to play what the environment considered a masculine role lead to tragic consequences. African-Americans began accepting the stereotypes that had been cultivated for a long time. Patterson says that black males embraced the roles assigned to them by Euro-Americans. They reconciled with those images. Self-hate and anger marked the inner experiencing of African-American men, they inclined to severe depressions. This was not only the case of the life in the South but it turned out to be even more damaging for blacks in the ghettos of American cities. The outward expression of the depression turned into violence against other black males and it also led to sexual aggression against women.<sup>7</sup>

The pathological internalization of the perverse role assigned to African-American males is what the American society is forced to cope with in the present and it finds a perfect expression in the figure of “bad nigger” and rap lyrics.

The virtue of “gangsta” lifestyle may be said to derive from a natural necessity. One did not become a “gangsta” because he wanted to but because “the lack of economic options in their neighborhoods pressured him to become a ‘gangsta.’” For those people who, as Tupac claimed, “had nuttin’ to lose,” the path of a criminal is perceived as a viable option or the only way out of the desperate life situation. Blacks lacked access to decent housing, education and health care, they were outcasts, not allowed to enjoy what the majority was, no progress on the horizon; and “jobs needed for upward social mobility, the political victories of the civil

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<sup>6</sup> Patterson, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Patterson, 51.

rights and Black power movements failed to produce the promised economic development envisioned by civil rights activists.”<sup>8</sup>

As we see, the frustration and nihilism rooted in the poor black communities affect the views of masculinity as well. Black men are unable to become breadwinners of their families by ordinary means; therefore, they seek fortune in different, and often criminal, career paths. The tragic outcomes are described nicely by Patricia Phil Collins:

As the line between street gangs and prison gangs blurred, so did the distinction between prison culture, street culture, and some aspects of black youth culture. More important, this growing interconnectedness of prison, street, and youth culture, with the importance given to hierarchies of masculinity, affects African-American neighborhoods and families. The valorization of thug life within Black youth culture, the growing misogyny within heterosexual relationships, and the increased visibility of homophobic violence [...] all seem to be casualties of the incarceration of African-American men and the ceaseless need to prove one’s ‘manhood.’<sup>9</sup>

While Collins argues that these are the effects of the mass incarceration of black males, we should remember that the mind set and circumstances that usually lead to the imprisonment stem from the past atrocities committed against blacks and the oppression targeted at them. Moreover, the fact that African-American men are constantly required to prove their masculinity does not discourage them from keeping the way of living because the way of proving one’s manhood in the streets is attainable to them as opposed to the more regular means of being men, such as securing their families financially or raising children, which no longer presents a viable option in the reality of the ghetto.

## ***II.1 Slavery, Aggression and Violence***

If one is exposed to violence everyday one learns to become insensitive to or one embraces the violence as a viable means of self-expression. Jean Paul Sartre writes in his preface to Franz Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth*:

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<sup>8</sup> Patterson, 78.

<sup>9</sup> Collins, 82.

colonial aggression turns inward in a current of terror among the natives. By this I do not only mean the fear that they experience when faced with our inexhaustible means of repression but also that which their own fury produces in them. They are cornered between our guns pointed at them and those terrifying compulsions, those desires for murder which spring from the depth of their spirits and which they do not always recognize; for at first it is not their violence, it is ours, which turns back on itself and rends them. If this suppressed fury fails to find an outlet, it turns in a vacuum and devastates the oppressed creatures themselves. In order to free themselves they even massacre each other. The different tribes fight between themselves since they cannot face the real enemy.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, the violence and oppression is stored in the minds of black males and they vent the emotions against each other because to victimize their own people is in their power. Franz Fanon's analysis of natives' inclination to violence against themselves can be used for description of the violence in the ghetto, the black-on-black, gang-related violence of African-American male. Fanon argues: "The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people. This is the period when the niggers beat each other up."<sup>11</sup> The colonized do not only want to be free; but they want to become colonizers. They want to have power over others: "He is in fact ready at a moment's notice to exchange the role of the quarry for that of the hunter. The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor."<sup>12</sup> The longing for power is so strong that the oppressed do not hesitate to turn their anger against their brothers. As Fanon claims: "the last resort of the native is to defend his personality vis-a-vis his brother," and, therefore, it leads to "a suicidal behavior which proves to the settler (whose existence and domination is by them all the more justified) that these men are not reasonable human beings."<sup>13</sup> Places such as Compton, Inglewood and Watts in Los Angeles, the South Bronx, The Red Hook Houses in New York City, South Park in Houston or Riverdale and Rosedale

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<sup>10</sup> Franz Fannon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), 18.

<sup>11</sup> Fanon, 52.

<sup>12</sup> Fanon, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Fanon, 54.

in Chicago, are living proofs that Fanon's theory of the native's violence is applicable to African-American struggle in the United States.

## **II.2 From "Bad Nigga" To "OG"<sup>14</sup>**

The historical development of African-American oppression is tightly intertwined with the perpetuation of the “bad nigga” folklore figure that dates back to the era of slavery when an outlaw was perceived as a hero of sorts. A black outlaw was someone who did not honor the rules that were imposed upon him by the white supremacy. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

Almost every law and method ingenuity could devise was employed by the legislatures to reduce the Negroes to serfdom,—to make them the slaves of the State, if not of individual owners[...]Daily the Negro is coming more and more to look upon law and justice, not as protecting safeguards, but as sources of humiliation and oppression. The laws are made by men who have little interest in him; they are executed by men who have absolutely no motive for treating the black people with courtesy or consideration; and, finally, the accused law-breaker is tried, not by his peers, but too often by men who would rather punish ten innocent Negroes than let one guilty one escape.<sup>15</sup>

To ignore the rules was an act of defiance and toughness, it was a proof that the Negro who committed the crime (against the white system) is strong enough to stand against the discrimination and atrocities. The “bad nigga” was a person who was highly regarded in the community even though he sometimes meant a threat even to the black folks. Imani Perry says the outlaw stands for a heroic figure. That is not to say that the outlaw was supposed to be a model for others, his figure was rather mythical, not to be emulated per se. In African-American culture, Perry says, the personas of “bad nigga” and the “bad nigger” blended with

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<sup>14</sup> “Original Gangster,” the highest ranking of a gang member

<sup>15</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” *The Souls of the Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994), 18.

the heroic outlaw although they were considered very dangerous for everyone, both the black and the white community. They were honored because they did not respect any authority.

Fox Butterfield describes the circumstances into which “the bad black man” was born:

All this violence was not simply pathology. It grew out of the old white Southern code of honor, an extreme sensitivity to insult and the opinion of others. But where antebellum whites believed they were above the law, blacks at the turn of the century realized they were outside the law[...] violence was the only alternative of resolving quarrels.<sup>16</sup>

The bad black man was coined out of desperation and helplessness. The figure emulated the Southern qualities and the code of honor and, additionally, it complemented them with the black idea of resistance to the oppressing system. Bad black men were “pitiless, toughs dispatching their opponents without remorse.” They were celebrated in songs and stories. However, we should not mistake them for noble outlaws because they were not. They “did not steal from the rich and give to the poor. They killed blacks as readily as whites, unfaithful women as well as men.”<sup>17</sup>

The honor they sought was personal; they did not care about their community’s well-being so much, and thus, the results of their efforts were and still are immensely destructive for the black folk. Butterfield quotes the historian Edward L. Ayers who claims that ironically, the code of honor had deadly outcomes and they were even more damaging for the post-bellum African-American community than for whites before the Civil War. Poverty caused the blacks’ not being able to gain or ensure their honor by the means of social status and wealth; they were made to protect their honor by different means, as the usual way of climbing the ladder of communal respect was impossible among the impoverished and degraded black folk. They could not simply ignore the opinions of others as the wealthy could, because the wealthy whites worried mostly about the opinions of the ones considered their equals. Blacks had to face offensive and degrading attitudes much more often and from a much larger number of people.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Fox Butterfield, *All God’s Children* (Vintage Books: New York, 2008), 63.

<sup>17</sup> Butterfield, 64.

<sup>18</sup> Edward L. Ayers quoted in Fox Butterfield, *All God’s Children* (Vintage Books: New York, 2008), 65.

## **II.3 “Street Cred,” and the Importance of Reputation**

The code of honor corresponds to the code of the streets, which dictates chasing street credibility. Among those who write on the topic we find former gang members such as Stanley Tookie Williams or Cody ‘Monster’ Scott. Stanley Tookie Williams, the co-founder of the Crips, depicts an extreme form of the yearning for respect when he says: “My lack of anonymity and my obsession to be recognized enabled the school administration to identify me as the West Side Crips leader Tookie, and expel me. It was a blow to my ego to be thrown out of a school I was supposed to reign over.”<sup>19</sup> A couple of pages later Tookie illustrates the amount of street cred he enjoyed:

‘My cousins, my cousins, let Mr. Tookie speak! He is the Crip King!’ Black Johnny, an equal to Buddha in ruthlessness and flamboyant commander of the 43rd Street Crips, who ruled with brass knuckles, would lay out the blue carpet when I showed up. The respect I received inflated my head to the size of a watermelon.<sup>20</sup>

Tookie sought the honor and respect that was demanded by both whites and blacks in the South in the past and, as a “bad black man” or “bad nigger,” he turned his anger against his own kin. Although he co-founded the Crips, he was more concerned of his own individual reputation than of the reputation of his set.

Avoidance of the law brings respect and respect is a crucial aspect of “street cred.” Everyone who is willing to or forced to participate in the game has a role to play. Nathan McCall recalls a situation when he got into a street brawl with his friend who turned out to be a much better fighter than himself. When his mother stops the fight, he is actually grateful to her for doing it because he knows he would have ended up badly hurt. However, he says: “I had an image to project and a role to play. So I acted disappointed, like I was pissed off that my mother kept me from tearing off the nigger’s head [...] I balled up my fist, pointed it threateningly at him, and yelled: ‘It ain’t over, niggah! I’m gonna finish you off when I see you again.’<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Stanley Tookie Williams, *Blue Rage, Black Redemption* (Pleasant Hill, CA: Damamli, 2004), 96.

<sup>20</sup> Williams, 129:

<sup>21</sup> Nathan McCall, *Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 71.

The reputation of a “bad nigger” is what the stories are about and, as pointed out above, he builds his reputation to the detriment of his community. This perverted passion has been in force ever since the slavery era.

The images of the “hustla” and the “bad nigga” (and the “bad nigger” as well) are the most often seen figures embodying African-American masculinity, the one that most of the movies’ characters and rap recording artists try to achieve. In all of the examples we can see how the “authentic” self-staging which is performed in order to gain “street cred” leads to black-on-black violence and ultimately to self-destruction. The burden of seeking “remasculination” dictates being confrontational, aggressive, which goes hand in hand with law violations.

Hustlers and “street niggaz” are honored in the ghetto. They are the ones who defy orders from anyone, yet they are able to make a fortune and usually stay out of jail. Julius Lester writes:

Today resistance manifests itself in what whites can only see as the “social ills” of the ghetto, i.e. crime, high school dropouts, unemployment, etc. In actuality, many blacks have consciously rebelled against the system and dropped out. After all, why waste your life working at a job you hate, getting paid next to nothing, when you make more money with half the effort. So, a new class is created, the hustler who gambles, runs numbers, pushes drugs, lives off women, and does anything to avoid going to “meet the man” five days a week. Year in and year out [...] A modicum of self-respect and the respect of a good segment of the community is gained.<sup>22</sup>

The individuality of the “bad nigga” and even more of the “bad nigger,” is a crucial quality of the hero. He is not a leader or an activist who is supposed to set an example for others. He is a rebel whose beliefs are usually devoid of any sort of political awareness. He stands up against the system because it is embedded in his rebellious and unruly nature.

As noted before, the “black bad man” or “bad nigger” does not have a political agenda, he is not a member a political movement as his actions lack a conscious political purpose. He is too unruly to bend to the rules.

It means not only ignoring the “white” laws and rules but also, and perhaps usually, going directly against them. That earns “the juice” that Tupac Shakur’s character Bishop is so

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<sup>22</sup> Julius Lester, *Look Out Whitey! Black Power’s Gonna Get Your Mama* (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 27.

obsessed with in movie of the same name and what Booth dreams about. R.A.T. Judy says that “the systematic use of law by white authorities to disenfranchise blacks after the resumption of home rule in the South caused blacks to make avoidance of the law a virtue.”<sup>23</sup>

John Edgar Wideman also tries to explain why black people honor thugs, hustlers and gangsters:

You remember what we were saying about young black men in the street-world life. And trying to understand why the “square world” becomes completely unattractive to them. It has to do with the fact that their world is the GHETTO and in that world all the glamour, all the praise and attention is given to the slick guy, the gangster especially, the ones that get over in the “life.” And it’s because we can’t help but feel some satisfaction seeing a brother, a black man, get over on these people, on their system without playing by their rules.<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, there is another reason why criminals are romanticized in the black community. They are viewed as a revolutionary, or as the rap artist Reks might say “rebelutionary.”<sup>25</sup> Franz Fanon sees criminals and underdogs as a source of a great revolutionary potential: “So the pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed, and the petty criminals, urged on from behind, throw themselves into the struggle for liberation like stout working men. These classless idlers will by militant and decisive action discover the path that leads to nationhood.”<sup>26</sup> It is important to remember that many of the black community heroes were either perceived as criminals by whites or they really had a criminal record. We can mention Malcolm X (previously known as Detroit Red), Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, H. Rap Brown, Huey Newton, Stokely Carmichael, Geronimo Pratt, Mumia Abu Jamal and others. All of them are generally praised civil rights activists with criminal records. The criminal records become a badge of honor in certain layers of the black community.

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<sup>23</sup> R.A.T. Judy, “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity,” *That’s the Joint: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman, Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 110.

<sup>24</sup> John Edgar Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 57.

<sup>25</sup> Reks, *REBELutionary*, (Detroit: ShowOff, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), 130.

### III. THE N-WORDS IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE

By considering the points made above, we are getting to the difference between the terms “nigger” and “nigga” that are often misinterpreted by cultural critics who are obsessed with the “n-word” and they are trying very hard to make the words disappear forever. Their obsession disregards the context that the two words are used in, as P.P. Collins says that what many Black men aim to do with the term *nigger* is that they “throw the slur back at the oppressor by changing its meaning.”<sup>27</sup> R.A.T. Judy in “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity” differentiates between two folkloric figures:

Truly thinking about the significance of hard-core gangster rap requires that we disengage the question of its significance from that of its significance for African-American society. The place to begin this disengagement is the identification of nigga with bad nigger. In order to establish hard-core rap's connection to the African-American tradition, it has become convenient to differentiate between morally legitimate hard-core rappers and those who are amoral or nihilistic. The former, the heroic badmen hardcore rappers, are considered to be a continuation of the badman figure of African-American folklore-a Railroad Bill, who may be either radically secular or religious. This differentiation is of some use here, because it goes directly to the problematic relationship between nigger and nigga that frames this discussion. It is particularly so in its identification of the hardcore nigga with the bad nigger, who, like the badman, is a figure of folklore.<sup>28</sup>

The difference is that the “bad nigger” is mostly not aware of his role and his status, whereas the “bad nigga” possesses the self-knowledge that the “nigger” lacks.<sup>29</sup> Michael Eric Dyson specifies the difference between a thug and a revolutionary in a similar way when he argues that “revolutionaries and thugs alike share a worldview in which flipping the economic order is the reason for social rebellion. Yet thug logic undermines the society that the

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<sup>27</sup> Collins, 161.

<sup>28</sup> Judy, 108.

<sup>29</sup> Judy, 109.

revolutionary seeks to change.”<sup>30</sup> We may notice that among the hip hop artists we find representatives of both categories, some rappers even oscillate between those two. They switch stances multiple times on one album, even one song. Tupac Shakur summarizes the paradox on his critically acclaimed album *Me Against the World*, which highlights the importance of both strong individuality related to the outlaw posture and the importance of being politically conscious: “There ain’t no stoppin me/Constantly movin while makin millions/Witnessin killings, leavin dead bodies in abandoned buildings/Can’t raise the children cause they’re illin/Addicted to killin and the appeal from the cap peelin/Without feelin, but will they last or be blasted?”<sup>31</sup> In just a couple of verses, Tupac pictures the transformation of a “bad nigger” to a “bad nigga.” He brags about killing and his unstoppable hustling, yet he, in the end, stops and thinks about what he is actually doing to his community.

Additionally, Tupac also touches upon the well-known Emersonian theme of a constant movement as a confirmation of life. The fast life lived by gangstas alludes back to the Emersonian concepts of American life. Similarly the New York MC Cormega raps: “Life is purpose and goal, death is not doing anything.”<sup>32</sup> Apart from violence, the characters of rap narratives also represent an extreme form of self-reliance which shall be touched upon later.

He also realizes the harm he causes by his deeds and he then stresses the importance of social and political awareness. He contemplates whether there is another way of living: “Is there another route? For a crooked Outlaw/Veteran, a villain, a young thug, who one day shall fall,” and he concludes by “They punish the people that’s askin questions/And those that possess, steal from the ones without possessions/The message I stress: to make it stop study your lessons/Don’t settle for less - even a genius asks-es questions/Be grateful for blessings/Don’t ever change, keep your essence/The power is in the people and politics we address.”<sup>33</sup>

R.A.T. Judy elaborates on the differences between the “badman” or “bad nigga” and the “bad nigger” further by stating: “The badman political hard-core rapper will regain the morality that Roberts claims preserved the postbellum community from both the law and bad niggers.”<sup>34</sup> Thus we may say that the badman distances himself from both the whites and the

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me* (Basic Civitas Books: New York, 2001), 159.

<sup>31</sup> Tupac Shakur, “Me Against the World,” *Me Against the World* (Interscope: Santa Monica, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> Cormega, “Journey,” *Born and Raised* (Aura Records: New York, 2009).

<sup>33</sup> Tupac Shakur, “Me Against the World,” *Me Against the World* (Interscope: Santa Monica, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> Judy, 110.

“bad niggers” whom he perceives as equal dangers because even though the “bad nigger” does not play by the white rules, he constitutes an equal danger to the black community. “Bad niggers” are despised even more so since they give vent to their frustration at the worst possible place and they reinforce the stereotypes that justify the treatment African-Americans receive from whites.

### ***III.1 The “Rebellious Property” and “Homo Criminalis”***

R.A.T. Judy works with the oxymoronic term “rebellious property,” which stands for the “bad nigger.” He explains:

In rebellion, the bad nigger exhibits an autonomous will, which a nigger as commodity-thing is not allowed to exhibit. There is little more dangerous than a willful thing; through the exhibition of autonomous will, the bad nigger marks the limits of the law of allowance by transgressing it. The bad nigger frightens both white planter and other slaves because he/she reveals the impossibility of completely subjugating will.<sup>35</sup>

The rebellion of the property actually denies the possibility of rebellion and it only serves further reason for whites to keep preventing blacks from any form of progress. The rebellion of the property as Judy sees it actually presents an extremely powerful counter-revolutionary potential. When the “bad niggers” rebel, they are very likely to destroy the community efforts for civil rights, equality, respect, political power, etc; because “the bad nigger as homo criminalis, constituting a threat to the survival of the community by giving the police cause to attack.”<sup>36</sup> The “bad niggers” destroy everything. They undermine the progress of fellow members of the African-American community.

We can argue that the black narrators of “gangsta rap” use the lack of morality as a basis for identity. They identify themselves as American nightmares that are described by the narrator of the movie *Menace II Society* as “young, black and I don’t give a fuck.”<sup>37</sup> They are

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<sup>35</sup> Judy, 112.

<sup>36</sup> Judy, 112.

<sup>37</sup> *Menace II Society*, prod. Darin Scott, dir. Allen Hughes, Albert Hughes, 1993, 15 min, 40 sec.

against everyone. Anyone who stands in their way is in trouble, they either entirely lack moral constraints or their view of morality is severely perverted.

Judy says that “In terms of governability, hard-core nigga gangster rap is an index of a general crisis of morality in the black community.”<sup>38</sup> What is, however, important to realize is that the morality crisis is a result of the oppression, discrimination and ghettoization of African-American community that has been in force for centuries. The refusal of the general morality represents an answer to the atrocities committed against blacks in America. It should be paid attention to and criticized, yet it needs to be understood at first.

Imani Perry says in his book *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*:

The outlawry present in hip hop is multifaceted. At times, it is literal, appearing in the personification of the outlaw or through outlaw values, but it is also present in the sense of oppositions to norms that unfairly punish black communities or discount the complexity of choices faced by those black and poor in the United States, and it presents itself in the creation of alternative values, norms, and ideals in contrast to those embraced in American society. Moreover, outlawry may manifest itself as an individual assertion or as a collective sensibility, either in the form of an archetype (the “bad nigga,” the thug, the roughneck, the convict) or in a celebration of outlaw community.<sup>39</sup>

The outlaw of hip hop lyrics, especially the “bad nigger,” has a profoundly symbolic meaning. He stands for the protest against the white supremacist system. Nevertheless, he embodies a deeply flawed individual who was forced to abandon his moral values in order to survive among other predatory individuals who were created by white America.

Regardless if we speak about a thug, drug dealer, gangsta, or a pimp, all of whom we find in rap music, we encounter the crucial sense of rebellion within the figures. The revolt is very individualistic, as stated above, it’s about finding one’s own way to cope with the system and to stand up to it. We may also sometimes notice the difference between a white and a black outlaw. Russell A. Potter says: “When the outlaw is white, it seems, he is a counterculture hero; when he is black, he is reduced to yet another avatar of the stereotypical black man.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Judy, 113.

<sup>39</sup> Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2004), 103.

<sup>40</sup> Russell A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (State University of New York Press, Albany), 88.

On the other hand, some hip hop narratives focus on community and the narrator's consciousness represents and attempts to speak for the African-American community. Here we come across once more to the distinction between the "badman" ("bad nigga") and the "bad nigger." The former might be an avid speaker for his community, while the latter is a menace for everyone. That is not to say that we can sort out rap artists to those simple categories, we need to speak about the narrators of their stories. A rap artist may fall within both categories on one album. The clash between the "bad nigga" and "bad nigger" narratives may be a theme of a song, as we notice in Tupac's "Me Against the World."

We find a good example in the work of the pioneering gangsta rap group NWA. Their lyrics are filled with images of black-on-black violence, misogyny, homophobia and other things that rap music is widely criticized for. Yet, their most famous narrative goes beyond the "bad nigger" attitude and it is called "Fuck the Police." It addresses police brutality and racism and it brought the group an international fame. Ice Cube raps:

Fuck the police comin straight from the underground  
A young nigga got it bad cause I'm brown  
And not the other color so police think  
they have the authority to kill a minority  
Searchin my car, lookin for the product  
Thinkin every nigga is sellin narcotics  
Ice Cube will swarm  
on ANY motherfucker in a blue uniform  
Just cause I'm from, the CPT  
Ounk police are afraid of me!  
HUH, a young nigga on the warpath  
And when I'm finished, it's gonna be a bloodbath  
of cops, dyin in L.A.<sup>41</sup>

In the lyrics the two folklore figures meet. We may notice an attitude characteristic of both the "bad nigga" and the "bad nigger." When we look at the album *Straight Outta Compton* where we find the song recorded, we see that Ice Cube, Eazy-E, MC Ren, Dr Dre and DJ Yella frequently confirm the stereotypes they protest in the song "Fuck the Police." In

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<sup>41</sup> N.W.A., "Fuck tha Police," *Straight Outta Compton* (Ruthless Records: Los Angeles, 1988).

“Straight Outta Compton” Ice Cube says: “When I'm called off, I got a sawed off/Squeeze the trigger, and bodies are hauled off [...] So when I'm in your neighborhood, you better duck/Coz Ice Cube is crazy as fuck.” MC Ren continues: “I'm the motherfuckin villain/The definition is clear, you're the witness of a killin, [...]Straight outta Compton, another crazy ass nigga/More punks I smoke, yo, my rep gets bigger.”<sup>42</sup> The artists who once complained about being stopped by the police and harassed now give reasons to the police to abuse them. The attitude changes and the political activists transform into “bad niggers,” who are fed up with everything and everybody; “bad niggers” who, as opposed to “bad niggas,” present a threat to everyone because they do not respect anyone, they know absolutely no boundaries and lack a political agenda. “Bad nigger” is a scornful label in both black and white communities, whereas to be a “bad nigga” is a badge of honor. “Bad nigga” is someone who is strong enough to protest and stand up to the oppressing system; “bad nigger” is an uncontrollable nightmare NWA, as well as other rappers (David Banner, Dead Prez, Freddie Gibbs, Guilty Simpson, Ice-T, Killer Mike, and others), contrast political consciousness of the “badman” and the “I don't give a fuck” attitude of the “bad nigger.”

### ***III.2 Internalization of Derogatory Images***

There is no doubt that African-Americans partially adopted the derogatory images and stereotypes that they have been fed for centuries. The adoption of the images is generally of two dimensions. One of them is the conscious adoption which is basically the attitude of many hardcore gangsta rap artists whose agenda is to supply the whites with what they have seen in blacks; or they take the stereotypes to a whole new level by exaggerating or even caricaturing them. The other dimension happens on the unconscious level when African-Americans truly begin to doubt their worth and equality and they generally reconcile with the second-class citizenship.

Imani Perry comments on the topic:

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<sup>42</sup> N.W.A., “Straight Outta Compton,” *Straight Outta Compton* (Ruthless Records: Los Angeles, 1988).

It is alarming how many blacks from various walks of life have accepted the “culture of poverty” theories of the demise of the black family and the notions of black sociopathy. Engagement with that identity takes places in hip hop, and it also fuels some of the critique of hip hop.<sup>43</sup>

They subvert the stereotypes; they make use of them by turning them into their advantage. As R.A.T. Judy points out, they use the images as a basis for their identity which would be otherwise hard to find. Biggie Smalls a.k.a Notorious B.I.G. raps in “Suicidal Thoughts: “When I die, fuck it I wanna go to hell/Cause I'm a piece of shit, it ain't hard to fuckin' tell/ It don't make sense, goin' to heaven wit the goodie-goodies/Dressed in white, I like black Tims and black hoodies[...]All my life I been considered as the worst/Lyin' to my mother, even stealin' out her purse/Crime after crime, from drugs to extortion/I know my mother wished she got a fuckin' abortion.”<sup>44</sup> However, as opposed to other gangsta rap artists, Biggie Smalls has mixed feeling about his persona. On the one hand, he brags about his “badness” but, on the other hand, he shows remorse, he asks for forgiveness, he apologizes: “I wonder if I died, would tears come to her eyes?/Forgive me for my disrespect, forgive me for my lies.”<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, he is ready to admit that the stereotypes provide him with a sense of identity. Imani Perry adds: “The artist might mirror the stereotype of the black assailant or criminal effectively and subvert not in terms of critiquing the stereotype itself, but in terms of giving a voice to the stereotypical figure.”<sup>46</sup> Michael Quinn says in “Never Shoulda Been Let Out the Penitentiary:” “Gangsta rap subverts the signification of difference through strategies that operate ‘in and against’ the same symbolic codes that had once circumscribed their subjection and oppression.”<sup>47</sup>

On the contrary, Miles White asserts that there is a negative side to it. He says: “What gets lost behind the imagery and masculine desire involved in the fetishization of the hip-hop gangster is the extent to which these representations of black masculinity depend upon and

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<sup>43</sup> Perry, 112.

<sup>44</sup> Notorious B.I.G., “Succidal Thoughts,” *Ready to Die* (Bad Boy: New York, 1994).

<sup>45</sup> Notorious B.I.G., “Succidal Thoughts,” *Ready to Die* (Bad Boy: New York, 1994).

<sup>46</sup> Perry, 109

<sup>47</sup> Michael Quinn, “Never Shoulda Been Let Out of Penitentiary: Gangsta Rap and the Struggle over Racial Identity (Minnesota University Press: Minneapolis, 1996), 73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354612>

perpetuate the imagined malevolence of black males generally.”<sup>48</sup> White males also construct their masculine identities after the fashion of hip hop artists and the lyrics might, apart from being “one’s culture ventriloquial self-expression through the art forms of someone else’s,” indeed serve as a confirmation of the images that are perpetuated by the larger society. White continues: “For white adolescent males coming to terms with issues of masculinity and identity, the image of the swaggering black male in hip hop videos is an appealing figure that has become iconic of an authentic and desirable representation of masculinity to be emulated.”<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, African-Americans made use of the widely-discussed and criticized word “nigger.” The offensive connotations were shifted into an entirely positive meaning. As in the case of glorifying outlaws, when breaking white rules came to be seen as an act of valor; the one who was called “nigger” was automatically approached as a hero for blacks, just because he was a person whites hated. H. Rap Brown explains in his political autobiography *Die, Nigger, Die!* that for the radical revolutionaries of the 1960s, “nigger” was a term for a politically involved black brother or sister who did not fear opposing the white society and battling for their civil rights.<sup>50</sup> “Nigger,” therefore ceased to be a term of disdain and it became a term of respect and honor. Additionally, much like the term “dude” “indexes for young white males a ‘stance of cool solidarity’ as they navigate discourses around masculinity that demand group solidarity, demonstrable heterosexuality, and social nonconformity;” “nigga” suggests solidarity among black men, especially those who were brought up in poor inner-city neighborhoods.<sup>51</sup>

Collins takes a similar stance toward the language although she acknowledges the controversy surrounding the widely discussed words:

On one level, *freak*, *nigger*, *bitch*, and *faggot* are just words. But on another level, these terms are situated at an ideological crossroads that both replicates and resists intersecting oppressions.[...] People also resist systems of oppression often by taking offensive words and changing their meaning; the case, for example, of African-

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<sup>48</sup> Miles White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity* (University of Illinois Press: Chicago), 23.

<sup>49</sup> White, 23.

<sup>50</sup> H. Rap Brown, *Die, Nigger, Die!* (Lawrence Hill Press: Chicago, 2002), 19.

<sup>51</sup> White, 22.

American men whose use of the term *nigger* challenges the derogatory usages of White America.<sup>52</sup>

### **III.3 Hip Hop as a (Hyper)Masculine Music**

Perry claims hip hop to be a masculine music. Although we find remarkably gifted women MC's in the "game," such as Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill, Salt-N-Peppa and many more, hip hop is usually discussed in regards to its masculine, and often hypermasculine, elements. Hypermasculinity is usually defined as "the exaggeration of gender-stereotyped behavior that is believed to be masculine." We see classic examples in 50 Cent's *Get Rich or Die Tryin* album cover or LL Cool J exposing his muscular body on magazine covers or concerts. What we are most often shown in media, and we do not necessarily have to speak about hip hop artists only, is a half-naked black man with gold chains and a gun.

Andrea Hunter and James Earl Davis say:

Hypermasculinity (i.e., hyperaggressiveness, hypersexuality, excessive emphasis on the appearance of wealth, and the absence of personal accountability) as a dominant conception of manhood in poor inner-city communities, particularly among youth, is seen as a by-product of the pathology and despair of the "Black underclass."<sup>53</sup>

That is the ideal of African-American male that some may fear will be emulated by wider populace. Guns, money, cars and women, are what matter. The most popular image of a black man in hip hop is the "badman" or the "bad nigger" who made it in America and who did not have to succumb to the white supremacist ideals. Jay-Z, 50Cent or Game frequently glamorize such a persona. The Los Angeles based rapper Game performs "I got a Louis Vuitton belt buckle holdin' a glocc."<sup>54</sup> Obviously, Louis Vuitton brand symbolizes wealth and financial security, while the gun behind it is what earned Game the money, it stands for authenticity

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<sup>52</sup> Collins, 121.

<sup>53</sup> Andrea Hunter and James Earl Davis, "Hidden Voices of Black Men: The Meaning, Structure, and the Complexity of Manhood," *Journal of Black Studies*, (Sage Publications, Inc.: Thousand Oaks, CA, 1994), 23.

<sup>54</sup> Game, "It's OK," *Doctor's Advocate* (Gefffen: Los Angeles, 2006).

which not only played an important role in his rags-to-riches life but it also alludes to the supposedly authentic accounts of street life which he intends to keep reporting. Last but not least, it symbolizes his loyalty to the streets which only underlines his status of, as Ice Cube might say, “a wrong nigga to fuck with.”<sup>55</sup>

The violence is of course related to the rebellion and the image of the “badman” and the “bad nigger.” Cornel West argues that by subverting the language and conditions of dominant culture by violence, “the black male search for power often reinforces the myth of black sexual prowess and [...] this search for power also usually results in a direct confrontation with the order-imposing authorities of the status quo, that is, the police or criminal justice system.”<sup>56</sup> The ideal representative of black men is distorted due to the long lasting discrimination, brainwashing and brutal treatment. The means of black progress might be immoral but the lack of morality is in a way a basis for identity as we have mentioned before, the Negroes who threatened the order during slavery were actually perceived as heroes in black plantation communities. They were the ones who challenged the laws of slavery, the courageous individuals who refused to become things.<sup>57</sup> Violence and rebellion that were seen as immoral and deplorable by the white society were in fact applauded to by the blacks. Thus the result is two-fold. On the one hand, the violent rebellion aids black men regain their lost masculine power and confidence; on the other, it reinforces stereotypes which prevent the community from achieving a long lasting progress. Hunter and Davis add: “Black males are both victims and participants in their own destruction.”<sup>58</sup> The performance of violence and revolt finds hip hop the best instrument of projection.

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<sup>55</sup> Ice Cube, “Wrong Nigga to Fuck Wit,” *Death Certificate* (Priority: Los Angeles, 1991).

<sup>56</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: A Division of Random House, Inc.2001), 128.

<sup>57</sup> Judy, 112-113.

<sup>58</sup> Hunter and Davis, 23.

## **IV. “I’m not a businessman, I’m a business, man!”<sup>59</sup> AUTHENTICITY IN HIP HOP**

Patricia Phil Collins makes a brilliant point when she claims that “mass media’s tendency to blur the lines between fact and fiction has important consequences for perceptions of Black culture and Black people.”<sup>60</sup> Rap music is a unique art in terms of putting a huge emphasis on authenticity. Hip hop artists (especially hardcore rappers) are often evaluated according to biographical information. If a rapper grew up in the ghetto it automatically increases the legitimacy of his voice and its attractiveness for listeners. David Banner once said: “I am like Stephen King, I do better in horror music, horror music is what I do [...]”<sup>61</sup>

The ambiguity between an authentic account of experience and a made-up story of a person who created the narrative out of a general knowledge of life conditions of the ghetto is extremely hard to solve. Jay-Z captures the issue in his line: “I’m not a businessman, I’m a business, man!” The line is very fertile regarding interpretation. Jay-Z may talk about Jay-Z, not Shawn Carter. He says that what he does is a business, that his whole persona of Jay-Z is a business and nothing else. Jay-Z is not a businessman; Shawn Carter is, and Jay-Z is his business. We can interpret the line in the opposite way when we may say that Jay-Z claims he is not a businessman, but he is the business because he refers to Shawn Carter and suggests that Shawn Carter and his life is what is sold to listeners, therefore, the lyrics are truly authentic.

The authenticity causes most of the controversies around hip hop music including the endless debate about the hypermasculine content of the lyrics. We can obviously distinguish between rappers such as Brotha Lynch Hung whose narratives are not taken seriously because they are simply far-fetched, they are basically presented as fiction. He announces to release an album trilogy about a character named Coathangastrangla and everybody knows what to expect. The content can be misogynistic and extremely violent but at least he is not accused of perpetuating offensive images in his everyday life because people see that Brotha Lynch

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<sup>59</sup> Jay-Z featuring Kanye West, “Diamonds from Sierra Leone,” *Late Registration* (Roc-A Fella: New York, 2005).

<sup>60</sup> Collins, 151.

<sup>61</sup> David Banner on *From Imus to Industry: The Business of Stereotypes and Degrading Images*, 2007.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8L8xTG7tufM>

Hung is only a performer. Then we have artists such as Tupac who based his career on authenticity and, which is significantly tragic, he also died in a way that he anticipated in many of his songs.

Mostly we can assume that what Notorious B.I.G. rapped about he also lived, however, it is not what Christopher Wallace lived. Nevertheless, when a rapper tries to support the authenticity of his lyrics by imitating the characters of his narratives he ends up like Biggie, Tupac, Slim Soulja, Proof and others did. When artists forget about their status of artists and they let the art mingle with their real lives, it literally leads to the death of authors. Their street hustler past catches up with them if they are not able to draw a thick line between reality and art.

#### ***IV.1 The Construction of Authenticity and the Importance of Individuality***

When we talk about authenticity, we need to define the term first. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines “authentic” as “worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact;” but also, which is very important, as conforming to an original so as to reproduce essential features;” or made or done the same way as an original.”<sup>62</sup> What rap artist usually yearn for and what is desired most by rap fans is the first definition of “authenticity.”

Authenticity and its application may be defined in different ways; some of them very much contradict the common notion of it. Richard Handler claims authenticity to be “a cultural construct tied to Western notions of the individual [...]. The individual has a central place in our understanding of reality.”<sup>63</sup> Cassirer speaks about the importance of individuality:

Nature ... implies the individuality, the independence and particularity of objects. And from this characteristic force, which radiates from every object as a special center of activity, is derived also the inalienable worth which belongs to it in the totality of being. All this is now summed up in the word 'nature', which signifies the integration of all parts into one all-inclusive whole of activity and life which, nevertheless, no longer

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<sup>62</sup> “authenticity,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authenticity>

<sup>63</sup> Richard Handler, “Authenticity,” *Anthropology Today* (Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland: London, 1986). 2

means mere subordination. For the part not only exists within the whole but asserts itself against it, constituting a specific element of individuality and necessity.<sup>64</sup>

The individuality as described by Cassirer resembles what we encounter in works of rap artist who constantly define and assert themselves against the whole, which is often the US, the whites, other gang sets or the other coast of hip hop America. Tupac provides a great example in the already mentioned track “Me Against the World:” “I got nuttin’ to lose, baby/’Cause it’s just me against the world.”<sup>65</sup> Chuck D also defines himself against the white supremacist system by saying: “Elvis was a hero to most/But he never meant, shit to me you see/Straight up racist that sucker was/Simple and plain/Mother fuck him and John Wayne.”<sup>66</sup> Regardless of whether we talk about the “bad nigga”/”badman” or the “bad nigger” of rap music, the individuality is a paramount feature of his persona. The differences of levels of individuality shall be discussed later.

Authenticity as social construct relates to individual’s assumption of social roles. To put it simply, we may point out that even gangsters who rap about their life are not real gangsters. They are merely people who assume the role of a “gangsta” in order to survive, to earn respect, money etc. The authenticity depends on acting, on choosing roles. Handler mentions

the idea that everyone in society ... acts a part, takes a "position", does his dance, even the King himself. That a king can be imagined as playing the social role of king suggests how greatly the modern outlook differs from the medieval, in which, presumably, the king simply was king, by virtue of the essential being God had granted him.<sup>67</sup>

The question is how much authenticity matters if everyone only tries to fulfill the role that he is supposed to? Is there a life without roles? The obsession with authenticity is ridiculed if we seriously consider the questions. We do not know what would be left of us if we were

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<sup>64</sup> Ernst Cassirer quoted in Richard Handler, “Authenticity,” *Anthropology Today* (Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland: London, 1986), 3.

<sup>65</sup> Tupac Shakur, “Me Against the World,” *Me Against the World* (Out Da Gutta: Los Angeles, 1995).

<sup>66</sup> Public Enemy, “Fight the Power,” *Fear of Black Planet* (Def Jam: New York, 1990).

<sup>67</sup> Handler, 3.

stripped of all of the roles we play because it seems to be highly implausible. Art, hip hop not being an exception, is based on the same principle of roles. Handler paraphrases Trilling:

Modern art is required, not to please, as in earlier aesthetic theories, but to provide its audience with examples of authenticity: 'As for the audience, its expectation is that through its communication with the work of art, which may be resistant, unpleasant, even hostile, it acquires the authenticity of which the object itself is the model and the artist the personal example.<sup>68</sup>

Nowhere does it work more visibly than in rap music. In the rap culture, a person who has never been a gang member has no right to be a "gangsta" rapper. Although he might be exceptionally familiar with what "gangbangin'" involves, his work will never be labeled authentic. The "keep it real" slogan is what makes rap music both attractive and tragic. Nevertheless, a rap artist has to be a personal example of what he talks about in his lyrics in order to be respected.

Hip hop often approximates what Gary Alan Fine calls the "identity art," which fits rap fans concern for authenticity. Authenticity is "linked to an absence of cognitive understanding, creating an unmediated experience."<sup>69</sup> Hip hop, like some forms of folk art, has been created mostly by people who lacked any formal knowledge of how to create art. The artists did not study art, its history; nobody really taught them how to create it. Hip hop might be labeled a self-taught art. It developed naturally out of the limited means of creating music that was possessed by the black and latino youth in the South Bronx. The "self-taught" quality, when the people made use of what they had to express their emotions, joys and hardships, is still a relevant element of the art. Only nowadays, hip hop fandom and critics focus more on the life and biographical facts of artists, which substitutes for the self-taught quality that rap music had at its core when it originated. Additionally, the self-taught aspect still exists as one does not need a formal education or mastering a musical instrument to start creating it. One teaches himself by practicing, very often on a street corner. That is what later gives artists credibility. By boasting about being in prison, having a criminal record or being

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<sup>68</sup> Handler, 4.

<sup>69</sup> Gary Alan Fine, "Crafting Authenticity: The Validation of Identity in Self-Taught Art," *Theory and Society* (Springer: New York, 2003), 155.

shot at, they construct both their authenticity and their masculinity, which go hand in hand in the rap music industry.

Fine gives us the characteristics of his “identity art:” By this I refer to the fact that it is the social location of the artists that links the works together, not formal qualities of the work, social ties among artists, self-image of the artists, or the acceptance of a theory of artistic production.” Nowadays, rap artist understand very well that the “identity art” sells, so they know what biographical information they should promote to the public. They literally work on constructing their identity in order to appear relevant. The self-image is developed according to the taste of the fans. Fine adds that the creators of “identity art” are usually “uneducated, elderly, black, impoverished, mentally ill, criminal or rural.” Listeners are drawn to “the other,” in our case, to the ghetto underdogs. Fine’s rule that “it is their lack, rather than their attributes, that defines them,” is nowhere more in force than in rap music. Growing up poor without a father, being forced to succumb to criminal activities, seeing one’s friends die on the streets; those are the bricks that build the wall of authenticity around the rap artist. Fine says:

Not only are these artists outside the art market, but also the value of their works is directly linked to the biographies of the artists and the stories of authentic creation that the objects call forth. Life stories infuse the meaning of the work. It is the purity or unmediated quality of the production of the work, in the view of its audience, that provides the work with significance, and, not incidentally, with value as a commodity, creating a biography of the object.<sup>70</sup>

The authenticity and the “bad nigga” or the “bad nigger” images are closely connected on contemporary hip hop records. These representations of masculinity are the ones perceived as authentically African-American, which causes the fiery debates about the negative effects of rap music. As rap artists start to realize that the ghetto background sells records, they acknowledge the rules of authenticity. Through the realization of authenticity and creating art that fits the authentic frame, the authenticity is denied. The question is whether any rap music can be classified as authentic nowadays. The answer would be: probably not; however, it does not lower the quality of the art itself, one only needs to realize that not everything that comes

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<sup>70</sup> Fine, 155-156.

out of speakers is reality; it is a constructed world of the hip hop artist even though it unfortunately resembles what they may have grown up in. This is a substantial thing to realize for both the critics of hip hop and the fans.

All of what is stated above is not to say that personal experience does not play any role in hip hop narratives whatsoever. The cultural anthropologist Robert Plant Armstrong mentions in connection to performance practices and says that there is “a number of [...] affecting media that are highly interpretive and rely on variable uses of situation, surface, color, volume, tone, movement, word, relationality, and experience (personal life experience or group experience).”<sup>71</sup> The experience may participate in the final performance or art creation, yet the final product is not the experience itself, only performance possibly inspired by life in ghettos.

#### ***IV.2 “All Eyez on Me:”<sup>72</sup> Tupac’s Performance of a Street Thug***

“The performance of self through alter-egos and assumed identities” is a seminal part of rap music performance as well. Armstrong argues that artists express themselves not only “through the creation of art, but *as* art manifested in themselves.”<sup>73</sup> Nowhere is it more obvious than in the case of the previously mentioned deceased rapper, actor and political activist Tupac Amaru Shakur who used his body to enhance the power of his performance, his body being a spectacular evidence of his self-proclaimed “realness.” Tupac’s body was a gallery of tattoos expressing themes from his songs. There was a tattoo saying “50 Niggaz” on his solar plexus, a large “Thug Life” written on his stomach, “Fuck the World” spread across his trapezoids, a giant cross on his back, several others including “Only God Can Judge Me,” “Outlaw,” a head of a black panther referring to his mother’s affiliation with The Black Panther Party “Heartless,” and several others. What we are presented with is a remarkable mélange of messages, reaching from political statements to images confirming his fearlessness to thug persona.

However, one of the tattoos does not get as much attention as it should. Tupac has on his back two masks with “Laugh Now” and “Cry Later” icons which stand for comedy and tragedy, two elementary types of play; and the symbols also suggest the importance of

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Plant Armstrong quoted in White, 34.

<sup>72</sup> Tupac Shakur, *All Eyez on Me* (Death Row: Los Angeles, 1996).

<sup>73</sup> White, 35.

Tupac's theatrical performance. We should not forget that he also studied at the Baltimore School for the Arts, mainly acting and poetry. He even starred in several productions of Shakespeare's plays, and he was aware of the power of convincing performance which he employed both during his acting career and his musical acts. Tupac had studied performance even before he became a rapper. Although the tattoo with masks underscores the performative element in Tupac's work, the "THUG LIFE" sign on his stomach attracted the most attention from the public.

Tupac was eventually consumed by his performative genius. The extent to which Tupac staged himself in the end erased the line between reality and art. He decided to live his lyrics: "I see death around the- corner, anyday/Trying to keep it together, no one lives forever anyway/Strugglin and strivin, my destiny's to die/Keep my finger on the trigger, no mercy in my eyes;" or "Picture niggaz we rushin and still bustin/til the cops come runnin, duck in abandoned buildings/Ditchin my gun, homeboy the motherfukkin villain;" or "And niggas laugh, 'til the first motherfucker got blasted/I put the nigga in his casket,/Now they coverin' the bastard in plastic."<sup>74</sup> In Tupac's case, fans truly believed that he lived what he depicted in his songs. Dyson argues that the "couplings of authenticity and violence trap the real niggas,[...]Tupac's embrace of a dangerous lifestyle that he viewed as the unavoidable destiny of real niggas lead to self-destructive choices."<sup>75</sup> In other words, Tupac refused or failed to distinguish between Tupac Amaru Shakur the artist and 2Pac the thug. He may have achieved the highest level of authenticity but he also paid the highest price for the achievement.

The blend of art, conscience, and theatre provided him with a unique performative power, and that is what he concentrated on. Dyson continues by saying: "Tupac's devotion to tracing the anatomy of the real nigga inevitably invites the question of whether his vision of authenticity is enabling or destructive."<sup>76</sup> In fact, Tupac seems to reach beyond authenticity; he was both an artist and a work of art. Friedrich Nietzsche says:

Let us therefore LIMIT ourselves to the purification of our opinions and valuations and to the CREATION OF OUR OWN NEW TABLES OF WHAT IS GOOD, and let us stop brooding about the "moral value of our actions!...We...WANT TO BECOME THOSE WE ARE--human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give

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<sup>74</sup> Tupac Shakur, "Death Around the Corner," *Tupac: Resurrection* (Amaru: Los Angeles, 2003).

<sup>75</sup> Dyson, 150.

<sup>76</sup> Dyson, 153.

themselves laws, who create themselves.... Life is art - I do not know of any more profound difference in the whole orientation of an artist than this, whether he looks at his work in progress (at "himself") from the point of view of the witness, or whether he "has forgotten the world," which is the essential feature of all monological art.<sup>77</sup>

Tupac made himself (including his body) into a work of art. He attained the ultimate success by turning into one of the characters that he talked about so often. Is this the kind of authenticity that everyone claims to miss in rap music today? "The shredding of the artistic and moral lines that separate stories and the truths they embody from the 'real' is exactly what worries the critics of hip hop and black youth."<sup>78</sup> That is exactly why Tupac embodies the best and the worst we can find in hip hop music. Tupac refused to be categorized, he talked about what he felt like talking about; he defied labels, he might be mentioned as a political, gangsta, ghetto-centric, conscious or hardcore rapper. . All of those fit; his art was very complex, going through various stages, always saying what he lived and living what he rapped about. That's the authentic "Thug Life."

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<sup>77</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, [http://archive.org/stream/Nietzsche-TheGayScience/Nietzsche-GaySciencewk\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/Nietzsche-TheGayScience/Nietzsche-GaySciencewk_djvu.txt), 324-325.

<sup>78</sup> Dyson, 158.

## V. THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN HIP HOP

Dyson states that “the moral equivalency of masculinity and authenticity is an undeniable, if troubling, sign of the degree to which machismo and patriarchy continue to determine the cultural and political priorities of black life.”<sup>79</sup> To show that the “bad nigga” and “bad nigger” of hip hop are merely products of artistic constructions, we need to deal with the other part of the hip hop male identity. We have noticed that the authenticity of rap narratives is further from reality than we are usually able or willing to admit; which is not to say that the conditions that hip hop was born in and where its creative potential still resides is not real. Unfortunately, a ghetto is not a made-up space but for some, it is a part of everyday life. However, the stories and characters which are situated in the projects, the ‘hood; cannot be taken literally. There are no Curtis’ Jacksons, O’Sheas Jacksons, Shawn Carters or Brads Jordans, the rappers cannot be identified with the characters that sell drugs and live the ghetto lifestyles. There are only their alter-egos or made-up personas such as 50Cent, Ice Cube, Jay-Z and Scarface who are fictional characters reporting their stories of the streets. Are their stories literally true? No stories are, they are just stories told by brilliant storytellers but we cannot identify Jay-Z’s narratives with Shawn Carter’s life. Jay-Z, Ice Cube, and others are fabricated personas, created to entertain or illuminate.

The gender roles of the created characters are also founded upon stereotypes and constructed to entertain, to report, sometimes to teach. The gender roles of rappers evolve during their careers. An artist like Nas goes from a street thug known as Nasty Nas on his classic album *Illmatic* to his later successful records where he calls himself NasNas Escobar, presently assuming a role as a responsible and caring father, mainly on the track “Daughters,” on his latest record *Life is Good*. Christopher Wallace’s character started as a common drug dealer and works his way up to calling himself Biggie Smalls and even a Mafia Don. Notwithstanding, as Tracy Marrow a.k.a. Ice-T once pointed out: “I’m no more a gangsta or a cop killer than David Bowie is an astronaut.”<sup>80</sup> Here Marrow basically states that he is not Ice-T; he is merely an artist who brings to his fans pictures of the urban decay of African-

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<sup>79</sup> Dyson, 158.

<sup>80</sup> Ice-T quoted by Prof. John Sutherland on *Rappers Are Not Gangsters; They’re Poets* (23. 06. 2012) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vs3n1ujkflc>

American communities through the eyes of a “gangsta” called Ice-T. Marrow denies literal accuracy as we usually conceive of it and he suggests the importance of taking into account rap music’s essence, which is that it is still art regardless of how accurately it depicts reality.

## **V.1 Judith Butler and the Performance of Gender**

Gender is one of the most often discussed aspects of rap music and it is also the one most responsible for passionate anti-hip hop arguments and campaigns. The controversy surrounding hip hop stems most often from its construction and performance of masculinity. Generally speaking, according to Judith Butler’s gender theory, both sex and gender have been culturally constructed. Gender is imposed upon people, and it is based very much on gender stereotypes. The pressure to succumb to gender requirements is so strong that the supposedly biological category of sex is either insignificant for one’s identity because it is fully consumed by the category of gender; or it is looked upon by Butler as a cultural construction as well. In any case, gender is adopted by means of performing gender conventions. Therefore, we may say that one adopts gender by performing what he/she is given by her surroundings and the acting as gender ultimately, and subconsciously, becomes part of one’s gender identity.

Butler mentions in the Preface to *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* “the radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female ‘Other.’”<sup>81</sup> We should perhaps add the “Other” is also represented, in hip hop particularly even more often, by weaker men , and we very often encounter efforts figuratively to effeminate other men, whether in regular hip hop lyrics or in a rap freestyle battle. In rap music, the “Other” against which masculinity is defined is the weak, effeminate man, possibly gay but not necessarily. Rap’s hypermasculinity is confirmed by feeding on other men, by masculine rivalry and vying. The Philadelphia based rap artist Vinnie Paz raps: “low shit, baggy nautica with the gatt cocked/you ho shit, tight jeans, pink with the tank top/you make the kind of rap music that fags watch/I make the kind of rap music that stab cops/I brought it raw, I been here ever since/I remember you the fagget wearin’ gear like you Prince.”<sup>82</sup> Big L offers many battle rap lines that aim to ridicule the imaginary opponent, such as: “niggas be getting’ mad ‘cause I hit

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<sup>81</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge: New York, 1990.), VII.

<sup>82</sup> Vinnie Paz, “When You Need Me,” *The Sound and The Fury* (New York: Babygrande, 2006).

more chicks than they spoke to,” or “And you ain’t made a hit yet, you flop in a split sec/In the shower’s the only time you get your dick wet.” The lyrics might be shockingly offensive such as Big L’s “No dame can give me a bad name, I got mad fame/I’m quick to put a slug in a fag brain,”<sup>83</sup> or they can be playful and humorous, for example Sean P raps: “Y’all niggaz are softer than wack shit/My rap slap the Earth off of its axis,” QQ or “Shoot the fair one, mano-a-mano the clown/I’ll pull the pound on a Ronald McDonald/You a Happy Meal nigga with the toy in the box/I clap the steel nigga, put your boy in the box.”<sup>84</sup> Regardless of the style that is adopted for its expression, the performance of hypermasculine images stand in the centre of hip hop music.

Gender conventions are even more strongly imposed on African-Americans (male and female) because the minority is generally a highly stereotyped one. Since minstrel shows, continuing all the way to the contemporary Hollywood movies, African-Americans have been presented in very limited ways. The way of presenting them has been so powerful and ever-present that African-American folk had almost no choice but to accept and internalize them. Rap artists are often accused of spreading stereotypical images of hypersexual, violent, uncontrollable individuals. We should bear in mind that, first, the performance of these particular gender stereotypes sells very well; and, secondly, they indeed often stem from what the artist used to see in the streets. Hypermasculinity is, therefore, the aftermath of street life and “gangsta” lifestyle where one cannot afford to show weakness; this attitude prevails in the prison culture also, and many African-American males have to adjust to the attitudes due their stay in correctional facilities; as Ice-T says: “In the jungle, masculinity is at a premium. Anybody weaker than the next man will be victimized by the stronger [...]. Displays of strength and aggression are prized because you’re always walking like a prison inmate.”<sup>85</sup>

The hypermasculine element of African-American culture is also a valuable article on the market. Rappers often sell what they have seen because it is the easiest way to earn money. David Banner once said: “There is nothing in my lyrics that you can point your finger at and say that it doesn’t exist in my community.”<sup>86</sup> Instead of blaming rappers for all the evil in black communities, one should perhaps examine what it is that actually makes them rap about

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<sup>83</sup> Big L, “All Black,” *Lifestylez ov da Poor and Dangerous* (Columbia: New York, 1995).

<sup>84</sup> Sean P, “Pyrex,” *Mic Tyson* (Duck Down: New York, 2012).

<sup>85</sup> Ice-T, *The Ice Opinion: Who Gives a Fuck?* (St. Martin’s Press: Los Angeles.), 10.

<sup>86</sup> David Banner on *From Imus to Industry: The Business of Stereotypes and Degrading Images*, 2007.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8L8xTG7tufM>

the things that they rap about. This is not to say that rap artists do not distribute images, but simply to recognize that the musicians are themselves products of the atrocities, decay and violence that have been poisoning cities like Detroit or East St. Louis.

Consequently, we may say that the construction of hip hop masculinity is both free will and determinism to a certain extent. The black body of a rapper starts as a passive medium on which cultural conventions are projected; but the same conventions that he is forced to accept are later supported and cultivated in his art because he is aware that they are found desirable and that they are profitable. Therefore, the rapper creates art that is based on the life in the ‘hood and, simultaneously, it promises a financial gain; so he essentially uses his body as the instrument to both testify and gain profit. Butler’s passive medium becomes an instrument.<sup>87</sup> We thus encounter a paradoxical situation where an artist is basically made to produce authentic art which, although fans do not realize this, denies their conception of authenticity as well as the subjective authenticity of the artist who raps about what the public desires.

## V.2 *The Enemies of Hip Hop’s Public*

Judith Butler talks about “spectres of discontinuity” and her term suits our analysis of gender in hip hop as well. “Intelligible genders” are those who fit and “maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire.”<sup>88</sup> Interestingly, the “intelligible” gender in hip hop consists of both heterosexual and homosexual characters; but one of them (the heterosexual male) controls the others. What makes the other intelligible is the fact that they contribute to the overall stability and they seem to be necessary to many narratives of the genre. Therefore, the intelligibility of the female and homosexual element lies in their simplification; and also in their being turned against the (hyper) masculine supremacy. They are skeletonized to become intelligible. They are also constantly “prohibited and produced” at the same time for the same reasons. The hip hop versions of feminine gender and homosexuality are produced in order to be destroyed.

We may speak about the establishment of masculine cultural identity through “an overt act of differentiation.” Butler argues that “the differentiating moment of social exchange appears to be a social bond between men, a Hegelian unity between masculine terms that are

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<sup>87</sup> Butler, 8.

<sup>88</sup> Butler, 17.

simultaneously specified and individualized.”<sup>89</sup> On the one hand, there is the bonding aspect of men who are above the rest of society. We may differentiate between two possible bonding concepts; the “me-and-my-homeboyz” concept, based on what might be called a friendship; and “me-and-real-nigs” concept that accentuates not necessarily a personal relationship to the other “nigs” but it connects them usually in a emotionless association of people who are, to use Ice Cube’s term again, “the wrong niggaz to fuck wit’.”<sup>90</sup>

The former concept is typical for the “badmen” or “bad niggas”; the latter is usually seen with “bad niggers.” Tupac characterizes the former relationship in his songs as: “two niggaz of the same kind/Quick to holla at a hoochie with the same line [...] like distant cousins, fightin, playin dozens/Whole neighborhood buzzin, knowin, that we wasn’t/Used to catch us on the roof or behind the stairs/I’m gettin blitzed and I reminisce on all the times we shared.”<sup>91</sup> Tupac admits that shared time between him and his friends might have been marked activities that were not strictly speaking legal; however, what drew them close were the common background and the hardships they have been through.

The latter kind of association that we called “me-and-real-nigs” can be illustrated on Big L’s raps: “I’m known to pull steel trigs and kill pigs/I run with ill kids and real nigs who peel wigs.”<sup>92</sup> Big L associates himself only with “the real nigs who peel wigs,” which is what makes them close. The “gangstas” who show the same kind of “I-don’t-give-a-shit” attitude are the only ones he wants to be with. They distinguish themselves from the weak and law-abiding citizens precisely by their “badness.” The difference of being “bad” provides a bonding opportunity for them; yet it does leave them enough space to function as individuals.

Women seem to be excluded from the community ties. In rap lyrics, the emphasis is put on ties between men, homies and “niggaz”. However, we should not make hasty critiques of rappers for what they talk about in their lyrics. As an example we can take Bakari Kitwana’s complaints about Jay-Z’s lyrics to his song “Big Pimpin”

You know I - thug em, fuck em, love em, leave em

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<sup>89</sup> Butler, 40.

<sup>90</sup> Ice Cube, “Wrong Nigga to Fuck Wit,” *Death Certificate* (Priority: Los Angeles, 1991).

<sup>91</sup> Tupac Shakur, “I Ain’t Mad at Cha,” *All Eyez on Me* (Death Row Records: Los Angeles, 1996).

<sup>92</sup> Big L, “Put It On,” *Lifestylez ov da Poor and Dangerous* (Columbia: New York, 1995).

Cause I don't fuckin need em  
Take em out the hood, keep em lookin good  
But I don't fuckin feed em  
[...]  
Me give my heart to a woman?  
Not for nothin, never happen  
I'll be forever mackin  
Heart cold as assassins, I got no passion<sup>93</sup>

Not to disrespect Kitwana's opinion; yet we should realize that the song is called "Big Pimpin" for a reason.<sup>94</sup> In the song Jay-Z personifies a pimp, one of the reoccurring characters of rap music, one of those who symbolize the dark side of the American myth of a self-made man, which shall be mentioned later. Therefore, we should not condemn the artist for giving voice to a highly controversial character, we should rather examine the conditions that gave rise to the character and made him attractive. Kitwana also points out that those ideas that are expressed in Jay-Z's song have become more universal. It is surely true but once again, the gender divide is not caused by hip hop, the genre only reflects on the circumstances in American society.

Annette J. Saddik points out the importance of role-playing. She speaks of "the construction of identity as role-playing." She continues: "Delivery, tone, and style are keys to understanding rap. Rappers consciously take on roles."<sup>95</sup> Jay-Z takes on the role of a pimp in "Big Pimpin," Jus Allah and Brotha Lynch Hung embody mass murderers in many of their lyrics, Kool G Rap often stands for a Mafia member, Nas narrates one of his songs from the point of view of an unborn baby, Chino XL presents us with his persona of the Puerto-Rican Superhero where he brags about his supernatural abilities; Freddie Gibbs, Game, Spice 1, Yukmouth, Styles P and others have been known for their "gangsta" narratives. All of them choose different variations of masculine identity and character types to get their intended messages to their audience.

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<sup>93</sup> Jay-Z, "Big Pimpin'," *Vol.3...Life and Times of S. Carter* (Roc-A-Fella: New York, 1999).

<sup>94</sup> Bakari Kitwana, *Hip Hop Generation: Crisis in African-American Culture* (Basic Civitas Book: New York, 2002), 86.

<sup>95</sup> Annette J. Saddik, "Rap's Unruly Body: The Postmodern Performance of Black Male Identity on the American Stage," *TDR*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (The MIT Press: Cambridge), 117.

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Rappers, especially “gangsta” and hardcore political rappers, succeeded in creating a fictional world that is reflective of the reality to the extent that listeners sometimes struggle to spot the line which divides reality from fictional narratives. As Saddik rightly claims:

The blatant self-referentiality of the lyrics, the reversal and even invisibility of whiteness as “the other color,” the masculine pose of resistance and threat, and finally Ice Cube’s declaration that he’s “got something to say” (as well as the space which allows him that speech) signifies a *fictional* world where black voices are heard and black power is the standard.<sup>96</sup>

The fact that the world of rap narratives is constructed is suddenly forgotten or ignored and rappers are not looked upon as mere actors or artists; but as gangsters, pimps, terrorists, rapists and murderers.

Returning to Butler, she also says that “one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender” which “presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within the binary pair.”<sup>97</sup> In the rap game, however, not to be feminine does not automatically mean to be masculine, it is hard to speak of a binary pair and if so, the pair is defined by the antagonism between its components, not by its complementary nature. The “true masculinity” in hip hop is represented by the gangsta or the hardcore rap narrators who shift the masculine conventions by their exaggerated accentuation of toughness, violence and domination. The ones who do not give in to those new rules are not considered masculine; they are called weak, sissies, bitches or “bitch-ass niggaz.” Accordingly, one can claim that the binary opposition both does and does not exist in rap music. It does not in the sense that men and women are not really antagonized or put strictly to the either/or relation. It does exist if we endorse the fact that what we come across is usually men, i.e. the hypermasculine hardcore rap individuals; and everything else might be labeled as the “Other.” The intelligibility of the hypermasculine gender identity is exceptionally prominent in hip hop music. The opposite of man is not woman but a weak, timid and helpless man. The binary opposition in hardcore rap music is usually constituted by strong men on one side and everything else on the other.

However, to make this issue even more complex, it is possible to, to a certain extent, deconstruct what has just been said about the binary order of gender; that is to say we may

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<sup>96</sup> Saddik, 118.

<sup>97</sup> Butler, 22.

point out that the binary system exists so far as the way of referring to the “Other” is concerned. Anything that is not masculine in the rap music kind of sense is referred to by effeminating remarks. As we have noted earlier, both women and weak men are called bitches. Men are called “bitch-ass niggaz,” sissies, pussies etc; thus, in terms of reference, the binary opposition is in force. It exists between two sorts of men, each of them differently gendered. We notice “the fear of ‘feminization’ associated within heterosexual cultures with male homosexuality.”<sup>98</sup>

Rappers perceive the homophobic remarks as most offensive, and they use them frequently in “beefs.” As an example, we may look at Nas’ lyrics at the time of the famous beef between him and Jay-Z. Although Nas is considered a very progressive rapper, politically outspoken, he called Jay-Z “Gay-Z” and Jay-Z’s Rocafella Records were changed into “Cockafella Records.”<sup>99</sup> The Los-Angeles based crew G-Unit (consisting of 50 Cent, Tony Yayo, and Young Buck, to name a few) was often called Gay-Unit by other rap artists who had a “beef” with them. The animosity among rap artists and rap crews is often expressed by using similarly homophobic remarks, which also supports the extremely masculine appearance of the other side.

The exaggeration and also distortion of masculine elements partially stem from the excessive emphasis on masculinity in general and the urgency of keeping up with it. Butler writes:

The sexuality that emerges within the matrix of power relations is not a simple replication or copy of the law itself, a uniform repetition of a masculinist economy of identity. The productions swerve from their original purposes and inadvertently mobilize possibilities of “subjects” that do not merely exceed the bounds of what cultural intelligibility is, but effectively expand the boundaries of what is, in fact, culturally intelligible.<sup>100</sup>

If personas such as Shaft predicted the rise of hypermaculine black man, we can say that rap music is the ultimate representation of it. We obviously need to generalize a bit for the sake of analysis because these days we cannot safely say what hip hop does and what it does

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<sup>98</sup> Butler, 59.

<sup>99</sup> Nas, “Ether,” *Stillmatic* (Ill Will: New York, 2001).

<sup>100</sup> Butler, 29.

not as it has developed into a very diverse genre, and the performance of masculinity take many different forms, which will be addressed later in more depth. The hypermasculinity—“the exaggeration of the posture of manhood and the aggression associated with male identity”—according to Michael Eric Dyson, reflects a “broader American trait.”<sup>101</sup> The rappers perform in accordance with the widely spread idea of masculinity in American culture.

Butler further says that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”<sup>102</sup> The “natural being” in rap music is currently the hypermasculine “gangsta,” which is not itself condemnable; the problem comes when the hypermasculinity turns against others, particularly women and homosexuals. The possible solution is not to invite more gay and female rappers to the “game” so that the “natural sort of being” of hip hop changes, but to make all rappers aware of the message that they send to the community by their lyrics. To change the essence of rap music as a masculine art is an unnecessary disruption that would compromise the art’s uniqueness.

Butler is absolutely right when she says that “The conflict of masculinity appears, then, to be precisely the demand for a full recognition of autonomy that will also and nevertheless promise a return to those full pleasures prior to repression and individuation.”<sup>103</sup> This is true especially for African-American males if we endorse the fact that they have been emasculated in the past, and they still bear the psychological scars of their uneasy history.

The hidden underlying notion of a homosocial desire that Judith Butler mentions seems to be too radical for our purpose of analysis of rap music. She argues that relations among patrilineal clans are based in what Irigaray would call “hommo-sexuality,” which is a repressed sexuality which refers to the bonds of men.

Indeed, strong relationships among men are common in rap lyrics, particularly for “badmen,” whose personal bonding with other men are significant in their narratives; and whose level of individuality is not as high as in “bad nigger” psyche. Michael Eric Dyson talks about another prominent field of African-American performance where the bonding is even more visible than anywhere else. Dyson talks about African-American athletes:

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<sup>101</sup> Dyson, 94.

<sup>102</sup> Butler, 33.

<sup>103</sup> Butler, 45.

Patting one another on the behind to say ‘good game’ or ‘good play,’ hugging each other and kissing one another, falling into each other’s sweating arms to boost camaraderie, and so on. This is a sexualized choreography of suppressed black desire and the way it is portrayed from the gridiron to the hardwood floor, pun intended!<sup>104</sup>

We see the powerful bonds among African-American men in hip hop by referring to each other as “homeboys,” “homies,” “bros;” while referring to women as “bitches,” “hoes,” “chickenheads,” or to their girls as “baby mamas,” that in itself suggests a lack of emotional relationship to the women who give birth to African-American children. Everything is created, as Tupac might say, “strictly for my niggaz,”<sup>105</sup> or in Kool G Rap’s words: “for tha brothaz.”<sup>106</sup>

The appearance of the rap performers tends to correspond to the hypermasculine nature of their lyrics. However, it does not prove, as some might argue, that the rap artists truly honor the hypermasculine code of life while off stage; rather it tells us something about the amount of time they spend preparing for their role. During a concert, they often start taking their clothes off until they end up half-naked, exposing their muscular bodies. Rappers such as 50 Cent, Nelly, LL Cool J, DMX, and Ja Rule support the power of their masculine performance by flexing their muscles, showing their abs, etc. The surface of the body is in this case, as Butler might say, over-sexed due to the performative purpose of it. It becomes the “necessary sign of a natural(ized) identity and desire.”<sup>107</sup> They let no one doubt their sexual orientation, strength, and fearsomeness.

In Butler’s work we come across the notion of violence with regards to assuming one’s heterosexuality. She writes: “the norm of compulsory heterosexuality does operate with the force and violence [...].”<sup>108</sup> In rap performance and lyrics, this might be interpreted literally as violence is clearly related to heterosexual performance of masculinity.

Nevertheless, if we look at what hip hop is most famous for, it is the hardcore “gangsta” character. It is precisely this character that has expanded our understanding of what it means

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<sup>104</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Open Mike: Reflections* (Basic Civitas Books: New York, 2003), 170.

<sup>105</sup> Tupac Shakur, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* (Interscope: Los Angeles, 1993).

<sup>106</sup> Kool G. Rap, “For tha Brothaz,” 4,5,6 (Cold Chillin’: New York, 1995).

<sup>107</sup> Butler, 71.

<sup>108</sup> Butler, 123.

to be a man in African-American art. What unsettles people is the possibility that the “gangsta” persona may (or that it already has) become acceptable. We may argue that the advocates of rap music, and the artists themselves, do not fight for its acceptance but precisely for its intelligibility. To refuse the character blindly due to its offensiveness means to refuse to attempt to solve the problem. It means to examine the reality of the predatory conditions of the projects. Although the gender in hip hop music is based on performance, it also mirrors some of the harsh circumstances that many blacks are born into. Connected with the authenticity, when 50Cent raps: “I got a itchy itchy trigger finger/ nigga its a killa in me not to spray that shit/I got enough ammo shots to blow up a hole in every mothafucka out this bitch/[...]niggas get knocked if they start askin' question, my name end up in all types of shit I be a gangsta, a nigga till I die fo' sho', whether I'm poor or I'm filthy rich,”<sup>109</sup> it would be absurd to assume that Curtis Jackson indeed lives by the rules he conveys in the lyrics he writes. Nonetheless, the narrator of the song “This Is 50” provides us with the idea of attitudes that are held in certain layers of American society; the narrative does what movies such as *The Godfather*, *Scarface*, or more recently *American Gangster* did when they came out. Curtis Jackson is a gangster as much as Al Pacino is Tony Montana. What is paradoxical about gender in hip hop is that rappers are often accused of being too “real;” they are accused of supporting negative stereotypes. We need to bear in mind that they are performers, and their performance is only an exaggerated version of gender rules that are themselves a performance of the larger society.

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<sup>109</sup> 50 Cent, “This is 50,” *The Massacre* (Aftermath: Santa Monica, 2005).

## **VI. “BEFORE I SELF DESTRUCT”- “Niggaz” and “Niggers” on Hip Hop Stage**

One needs to bear in mind that before hip hop appeared, there had been black males who roused the white majority by their actions and performance. The nature of their performance was even more tied to violence; one may think of the likes of Jack Johnson and Muhammad Ali. . The two athletes were constantly repelling white supremacy by their bravado, which was of course enhanced by their literal power and skills during their performance in the boxing ring. They rejected what they were supposed to do and the way they were supposed to do it; and by denying the norms, they both “put themselves beyond the social control of whites, and as a consequence were severely sanctioned.” Both were very strong individuals who might be called “bad niggers” or “bad niggas”; their individualistic and hypermasculine demeanor was either admired or hated. Muhammad Ali in particular knew how to use his performance skills to hype his fights and to entertain his fans. His acting included freestyle poetry and the same braggadocio rhetoric that is used nowadays by rap artists. Miles White compares the two kinds of performers: “Like boxing, hardcore rap portrays masculine figures risking themselves in heroic performance of verbal violence, which accounts for the aggressive nature of lyricism and much of its macho posturing.”<sup>110</sup>

The moral panic surrounding rap music may gradually compromise the power of the art, and it may lead to an ultimate destruction of it. Regardless of the consequences, we may claim that the panic and disgust represent a triumph for rap artists as actors in their own stories. When Academy Award actor Denzel Washington played Los Angeles police officer Alonzo Harris in the movie *Training Day*, he was rewarded for a believable performance of a controversial character. Alonzo Harris may repulse the audience, yet he was accepted and praised for his performance. Rap artists are seldom perceived in a similar fashion, although the quality of their performance is often not incomparable to that of Washington.QQMOVIE Moreover, Russell A. Potter argues that the images in hip hop

can be taken as threatening by audiences who find them so, and like the Signifyin(g) Monkey, hip-hop in a sense presupposes such a mis-taking [...] This would seem to

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<sup>110</sup> White, 67-68.

place the politics of reception in a paradoxical position; if Signifyin(g) presupposes a mis-taking, then doesn't such mis-taking become, in a sense "correct"?<sup>111</sup>

The "serious unseriousness" of rap music causes trouble. It is hard to distinguish, unlike in the case of cinema where the public usually approaches the characters as entirely fictional, between a rap lyrics narrator and the author who gives voice to the narrator. The "serious unseriousness" of rap lyrics is "a double ploy whose verbal play conceals a linguistic assault," and some tend to think that there is an "actual force behind the narratives of violence."<sup>112</sup> KRS-One mentions the problematic perception of authenticity in his song "Necessary:" "Even before the rock and roll era, violence played a big part in music/It's all according to your meaning of violence and how or in which way you use it [...] /And, oh no, it's not violent when under the Christmas tree is a look-alike gun/ But, yes, of course it's violent to have an album like KRS-One."<sup>113</sup>

If we go back to the question of authenticity which is closely linked to the performance of gender, the notion of rap music as a "look-alike gun" is crucial and very simple at the same time. It can hardly shoot anyone but when it is well-made, it looks real; therefore, one may get into trouble by pointing it at people who often due to the misunderstanding pull out real weapons. Nevertheless, the policy seems to be to make the guns as real-looking as possible. The intentions of "gangsta" rappers are analogous.

The figurativeness of violence in rap performance is depicted well in the rap supergroup Slaughterhouse's lyrics to their song "Lyrical Murderers." It expresses the fact that very often when rappers speak of violence, they refer to a verbal competition, not the intention to hurt anyone. Crooked I raps in the first stanza of the song:

Lyrical murderer, blame Rakim  
I'm a sniper shootin my way into your lame top 10  
Niggaz better pray to the lyrical lord  
that I fall off like the umbilical cord before I fill up the morgue  
This is how a killer record  
with the double-edged triple syllable sword, I'm iller than all

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<sup>111</sup> Potter, 85.

<sup>112</sup> Potter, 85.

<sup>113</sup> KRS-One, "Necessary," *By All Means Necessary* (Jive: New York, 1988).

Dineri, see I'm a literary genius  
Bury niggaz with words, a cemetery linguist<sup>114</sup>

Royce Da 5'9" continues by rapping: "Now you could walk through the shadow of death next to that shady street/Where the verbal cocaine business and 80's meet." He brags about his lyrical skills because when he raps, you may indeed feel as if you were walking the streets of his 'hood. However, the important thing to remember is that the cocaine sold is "verbal" and the murders are "lyrical," so the members of the group are able to defeat their opponents with words, with their lyrical dominance, not a physical one.<sup>115</sup>

According to Potter, authenticity and constructivism are not antagonistic but "mutually resonant" in African-American culture. Black artists have always had to "make something out of nothing, to make use of materials at hand." The characters featured in rap narratives are often based on real characters; they evoke authentic experience, yet they always have to be created. Potter says:

In order to be seen at all, one must invoke characters in official narratives, what Michael Franti calls "brand name negroes;" check the boxes: Welfare Mother, Coke Addict, Gang Member, impoverished child, boothstraps buppie. Hip hop's way into the spectacle is also its greatest danger: by picking up these narratives and Signifyin(g) on them, it runs the constant risk of being collapsed and conflated within them by those who don't "get" the doubleness of Signifyin(g).<sup>116</sup>

As touched upon before, hip hop causes confusion because the artists basically stage themselves and the boundaries between fact and fiction are deliberately made blurry. Despite all the complaints, we should realize that when people actually believe that the "gangsta" narratives are true, and all they want to do is to forbid artists to talk about it, something is wrong.

There is an obvious contradiction between the self-conscious performance and the "keep it real" slogan that resonates especially in the "gangsta" rap subgenre. What does it mean to

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<sup>114</sup> Slaughterhouse, "Lyrical Murderers," *Slaughterhouse* (E1: New York, 2009).

<sup>115</sup> Slaughterhouse, "Lyrical Murderers," *Slaughterhouse* (E1: New York, 2009).

<sup>116</sup> Potter, 134.

“keep it real?” It is an imperative adopted by artists that might be an equivalent to “based on a true story” that we hear in connection to movies. One may say that stories and characters portrayed in rap lyrics resemble real life characters and events that happen on the streets. Once again, rappers play the characters to bring testimony, to inform, or (and it is the most important reason of all) to entertain.

Moreover, “keep it real” is a contradictory motto. When you keep something real, it implies a forceful arrangement and if one wants to keep it “in the streets” by all means (which is usually what the rappers aim for), it is not real anymore. The realness of rap narratives is an illusion which, once again, sells records. This is not to criticize rappers who use the motto. This is to criticize the critics and the people who are not aware or who refuse to accept the fact that rap artists are performers of narratives, poetry and shows that might be based on what happens in the “hood;” yet it does not make Scarface, Eazy-E, Joe Budden, Jay-Z, Roc Marciano, etc., criminals and the people to blame for all the evils that torment African-American community.

Ice Cube claims that the communication that hip hop enables people to maintain is done in storytelling, in a theatrical way.<sup>117</sup> Saddik says that hip hop is a part of the “continuum of African-American performance.”<sup>118</sup> The reason why we have such endless debates about its influence and content is because it is an extremely powerful and wide-spread genre. It manages to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality by its emphasis on authenticity and also by the social background of many of its performers. The achievement is significant yet it also imposes an unfair amount of responsibility upon its creators. It has always to be emphasized that society cannot make young black males responsible for the political awareness of the masses.

Why should every rapper be a political rapper? Fans claim to miss the days of Public Enemy, X-Clan and other politically outspoken rap artists although they do not seem to give the same amount of attention to current artists the content of whose lyrics resembles those of the Golden Age of hip hop; artists such as Immortal Technique, dead prez, Sole or Lupe Fiasco.

On the other hand, gangsta rap is harshly criticized for its portrayal of black males. Saddik in her essay “Rap’s Unruly Body: The postmodern Performance of Black Male Identity on the American Stage” says that gangsta rap:

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<sup>117</sup> Ice Cube quoted in Saddik, 110.

<sup>118</sup> Saddik, 111.

is arguably the most "theatrical" style of rap in terms of black masculine performativity within commodity capitalism and dominant power structures. In gangsta rap's deliberately ironic performance of "the real," I locate a postmodern gesture using contradictory constructions of black male identity in American culture in order to undermine them and expose their contradictions. Black America has always seen these contradictions, and gangsta rappers have used the culture of hip hop to comment on the place of black masculinity in the American value system, as well as to imagine alternative spaces where the power structures may be redefined.<sup>119</sup>

Gangsta rap constructs black masculinity according to the blueprint that is given to it by society. By commodification of the stereotypical images, it exposes the circumstances that surround the African-American community; therefore, we may argue that even gangsta rap contains a political message, but it is covered by a thicker veil of a complex theatrical performance than what the political subgenre of hip hop offers us.

Despite the fact that hip hop presents a constant attack on conservative America, Cornell West, among others, stresses the all-American ideal of masculinity as a major influence on hip hop artists. West says in *Race Matters* that the black concept of masculinity is "a form of self-identification and resistance in a hostile culture; it also is an insistence on machismo identity ready for violent encounters. Yet, in a patriarchal society, machismo identity is expected and even exalted."<sup>120</sup> Of course, it is not only about violence. Although the mainstream society does not have to approve of the values that hip hop seems to promote, the art merely reproduces the values that are perceived as signs of success in America; we see that luxurious cars, houses, jewelry and material wealth in general indicate that the one who possesses them has "made it." Hip hop, in a way, stages a caricature of a self-made man.

The image of a black self-made man of hip hop is painted in accordance with the economic pressures that are felt by disfranchised black men in the 'hood. It can be also seen as conscious unveiling of what these rappers see as the hypocrisies of the capitalist, patriarchal values of the mainstream American dream.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Saddik, 112.

<sup>120</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Vintage: New York, 1994), 96.

<sup>121</sup> Saddik, 114.

To support the view that the materialistic content of rap lyrics corresponds to American materialism, we think of Nelson George who says: "the values that underpin so much hip hop materialism, brand consciousness, gun iconography, anti-intellectualism- and to this I would add misogyny- are very much byproducts of the larger American culture."<sup>122</sup> We shall not forget to mention that there are numerous rappers who have been critical of the material values as represented by the mainstream rap culture. Some artists used the critique as a theme for whole albums: we may mention the duo KRS-One and Buckshot or the underground lyricist PackFM who came out with an album called *I Fucking Hate Rappers*<sup>123</sup> where he argues against the state of rap music, which has shifted into a pointless bravado and in which the lyrical skills are neglected. KRS-One and Buckshot also distance themselves from the mainstream, and they try to bring lyricism into the centre of attention. They disavow the "soft hip hop shit, the pop shit"<sup>124</sup>; They also say that "it's not about the salary/It's all about describing reality that's grabbing me accurately." Regarding the previous arguments, there are two things worth noting in the lyrics. One of them is the expression "describing reality," which is very ambiguous. KRS-One and Buckshot do not mean that what is mentioned in rap lyrics has necessarily to be true; what they say is that the rap music that is connected to the streets is the one that communicates a message about the uneasy fate of the African-American community. Being "real" does not mean to keep hustling and gangbang; it stands for the effort of occupying one's mind with lyrics (verbal reformulations) that might affect the level of awareness about the life in the ghetto.

The other thing we shall point out is the mockery of "the soft shit" in connection to the lack of "authenticity" of rap lyrics. For KRS-One and Buckshot, the message and "realness" of rap music relates to the tough posse of rappers. The artists realize that hip hop's core is still to be found in masculine narratives and lyrics; which is not to say that women are not able to produce great records; it only points to the view that it should not be "soft." The word that might perhaps describe the ideal hip hop quality is "raw," applying not only to the lyrics, but also to the instrumental, which, however neutral it may seem, still evokes the masculine character of the majority of rap lyrics.

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<sup>122</sup> Nelson George quoted in Saddik, 113.

<sup>123</sup> PackFM, *I Fucking Hate Rappers* (QN5 Music: New York, 2008).

<sup>124</sup> Buckshot, "ROBOT," *Survival Skills*, with KRS-One (Duck Down: New York, 2009).

## **VI.1 Presence and Present Absence of Thugz, P.I.M.P.s and Bitches**

The self-empowerment that hip hop brings in the form of swagger is crucial for the African-American search for identity. The arrogance pointed at the system ensures pride. There is a sense of self-empowerment by the means of performance of strong, black masculine identity. The images offered by hip hop are so lively that it scares the general public. The monsters of hip hop narratives are seemingly getting out of control; African-Americans found a voice in art which is accused of mediating a problematic message, regardless of whether we speak of the radical political messages of Chuck D's songs or the allegedly self-destructive gangsta lyrics of NWA. Chuck D raps in "Fear of Black Planet:" "I've been wondering why/People livin' in fear/Of my shade/Or my hi top fade/I'm not the one that's runnin'/But they got me on the run/Treat me like I have a gun."<sup>125</sup> Chuck D complains about the fear and prejudice that he feels from the white society, yet we need to add that the fear is mixed with obsession over the "bad nigga" and "black nigger" which causes that American society to be attracted to both characters, and that rap both suffers from and takes advantage of that obsession.

Miles White argues that "the body was an indispensable component of musical performance until the arrival of sound recording in the early part of the twentieth century."<sup>126</sup> While the body component of music got lost for a significant amount of time, rap artists are among those artists whose body is crucial for their performance; gang signs, hand gestures, flexing muscles, exposing ones tattooed body to the crowd; all of those are important parts in hip hop performance. On the one hand, the total commitment to performance puzzles and appalls the public. On the other hand, it is also what attracts people to the genre.

The dilemma represented by the fear and obsession over African-American performance was partially solved by the minstrel show phenomenon. The love of black music and performance in America has been problematized by the fact of blackness itself; the black body in white space. America has always walked the fine line between embracing the black presence and the need to erase it.<sup>127</sup>

White raises a crucial point by saying that "neither the white minstrel in blackface nor white minstrel songs of the day offered authentic renderings of black music or black culture,

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<sup>125</sup> Public Enemy, "Fear of a Black Planet," *Fear of a Black Planet* (Def Jam: New York, 1990).

<sup>126</sup> White, 10.

<sup>127</sup> White, 10-11.

but rather signified upon black subjectivities as absent presences.”<sup>128</sup> The ubiquitous absent presence is entirely denied by rap artists. The actual presence of black male’s body on stage creates an illusion of authenticity, particularly because rap artists’ performance frequently gives in to the stereotypical images created by white society. However, the presence of blacks cannot be satisfactory for everyone, as the portrayal of black masculinity evokes fear in the audience.[in whom?] The rhetorical genius of rap music is neglected due to critics’ preoccupation with the lyrics’ content. While the present absence of black bodies was a source of entertainment during the era of minstrel shows, the presence of black actors embodying fear-inflicting characters raises fear and the fear becomes a source of identity and satisfaction. Moreover, for many critics, the artist becomes absent or invisible as he stages his character. A rapper as writer of narratives is hidden behind his characters so carefully that people tend to identify one with the other although a rap concert, like any other performance, is essentially based on the disappearance of actors in exchange for the believable presence of characters. Miles White illustrates the difference between a minstrel show and rap music by saying:

If minstrelsy was a performance practice in which masculine power was denied to black males, hardcore rap performances [are] an opposite extreme, where black masculinity is recuperated in an arena of affective representation and performance of the body.<sup>129</sup>

We should add that rap music and its masculine types are today so diverse that we can hardly apply White’s notion of a reversed minstrel shows to every artist, although some of them, such as the newcomers 2Chainz and Cheef Keef, are notorious examples of how deep the art of hip hop may sink.

## ***VI.2 “Put ‘Em in tha Grave:”<sup>130</sup> The Rage and Battle Rap***

One of the things that rappers embody very often is black rage. Hardcore rap artist project the emotion by means of their lyrics, clothing, facial expression and bravado. White

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<sup>128</sup> White, 12.

<sup>129</sup> White, 18.

<sup>130</sup> Army of the Pharaohs, “Put ‘Em in tha Grave,” *Servants in Heaven, Kings in Hell* (Babygrande: New York, 2006).

comments on the term: “black rage entered the lexicon of public discourse around race, rights, and social resistance, embodied in the faces of men like Stokely Carmichael and Huey Newton.” The term originated in the civil right movement; its usage is now commodified, and it sells many things from milk, to headphones, to sneakers. While it is widely used in the mainstream society, it is also widely criticized for its potentially destructive effects and, according to Miles White, it “breeds and perpetuates more pejorative views of black males and, arguably, black people in general.”<sup>131</sup> The “commodified fury” only underscores the stereotypes used against hip hop culture, yet it is one of its most powerful and attractive elements for the fans that seems to be drawn to the violent delivery and flows of rap artists. What is noteworthy if we study the lyrics of hip hop artists is that the rappers who are famous for lyrics filled with anger and subsequent brutality are often white and that the image of an angry male is thus associated with white rappers who emulate the black rage in their own way.

We may speak of hip hop groups such as Army of the Pharaohs, Jedi Mind Tricks, La Coka Nostra; and artists such as Vinnie Paz, Diabolic, Ill Bill, Apathy, and Virtuoso; but even the early lyrics of Eminem show the same signs. However, one needs to be careful about mixing together battle rap lyrics and those showing signs of black rage. Both are often profoundly offensive, misogynistic, and homophobic; yet the theme of black anger stems from the unbearable frustration caused by never-ending discrimination. Therefore, we may claim that black rage still has a traceable political agenda in many lyrics.

The battle lyrics obviously come from the rap battle events that have roots in the Dirty Dozen game. Most of the lyrics “are insults directed at the other rapper which have to rhyme at the same time.”<sup>132</sup> Battle rap lyrics today are used not only in freestyle rapping but also in regular album recordings where they are supposed to humiliate others (rappers mostly) and their families. We may look at Vinnie Paz’s lyrics in “The Philosophy of Horror:”

Punch a faggot till his nose bleed heavy  
Dead’em all then I escape in green chevy  
I merk your wisdom, spit a dart at you to hurt your vision  
Put you in the worst position in a turkish prison

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<sup>131</sup> White, 24.

<sup>132</sup> Rap Battle, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/>

Yeah... and my intention is to waste y'all  
And cover your body with stitches like a baseball<sup>133</sup>

Apathy's verse in the song "Battle Cry" is another great example of battle lyrics:

I put you up on the IV, not the Roman Numeral 4  
But the IV that leads to the funeral floor  
Wax gets melted, breaks bones, fractures pelvics  
Speeds through space and cracks blast astronaut helmets  
Face it, muthafucka I could pay to get rid of you  
I got more heads in the hood than pagan rituals  
A new tyrannical force for you to fear  
Known to kill and keep human ears as souvenirs  
A shape shifter, face slitter, paper getter  
Take your sister, rape your sister  
Make your sister take it in the face  
And if you're facin' us, block off a 30-block radius  
I throw more blows than boxin' Dr. Octavius<sup>134</sup>

We can see an example of a more straight-forward battle rap directed at a specific person in Tupac's "Hit 'Em Up" song, which was released to "diss" Biggie Smalls and his rap collective called Junior Mafia:

First off, fuck your bitch  
And the clique you claim  
West side when we ride  
Come equipped with game  
You claim to be a player  
But I fucked your wife  
We bust on Bad Boys

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<sup>133</sup> Vinnie Paz, "The Philosophy of Horror," *Legacy of Blood* (Babygrande: New York, 2004).

<sup>134</sup> Apathy, "Battle Cry," *The Torture Papers* (Babygrande: New York, 2006).

Both lyrics employ a hardcore explicit imagery and even though they differ in style, they share the purpose of humiliating others' masculinity, and to highlight the author's sexual prowess and power over weaker individuals. This is an inherent part of the hip hop culture, a constant competition of who is the best, who is the king of New York, Los Angeles, who is the best battle rapper etc. The confrontational nature of hip hop is a part of the performance; it is closely related to the notion of hip hop as a masculine art and it significantly contributes to the controversial message of rap lyrics because they are mostly filled with extreme violence and offensive content.

Nevertheless, given the examples, one may notice that there is a difference in the works of black and white artists. Generally, the violence and anger of battle rhymes crafted by African-American rap artists are more realistic, the references made are closer to real life. White says that the images "commodify and (re)present back to adolescent males essentially decontextualized images, codes, and symbols around what it means to be black, male, and authentic in an urban environment." The qualities that White lists "include emotional rigidity, misogynistic behavior, nihilism, and the adherence to the code of the streets."<sup>136</sup>

On the other hand, artists such as Vinnie Paz and Apathy may be said to parody violence by taking it a step further and acting like a kind of super villain with supernatural power. The exaggerated manner in which they stage their personas goes, generally speaking again, much further than the ghetto narratives and "diss" songs of Eazy-E, Tupac, Styles P and others. Of course, there are rappers who partially deny the distinction but they are more or less exceptions that confirm the rule; one may think of the African-American rapper Kool G Rap who takes on a similar style to Vinnie Paz in his song "Executioner Style:" I'm an outlaw, the motherfuckin villain doin killings/I won't stop until the morgue got bodies stacked up to the fuckin ceiling."<sup>137</sup> Kool G Rap lampoons the stereotype of a violent black man in several of his lyrics, although he never goes as far as the previously mentioned white rappers Vinnie Paz, Apathy, Diabolic, or Celph Titled. White rappers seem to feed on the popularity of violence and hypermasculine images and they parody them even more visibly by exaggerating them.

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<sup>135</sup> Tupac Shakur, "Hit 'Em Up," *All Eyez on Me* (Death Row: Los Angeles, 1996).

<sup>136</sup> White, 25.

<sup>137</sup> Kool G Rap, "Executioner Style," 4,5,6 (Cold Chillin': New York, 1995).

The lyrics by African-American rappers might be interpreted as the ultimate counterstrike against the emasculation suffered in the past. We may also apply the depoliticized interpretation and say that they merely portray the kind of attitude one needs to adopt to enable oneself to survive in the streets of black ghettos. The reasons why the images are so popular today are, firstly, the general fascination with violence and strong masculine figures in American culture and, secondly, the attraction and misinterpretation of the ghetto environment which Robin D.G. Kelley speaks about in his essay “Looking for the Real Nigga.” The obsession with underdogs heavily influenced the ethnographic studies of the inner city neighborhoods and lead to an extremely limited view of African-Americans living under the poverty line in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The environment of the “concrete jungles” became appealing material for both social scientists and the public.<sup>138</sup>

Miles White rightly points out that speech patterns are particularly important for rap music, because “they help to (re)construct the inner-city street as a site of performance and constant self-dramatization.”<sup>139</sup> However, the term “spectacles of primitivism,” which he uses on the next page, should not be applied only to rap music; moreover, given the proportions into which rap music has grown, we should bear in mind that we cannot judge the genre as a whole as we have artists as diverse as KRS-One and Wiz Khalifa, Aceyalone and Rick Ross. That being said, we should also repeat that African-American rappers parody the “spectacles of primitivism” by adopting them. The exaggeration of racist stereotypes leads to their subversion.

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<sup>138</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, “Looking for the Real Nigga,” *That’s the Joint: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman, Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 120-123.

<sup>139</sup> White, 26.

## VII. *Amerikkka's Most Wanted*<sup>140</sup>: MASCULINE TYPES IN HIP HOP MUSIC

In hip hop lyrics we encounter numerous types of narrators and perspectives. Although there are countless differences and modifications, this chapter is going to suggest five categories of narrators that we encounter in rap music most often. This chapter does not attempt to divide rap artists even though media tend to do that, which is rather fallacious as many rap performers often move from one category to another, assuming different sets of characteristics. They may switch their focus and their lyrics' content in their career, they may move from one category to another on the very same album or even one song. Some of the categories may also overlap in certain features, yet the categories that are dealt with in the following chapter will suffice briefly to characterize hip hop's narratives of masculinity. The names assigned to the categories derive from rap albums or song titles by various rappers. The categories are: "Good Kid, Mad City;" "Rebelutionary;" "Gangsta;" "Dick Almighty;" and "White Nightmare."

### VII.1 "Good Kid, Mad City:"<sup>141</sup> Street Narratives

The first two categories are today mostly approved of by the general public and praised by critics.[praised for what, and by which critics?] The other categories are widely criticized for what KRS-One might call "niggertivity."<sup>142</sup> To characterize the first category, we should say that it borders with both "Rebelutionary" and "Gangsta;" depending on where the narrator is taken by the streets. The narrator is essentially a "good kid" but he is very much under the influence of his environment, the naturalistic essence of the narrators is stressed by portraying them as products of their environment. This description may also be valid in various "gangsta" narratives; but the "Good Kid" usually gives in to the external pressures and is noted for petty criminal activity and "street brawls"; he witnesses gang wars and robberies without being fully involved in the highest level of destructive acts. "Good Kid" is usually

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<sup>140</sup> Ice Cube, *Amerikkka's Most Wanted* (Priority: Los Angeles, 1990).

<sup>141</sup> Kendrick Lamar, *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (Top Dawg: Los Angeles, 2012).

<sup>142</sup> KRS-One, "2nd Quarter: Free Throws," *I Got Next* (Jive: New York, 1997).

reflective about his own being and wrong-doings, unlike the typical “Gangsta.” He may also utter political commentaries at times, yet he wants to be perceived as one of many. His individuality may be suppressed in the narratives to accentuate the common experience of people growing up in the projects. “Good Kid, Mad City” is an everyman narrative: we can hardly label the narrator as a “bad nigga”: his masculine behavior adapts to the streets, he wants to survive and the narrators usually stress the importance of hiding any weakness that might jeopardize their well-being. However, such narrators often admit that their “toughness” is only a protective mask that keeps them from being victimized by others.

Kendrick Lamar’s work would probably be the best example of this category, especially his album *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. One of his earlier songs clearly exemplifies what “Good Kid, Mad City” stands for:

Who is K. Dot? A young nigga from Compton  
On the curb writing raps next to a gun shot  
On the corners where the gangsters and the killers dwell  
The fraudulent tender scars that get unveiled  
Everyone I knew was either crip or piru  
Cousins in elementary, relatives in high school  
With that being said, each one of their rivals  
Was aiming something at my head, I needed survival  
Got jumped, got jacked, shot at, shot back  
And I don't even push a line, I'm just tryna push these rhymes  
In the midst of staying neutral and discrete  
My momma said you're judged by the company you keep<sup>143</sup>

Kendrick Lamar describes how hard it is to stay mentally off the streets. The narrator has been harassed before but despite the hardships he still intends to “push these rhymes” instead of being swallowed by the self-destructive lifestyle that surrounds him. The narrator decides to use art to escape the ‘hood. He is steadily trying to “duck the influence of” his city by doing “everyday life music,” which points back to the fact that his experience is not really unique to his personal situation.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Kendrick Lamar, “Average Joe,” The *O.D Mixtape* (Top Dawg: Los Angeles, 2011).

<sup>144</sup> Kendrick Lamar, “Average Joe,” The *O.D Mixtape* (Top Dawg: Los Angeles, 2011).

Another song that corresponds to the “Good Kid, Mad City” narrative point of view is “The Art of Peer Pressure” from his *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* album. Lamar raps: “I got the blunt in my mouth, usually I'm drug-free/But shit, I'm with the homies [...] I never was a gangbanger/ I mean I never was stranger to the folk neither, I really doubt it [...] That's ironic cause I've never been violent/until I'm with the homies.”<sup>145</sup> In order to blend in, the narrator is willing to take part in whatever his crew does because he needs to build a reputation that will protect him. He is not a gangbanger but he knows people who gangbang. He is not a drug addict or a regular smoker of marihuana, but he cannot afford to refuse the blunt because it would make him an outcast.

In “m.A.A.d. city” Lamar uses strong language to describe the life in South Central Los Angeles:

We adapt to crime, pack a van with four guns at a time  
You fuckin punk, pickin up the fuckin pump  
Pickin off you suckers, suck a dick or die or sucker punch  
AK's, AR's, "aye y'all. Duck."  
That's what momma said when we was eatin that free lunch  
Aw man, God damn, all hell broke loose  
You killed my cousin back in '94. Fuck yo truce  
When we in traffic and tragic happens, that shit ain't no threat  
You movin backwards if you suggest that you sleep with a Tec  
Go buy a chopper and have a doctor on speed dial, I guess<sup>146</sup>

Therefore, there is no way to survive but to adapt. There are drive-by shootings around; one is not safe even when he is home and eating lunch. Here we may notice the self-reflection when Kendrick raps: “You movin’ backwards if you suggest that you sleep with a Tec.” He knows that such attitude does not lead to progress, it only further plagues society. However, it is the only way to get along.

On “Good Kid,” the narrator illustrates the danger of not taking side with either one of the gangs:

For the record I recognize that I'm easily prey

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<sup>145</sup> Kendrick Lamar, “The Art of Peer Pressure,” *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (Top Dawg: Los Angeles, 2012).

<sup>146</sup> Kendrick Lamar, “m.A.A.d. city,” *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (Top Dawg: Los Angeles, 2012).

I got ate alive yesterday  
I got animosity building  
It's probably big as a building  
Me jumping off of the roof  
Is just me playing it safe  
But what am I supposed to do  
When the topic is red or blue<sup>147</sup>

The narrator actually considers suicide as a means of leaving the uneasy situation. Later on, he claims to get harassed by the police as well, which further complicates his life:

Every time you clock in the morning  
I feel you just want to kill  
All my innocence while ignoring my purpose  
To persevere as a better person  
I know you heard this and probably in fear  
But what am I supposed to do  
With the blinking of red and blue  
Flash from the top of your roof  
And your dog has to say proof  
And you ask "lift up your shirt"  
Cause you wonder if a tattoo  
Of affiliation can make it a pleasure to put me through<sup>148</sup>

What Kendrick Lamar presents here is actually a unique kind of masculine narrative that is not to be seen in any other category but “Good Kid, Mad City.” He admits to be victimized. He admits desperation and being weaker than the others. He admits insecurity. He is harrassed by his peers; he is hassled by the police. The narrator in “God Kid” is a misfit who struggles to stay away from problems. This kind of narrator denies the stereotype of the ubermasculine posturing of rap music by not being afraid to show vulnerability.

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<sup>147</sup> Kendrick Lamar, “Good Kid,” *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (Top Dawg: Los Angeles, 2012).

<sup>148</sup> Kendrick Lamar, “Good Kid,” *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (Top Dawg: Los Angeles, 2012).

Another artist whose debut album is sometimes compared is Nas and his legendary album *Illmatic* where Nas (formerly known as Nasty Nas) embodied the “Good Kid, Mad City” persona. Nas’s narrator survived because he began rapping instead of hanging out in the streets. He raps: “I woke up early on my born day, I’m twenty years of blessing/The essence of adolescent leaves my body now I’m fresh in/My physical frame is celebrated cause I made it/One quarter through life some God-ly like thing created.”<sup>149</sup> In another song Nas goes: “

The versatile, honey stickin wild, golden child  
Dwellin in the Rotten Apple, you get tackled  
Or caught by the devil’s lasso, shit is a hassle  
There’s no days, for broke days, we sell it, smoke pays [...]  
Trying to maintain, I flip, fill the clip to the tip  
Picturin my peeps, now the income make my heartbeat skip<sup>150</sup>

Nas says that he did what he had to do to survive. He used whatever means necessary to earn money in the world where the “devil’s lasso” is constantly being thrown and he merely adapts to the ‘hood: “Live amongst no roses, only the drama, for real/A nickel-plate is my fate, my medicine is the ganja”<sup>151</sup>

Nas is pushed to illegal activity by his environment, same as Kendrick Lamar. He continues: ‘I’m trying to get this money, God, you know the hard times, kid Shit, cold be starvin make you wanna do crimes kid.’<sup>152</sup> His masculinity is strengthened by owning a gun: “got a older mind/Plus control a nine, fine, see now I represent mine.”<sup>153</sup> He feels more powerful and experienced because he has a gun to protect himself with and to impose violence upon whoever gets into his way. This attitude allows him to survive in the ghetto. The mindset adopted by the “Good Kid, Mad City” is best expressed by Tupac’s “I

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<sup>149</sup> Nas, “Life’s a Bitch,” *Illmatic* (Columbia: New York, 1994).

<sup>150</sup> Nas, “World Is Yours,” *Illmatic* (Columbia: New York, 1994).

<sup>151</sup> Nas, “Memory Lane,” *Illmatic* (Columbia: New York, 1994).

<sup>152</sup> Nas, “One Love,” *Illmatic* (Columbia: New York, 1994).

<sup>153</sup> Nas, “One Time 4 Your Mind,” *Illmatic* (Columbia: New York, 1994).

ain't a killer but don't push me," which borders with the next masculine category of hip hop to be discussed, which is the "Gangsta."<sup>154</sup>

## VII.2 *Gangsta: "The Street R Death Row"*<sup>155</sup>

The "gangsta" persona that became popular in the late 1980s and early 1990 is probably the most discussed and controversial feature of rap music. The artists who construct "gangsta" narratives are the ones who are reproved for spreading the negative stereotypes; they are known for objectifying women; homophobic lyrics filled with graphic violence. They are also the ones from whom authenticity is demanded the most. To put it plainly, "if you're not a "gangsta" who grew up in the projects, you have no right to talk about it." "Gangsta" rappers use strong and offensive language in their tales of violence, yet the amount of violence and the way it is depicted is still very realistic; therefore, people do not know how to deal with them. The "White Nightmare" narratives exaggerate the violence to an extent which does not allow anyone to doubt that the stories are made up. However, "Gangsta" is often realistic; he takes pride in the authenticity of his stories. The narrator claims that he lives the stories, he carries a gun, and he participates in drive-by shooting and gang wars. The "Gangsta" narrator is wrongly identified with the rapper. The artist is an actor who stages the "Gangsta" and he often dresses accordingly to make his performance believable. The thin line between a performance and reality blurs and it attracts listeners and repulses critics.

"Gangsta" embodies the "bad nigger" figure of African-American folklore. He is a very individualistic character who, although he is sometimes affiliated with a group or a gang, is always isolated in a way. His homeboys may provide an opportunity for social bonding, yet he is forced to be an extreme example of a self-reliant person because any emotional bonds make him weak in the eyes of his enemies. He is rarely self-reflexive unless the character intertwines with the previously discussed "Good Kid, Mad City" type.

The macho posturing is typical for the "Gangsta." He also invokes fear in others which is perceived as necessary for his survival; and which paradoxically often leads to his doom by a gun of another "Gangsta" who is struggling for a frightening reputation of his own. Bell hooks says: "Young black males, particularly underclass males, often derive a sense of

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<sup>154</sup> Tupac Shakur, "Hail Mary," *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* (Death Row: 1996).

<sup>155</sup> Tupac Shakur, "The Street R Death Row," *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* (Amaru: Los Angeles, 1993).

satisfaction from being able to create fear in others, particularly in white folks.”<sup>156</sup> For many African-American males, this might be the only way to earn respect and rappers portray this sentiment brilliantly in their performances. Nelson George comments on the same issue: “On a planet where to demonize, demoralize, disdain, and dis black people is a long-standing preoccupation, this kind of extravagant pride is often a system of survival. [...] For African-American males, this pride can be an aggressive manifestation of identity.”<sup>157</sup> Lyrics by Ice-T, Ice Cube, Tupac, Spice 1, Onyx, NWA, MC Eiht and other only reflect on the way derogatory images are internalized by black males. Cornel West adds:

For most young black men, power is acquired by stylizing their bodies over space and time in such a way that their bodies reflect their uniqueness and provoke fear in others. To be “bad” is good not simply because it subverts the language of the dominant white culture [The term ‘nigga’ in hip hop culture works in a similar way, of course.] but also because it imposes a unique kind of order for young black men on their own distinctive chaos and solicits an attention that makes others pull back with some trepidation.<sup>158</sup>

The ultimate goal of the “Gangsta” is to be the “baddest,” which means to be the best “Gangsta.” The meaning of good and bad is subverted; one’s respect is measured by how many crimes the “Gangsta” has committed, how many people he has “blasted.” Big L says: “I got a crime record longer than Manute Bolé,”<sup>159</sup> which brings him closer to his goal. Bell hooks shares West’s view of the internalized stereotypes that are now being spread by the mainstream culture. She argues:

While the hypermasculine black male violent beast may have sprung from the pornographic imagination of racist whites, perversely militant anti-racist black power advocates felt that the black male would never be respected in this society if he did not cease subjugating himself to whiteness and show willingness to kill.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Hooks, 49.

<sup>157</sup> Saddik, 122.

<sup>158</sup> West quoted in Saddik, 124.

<sup>159</sup> Big L, “MVP,” *Lifestylez ov da Poor and Dangerous* (Columbia: New York, 1995).

<sup>160</sup> Hooks, 50.

The pioneering “gangsta” rap group N.W.A. exemplifies this kind of attitude in many of their songs, for example in “Gangsta, Gangsta:”

Cause I'm tha type o' nigga that's built ta last  
If ya fuck wit me I'll put a foot in ya ass  
See I don't give a fuck 'cause I keep bailin  
Yo, what the fuck are they yellin  
Gangsta, Gangsta  
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<sup>161</sup>

Ice-T’s “Gangsta” presents the same kind of a scary black man who anger is about to turn against his peers. He raps:

E-V-I-L E and Ice-T are on a jack move  
Layin down the dope groove, smokin those who disapprove  
Wreckin the deck, you'll regret if you cross punk  
Rollin like a Mack truck, waxin those who talk junk  
Violent your end, I got your face in my crosshairs  
Wanna see your dome bust sucker cause I don't care  
Nuttin bout you, your crew, because you talk shit  
I'm the Lethal Weapon boy, ridin the apocalypse<sup>162</sup>

In “G-Style,” Ice-T raps:

G Style, The gangsta talk

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<sup>161</sup> N.W.A., “Gangsta, Gangsta,” *Straight Outta Compton* (Ruthless: Los Angeles, 1988).

<sup>162</sup> Ice-T, “Lethal Weapon,” *The Iceberg/Freedom of Speech* (Sire: Los Angeles, 1989).

I got a teflon .9  
And it eats vest  
I take a motherfucker out quick  
Just for talkin shit<sup>163</sup>

Obviously, fear and no hesitation to kill is very often used themes. The narratives show what it takes to survive and what one needs to do to become a man in the streets. The hypermasculine pose does not seem to be a matter of choice, it is a survival strategy. MF Grimm adopts the same theme while describing the harsh realities of the streets:

I represent the murderers and felony offenders  
Who either bought time out, to get these legal tenders  
Brains left in particles, fragments and fractions  
Grimm, the money stacker, heat packer  
I'm lurkin, I'm waitin, attackin like a linebacker

Kool G Rap continues on the same song:

So let a motherfucker move a muscle  
When I tussle they'll be piecin niggaz back like fuckin puzzles  
Cause Kool G. Rap is known for bringin mad noise, a bad boy  
When I was younger always carried guns, I never had toys<sup>164</sup>

The gun is a powerful symbol of manhood in these lyrics. It gives one the power to kill which makes the owner a man in the competitive nature of the ghetto. A gun is a symbol of authenticity as well as we have noticed in the previously discussed Game's lyrics. He often uses gun as a symbol of "realness." In "LAX Files" he says: "It ain't a movie dawg, hell yeah this a real fucking Uzi dawg."<sup>165</sup> He uses the gun to support the credibility of his words and

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<sup>163</sup> Ice-T, "G-Style," *Home Invasion* (Priority: Los Angeles, 1993).

<sup>164</sup> Kool G Rap, "Take Em to War," 4,5,6 (Cold Chillin': New York, 1995).

<sup>165</sup> Game, "LAX Files," *LAX* (Geffen: Los Angeles, 2008).

his powers. The “Gangsta” is the “bad nigger,” who means a threat for everybody around. He is admired because he is to be feared by whites and blacks.

### **VII.3 “Rebelutionary:”<sup>166</sup> A “Badman” with a Message**

The third masculine type of hip hop is “Rebelutionary.” “Rebelutinary” is a narrator of political or the so-called conscious rap who always tries to either spread an uplifting message by his lyrics or he offers a harsh critique of politics, gangsterism, racism and basically anything that poisons the community. Obviously, political rap differs in terms of how radical the narrator chooses to be, it reaches from mild commentaries such as those of A Tribe Called Quest and Jay-Z to extremely radical occasionally anti-white narratives of X-Clan, Public Enemy, Poor Righteous Teachers and Dead Prez. Among other artists who are often classified as political rappers we may name Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Common, Ice Cube, The Roots, Killer Mike and others.

“Rebelutionary” is largely equivalent to the “bad nigga” or “badman.” He might be considered a criminal by the white supremacy logic but he is usually seen as a hero by blacks. He works for his community, he attempts to improve the conditions of black life in America and sometimes he adopts a Pan-Africanist view of solidarity of all black people. Regarding masculinity, “Rebelutionary” is a strong and powerful man who is ready to stand up and speak out, he assumes his masculinity by the means of his ability to protest and lead. Miles White says that the black “hardness” promoted by “gangsta” rap is preserved in the works of Chuck D and Public Enemy; the difference is that Chuck D’s narratives did not play with images of criminality and deviance so much. Chuck D’s “projection of masculine power and narrative flow were used to circulate messages of socio-political empowerment and positive self-awareness that were well received by black and whites alike.”<sup>167</sup>

Public Enemy talk about the miseducation of black community in their lyrics and they focus on substituting for the education that blacks never get. For example, they rap: “Left or right, Black or White /They tell lies in the books /That you're readin'/It's knowledge of

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<sup>166</sup> Reks, *REBELutionary* (Gracie Productions: Detroit, 2012).

<sup>167</sup> Chuck D quoted in White, 74.

yourself/That you're needin'.”<sup>168</sup> In “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos” Chuck D’ narrator, the frontman of Public Enemy, resembles the “badman” rhetoric of Muhammad Ali:

I got a letter from the government  
The other day  
I opened and read it  
It said they were suckers  
They wanted me for their army or whatever  
Picture me given' a damn - I said never  
Here is a land that never gave a damn  
About a brother like me and myself  
Because they never did  
I wasn't wit' it, but just that very minute...  
It occurred to me  
The suckers had authority  
Cold sweatin' as I dwell in my cell  
How long has it been?  
They got me sittin' in the state pen  
I gotta get out<sup>169</sup>

Just as Muhammad Ali refused to go to Vietnam, the narrator does not want to serve a country that has never shown any sign of understanding and care of his people. The “Rebelutionary” and “badman” narrators reappear throughout African-American art and culture. Chuck D also addresses the issue of stereotypes and mix-raced couples on his song “Fear of Black Planet,” the narrator says he aims at equality, he does not threaten anyone, and he only wants respect:

Man don’t ya  
Worry 'bout a thing  
'Bout your daughter

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<sup>168</sup> Public Enemy, “Prophets of Rage,” *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam: New York, 1988).

<sup>169</sup> Public Enemy, “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos,” *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam: New York, 1988).

No she's not my type  
(But suppose she said she loved me)  
Are you afraid of the mix of Black and White  
Livin' in a land where  
The law say the mixing of race  
Makes the blood impure  
She's a woman I'm a man  
Look at your face  
I see ya can't stand it

I've been wonderin' why  
People livin' in fear  
Of my shade  
(Or my hi top fade)  
I'm not the one that's runnin'  
But they got me on the run  
Treat me like I have a gun  
All I got is genes and chromosomes  
Consider me Black to the bone  
All I want is peace and love  
On this planet  
(Ain't that how God planned it?)<sup>170</sup>

Public Enemy promote a universal peace and love with people who pay respect to the black community but they acknowledge the stereotypes that present African-American males as criminals.

“Rebelutionary” narratives are often told in a third person narrative point of view, they often describe someone else’s life. One of the most famous examples is Tupac’s “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” but Dead Prez also use the same narrative strategy in “Behind Enemy Lines” for example:

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<sup>170</sup> Public Enemy, “Fear of a Black Planet,” *Fear of a Black Planet* (Def Jam: New York, 1990).

Lord can't even smoke a loosey since he was twelve  
925 locked up with a L  
They call him triple K, cause he killed three niggaz  
Another ghetto child got turned into a killer  
His pops was a Vietnam veteran on heroin  
Used like a pawn by these white North Americans<sup>171</sup>

Dead Prez comment on the position of African-Americans in the society, they talk about the way they are used and abused and the way they are being destroyed by derogatory images. The themes might sometimes overlap with “gangsta” rap although “Rebelutionaries” have a different agenda. Dead Prez write narratives about violent revolts as the last desperate attempt to reach freedom. They combine, as opposed to Public Enemy, “gangsta” rap with revolutionary purpose:

Backseat of the 'lac, big gat in my lap  
Ready for combat, feelin like Geronimo Pratt  
We had the windows cracked, headed up the strip  
Black rag in my hand, don't want no prints on the clip  
That's a lesson you learn, comin strait from the slums  
And it don't stop till we get full freedom!<sup>172</sup>

This is the kind of revolution pioneered by radical African-American movements such as the Black Panthers. The narrator has given up on peaceful means of achieving freedom and the only option left is to take arms. This is a hardcore version of the heroic “badman.”

Dead Prez also criticize the educational system that has a conforming effect on everybody and it therefore destroys black culture and identity: “To advance in life, they try to make you pull your pants up.”<sup>173</sup> The options are either to assimilate with the white society or to be excluded from it and they are denied the possibility of progress.

Groups such as the X-Clan even talk about blowing up the White House as a symbol of oppression. They say: “I hear some niggas talking 'bout they'll paint the White House black

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<sup>171</sup> Dead Prez, “Behind Enemy Lines,” *Let’s Get Free* (Loud Records: New York, 2000).

<sup>172</sup> Dead Prez, “I Have a Dream, Too,” *RBG: Revolutionary but Gangsta* (Sony Records: New York, 2004).

<sup>173</sup> Dead Prez, “They Schools,” *Let’s Get Free* (Loud Records: New York, 2000).

I'd blow the sucker up and pressure on the attack.”<sup>174</sup> This is another example of the ultra radical rhetoric that may appear in rap narratives and which spark much controversy. The refusal of American patriotism and hatred towards what America stands for made X-Clan one of the most controversial rap groups: “I'm singin "Raise the Flag" cause I hate the Spangled Banner/Because you can't get with me, you label me enemy/Your comments on the mortal side are labelled as blasphemy.”<sup>175</sup> The radical “badman” cannot love his country; he treats her as she has been treating him.

#### ***VII.4 “Dick Almighty:”<sup>176</sup> Biggie, 2 Live Crew and African-American Sexuality***

“Dick Almighty” is the hypersexual African-American narrator, often poking fun at the stereotype of black uncontrollable sexuality, he brags about being exactly the kind of hypersexual being that he has been considered by white majority. He bases his self worth on his sexual prowess. As an example, we shall quote a song called “One More Chance” by Notorious B.I.G. a.k.a. Biggie Smalls. Although he is not known primarily for this kind of narrative, the song serves as a perfect example of the narrative mode usual for the lyrics:

When it comes to sex, I'm similar to the thriller in Manila  
Honeys call me Bigga the condom filler  
Whether it's stiff tongue or stiff dick  
Biggie squeeze it to make shit fit, now check this shit  
So recognize the dick size in these Karl Kani jeans  
I'm in thirteens, know what I mean  
I fuck around and hit you with the Hennessy dick  
Mess around and go blind, don't get to see shit  
The next batter, here to shatter your bladder, it doesn't matter

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<sup>174</sup> X-Clan, “Xodus,” *Xodus* (Polydor: New York, 1992).

<sup>175</sup> X-Clan, “Verbal Milk,” *To the East Backwards* (Island: New York, 1990).

<sup>176</sup> 2 Live Crew, “Dick Almighty,” *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* (Atlantic Records: New York, 1989).

Skinny or fat or light-skinned or black, baby I drop  
These boricua mommies screamin "Aiy papi!"  
Big bang boots from the Bronx to Bolivia  
Gettin Physical like Olivia Newt  
Tricks suck my clique dick all day with no trivia  
So gimme a hoe, a bankroll and a bag of weed  
I'm guaranteed to fuck her till her nose bleed  
I fuck nonstop, lick my lips alot, used to lick the clits alot  
But lickin clits had to stop  
Cause y'all don't know how to act when the tongue go down below  
Peep the funk flow, really though  
I got the cleanest meanest penis, ya never seen this stroke of genius  
Sex gettin rougher when it come to the nut buster  
Pussy crusher, black nasty motherfucker  
I don't chase em, I replace em  
and if I'm caressin em, I'm undressin em[...]<sup>177</sup>

Notorious B.I.G. uses a narrator whose pride and identity derive from his sexual performance. In fact, in this song, it is the only source of pride he has. His ignorance towards the responsibility for his family (which is expressed in the prelude to this song) confirms the stereotype of black man as completely unfit for family life. The narrator knows he is a failure in his everything and that long time relationship cannot satisfy his need for self-assurance, thus, he shows off in the only domain that is left for him.

Few rap artists have triggered such uproar as the Miami group 2Live Crew. When it comes to sexuality in rap lyrics, fans and critics perhaps remember Luther Cambell, Fresh Kid Ice, Amazing V. and their inflammatory album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* from 1989. The group had to face two lawsuits due to their sexually explicit tracks. Despite the general outrage caused by the album and the trials following the release, Henry Louis Gates defended the group by claiming that the core of 2 Live Crew art is parody, specifically the parody of the old stereotypes connected to black sexuality. He says: “Their exuberant use of hyperbole

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<sup>177</sup> Notorious B.I.G., “One More Chance,” *Ready to Die* (Bad Boy: New York, 1994).

(phantasmagoric sexual organs, for example) undermines--for anyone fluent in black cultural codes--a too literal-minded hearing of the lyrics.”<sup>178</sup>

They engage in “sexual carnivalesque” and their performance originates in the “playing the dozen” which is won by the one who can signify best, “the biggest liar” as Gates says. The stereotypes that are to be undermined by 2 Live Crew may not be so easy to come to terms with; however, censorship does not seem to be the solution. Gates states that “censorship is to art what lynching is to justice.”<sup>179</sup>

Lines such as “Dick the Almighty's of no surprise/It'll fuck all the bitches all shapes and sizes;” “It's 12" long, 8" thick/Last name Almighty, first name is Dick;” or “I'm like a dog in heat, a freak without warning/I have an appetite for sex, 'cause me so horny;” still belong to the less explicit verses in 2 Live Crew repertoire. All of their songs only play with the stereotypes that were imposed upon them and the subversive act of 2 Live Crew lies in repeating and exaggerating them and by doing that, they parody the hypersexual masculinity that has been ascribed to black males throughout history.<sup>180</sup>

## **VII.5 “White Nightmare:” A Hyperbolic “Bad Nigger”**

Probably the only reason why this is not the most discussed and condemned masculine type of rap music is that it does not occur in mainstream rap music very often. “White Nightmare” takes all the stereotypes and takes them into absurd, grotesque proportions. If Ice Cube exaggerates the stereotypical violent aspect of black masculinity and 2 Live Crew shock by their portrayal of black sexuality; Big L, Jus Allah, Brotha Lynch Hung and Geto Boys take everything a step further.

“White Nightmare” is the “bad nigger” of hip hop. Not only is he absolutely heartless. He is not apathetic to the pain and misery he brings along, he enjoys it; which takes him maybe even further than what the “bad nigger” usually represents. He is the “Devil’s Son” that Big L rapped about, a menace to anything that stands in his way. Big L pictures him as following:

L's a rebel, on a higher level, go get a shovel

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<sup>178</sup> Henry Louis Gates, “2 Live Crew Decoded” <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~jenglish/Courses/gates.htm>

<sup>179</sup> Henry Louis Gates, “2 Live Crew Decoded” <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~jenglish/Courses/gates.htm>

<sup>180</sup> 2 Live Crew, “Dick Almighty,” *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* (Atlantic Records: New York, 1989).

Cause I'm the only son of the motherfucking devil  
It's a fact I'm living foul, black  
Niggas should have known I was sick from the shit I did a while back  
Cause being bad I couldn't stop  
When I was in pre-school, I beat a kid to death with a wooden block  
[...]  
It's Big L and I'm all about taking funds  
I'm a stone villain known for killing and raping nuns  
Ayo I even kill handicapped and crippled bitches  
Look at my scalp real close and you'll see triple sixes<sup>181</sup>

Big L lampoons the notion of black being associated with evil by confirming it. The image of a black rapist is used in other Big L's lyrics as well; for instance in "All Black:" "I be placin snitches inside lakes and ditches/And if I catch AIDS, then I'ma start rapin bitches."<sup>182</sup>

Jus Allah takes a similar approach of dealing with stereotypical images of African-American males. In "White Nightmare," he raps:

Yo, I was placed on the planet just to cause problems  
Sperm I spawned from, burnt holes in condoms  
My brain never touched the soap  
Refused to be another fuckin slave that stuffed the boat  
Pass me the gun for mans extinction  
I piss in the fountains of youth you drink from  
My stomach got young dead orphans in it  
I eat from trash cans at abortion clinics  
Elite crooks, even the police be shook  
My crib got dead cops attached to meat hooks  
I love black, I wish that I was two shades darker  
We unbreakable, like Hurricane Carla<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Big L, "Devil's Son," *Lifestylez ov da Poor and Dangerous* (Columbia: New York, 1995).

<sup>182</sup> Big L, "All Black," *Lifestylez ov da Poor and Dangerous* (Columbia: New York, 1995).

<sup>183</sup> Jus Allah, "White Nightmare," *All Fates Have Changed* (Babygrande: New York, 2005).

“White Nightmare” is a brilliant hyperbole of James Brown’s “I’m Black and I’m proud” song.<sup>184</sup> The narrator wants to be “two shades darker,” he wants to be even worse a menace than he is. He is proud of his malice.

Brotha Lynch Hung mastered the art of horrorcore rap music. His narrator is a mass murderer, rapist and cannibal. In one of his tracks, he raps: “I like the raw meat/Pussy meat, push me, I’ll put you right in the saw seat/I’ll cut your head open, it’s Spidey, he’s off the opium/Scopin’ ‘em right out the trunk and I’m ‘bout to open ‘em.”<sup>185</sup>

Another notorious example of hardcore “bad niggers” of rap music is the group Geto Boys, which was popular and most active in the 1990s. They pushed gangsta rap themes to the extreme and they embody the typical “White Nightmare” type with references to rape and murder. In “Mind of a Lunatic” Bushwick Bill rhymes:

Lookin through her window, now my body is warm  
She's naked, and I'm a peepin tom  
Her body's beautiful, so I'm thinkin rape  
Shouldn't have had her curtains open, so that's her fate  
Leavin out her house, grabbed the bitch by her mouth  
Drug her back in, slammed her down on the couch  
Whipped out my knife, said, "If you scream, I'm cuttin"  
Opened her legs and commenced the fuckin  
She begged me not to kill her, I gave her a rose  
Then slit her throat, and watched her shake till her eyes closed  
Had sex with the corpse before I left her  
And drew my name on the wall like helter skelter<sup>186</sup>

Once again, the title of the song is important to understand the concept of the song. The story is narrated from a lunatic’s point of view, the track presents us with a horror story intended for a specific audience who enjoys the genre. Although the story is extremely obscene, one should not forget to appreciate the vivid storytelling behind it. “White Nightmare” endorses stereotypes coined by whites, yet his actions plague everybody, all communities, and all

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<sup>184</sup> James Brown, “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud,” (King: Cincinnati, 1968).

<sup>185</sup> Brotha Lynch Hung, “Murder Over Hard,” *Coathanga Strangla* (Strange Music: New York, 2011).

<sup>186</sup> Geto Boys, “Mind of a Lunatic,” *Grip It! On That Other Level* (Rap-A-Lot Records: Houston, 1989).

people. He is a true disaster, an extreme version of the folkloric “bad nigger.” He is the most shocking masculine type of the pallet of black masculinity.

## **VIII. CONCLUSION: Remaining “Amerikkka’s Most Wanted”**

African-American manhood and its depiction in media is a very complex and controversial issue. The notion of black masculinity had to adjust to the new environment when African slaves were brought in masses on the American continent. The cultural traditions were severely damaged and it was crucial for African-American men to find a new place in the extremely hostile circumstances of slavery. Men were deprived of their role of protectors, breadwinners for their families and the emasculating effects continued even after the promising Emancipation Proclamation which provided African-Americans with the desired freedom.

African-American men continued to struggle during the Reconstruction period and after. The patriarchal society settings were even more frustrating for black males as they felt the pressure to become what they were not allowed to become. Instead of offering them the opportunity for self-realization, the white supremacist society kept breeding damaging stereotypes about black men that presented them as intellectually inferior, violent and uncontrollable. Many men adopted these images and adopted the stereotypes as an inherent part of their identity. Later on, African-American rappers started working with the stereotypes consciously because it was considered lucrative. Rappers are aware of the fact that the streets sell. The ghetto experience can be turned into a very profitable business and the exotic characters of gangsters and pimps are demanded and attractive.

The ghetto experience is linked to a crucial element of rap music and that is authenticity. An authentic record is characterized by some in hip hop culture as only the one that was made by a man who grew up poor, participated in various criminal activities and tasted the horrors of the ‘hood first hand and who raps about what he experienced in the streets. This definition of authenticity is common among rap fans and even critics. However, we should acknowledge that no rap music is truly authentic. In fact, no art is. The first person narrator of rap lyrics does not mean that the narrated event was experienced by the rapper. The artists might be inspired by his life but the stories are just stories. These are fiction. Nevertheless, it does not compromise the art’s value. The ghetto narratives of rap artists are still important testimonies of what happens in the impoverished urban areas of American cities. They are fictional testimonies; they are fictional and authentic at the same time. Their authenticity lies in the way the artists feel about the work of art. They express themselves and the expression is

subjectively authentic. It does not mean that rappers are necessarily gangsters or pimps, but the lyrics reflect their concerns. The acts they perform may be pronounced authentic depending on how believable and well performed they are. The performance characterizes the narrator, the mindset of a ghetto black male that the artist wishes to picture. The quality of performance may make the story authentic. The authenticity in art as truthfulness is a constructed phenomenon.

Rappers constantly work with and reconstruct the stereotypes of violence, sexuality and manhood. Sometimes they use them to mock the system; they parody them and use hyperbolic rhetoric to subvert them. They accept the labels of “bad niggas” and “bad niggers,” they carry on the tradition of the African-American folklore where the personas were both praised and feared. “Bad nigga” is the conscious narrator who feels responsibility for his community. He is aware of the consequences of his deeds but he acts as he has been taught because he has to use whatever means to survive. He is what the streets made him and he is at certain point conscious of his limitations. Although he sometimes shows hypermasculine characteristics, he usually assumes them on purpose. He cannot afford to show weakness because he would not last long in the violent world of the projects.

“Bad nigger” is a menace to society. He is the extremely self-reliant individual who pursues only his goal and yearning. He is a young, black and does not “give a fuck.” QQ He goes against the system mostly unconsciously. He denies all rules not because of a deliberate protest but because the unruliness is in his nature. Therefore, he is unsuitable for companionship or a strong bonding with others. He is an extremely dangerous individual for everyone, unlike the “bad nigga” who usually takes part in the black community and tries not to cause much damage to his own people.

Rappers use various narrative modes. We can classify them into basic masculine narrative modes. The modes are “Good Kid, Mad City,” “Gangsta,” “Rebelutionary,” “Dick Almighty,” and “White Nightmare.” They differ according to the emotions they put on display, how they account for the events, stories; the rhetorical mode they apply. Another crucial distinction derives from the way they use stereotypes of hypermasculinity and if they use them at all. No rappers can be classified strictly as “Gangsta” or “Rebelutionary.” They can be used to categorize narrative modes only.

All fans and critics of rap music should recollect the traditions from which rap music derives, such as African-American folklore and “Playing Dozens.” The misogyny and violence of rap music did not start with Too Short and N.W.A. The content of rap lyrics reproduces the cultural conventions and themes of wider American society. The art of rap lies

in its performative power. It is a performance. Until people come to terms with the performative character of hip hop and the historical context that the art stems from, rappers will be publicly gibbeted for all the evil that poisons society; they will remain “Amerikkka’s Most Wanted.”<sup>187</sup>

People need to realize the necessity to understand street culture and hip hop with all its controversies. We need to understand the performative aspect of hip hop culture, stop calling rappers and graffiti artists criminals. Some are afraid of the image of black men that is given to us by the media and the misunderstanding caused by the fear may have lethal consequences. Some people tend to make up excuses for people like George Zimmerman who shot a black teenager named Trayvon Martin in 2012. Trayvon Martin got harassed by Zimmerman because he looked “suspiciously.” The ones who try to come up with the excuses are the ones who share the fear that George Zimmerman felt when he saw Trayvon; the fear of black men dressed in a hoody and saggy pants.

The day we begin to understand street culture and its masquerading may be the day we will no longer bury kids who were found potentially dangerous and automatically labeled “homo criminalis” while just walking through their own neighborhood with a bag of Skittles and a soda bottle. We need to be aware of the way hip hop culture works with stereotypes and we should start learning about hip hop poetics in general. Maybe we will eventually learn something about ourselves. “Looking for these better days,”<sup>188</sup> hands down!

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<sup>187</sup> Ice Cube, *Amerikkka’s Most Wanted* (Priority: Los Angeles, 1990).

<sup>188</sup> Tupac Shakur, “Better Dayz,” *Better Dayz* (Amaru: Los Angeles, 2002).

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