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# *From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: African American Literature and Hip Hop as Testimonies of Oppression*

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## Foreword

This work delves into African American written cultural expressions, from literature to Hip Hop, with a primary focus on the protest aspect, tracing the historical backdrop of oppression and racial disparities within the United States. I combine traditional sociopolitical analysis with an investigation of the artistic insights of Black writers, highlighting the continuity that binds together some of their experiences in the US, even with centuries in between them. This experiential continuity, defined by the persistence of racial oppression and the complexities of Blacks' position in the country, leads to a continuity in motifs and approaches in their cultural production. The point of view of the oppressed emerges and the oppression is conceptualized and re-elaborated, as I try to show in this work.

A comprehensive grasp of the sociopolitical and cultural landscape within the United States and a comprehension of the historical interactions between Black and White America is essential when dealing with African American cultural expressions. Therefore, to methodically analyze this topic, I have structured my analysis in chronological order, aligning it with the historical evolution of racial oppression in the US. This trajectory encompasses the eras of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and the contemporary phenomenon of mass incarceration. The initial chapter offers a panoramic view of these distinct periods, presenting a broader perspective of the overarching conditions faced by Black writers. The second chapter takes a closer look at specific texts within these timeframes.

It is crucial to clarify that the aim of emphasizing the aspect of continuity in these oppressive forms is not to insinuate that the circumstances of minorities in the United States have not improved over time. Undoubtedly, the current state of affairs vastly differs from the indiscriminate denial of human rights and forced labor of the past. Nonetheless, the intricacies of racial relations in the United States persistently manifest themselves in the post-Civil Rights era, albeit in subtler forms. Despite the implementation of ostensibly color-blind policies, the racial dimension has often remained pivotal in shaping public opinion and government policies. The enduring legacy of slavery and legalized discrimination continues to exert an influence on American society, which was built on them, as my work highlights.

My objective is to elucidate the intricate interplay between the historical narratives and lived experiences of the African American community, as it manifests within their cultural expressions. This entails examining the manner in which a culture subjected to oppression not only conveys the weight of that oppression but also explores the subsequent responses of the dominant culture, an aspect that I explore in the third chapter. In the first chapter I introduce the threefold chronological subdivision above mentioned. I start from the slavery period and the condition of African Americans who wanted to pursue literacy in those years, their obstacles and the dominant culture's perception of them. The slave narrative is the most remembered genre of this period. I do the same for the Jim Crow years, analyzing the historical changes that occurred. I explore how the system quickly rearranged to maintain forced labor in the south, despite the abolition of slavery, as "punishment for a crime". The insecurities about the Reconstruction and the role that Blacks would have in the new America is a recurring theme in the literary efforts of this time. The essay as a literary genre and the Harlem Renaissance as a movement are the main actors. The focus is then shifted to the Civil Rights period and the end of the Jim Crow segregation laws, with African American writers discussing their role in society. After defining the general framework, I analyze the deep intertwining of African American literature with musical and oral folk cultural expressions. Slave songs, emerging as a shared language upon linguistic deprivation as Black individuals were forcibly separated on plantations, are acknowledged to have left an indelible mark on subsequent cultural expressions. These influences extend beyond Black music, encompassing literature and the spoken word tradition. I therefore analyze these deep roots in music and rhythm, and how they were discussed and implemented in literature, shifting the focus on the execution of a text rather than the mere writing of it. I maintain the focus on how such cultural expressions recount the African American experience and thus classify as a form of protest writing. These discourses brought to what has become the most prominent Black form of protest writing/execution of texts, the Hip Hop movement, with particular focus on rap. I therefore briefly go through the history of the movement, highlighting its inherent identification with the African American community. I also highlight the aspects of continuity with previous Black cultural expressions through the sampling of soul and jazz music, and through the legacy of spoken word traditions exemplified in the use of humor, wordplay, and lyrical content, infused with rage towards

racial disparities and storytelling about neglected urban environments. In its nascent stages, Hip Hop may have appeared as a passing trend among the younger generation, while as it began to gain global traction, it was perceived by many as a commodity ripe for exploitation. However, scholars have consistently emphasized its underlying elements of social disruption and enduring significance as a cultural expression. Over the span of fifty years, Hip Hop has not only weathered changing trends but has exerted a profound influence on musical genres and pop culture overall. Consequently, it has now firmly established itself as a legitimate form of cultural and popular expression in contemporary society.

Since I intended to present Hip Hop's lyrical protest aspect, I conclude the first chapter with an analysis of mass incarceration. Besides being the US one of the countries that proportionally incarcerates more people in the world (holding the first place in 2009, when the rate peaked), the shocking aspect is the disproportion in which Blacks and Hispanics are incarcerated compared to Whites. Many social, historical, and political elements concur in defining this particular situation such as prison privatization, drug sentencing laws, and race profiling. The numbers show that minorities are disproportionately targeted by law enforcement, leading to a higher incarceration rate. The social stigma of a felon is not just a matter of perception, since societal disenfranchisement exists in different forms, with limited access to jobs, education, and vote.

But why use Hip Hop as an analysis tool? I have already highlighted the legacy of precedent African American cultural expressions in Hip Hop, but the peculiarity of rap is that it evolved into a highly lyrical genre. The quantity of written material in a rap performance is incomparable to other musical genres, therefore, rap became a very descriptive, storytelling-oriented musical expression; a blending of poetry, music, and prose narrative. Therefore, everyday-life themes naturally emerged in the lyrics. Hence, we can discern a multitude of depicted scenarios that collectively serve as a microcosm, capable of illustrating a more comprehensive portrait of the group subjected to mass incarceration, conveying how this group re-elaborates the unilateral representation made by the medias.

Hip Hop emerged in the exact years of the incarceration rate peak, and it originated from the very targeted communities, this with other reasons that I analyze lead me to hold it as

a valuable form of expression able to recount the contemporary African American experience, which is in many cases familiar with the direct consequences of mass incarceration. Furthermore, rap's imaginary, while being influenced by the urban context, became itself an influence for it, with entire generations seeking to identify with its narrations, becoming therefore deeply intertwined with the community itself. Nonetheless, I maintain an analytical stance, always mindful of the entertainment factor inherent in rap, which therefore cannot be deemed as an unbiased life narrative, but neither literature does. Both don't have protest as their primary function, in the majority of cases, but the underlying idea in this work is that the protest aspect emerges naturally when analyzing, through a large corpus, the recurrent themes in a given community's cultural expression. I won't argue that rap is the natural development of literature since the latter is still productive, the analysis of the conjunctions between the two forms simply serves to highlight the cultural and ethnic continuity, the fact that it is the same community, with similar issues, that expresses itself through it. However, in the specific context of American urban poverty and ghettoization, a popular form of protest writing such as rap is more likely to reach and have an influence on communities lacking resources and educational access. Therefore, it is more able to be influential on a wider range of people. As I said it became highly intertwined with the community, being relevant for the demographic concerned in a discourse about mass incarceration.

I devote the second chapter to a closer analysis of specific texts, from literature to Hip Hop, following the threefold division that I used in the first chapter.

For the slavery period I analyze *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, particularly focusing on his idea of literacy and his description of slavery as an institution, with its effects on the character of both the slave and the master. I then discuss the elements of continuity between Douglass' approach and some Hip Hop motifs, with the help of scholarly articles. The main conjunction points are the appropriation of stereotypical depictions to one's advantage, the use of humor and clever wordplays to entertain audiences, and the building and re-building of Black masculinity.

With these elements in mind, I analyze how the theme of slavery is addressed in rap, detecting different purposes, for example the claiming of a payback through success and wealth, and the comparison of today's forms of oppression with slavery.



Moving to the Jim Crow period, I analyze W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folks*. The work is divided in fourteen chapters and it deals with the Reconstruction and the African American experience from different points of view, finally giving a vivid image of the struggles faced by the Black community in that period. I particularly focus on Du Bois' idea of double consciousness, the phenomenon of looking at oneself through the eyes of others, assuming the oppressor's perspective. This translates into Blacks identifying with racist depictions, resulting in self-hatred and insecurities. I observe how this concept has been repeatedly applied to the African American experience by many authors after its first elaboration, detecting it also in Hip Hop performances and rappers' characters. Two main manifestations emerged in the latter: the appropriation of the consumerist "American Dream" ideals, with the obsessive wealth ostentation, and the assumption of the thug persona, with the appropriation and claiming of negative stereotypes. I give examples of both, through the analysis of lyrical content. I then continue chronologically moving to mass incarceration, explaining how the issue repeatedly emerges in Hip Hop, again recognizing two different manifestations. The first when rappers perform protest lyrics where the social issue is addressed, the second when they recount their experience with the law and/or ghetto storytelling. Discourses around the thug persona and the street credibility emerge, especially when dealing with the latter manifestation.

Despite Hip Hop's continuity with precedent cultural expressions, many aspects are new; one of them is the prolific use of visuality, I therefore end the chapter with an analysis of three music videos, where the precedentially explored ideas and approaches emerge through the use of modern cinematographic techniques.

The third chapter focuses on the world's reaction to Hip Hop. I analyze the reception and scandalization of explicit lyrics, with the help of literary scandals theory.

In the framework of the scandal tryptic, where a scandalous work, its creator, and the scandalized audience act reciprocally to create the mediatic phenomenon, I analyze three scandals in Hip Hop, observing the different reactions and the purposes behind them. Lyrical content of violence, misogyny, and explicit involvement in criminal activity has not only led to superficial indignation, but also to some research and scholarly efforts to understand the deeper causes of the rappers' thug persona, I therefore analyze some perspectives to this regard. Discourses about race, gender, and Black masculinity emerge

and intertwine, in this section I also analyze how this character assumed by rappers has been adopted outside of the specific context it was born in, with the difficulty of non-English speakers and non-American viewers at grasping the US cultural/social/racial specific tropes in Hip Hop. Another aspect of the reaction is commercialization, I devote the last part of the chapter to analyzing the exploitation of Hip Hop upon its worldwide success. This happened in the framework of record companies taking advantage of inexperienced young artists in need for money, but also in the phenomenon of cultural appropriation by non-Blacks artists and influencers seeking to profit of the success of Hip Hop, with the diffusion of African American English, and Black “coolness”.

The element of continuity with previous African American cultural expressions remains at the center of the analysis also in the third chapter, especially when discussing the concept of Black masculinity and cultural/economic exploitation.

## 1. Writing as a Form of Protest

### 1.1 African American Writers and Their Condition in Different Periods

The oppression that African Americans have faced ever since their arrival in the “New World” could only turn into the main theme dealt with in their writing.

Pseudo-scientific evolutionary theories used to justify racial cruelty dismissed black people’s creative abilities. Therefore, the very act of writing has always been a revolutionary form of protest and redemption.

Despite trying to avoid being perceived as mere “pamphleteers”<sup>1</sup>, African American writers naturally developed political engagement, compelled to shed light on societal injustices and incite change. I will analyze chronologically the different forms taken by racial oppression and the concurrent status and conditions of writing and writers belonging to the oppressed culture.

#### 1.1.1 Slavery period

##### *First efforts*

From 1619 to the early 19th century, Africans were enslaved and transported to the future United States. Around 600,000 slaves arrived in the colonies and many died during the horrific “middle passage” journey. Slavery continued in states below the Mason-Dixon line until the Civil War ended in 1865 and the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified. During this period Black people were dehumanized and considered mere property. They underwent brutal labor and systemic violence, and they were further degraded by the pervasive belief among whites that they lacked intellectual and creative capabilities.

Some slaves secretly acquired literacy skills, since educating black individuals was discouraged by slave owners due to the potential threat posed by the increased awareness of their circumstances. However, some owners did educate their slaves. This was the case for Phillis Wheatley, a domestic slave who stirred the publishing world with her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), becoming the first African American to publish a literary work. Her poems were filled with allusions and erudition, therefore, because of the aforementioned preconceptions about black people’s creativity, it was

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<sup>1</sup> As debated by James Baldwin in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955).

impossible for many white readers to believe that these poems were really written by her. Thus a trial was carried out in 1772 where a council of eight reluctant statesmen and religious leaders sought to validate her authorship, which they eventually did.

### *Slave narratives*

However, the dominant genre associated with enslaved black people is the slave narrative. Its authenticity appeal attracted many readers; the autobiographic genre became popular from the end of the 18th century onward<sup>2</sup>. “I was born a slave in...” functioned as the opener in slave narratives, resonating with the traditional “Once upon a time”. The genre possesses a certain coherence, yet notable variations exist among individual texts. In a 1984 article, James Olney<sup>3</sup> outlines the shared characteristics of slave narratives; he identifies the importance of authenticity and truth-telling, and he asserts that those who immerse themselves in a substantial collection of slave narratives will be struck by the overwhelming repetitiveness of the themes and narratives present. He discusses the role of the audience, the intended impact, and the aim to create empathy and foster social change. The spiritual and religious theme has also been identified by Olney as crucial in slave narratives, and regarding this topic the comparison suggested by D. Quentin Miller<sup>4</sup> between Equiano and Nat Turner, is very interesting. In Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789)<sup>5</sup> English politicians are identified as the audience. Despite trying to make them aware of the conditions in which slaves are forced to live, Equiano praises their kingdom and their religion, holding a steadfast belief in divine providence, trusting that he will be safeguarded on earth and receive provisions in heaven. On the other hand, Nat Turner<sup>6</sup>’s religious vision led him to organize a violent uprising in Virginia in 1831. He orchestrates a rebellion resulting in

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<sup>2</sup> Rousseau’s *The Confessions* (1782) was seminal for the development of the autobiographical genre and its popularity in the XIX Century.

<sup>3</sup> James Olney, “I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature.” *Callaloo*, no. 20, 1984, pp. 46–73.

<sup>4</sup> D. Quentin Miller, *Routledge Introduction to African American Literature*, Taylor & Francis Ltd pp. 28–29.

<sup>5</sup> The classification of this work as an American slave narrative has been debated since Equiano spent some time in the British colonies, but also went to Europe and to the Caribbean, and his narratives mostly takes places on ships, thus making it an important testimony for the “middle passage” and the Slave Trade diaspora but hard to classify in terms of a national literature.

<sup>6</sup> When analyzing *The Confessions of Nat Turner* it is important to bear in mind that the text was written by Thomas Gray, the white lawyer who heard and transposed his confession, and therefore is often not considered as direct testimony.

the deaths of white slaveholders and their families before being captured and executed. In contrast with Equiano's passive conception of religion, Turner carries an overwhelming sense that he is destined for an active purpose under the guidance of a higher power, his usage of biblical language is therefore in continuity with the slave's narrative tradition, but he uses it to justify a revolution. It is therefore interesting to observe how literacy gives rise to a social and political consciousness about one's condition of oppression, a consciousness that can have different practical outcomes in an individual's thinking and actions as we have just seen. The reading of the Bible has always been given multiple interpretations, and the confirmation bias plays a key role. Therefore, it is very likely that Turner already harbored feelings of hostility toward slaveholders and thus found in the Bible the ultimate confirmation of the need for a revolution. The theme of religious interpretation is also dealt with by the slave-born Sojourner Truth (a prominent African American abolitionist and women's rights activist, whose *Narrative* is the first one coming from a woman's perspective), who highlights the dangers of religion, pointing to the need to receive the Bible without distortion, and explaining that she prefers having children read it because they wouldn't add misinterpretations<sup>7</sup>. An interesting aspect of the analysis of slaves' Christianity that should be considered is related to how the oppressor's religious beliefs managed to penetrate the mind of the oppressed, after eradicating their cultural roots and turning them into a blank sheet susceptible to the imprint of the dominant belief system. In the same way, I will discuss how representations of blacks carried by the white dominant culture manage to penetrate the perception of the oppressed. WEB Du Bois will call this double consciousness, highlighting the coexistence in the subaltern of opposing sets of values and beliefs<sup>8</sup>.

Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) is perhaps the most famous slave narrative. The inclusion of "American" in the title highlights its distinct evolution as an American genre. Slave narratives were indeed very successful, perhaps as a disengaged and entertaining reading for someone, but predominantly as a testimony of protest and urgent demand for change. The genre also

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<sup>7</sup> Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828, 1850*.

<sup>8</sup> The concept of double consciousness refers to the internal conflict of having a dual identity, the perception of oneself through the eyes of others, specifically the racist ones of the predominant culture.

played a role in the development of the African American novel (the novel emerged as the predominant literary genre in the mid-nineteenth century), since among the most successful and influential novels of that era in the US was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which drew inspiration from slave narratives.

### 1.1.2 Jim Crow Period

#### *Reconstruction Era*

The end of slavery in the United States came with the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865, abolishing slavery and involuntary servitude, except as punishment for a crime. The last part of the sentence will be the basis for further labor exploitation in the carceral system. Booker T. Washington, prominent African American educator and leader, recognized the significance of slavery in the white nation-building process. He saw how with the abolition of slavery, the majority of the labor force vanished in the South, leading to the emergence of forced labor as a substitute during the era of Reconstruction<sup>9</sup>. Labelled criminals, black people could be enslaved once again, in actual continuity with the pre-Civil War era.

A genuine effort to integrate former slaves into society never truly took place, leaving many in precarious conditions and confusion. It was not hard in these circumstances for white authority to criminalize the black community. As highlighted by Michelle Alexander, laws targeting vagrancy and other minor offenses were disproportionately applied to African Americans, creating opportunities for the widespread practice of convict leasing: “It was the nation’s first prison boom and, as they are today, the prisoners were disproportionately black. [...] The criminal justice system was strategically employed to force African Americans back into a system of extreme repression and control”<sup>10</sup>. This exploitative system involved renting out prisoners as laborers to the highest bidder in the private sector. In retrospect, it becomes evident that slavery changed its name and adapted to the common sensibility of the new times. Consequently, a process of racialization took shape, depicting black individuals as irrational criminals was necessary in order for the white population to accept labor exploitation. While before the

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<sup>9</sup> Booker T Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 1901, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Michelle Alexander, “Chapter 1: The Rebirth of Caste: The Birth of Jim Crow” in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2010.

Civil War there was no need to instill fear towards black individuals, perceived as docile as the institution of slavery guaranteed submission, now a shift in the perception of African Americans took place. Lynching and discriminatory laws hindered progress, making the post-Reconstruction era (1877-1900) a dark time in African American history. After the death of Frederick Douglass, a new leader was needed to address the new challenges of the community of color. As the 19th century transitioned into the 20th, the essay naturally succeeded the slave narrative as a powerful literary tool. An example is Ida B. Wells-Barnett's crusade against lynching<sup>11</sup>, whose necessity was confirmed by a white mob demolishing her office.

Booker T. Washington became the preeminent African American figure during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He asserted that "the black man got nearly as much out of slavery as the white man did"<sup>8</sup> The point he was trying to make was that white individuals became reliant on black people during slavery to such an extent that they struggled to operate independently in the post-slavery era. As I mentioned, this condition will be the cause of the new forms of black labor exploitation. *Up from Slavery* (1901) has been criticized for being too naïve and optimistic. In addition, many have observed how responsibility is shifted very much to the individual level in this work: willpower is praised to such an extent that it seems that if a former slave does not succeed, it is his own fault. Many thus have lamented a lack of real social critique and excessive responsibility being burdened on blacks. Furthermore, the Ku Klux Klan is looked at as a phenomenon from the past, while white mobs were still perpetrating lynching and violence, as demonstrated by the aforementioned terroristic act towards Wells-Barnett, which happened just nine years before the publication of *Up From Slavery*.

Undoubtedly, one of the most prominent critics of Booker T. was W.E.B. Du Bois, a highly influential black intellectual<sup>12</sup>. Du Bois points at important matters that Booker T. dismissed in favor of industrial training: "First, political power, second, insistence on civil rights, third, higher education of Negro youth"<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Ida B Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900*. Ed. Jacqueline Jones Royster. Boston, MA: Bedford, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Du Bois holds the distinction of being the first African American to obtain a Ph.D. from Harvard University.

<sup>13</sup> W.E.B Du Bois, chapter: "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others." in *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, 398.

### *Poetry*

Black poetry emerged, and a considerable amount of it employed vernacular verses, aiming to capture the authentic speech of black individuals.

However, in the racially charged climate of the late 19th century, this use of dialect made black speakers susceptible to ridicule. Dialect was associated with racial subjugation, particularly in forms of entertainment like minstrel shows, where black characters were depicted as superstitious, uneducated, and foolish. These portrayals perpetuated harmful stereotypes and reinforced the notion of black inferiority. The racialization and depiction of black people of this time was subtle, under a facade of freedom systematic racism was even more poisonous in some ways than slavery, with its contradictions harming the psychological stability of the oppressed.

Black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar was one of the first African American writers to try to make a living out of his writing, and he explored the theme of masking one's true emotions and identity, presenting a facade of happiness and contentment while concealing the pain and oppression experienced by African Americans<sup>14</sup>. Fenton Johnson's poem "Tired"<sup>15</sup> expresses the despair felt by the black working class, with the speaker expressing exhaustion from laboring to uplift a civilization that does not belong to them.

### *Passing narratives*

The passing narrative in African American literature explores the complex theme of racial identity and the experience of light-skinned individuals who choose to "pass" as white to access social advantages. These narratives highlight the psychological, social, and moral dilemmas faced by those living with dual identities and the consequences of their choices. Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) is an example. From a European perspective, these writings offer valuable insights into the unique perception of race in the United States, where the significance of genotype surpasses that of phenotype as a racial marker. This distinctive phenomenon can be traced back to the historical practice of white slave owners engaging in sexual exploitation of black slave women, resulting in the birth of mixed-race children who, despite potentially having white physical characteristics, were still classified as black due to their maternal lineage. This complex interplay of race and

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Majors and Minors*, 1896.

<sup>15</sup> Fenton Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, 1922.



ancestry underscores the intricacies of racial categorization in the United States and might be hard to understand from a European perspective at first sight. Charles Waddell Chesnutt is considered to be one of the most important African American fiction writers before the Harlem Renaissance. His novel *The House Behind the Cedars* is a passing narrative that explores the psychological aspects of the phenomenon. Through the protagonist Rena, a tragic mulatto archetype<sup>16</sup>, the novel examines the dangers of forgetting or denying the past and sets the stage for themes that would emerge during the Harlem Renaissance in African American literature. The narrator highlights the continuity between the condition of black people before and after the abolition of slavery: “One curse of negro slavery was, and one part of its baleful heritage is, that it poisoned the fountains of human sympathy”<sup>17</sup>. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness captures the psychological state and confusion experienced by black individuals during the Reconstruction Era. This concept resonated with subsequent authors, who continued to explore the fragmented identity of black Americans.

### *The Harlem Renaissance*

In the 1920s and 1930s in Harlem, New York, a vibrant cultural and intellectual movement took place. It showcased the artistic achievements of African American writers, musicians, artists, and thinkers, and played a pivotal role in shaping modern Black culture. In a groundbreaking shift, new themes emerged, experimental forms were embraced, and diverse voices arose, defying conventional harmony. One of the catalysts for the movement to emerge was the Great Migration, where approximately 1.5 million African Americans migrated from the rural South to the urbanized North, seeking opportunities in industrial cities, and escaping violence. For the first time a very hot debate arose on the purpose of literature in the Harlem Renaissance: was it supposed to inform and persuade white readers about social issues of black people, or should it be pure artistic expression with no specific audience and agenda? George Schuyler (prominent journalist and author who contributed to the literary and cultural movement of the Harlem Renaissance) indeed challenges the idea that black art should always

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<sup>16</sup> The Tragic Mulatto archetype refers to a fictional character, usually a mixed-race woman, whose limited choices and heritage lead to an unfulfilled, often tragic, fate in passing narratives.

<sup>17</sup> Charles W Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars*. 1900. Ridgewood, NJ: The Gregg Press, 1968, 118.

embody something unique to the black experience, as such a distinction from the white experience would inevitably strengthen racial hierarchies<sup>18</sup>. Langston Hughes's essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) responds to Schuyler's ideas, advocating for unique black art that embraces authenticity and self-expression. Hughes celebrates the confidence and individuality of common black people, encouraging fellow artists not to fear expressing their truths and to avoid imitating dull white art. He finds inspiration in jazz, considering it a true expression of African American life in America. The era of the Harlem Renaissance brought about an emancipation for African American writers, opening doors for subsequent artists to draw inspiration from different facets of literary heritage that resonated more strongly with their creative aspirations. Also influenced by experimentations typical of the literary trends of the age (such as the stream of consciousness), the Harlem Renaissance allowed black writers to experiment a great deal with formal aspects of writing and to define many aspects of their culture that will play a key role in defining their identity and pride throughout the twentieth century. Langston Hughes, a celebrated poet and prominent figure of the movement, skillfully incorporated the melodic beats and vibrant tones of jazz music in his early works, suggesting the inseparable relationship and mutual influences between African American music and literature, a theme that will be further explored in the next subchapter (1.2).

### 1.1.3 Civil Rights period

The mid twentieth century was a transformative period in American history, marked by significant social and political changes aimed at ending racial segregation and securing equal rights for African Americans and other minorities. It saw the emergence of influential leaders, such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr, who despite different approaches, advocated for racial justice and equality. Three African American authors emerged in the post-WW2 era: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. All three owe much to the Harlem Renaissance but at the same time criticize some aspects of it. Richard Wright for instance criticizes the black literary tradition for being tamed and polite<sup>19</sup>, and he points out that it had mainly ignored the oral folk culture, which is

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<sup>18</sup> George S. Schuyler, "The Negro-Art Hokum" 1926. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Winston Napier. New York, NY: *New York University Press*, 2000. 24–26.

<sup>19</sup>Richard Wright, "Blueprint for American Negro Writing." *Richard Wright Reader*. Ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1978, 2.

perceived by him as a potent source of African American expression. In his novel *Native Son* he tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a young African American man living in poverty and facing racial oppression in 1930s Chicago. The story delves into Bigger's internal struggle, societal pressures, and the consequences of his actions. Wright challenges readers with his unflinching portrayal of a protagonist who lacks nobility and invites little sympathy. By doing so, Wright confronts the notion that black characters must embody purity and flawlessness, as if they must prove their worthiness for recognition as human. He skillfully depicts the alienation and self-destructive tendencies of his protagonist as a result of the dominant culture's depiction of black people. The protagonist is driven by fear and a desperate need to appear tough, it almost seems like he adopts a persona, a common phenomenon recognized as a coping mechanism of oppressed people re-elaborating the prevalent culture's depiction of them, ending up being entrapped in it, this theme will be discussed in subsequent chapters. Du Bois' double consciousness is a core concept in this regard. In his essay Baldwin cautions against perpetuating the stereotype represented by Bigger<sup>20</sup>, as it becomes ingrained in both the perception of African Americans and their own self-perception. He argues that once individuals embrace this distorted image, it becomes their only reality, limiting their ability to assert their true identity.

## **1.2. African American Literature and the Importance of Musical Expression**

The theme of oral Black oral and folk culture has already emerged in Hughes' and Wright's approach to literature. But why does it appear to be of such importance among the African American community?

### **1.2.1 Thematic and Structural Influence of African American Music in Literature**

Slave songs served as a powerful form of expression and communication. They have been a thematic presence in African American literature since slave narratives, where their purposes were discussed. Why did slaves sing? In contrast to the dominant white idea that this demonstrated their carefree and accepting inclination, quite the opposite seems to be the case: they conveyed messages of hope, resistance, and shared sorrow among enslaved individuals. Slave songs have been discussed by important African American writers I

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<sup>20</sup> James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel" in *Notes of a Native Son*, 1955, 38.

have mentioned, such as Du Bois in *The Souls of Blacks*. But an interesting point of view comes from Frederick Douglass's slave narrative, in which he urges readers to actively engage with the songs sung by enslaved individuals, emphasizing the significance of their heartfelt lyrics and mournful melodies. He contends that the experience of simply listening to these songs can evoke a deeper understanding of the abhorrent nature of slavery, surpassing the impact of extensive philosophical writings<sup>21</sup>. Within a population deprived of literacy, music emerges as a vital and central form of communication and self-expression. With regards to this last point, Kalamu ya Salaam explains in a 1995 article<sup>22</sup> the importance of slave songs as a root for African American identity, tradition, and musical/cultural development. He argues that every form of contemporary Black music<sup>23</sup> can be linked back to when slaves were deliberately denied access to more sophisticated forms of artistic expression, prohibited from acquiring literacy skills or engaging in visual arts, and even in musical endeavors. Consequently, spoken word, chants, and dance became the primary channels for the slaves' creative expression. Salaam argues that since Black people were denied a native tongue, as enslaved individuals who originated from the same regions of Africa were intentionally separated in an effort to impede communication, and they were forced to adopt Standard English, African Americans found in the music their native tongue: "We created a nonverbal language which expressed our worldly concerns, as well as our spiritual aspirations. This language we created is 'the music'." (352). He even argues that it is possible to understand African American history by "studying their music without ever reading a novel or viewing a piece of art" (353). Thus given their condition and the suppression of their expression by white authority, an "attitude of cultural warfare is indelibly encoded in the mother tongue of GBM" (355) and therefore, he argues, also in what became Black English. Some of the features he recognizes in GBM, as compared to traditional European music, are: loudness (so to overcome silencing attempts), rhythm (the engagement of movement is associated with the desire of freedom), rawness, bluesy (described as "attitude of transcendence through acceptance, but not submission"), iconoclasm (as "destroying the tyranny of

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<sup>21</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 1845, B Publishing 2023, chapter II, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Kalamu ya Salaam, "It Didn't Jes Grew: The Social and Aesthetic Significance of African American Music." *African American Review*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1995, pp. 351-75.

<sup>23</sup> He uses Great Black Music (GBM) as an umbrella term for Gospel, Blues, R&B, Jazz, and Rap.

dominant culture”) and reference to previous art forms (355). This last aspect is clear in the influence of slave songs in blues music and then in the influence of blues music in rap through sampling. Music as a native tongue became the basis for Black identity. Salaam specifies that when he talks about “Black” he doesn’t refer to biology: “we generally mean a lot more than race; after all, we are a mixture of races. So the biological is the least important of the three elements of Blackness. Culture and consciousness are the critical elements” (352). Salaam explains how blues has also given voice to numerous women in a way that never again happened (especially in the African American community). The Blues women have been thematized in literary works (such as Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*) and they have been able to subvert stereotypes. Salaam argues that they “were not svelte sex symbols comparable in either features or figure to White women, but robust, dark- skinned, African-featured women who thought of and carried themselves as the equals of any man”, adding that “Bessie Smith was clearly nobody’s Aunt Jemima.”(366).

I’ve already mentioned Hughes as a prominent poet of the Harlem Renaissance. He sees jazz as a genuine expression of Black life in America, and he purposefully incorporate its rhythmic and melodic elements in his early works. His poems, though seemingly straightforward, break free from the complexities and elitism of modernist poetry. He captures the reader's attention through a confident and articulate voice that speaks the language of the common people with elegance. By transforming the lyrics of a familiar musical genre into poetry, Hughes not only highlights the significance of the blues but also dismantles the distinction between high and low art.

### 1.2.2 The Development towards Oral Expressions

#### *Black Arts Movement*

In the 1960s, the Black Arts Movement revolutionized African American literature by emphasizing musical and oral aspects in texts. Writers and artists incorporated rhythmic cadences, improvisation, and performance into their works, inspired by Black oral traditions and influenced by jazz and blues. These artists created dynamic and engaging experiences, blurring the boundaries between literature, music, and performance. By fostering communal artistic spaces, they promoted unity and resistance. The Black Arts Movement's impact cannot be overlooked, as it reshaped the trajectory of African

American artistic expression. Amiri Baraka, the predominant figure of the movement, believed that Black art should address a black audience, and criticized the Harlem Renaissance for not connecting with the struggles and cultural identity of the Black community. Poetry in the Black Arts Movement draws inspiration from the Beat Generation<sup>24</sup>, incorporating jazz aesthetics like improvisation and energetic expression. The potential of poetry and drama to bring together audiences in black urban communities was a core element of the movement, as it will be with the blooming of hip hop.

### *Toast tradition and the birth of hip hop*

The African American toast tradition is a vibrant and dynamic oral storytelling practice deeply rooted in Black culture. Skilled storytellers captivate audiences with rhythmic delivery and engaging narratives. Through spoken poetry and performance, toasting preserves collective memories, shares cultural heritage, and fosters community identity, while delivering social critique. Poetic and musical aspects of toasting influence contemporary forms of Black artistic expressions. Scholars explored the toast tradition, their significance and various types within the genre. Wepman and Dennis explain in a 1974 article<sup>25</sup> that in addition to the traditional narrative story-toasts, different types exist, such as insult-exchange, boasting, and warning. The origins of toasts can be traced to black urban culture, particularly in the urban life associated with drugs, pimping, and prostitution. Toasts are considered a form of oral literature and meet the criteria of folk art, with their vitality, wide dispersion, and alteration in performance. The communal nature of composition allows toasts to evolve and adapt over time, resulting in a degree of unpredictability in their variations.

African American culture embraced the oral and performative aspect of texts as a means of expression. While literature in its traditional form still existed, the lived experiences of black individuals in urban segregation contexts found vibrant representation in other forms of expression. Soul songs like Marvin Gaye's "What's going On" or Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" resonated directly with the community, in circumstances in

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<sup>24</sup> Cultural and literary movement in the 1950s that rejected mainstream norms, embraced nonconformity, and explored themes of rebellion and personal freedom in literature. It included writers like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs, and had a lasting impact on American counterculture.

<sup>25</sup> Dennis Wepman, et al. "Toasts: The Black Urban Folk Poetry." *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 87, no. 345, 1974, pp. 208–24.

which access to literature was often limited. Eventually, in the seventies the phenomenon of hip hop emerged in New York among the African American community as a creative expression. At first mainly involving Djing, breakdancing, and graffiti, in the 1980s rap emerged as a form of oral expression. Tricia Rose<sup>26</sup> explains that different historical accounts portray the origins of rap music as a direct extension of long-standing African American oral, poetic, and protest traditions. Rap often adopted the structure of boastful and aggressive oral storytelling, Rose traces those aspects back to the toast tradition, which not only conveyed explicit political messages but also contained content that was forceful, violent, and sometimes sexist. The roots of rap can be attributed to a diverse range of vernacular artists, including the Last Poets, who openly admitted in an interview to perceive their legacy in the rappers of the 1990s<sup>27</sup>.

By incorporating these elements, rap music establishes a dynamic connection to its cultural heritage while forging a unique artistic path.

### **1.3. Hip Hop: A contemporary African American Protest Voice**

During the 1970s, New York City experienced severe financial distress, with the South Bronx becoming a symbol of urban decay and devastation. Reports documented the burning buildings<sup>28</sup>, displaced families, and the aftermath of this widespread collapse. Efforts to salvage the situation were made, including a visit from President Carter, highlighting the need for action. African American and Latino families endured severe poverty, and deteriorating living conditions. Limited access to essential services and high unemployment bred hopelessness and danger, with escalating gang violence. The South Bronx became synonymous with urban decay and neglect.

Amidst this backdrop, DJs started organizing block parties, using vinyl records found in their parents' homes, blues, jazz, funk, and R&B, mixing pop culture references and political content like Malcolm X speeches. DJs like Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa focused on the rhythmic part of songs (called the “get down”), employing two turntables and records to loop and extend those sections. Initially, rappers served as mere

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<sup>26</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise : Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America Music/culture*, Wesleyan University Press, 1994, 2, 24-25.

<sup>27</sup> The interview is available on YouTube under the name of “Something To Die For (ft. The Last Poets) - Documentary (1997)” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Efe5dW01Fu4> Accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Arson was often perpetrated for various reasons, including insurance fraud, property speculation, and as a form of protest against the neglect and poor living conditions.

vocalists to energize dancers, with DJs taking the spotlight, but over time, they refined their techniques, drawing inspiration from oral poetry and rhymes. With references to the neighborhood and community-specific issues that were widely ignored, many people felt represented in something for the first time. The release of “Rapper's Delight” by Sugar Hill Records in 1979 aroused the interest of the public and record labels. “The Message” by the Furious Five became one of the first rap songs with explicit references to ghetto problems. Initially centered in New York, rap gained momentum during the '80s, taking on specific forms and formulas according to the context in which it developed. In the West Coast the influence was the psychedelic sound of P-Funk<sup>29</sup>. By incorporating funky basslines, soulful melodies, and the rawness of the lyrics, they shaped what will come to be called Gangsta Rap (and the variation of G-Funk). In New Orleans the subgenre called Bounce took shape, influenced by the energetic and rhythmic characteristics of New Orleans' second line parade music traditions, with infectious beats, lively call-and-response patterns, and a strong emphasis on danceable rhythms. Obviously, the themes addressed in the lyrics also took on specific nuances with respect to the socio-cultural conditions of the different communities. Eventually rap developed as a worldwide phenomenon and is today one of the most listened musical genres in the world.

### 1.3.1 A Legitimate Voice?

How far can rap lyrics be considered as a legitimate voice and expression of African American culture? One must begin with the premise that the genre cannot be viewed as homogeneous due to its numerous transformations and trends, but there are records and specific lyrics that are considered to be valid expressions of African American communities, providing an inside perspective of the community's peculiarities and its perception of the oppressions it still suffers today. Hip hop has been studied as a cultural phenomenon and rap lyrics have been object of academic discussion more and more in the last decades. One of the elements that has made it so interesting is undoubtedly the amount of people it reached and thus potentially influenced.

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<sup>29</sup> Coined by George Clinton, P-Funk is the musical style and collective of Parliament-Funkadelic, an innovative group known for their groundbreaking fusion of funk, soul, and psychedelic sounds in the 1960s and 70s.



Adam Bradley analyzes rap lyrics as poetry in his work *Book of Rhymes*<sup>30</sup>, highlighting the use of complex rhetorical figures, puns, metrics, and storytelling. He argues that a failure to recognize rap as poetry would result in overlooking the forefront of contemporary poetry. Bradley's work dates back to 2009 and thus still tends to justify treating rap as a poetic form, but today the genre is widely recognized as a legitimate and influential expression of African American culture. Kendrick Lamar's historic Pulitzer Prize in 2018 further validated the artistic value and cultural impact of rap.

### 1.3.2 Development of Hip Hop

I have already mentioned Gangsta Rap, which stirred great controversy with artists such as Ice-T's and N.W.A.'s explicit and violent language and references to street gangs.

Meanwhile, in New York, politically charged groups like Public Enemy, influenced by the Nation of Islam and its leader Farrakhan, gained prominence. Their songs centered around anger towards an oppressive and racist system.

However, the nature of this oppression raises questions. In the aftermath of the Civil Rights era, there was a prevailing belief in American society that racism was now left behind. But was it? What incited such intense anger among these young writers? As early as 1974, Terry Jones<sup>31</sup> explored the existence of racism in two distinct forms: explicit and implicit. Explicit racism involves overt actions by white individuals targeting black individuals, resulting in physical harm, injury, or property damage. Implicit racism operates in a more subtle manner, evading easy detection and accountability, which makes it well-suited for perpetuating the systemic racism deeply embedded within today's societal structures. Scholars widely acknowledge the presence of systemic racism across various contexts in the United States. In a supposedly colorblind society, where individual acts of overt racism can be punished, a de facto race-based system continues to persist. Jones explains that there is a widespread belief, even among the very oppressed, that racism requires overt and intentional acts to be considered as such. However, this perspective is no longer applicable in present-day America, where the workings of racism can be seen effectively even without explicit and deliberate actions.

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<sup>30</sup> Adam Bradley, chapter "Rap Poetry 101" in *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*. Basic Civitas Books, Basic Civitas Books, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Terry Jones, "Institutional Racism in the United States." *Social Work*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1974, pp. 218–25.

The most striking manifestation of modern systematic racism can be observed in the reality of police brutality and mass incarceration.

### 1.3.3 Systemic Racism in the Hip Hop Era: Mass Incarceration

Michelle Alexander explains in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* that the fact that some African Americans have achieved success does not negate the existence of a racial caste system. It is crucial to acknowledge that a significant number of black men in the United States are still legally denied fundamental rights, “just as they have been throughout most of American history”<sup>32</sup>. Instead of explicitly using race as a basis for discrimination, the criminal justice system has become a mechanism to label people of color as “criminals”. Consequently, individuals marked as criminals face severe limitations on their rights. So the question is, “who does the Us society predominantly label criminal?”. H.R. Haldeman, Nixon’s advisor, apparently said: “He [President Nixon] emphasized that you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to”<sup>33</sup>. Racial caste in America has not been eradicated; it has been reconfigured. Contrary to popular belief, the War on Drugs was not initiated in response to the crisis caused by crack cocaine in inner-city neighborhoods. President Ronald Reagan officially declared the war in 1982, before crack became a prominent issue in the media or a crisis in poor black communities. However, the emergence of crack cocaine in 1985 was heavily publicized as part of a strategic effort to generate public and legislative support for the war. Media campaigns successfully inundated public discourse with images of blacks, reinforcing negative racial stereotypes about impoverished inner-city residents.

Within a span of thirty years, the U.S. penal population skyrocketed from approximately 300,000 to over 2 million, and drug-related convictions constitute the primary factor contributing to the overall rise. Approximately 75% of young African American men, and nearly all those residing in impoverished communities, are projected to experience incarceration during their lifetime<sup>32</sup>. Studies consistently demonstrate that people of all

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<sup>32</sup> Michelle Alexander, “Introduction” in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, The New Press, 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Dan Baum, *Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1996, p. 13.

racism use and sell illegal drugs at similar rates, however, law enforcement chooses whom to target and arrest, leading to the disproportionate policing and criminalization of minorities. The criminal justice system effectively shuts out any claims or challenges suggesting racial discrimination. Those seeking to address racial bias must provide concrete evidence of intentional discrimination, which is rarely available in today's supposedly colorblind era. The War on Drugs disproportionately targets individuals based on their race, although it remains unspoken, the profile of the "young black male" resonates redundantly in defining the subject who is typically considered a suspect (it will also become the name of the opening song of Tupac's debut album, as I will analyze in the second chapter). This immunization of the system from claims of racial bias enables prosecutors to operate with unchecked discretion in charging, plea bargaining, case transfers, and sentencing. Consequently, both conscious and unconscious biases thrive within this environment. Terry Jones' aforementioned concept of implicit racism is an important insight to understand this situation. Through a complex web of laws, regulations, and informal rules, reinforced by social stigma, a large part of black individuals is confined to the fringes of mainstream society and denied access to the broader economy. Similar to the era of Jim Crow, they are systematically deprived of employment opportunities, adequate housing, and public benefits. This denial of opportunities and the creation of a segregated, second-class citizenship continue to disproportionately affect African Americans. Often, individuals who cannot afford legal representation and counsel, feel compelled to accept plea bargains and plead guilty in order to secure their release and return home. However, this decision comes with far-reaching implications that subject them to a lifetime of marginalization and discrimination. Therefore, a significant portion of individuals who find themselves in this predicament have not actually committed the offense they are being accused of. Individuals labeled criminals encounter a multitude of barriers that permeate various aspects of their lives. Exclusion from vital social welfare programs, bans on food stamps and money assistance imposed by numerous states for those with felony drug convictions, perpetuate a cycle of poverty and hinder the path to rehabilitation. Additionally, public housing authorities and private landlords can legally deny housing assistance and rentals to individuals with criminal records, and many employers exclude individuals with criminal records. Denial of voting rights is yet another consequence faced by individuals

with criminal records. In several states, felony convictions result in the revocation of the right to vote, even after completing their sentences, silencing a significant portion of the population and perpetuating marginalization from the political process. Education is also hindered, as institutions restrict admission based on criminal records, denying opportunities of upward mobility. These obstacles further compound the difficulties faced by individuals seeking to reintegrate into society and rebuild their lives.

The United States, the “land of freedom”, holds one of the highest rates of incarceration in the world, disproportionately impacting racial and ethnic minorities. Whereas the numbers have slightly decreased in the last years, it is important to note that this is due to the accelerated releases in the first year of the pandemic, I will therefore take a look at pre-pandemic data. The phenomenon is still a reality, in 2018<sup>34</sup> African American made up approximately 12% of the population<sup>35</sup> but 41% of the total prison population<sup>36</sup>.

The prevailing colorblind consensus in the US, where race is believed to no longer be a significant factor, has obscured society's understanding of racial realities and facilitated the emergence of a new caste system.

Hip hop as a phenomenon was born and developed in the exact years when the climb in incarceration number began, its history and the history of the communities using this creative form is therefore deeply intertwined with the phenomenon of mass incarceration. It thus serves as an internal testimony of the affected communities. In this chapter I analyzed the characters of continuity between rap and earlier literary forms and the characters of continuity between today's system of oppression and earlier ones. In the next chapter I will analyze corpora of literary texts and rap lyrics, maintaining continuity as a research paradigm, I will show how the arguments set forth thus far naturally emerge in the creative effort of the African American community.

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<sup>34</sup> Sawyer, Wendy. *Visualizing the Racial Disparities in Mass Incarceration*, Prison Policy Initiative, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates*, <https://data.census.gov/table?q=2018+demographic+by+race&tid=ACSDT1Y2018.B02001>, accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2023.

<sup>36</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics *Jail inmates in 2018*, Table 2, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/07/27/disparities/#slideshows/slideshow3/1>, Accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2023.

## 2. Literature and Hip Hop Text Analysis

### 2.1 Slavery

Relying on Frederick Douglass's slave narrative, considered a masterpiece of the genre, I will analyze how a former slave described slavery and its impact on both the oppressor and the oppressed. I will then examine how the theme is addressed in African American Hip Hop, with diverse approaches and purposes. Elements of continuity will emerge.

#### 2.1.1 Slavery Institution and Literacy in Douglass' Perspective

*The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*<sup>1</sup> is one of the most famous slave narratives, able to transcend the narration of an individual experience and give insights about the slavery institution as a whole. In Chapter VI, when Douglass moves to Baltimore and encounters his new master's wife, Mrs. Auld, he first describes her as "a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings" (42), she's empathetic, there is "no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear" (46). The reason for her positive connotation is linked to the fact that "She had never had a slave under her control previously" (42). She hasn't yet been corrupted by slavery, "she had been in a good degree preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery" (42). However, as her husband prohibits her to teach Douglass the alphabet she starts losing her pious features: "Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities" (46). Douglass discusses the effect of slavery upon her in the same way he regards that of alcohol on her husband: "The influence of brandy upon him, and of Slavery upon her, had effected a disastrous change in the characters of both" (56). "Slavery" is regarded as a poison capable of changing people, both the master and the slave. The denial of education is seen as the first step of "her downward course" (46), in the same way, the dualism between education and negation of it, functions as a yardstick, reflecting a positive or negative mental condition of the slave. When Douglass describes his first six months under the control of Covey, known for his cruelty to slaves, he defines himself as being "broken in body, soul, and spirit"; despite his hunger for knowledge, his "intellect languished, the disposition to read departed" (67). Interestingly, Douglass is explicitly calling out to slavery itself more than its perpetrators as responsible for such outcomes: "the dark night of slavery closed in

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 1845, B Publishing 2023.

upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute” (67). Without his drive for knowledge he feels denied of the label of man, and vice versa. Illiteracy is what keeps a man a slave, in Douglass’ perspective. It emerges in the first page of the narrative that “it is the wish of most masters [...] to keep slaves thus ignorant”(18). Douglass delivers insights about the common thinking among masters, through the perspective of Mr. Auld: “if you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master”, he tells his wife, explaining how teaching him something would be counterproductive both to the master, as it would “forever unfit him to be a slave”, and also to the slave himself, as “It would make him discontent and unhappy”(43). Douglass seems to submit to his master’s ideas when he writes: “I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing”(49), and “I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one” (96). Eventually, although painful, the gaining of awareness is regarded as necessary in the making of a free man in Douglass’ perspective, making the difference between a “man” and a “brute”, exactly how the denial of it is necessary in to keep a human being enslaved.

#### 2.1.2 Building a Bridge through Appropriation, Humor, and Masculinity

Likening Frederick Douglass to rappers might seem a stretch, yet the essential distinction between firsthand narration and retrospective references notwithstanding, certain narrative techniques and approaches point to continuity between the autobiographical account of the experience of enslavement and its contemporary memory in Hip Hop. For example, one could be the tone of defiance we can find in both: Douglass seemingly embraces his master’s oppressive discourse with a sense of pride, a common practice in rap performances in the framework of the adoption of a thug persona (further analyzed in 3.2.1). In his recollection of Mrs. Auld’ lessons he writes: “Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the inch, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the ell” (47), repurposing the negative connotation ascribed to slaves a few pages before (cited above in 2.1.1). As education becomes the key to freedom, he strives relentlessly to get it. Rappers describe their eager pursuit of success to overcome adversity in similar tones. They chase different currencies, but they both embrace negative portrayals with pride, leveraging them to their advantage. Another bridge is humor. Despite being *The Narrative* a brutal testimony of the horrors of slavery, Ganter pointed to Douglass’ use of

humor<sup>2</sup>, primarily in his speeches, but subtly also in some sections of the *Narrative*<sup>3</sup>. People who attended Douglass's performances reported that he made the audience laugh, by "illustrating the hypocrisy of the Christian slaveholders" and by imitating a pro-slavery minister (536). His talent is described by Ganter as "inheritance of African traditions of tricksterism and double-voiced narrative" (539). Douglass is reported to have used clever puns that might have been perceived as bad taste, which is very common in rap. An example is his comment on the plan to bring African Americans to remote locations, when he said that "Nicaragua" might become "Nigger-agua" (541). Dorinson and Boskin assert that African Americans have historically employed humor in response to oppression (542), and highlight the transgressive force of laughter, able to temporarily form bonds among people who otherwise have little in common (547). For example, among Blacks and whites of the late nineteenth century in the US, which he made laugh working with stereotypes of both. To this regard Ganter argues that "Douglass exploits the stereotype of a lazy slave [...], a technique that could backfire because it materializes the very prejudices he seeks to disarm" (537). This concept of satirical humor and self-irony is very close to how African Americans use it today, in movies, comedy, and Hip Hop. The risk highlighted by Ganter is still present, since a portion of listeners will not grasp subtle satire in contemporary irony and are instead ready to be indignant because of a simplified perception of artistic expressions, and perhaps of the world itself. Jeffries interviewed Hip Hop listeners<sup>4</sup> and highlights how the use of humor and layering of clever wordplays are recurrently regarded as essential in the making of a good rapper (124)<sup>5</sup>. Vognar further discusses the importance of humor in rap<sup>6</sup>: "Hip-hop mines the gold of Black humor traditions with the same tenacity and creativity as literature and film, using the disarming aural devices of enticing beats and rhymes to create sensations unavailable on the written page or the screen", recognizing Hip Hop's use of humor as a legacy of "hundreds of years of Black humor traditions practiced from cotton fields to street corners, from

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<sup>2</sup> Granville Ganter, "He Made Us Laugh Some!: Frederick Douglass's Humor", *African American Review*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Ganter sees some elements of wit in Douglass' fight with Covey in terms of overthrowing the readers' expectations about the relationship between slave and overseer (546). Douglass' penchant for satire is also evident in his revision of the Methodist hymn "Heavenly Union" that closes his narrative.

<sup>4</sup> Michael P. Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop*, The University of Chicago Press, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> The author also explains that "this recognition of humor within hypermacho and supposedly threatening raps is something that is often overlooked" (137).

<sup>6</sup> Chris Vognar, "This Ain't Funny So Don't You Dare Laugh", *Transition*, No. 104, 2011, pp. 102-120.

vaudeville stages to comedy clubs.” (104). In his vision Notorious B.I.G becomes someone who “[Has] got a gun, but he’s also got jokes.” (113). Another evidence of continuity is offered by Tracy Butts<sup>7</sup> as she compares the making of Black masculinity in Douglass’ narrative with contemporary Hip Hop artists such as Jay-Z, the typical self-made man who struggled himself out of harsh life circumstances, arguably as Douglass did (63). The author argues that sexist postures often assumed by rappers are also observable in Douglass’ narrative, for example in his refusal to treat extensively his wife’s role in freeing him, in order to protect his masculine image (58). Yet another bridge between two worlds that seem so far apart at first sight is built by Tibbs and Chauncey<sup>8</sup>, who deal with legal controversy involving rap lyrics used as evidence for criminal activity<sup>9</sup>, pointing out to how this aligns with a long-established trend of regulating Black speech in the American legal framework. During slavery authorities targeted and penalized slave words under laws explicitly designed to suppress Black speech. Southern colonies were concerned about potential slave revolts, leading to prosecutions just based on words, motives, and future potential actions (40). The authors assert that current hip-hop narratives are the legacy of historical plantation tales, imbuing Black speech with covert resistance against White supremacy, woven into the cultural significance of Black expressiveness (50).

### 2.1.3 Slavery in Hip Hop

Slavery has been touched on in Hip Hop in different ways and with different purposes. A common trope is the contraposition of Black artists’ wealth and power with the condition of slaves, claiming a sort of revenge. A wordplay used for this purpose is “whips and chains”, comparing the whipping of slaves and their chains, with the luxury cars (whips) and jewelry (chains) that rappers boast about<sup>10</sup>. This approach is observable in Nas’ album *Untitled*, where he represents slavery as a dark time for his community which

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<sup>7</sup> Tracy R. Butts, “‘You Shall See’: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass as a Guide for Forging Black Masculinity in Hip Hop” *The Langston Hughes Review*, Fall 2007, Vol. 21, pp. 54-67.

<sup>8</sup> Donald F. Tibbs and Shelly Chauncey, “From Slavery to Hip-Hop: Punishing Black Speech and What’s ‘Unconstitutional’ About Prosecuting Young Black Men Through Art”, *Washington University Journal of Law & Policy*, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> For more information about these legal controversies, see Erik Nielson, *Rap on Trial: Race, Lyrics, and Guilt in America*, University of Richmond, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> The metaphor has extensively been used in Hip Hop, some examples are to find in Kanye West’s “Saint Pablo”, Drake’s verse on Jack Harlow’s “Churchill Downs”, and Childish Gambino’s “Bonfire”.



was preceded and followed by wealth and power (for the hint to a glorious past he refers to African history, particularly the Egyptians, also referred to when he raps: “History don’t acknowledge us, we was scholars long before colleges”<sup>11</sup>). The line “from gold to shackles and back to gold”<sup>12</sup> resonates with Douglass’ concept of a man made a slave and then made a man again. While the lack of Black history in schools is continuously highlighted in Hip Hop<sup>13</sup>, the celebration of today’s wealth is a more sensitive theme that can have different implications. The adoption of eccentric clothing styles and iconic heavy gold chains associated with rappers from their early days, possesses a striking visual impact and a rupture function. It signifies a reclamation for a community that has, for centuries, been deprived of aesthetics and vanity. Throughout the twentieth century, Black individuals have navigated a complex path in terms of representation and self-image, negotiating the tension between drawing from their African roots and assimilating white beauty standards. The latter ignited insecurities tied to skin tones and diverse hair types. The parallel drawn between weighty gold chains and slave chains is a recurring motif as I mentioned, but also the haunting imagery of post-slavery lynching is comparable. Tupac, in an interview, when dealing with the use of the N-word, emphasized the distinction between the version of the word ending in -gger (often used derogatorily) and -gga (proudly appropriated and extensively used in Hip Hop). He succinctly illustrated this by stating: “Niggers were the ones on the rope hanging out the thing (mimicking a noose around the neck), Niggas is the ones with gold ropes hanging out in clubs”<sup>14</sup>. This underscores how eccentric ornamentation and lifestyle serve as potent tools for expressing an identity that intentionally and proudly stands in defiance of mainstream, where purchasing power overturns the perception of a vulnerable and oppressed community. Therefore, a unique dress code and style within Hip Hop serves as a valuable resource for Black identification, to such an extent that it has transcended its origins, being embraced and imitated by non-Black individuals (as I will discuss in 3.3.2), reversing the roles of trend setter and trend follower. However, the exaggerated and

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<sup>11</sup> Nas, “N.i.g.g.e.r. (The Slave And The Master)”, *Untitled*, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Nas, “You Can’t Stop Us Now”, *Untitled*, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> with Krs One being the first to take on that approach, with his songs “You Must Learn” and “Why is that?” His name, an acronym for “Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everybody” reflects his informational rap style, densely infusing verses with concepts, and urging listeners to engage in study.

<sup>14</sup> Tupac interview with Tabitha Soren, MTV, October 1995, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfb3wiaT4w&t=375s>, accessed on 7th September 2023.

eccentric celebration of wealth has also been seen as a passive coping mechanism, and as a modern-day expression of Du Boisian double consciousness, as I will analyze in 2.2.2. Jeffries<sup>4</sup> explains that rappers are often captivated by their unwavering faith in the “American Dream”, entranced by excessive materialism. He attributes this behavior to lack of access to conventional routes towards positive self-esteem, which leads to a coping mechanism, seeking self-worth and societal approval through the acquisition and possession of goods (71). The dangers of this kind of celebration of wealth as a kind of payback for slavery is explained by Kendrick Lamar in his song “Vanity Slaves”, where he argues that four hundred years of low access to resources have led to overcompensation and mistaken life goals: “if you get your first big check and you cop a chain before you buy a house you're a vanity slave”.

Another way slavery is addressed in rap lyrics is to draw parallelisms with today’s forms of oppression. Tupac tried to explain urban violence as a consequence of slavery-related trauma when he rapped: “some call me crazy but this is what you gave me, amongst the babies who raised up from the slavery”<sup>15</sup> or “If you investigate you'll find out where it's comin' from, look through our history, America's the violent one”<sup>16</sup>. The rapper Lupe Fiasco offers yet another perspective. In his song “All Black Everything” he imagines a world in which slavery never happened, thus Black and White culture flourished together. Using Reverend King’s signature phrase “I had a dream” as a narrative device, he portrays a utopian world in which W.E.B. Du Bois wrote the constitution and “Hip Hop ain't got a section called conscious”<sup>17</sup>. Further insight into slavery is delivered by Lamar in his album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. In “Complexion” he discusses the insecurities related to different skin tones in the African American community, insecurities that he relates to the Willie Lynch theory<sup>18</sup> and the internalized oppressor’s point of view. He embodies a field slave who sneaks into the house to bring a flower made of cotton to a house slave and tells her not to listen to the master when “he’s about to mention complexion”. In “King Kunta”, Lamar puts himself in the shoes of the slave Kunta Kinte from Haley’s novel

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<sup>15</sup> Tupac, “The Streetz R Deathrow”, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*, Interscope Records, 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Tupac, “Violent”, *2Pacalypse Now*, Interscope Records, 1991.

<sup>17</sup> Conscious rap addresses social and political issues, advocating for awareness, change, and critical thinking through lyrical content. In Lupe Fiasco’s ideal world there is no need for that.

<sup>18</sup> The Willie Lynch theory is a controversial historical claim about methods to control slaves using varying skin tones to create divisions among them, perpetuating control through internal conflicts.

*Roots*, exploring the perils of power in inexperienced hands, paralleling his own experience of newfound success-derived power with the slave's tale.

## **2.2. Jim Crow and the Legacy of Slavery**

In this section, I will analyze a work that emerged from the Jim Crow period and analyzed the enduring legacy that slavery left within society and individuals. I will then explore how the same issues resurface in today's African American Hip Hop cultural production.

### 2.2.1 Du Bois and Double Consciousness

*The Souls of Black Folks* emerges from the Jim Crow period and deals with issues of its time with a research oriented approach, even though Du Bois recognized how hard it was to “be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered and starved”<sup>19</sup>. The book has been defined as the “the political Bible of the negro race”<sup>20</sup> and in its fourteen chapters it features aspects of sociological, philosophical, and historical concerns, while also giving space to narrative and autobiographical sections. In the second chapter Du Bois explains the logistics of the reconstruction that was taking place. The work of the Freedman Bureau is analyzed and its failures highlighted, but the author avoids laying all the blame on it, arguing that without an organ of control the reconstruction might have gone even worse (29). He dismisses the “theory of the North” that just granting land to former slaves would solve emancipation problems (22) as naïve, and the promise of “40 acres and a mule”<sup>21</sup> as delusional (27). The “social uplifting of four million slaves”(24) was complex and couldn't be fixed with single measures. The core problem seems to lie in the deep connection that American social and work organization had with slavery, and Du Bois treats this as a problem that affects both sides, former slaves and southern farmers. Of course the latter are the main obstacle for progress, since they “had fought with desperate energy to perpetuate this slavery”<sup>22</sup> (25),

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<sup>19</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 1940, p. 603.

<sup>20</sup> William H. Ferris, *The African Abroad; or, His Evolution in Western Civilization, vol. i*, New Haven: Tuttle, Morhouse, and Taylor, 1913, 276.

<sup>21</sup> The “forty acres and a mule” promise, issued in 1865 after the Civil War, aimed to provide land to newly freed African American families for economic self-sufficiency, but was ultimately revoked by Lincoln's successor Andrew Johnson. This broken promise became a symbol of the broader struggles for civil rights and justice in the post-Civil War era.

<sup>22</sup> And “not a single Southern legislature believed free Negro labor was possible without a system of restrictions that took all its freedom away” (31).

but in his opinion also the Blacks were not ready to adapt to such a social change. The deep cause for this lies in generational trauma caused by centuries of slavery, while the direct cause is recognized in lack of higher education. The focus on industrial training suggested by Booker T. Washington is thus criticized<sup>23</sup>. The need for Black higher education in the south is further emphasized in the fifth chapter (*Of the Wings of Atlanta*). What emerges as necessary is a change of mindset on both sides. Du Bois observes how former slaves are often “careless because they have not found that it pays to be careful” and to “make the white man’s land better”, while at the same time the farmer “shows his Northern visitor the scarred and wretched land, the ruined mansions, the worn-out soil [...], and says, This is Negro freedom!”. So the author argues that “both master and man have just enough argument on their respective sides to make it difficult for them to understand each other” (106). There is no point of contact or common ground where the emotions and thoughts of different races can connect. Du Bois argues that before the war, close relationships existed between Black servants and white families, sharing homes, churches, and conversations, but such a connection vanished with the end of slavery. Far from praising racial subjugation in any sense, Du Bois is acknowledging this shift in society, complaining the sedimentation of slavery in people of both races<sup>24</sup>. The Black and the White South “both act as reciprocal cause and effect, and a change in neither alone will bring the desired effect. Both must change, or neither can improve to any great extent” (127). Du Bois portrays a people who have assimilated within themselves the atrocities to which they have been subjected, and who struggle to identify with anything other than the violence they have suffered. Double consciousness, “this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others” (8) is further burdened by “The red stain of bastardy, which two centuries of systematic legal defilement of Negro women had stamped upon his race”. What he depicts is a poisoned man, who finds himself crying Amen to prejudice justified as “natural defence of culture against barbarism, [...] 'higher' against the 'lower' races”(12).

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<sup>23</sup> “but if that reconciliation [between the North and the South] is to be marked by the industrial slavery and civic death of those same Black men, with permanent legislation into a position of inferiority, then those Black men, if they are really men, are called upon by every consideration of patriotism and loyalty to oppose such a course by all civilized methods, even though such opposition involves disagreement with Mr. Booker T. Washington.” Chapter 3, “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others”, 42.

<sup>24</sup> This sedimentation of slavery institution in the minds of the South, and the economic dependence that the society developed on it, is what led to further work exploitation and new forms of subjugation as I explained in 1.1.2.

In the sixth chapter Du Bois points to the fact that Blacks are terribly aware of the inherent injustice of their condition, but their counter-cries to white accusations, despite conveying “burning truth”, lack in “formal logic”. For example, “if in just fury you accuse their vagabonds of violating women, they also in fury quite as just may reply: The wrong which your gentlemen have done against helpless Black women [...] is written on the foreheads of two millions of mulattoes, and written in ineffaceable blood”. Despite defending their positions, the author “will not say such arguments are wholly justified” (75), and thus observes a lack of ability to articulate them for the purpose of a constructive dialogue. Building on this, he reiterates the need for higher education, he wants his people to study and understand their history, going beyond their individual experience and building a common conscience in which they can identify<sup>25</sup>, otherwise they will merely act looking for vengeance. In this regard, Du Bois believes that the problem in dealing with the organization of the post-slavery state will be “how best to keep these millions from brooding over the wrongs of the past and the difficulties of the present, so that all their energies may be bent toward a cheerful striving and co-operation with their white neighbors toward a larger, juster, and fuller future” (75). In other words, he wants the acknowledgment of racial injustices to be canalized towards constructive aims.

What makes this such a powerful work is the fact that, despite speaking for its people, it holds the ability to analyze and, if necessary, criticize some of their approaches. *The Souls of Black Folks* is able to avoid becoming a fundamentalistic work, while still maintaining a strong political character. In fact Du Bois contends that Blacks required genuine leadership, coming from well-intentioned whites for positive social uplift. However, he asserts the opposite occurred, with the uneducated, deeply racist southern whites controlling Blacks in the southern states (120).

### 2.2.2 Double Consciousness in Hip Hop

Double consciousness emerges in Hip Hop in two different forms. The first one is through the taking on of a thug persona as a coping mechanism, absorbing white hatred and

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<sup>25</sup>As he explains in the first chapter, in the attempt “to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (9), the Black man has faced innumerable struggles to discover “the ideal of book-learning, the curiosity, born of compulsory ignorance, to know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man”, and obtain “self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect” by seeing oneself for the first time “darkly as through a veil” (11). This tortuous path of the Black man towards the forbidden knowledge is what has been observed in the previous subchapter with the case of Douglass.

claiming negative connotations as “culture”. This tension is depicted in Kendrick Lamar’s second album *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*, which narrates the life of a young boy growing up in Compton<sup>26</sup>, and has been defined an autoethnographic work<sup>27</sup>. Lamar stands out by transcending the figure of the stereotypical rapper; despite his roots in Hip Hop culture, he is able to narrate rap’s essence and critique its sometimes whimsical and hypocrite stances. In this sense his posture towards the Black community mirrors Du Bois’ as I described it. Another form taken by double consciousness in rap is related to consumerism and in this case the absorbed ideal is the American Dream. I have already mentioned the celebration of wealth within rap performances. The conflict that emerges in Kanye West’s first album *College Dropout* between consumerism and the search for a truer self has been defined as “a crystal-clear illustration of Du Boisian double consciousness, as the American Dream”<sup>28</sup>. The line “They made us hate ourselves and love their wealth” is a brilliant elucidation of this point of view<sup>29</sup>. Lamar elaborates the theme in his third studio album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. The rapper skillfully weaves a dense web of double entendre, merging individual and collective experiences<sup>30</sup>. He recounts the perilous impact of success, wealth, and idolization on Black artists originating from neglected environments. He addresses the phenomenon of African American artists exploited by the record industry, accused to leverage Blacks’ internal drive for the wealth denied within their

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<sup>26</sup> The album *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* vividly conveys the feeling that in contexts like Compton, a specific lifestyle and mindset seem like the sole option, creating a pervasive sense of resignation and entrapment, highlighting both internal and external conflicts. “The Art of Peer Pressure” deals with the impact of social dynamics that drive to the adoption of a “thug” identity. “Black Boy Fly” narrates two success stories, a rapper and a basketball player who were able to “fly” out of Compton. By doing that Lamar also ironizes on the stereotypes of African Americans whose only chance to access a better life is through sports and music: “The only way out the ghetto you know the stereotype, shooting hoops or live on the stereo like top 40, and shortly, I got discouraged like every time I walked to the corner, had them guns bursting”.

<sup>27</sup> James B Haile, “*Good Kid, m.A.A.d City*: Kendrick Lamar’s Autoethnographic Method.” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 32, no. 3 (2018): 488–98.

<sup>28</sup> George Ciccariello-Maher, “A Critique of Du Boisian Reason: Kanye West and the Fruitfulness of Double-Consciousness.” *Journal of Black Studies* 39, no. 3 (2009): 371–401.

<sup>29</sup> Kanye West, “All Falls Down”, *The College Dropout*, 2004. The song also contains the following lines: “we shine because they hate us, floss 'cause they degrade us: we tryin to buy back our 40 acres, and for that paper, look how low we a’stoop even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coop”, where coop has a double meaning, referring to the enclosure and to a coupe car.

<sup>30</sup> The same technique is employed in his latest album *Mr. Morale & the Big Steppers*, (2022). However, this time he delves deeper into the psychological realm, dissecting individual familial issues that merge with a broader framework of generational traumas of his community. The topic of sexual violence against Black women leaving scars for generations articulated by Du Bois (as I mentioned in 2.2.1) is vividly palpable in the song “Mother I Sober”, where traumas are confronted and excavated, akin to a psychoanalytical session. The realization is that these traumas are responsible for the adoption of thug personas and misogynic postures as coping mechanisms.

upbringing (further analyzed in 3.3.1). The temptation is personified by the character of Lucy, whose voice comes up in different songs and offers materialistic goods to the rapper. The concept of “40 acres and a mule” is also employed to mock the concessions and promises from the white Establishment<sup>31</sup>. The tempter knows that the rapper is not used to luxury and it can therefore have the effect of dulling his social anger. In Lamar’s vision this would lead to the silencing of his voice as an African American influential figure. This would also take place within the rapper’s inability to handle a big amount of money, as expressed in “Wesley’s Theory”, the first song of the album. Lucy keeps pushing the rapper to buy objects, praising him and telling him how he deserves them, but then adds that he “ain’t passed economics in school” and that eventually he will “Wesley Snipe your ass before 35”, referring to the actor's legal troubles related to tax evasion, and 35 referring to the minimal age to run for president, meaning that he will get himself in trouble nullifying his public or political power<sup>32</sup>.

A third layer of meaning emerges when the critique extends to the Black community itself, for internalizing and perpetuating racial animosity. Lamar’s approach parallels Du Bois’s in trying to portray the Black community’s essence of his time. This lies in his dual role as a spokesperson for their struggles<sup>33</sup>, and a critic of misguided approaches. Lamar’s portrays a Black individual who internalizes stereotypes, at times embodying racial caricatures. Even in powerful positions, inexperience hinders Blacks’ effectiveness in societal roles. In “Institutionalized” he recounts taking a friend to a music awards event. Amid affluence, the friend’s unease prompts an attempt at jewelry theft. Snoop Dogg’s bridge encapsulates this experience: “you can take the boy out of the hood, but you can’t take the hood out the homie”. The strongest song on the album is probably “The Blacker the Berry”. The initial verse unveils the theme of a complex dual identity, straddling between being Black and American. By skillfully manipulating the stereotypes affixed to African Americans, the artist employs an incensed tone to speak to the very white establishment that perpetuates these stereotypes. The theme of Blacks’ consciousness

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<sup>31</sup> “What you want you, a house? You, a car? Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar? Anything, see my name is Lucy, I’m your dog, motherfucker you can live at the mall.” (“Alright”, *To Pimp a Butterfly*).

<sup>32</sup> With the wordplay on the verb “sniping”, meaning that they will “shoot you” down. The concept of Black figures being nullified or depoliticized when reaching a certain age is recurring through the album, and echoes Tupac’s ideas.

<sup>33</sup> The song “Alright” of this album has become one of the anthems for the Black Lives Matter movement. To this regard see Chanté Joseph, “YG, Che Lingo, Kendrick Lamar: the protest songs of Black Lives Matter 2020”, *The Guardian*, 10 Jun 2020.

being influenced by those stereotypes emerges in lines like: “you vandalize my perception”. In the second verse he directs his rage towards modern day institutionalized racism addressing police brutality and mass incarceration. From the third verse, one starts feeling that there is something more; Lamar's references to the social injustices endured by Black individuals start to carry a potential dual significance. This duality culminates at the end of the verse when, after a resounding buildup where he lists typical things associated with Blackness, he reveals the hypocrisy of Black on Black crime and self-hatred: “So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin<sup>34</sup> was in the street, when gang-banging make me kill a nigga Blacker than me? Hypocrite!”. On a second listening, the significance behind the line “I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2015”, which introduces each of the three verses, becomes clear. In the third verse Lamar skillfully intertwines the lines about self-hatred with those of white racism, merging the two notions. The effect produced is that one can hardly tell which of the two notions are referred to since many lines work on both levels. This fusion intricately reflects the interweaving dynamics of these two notions within society itself. The initially obscured self-hatred aspect emerges as a revelation, cleverly illuminating Blacks taking on white hatred. Using this technique, Lamar is able to convey this sense of absorbed hatred giving his perspective on contemporary double consciousness.

### **2.3. Mass Incarceration in Hip Hop**

The criminalization of minorities, their incarceration, and subsequent social exclusion upon their release emerge in Hip Hop in two different ways. The first occurs when rappers address the social phenomenon and try to implement an analysis of it, without necessarily exposing their own experiences, composing a social critique that can be subtle or explicit. This approach is commonly termed conscious rap<sup>35</sup>, encompassing artists like J. Cole, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Immortal Technique, and Common, whose song “Letter to the Free”<sup>36</sup> addresses the themes of mass incarceration in depth, with a calm and explanatory use of the voice. The song explicitly discusses the “New Jim Crow” and draws a

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<sup>34</sup> Trayvon Martin was an unarmed African American teenager who was fatally shot in 2012 by a neighborhood watch volunteer, igniting national discussions on racial profiling, self-defense laws, and justice.

<sup>35</sup> Hip Hop’s division into subgenres is not unanimously accepted and the majority of artists engage in different styles, those examples are therefore just approximative and not definite divisions.

<sup>36</sup> The song was crafted for DuVernay's film “13th” reflecting its theme on the Thirteenth Amendment’s paradox, which banned slavery but permitted it as punishment.



comparison between the hate speeches and racist tendencies in contemporary (2016) political discourse with the Reagan era. It uses the wordplay “Shot me with your ray-gun [spelled as to sound like “Reagan”] and now you want to trump me” to express the concerns among minorities regarding Trump's 2016 election and his “Make America Great Again” slogan, which prompts the question “Great for who?”. A second approach occurs when rappers narrate their own or their friends’ individual experiences with the law, moving closer to Gangsta rap and storytelling rap. The two approaches are often overlapping, but it’s still worth separating them because of the differences in terms of intention, final product, and reaction/perception. This approach has often degenerated in a mere celebration of illegality, where videos and lyrics serve as entertainment that evoke the allure of crime, akin to how a film like *The Godfather* works. Alexander<sup>37</sup> considers this manifestation a modern minstrel show, where Black youth “put on a show [...] that romanticizes and glorifies their criminalization” and display racial stereotypes for the entertainment of whites<sup>38</sup>. In many cases this seems appropriate: once the thuggish rapper had become a commodity and the consumers wanted to see that, record companies constructed a significant roster of rappers to fulfill the public demand by replicating whatever was the trend of the moment. This led to a saturation of the genre’s musical landscape, diluting the original messages and intentions in a sea of marketability, causing an understandable bias in those who first came into contact with the genre through those oversimplified and superficial expressions of rap. Nonetheless, upon a more attentive analysis, the life narration of communities facing mass incarceration offered by many artists, although obviously not akin to formal social research or scholarly analysis, possesses inherent value. They offer a glimpse into marginalized suburban realms, often sidelined in mainstream discourse. The very controversy these expressions elicit can serve as a catalyst for dialogues about matters that might remain obscured otherwise. Therefore Alexander, despite offering a brilliant social and historical analysis of mass incarceration, fails to see the possible countercultural work of rappers dealing with thug life. Tupac for example explained frequently that his raw narrative of inner-city violence could not be

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<sup>37</sup> Already mentioned in the first chapter, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 2010.

<sup>38</sup> *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 2010, “Chapter 4 – The Cruel Hand”, subchapter “The Minstrel Show”.

sugarcoated because the purpose was precisely to show the worst possible, so as to provoke a sense of unease and urgency, and possibly spark feelings of need for change<sup>39</sup>. His story is deeply intertwined with mass incarceration. Afeni Shakur was a section leader of the Black Panthers<sup>40</sup> and she was in jail when pregnant with the kid she will name after Tupac Amaru, the last emperor of the Inca people who resisted Spanish colonial domination<sup>41</sup>. Steeped in resistance and Black power ideals from youth, Shakur channeled his fury in his songs, addressing racial profiling, police brutality, and mass incarceration. He did that combining the aforementioned analytic and autobiographic approaches. This stance is particularly evident in the early Tupac, before the 1994 shooting incident in NY at Notorious B.I.G.'s studio. This event triggered Tupac's paranoia, suspecting a setup by his friend, fueling the infamous East-West coast feud that culminated in their unsolved murders. Tupac's thug persona has been explained with the repression of his sensitivity and dramatic/artistic inclination, due to his challenging upbringing in poverty, as a way to "fit in" in the crime-ridden neighborhoods, with negative paternal influences<sup>42</sup>. Post-1994, his music turned more aggressive and his transformation into the thug he's most known for was complete. Many felt that the compassionate artist who wrote songs like "Brenda's Got a Baby" and "Keep Ya Head Up" died in that 1994 shooting, not in the 1996 one. Mass incarceration underlays as a theme in his whole debut album *2Pacalypse Now*. In "Trapped" the sense of captivity applies both to actual incarceration and to urban segregation in problematic neighborhoods. Resignation toward the possibility of improving living conditions for poor communities is discernible: "they got me trapped in this prison of seclusion, happiness living on the streets is a delusion". The video shows the rapper being arrested and eventually incarcerated, and the lyrics are delivered from the penitentiary halls and through the prison phone booth. In "Words of Wisdom" the

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<sup>39</sup> He said in an MTV interview in 1994 that he, as an artist, does not know how to change the conditions of his community, recognizing that his job is to show the worst of it. "Spark the mind" of someone who will change the world is rather recognized as his job as an artist.

<sup>40</sup> She was part of "The Panther 21", a group of twenty-one Black Panthers charged with allegations of conspiring to carry out coordinated bombings targeting police stations in New York City during 1969. In May 1971, they were all acquitted.

<sup>41</sup> see Mcquillar, Johnson, *Tupac Shakur The Life and Times of an American Icon*, 2010

<sup>42</sup> The adoption of a thug persona to compensate for the absence of a paternal figure in the Black community, especially among Hip Hop artists, is also explored by Kendrick Lamar in his song "Father Time" The song delves into the perpetuation of toxic masculinity across generations. "My niggas ain't got no daddy, grow up overcompensatin', learn shit 'bout bein' a man and disguise it as bein' gangsta." This phenomenon is further examined by Michael P. Jeffries in *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop*.

rapper depicts a role switch by becoming the judge as he puts the U.S. state on trial for crimes committed against African Americans throughout history: “I charge you with the crime of rape, murder, and assault, for suppressing and punishing my people, [...] for robbing me of my history, [...] false imprisonment for keeping me trapped in the projects, and the jury finds you guilty on all accounts”, he also takes on the role of the prosecutor as he begins the second verse which is introduced by: “Prosecutor, do you have any more evidence?”. Another example of a rapper repeatedly addressing mass incarceration is Krs One, with songs like “Who Protects us from You”, “R.E.A.L.I.T.Y.”, and “Sound of da Police”. In the latter the rapper builds a dense web of similarities, particularly in the second verse, which compares policing with the overseers’ control over slaves, bending the pronunciation of the words “overseer” and “officer” until they become homophones. As I mentioned, the perspective of rappers on societal matters cannot be equated with professionals or structured activities. Their role doesn’t of course encompass actively engaging in shaping society, although instances of such ideas arose. In a 1987 panel at Howard University, Bill Stephney, Amiri Baraka, and others, discussed holding rappers to revolutionary leadership standards<sup>43</sup>. Stephney expressed his skepticism: “Now that our community leaders cannot take up their responsibility, you’re gonna leave it up to an eighteen-year-old kid who has mad flow? [just because he can rap]”. It’s always good to remember that despite the potential for conveying political messages, we are still talking about entertainers. However, when dealing with mass incarceration, Hip Hop’s significance lies in the fact that it comes from those directly affected by its consequences. The comparison is deliberately hyperbolic, but war diaries captivate not due to expert historical authorship, but due to their being firsthand accounts, offering a window into individual life experiences that remain otherwise inaccessible, weaving together a collective tapestry of history. The importance of such testimony is also argued by Tibbs: “Our failure to recognize, and our attempted censoring of, the young Black men of Hip Hop, who are the front-line victims of the drug war, left them unprotected from the vice-grip of the Prison Industrial Complex, and left us uninformed about the brewing national crisis associated with “race-less” jurisprudence by the Supreme Court of the United States”, adding that “we have to allow rap music the intellectual space to be brave, critical,

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<sup>43</sup> An argument was that rappers had the ability to “move the media like no one since the Panthers”, as argued by Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 2005, p. 269.

and brutally honest, and to say the things that legal scholars, sometimes for various reasons, cannot.”<sup>44</sup>

## **2.4 Protest in Hip Hop Videos**

The aforementioned Common’s song “Letter To The Free” is complemented by its music video. Set within a prison, opened doors symbolize the aspiration for freedom. The video employs shadows and stark contrasts, and, as a Media Studies article explicates, the deliberate choice of half-concealing the artists in chiaroscuro lighting serves to symbolize a veiling of their individual identities, resonating with Du Boisian concepts, and potentially underscoring the importance of a collective identity over individualism<sup>45</sup>. A symbolic Black box, characterized by Common as representing the boundless nature of Blackness, materializes both within prison confines and amid fields, signifying the perpetuity of the Black experience and its ongoing struggle against oppression across various eras. The video enhances the song’s themes, providing a cohesive and thought-provoking audiovisual experience. Another example of Black protest in a music video, but with more controversy surrounding it, emerged in 2020. Amidst the social unrest sparked by the killing of George Floyd, the rapper Dababy released a remix of his song “Rockstar”, titled “BLM version”. The new version accompanied an additional verse that resonated with the protests, and a new video, commencing with a close-up shot of Dababy donning a white tank top. As the camera pulls back, it reveals a Black-trousered knee on his head, clearly referring to the infamous Floyd footage. The visual narrative intensifies through cuts depicting protests, culminating in a poignant moment of silence at the end of the verse. The only difference between Dababy’s portrayal and Floyd lies in the former’s ostentatious gold chain. The deliverance of the verse in the suffocating position where Floyd’s agonizing words “I can’t breathe” were uttered, might be seen as a metaphor of wealth and success being the only thing affording him a voice and a degree of immunity from racialized police violence. This is further underscored by his verse concluding with the cut-off line connecting to the hook “police can't catch me this a ...” (silence, a passage into the sky accompanied by birdsong. This sequence may symbolize

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<sup>44</sup> Donald F. Tibbs, “Hip Hop and the New Jim Crow: Rap Music’s Insight on Mass Incarceration”, *University of Maryland Law Journal of Race, Religion, Gender and Class*, Volume 15, Issue 2, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> “Letter to the Free, A detailed guide to the music video, including semiotic analysis, context, form and representation”, Media Studies, <https://media-studies.com/letter-to-the-free/>, accessed on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2023.

Floyd's passing, and the subsequent performance of the hook the survival of the rapper) “Brand new Lamborghini fuck a cop car”, emblematic of his success, which protects him. Following the skyward cut, Dababy transforms from embodying Floyd to performing the hook on a stage. This shift further represents his personal survival in the face of these issues due to his elevated status as an artist. Reactions to the performance have been mixed. Shamira Ibrahim<sup>46</sup>, for example, criticized DaBaby for blending his legal problems with Floyd's tragedy in a song meant for boasting about wealth, deeming it distasteful, and accusing him of opportunism for exploiting the BLM movement's momentum.

Someone who, on the other hand, was chosen by the movement as a voice<sup>47</sup>, delivers instead an invitation to deal with different perspectives and avoid cultural integralism. In “The Heart Part 5” Lamar critiques the unreserved embrace of Black culture, highlighting the paradoxical acceptance and celebration of violence and animosity within his community. Strategically blending lyrics and visuals, he utilizes deepfake technology to embody renowned African American figures, delivering lines from their perspectives. The first verse presents Kendrick in his own identity, introducing and questioning the concept of “culture”. Subsequently, he morphs into O.J. Simpson, with Jay-Z's lines from “Izzo (H.O.V.A.)” intertwining<sup>48</sup>. Transitioning to Kanye West's appearance, he raps about a bipolar friend and manipulative opportunists. Jussie Smollett's face emerges<sup>49</sup>, then he embodies Will Smith's perspective, rapping “hurt people hurt more people, fuck calling it culture” resonating with the backlash faced by the actor for slapping the comedian Chris Rock at the Oscar ceremony. From Kobe's viewpoint, Kendrick conveys personal growth, dedication and sacrifice. In closure, he channels Nipsey Hussle<sup>50</sup>. Central to these portrayals is “the culture” a theme woven through influential Black

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<sup>46</sup> Shamira Ibrahim, “DaBaby Jumps On Black Lives Matter Bandwagon With 'Rockstar (BLM Remix)’”, *NPR*, June, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Despite being criticized for not engaging on social media during the aforementioned 2020 protests, photos surfaced of him at a march, with his face covered. In his latest album he dissects his role as a cultural spokesperson, particularly in “Savior”, where he keeps repeating “I am not your savior” and addressing the hypocrisy of some of the protesters: “Even Blacked out screen and called it solidarity, meditating in silence, made you wanna tell on me” and “One protest for you, 365 for me”.

<sup>48</sup> Also alluding to Jay-Z's song “The Story of O.J.” which ironizes on the tendency among Black celebrities to distance themselves from their racial identity to avoid polarization. “O.J. like: I'm not Black, I'm O.J.”

<sup>49</sup> An actor who faced a scandal in 2019 for staging a fake racist/homophobic attack on himself for attention.

<sup>50</sup> Nipsey Hussle, rapper and community activist, was fatally shot in 2019. Known for uplifting his neighborhood, his death was a loss felt deeply in both music and social spheres.

figures, often as a justification for polarizing actions. The opening title card “I am. All of us” underscores the concept of fragmented viewpoints within a collective identity. The video employs a minimalist aesthetic, focusing on Kendrick’s visage and his message. With a zoomed-in frame, the backdrop emphasizes his words and faces, accentuating the song’s stripped-down ambiance.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I delved into the portrayal of slavery in Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative*, examining its impact on both slaves and masters. I draw parallels between Douglass’ strategies in confronting oppression and the modern expression of African Americans in Hip Hop. The common threads include reclaiming negative stereotypes, use of humor, and the making of Black masculinity. I then explored how the theme of slavery is addressed in Hip Hop with different approaches, such as claiming a payback and comparing it with contemporary forms of oppression.

I proceed chronologically, delving into W.E.B. Du Bois’ pivotal work *The Souls of Black Folk* which emerged during the Jim Crow era. I focused on the concept of double consciousness, where individuals see themselves through the eyes of others, internalizing the oppressor's perspective. I examined how this concept persists in contemporary Black culture, particularly in the lyrics and personas of rappers. I recognized Double consciousness in two aspects of Hip Hop representation: the ostentatious celebration of wealth and the adoption of a thug persona.

Shifting to modern racial oppression in the form of mass incarceration, I analyzed its portrayal in Hip Hop, finding two different approaches: societal analysis and narration of personal experiences, highlighting the disparities between the two. In subchapter 2.4, I dissected three Hip Hop music videos that deal with Black protest, emphasizing their different approaches and representation of Black culture.

### 3. The World's Reaction to Hip Hop

#### 3.1 The Scandalization of Explicit Lyrics

Rap performances with explicit lyrics, openly alluding to illegal, violent, and sexual acts, gained significant traction in late 80s Los Angeles. Ice-T's song "6 In The Morning" (1987) vividly recounts a police flight and participation in criminal activities. This lyrical content drew the attention of the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), an advocacy group established in 1985 by Tipper Gore, wife of the future vice-president Al Gore, in conjunction with other politicians' wives, collectively known as the "Washington Wives". Despite initially concentrating on heavy metal music, the PMRC swiftly shifted its focus to rap upon encountering Ice-T's work, deeming it their primary concern<sup>1</sup>. Before I delve into Hip Hop scandalous reactions, I will define scandalization itself.

##### 3.1.1 What Generates a Scandal?

It is interesting to ask why a scandal originates in a given society, and literary scandal research might be helpful. In literature (but the same happens for movies and music) a scandal can originate from the breaking of the horizon of expectation, when an author does something unexpected with his art, and this might lead to the establishment of new horizons of expectations. But besides the technical characteristics of a work, the society in which it originates has to be considered as a main actor in the creation of the scandal. Nearly universally, scholars studying scandals recognize that the transgression of a prevalent societal value system constitutes the core of a scandal. Therefore, a scandalization is able to highlight what the societal values of a time are, but it's important to remember that it's never the whole society that reacts. Absence of universal norm standards means scandals are contextually significant: particular communities may perceive a work as scandalous, while others do not, as there is no unanimity about what constitutes a scandal. Instead of gauging entire cultures, they highlight differences in how groups portray themselves and their society.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in the process of scandalization, a specific constellation of schematic figures appears: a trio comprising the scandal's

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<sup>1</sup> Michael P. Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip Hop*, The University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes Franzen, "Skandal Global. Ansätze zu einer vergleichenden Literaturskandalforschung", in *Globalgeschichten der deutschen Literatur*, 2022, p. 6.

provocateur, its scandalous object or statement, and the reactant audience. Neckel<sup>3</sup> draws a comparison to a theatrical production, where the involved actors assume roles as protagonists in the scandal, characterized as “heroes” or “anti-heroes”. It is stressed that a compelling scandal must feature intriguing or eccentric characters, much akin to a captivating theater performance. It is always someone’s specific choice to define something as scandalous. Thus, the creation and media diffusion of a scandal frequently serves as a communalization tactic, effectively staging the unity of a collective identity by orchestrating media-driven indignation toward a mediatic phenomenon<sup>2</sup>. When it comes to parents organization’s indignation about explicit lyrics the intentions seem clear; by positioning themselves against content that is considered violent or obscene, they highlight their purity and moral values, sometimes using their indignation as a sort of cathartic tool.

In the realm of literary studies, designating a text as a scandal rarely implies a negative assessment. Instead, it seems to serve as a hallmark of literary quality when a work includes an element of scandal<sup>4</sup>, generating discourses about societal relevant matters.

I will therefore employ those analysis tools to take a look at some scandals that emerged within the Hip Hop framework.

### 3.1.2 Scandal in Hip Hop

In contrast to the measured approach of East Coast rap figures of the late 80s, like Public Enemy’s Chuck D and Rakim, who advocated control and gradual boundary expansion to prevent excessive backlash, the emerging collective N.W.A in Los Angeles embodied a spirit of excess. Their intent was to express themselves immediately without restraint, foregoing filters in narrating their lifestyle. With their debut album *Straight Outta Compton* (1988) they completely changed the approach; the place where they were from became the center of the narration. The rawness of the lyrics was essential, and with songs like “Gangsta Gangsta” and “Fuck The Police” it wasn’t subtle anymore<sup>5</sup>. They broke the horizon of expectation of both rap listeners and non-listeners, creating a shock effect in those who heard for the first time such boldly admitted behaviors recorded and released.

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<sup>3</sup> Sighard Neckel, “Das Stellhölzchen Der Macht. Zur Soziologie Des Politischen Skandals”, *Leviathan*, vol. 14, 1986, p. 585.

<sup>4</sup> Regina Roszbach, *Der Literaturskandal*, 2020, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation*, Picador, 2005, p. 310.



With their impact and influence they established a new horizon of expectations. The success of the album brought wide attention to the phenomenon, the assistant director of the FBI office of public affairs Milt Ahlerich wrote a letter<sup>6</sup> to Priority Records, the distributor for N.W.A's music, accusing them of encouraging violence, obtaining nothing but increasing mediatic attention on the group. Recalling the three actors of scandal that I mentioned, the scandalized reaction first emerges from the "attacked" instance, the law enforcement, but the shock effect was so high that backlash also arrived from the Hip Hop and Black community. Writers and community radio hosts saw the music as both powerful and offensive. Bay Area DJs led a boycott against N.W.A in influential college radio shows, finding such a violent content in contrast with the Afrocentric values they were trying to promote<sup>7</sup>. In this context, the scandalization provides insight into the Hip Hop community of that period, which endeavored to establish itself as the representative voice of its generation. The reaction was therefore centered on the potential misrepresentation of young Blacks that could lead to regressing in terms of societal recognition and acceptance, a path that Hip Hop and Black community were often walking together. Discourses about the Compton-based group spread nationally, sparking debates on N.W.A's stance on misogyny, homophobia, and violence. In an article in *The New Republic*, David Samuel went as far as to compare the consumption of rap with a desensitization to death and murder, stating that "The values it instills find their ultimate expression in the ease with which we watch young Black men killing each other: in movies, on records, and on the streets of cities and towns across the country"<sup>8</sup>. Ice Cube, the main rapper in the group, went solo and made clear with his first album *Amerikkka's Most Wanted*, that he intended to maintain the same approach. However, It was his second album, *Death Certificate* (1991), that faced a big scandal. *Billboard* magazine editor Timothy White advocated for record-store chains to boycott the record<sup>9</sup>. Besides the usual issues that he was backlashed for, such as violence and sexism, he received accusations of antisemitism, and a big source of scandal was the song called "Black Korea". In the latter, the rapper narrates going to a Korean grocery store and reacting with violence when

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<sup>6</sup> Steve Hochman, "Compton Rappers Versus the Letter of the Law: FBI Claims Song by N.W.A Advocates Violence on Police", *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, p. 315.

<sup>8</sup> David Samuels, "The Rap on Rap, the 'Black Music' that isn't either", *The New Republic*, November 11, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, p. 334.

accused of stealing. With clear reference to Latisha Harlins<sup>10</sup>, the song (and other references in the album) fueled the ongoing tension between African Americans and Korean Americans in Los Angeles, regarding store boycotts, violence, and reciprocal accusations. Such tension would further escalate after the Rodney King trial and the L.A. Riots<sup>11</sup>. Jewish organizations urged four major retail record chains to boycott the album, labeling it a “cultural Molotov cocktail” and “a real threat”<sup>12</sup>. The Korean American Coalition hosted a press conference, joined by a diverse array of civil rights groups including African American ones: Los Angeles Urban League, and the NAACP. Guardian Angels picketed stores in New York and Los Angeles, where Korean vendors already participated in the boycott. Also in this case the first reactors that generate the scandal are within the “targeted” group, and yet again instances of Black community promptly distanced themselves from the scandalized object. This attempt of positioning oneself on the “right” side of the mediatic attention is explicative of the complexity of scandalization itself, especially when dealing with racial issues. There is no clear line that divides two groups in friction, a community is never to be considered as a whole, but rather it is a group of different individuals. This is further evident when reading what a member of the “targeted” Korean community, Dong Suh, wrote in *Asian Week*. He called to avoid censorship and stereotyping on rap, and “move toward addressing the core problem”<sup>13</sup>. The internal heterogeneity of communities is responsible for the complexity of racial tensions, rendering every simplification dangerous.

The aforementioned PMRC group eventually pressed the music industry to have the “Parental Advisory” sticker put on records with explicit lyrics, and the first album to have the black and white sticker as we know it today, was *Banned in the U.S.A.* (1990) from the rap group 2 Live Crew. However, what the group is most famous for is their first album; *Nasty as I Wanna Be*, which was declared obscene by a federal judge in Florida

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<sup>10</sup> Latasha Harlins was a 15-year-old African American girl who was fatally shot by a Korean convenience store owner in Los Angeles in 1991. Her tragic death, just two weeks before the Rodney King beating and subsequent riots, further strained racial tensions in the city and contributed to the unrest.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Shyong, “Column: What we got wrong about Black and Korean communities after the L.A. riots”, *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> The Jewish organization Simon Wiesenthal Center reacted to some reference made by Ice Cube to the Jews in the album, particularly in the song “No Vaseline” where Ice Cube disses his former group N.W.A and their Jewish manager Jerry Heller. (See Chuck Philips, “Wiesenthal Center Denounces Ice Cube’s Album: Rap: Jewish human rights group finds ‘Death Certificate’ lyrics racist and calls for retailers to stop selling record”, *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 1991.)

<sup>13</sup> Dong Suh, “The Source of Korean and African American Tensions” *Asian Week*, February 21, 1992.

in 1990, because of the sexually explicit lyrics<sup>14</sup>. When the group performed it in Broward County, they were arrested<sup>15</sup>, and a record shop owner in Fort Lauderdale was arrested for selling the tape<sup>16</sup>. The obscenity trial that followed seemed to turn into a freedom of speech negotiation, gaining national attention. The jurors were particularly impressed by the defense's expert witnesses during the trial. One of these was Henry Louis Gates Jr., then an American literature professor at Duke University, renowned for his criticism of Black art and culture and for his book *The Signifying Monkey*<sup>17</sup>. He defined the group as literary geniuses, interpreting their lyrics as a satirical take on the stereotype of hypersexualized Black men. He defended the artistic value of rap by tracing its roots to Black heritage and describing the lyrics as a type of "signifying". Gates linked this to the historical fight against Black oppression, emphasizing rapping as modern signifying. He also highlighted the album's lack of violence incitement, characterizing it as brimming with humor, joy, and exuberance, resembling a parody. In contrast to the first cases discussed, the scandalous reaction did not spread beyond the instance that generated it, given the mentioned defense in court and the popularity enjoyed by the group during the trial. The absence of violent and racially problematic positions allowed the group to maintain public appreciation. The rappers won the trial<sup>18</sup>, thus setting a new standard in terms of boundaries, permitting subsequent creators to freely produce explicit content while relying on the First Amendment.

Less than two years had passed from the 2 Live Crew victory in court and rap was again on trial. In April 1992 Ronald Ray Howard was accused of killing a police officer in Texas. His lawyer told the jury that he had been strongly influenced by the music he was listening to<sup>19</sup>, which was Tupac's album *2Pacalypse Now*, released in November 1991. Although Howard's defense was dismissed by the jury, the case garnered widespread

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<sup>14</sup> Perhaps for the first time in a record company owned by African American LukeRecords.

<sup>15</sup> Steve Hochman, "Two Members of 2 Live Crew Arrested After X-Rated Show", *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1990.

<sup>16</sup> Chuck Philips, "Man Arrested for Selling 2 Live Crew Album: The law: Florida store owner is the first to openly defy ruling that makes it illegal to sell 'obscene' records", *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 1990.

<sup>17</sup> *The Signifying Monkey: An Approach to Afro-American Literary Critique* is a literary theory book by published in 1988. It explores the folkloric roots of African American "signifying" practice and applies it to analyze interactions among texts by notable African American authors.

<sup>18</sup> Sara Rimer, "Rap Band Members Found Not Guilty In Obscenity Trial", *The New York Times*, October 21, 1990.

<sup>19</sup> Chuck Philips, "Rap Defense Doesn't Stop Death Penalty: 'The music affected me' says Ronald Ray Howard. 'That's how it was that night I shot the trooper'", *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 1993.

attention, further fueling the ongoing discourse surrounding violent lyrics in Gangsta Rap, with the vice-president Dan Quayle asking for the removal of the tape from the shelves<sup>20</sup>. The record industries were worried about costly legal battles and negative media attention. The lawyer's move was a last-ditch effort to leverage a trending issue, aiming to sway public opinion in his favor taking advantage of the rap-scandalized audience. But psychologist David Stewart deemed the environment in which Howard grew up as a crucial factor in making him a candidate for violent actions. Amid media scrutiny, this case deepened Tupac's association with controversy, unfairly linking his image to a police-murder case he was not involved with in any way. The discussion that this case should have sparked was rather that of critical media consumption, encompassing not only music but also movies, television, and news.

### **3.2 Discourses and Re-elaboration of Black Masculinity**

Discourses surrounding public Black figures' masculinity precede the advent of rap. African American artists and athletes have been observed to embrace a robust male identity, especially when dealing with performance and competition<sup>21</sup>, be that a jazz cutting contest or a playoff game. Discourses of race intertwine with gender considerations, as scholars have highlighted a cultural rearticulation of white patriarchal forms of authority within the Black community, "enveloping" them in Black vernacular<sup>22</sup>. However, the ascent of Gangsta rap intensified this character, magnifying masculine bravado into lyrical violence. It has been argued that rappers appropriate the imaginary of the dangerous Black male as it has been depicted in the media, associated with crime and poverty during the War on Drugs, "drawing on deeply felt moral panics about crime, violence, gangs, and drugs"<sup>23</sup>.

Violent, misogynistic, and homophobic postures created scandals as discussed above, but they also sparked deeper attempts of analysis around the central question "where does it come from?"

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<sup>20</sup> John Broder, "Quayle Calls for Pulling Rap Album Tied to Murder Case", *Los Angeles Times*, September 23, 1992.

<sup>21</sup> Ken McLeod, "The Construction of Masculinity in African American Music and Sports." *American Music*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2009, pp. 204–26.

<sup>22</sup> Herman Gray, "Black Masculinity and Visual Culture." *Callaloo*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1995, p. 402.

<sup>23</sup> Ivi, p. 403.

### 3.2.1 The Thug Persona, Where Does it Come From?

The thug persona in Hip Hop context has been interpreted in different ways. The first thing to keep in mind is the demand for authenticity. Since rap's early stages, real-life street-storytelling assumed a central role, prompting demand for genuine accounts from individuals embodying the narrated experiences. Street credibility emerged as pivotal, artists addressing urban life and crime were expected to live what they rapped. This created a competitive environment: who's tougher? Who's more entitled to talk about certain issues? So the boundaries were pushed further and further in a domino effect. This dynamic triggered reciprocal accusations of being "fake", with rappers dissing each other, further constructing the image of the bellicose and violent thug, an image that was promptly spread in the media and proudly appropriated together with other dominant narration in terms of stereotypical depictions, leading to a vicious cycle. It's important to keep in mind that the media-depicted violent and oversexualized Black man of the pre-civil rights period, and the representation of Blacks in the news during the War on Drug, have not only influenced white perceptions of Blacks. Also the self-perception of African American generations growing up in this environment has been exposed to such depictions, with double consciousness emerging again as a powerful analysis tool.

When considering the racial aspect, an interesting point of view is offered by Jeffries, as he compares Black masculinity with the dominant form of masculinity in society: the white straight male. His idea is that men in subordinate position adopt strategies to overcompensate for their subordination, exaggerating masculine features, often degenerating in homophobia, femininity devaluation, and heightened bravado<sup>24</sup>. However, a marked manifestation of masculinity does not necessarily convey toxic aspects, a strong character can be adopted to manifest independence and self-determination for a minority whose masculinity has been oppressed for three centuries and criminalized for one. The construction of self-worth and masculinity in the African American context is therefore a complex theme, intertwined with racial, social, mediatic, and psychological aspects. An analysis regarding the latter is offered by Antonia Randolph<sup>25</sup> as she discusses the insecurities regarding Black bodies. While white people

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<sup>24</sup> Michael P. Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip Hop*, The University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 58.

<sup>25</sup> Antonia Randolph, "'Don't Hate Me Because I'm Beautiful': Black Masculinity and Alternative Embodiment in Rap Music" *Race, Gender & Class*, vol. 13, no. 3/4, 2006, pp. 200–17.

can avoid thinking of themselves as racialized individuals, since white tends to be considered the default position of the human, Black people have never had that luxury, thus collectively developing a sense of being scrutinized and tendencies to overcompensation. Randolph discusses intersectionality as Black men benefit from male privilege while suffering from race disadvantages. This particular position seems to create the friction of exaggerated masculinity, which the author considers to be what distinguishes rap from other popular Black forms of music expressions. Another interpretation related to insecurity is offered by Tricia Rose, who holds the “ghetto badman posture” as a shell<sup>26</sup>, where the individual hides himself behind this strong character so to overcome harsh life circumstances in neglected environments, adopting an unbreakable posture.

It is therefore hard to pinpoint a single source for the emergence of the thug persona, since multiple factors coexist in different intensity in every individual case. All these reasons have laid the foundation for the emergence of the thug persona, but the commercial success of Gangsta rap in the early 90s caused many rappers to adopt it merely to fit the best-selling character standard. The tough rapper formula was now replicating itself, new rappers were not only influenced by all the aforementioned aspects, but were now reproducing the imaginary, making it even harder to analyze the deep origins of postures and behaviors. This situation was further complicated by record company manufactured characters, exploiting the selling potential of the young rebel as they did with other musical genres decades before. What can be analyzed however, is the reception and readaptation of these characters outside of the specific African American culture they emerged from, taking a look at the rest of the world’s re-elaboration of the phenomenon.

### 3.2.2 Outside Reception and Re-elaboration

When a context-specific cultural expression is exported it always runs risks of misunderstanding, simplifications, distortions. All the discourses aiming at analyzing the deep causes of rappers’ tough posture don’t reach the big public, just the final product does, the proverbial tip of the iceberg. When the phenomenon exploded all over the world

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<sup>26</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise : Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America Music/culture*, Wesleyan University Press, 1994, p. 12.

in the 90s, the Black “cool pose” described by Jeffries<sup>27</sup> was part of the package, but only a superficial level was tangible, especially to non-English-speaking countries who were not familiar with American society and its very specific racial relationships. Some early efforts to emulate were filled with confusion, depicting caricatures of Blacks and the American urban context<sup>28</sup>, but soon many were able to readapt the cultural expression of rap to their sociopolitical context, building what would be defined as “Hip Hop nation”. Morgan used Benedict Anderson’s idea of imaginary community<sup>29</sup> to describe the phenomenon, where individuals are able to feel connected through shared values and approaches<sup>30</sup>, despite geographical and socioeconomical distance. Rap became a powerful voice of resistance in many countries that struggled with freedom of speech issues. In Tunisia and Egypt for example, during the Arab Spring, this led to the arrest of Egyptian rapper El General<sup>31</sup>. Revolutionary rap flourished in Cuba, while Israel rap reflected the political complexity of the country, with Zionist, but also pro Palestine ideas infusing rap lyrics. Russian rappers have battled censorship for years. When the Ukraine invasion began in 2022, Oxxxymiron, a Russian rapper, performed in Istanbul. This event united Russians against the war and was live streamed for audiences in Russia, bypassing censorship restrictions in his home country.<sup>32</sup> Considering some of these situations, where rap gave voice to constructive social critiques, Morgan asks why Hip Hop has received such mediatic hate only in the very country that created it, while finding positive outcomes elsewhere. I would argue that other countries have had more choice, they could see an already formed movement, and take from it what they wanted, perhaps what they

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<sup>27</sup> Michael P. Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip Hop*, The University of Chicago Press, 2011, Chapter Two, “From a Cool Complex to Complex Cool”.

<sup>28</sup> “Early attempts by Japanese youth to ‘represent’ Hip Hop’s African American heritage reportedly involved intensive tanning, the use of hair chemicals to grow Afros and dreadlocks, and caricatures of hyper-stereotyped urban Black masculinity” Marcyliena Morgan, Bennett Dionne, “Hip Hop & the Global Imprint of a Black Cultural Form.” *Daedalus*, vol. 140, no. 2, 2011, pp. 180.

<sup>29</sup> Marcyliena Morgan, Bennett Dionne, “Hip Hop & the Global Imprint of a Black Cultural Form.” *Daedalus*, vol. 140, no. 2, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> The author posits that this environment can foster critical thinking among young listeners, drawing from Gramsci’s notion of “organic intellectuals”. However, it’s crucial to approach this with caution, as excessive reverence and blind faith in Hip Hop’s potential for cultural critique might perpetuate the echo chamber effect. This could result in excluding voices beyond a specific community or subculture, narrowing perspectives and stifling openness to alternative viewpoints. A critical consumption of media is again deemed as crucial.

<sup>31</sup> Andy Morgan, “From fear to fury: how the Arab world found its voice”, *The Guardian*, February 27, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Ivan Nechepurenko, “A Russian Rapper Brings His Banned Antiwar Message to Istanbul” *The New York Times*, March 17, 2022.

could better re-adapt to their environment, leaving out the rest. On the other side, in the US the phenomenon developed spontaneously within a context of racial tensions, among a misrepresented minority, with the media promptly deeming the rapper's thug persona as reflecting typical Black male behavior, while gangsta rappers described themselves as entertainers<sup>33</sup>. This further fueled racial frictions, filling the movement with highly polarizing issues, making it, as described by the above mentioned Jewish organization (see 3.1.2) a "cultural Molotov cocktail".

A core difference lies in the diverse approaches of countries with censorship and countercultures. Rappers in Arabic or Russian contexts often express a political stance characterized by rupture with hegemonic discourses, thus shared and supported by popular opinion and the media supporting the fight for freedom of speech, who see the value of powerful and unfiltered voices. On the other hand, it seems that in a country like the US, where freedom of speech is supposed to be the political foundation, this is instead repeatedly endangered. The privilege of the First Amendment is taken for granted, neglecting the need for protecting it and exercising it. Another factor for the difference in reception lies in the political and demographical subject that generates the protest expression, whether it comes from an individual who recognizes himself in his country as being part of the majority, or from a minority group, perhaps with a long-standing history of tension with the dominant culture. The examples of rap outside of the American context often differ from the original manifestation in this sense. Protest rap in the Arabic and Russian context are not coming from a minority, they often recognize themselves as part of the majority, even with a sense of patriotism, thus triggering specific political tensions rather than long-standing complex racial relationships.

However, the minority-protest rap, closer to how it originated in the US, also emerged. In France, engagement with African American culture has always existed. Furthermore, the impoverished and marginalized context of peripheral sections of large cities, such as the Banlieues of Paris, with high unemployment and crime rates, mostly populated by foreign families, mainly from former French African colonies, was well-suited for the re-

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<sup>33</sup> "While gangsta rappers played into stereotypes of criminal Black masculinity, they ultimately asserted that they were entertainers. However, the rhetoric of authenticity erased the gap between what gangsta rappers talked about versus who they were" (Antonia Randolph, "Don't Hate Me Because I'm Beautiful", p. 208.)



adaptation of the US rap tropes of housing projects, ghetto-related issues, and racial tension. In other cases rap flourished among second-generation immigrants, inheriting characteristics of the African American approach such as the reclaiming of racial words and stereotypical depictions and the tension of being in-between two worlds in terms of racial and national identity. An example are Turkish German rappers<sup>34</sup>, who have used the word “Kanake”, a German racial slur, with pride, mimicking the reappropriation of the N-word in African American Hip Hop. Their approach sparked debates about hate speech and explicit lyrics<sup>35</sup>. A similar situation is that of second-generation Moroccan rappers in Italy, who were able in the last few years to spark talk-show debates about explicit lyrics<sup>36</sup> that had already been digested and forgotten twenty years before in the US. Therefore, it seems that, when the content is coming from the minority, and the minority is already in some friction with the dominant narration, the perception tends to be negative, leading to discussions in which the artistic value is questioned. This tendency can be seen as a hegemonic one, where the power relationship between two groups is evidently unbalanced and the stronger attempts to silence the weaker.

### **3.3 With Success Comes Exploitation**

The success of a musical genre linked to a lifestyle, a way of speaking and appearing, born from an oppressed community and thus carrying feelings of social revenge, has become a magnet for artistic imitations and economic exploitation. As the allure of market potential intensified, a gold rush ensued. I will dissect two forms of exploitation, rooted in a continuum with historical African American experiences shaped by racial dynamics in the United States.

#### **3.3.1 Record Companies’ Exploitation**

Record companies’ exploitation of Black artists is a long-term issue in the US. During the early 20th century, Black musicians were frequently exploited by record companies, through unfair compensations and unauthorized imitations, taking advantage of artists’

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<sup>34</sup> Heinz Ickstadt, “Appropriating Difference: Turkish-German Rap” *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1999, pp. 571–78.

<sup>35</sup> Boris Peltonen, “Kokain an die Juden von der Börse”, *Welt*, 16 April 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Francesca Galici, “‘Ti stacco quella collana...’. I testi choc dei rapper rapinatori”, 20 January, 2022, *Il Giornale*.

limited understanding of their rights, the industry's practices, and copyright, especially in the case of rural blues artists. Little Richard<sup>37</sup> died without ever getting the royalties for his hit songs, and Eric Holt, assistant professor of music business at Belmont, finds many similarities between the situation in the 50s and today's. He underlines that the artists are "African American, poor, looking for a way out of their circumstances, and using their talent as a way out [...] That is easy to exploit: 'Let's give them a little bit, and they don't even know the value of what they're selling us for this little bit'". Vince Phillips, entertainment attorney representing Hip Hop stars, said that "If a major label knows a Black artist needs to earn money quickly, they'll use that knowledge to pressure them into signing a bad contract"<sup>38</sup>. Of course unfavorable contract agreements can affect anyone, yet Black artists in many cases face and have faced heightened vulnerability due to educational and economic gaps. Lengthy contracts laden with complex legal terms require skilled legal counsel, a resource that many aspiring Black artists lack in the early stages of their careers.

After "Rapper's Delight" the record companies' interest kept rising through the 80s, recognizing untapped potential, sparking a surge in rap crews. Hip Hop transitioned from community spaces to studios. Indie labels innovated to align rap with industry standards, figuring out "how to find, capture, package, and sell its essence like a bottle of lightning"<sup>39</sup>. With the beginning of Yo!MtvRaps in 1988 the phenomenon became national, and soon global. In 1991 a new data-tracking system called Soundscan permitted to know exactly how many copies of CDs were sold, and the debut of its derived Billboard chart in May 1991 came as a surprising revelation to the music sector. What the industry regarded as niches, including metal and rap, turned out to be the most significant trends. They figured out that those artists could generate not only hits but also synergies of products, movies, books, and videos. Moreover, the lifestyle and the image were sold to a young generation seeking to identify with this subculture, the aforementioned "Hip Hop nation", which could be milked by selling clothes, magazines, tickets and other products.

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<sup>37</sup> Carlie Porterfield, "How Little Richard Was Exploited By A Bad Record Deal And Never Fully Cashed In", *Forbes*, 9 May 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Drew Schwartz, "Black Artists Are Still Getting Ripped Off the Way Little Richard Was", *Vice*, October 21, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation*, 2007, p. 139.

“This market is dying to be marketed to”<sup>40</sup>, said David Mays, founder of *The Source* magazine.

By 1996, the majority of independent labels succumbed to the buyouts of big white-owned companies. Chang called it the “new corporate order”<sup>41</sup>; at the beginning of the new millennium five companies controlled 80% of the music industry.

In this situation of marketization, culture versus commerce emerged as a defining Hip Hop narrative, generating a “constant tension between succeeding in a commercially driven art form and retaining the oppositionality that engendered the form’s success in the first place”, says Wahl<sup>42</sup>, who also deals with the issue of white corporation exploiting music coming from minorities in order to reduce their threat, and to profit from dead artists’ material. Many rappers have spoken about record companies stealing royalties; Tyga, Megan Thee Stallion, Lil Uzi Vert are some of them. However, as the contracts are confidential, it is hard to analyze and unveil them. According to Tonya Butler, former entertainment attorney, the Black Music Action Coalition (BMAC) established in 2020 to tackle systemic disparities in the music sector, is striving to acquire numerous major-label record contracts<sup>38</sup>. BMAC has by now released two music industry report cards, for 2021 and 2022, and is willing to do so every year.<sup>43</sup>

### 3.3.2 Cultural Appropriation

Absence of copyright protection for artists during the earlier decades of the last century resulted in instances of songs being appropriated and exploited for profit. This phenomenon, within the realm of commercial competition in the United States, took on a discernible racial dimension<sup>44</sup>. This was attributable to dearth of music-industry knowledge and vulnerable negotiating position of Black artists. A telling illustration of this occurrence is the triumph of Elvis Presley, who assimilated songs and aesthetics from Black artists. While the significant flaws in copyright laws have been solved thanks to

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<sup>40</sup> Ivi, “Vibe and the Triumph of the Urban”, p. 406.

<sup>41</sup> Ivi, p. 424.

<sup>42</sup> Greg Wahl, “‘I Fought the Law (And I Cold Won!)’: Hip Hop in the Mainstream” *College Literature*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1999, p. 109.

<sup>43</sup> BMAC Coalition website: <https://www.bmacoalition.org/musicindustryreports>, accessed on September 9, 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Springer, “Folklore, Commercialism and Exploitation: Copyright in the Blues.” *Popular Music*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2007, pp. 33–45.

the efforts of various campaigns and organizations<sup>45</sup>, the appropriation of Black culture remains a topic of debate, being language one of the main areas in which it occurs. McWorther deals with African American Vernacular English (AAVE), also defined “Black English”, in his book *Talking Black*. He explains how in the majority of cases where a non-standard version of a language exists, it is treated as merely a variety, but for Black English there has always been a stigma, as it has always been perceived as a “degradation of the standard form, rather than simply something different”<sup>46</sup>. It is therefore not a surprise that Black people might take offense when non-Black individuals appropriate it. This reaction stems from the historical irony wherein Blacks were ridiculed for using it, only to see it now deemed “cool” by those who once scorned it, revealing a striking hypocrisy. Despite Hip Hop being a subculture that was never exclusively confined to Black expression, Cutler asserts that “the urban African American experience is central to its message”<sup>47</sup>. The author further elaborates that many marginalized youths globally, facing challenges of ethnicity or class, adopted the metaphor of the Black struggle within the United States as a framework for their own resistance against racism and authoritarianism, as I discussed in the section 3.2.2. Instances of white artists trying to emulate the “original” experience have always existed, both as individual character decision, and as record companies built characters. Cutler conducted interviews with white Hip Hop enthusiasts and identified a notable incorporation of AAVE within their language use. When questioned about the concept of “keeping it real”, a phrase commonly associated with rap culture, certain respondents exhibited apparent contradictions. While asserting that authenticity and staying true to oneself were core ideals, they were deliberately crossing ethnolinguistic boundaries. This paradox was navigated through the employment of fractal recursivity, a linguistic maneuver wherein they positioned themselves in contrast to other white individuals on socioeconomic grounds. Furthermore, they felt legitimated in utilizing Black English, recognizing it as part of what the author defines Hip Hop speech style (HHSS).

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<sup>45</sup> Ivi, pp. 42,43.

<sup>46</sup> John Mcworther, *Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths About America's Lingua Franca*, Bellevue Literary Press, 2017, Introduction, p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Cecilia Cutler, “‘Keepin’ It Real’: White Hip Hoppers’ Discourses of Language, Race, and Authenticity.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2003, p. 213.

Due to limited actual interactions with Black communities, many white fans shape their perception of Blackness through rap consumption, and thus associate it with street culture. By idolizing rap characters, they seek to embody what emerges in Hip Hop as the essence of the street, not just as a physical space, but as a realm of “creativity, culture, cognition, and consciousness”<sup>48</sup>. The facet of white privilege is observable as individuals adopt this aesthetics by code/style-switching, personifying their idea of Blackness in recording studios, music videos, and social media, while maintaining the possibility to switch back to white as they wish. It emerges that while whites can put on a Black mask<sup>49</sup> at will, Blacks cannot and are trapped in a racial position, resulting in the latter’s resentment at the appropriation of a perceived “coolness” with the privilege to evade the associated struggles. The white rapper Vanilla Ice for example, a “creation of record-industry moguls”<sup>50</sup>, has been criticized for faking his upbringing in the ghetto. On the other hand, Eminem grew up in a poor neighborhood in Detroit and formed himself musically within the Black environment and was eventually discovered and promoted by Dr. Dre (former N.W.A producer/rapper, one of the pioneers of Gangsta Rap). He was thus accepted and deemed authentic in the context of Hip Hop. This highlights the fact that race is not always the decisive factor.

However, discourses around Black cultural appropriation are not limited to language, the word “Blackfishing” has emerged lately as a definition of non-Black influencers and public figures changing their looks to appear Black. The phenomenon has been observed<sup>51</sup>, for example, in the music video for the song “Can’t Hold Us Down”, from Christina Aguilera and Lil Kim. It seems that the latter, a Black rapper, is vividly embodying and representing Blackness, while the former is able to switch and fit in both shoes due to her whiteness. Another examined case is Arianna Grande, who gained popularity as a white actress but moved towards R&B and Hip Hop sounds as she engaged in musical career. Cherid highlights Grande’s lyrics and depiction in her video “7 Rings”, arguing that “she chooses what part of Blackness to take, and she takes the part that make

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<sup>48</sup> Ivi, p. 218.

<sup>49</sup> Reminiscent of minstrel show’s Blackface, where the idea of Blackness was personified for entertainment, and the abstractedness of such idea is highlighted by the fact that even Black people acting had to paint their face. They had to adapt to the white idea of Blackness.

<sup>50</sup> Cutler, p. 219.

<sup>51</sup> Maha Ikram Cherid’, “‘Ain’t Got Enough Money to Pay Me Respect’: Blackfishing, Cultural Appropriation, and the Commodification of Blackness”, *SAGE Publications*, 2021.

her money”, adding that those artists “benefit from Blackness without ever having to give up the privilege of being White”<sup>52</sup>. Other public figures accused of Blackfishing are Iggy Azalea, with her extensive use of AAVE, and the Kardashians, with their image, the use of fashion styles, make up, and tanning clearly exploiting “Black coolness”<sup>53</sup>.

Black English, together with street slang, was undoubtedly popularized by the success of Hip Hop<sup>54</sup>. Some typical features of AAVE are multiple negation with the use of “ain’t”, habitual be, deletion of the auxiliary and the copula, and deletion of morphemes such as the third person singular -s. Some aspects of Black English have influenced the way of speaking of many people, particularly among younger generations, an article on *The Washington Post*<sup>55</sup> analyzes how AAVE has been mistakenly conflated with “Internet Slang”, as many people encountered it on social media for the first time, ignoring its ethnic-specific origin. Content creators speak it as a form of entertainment, “giving them a Black caricature in a way, kind of like a minstrel show”, at the same time “Black people are denigrated and told they’re speaking improperly when using it”.

While the fusion of cultural influences is intrinsic and productive, especially evident in Hip Hop’s adaptation of already-existing music and mainstream elements<sup>56</sup>, one needs to consider the complex racial dynamics within the US, when dealing with exploitation. An oppressed minority’s inventive remolding of mainstream culture (much of which had by the way roots in Black music genres like blues and soul) to craft a novel self-expression, is not comparable to the recycling of Black culture, often without a genuine grasp of its historical underpinnings, by white entertainers who are “profiting off it without having to deal with the legacies of racist segregation, redlining, overpolicing, and disinvestment in the same ways Black people do”<sup>57</sup>. This discourse doesn’t aim at denouncing white

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<sup>52</sup> Ivi, p. 363.

<sup>53</sup> Priya Elan, “Blackfishing: ‘Black is cool, unless you’re actually Black’”, *The Guardian*, April 14, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Besides entire discographies filled with it, one single quite explicative example song is Big L’s “Ebonics” (1998), where he dissects some of the most popularized street slang words used in Hip Hop.

<sup>55</sup> Samantha Chery, “Black English is being misidentified as Gen Z lingo, speakers say”, *The Washington Post*, August 17, 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Stuart Hall and T. Jefferson described the phenomenon of the subculture analyzing the punk movement in Post-war Britain, highlighting how they build their styles by drawing on the culture industry, and on different symbolic reservoirs, selecting elements from the dominant or parental culture and combining them to create their own. Stuart Hall, T. Jefferson, *Resistance Through Rituals, Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. London, Harper Collins Academic. 1976.

<sup>57</sup> Sydnee Thompson, “So Much Modern Slang Is AAVE. Here’s How Language Appropriation Erases The Influence Of Black Culture”, *Buzzfeednews*, September 7, 2021.

individuals for engaging with Black culture, as cultural exchanges are fundamental for transcending racial barriers. Instead, it extends an invitation to shoulder the responsibility of navigating complex matters with care. The idea that a privileged group is inherently entitled to appropriate aspects from an historically subdued group's culture (especially given the backdrop of recent historical exploitation that has delineated the dynamics between these groups), is sure to evoke negative resonances reminiscent of colonization, thereby igniting debates. The absence of such reactions should rather raise concerns, reflecting a lack of historical awareness. Yet, it remains crucial to meticulously analyze each scenario, for any form of oversimplification poses the risk of distorting the core issue. Hence, the inclination to over-label matters as offensive, devoid of thorough analysis, blindly following "wokeness" ideologies (which is by the way another term derived from AAVE), is a reductive approach and a simplification of intricate concerns.





## Conclusion

In this study, I have examined the cultural expressions of the African American community across distinct historical epochs, with a particular emphasis on the prominent theme of protest within their works. I have defined the environment in which Black writers lived and the obstacles they faced throughout different periods. I examined how they depicted their plight and grappled with the internal tension of identifying with a nation that had forcefully displaced them, since their very presence in the United States stands as a testimony of historical oppression and power dynamics.

I chronologically followed the history of relationships between White and Black America, analyzing the differences between the diverse periods, while highlighting the elements of continuity. I kept the focus on firsthand accounts, on the cultural production of African Americans, trying to understand their point of view and how they narrate and describe their experience in the country.

Many scholars have highlighted the continuity that exists between historical forms of racial oppression in the US and today's systemic racism, exemplified in mass incarceration and the subsequent disenfranchisement of minorities. I therefore applied that sociological/historical continuity to the cultural/literary context, thereby building a bridge between protest writing in African American literature and in contemporary Hip Hop expressions.

A core idea is that, when analyzing the cultural production of a specific community, patterns will emerge that can be highly explicative of the experience of that group in a given political/social environment, conveying a perspective that may otherwise remain unnarrated in mainstream discourses.

I therefore started from the first African American writers, slaves who had to fight for their access to literacy, analyzing how they elaborated this struggle in their writings.

During the Reconstruction and the Jim Crow period the situation was more complex and diverse. The aftermath of slavery was complicated to handle, the situation of Blacks was burdened by insecurities about the reorganization of the state and their position in it. This more heterogeneous situation emerged in the African American cultural production, with a broader array of literary forms and ideas, but with the oppression and the difficulties of being accepted as a Black individual still at the center of many works.

With the Civil Rights movement the US society took significant steps forward toward equality, but the legacy of Black misrepresentation campaigns from the first half of the twentieth century couldn't be cancelled from the perception of both Whites and Blacks. A supposedly colorblind society was formed by the same generation that had lived through legalized racism and discrimination. While the notion of white superiority was normalized for Whites, internalized racism was often the case for Blacks, both aspects working at an unconscious level if not at a conscious one.

White perception of Blacks during the Fifties and Sixties was clearly still influenced by the pre-civil rights media representation, and this fear/hatred that people inherited from their parents and grandparents was clearly exploited with the War on Drugs campaign and the depiction of Blacks in the urban environments.

New administrations adapted quickly to the "colorblind" society, distancing from explicitly racist agendas and talking instead about criminality. The seventies' "tough on crime" rhetoric is considered by many to implicitly leverage the Whites' idea of the typical criminal within the urban context: the young Black male.

I therefore analyzed, with the help of scholarly work, the ethnic disproportions regarding incarceration, associated with the media depiction of Blacks and the system that eventually leads to their economic, political, and social disenfranchisement.

Despite seeing continuity with the past in terms of racial power relationships and inequalities, I cannot argue that the situation is the same as it was fifty or a hundred years ago. The comparison of mass incarceration with Jim Crow laws is highly explicative for the contemporary flaws in the justice system but I am not, nor are the scholars I referred to, arguing that the US politics toward racial issues have not progressed. Highlighting the continuity serves instead to call for historical awareness and to point to how the complex historical racial relationship in the US have influences on today's inequalities, whose existence in the penal system is undebatable.

The argument is therefore not a sensational "things haven't changed", but rather an invitation to see how the contemporary situation is still shaped and influenced by hegemonic unilateral decisions of the past and how the self-definition of the US as land of freedom is debatable in many cases.

Starting from the continuity of contemporary forms of oppression with precedent, I found continuity within the narration of oppression in African American written cultural forms, despite the evolution of their formal aspects.

I therefore analyzed the cultural expression of Hip Hop, since it originated in the same period of the War on Drugs, from the same community that is targeted by racial profiling and mass incarceration. Furthermore, scholars highlight how the image of the rapper was built by appropriating the media depiction of the dangerous Black male. I therefore highlighted such appropriations and re-elaborations, while also discussing some of the reactions, both within the Hip Hop world and outside of it.

Continuity as a research paradigm proved to be functional in the analysis of the oppression and its re-elaboration in Black cultural expression, but also in the White reaction to African American protest writing. The analysis of this reaction, with focus on some mediatic scandals, confirmed to some extent the White middle class perceptions of the Black community, and the use of scandalization to highlight mainstream moral values. The media promptly leveraged on the rappers' appropriation of the discourse about black criminality, causing reactions of fear and indignant condemnation towards young Black artists daring to blatantly say of themselves what the White media had been deliberately saying for decades.

The continuity with precedent forms of Black written expressions is also observed in terms of its exploitation by White artists, in the hypocrisy of devaluation and scorn followed by imitation and appropriation when its commercial potential is detected.

The complex racial relationships in the US are hard to compare to any other country, because of their very specific history. This work is closer to a literary/cultural analysis than it is to a social/political one, the former two aspects however, when analyzing the work of a minority like the African American one, emerge constantly as problematic and are therefore to be considered, requiring an interdisciplinary approach to African American literature, and also to Hip Hop analysis.



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## Riassunto

In questo lavoro ho analizzato la scrittura di protesta afroamericana, partendo dalle prime opere scritte dagli schiavi nel Settecento ho percorso cronologicamente diversi periodi storici, esplorando i cambiamenti delle condizioni dei neri nella società americana, le rappresentazioni che di loro sono state fatte, e il modo in cui hanno rielaborato, tramite la letteratura e la musica, l'oppressione subita.

Nel primo capitolo offro un quadro generale delle condizioni degli afroamericani in diversi periodi, considerando l'aspetto sociale, lavorativo, e politico. Per fare ciò propongo una tripartizione, suddividendo l'analisi in tre periodi storici diversi e definendone le caratteristiche: periodo dello schiavismo (dal Seicento al 1865), periodo della segregazione e delle leggi razziali dette di "Jim Crow" (da fine Ottocento al 1965), e il periodo delle lotte per i diritti civili e successivo inizio dell'incarcerazione di massa (dagli anni Cinquanta del Novecento).

La tratta degli schiavi iniziò nel Cinquecento e in circa tre secoli furono trasportati una decina di milioni di Africani in America per essere sfruttati nelle piantagioni e nella costruzione della ricchezza americana. Se riuscivano a sopravvivere il terribile passaggio dell'Atlantico, questi individui venivano sottoposti a lavoro forzato, trattati come mera proprietà, venduti e scambiati al pari del bestiame.

In questo periodo l'idea dominante, soprattutto nel sud più ideologicamente schiavista, era che non si dovesse insegnare ai neri a leggere e scrivere, temendo che ciò avrebbe reso gli schiavi più coscienti delle loro condizioni e più inclini a mobilitarsi in proteste. Schiavi provenienti dalle stesse aree dell'Africa venivano inoltre divisi nelle piantagioni, così da evitare che potessero comunicare efficacemente, questo li portò ad articolare delle canzoni in cui narravano la loro esperienza. La musica e il ritmo, aspetti importanti della vita sociale africana, accumulavano individui provenienti da zone diverse del continente, le slave songs sono riconosciute da alcuni studiosi come l'unica madrelingua che gli schiavi potessero condividere, e in questo lavoro analizzo come ciò influenzerà e plasmerà la letteratura e la musica afroamericana.

In queste condizioni gli schiavi che riuscivano ad ottenere un'educazione erano pochi, alcuni per la fortuna di trovare dei padroni che gli insegnarono a leggere, altri imparando di nascosto, rischiando severe punizioni. Sono emerse ad esempio le poesie della schiava Phillis Wheatley, che nel 1773 diventò la prima persona afroamericana a pubblicare

un'opera letteraria. In un contesto estremamente razzista come quello americano di fine Settecento, molti non credevano che una donna nera potesse scrivere poesie così aderenti ai canoni contemporanei, venne infatti riunito un consiglio per valutare la paternità dell'opera, e i riluttanti esperti dovettero infine riconoscere che diceva la verità.

Durante il primo Ottocento vari stati del nord iniziarono ad abolire lo schiavismo, la divisione ideologica con il sud che manteneva invece un fermo approccio schiavista crebbe, culminando nella guerra civile (1861-65) e risultando nella rettificazione del tredicesimo emendamento (1865), che nega lo schiavismo e il lavoro forzato, "eccetto per la punizione di un crimine". Questa frase sarà la chiave che permetterà agli stati del sud di mantenere di fatto un'economia basata sul lavoro forzato.

Il sistema schiavistico costituiva le fondamenta su cui la ricchezza americana era costruita, smantellarlo improvvisamente si rivelò insostenibile. Gli stati del sud iniziarono così ad arrestare un numero sproporzionato di neri, viste le loro precarie condizioni in un periodo in cui un vero tentativo di reintegrazione non esistette, si rivelò facile accusarli di crimini come vagabondaggio o cattiva condotta. L'applicazione accanita di questi reati penali aprì un enorme mercato per il leasing di detenuti, in cui i prigionieri venivano appaltati come lavoratori al miglior offerente privato. Ci fu dunque il primo decollo dei tassi sull'incarcerazione, nacquero le leggi di segregazione dette di Jim Crow, in cui venivano divisi luoghi pubblici e definiti diritti civili sulla base del colore della pelle.

Per giustificare il boom delle incarcerazioni e delle nuove prigioni, iniziò una campagna di disinformazione mirata a generare paura e ostilità verso gli afroamericani, rappresentandoli come violenti e irrazionali, cosa che non era necessaria durante lo schiavismo, in cui anzi i neri vivevano assieme ai bianchi e si creavano spesso rapporti stretti, anche se definiti da nette gerarchie e dallo sfruttamento. La condizione dei neri in America non migliorò dunque di molto con il tredicesimo emendamento, per certi aspetti anzi si complicò; l'odio che si diffuse tra la fine dell'Ottocento e il primo Novecento mise gli afroamericani nella condizione di dover subire linciaggi e altre violenze da gruppi suprematisti bianchi come il Ku Klux Klan.

In questo contesto di confusione e violenza la produzione culturale degli afroamericani continuò ad avere l'oppressione come tema principale, ma si svilupparono forme nuove come il saggio, e si diffuse la narrativa. La grande migrazione portò molti neri liberi a scappare verso nord, ad esempio a New York, dove si sviluppò nei ruggenti anni Venti il

movimento letterario del Rinascimento di Harlem. Il movimento fu caratterizzato da forme di scrittura sperimentali tipiche del tempo, come il flusso di coscienza, e per la prima volta venne messo in dubbio il fatto che lo scrittore afroamericano dovesse trattare questioni sociali e politiche contemporanee, potendosi invece dedicare ad una pura espressione artistica. Scrittori di questo periodo come Langston Hughes evidenziano l'importanza della musica nella cultura afroamericana, quest'ultimo include cadenze ritmiche tipiche del jazz nella sua scrittura.

Negli anni Cinquanta e Sessanta ci furono le lotte per i diritti civili, un periodo vibrante e ricco di speranza; emergono leader importanti come Martin Luther King e Malcolm X. Nel 1964 passò il Civil Rights Act, una legge federale che dichiarò illegale qualsiasi forma di segregazione razziale.

Importanti scrittori afroamericani di questo periodo sono James Baldwin e Richard Wright, quest'ultimo evidenzia come la letteratura della sua comunità abbia dato nel recente passato troppa poca importanza alle forme di espressione artistica popolare come la musica, alle quali lui invece attribuisce un grande valore come testimoni dell'esperienza afroamericana nel paese, la linea che divide una forma d'arte "alta" da una "bassa" sembra sfumare.

La musica ha un ruolo fondamentale nell'esperienza afroamericana, essa influenza sia a livello tematico che strutturale le forme di letterature più sperimentali degli anni Sessanta, nel Black Arts Movement, ad esempio, l'esecuzione del testo diventa lo scopo piuttosto che la scrittura di esso. Un'altra influenza per il movimento è la toast tradition afroamericana: performance ritmiche di parlato in cui abili storytellers si cimentano nella narrazione di vicende urbane, tale approccio è un'evidente influenza per la prossima espressione culturale che analizzerò.

Negli anni Settanta nel South Bronx di New York, tra povertà, criminalità, e complessi abitativi in fiamme, si sviluppa tra i giovani (soprattutto afroamericani) l'Hip Hop, un'espressione culturale fondata inizialmente sulla rielaborazione e riarticolazione di musica e idee della generazione precedente. I djs iniziano prendendo i dischi funk, soul, e jazz dalle collezioni dei genitori e a suonarli in un modo nuovo, riproducendo a rotazione le sezioni più ritmate così da energizzare il ballo. I djs e i ballerini sono protagonisti delle prime fasi del fenomeno, ma presto si aggiungono i writers per l'espressione grafica e i rappers per quella musicale, questi ultimi cercano di coinvolgere

ulteriormente il pubblico, esprimendosi in rima in modo sempre più articolato, arrivando a sfidarsi e a raccontare episodi di vita urbana, con riferimenti specifici a quartieri e persone, arrivando poi ad articolare delle vere e proprie narrazioni di strada, più o meno autobiografiche, in cui emergono i topos della comunità afroamericana delle realtà urbane complicate. Iniziano inoltre ad articolare testi di denuncia sociale, trascendendo l'etichetta di movimento giovanile e diventando in molti casi una forma di scrittura di protesta. In questo lavoro analizzo brevemente la storia del fenomeno, illustrando come il rap sia arrivato ad essere al giorno d'oggi tra i generi più ascoltati al mondo, con studiosi che ne hanno sempre evidenziato il valore come espressione culturale di rottura e come testimonianza di oppressione. Ma se nel 1964 è passata la legge sui diritti civili e la discriminazione razziale è stata proibita, di quale oppressione stiamo parlando?

Nonostante abbia segnato degli importanti passi avanti, la legge sui diritti civili non ha definitivamente sradicato le diseguglianze razziali negli Stati Uniti. Sul piano abitativo avviene una segregazione di fatto, le minoranze vivono spesso nelle aree più problematiche e il divario economico è alto. La campagna mediatica di criminalizzazione dei neri promossa durante il periodo delle leggi di Jim Crow ebbe un effetto profondo sia sui bianchi che sui neri, in molti casi ciò si ripercosse sulle generazioni successive, con odio e diffidenza da una parte e insicurezze dall'altra. Il passaggio di una singola legge nel 1964 poteva quindi proibire la segregazione ufficiale, rimuovere i cartelli che dividono i luoghi pubblici, ma non poteva cancellare le idee, i pregiudizi, le paure, e l'odio. Le amministrazioni del tempo lo sapevano bene e la grande campagna di "guerra alle droghe" promossa da Nixon negli anni Settanta fece evidentemente leva su questo. Ho analizzato dunque diverse fonti che sottolineano come nei discorsi sull'ordine ("law and order"), una comunicazione priva di espliciti riferimenti razziali fece chiaramente leva su paure e pregiudizi verso le minoranze, portando di fatto avanti politiche razziste, senza il bisogno di usare riferimenti espliciti.

Dagli anni Settanta il tasso di incarcerazioni negli Stati Uniti sale alle stelle, la privatizzazione di molti complessi carcerari fa arricchire gli investitori con la manodopera a basso costo e l'ideologia del "tough on crime" ("intransigenza verso il crimine") diventa un mantra per ogni nuovo insediato alla Casa Bianca, che deve dimostrarsi duro contro il crimine, tanto quanto il precedente presidente, se non di più. Gli Stati Uniti, la "terra della libertà", hanno così più volte raggiunto la prima posizione nelle classifiche mondiali dei

paesi che incarcerano proporzionalmente più cittadini. Per avere più carcerati bisogna arrestare più persone, c'era dunque decidere dove concentrare le indagini e gli arresti, ponendosi la domanda: “chi consideriamo come criminale?” E osservando la storia degli Stati Uniti emerge una sola risposta. Fin da subito è infatti evidente una disproporzionata incarcerazione delle minoranze ispaniche, ma soprattutto afroamericane, questi ultimi nel 2018 compongono il 12% della popolazione, ma rappresentano il 41% dei carcerati. Quando venne dichiarata la famosa “guerra alle droghe”, la comunicazione era implicitamente chiarissima, soprattutto in congiunzione con quella che era la rappresentazione dei neri nei media.

Dalle ricerche che ho svolto emerge come qualsiasi etnia nel contesto americano degli anni Settanta fosse incline a commettere crimini in percentuali simili, ma la guerra alle droghe scelse come obiettivo le minoranze, e gli Stati Uniti si trovarono ancora una volta ad accanirsi internamente contro neri ed ispanici. Durante la “war on drugs” vengono usati metri di misura sproporzionati per la punizione del possesso di piccole quantità di stupefacenti, viene inoltre concesso un grande potere al pubblico ministero, che può aumentare o diminuire le condanne per convincere gli imputati a patteggiare e ammettere reati, molti casi non arrivano quindi nemmeno in tribunale. Inoltre, le forze dell'ordine possono decidere arbitrariamente chi perquisire e in che comunità e quartieri condurre la maggior parte delle indagini.

Nel mio lavoro analizzo l'opera di Michelle Alexander che, fin dal titolo, arriva a definire questa incarcerazione di massa come il “nuovo Jim Crow”. Chi ha commesso un crimine, anche se di piccola entità, subisce una discriminazione legalizzata una volta rilasciato, spesso addirittura chi viene accusato e non può permettersi rappresentazione legale si trova a dover ammettere un reato che non ha commesso pur di non andare in carcere, dovendo quindi vivere con l'etichetta di pregiudicato. Etichetta che non porta con sé solo lo stigma sociale, gli ex “criminali” possono infatti essere legalmente rifiutati da datori di lavoro e istituti di educazione, l'accesso a case popolari e altri sistemi di welfare è ostacolato, il diritto di voto viene spesso revocato, e il reinserimento nella società estremamente complicato. In questo modo una grande frangia delle minoranze ispaniche, ma soprattutto afroamericane, viene tagliata fuori dalla democrazia del paese e ogni forma di mobilità sociale viene negata per chi nasce in contesti urbani difficili. Alexander presenta ad esempio un dato su Washington D.C (nell'introduzione), in cui statisticamente tre

giovani neri su quattro possono aspettarsi di essere arrestati almeno una volta nella vita, e praticamente tutti e quattro se vivono nei quartieri più poveri.

Viene dunque spesso espressa nella produzione culturale afroamericana una sensazione di essere intrappolati, c'è ad esempio lo stereotipo di dover saper cantare o eccellere in uno sport per uscire dal ghetto.

L'Hip Hop nasce e si sviluppa negli esatti anni in cui i tassi di incarcerazione salgono, e la comunità che ne subisce gli effetti è la stessa comunità che sviluppa questa nuova forma di scrittura ed esecuzione di testi. Una tale quantità di contenuto testuale porta per forza con sé un grande numero di narrazioni, in nessun altro genere musicale si può infatti raccontare così tante cose in così poco tempo come nel rap. Emerge quindi la vita e l'esperienza afroamericana nei contesti urbani colpiti dall'incarcerazione di massa.

Molti studiosi evidenziano come la figura del rapper abbia appropriato le rappresentazioni del "criminale nero", rielaborandole con mezzi satirici e caricaturali in continuità con la cultura afroamericana precedente, che, come analizzo nel secondo capitolo, ha sempre risposto all'oppressione con forme di espressione culturale incentrate sull'ironia. La continuità emerge dunque come paradigma di analisi nel mio lavoro, sia per quanto riguarda l'oppressione subita dai neri negli Stati Uniti, sia a livello artistico e attitudinale nella loro produzione scritta, dalla letteratura alla musica.

Dopo aver esplorato il contesto sociopolitico e la situazione in cui vissero gli scrittori afroamericani in diversi periodi, nel secondo capitolo analizzo da vicino delle opere specifiche per esemplificare le idee teorizzate. Riprendendo la tripartizione proposta nel primo capitolo inizio dall'analisi di un'opera del periodo dello schiavismo, in particolare mi concentro su una "slave narrative", un genere autobiografico che ebbe successo nell'Ottocento, in cui uno schiavo racconta il suo travagliato percorso verso la libertà. L'opera che ho scelto è una delle più famose nel suo genere: *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Ho analizzato il modo in cui Douglass rielabora e descrive l'istituzione dello schiavismo, ritenendola un veleno capace di cambiare le persone in peggio, sia lo schiavo che il padrone. Mi concentro inoltre sul suo concetto di educazione e di come essa sia considerata la chiave per una liberazione pratica e ideologica ma allo stesso tempo un privilegio pericoloso, un'arma a doppio taglio. Con l'aiuto di articoli accademici evidenzio alcuni tratti nell'approccio di Douglass, non limitativamente

all'opera analizzata ma in generale nel suo personaggio, che lo rendono accostabile a fenomeni culturali afroamericani più recenti. Ho individuato tre punti di contatto che tracciano una linea di continuità tra l'approccio di Douglass e alcuni personaggi ricorrenti nel rap; l'ironia e i giochi di parole, ampiamente utilizzati da Douglass e fondamentali nel contesto dell'Hip Hop, l'appropriazione di rappresentazioni stereotipiche perpetrate dalla cultura dominante, con una riarticolazione di essa a proprio favore, elementi che ho riconosciuto nella narrativa dell'ex schiavo e che sono temi ricorrenti nel rap, e infine i discorsi sulla mascolinità e le tendenze verso la misoginia.

Dopo aver costruito questo ponte mi dedico all'analisi di alcune performance rap che richiamano al periodo dello schiavismo e ne analizzo gli intenti comunicativi e gli approcci, osservando ad esempio l'ostentazione del successo e della ricchezza come rivalse per i soprusi subiti dalle generazioni precedenti.

Per il periodo della segregazione razziale ho analizzato *The Souls of Black Folks*, un'opera di W.E.B. Du Bois (il primo studioso afroamericano ad ottenere un Ph.D. ad Harvard). L'opera include capitoli di taglio saggistico, storico, politico, autobiografico e narrativo, e nel suo complesso offre una vivida immagine dell'esperienza afroamericana durante la ricostruzione, evidenziando le complessità della riorganizzazione di uno stato fondamentalmente dipendente dal lavoro forzato. Du Bois descrive una comunità profondamente ferita, con traumi generazionali e con un urgente bisogno di perseguire l'educazione universitaria, ritenuta da lui un elemento fondamentale. Una teoria su cui mi soffermo particolarmente è quella della doppia coscienza, che descrive la condizione in cui una persona arriva a vedere sé stessa attraverso gli occhi dell'altro, assorbendone i giudizi, in particolare gli occhi giudicanti della maggioranza nel caso di una minoranza. Du Bois spiega come questo porti gli afroamericani ad assorbire idee della cultura dominante e senza accorgersene finire per perpetrare odio verso sé stessi.

Questo concetto è l'eredità intellettuale più grande lasciata da Du Bois, ed è stato ripreso da studiosi per descrivere un grande numero di situazioni, ho dunque cercato di applicare tale interpretazione ad alcuni testi rap, trovando risultati interessanti. Ho riconosciuto due manifestazioni di doppia coscienza nei testi: la prima avviene con l'assorbimento dell'ideale del sogno americano, in cui artisti neri provenienti da contesti poveri con scarso accesso a risorse, arrivano al successo e ostentano ossessivamente il lusso, quasi volessero compensare per la scarsità e la negligenza in cui sono cresciuti, a tal proposito

propongo esempi in cui queste idee sono articolate chiaramente e non sono quindi frutto di un'eccessiva interpretazione. Una seconda manifestazione è nell'assunzione di un personaggio forte e violento, la cosiddetta "thug persona", in questo caso l'aspetto di doppia coscienza risiede nell'orgogliosa appropriazione delle rappresentazioni cariche di stereotipi razziali portate avanti nei discorsi della cultura dominante.

Continuando nell'ordine cronologico, mi dedico quindi all'analisi di rap che tratta l'incarcerazione di massa, che emerge come protagonista o come sfondo in molti testi del panorama rap, a volte descrivendo il fenomeno e formulando una critica sociale, più spesso semplicemente raccontando esperienze personali che spesso sfociano in mere celebrazioni dell'illegalità, che però articolano quella che è l'esperienza e la percezione dei giovani afroamericani alle prese con l'accanimento delle forze dell'ordine.

Con la premessa di tenere conto dell'aspetto di intrattenimento e spettacolarizzazione, evitando quindi di considerare le performance rap come fedeli resoconti di vita quotidiana, esploro i topos, i temi ricorrenti, i personaggi e i metodi con cui viene rielaborata l'esperienza dell'incarcerazione di massa, nonché il generale contesto in cui le privazioni di diritti economici, sociali, e politici dovute alla criminalizzazione avvengono.

Va chiarito che nonostante applichi strumenti di analisi letteraria a testi rap e ne sottolinei gli aspetti di continuità culturale con la letteratura afroamericana, non lo considero come evoluzione della letteratura stessa, non avrebbe senso in quanto essa è ancora produttiva e rappresenta evidentemente un livello più elaborato di comunicazione, tuttavia, per gran parte della comunità colpita dall'incarcerazione di massa l'accesso all'educazione universitaria e alla letteratura è spesso ostacolato dalla povertà. Una forma di scrittura di protesta più popolare come quella del rap diventa così uno strumento per ovviare a tali mancanze, affermandosi come la forma di espressione culturale più diffusa tra i diretti interessati di queste disuguaglianze, in questo risiede quindi l'importanza attribuita al rap come espressione culturale, è un media che questa comunità consuma e produce, c'è quindi reciprocità di influenza con il contesto urbano colpito dall'incarcerazione di massa. Chiudo il secondo capitolo analizzando tre video musicali, in cui elementi teorizzati e discussi precedentemente vengono messi in scena tramite l'uso di moderne tecniche cinematografiche.



Ho dedicato il terzo capitolo all'analisi della ricezione e delle reazioni all'Hip Hop, in particolare mi concentro sulla scandalizzazione di testi espliciti, sui discorsi attorno alla mascolinità, sulle rielaborazioni e ri-contestualizzazioni dei personaggi e temi ricorrenti del rap in altre parti del mondo, e sullo sfruttamento commerciale e l'appropriazione culturale.

Illustro quindi alcune teorie dello scandalo letterario che possono essere applicate anche al mondo dello spettacolo e del rap, partendo dalle quali analizzo tre casi di ricezione scandalizzata di fenomeni hip hop, principalmente legati a testi con espliciti riferimenti ad azioni criminali, violente o sessuali. Appare chiaro come ad esempio gruppi organizzati di genitori e mogli di politici, inscenino scandali rispetto a questi elementi con lo scopo di evidenziare i propri valori morali, distanziandosi da quello che definiscono osceno attuano quello che può di diritto essere visto come un atto catartico.

I testi espliciti non hanno tuttavia dato origine solo a questo tipo di reazioni superficiali, ma anche a studi in cui si tenta di capire l'origine di tali atteggiamenti violenti, con al centro la domanda "da dove viene tutto ciò?" Ho dunque analizzato alcune di queste idee riguardo alle maschere sociali indossate dai rapper, emergono aspetti psicologici di compensazione e subordinazione verso una cultura dominante che ha di fatto privato per secoli agli afroamericani di esprimersi, e discorsi sociali e storici in cui il complesso rapporto tra l'America bianca e nera emerge costantemente.

Analizzo poi come questi personaggi e questi temi ricorrenti siano stati elaborati in altre parti del mondo, dove la distanza dal nucleo d'origine ha causato un'iniziale confusione dovuta alla decontestualizzazione rispetto allo specifico ambiente urbano statunitense, seguita però da efficaci rielaborazioni del fenomeno.

Un altro aspetto della reazione è lo sfruttamento commercializzante avvenuto quando la cultura dominante si è resa conto dell'enorme potenzialità di mercificazione a livello globale del fenomeno. A tal proposito ritorna utile il paradigma della continuità; emerge come le case discografiche abbiano infatti da sempre sfruttato artisti neri, approfittando della loro scarsa conoscenza dell'industria musicale e della mancanza di rappresentazione legale dovuta alle poche risorse finanziarie di giovani artisti neri emergenti, spesso con un urgente bisogno di guadagnare che li porta a firmare contratti sfavorevoli. Questo sfruttamento si manifesta anche nell'appropriazione culturale, da Little Richard che muore senza mai vedersi pagate le entrate dei suoi successi fino ad Elvis Presley che

diventa un'icona rubandogli le canzoni. Analizzo quindi come alcuni analisti riconoscano tratti di questo sfruttamento anche nel panorama dell'intrattenimento odierno. Ad esempio quando influencer o musicisti non neri fanno con leggerezza uso dell'inglese afroamericano, con le sue peculiarità morfologiche e sintattiche, per sfruttarne l'appeal, appropriandosi di quella che è diventata la black "coolness", soprattutto in seguito al successo mondiale dell'Hip Hop, e sfruttarla a proprio vantaggio. Questa appropriazione ha fatto emergere accuse di ipocrisia in quanto gli afroamericani sono precedentemente spesso stati derisi per parlare un inglese "scorretto".

La continuità è dunque il filo conduttore di questo lavoro; la continuità culturale che è riscontrabile nella produzione scritta della comunità afroamericana, la continuità che unisce le canzoni degli schiavi alla letteratura, alla poesia, e alla musica moderna prodotta dalla stessa comunità. La stessa continuità unisce forme nuove e vecchie di oppressione razziale; a tale proposito è tuttavia giusto precisare che né io, né gli studiosi che cito, abbiamo l'intenzione di mettere sullo stesso piano le condizioni in cui vivono le minoranze negli Stati Uniti oggi con le pratiche disumane perpetrate fino allo scorso secolo. Lo scopo di evidenziare tale continuità è quello di promuovere la consapevolezza storica e di osservare come molti dei rapporti di potere esistenti oggi siano l'eredità di secoli di decisioni unilaterali e colonialiste, la presenza stessa di africani sul suolo americano lo è. Questo lavoro è molto più vicino ad un'analisi letteraria/culturale che ad una sociopolitica, ciononostante gli aspetti sociopolitici emergono costantemente analizzando una comunità la cui storia è così segnata dall'oppressione, rendendo l'analisi della cultura afroamericana un campo che richiede competenze interdisciplinari. Ho quindi cercato di raccontare l'oppressione con le parole dei diretti interessati, analizzando il modo in cui questa è stata riarticolata nelle espressioni culturali dell'oppresso stesso.