

**Aspects of Hip Hop discourse: Constructing reality, ideology and identity.**

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## Preface

Before I started writing this little preface, I went to my shelf and got out my copy of *Doggystyle*. Fourteen years have passed since I first heard it and it never gets old. It is almost strange how Snoop Dogg was how I first got interested in Hip Hop, and that he is also the subject matter of my final analysis chapter. Writing a thesis like this is an interesting, frustrating and rewarding process. *Doggystyle* brings back fond memories and is a welcome companion while writing now, but there have been times when I could not even stand to listen to any of the artists I were writing about. To quote Snoop's grandfather: "There'll be ups and downs, smiles and frowns". I have learned a lot as well, and I think I am able to appreciate the lyrics a little more than before.

I hope I have been able to not only provide analyses of different types of rap lyrics, but that I have also conveyed something about my subculture. I have tried to distance myself somewhat although I have made an effort to stay true to it and not representing something I cannot stand for. Hip Hop has always been an inspiration and I sincerely hope I have been able to give something back.

I could not have managed this on my own, and I would like to extend my gratitude to those have helped me along the way. First and foremost I am forever grateful to my supervisor Stig Johansson for giving me the OK on extending my term paper and showing genuine interest in my work. I have felt great comfort in knowing you were never further away than an e-mail and a single flight of stairs. I must also thank Elaine Richardson for writing the book that made it all clear and also answering my e-mails. I would also like to thank my parents for all the support they have given me for as long as I can remember and for applying light pressure where my academic career is concerned. Last but not least I must thank my friends who have been a great support throughout the process.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

I have chosen rap lyrics as my material for two reasons. The first is that I have considered myself a practitioner of the Hip Hop subculture for several years, and have access to and knowledge of much of the material I find useful for my thesis. The second reason is that rappers, or MCs<sup>1</sup>, deliver themselves quite explicitly in their lyrics. Songs in most musical disciplines can contain social comment or autobiographical elements, but in Hip Hop, the artists do it blatantly, rarely with the use of metaphor that alludes to the true voice behind. This arguably dates back to the origins of Hip Hop<sup>2</sup> culture and rapping.

## 1.2 Hip Hop: A short presentation.

My thesis concerns discourse within one domain of the Hip Hop subculture. What started as a perceptive DJ's<sup>3</sup> crowd-pleasing experiments is now a wide-spread subculture and big business. A few years ago, fellow Hip Hop heads<sup>4</sup> were easily recognizable due to the clothes they wore, but now it seems everyone under the age of 20 is wearing baseball hats and oversized t-shirts. Contemporary fashion does not necessarily place people within a subculture, however. Trends have tended to be influenced by subcultures, especially when these have been exposed in the media through for example musical expression. Rap music has been one of the dominant genres in the charts for some ten years, and youths tend to emulate the stars. Globalization has helped the spread of subcultures as one is no longer confined to one's particular geographical space, and although there are geographical variations in Hip Hop, the essence remains the same. Since I heard *Gin'n Juice* for the first time in 1994, I have lamented the state of the Norwegian Hip Hop scene with a Danish head, bought several records of Finnish rap and have even discussed with a store clerk in Kyoto why certain Japanese rappers are not respected. Where does it come from, the music on MTV, the fashion and the graffiti on the subway? What is Hip Hop?

In the beginning, when DJ Kool Herc revolutionized the block party culture in the Bronx, there was fierce competition between DJs about who had the best sound system around. This later developed into a competition about who had the best break beats etc. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Originally comes from Master of Ceremony.

<sup>2</sup> The origins of the term Hip Hop are uncertain, but I will discuss it in chapter 4.

<sup>3</sup> The DJ was originally a traditional DJ, but has evolved into the rapper's "band" Hip Hop music is generally not played with live instruments, but is rather a result of sampling and mixing beats etc. from records.

<sup>4</sup> Also known as Hip Hoppers, these are the practitioners of the subculture.

70s gangs were very prominent in the Bronx, and at block parties different gangs were representing themselves, trying to shout their names louder than the other gangs (this was because the best DJs around refused to continue playing if any violence broke out). As competition developed, some kids started competing for having the best dance moves in the breaks (thus the B-Boys or break dancers were born), and DJs had members of their crew, most likely inspired by Jamaican toasting, boast their sound system to the beat. (Chang 2005: 41-85) This is where rapping, in its Hip Hop sense, started. Rapping (called DJ-ing) has been a prominent part of Jamaican DJ culture for decades, but Hip Hop developed from Jamaican DJing. Kool Herc himself is originally from Jamaica, and dancehalls in Trenchtown is where he discovered his passion for music. And it is probably the inherent competitiveness in rapping that makes the lyrics even in contemporary rap so explicitly first-hand. In the beginning the MC was boasting his crew and sound system; as it evolved, they started to promote their own, and their MC crew's skills and street credibility. The competitive element has been in African-American youth culture for a long time. Street gangs in the 50s and 60s used to battle it out with do-wop songs, and the dozens is a well known activity of dissing one's peers in a more or less competitive manner<sup>5</sup>.

In Hip Hop, there is a core tradition of competitiveness. Break dancers have been battling since the first B-boys started spinning on the floor to James Brown breaks, graffiti artists compete in 'getting up' and 'burning', and DJs try to peak each others' performances. An important part of this competitiveness is the MC battle, where MCs take turns improvising raps, trying to 'take out' their opponent. Freestyling is also a way for MCs to really showcase their skills, even without an opponent. Boasting is a central part in these scenarios too. A good example is Big L's freestyle on the Stretch and Bobbito show in 1998<sup>6</sup>. It was meant as a part of a radio show, but was recorded, and is an important part of the rap canon. It begins with the following lines:

Fuck all the glammers and glitz, I plan to get rich,  
I'm from New York and never was a fan of the Knicks.  
And I'm all about expandin' my chips<sup>†</sup>  
You mad cuz I was in the van with your bitch with both hands on her tits.

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<sup>5</sup> The dozens were documented by several social scientists, but much of their research has met criticism from African American scholars who have been part of the culture growing up themselves. The criticism has to do with anthropologists and linguists etc. staging events of the Dozens, while in reality it is a very spontaneous event

<sup>6</sup> Released on Big L's posthumous album *The Big Picture* (2000)

Corleone hold the throne, that you in your heart  
I got style, plus the way that I be flowin' is sharp

It continues for two minutes of self-boasting: *I, Corleone* and other self-referring elements are prevalent. In addition to this (after having just spontaneously created an instant Hip Hop classic) Big L says “tired”. Meaning, probably, “I can do even better than this”. The first-person narrative in rap lyrics makes the stories told more personal, and perhaps more believable. This also creates the problem that a rapper can be misunderstood with respect to his or her motives, and also that irony may not be understood.

As mentioned earlier, I will work mainly with rap lyrics. I will concentrate on a selection of artists and their work, rather than referring to a large number of different artists from different areas and/or traditions. This, I believe, makes it clearer how rappers represent/construct identity and reality, and gives insight into their lyrical development. I find myself working on numerous themes, but discourse analysis and postmodernist strategies of reality presentation will be a governing idea throughout. I believe, however, that this thesis is best regarded as a collection of essays on different topics within a set, unifying framework.

### **1.3 Aims**

In my thesis, I will deal with a number of issues, all in some way connected to analysis of textual content. Mainly, I shall attempt to show how MCs construct different aspects of reality through lyrics and extra-linguistic symbolism.

*Gangster rap* is the title of chapter 3, the first part of my analysis. My main focus will be on the construction of reality, as a great deal of gangster (or gangsta) rap can be considered representative of the choices Black youth are sometimes faced with. Hip Hop, like so many other aspects of youth culture, has met with a lot of criticism. Violent and misogynic lyrics mainly found in gangster rap have been the main reason for the critics' reactions. I will make no attempt to censor the lyrics, but I will try to provide an explanation as to why there are explicit references to such atrocities as gang crimes and derogatory terms for women. KRS-One says in *Free Mumia* (1995), an appeal to critics of rap, especially Delores Tucker:

Buck buck! Buck-buck-buck!  
It sounds like gunshots, but it could be the cluck  
Of a chicken

Definition is what you're missin'  
Listen to your children instead of dissin'em<sup>†</sup>

Chapter 4 will deal with the branch of rap often referred to as conscious rap. In its 35-year history, Hip Hop has grown from a creative twist on block parties in Black/Latino areas of the Bronx to an international, billion-dollar industry. Yet much of the bedrock philosophy stays among hardcore practitioners. Among these are a number of artists with specific views on how the originally very geographically and socially/ethnographically limited subculture has coped with its own spread and development. Many conscious rappers are, in fact, among the hardest critics of Hip Hop while at the same showing a profound love for the culture and struggling to spread its message. As a dedicated Hip Hop head, I tend myself to listen to appeals of “realness” and frowning at commercialized rap and its mass-appeal. Such an attitude brings to mind the type of discursive constructions Chouliaraki and Fairclough refer to as *ideologies* (1999: 26-28). *Conscious rap* will then deal with the construction of Hip Hop as an ideology, in particular as portrayed by Hip Hop's main idealist, KRS-One.

The fifth analysis chapter of this thesis will be somewhat different in form from the first two. Lyrics will constitute the main body of data, but I shall concentrate on a single artist: Snoop Dogg. It is no coincidence that he has become the single most recognizable rapper in the world. Snoop is a master of identity construction, and I will show how he has continuously constructed and re-constructed his persona throughout his 15-year-long career. In this chapter, extra-linguistic devices are equally important as the lyrics. In our commodified society, image is everything.

#### **1.4 Previous work**

Hip Hop culture is relatively new, and Hip Hop scholarship is even younger. A good deal of work has been done, however, and I shall present some central books here. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal's *That's the Joint!* (2004) is a work I consider quite central. Although quite recent, it is an important historical work, as one of Neal and Forman's agendas is to form a canon of Hip Hop scholarly texts. They are defenders of academic writing on Hip Hop, and recognize that Hip Hop has taken the step into many a curriculum in different academic subjects. Their book is a tome of important Hip Hop articles, compiled mainly by

investigating syllabi of numerous academic courses. They claim Hip Hop scholars to be important practitioners of the subculture (p. 3):

With *That's the Joint!* We assert that research and writing, whether in journalistic or academic contexts, is absolutely part of the wider hip-hop culture. Analyzing, theorizing, and writing about hip-hop are also forms of cultural labor and should accordingly be regarded as consequential facets of hip-hop.

They are concerned, however, that many Hip Hop heads are skeptical of academics writing about their culture. Some accuse academics of using Hip Hop to make their research “cool” or “phat”, or that they lack the street credibility to be writing about it at all. In addition, scholars are sometimes suspected of “doctoring” research towards representing their own views or agendas. These are concerns I have myself. Not only that I might meet criticism from peers, but also that I might misrepresent my own culture in an attempt to distance myself, in order to not be too “ethnocentric”.

Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* (1994) is a classic within scholarly Hip Hop. It is thirteen years old, but in no way redundant. In Forman and Neal's canon, it will be as central as Grandmaster Flash's *Grandmaster Flash's Great Adventures on the Wheels of Steel* (1982) or Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* (1992) are in the musical canon. It is the first academic book written on Hip Hop, and interestingly it was released at the end of “the Golden Era” of 1988-1994, and may thus be seen as a document of then vs. now. And it really is a starting point. On the back cover is a comment by Andrew Ross: “No more loose-headed talk about rap and hip hop! From now on, all discussion starts here with *Black Noise*, a crucial book about a culture that has also become a new kind of social movement.” Rose attempts to combine theory with non-theoretical approaches. She has a very varied background which she uses for all its worth in this quite ambitious work: “[...] I also believe that my peculiarly situated identities have been immensely productive in *my efforts to produce a blueprint for understanding contemporary black popular expression*” (p. xiii, my emphasis). She says that she makes no effort to give a complete history or touch upon every single aspect of the culture, which fits the ambition of first and foremost creating a framework for further research.

Where many Hip Hop scholars may have found inspiration in *Black Noise*, my revelation came with Elaine B. Richardson's *Hiphop Literacies* (2006).



What I strive to do in this book is show the depth, the importance, and the immediate necessity of acknowledging one of the most contemporary, accessible, and contentious of African American literacies, Hip-hop literacies. (p. xv)

Within literacies, Richardson, in the tradition of the New Literacy Studies, includes orality, visual and sonic literacies etc. She mentions music videos, video games and billboards as examples. These are all parts of the same literacy.

Richardson gives two aims for the book (p. xvi)

To locate rap/Hip-hop discourse, particularly its pop culture forms, within a trajectory of Black discourses [...], their engagement in a discursive dialectic between various vernacular and dominant discourses and semiotic systems”

[T]o examine African American Hip-hop in secondary oral context.”<sup>7</sup>

I will draw upon these two points with some modifications. I will locate Hip-hop discourse within subcultural ideology and within the framework of late modernity. African-American oral tradition will be used as a source of explanation of certain phenomena within the “oral tradition” of rap.

Jeff Chang’s *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* (2005) has been and continues to be a much appreciated companion. Chang gives an involved, yet entertaining and easy-to-read account of Hip Hop’s history from the socio-economic problems in the Bronx in the early 70s up to “The New World Order” of globalization and the huge commercial impact of, and on, rap music and Hip Hop culture. The book interestingly enough opens with a quotation by Don DeLillo, firmly placing it in postmodernism.

## References

### Primary Sources

Big L (2000) *The Big Picture* New York: Rawkus Records

KRS-One (1995) *KRS-One* New York: Jive Records

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<sup>7</sup> Here she means Afrodiasporic oral traditions that draw upon African tradition and are adapted to the new setting.

## Chapter 2 Theory and method

### 2.1 Background

In my investigation I will mainly focus on rap lyrics. I consider rap to be part of the African-American oral tradition appearing in a continuum that goes as far back as the first Diaspora and slavery. Portia Maultsby (1991:186) gives a diagram of the development of African-American music, showing clear ties between the different styles, and how they have influenced each other. Arguably, in addition to purely musical influence, different styles have had lyrical and thematic content passed down as well. African-American mythology is also central in rap lyrics, and this also dates back to slave narratives. An example is the ‘Badman’ or ‘bad nigger’ who has taken many shapes and names, and is now well known as the ‘nigga’, made public through rap music (Judy 1994: 6).

I will investigate the lyrics of a number of selected artists. This will not be a literary analysis per se, but some interpretation will be needed. Richardson (2006: xvi) explains her choice of commercial rap with the fact that “It is easier to prove that overtly socially conscious Hiphop/rap forms involve Black critical Literacy/discourse, if only because they may promote stronger Afrocentric messages, more traditional formulations of Black lifestyles.” My work is not as Afrocentric as Richardson’s, but I will nonetheless follow her argumentation with some modifications. I will look mainly at *gangster rap* as opposed to *conscious rap* when dealing with society and reality construction. One reason is that gangster rap is more commercialized than its conscious counterpart, and as such is arguably what most non-Hip Hop heads will associate with Hip Hop. In addition, gangster rap is the main reason why Hip Hop has faced a considerable amount of criticism. I will attempt to show that there is a reason why gangster rap lyrics are often violent or misogynic. In fact, I will try to show that gangster rap is indeed more “conscious” than is apparent. In my account of ideology construction, however, I shall turn to conscious rap for the reason that conscious rappers are generally more concerned with Hip Hop itself, as a subculture, than gangster rappers.

I am also interested in the extra-linguistic elements of social semiosis. My thesis is written within the framework of late modernity, or even postmodernism, and the alleged ongoing process of construction. Hip Hop culture is a subject I feel comfortable with, and am devoted to, and I feel it will be interesting to contextualize it within late modernity. Another advantage of Hip Hop as a phenomenon is, as mentioned above, that it evolved at the same

time as, and in accordance with, views on late modernity (see below). The entire process of creating and recreating one's own person and reality, fused with commodified capitalism is very well exemplified in the way for example Snoop Dogg has created merchandise around his own person.

## 2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

I shall approach rap lyrics within the framework of sociolinguistics and critical discourse analysis (CDA). As a relatively new subculture, Hip Hop discourse belongs to late modernity (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999), or postmodern urbanism. The developments of Hip Hop culture and the emergence, or recognition, of late modernity seemingly occur around the same time. Lillie Chouliaraki and Norman Fairclough locate CDA to the postmodern age in their book *Discourse in Late Modernity* (1999), which gives a thorough account of late modernity and the era's social and economic situation, and shows how discourse is an important part of (or, indeed the basis of) current institutions. Jan Blommaert (2005) gives a very good presentation of CDA by means of criticizing the theory itself. One point that especially caught my attention was that "[...] most of what we now accept as significant social theory supporting discourse analysis is based on reflections of First-World societies." (p. 49) He continues: "[...] one of the problems I have with CDA is the self-evidence with which it adopts the First-World highly integrated, Late Modern and post-industrial, densely semiotised societies as its model for explaining discourse-in-the-world." (p. 49) I agree to some extent with Blommaert's concerns. Sub-Saharan Africa (from which Blommaert has many examples) is not Europe, North America or Japan. However, cross-referring with Chouliaraki and Fairclough's socio-temporal framing of CDA, Blommaert's reference to "Late Modern and post-industrial, **densely semiotised** societies" (my emphasis) largely explains why e.g. Sub-Saharan Africa is not part of the Western World (and conversely, why e.g. Japan, though geographically separated, is). My work is based around First-World urbanity, but it is important to be aware of potential problems.

Chouliaraki and Fairclough speak of the new social reality that is late modernity. They stress that (p. 4):

It is an important characteristic of the economic, social and cultural changes of Late modernity that they exist as *discourses* as well as processes taking place outside discourse, and that the processes that are taking place outside discourse are substantively shaped by these discourses.

They use as an example ‘flexible accumulation’ in economy, which is regarded as having been ‘talked into being’, and as such exists as a discourse and an ideology. This is also interesting in Hip Hop, where we see discursive construction taking place. As Hip Hop changes in the media, it probably changes among its followers, but many dedicated Hip Hop heads see this as decomposing of the culture, and that ‘everything was better in the old days’. Hip Hop thus takes the shape of an ideology.

Critical Discourse Analysis is a framework which I feel will fit well into my investigation, even though my thesis may seem mainly sociolinguistic in its form. Chouliaraki and Fairclough give one definition of Critical social sciences (including CDA) (p. 35):

1. A critical engagement with the contemporary world recognizing that the existing state of affairs does not exhaust what is possible.
2. An emancipatory knowledge interest initiated and terminated in flows between theoretical practice and non-theoretical social practices, and anchored in the public sphere.
3. An engagement in explanatory critique directed at both intransitive and transitive objects (i.e. both practices themselves and theories of them), applying a dialectal logic.
4. A recognition of discourse as one moment in the dialectics of social practice, and, of changes in discourse as capable of opening up new social possibilities.
5. A ‘modest’ yet non-relativistic understanding of scientific truth as epistemic gain, where what counts is relative explanatory power and contribution to meeting needs.
6. A reflexive understanding of the historical and social positioning of the researchers’ own activity.

I will not only be concerned with “the contemporary world” as I will jump back and forth, so to speak, between eras in rap, in order to give an historical explanation of the phenomenon as a whole. There are a number of reasons why I choose to work within CDA. First of all, I consider rap to be part of an African-American canon dating back to slave songs. Black music is best seen within a sociocultural framework which includes the struggle black people have had in the Diaspora. An extension of this is explaining, or responding to, some of the criticism which rap lyrics, and as such Hip Hop culture as a whole, has met with, and basing this on Black mythology and oral tradition. CDA is also useful as a tool in the socio-temporal situation we are currently facing, as is shown in Chouliaraki and Fairclough’s work.

Late modernity or postmodernism is a very interesting period especially when working with discourse analysis. Chouliaraki and Fairclough describe the “state of affairs” (I use quotation marks because of the immense focus on construction) extensively in their book. The central theme seems to be construction of reality both literally and metaphorically. Flexibility

is a key concept, both when it comes to advances within technology, and the flexibility of labor. Modern communication has long since phased out geographical borders, and people move between different jobs more easily, which also means moving to other cities and countries. Where one could earlier have found one's place and identity quite readily within the confines of one's workplace, family and socio-geographical setting, these are no longer as fundamental in the defining of self and place. This is often referred to as loss of meaning. Baudrillard (1983) gives what can be seen as a good description of the situation of representation in Late Modernity: "Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum". People still identify themselves as individuals and as belonging to certain social and cultural groups. The issue seems to be whether there exists a fundamental reality at all, or if everything we perceive as 'reality' is created discursively (the point is intentionally made extreme). In commenting on the 'created' flexible economy, Chouliaraki and Fairclough state that (p. 5):

Achieving hegemony for this discourse means achieving a misperception of its arbitrariness so that it comes to be seen as transparently reflecting economic realities rather than constructing them in a particular way. This is a mystifying effect of unequal relations of power on language – it is discourse working ideologically.

Discourse in this sense does not represent reality, it creates simulacra. It is important here not to become overzealous, and too caught up in a purely theoretical approach. My methodology is concerned with constructivism, as most social sciences have been after Foucault, i.e. researchers view social life as produced not by thought, but by discourse, thus becoming social constructivists. Chouliaraki and Fairclough themselves warn against this, stressing that it is important for social science to incorporate discourse in its theorizing, but in a non-idealistic way which does not reduce social life to discourse. Harvey (1996) reminds us that discourse is just one element of the social life and that its relation to other moments is a matter of analysis and evaluation.

Critical social sciences are hermeneutically based, but ought not to be reduced to that. Bernstein (1996)<sup>8</sup> says:

A theoretical practice recontextualizes the social practices it theorizes: that is, it delocates them from their original contexts and inevitably in so doing dislocates them, 'breaks off' certain aspects

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: 31)

of them from the rest; and it relocates them, bringing different social practices into a new relation which is dictated by the internal logic of the theoretical practice itself, and the 'languages of description' it employs to make sense of social practices.

A critical theoretical practice should thus maintain a weak boundary between theoretical practice and the social practices it theorizes, and apply a relational/dialectal analytical logic to these practices. Herein lies the main strategy I will apply when analyzing rap lyrics. Verses, or parts of verses, will be analyzed as individual text and "re-inserted" into either a social context or the context of the respective chapter within which it is being analyzed. I.e. it falls between objective and hermeneutic research. Chouliaraki and Fairclough go as far as saying that the ideal situation in Critical Social Research is that the researcher himself is a participant in the practice researched. This is why I chose Hip Hop as subject material, but as Blommaert warned, one must not become ethnocentric either.

Construction of reality and identity is an important recurring theme in my thesis, and Preisler's approach to subcultures (see below) is compatible with discourse analysis in late modernity. Chouliaraki and Fairclough define discourse as "semiotic elements of social practices" (p. 38). This means that discourse analysis does not only deal with spoken or written material per se. Language, non-verbal communication and visual images (extra-linguistic elements) all make up the social semiosis. I will be dealing with all three of these elements, but I will not (except if one chooses to consider a music concert as such) deal with face-to-face communication or conversation analysis. Another very interesting phenomenon Chouliaraki and Fairclough mention is that of quasi-interactions (pp. 44-45). Since people in late modernity (I use this both as a temporal and a locative term; see arguments against CDA above) construct their own identities, they meet quasi-interaction, e.g. in lifestyle magazines. This fits in well with the commodified capitalism of today. The magazines themselves are commodities, and the lifestyles presented are often built around more commodities such as clothing and styling products. This is interesting to my research as a great deal of the subcultural symbolism of Hip Hop has to do with clothing, and most artists are 'walking billboards' clad from head to toe in what continues to be created and recreated as Hip Hop fashion.

### 2.3 Preisler's subcultures

In accordance with the construction of reality and self, I will to some extent investigate the use of subcultural symbolism, as I find this very relevant to the ways in which MCs convey their identity and Hip Hop credibility. Bent Preisler (1999) writes about subcultures and the importance of their symbols in an article which is originally part of a language debate in Denmark. The article explains how English comes into other languages via youth culture (including Anglo-American subcultures) and not necessarily through media and advertisements. Preisler stresses the fact that language is not only a means of conveying information, but has a substantial social importance, as one's choice of expressions and ways of expressing oneself places the individual within a social domain. As Preisler states (p. 41) "[It] is both a choice to distance oneself from the dominating culture, and choosing alternate values". Preisler also claims that (as he has worked with several subcultures with roots in the U.S.) the practitioners' symbolism is first and foremost linguistic (p. 43). This means that within the different subcultures, there is a jargon, just as in the spheres of vocations (cf. e.g. "legalese"). Due to its American roots, the jargon and expressions in the specialized semantic field of these subcultures are English. A Norwegian Hip Hop head would not say that he or she likes Ghostface Killah's "Fish scale" because of its great *rytmer*, but because of the *beats*, for example. Code switching is also a natural and important part of subcultures, as are quoting games. This (partly) constructed exchange could happen between two Norwegian Hip Hop heads:

A: Du er jo aldri på skolen lenger, bare jobber og går på byen. Hva skjer'a?

B: Du veit, Life ain't nothin' but bitches and money!

Here we have both code switching to English, and a quotation of Ice Cube in NWA's classic *Gangsta, Gangsta*. In this way, B explains his recent activities by placing it in a Hip Hop context, even taking a rap authority's advice, and "living out Hip Hop".

The sociolinguistic approach is quite compatible with Chouliaraki and Fairclough's account of late modernism, where much of reality is seemingly constructed discursively. Perhaps the most fundamental of non-linguistic symbols in Hip Hop culture are the Adidas Superstars, or "shelltoes". Many of the kids in the Bronx etc. who grew up while Hip Hop was starting wore these. They were originally meant as basketball shoes. The big turning point came with Run DMC who were among the most important pioneers in Hip Hop. They took rapping to a new level, they were the first rap act to be played on MTV, and they were

the first to be sponsored by a clothing company, Adidas. *The Source Magazine* included them in a list of the 10 most important events in Hip Hop for “Making Hip Hop fresh” (2002). Not only did they wear Superstars, but they had a song which arguably propelled the shoes to Hip Hop stardom, simply called “My Adidas”. It is an ode to the particular brand of sneakers, and still, young Hip Hop heads go to select stores to get a pair. This has had an impact on street fashion in general, and in 2004 Adidas even launched a 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary campaign with a range of limited edition specially designed Superstars.

## 2.4 Notes on language

Richardson places Hip Hop language within African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), commonly known as “Ebonics” (2005: 1). There are recognizable grammatical and phonetic distinctions in AAVE, and since this resonates in the lyrics I have chosen to analyze, some points need to be made about transcription. When I transcribe the lyrics, I do this semi-phonetically. There are two reasons for this. First of all there is the fact that like in any type of musical lyrics, lines rhyme with each other. If I were to “correct” the rappers as it were, and write the words of the lyrics in the standard form, some rhymes would likely disappear. The second, and most important reason, is that there exists within the subculture of Hip Hop a certain standardized way of writing words as they are pronounced. Where one would expect to find e.g. *for sure*, a Hip Hop head would write *fo’ sho’*. This phenomenon is perhaps most evident in graffiti art, where it is not unusual to write small comments or a dedication. It is also common to write *for* simply by the numerical 4. They are homophones, and the number requires only one symbol. I have tried to uphold a standard in my transcription, but there is one word that I have felt a need to write in two ways: *because*. A normal way of writing this is ‘*cos*, but I feel that it represents a more British pronunciation. ‘*Cuz* sounds (or looks) more American, and it is also the way in which it is most often written in Hip Hop contexts. In some instances, I have chosen to write it as *cause*. Sometimes it sounds as if though *be-* is dropped without the pronunciation being altered further. Finally, ‘*cuz* and *cause* show a stylistic difference where the former sounds more laid-back, as for example in Snoop Dogg’s rap.

An important aspect of transcribing AAVE is the lack of rhotacism. *Gangster rap*, for example, will henceforth be referred to as *gangsta rap*. This is not only how the word is pronounced in AAVE, it is written thus as well. Snoop Dogg’s studio album from 2004 is called *R&G (Rhythm & Gangsta)*. The replacement of *-er* by *-a* is most apparent in the



somewhat controversial use of *nigga*. One often hears rappers referring to themselves and each other as *nigga*. My friend is *my nigga*. It is uncertain when this happened, but one can hear it used in Blaxploitation movies from the early seventies, and soul singers like Curtis Mayfield sometimes used it. The use of *nigga* is not universally accepted among African-Americans, however, and Richardson, for example simply writes it as *N\_\_\_\_\_*. It is never acceptable, however, to pronounce it as *nigger*. The rhotic ending makes it irrevocably racist. Apart from the effort to transcribe lyrics as accurately as possible while making individual words legible, I will stress *-a* endings for the reason that I believe they contain social meaning. It seems like the persistent avoidance of rhotacism is a device with which speakers of AAVE distance themselves from the dominant culture, and white dominance. When white people are portrayed negatively in rap songs, the *-er* endings are emphasized. An example of this is the conclusion of NWA's *Fuck tha Police*, where a police officer is found guilty of being "a redneck, white bread chickenshit motherfucka". The officer's parting words are "Fuck you, you black motherfuckeeeeeerrrrrrrrrr". The *r* is prolonged to the extreme, compared to Dr. Dre's schwa ending on the same word.

An important part of Hip Hop as a subculture is the vocabulary, and slang is prevalent in rap lyrics. The majority of slang terms encountered are based on AAVE, and since Hip Hop originated in the Bronx, African-American slang has been adopted by most Hip Hop heads, be they African-American, British, French or Japanese. Very few terms can be said to be originally Hip Hop words; they tend to be existing words given slightly new meanings, such as *MC*, *spittin'* (rapping) or *backpacker*. As a practitioner of the subculture, I know many of these terms and use them actively, but they are not always self-evident. I shall provide the reader with a dictionary of sorts in an appendix. The words that are included here will be marked by a cross †. For reference, I have used the Urban Dictionary online ([urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com)). Due to its nature, the Urban Dictionary may seem like an unreliable source. It is an internet-based dictionary of slang terms where anyone can post definitions. As a dictionary then, it is reminiscent of Wikipedia in relation to a more controlled encyclopedia. The Urban Dictionary, however, is in a way an all-access continuously evolving dictionary of sociolects. There is some sort of quality control as users are free to post comments on all entries. I must be cautious when using it, however, and check a great many definitions before jumping to conclusions. Of course, homonymy occurs, but I mainly use the dictionary to find definitions of terms I already know through my subcultural activity. For example, if I look for a definition of *whip* I know that the definition I seek has to do with cars, not with controlling

someone or hitting someone with a gun. Possible synonyms are provided on the top of the page, and these can be clicked in order to find the relevant definition.

## **2.5 On background information**

My background as a Hip Hop head has been both a blessing and a curse. At the beginning of each of the chapters, I provide some background information on the branch of rap that is dealt with. I have also given a brief introduction to Hip Hop culture in chapter 1. Being a practitioner of Hip Hop for the better part of thirteen years, all of the information I have provided in this way is part of my cultural upbringing as it were. As such, I do not always provide references when I claim, for example, that KRS-One's artist name originated as his tag when he was a graffiti writer. For thirteen years, I have read magazines, watched television interviews, scoured the internet and gathered information through friends within the subculture. On the one hand, I have a good knowledge of the subject about which I write, on the other hand it has at times proved impossible to find references to information that I know to be true.

## Chapter 3 Gangster rap

“The streets is a muthafucka.

Dope game, rock game, cocaine, packages sold, pick a row.

Riding vogues, switching up as high as they go

Gotta let'em know the game, making money fo' sho”

-Krupt

### 3.1. Background

Gangster or gangsta rap can be held to account for re-creating the commercial Hip Hop scene after the short period of pop rap represented by such artists as MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice. West Coast rappers, Snoop Dogg and Warren G in particular, are arguably largely responsible for catching the attention of a new generation of youngsters outside the U.S. In 1994, after hearing such gangsta classics as *Gin'n Juice*, *Regulate* and *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, I replaced my Guns n' Roses t-shirt and red bandana with hoodies<sup>†</sup> and baseball hats. Although it was the beats that sparked my curiosity at first, the lyrics were what eventually drew me in and paved the path towards a subcultural identity.

When introduced to rap music, especially gangsta rap, one is easily struck by the evident self-referring lyrics. In gangsta rap, the lyrics often portray a character with money and street credibility. The term *gangsta rap* is not arbitrary – artists claim to be gang-related ex-criminals who would still not flinch if pulling a gun is an option when confronted. To a white middle-class teenager at the beginning of his search for an identity, this otherworldliness is undeniably tantalizing. Identifying oneself with individuals that are not to be messed with and have seemingly unlimited access to luxury and women is desirable. For my part, as I started listening to more and more gangsta rap, expanding my references to other artists etc. I began to realize that perhaps the lifestyle portrayed was not as glamorous as it seemed at first. Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* may contain several references to money and conquest, but when one really listens to it, it is an account of African-Americans' struggles and a harsh comment to the events leading up to the riots in L.A.

In this chapter, I shall look at reality construction. Some attention will be given to social comment apparent in gangsta rap, mainly through NWA's work. My main concern will be with the gangsta rapper's representation of himself and the reality he experiences. Due to

my own development from a “Wigger<sup>†</sup>” to a more culturally conscious Hip Hop head, I will pay much attention to the artist’s lifestyle. On the one hand there is the power-struggle between the sexes, and on the other hand a rap career may be construed as another way of choosing an alternative path to the lifestyle of a gangster. For the second part, I shall use the intricate lyrics of the recently successful gangsta rap group “The Clipse”.

### **3.2. Gangster Rap in the Golden era and the Coast War**

Gangster imagery has been present in rap right from the onset. There is for example the culminating concert scene in the classic Hip Hop movie *Wildstyle* from 1982. Here, the rap group Double Trouble bring fake Tommy Guns on stage, and are even dressed up as classical movie-type gangsters (Chang 2005: 184-187). Old School rap had very little lyrical content referring to “gangsterism”, however. In the beginning rap lyrics were oriented towards what rap really is: an extension of the block party culture. A good example of this is The Treacherous Three’s *Whip It* from 1982. This is early studio rap, and resembles the way in which MCs were initially a backup to the sound system, an extra instrument. They’re presenting a dance move, apparently, and are constantly urging the crowd to have a good time: “Because the object right here is just to have some fun, so have fun!” The introduction of message rap with Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s *The Message* marked the start of more realistic and somber rap. I will deal with message rap in another chapter, and thus leave this for now. Interestingly, the first rap song recorded, *Rapper’s Delight*, contained a lot of references to the rappers’ high quality of life, which is what most people (non-Hip Hoppers) today will expect from rap music.

When people talk about KRS-One, they usually think about his anti-violence, pro-Hip Hop, socially conscious lyrics. He is known as, among other things, Tha Teacha, one of the founders of the “Stop the Violence” movement and the Temple of Hip Hop, as well as being arguably the best MC to ever rock the mic. He burst on to the scene, however, as part of the group Boogie Down Productions with his mentor and DJ Scott la Rock in 1987 with the album *Criminal Minded*. The album is a monolith in Hip Hop history, and has influenced the genre musically on several levels. It is one of the albums that either came one year too early for, or possibly sparked, the Golden Era from 1988 to 1994. Musically, it is a timeless album, unabashedly sampling funky James Brown beats, reggae and even the heavy metal group AC/DC’s *Back in Black*. The album is relatively short, but contains multitudes. It was an early bridge between rap and reggae as well, with KRS rapping with a Caribbean accent in some

verses. *The Bridge Is Over* is seen by some as the symbol of beef songs, being one installment in the Boogie Down Productions vs. The Juice Crew or Bronx vs. Queens battle (this song was also hailed in *The Source*'s 100th anniversary issue in 1998 as having "The Phattest Beat" ever). In addition to this, it contains some of the earliest first person gangsta narratives in *9mm Goes Bang* and *P is Free*. In the British Hip Hop magazine *Hip Hop Connection*'s issue #210 (2006), KRS One was named one of the 20 most influential people in Rap music because he introduced contradiction to Rap. As mentioned above, KRS is one of the most outspoken advocates of non-violence and peace. During his concert in Oslo in July of 2006 (which I was blessed to attend), he suddenly mid-rhyme yelled out "Break it up, break it up!" and subsequently ran off stage and into the crowd, and broke up a fight that had started between two fans. Yet his debut album can be seen as a blueprint to all gangsta albums for at least ten years after its release. As he states himself in *Ova Here* (2002):

People say I'm condradictin, cause I'm all about peace,  
To say the least, with a violent history.

In 1988, it seemed that pandemonium was unleashed. Two landmark albums saw the light of day. Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* and NWA's *Straight Outta Compton* (Chang 2005: 231-261 & 299-329) I will not be talking about Public Enemy here, as theirs is not technically gangsta rap. I was uncertain as to whether I would write about NWA or not, as a great deal has been written about them already. It seems impossible to talk about gangsta rap without mentioning "Niggaz With Attitude", however. *Criminal Minded* may have been one of the catalysts, but *Straight Outta Compton* is arguably the album that put gangsta and California on the rap map. Their highly controversial song on this album, *Fuck tha Police*, takes the form of a mock trial, "The case of NWA vs. the Police Department", and the rappers' verses are their testimonies. Ice Cube's voice rings out like a gunshot in the opening verse:

Fuck the police coming straight from the underground  
A young nigga got it bad cause I'm brown.  
And not the other color so the police think  
They have the authority to kill a minority.  
[...]  
Fucking with me cause I'm a teenager

With a little bit of gold and a pager.  
Searching my car, looking for the products  
Thinking every nigga is selling narcotics.

This verse in a sense sums up the view of despair that many young black people have when it comes to their place in society, how they are viewed as a group, and the way in which law enforcement representatives act discriminately towards them, based on these assumptions. It is important to note that this comes before the Rodney King charges. Gangsta rap documents a concern and a situation that people have been conscious of also prior to that catalytic event. NWA may seem like romping, crime loving thugs to most listeners, but they, especially lead rapper Ice Cube, make it clear that they are not endorsing the lifestyles they depict; they are in fact documenting a problematic situation. The track *Gangsta Gangsta* is a documentary of a gangsta's situation and violent "job description". Ice Cube raps on most of it, and opens with these lines:

Here's a little story bout a nigga like me  
Never should'a been let out the penitentiary

He gives a thorough description of why and how he is a menace to society. It is interesting to note that while many points are exaggerated, and the protagonist in the text is a fictional character, he is also Ice Cube himself, which creates a duality in the character. He shows frustration at criticism of the group's lyrics with the classic lines

Do I look like a motherfucking role model?  
To a kid looking up to me:  
Life ain't nothin' but bitches and money!

It is clear that while depicting a hopeless situation, Cube is not ready to cover it up in order to give "the kids" a lesson in choosing the right path. It seems that this option may not be realistic to black youth. Their claim to being "ghetto journalists" resounds in the refrain, sampling KRS-One in the second line:

Gangsta, gangsta, that's what they yellin'  
It's not about a salary, it's all about reality.  
Gangsta, gangsta, that what they sellin'

Hoping you sophisticated motherfuckers hear what I have to say

Where exactly are they coming from? Are they modern day beats who realize there are problems in society, but decide there's nothing one can do about it? It may be that there is some despair in the situation, and that leading a life of crime is the only viable option. Ass Snoop Dogg raps in *Lil' Ghetto Boy* (1992).

We expose ways for the youth to survive  
Some think it's wrong, but we tend to think it's right.  
So make all them ends you can make  
Cause when you're broke you break.

This is a central theme in a lot of rap lyrics, especially in gangsta rap. Low expectations as to educational possibilities and lack of work are gargantuan problems for many black people in the US, and what can one do when it's hard to make ends meet? Big L's (1971-1999) first and only album (1995) while he was still alive takes up some of these problems, but as a battle rapper, Big L is more concerned about boasting how well off his rapping has made him. He nonetheless criticizes other rappers of "taking the rap game for granted", not realizing what an immense gift it is to have a legal way out. He also comments on the job problem, and how low-pay work will restrict a man's chances of success with the other sex in *No endz, no skinz*. The name of the album is as basic and all telling as can be: *Lifestylez ov Da Poor and Dangerous*. Being a master lyricist, L humorously tells of his childhood in poverty: "I wasn't poor, I was 'po', I couldn't afford the O-R". This works on another level in addition to the humorous effect. In African American Vernacular English, "poor" will usually be pronounced that way, "po". By making a point of the pronunciation, Big L emphasizes the poverty as a "black" situation. L also made a song in 1998 called *Ebonics*, which is basically a crash course in African American slang.

A dark, yet nevertheless important, chapter in this period was the conflict between the East and West coasts. Dr. Dre's Death Row Records reigned supreme after the releases of his own record *Tha Chronic* (1992) and Snoop Doggy Dogg's debut album *Doggystyle* (1993). Death Row records had been involved with "beef"<sup>†</sup> right from the onset. The break-up of NWA, of which Dre was a member, was a bitter one, and the opening track of *Tha Chronic* is essentially a dis-track aimed at former NWA members, Eazy-E in particular, and the 2 Live Crew. A young, virtually unknown Snoop raps masterly and boasts of Death Row's

impending claim to power. In 1994, Dr. Dre made a short movie called *Murder Was the Case*, based on the song with the same title from *Doggystyle*. The movie's soundtrack is Dre's real masterpiece, however, and showcases a lot of West Coast gangsta rappers, including Snoop's crew "Tha Doggpound". I will come back to Tha Doggpound in greater detail in my chapter on Snoop, but I'll have to say a little here, as Death Row were among the catalysts of what was to come. Tha Doggpound's funky *What Would U Do?* is yet another dis-track in what seems to be the initial tradition of Death Row artists' lyrical content. Dissing is a fundamental part of rap lyrics, as I mentioned in the introductory chapter, and being a young rapper signed by the legendary Dr. Dre has to be a confidence booster. It was soon to get out of hand, however. Nearing the end of Dr. Dre's time in Death Row, Suge Knight, the highly controversial CEO, paid rapper Tupac Shakur's bail money, and signed him to "Tha Row". Tupac was already a highly acclaimed rapper, but the move to Death Row sky-rocketed his career, and firmly established Death Row as the dominant Hip Hop label. Tupac's move to the West Coast was not to be unproblematic. Originally New York-based, he was a good friend of The Notorious B.I.G., the pillar of "the other coast". Biggie was on Sean "Puffy" Combs's label Bad Boy Records, at the time the only real commercial competition to Death Row. An enormous conflict emerged. What started as a conflict between Tupac and Biggie, blatantly illustrated in Tupac's *Hit'em Up*, quickly escalated into a cold war between the two coasts' claim to being the best or the "realest". What could, theoretically, have been a positive creative force based on the more or less friendly rivalry that sparked early MCs' stylistic evolution, ended tragically. On September 7<sup>th</sup> 1996, after a Mike Tyson fight in Las Vegas, Tupac was shot in the car where he and Suge Knight were sitting. Six days later, the news a whole world feared came; Tupac was dead. I remember I broke down. To me, this was "the day the music died". Even more people probably felt the same half a year later. On March 8<sup>th</sup> 1997, Biggie was shot and killed after a promotional tour in L.A. Two icons, and the flagships of their respective coasts, were gone. What would happen to Hip Hop? Soon after the last killing, Snoop and Tha Doggpound met with Puffy and other representatives from Bad Boy to call a truce, "squash the beef". None of the murders have been solved, but it seems unlikely any of the record labels were behind them. Puffy and Snoop, for example, have worked together on several occasions, and even toured together in the beginning of this year. Hip Hop did not die, but it would never be the same.



### 3.3. Post Tupac and Biggie gangsta rap

In the years that directly followed these tragic events, gangster rap continued, for a little while, the way it had. Snoop Dogg released his last record on Death Row *Tha Dogfather*, and Tupac's last album *Don Kiluminati: The 7 Day Theory* was released posthumously. Death Row Records was crumbling, and Kurupt from Tha Doggpound started releasing records on his own label Antra. The content on some of these records will be dealt with in greater detail later, but Kurupt made his mark by dissing almost the entire spectrum of prominent gangster rappers. This may or may not have to do with his failed relationship to female rapper Foxy Brown. Among the artists he lunges at are: The Firm (a super-group consisting of Nas, Foxy Brown, AZ and Nature), Mobb Deep, DMX and Ja Rule. Bad Boy artists are left alone.

Foxy is particularly interesting here, because she represents a new type of female rapper, together with Lil' Kim, a Bad Boy rapper, and B.I.G.'s on and off girlfriend. These rivals are strong representatives of rappers who take male dominated sexism and turn it into the theme of their own music. Their videos are intensely sexualized and the album covers resemble pin-ups. Especially Lil' Kim's lyrics are raunchy at best and at times rivals pornographic literature in explicitness. The shock factor is close to immeasurable. Why is it shocking? Male rappers have been doing this for years. They have been met with a lot of negative criticism, yes, but to the mainstream listener, it seems as if "boys will be boys" is the general mentality. But when a woman steps up and enters the same discourse, it seems we all tend to become somewhat traditional in our views. Male rappers' "I'll do this and that to you" is countered by "you better do this and that to me" and even copying the males' advances and tales of conquest. It seems as if they use young black men's fear of the black woman's sexuality. Misogynous rhymes have partially been explained with black men's status measured in success with the opposite sex combined with their fears and frustrations thereof (Richardson 2006: 58-60). The shock effect, the videos and, of course good beats and the fact that they are both good rappers, resulted in very good sales for both. The important thing, however, is that they forced their way into a very male dominated domain. There had been female gangster rappers before, such as The Lady of Rage, but until now sex-rhymes had been, at least in publicly accessible songs, an overwhelmingly male phenomenon.

I would like to jump a few years ahead, to 2002. Two very important gangster rap albums, with two different and highly interesting stories were released. Dr. Dre's new label Aftermath had already enjoyed fantastic success with Eminem, and now the stage was set for the doctor's new artist, 50 Cent. His album *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* was an overnight success, and astonished the public and even Hip Hop pundits. One thing was the man's ability to rap;

another was the story that came with him. 50 Cent, or “Fiddy”, claimed to be a true, straight off the streets gangster. His trademark is his slurring rap, and his at times childlike pronunciation. This is a result of him having once been shot in the head in a gang dispute. 50 has milked the fact that he has been shot several times for all it’s worth. It puts weight behind his claims to a gangster background, and adds to his authenticity, his “realness”. The notion of “realness” is extremely important in Hip Hop. I will come back to it both in the chapter on Snoop Dogg, and on conscious rappers. “Keepin’ it real” is an expression which is used and abused over and over, and plays on the authenticity that made rap so thrilling to the general public in the first place. It almost seems as if some rappers do not dare to rely on their music to be appealing, and that they need to uphold the fascinating effect of “the other”, that is, the underprivileged kid from the ghetto that is but a myth to the mainstream white suburban audience. There is another important facet to “Get Rich”: the song *P.I.M.P.* is a massive document of the turn gangsta rap took after ‘Pac and Biggie. Some even call it a new style of rap altogether: pimp rap. Where gangsta rap had documented the harsh realities of a life where crime seems like the only way out, pimp rap documents, or dreams about, the result: the flashy, luxurious life one can lead if one’s criminal endeavors are successful. This is also a life accessible to successful recording artists, but framing it in a gangster-like setting somehow improves the aforementioned authenticity of it. Gangster rap’s lyrical content has definitely changed on the surface, but what lies behind has also changed. As I have already mentioned, I consider rap to be part of an African-American oral tradition, which reproduces and recontextualizes itself. Where gangster rap played on the early Badman or Bad Nigger-mythos (Richardson), pimp rap finds inspiration in the pimp narrative. Badmen and pimps will be discussed in chapter five.

In the same year, another monolithic album was released. Pusha T and Malice, two brothers from Virginia, constitute The Clipse, and their album *Lord Willin’* is one of the most groundbreaking works within Hip Hop, and stands out as an important stylistic moment. Hip Hop Connection hailed it as the fifth best Hip Hop album released between 1995 and 2005 (HHC vol.198). Musically, it is a fantastically produced album, and proved what a brilliant producer Pharell from the Neptunes is. Lyrically, Pusha and Malice emerge as some of the best MCs in the game. As former cocaine dealers, their stories are as authentic as those of NWA or 50 Cent, if not more. They also show, or rather hide, a KRS-One type of contradiction, as they are quite open about their criminal endeavors, and, yet, are as “real” as can be when it comes to Hip Hop. I shall deal with the Clipse’s lyrical content below. The interesting thing they show when talking about the change in gangster rap, however, is that

their own chronological narratives show the dichotomy between gangsta rap and pimp rap beautifully blended together over a barrage of hard-hitting, supernaturally well-produced tracks.

### 3.4. The Clipse: Lord Willin' (2002)

The Clipse's debut album<sup>9</sup> is an important milestone in modern rap music. Not only is it arguably one of the greatest albums in the Hip Hop canon, it is also immensely interesting in its lyrical content. Produced by one of the most critically acclaimed producers in the millennium's first decade, Pharell Williams, the stage is set for Malice and Pusha-T from Virginia to dazzle anyone willing to listen to their autobiography as big-time cocaine dealers. Southern rap, with honorable exceptions, is usually thought of as being up-tempo, dance floor friendly "club bangers" with simple, repetitive rhymes. Pharell has, in what I personally consider his best work to this day, laid down tracks that are definitely danceable, but also pleasing to the ears of skeptical, hardcore Hip Hop heads. Had I not known Malice and Pusha were from the south, I would have never guessed it, as Pharell's sound was something completely new at the time and as such somewhat non-definable with respect to space.

Although I cannot allow myself to let the pure musical genius of this album go un-applauded, my main focus is, of course, on the rappers. Malice and Pusha-T are brothers born in the Bronx and grown up in Virginia. In their lyrics, they make no attempt to hide their history of drug dealing, yet their stories do not seem exaggerated or pretentious. What we hear is simply an account of what has been going on in their lives. What, in other words, might sound like a renaissance of traditional West Coast gangster rap, is (although maybe not as critical) more honest and as such seems at first to actually be as glorifying towards criminal life as e.g. NWA were accused of. Right from the onset, Pusha sets the stage, presenting himself as a life-long drug dealer and at the same time distancing himself from the Hip Hop game:

Player, we ain't the same, I'm into 'caine<sup>†</sup> and guns  
Show par with the fishes, make the face lift numb,  
Out in Panama with that amazing sun, I'm amazing, son  
You niggas wonder where my grace is from

---

<sup>9</sup> They have, in fact, recorded an album previous to this, also produced by Williams. The first single failed gravely, however, and the album was quickly pulled by record company Elektra, and the Clipse released from their contract. (Wikipedia)

[...]

Recognized the underworld since I was young

[...]

My mama should've seen it comin'

Me runnin' up the stairs too quick

Hummin' Miami Vice theme music

In the second line, “Show par with the fishes” might be a reference to “fishscale”, a highly potent type of cocaine which incidentally gave the name to Ghostface Killah’s 2006 album. “Make the face lift numb” definitely seems to refer to Pusha as a dealer. A numb face is an often-cited effect of cocaine. In the intro to Ghostface’s *Kilo* on the aforementioned album, he mumbles “I can’t feel my face, yo”. Further into the rhyme, Pusha starts with his history, stating that he started early and humorously referring to Miami Vice. As with most “cop and robber” shows, some kids like the cops, some the robbers. Gangsters in movies etc. from the 70s and 80s in particular were portrayed as having flashy lifestyles with big homes, fancy cars and women. Although Pusha-T is probably not saying he chose this lifestyle because of Miami Vice, it is more likely that this refers to images of a desired lifestyle and the ways in which to obtain it. But this may not have been the only gateway, however. Malice continues:

I even went by the book at first

Until I realized 9 to 5 wouldn't quench my thirst, so I

Start my mission, leave my residence

Mama knew that a child like me had better sense

But something had to give, that's real, I had to live

I chefed<sup>†</sup> that soft white and pumped from her crib<sup>†</sup>

Scouts honor started with my grandmama

Who distributed yay<sup>†</sup> she had flown in from the Bahamas.

This verse starts with a recurring theme in gangster rap. Legal jobs simply won't do if one wishes to obtain a glamorous lifestyle. Herein lays one of the problems when gangster rappers attempt to defend the criminal path to money. On the one hand, it seems like unemployment is not such a big problem after all, since many (in their lyrics) opt to leave their regular work in order to pursue a gangster's life. At the same time, when they refer to “9 to 5” it will probably be low paid jobs that are being referred to, as there are small prospects of finding well paid

work. As Big L states in *Lifestyles Ov Da Poor and Dangerous* on the album of the same name:

My moms told me to get a job, fuck that  
Aiyo, picture me gettin' a job  
Takin' orders from Bob, sellin' corn on the cob  
Yo, how the hell I'ma make ends meet  
Makin' about a hun' twenty dollars a week?  
Man, I rather do another hit  
I want clean clothes, mean hoes<sup>†</sup>, and all that other shit.

However, there is another recurring element in Pusha's rhyme as well. He actually states that his own grandmother was dealing cocaine (yay). In the album's second track *Young Boy*, the tales of the brothers' youth continue. Malice raps:

I was about four when I walked past that door  
That should have been closed where I first witnessed the raw  
See in my household it was quite unique  
Playin' hide and seek you might find a key<sup>†</sup>

This is an example of the fatalism that haunts many gangster rappers. One is born into this kind of life. Either your family or your neighborhood is already in some way a criminal environment. Or you are born so underprivileged that the only option to a low paid job is hustling. In Malice and Pusha-T's case, the situation would be the former.

Pal's my role model in that Lincoln Continental  
Bought all my friends Icees, it was 'bout 6  
And when he pulled off I was like, See told ya we was rich  
How I turned out let it be no surprise  
When they speak of cousin Ricky it brings tears to my eyes  
See, my family got a history of hustlers  
Lil' brother, big brother, mother to grandmother  
Its tradition

The first single from the album, *Grindin'*, is brilliant on many levels. This was the main public's, myself included, introduction to The Clipse. The beat on this song, especially in the hook, bears witness to the minimalism that helps make this record a work of genius. The setting for the video is quite standard for rap videos, with the rappers and their homies<sup>†</sup> outside a local diner, nodding to the beat in their basketball shirts. Malice and Pusha T are at the centre with Pharrell. The way Pharrell is dressed is quite significant. While Malice and Pusha are dressed in basketball shirts and college jackets, Pharrell sports an Adidas track suit with a trailer hat, looking more like an old school Hip Hop head than part of a gangster rap group from the new millennium. The hat he wears has the N.E.R.D. (Pharrell's original group) logo. It works as an advertisement, of course, but might also place him as the nerd who masterminds Clipse's music. As Pusha T, as one of the MCs and as such a front figure, puts it:

Platinum on the block with consistent hits  
While Pharrell keeps talking this music shit

This shows how Malice and Pusha attempt to distance themselves from the music. They are, by chance it appears, simply better than most at rapping, but they are first of all gangsters. This is a recurrent theme in their lyrics, and although they later admit to being more "real" than they claim, this distance works very well towards establishing the authenticity of their lyrics. In the first verse of *Cot Damn*, which takes up the theme of why someone will make the choice of pushing drugs, Malice twice refers to his 'main vocation':

You mistook me for a rapper, huh?  
Well that makes me an actor, 'cause I would rather clap a gun.  
[...]  
And I leave it to y'all to freestyle and battle and shit  
That's not me, I'm more at home with the chrome<sup>†</sup>  
Or that play with the yay<sup>†</sup>, moving twelve for a zone, I'm gone.

The song (*Grindin'*) itself is undeniably funky, simplicity aside, and I must admit that when I first heard it, I thought it was about grinding as in dancing. *Grindin'* has numerous other meanings, however, as the Urban Dictionary ([urbandictionary .com](http://urbandictionary.com)) will tell us; one of these

alternate meanings is “distributing drugs” (this song is even cited as one of the examples of this use of the word). As this was the first single the group released, it sets the tone for their further career, and will most likely have left an eternal mark. As I have been saying throughout my account of The Clipse’s lyrics, they make a point of being drug dealers, and succeed in conveying their image right from the start. This song with the word *grindin’* resounding throughout the chorus has brilliantly evaded the strict censorship enforced by numerous television networks. Years before this, Luniz’s hit single *I Got 5 on it*, a song about smoking marihuana, had large stretches of missing lyrics on e.g. MTV. In 2001, The Clipse basically kept saying “we deal drugs” over and over again in their song and got away with it!

The last song I shall look at from this album is the unlikely love song *Ma, I Don’t Love Her*. Malice and Pusha are attempting to comfort their jealous girlfriends. This is, as one can see in the video, classic gangsta/pimp rap about the player’s “problems” with entertaining numerous women at the same time. The video starts with Malice waking up with girls all over the house. His wife comes home and rings the doorbell. Chaos unfolds as Malice hides girls under the sofa, in closets etc. while his wife is standing impatiently outside. As he finally opens the door and hugs his wife, he ushers all the girls out the backdoor. This has been done many times in similarly themed videos. The wife gets an evasive explanation, partly denying his unfaithfulness, partly saying “you knew what you walked in to”. He also shows the mentality of distribution of power, his being wealth and the ability to provide for his wife:

When we met I was talking that game  
Parking that thang  
Since then between us  
A lot of things changed  
Now it’s like the world got a whole different name  
I can’t stop chicks from saying my name  
Most of it’s lies  
If not, don’t be surprised  
You knew I was ballin’<sup>†</sup> when I met you  
But really, I started layin’ low just to net you  
I’m raw as hell, yet can’t deny that you special  
These girls can’t either  
Winter, his and her Vivas  
Summer, his and her Louis sneakers

You don't think that bother people  
Guess again, you even need to check your friends  
Saying that I cheat  
Right, maybe with my heat<sup>†</sup>  
Got a pearl-handled chrome<sup>†</sup> thing that I call Sweets  
I greet with her, creep with her, even eat with her  
Late nights under my sheets, yeah I sleep with her  
But that's it

I regard this one verse as dense in thematic relevance. The opening lines describe Malice as a player, highly successful with the opposite sex due to his reputation as a gangster. This is the start of the explanation he gives to his wife about him being a *balla*<sup>†</sup> already when they met. However, she might have misunderstood as he was “laying low” in order to win her affection. As blunt as “I started laying low just to net you” sounds, this is a quite usual declaration of love as it were in this type of song. He is basically saying that “look, I can have any woman I want, but when I met you I made sacrifices so that I could court you to the fullest”. He even says further down that “[I] can't deny that you special”. It seems that unfaithfulness is somehow accepted as an “occupational hazard”. The point of the song is that he admits to sleeping around, but he does not love his mistress, and even though he does not say it in so many words, he is declaring his love for his wife. This reminds me of a classic line from comedian Eddie Murphy's show *Raw*. He talks of the situation where a woman finds her boyfriend in bed with another woman, and according to mister Murphy, the winning excuse is “Yes, YES, I fucked her! But I make love to YOU!”

He is also claiming that most of what is said about his affairs is untrue, and that it is based on envy, as he and his wife have quite a luxurious life with Louis Vuitton sneakers etc. As Malice says, they are most of all jealous of the wife, who has access to this lifestyle, and, as we will see from the chorus, the main reason for the rumors is to make her leave him. In addition, it is made clear that material goods is a benefit the wife reaps, and is also used by Malice and Pusha (who do the chorus together) to explain why the wife or girlfriend is their main “choice”, and not whoever they are “creeping<sup>†</sup>” with.

Ma, I don't love her  
Don't listen to her words



She tryin' to split us as lovebirds  
But that's not it  
Now, you see me buyin' her whips<sup>†</sup>'n shit? [no]  
You see me sendin' her on trips'n shit? [no]  
If the answer's "no" don't forget  
[how she know you then?]  
I don't know

### 3.5. The Clipse: Hell Hath No Fury (2006)

The Clipse's much anticipated sophomore album starts on a somber, yet triumphant note as Pusha T raps:

Fear him, as soon as you hear him  
Upon my arrival, the dope dealers cheer him  
Just like a revival, the verse seems to steer'em  
Through a life in the fast lane, like German engineerum<sup>10</sup>  
No serum can cure all the pain I've endured  
From crack to rap to back to selling it pure.

The first four lines describe Pusha's street credibility, that he is a man to be feared due to his criminal past and apparent support among pushers. He also seems to boast that he has in some way, through his music, been tutoring up and coming drug dealers; "the verse seems to steer'em through a life in the fast lane". At the same time, he laments a suspected evil circle in the dealer's life. Despite a successful career in music, he goes back to selling drugs, albeit pure cocaine as opposed to crack. The myths surrounding Easy E's alleged crack-based funding of NWA's debut is not unique. Several highly profiled rappers such as Fat Joe (Nicknamed Joe Crack) and E-40, openly claim to be active dealers. In the aforementioned *Fishscale*, Ghostface Killah states in *Kilo* that:

They say a drug dealer's destiny is reaching the key  
I'd rather be the man behind the door supplying the streets

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<sup>10</sup> It is not certain what is said here. It sounds like "engineerum" and this is also what is has been cited on the Original Hip Hop Lyrics Archive (ohhla.com). A guess would be that this has to do with cars, and that it is a reference to German engines, made to rhyme.

No doubt a successful recording career would provide funds with which to build a drug enterprise and with the alleged backgrounds of many rappers, sufficient “work experience” would be available. No doubt the drug business is lucrative, and as back men, these already wealthy artists might “expand their chips” under the old slogan *you’ve got to spend money to make money*. It seems somewhat unrealistic, however, as being busted for drugs means years in prison. It is more likely that the drug dealer image is the pimp in other robes. Pimp narratives and the image derived thereof will be discussed further in the chapter about Snoop Dogg. All the same, it seems like the brothers are not ready to give up their trade just yet. A different take on Ghostface’s *Kilo* is *Keys Open Doors* – pun intended, I believe. Pusha T opens the song:

I ain’t spent one rap dollar in three years, holler!  
Money’s the least, drag a bitch by her dog collar  
Now, hoe, follow. This is my ghetto story  
Like Cham, Ice-P is the Don Dotta  
Open the Frigidaire, 25 to life in here  
So much white you might you might think ya Holy Christ is near  
[...]  
The realest shit I ever wrote, not Pac inspired  
It’s crack pot inspired, my real niggas quote  
Bitch never cook my coke! Why? Never trust a whore with your child

He claims that it is the realest he has ever written, and yet he calls himself Ice-P and refers to gangster movies. There is also a reference to Tupac, and seemingly Pusha does not buy his lyrics. These statements can go two ways, as it either means that it is true that this is real, or that Pusha T does in fact regard Tupac’s lyrics as “real” (as many people would) and that he flips the script in that way. Equally interesting is the time-frame he sets up. He claims to not have spent one rap dollar in three years. *Hell Hath No Fury* was released in 2006, but it was heavily delayed and it is quite feasible that this song was recorded in 2005 – three years after their debut. This would mean that he has actually never spent any money earned from recording. He adds to his credibility by referring to his cocaine as his child, and by the fact that their own record label under which they release mix tapes is called Re-up Records. To

Re-up is a term used about acquiring more drugs when one is running low  
(urbandictionary.com)

Malice and Pusha continue flaunting their success with women based on their monetary and social power in *Dirty Money*. This is a different take on the previous album's *Ma, I don't Love Her*, and tells about superficial relationships based on money, sex and status. The chorus brilliantly sums up the theme:

All my fly<sup>†</sup> bitches like (Dirty money, dirty money)  
All my stripper bitches like (Dirty money, dirty money)  
All my college hoes like (Dirty money, dirty money)  
Don't it spend so right? (Dirty money, dirty money)  
Now let's go shopping, let's go chill  
Let's go buy them new Louis Vuitton heels  
Ass in La Perla, ears full of pearls  
Damn, dirty money know how to treat the girls

This differs from many other “money-equals-women” songs (although it is not unique), in that it stresses that the money's illicit history is a key factor. As mentioned, status is important, and being favored by a baller<sup>†</sup>, be it rapper or gangster, seems to be just as important as material status symbols. Spinning, I believe, on the myth that for an American girl, marrying a doctor is as good a career move as getting an education, Malice raps:

You done got you a rapper, I see ya vision,  
And one of the best too, that's ambition!  
You could tell me 'bout ya day, I'll pretend I listen  
And you ain't got to love me, just be convincing.

The third and fourth line show how superficial this type of relationship is, and that it is ultimately an exchange of goods, status for sexual favors, which in turns gives status to the male part of the “deal”. At the end of the song, Malice suddenly seems to flip the script in what might be more complex than it looks at first:

Before I'ma bicker with you ma, I'ma switch ya  
I fly'em quick, fly'em out even quicker

By no means am I in love with a stripper  
You understand that then you fitting the glass slipper

The first two lines are an explanation of how fast he obtains and discards women. But the third and fourth lines resemble a deeper desire. It plays on T Pain's *I'm in Love with a Stripper*, strippers being portrayed in rap videos as the group of women with most power, i.e. sexuality, and also the most desirable object in the race for status. The glass slipper obviously refers to the fairy tale of Cinderella, and as such, to put it cheap, he might be looking for his princess. This, then, might be a message to any woman wanting a deeper relationship to not come out like a stripper or attempting to win the rapper's attention through blatant displays of promiscuousness. It might be also be a warning, though. He might simply be saying "I am not in love with you", and asking the lady in question to accept this. In the fifth chapter, Snoop Dogg and to a certain extent the Doggpound will be scrutinized, and in their early years, "We don't love'em hoes" was a recurring slogan, and a great deal of their lyrics resembled *Dirty Money*.

### **3.6 Summing up**

After the explosion of crunk, gangsta rap may not hold the commercial position it once did, but it seems that many of the presuppositions people have about Hip Hop in general are still based on gangsta lyrics. Admittedly, recent artists such as 50 cent, G-Unit and most of the crunk artists base almost their entire lyrical content on the gangsta imagery, enforcing the presuppositions in the process. Lyrics such as Clipse's may seem to glorify crime and degrade women, but by investigating the background one can start seeing that there are more facets to it. I am not defending misogyny or the suggestions of choosing a criminal lifestyle, but I feel it is important to understand what inspires such lyrics. In the end, Malice and Pusha T are painting a picture of their own reality and portraying social conventions and problems they encounter in their life amplified, of course, by their economic situation and status as celebrities.

**Primary sources:**

Big L (1995) *Lifestylez ov da Poor & Dangerous* New York: Columbia Records

The Clipse (2002) *Lord Willin'* Virginia: Arista 2002

The Clipse (2006) *Hell Hath No Fury* Virginia: Re-Up/Arista 2006

Eazy E (1987) *Boyz'n the Hood* Single 1987 on the compilation *Spirit of Hip Hop* Paris:  
Wagram Music 2001

Ghostface Killah (2006) *Fishscale* New York: Def Jam Recordings

NWA (1988) *Straight Outta Compton* California: Ruthless/Priority

## Chapter 4 Conscious rap

“So the next time you write a rhyme  
Make sure your representing Hip Hop in every line”  
-Cipher Complete

### 4.1 Background

Rap music can be divided into several sub-categories. The roughest division would be originally geographic – East Coast, West Coast and Southern. This division has to do with historical background, and the evolution of different styles throughout the eighties and nineties. Beats, sample use, rapping style and lyrical content are some of the factors that can make an experienced listener distinguish these quite easily. When I say the division is historical, this means that you do not have to live in Virginia or Houston to make Southern rap. Fat Joe’s (from Brooklyn) latest album is very influenced by Southern rap and, for example, Danish rapper L.O.C. from Aarhus’s music is undoubtedly West Coast. One can further divide rap into fractions of style based on the same elements into categories such as gangsta rap (NWA), Britcore (Skinny man), hardcore (M.O.P), horror core (Necro), Crunk (Lil’ John), conscious (Talib Kweli) etc. Many of these share elements, and some divisions seem unnecessary, either because they have appeared around the same time or they have fused over the years. As an example, some people would perhaps call M.O.P., Mobb Deep or Biggie Smalls hardcore, but I would not be opposed if anyone were to call them gangsta. The difference between ‘hardcore’ and ‘gangsta’, as far as I can see, is that those that were initially labeled ‘hardcore’ came from the East Coast. At the same time, if someone asks me to ‘put on some gangstashit’, I would unfailingly reach for a West Coast album, e.g. Dogg Pound, and not Mobb Deep. Gangsta rap was covered in the previous chapter, so enough of that. This chapter will be concerned with a historically predominantly East Coast category – conscious rap.

Originating in 1982 with Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s *The Message*, this category has also been coined ‘message rap’ (Chang 2005). I feel a further categorization is necessary here. First of all, we have two ‘temporal categories’ – old school and new school. The latter is quite possibly a category that builds upon the former. ‘Old school’ is a fuzzy category in a way. In 1988, on his second album, only nine years after *Rapper’s Delight*, KRS-One complained about being called old school. He retorts on the track *I’m Still #1*:

Rap is still an art, and no-one's from the old school  
    'cuz rap is still a brand new tool  
I say no-one's from the old school 'cuz rap on a whole  
    Isn't even twenty years old  
Fifty years down the line we can start this  
    'cuz we'll be the old school artists

According to 'Tha Teacha' then, there will be no old school before roughly 2038. This is all a great exaggeration, of course. When I started getting into Hip Hop around 1993-94, old school was to us easily definable. Music from before the Golden Age, of course, and since I was sucked in by Death Row Records, the break-up of NWA demarked old school for my part. I have a different view now, and now it seems the deaths of Tupac and Biggie are the 'milestones'. But, as I mentioned, the boundary is very fuzzy. Perhaps the old school ends with the fall of the original Rawkus Records and with it the somewhat commercial success of independent rap, or perhaps it was the rise of 50 Cent. Maybe the old school is what was before Hip Hop became commercial, i.e. before Sugarhill released *Rapper's Delight*.

The reason I am so preoccupied with the definition of old school is because I will be talking about a particular aspect of conscious rap. It is not the obvious social consciousness, the modern protest songs or the Black Bob Dylans that I will be focusing on here. My main topic is the fact that nearly all so-called conscious rappers are very concerned with the state of Hip Hop today. 'Today' can mean almost any day from 2007 back to the late eighties, depending on the time at which concerns have been expressed. By reminiscing about how Hip Hop was and should still be and preaching what it ought not to be, these rappers are creating an ideology of Hip Hop rather than representing what it has evolved into. KRS-One is arguably the most 'Hip Hop conscious' MC of them all and yet, contradictive as always, partly denies the notion of old school. As recently as on his long anticipated reconciliation and conglomeration with Marley Marl, in one of the tracks *All Skool*, KRS claims that "I'm not old school or new school, I'm all school". What he tries to express with this, I believe, is that as a true Hip Hop head and a self-proclaimed teacher (bordering, in fact, on a preacher), KRS's teaching and musical production is all-encompassing when it comes to Hip Hop. He does not, though he certainly expresses points of view of realness tied in with the old school, wish to go back per se, but wants Hip Hop to develop in the right direction. KRS-One will be, as is probably already quite evident, a central character later in this chapter.

## 4.2 Lamenting the state of Hip Hop

I must admit, initially, that I found myself drawn deeper into the Hip Hop-culture through the Rawkus compilation *Soundbombing* (1997). I had started to realize that there was more to rap music than “blunts<sup>†</sup>, bitches and bling<sup>‡</sup>”, and that there was more to Hip Hop than rap music. This had to do with the sudden explosion in the Norwegian rap scene. Tommy Tee’s *Scandalnavia*, Pen Jakke’s *Østen* and especially Tungtvann’s *Nord og ned* set the stage. By pure interest I ran to the store and got these records as soon as they hit the shelves, and discovered two things: First of all, this was not the type of rap I had been used to hearing, i.e. it was not West Coast gangsta rap. Second, the lyrical content had more to do with Hip Hop as a subculture and mindset than anything I had heard before. Admittedly, tracks such as Tungtvann’s *Ubudne gjæsta* were about drinking and getting laid, but most of the tracks told the story of the struggle of being a Hip Hop head in Bodø. While the Death Row artists were talking about gunning down their adversaries<sup>11</sup> Pen Jakke rapped about break dancing and nightly bombing missions<sup>12</sup>. For me, and I believe this was the intention of the artists in question, this worked as edutainment, and my Hip Hop awareness was greatly enhanced. The situation was such that there was for the first time since the break dance ‘fad’ of the mid 80s a real potential for a strong Norwegian Hip Hop community. The artists that were willing to make the necessary sacrifices were naturally dedicated ‘real’ heads, and as such were using their music to build a fundament. This era, if one can call it that, lasted only a few years, however. Very few of the ‘original’ artists are still active and Norwegian rap has started spawning artists that are not as concerned with ‘real’ Hip Hop. This is a natural development, and if we consider the Norwegian rap scene as a microcosm of the rap industry as a whole, we can possibly see the evolution of Hip Hop in general.

A possible reason for the explosion of rap in Norway may well be that it came during a time in which independent rap labels flourished. It started a few years after the end of the ‘Golden Age’ (1988-1994), and one of the backbones of the movement was Rawkus Records. Their willingness to produce and front conscious underground started the careers of artists such as Mos Def, Talib Kweli and Pharoahe Monch. Although they proved to be a commercially successful label, they were not afraid to support acts that produced no such thing as radio-friendly music and subsequently could not be expected to sell big. The symbol, as it were, of this philosophy would be Company Flow’s *Funcrusher Plus* (1997). Hailed as

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<sup>11</sup> This is usually used metaphorically about lyrical battles as will be discussed in chapter 5.

<sup>12</sup> Bombing missions can both mean to write many tags at many different locations over a short time, but also to make a single piece.



one of the most important albums in Hip Hop history due to its innovations in beats and rap style, it is not unexpectedly hard to grasp. The lyrics are very complex and metaphorically dense, and the album works perhaps best as a course in listening for the hardcore Hip Hop nerd. El-P, the producer of the album, called it “independent as fuck” and this has caused some, most notably HHC Magazine, to fondly call the period “the independent as fuck period”. The very fact that everything was supposed to be independent is central, as Hip Hop is sometimes considered a musical-cultural movement reminiscent of punk. Independent was the only way to go in Hip Hop’s glorious yet meager beginnings. Also, if one wants to produce one’s music independently of major labels, there is less money for promotion etc, and selling big will not be probable. As such this cannot necessarily be the artists’ goal either. This does take pressure off the artist, however, and monetary backing is replaced with almost unlimited creative freedom. It seems clear then, why it is the independent artists that sell less than their major label colleagues and at the same time lament the state of Hip Hop. I do not believe it is fueled by jealousy, but rather that it has to do with creative and sub-cultural idealism. I am not saying that all major label artists are making bad Hip Hop, but it seems sometimes that sales come before the music and that the music is tailor-made for the mainstream audiences. This seems to be the main concern of independent (which I will use parallel to conscious henceforth) artists when they criticize commercially successful artists.

As an example I will use a song that includes dissing of major label artists, Hip Hop idealism and a longing for the past: Cipher Complete were a small underground rap group featured on Rawkus’s first Lyricist Lounge compilation (1998). The title leaves little to the imagination – *Bring Hip-Hop Back*. They start the song on an overbearing note: “Cipher Complete is blowin’ East, West, North and South”, excluding no regional style of rap.<sup>13</sup> As the first verse begins, however, it becomes clear that this is an angry MC:

It’s like one’s for the gods, two’s for the earths  
Three’s for these seeds to whom we give birth  
Respects to New York, y’all did it first  
But now we ‘bout to show the world what Jersey’s worth  
Here’s the facts, cats making pretty ass tracks  
And I ain’t gon’ relax till they bring back wax

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<sup>13</sup> Admittedly, the South had not exploded yet, and most of the Southern rap to come out is now acclaimed as canonical and quite influential. This mainly has to do with Outkast’s innovative albums.

All y'all frontin' ass labels who don't sign real acts  
Now y'all know why so many of us blacks sling<sup>†</sup> cracks  
Wanna stop this? Sign me on your shit and let me drop this  
Bet you make a profit, cuz niggas gon' cop<sup>†</sup> this  
The way we used to do it, shit is stuck to it  
Niggas sound so R&B it sound like I could fuck to it  
I ain't tryin' to se this Hip-Hop thing get vanished  
Crossover niggas, y'all can eat a dick sandwich  
Rap is like a setup KRS already told ya  
Peace to real soldiers in this Hip-Hop culture

The first two lines deal with the foundations of Hip Hop culture. “Gods” is an AAV term that can be used about a black person, but I believe that in this context, it means the founders of Hip Hop music. The earths, then, would be the foundation itself. The plural is probably used to refer to the four elements of Hip Hop: DJing, MCing, breakdancing and graffiti. “The seeds” refers to the music that is being made now (by “real” MCs, most likely), planted in the soil of Hip Hop. The next two lines give credit where it is due, to New York, where it all started, and to New Jersey. Representing one’s own “hood<sup>†</sup>” is important. The following lines make up a rant against major labels and commercial rappers. The MC here is so convinced about who is to blame that he starts his attack with “Here’s the facts [sic]”. “Pretty ass tracks” is clearly a reference to radio and consumer friendly rap. There is a reference later in the verse to the fact that much of this sounds like R&B. In the title track of KRS-One’s 1993 album *Return of the Boom Bap* KRS states that:

Return of the Boom Bap means just that  
It means the return of the real hard beats and hard rap

A further reference to this track comes later in the verse when crossover artists are criticized. In the above mentioned song KRS makes the point that “I never crossed over, I never turned pop”. KRS is also hailed and quoted at the end of the verse. It seems that the main blame is laid on the labels. They do not sign “real” acts, as he says. This is interesting to see as early as 1998, as there was much more “realness” to what was released back then. Admittedly, a great deal of the rap that hit the charts was crossover pop music. In recent years, however, crunk and acts like G-Unit are under fire - mainly due to their lack of lyrical content. I can honestly

not remember hearing critique like this when Snoop Dogg collaborated with Justin Timberlake in 2004. The line where major labels are blamed for crack seems mostly like a rhyme fueled by anger. It is likely that it is an offhand mocking remark. It might also be a subtle reference to the fact that “real” acts will have to work independently of the major labels, and that this costs money. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, legend has it that NWA’s demo-tapes were financed by crack dealing or “slingin”.

### **4.3 Is Hip Hop Dead? Nas’s warning**

Just before Christmas of 2006, Nas released his much hyped album *Hip Hop is Dead*. Due to the title, the album had been much debated, especially in the Hip Hop community, ever since its announcement that summer. Nas is one of the most highly acclaimed MCs from the Golden Age, and his debut album *Illmatic* regularly features among the top ten in all-time album lists. He has also enjoyed great commercial success, and is widely known also outside of the hard core of the Hip Hop community. Being a consistent force for 15 years makes Nas quite an authority, and an album with a title like *Hip Hop is Dead* is bound to cause much debate and have repercussions. The reactions to the album – long before it was released – were manifold, and mostly negative. Many critics claimed that Nas was blaming the influx of Southern rap for the “fall of Hip Hop”. That people draw such conclusions is not surprising due to the laments of days past and independent Hip Hop. The album basically has to do with the “fact” that striving commercial success lowers the artistic level of the music that is produced. Many “true school” rappers share his views, albeit not directly, in their own lyrics. Artists such as Common, Lupe Fiasco and KRS-One have all recently (some always) criticized the commercialization of the industry. None of them had yet had the audacity to make a claim such as Nas’s the title of one of their albums, however. In an interview on the AllHipHop ([allhiphop.com](http://allhiphop.com)) webpage KRS-One discusses Nas’s album and further supports the view that it has nothing to do with the South. He even makes the claim that the South are on top these days because they have stayed truest to Hip Hop itself.

“Hip Hop is Dead” is not a claim. It is essentially a warning. Let us take the title track’s, which ironically became a smash hit, chorus.

If Hip Hop should die before I wake  
I’ll put an extended clip and body’em all day  
Roll to every station, wreck the DJ

## Roll to every station, wreck the DJ

I was lucky enough to attend Nas's concert in Oslo this May, and on stage he said "kill the DJ". KRS insists that "murder the DJ" was the original lyric. An eye for an eye, it seems. Radio DJs are often seen as the ones who are to blame. They are the ones who play the music that the mainstream hear, and as such have significant power over the ebb and flow of musical trends. They are not solely responsible for their choice of play lists, however, as the record companies influence what singles are to be released etc. However, there is a tendency to "kill the messenger". Norway's Kingsize Magazine recently criticized radio stations (especially the NRK) for their choice of what rap songs to play, and in the early days of Norwegian rap, radio stations and musical editors such as Haakon Mosleth were under constant fire. When discussing radio stations, television networks are also implied. KRS-One mentions this on his latest record (which will be discussed below): "I'm the difference between real and Music TV (i.e. MTV)". It is only the chorus that reflects on the issue of radio DJs, and the main body of text has to do with how Hip Hop used to be, with credibility, and the decline (in Nas's eyes) of Hip Hop.

### **4.4 Hip Hop Lives: KRS-One and edutainment**

Although he openly supports Nas's views, KRS and Marley Marl's album title seems a bit tongue-in-cheek towards Nas. "Hip Hop Lives" (2007) can be seen as a reaction to Nas's album, and it is in a way. Although he shares Nas's concerns, KRS states (in the AllHipHop interview) that the very fact that Nas did the album and shouted a warning cry is proof itself that Hip Hop is definitely alive. A dead man cannot fight. Although KRS often hits out against "sell-outs" he represents what I like to call *positive backpacking*. *Backpacker* is a semi-derogatory term used about "true school" Hip Hop heads (it can also denote a homosexual, which not unlikely helps make the term derogatory). According to the Urban Dictionary, the term originated in the mid 90s when graffiti writers kept their cans and nozzles in backpacks (urbandictionary.com). The backpack became fashion among Hip Hop heads because it has connotations to one of the four elements of Hip Hop. The term now means Hip Hop nerds or even poseurs who try too hard to represent their subcultural affiliations. Herein lay the "whiny" true school heads who would join the laments discussed earlier. When I say positive backpacking, then, I mean that some true-schoolers or nerds celebrate Hip Hop music and culture and uphold a positive attitude to what Hip Hop is and

has to offer, rather than concentrating on attacking popularized Hip Hop that may or may not be commercial and fake. Such is the first song of this album. There is an intro skit first – a mock funeral with a preacher slurring some words about a young man who cannot be mistaken for anything else than Hip Hop (he was born around 1973 in South Bronx etc.), which is interrupted by someone screaming “It’s alive I tell you!” I will not in any way play down Marley Marl’s contribution to this album, but KRS is the lyricist and, as such, will henceforth be my main focus when dealing with this album. The first song *Hip Hop Lives (I Come Back)* begins with the chorus:

I Come Back  
Every day I get newer  
I’m the dust on the moon  
I’m the trash in the sewer  
I come back  
Every day I get brighter  
If you thinking Hip Hop is alive hold up your lighters

This is a direct hit, and KRS tells us that he is here to prove that Hip Hop is not dead. In fact, Hip Hop continues to evolve and change. This is quite interesting, and might be a finger pointed at those who categorically claim that Hip Hop was better before. As I have already said, KRS is known for being contradictive. He preaches about true Hip Hop and respecting the roots, and at the same time says that the South is most true to the culture and hails the changing nature of Hip Hop. Maybe he is not contradictive after all? “Tha Teacha” might be one of those who see beyond the commercialized face of Hip Hop and recognizes the hard core culture that still exists. Just because the car was invented, people did not stop walking. We were simply provided with an alternative means of transportation. This is what I mean with positive backpacking. To be subculturally conscious, knowing one’s history and forms of expression, and loving it for what it is, not wasting time trying to tell the whole world that “What you see on MTV is not Hip Hop”. A friend of mine recently expressed this very simply and precisely. While discussing the state of Hip Hop in Norway, I showed him an editorial in a music magazine. I was trying to prove a point: that not even the old Hip Hop heads were “real” anymore. After reading it, my friend says: “I don’t give a damn about those guys. They’ve sold out, OK, let them sell out. I won’t even bother hating. I want to do my thing.

Hip Hop is messed up in Norway, but not the people I choose to hang out with. We're just having fun with Hip Hop".

The first verse is typical of KRS-One. This is edutainment. This is why KRS is affectionately nicknamed "Tha Teacha". He gives a short lecture on the meaning of the term *Hip Hop* itself, and essentially gives an introduction to his own views of what kind of subculture, or rather movement, it is.

Hip means to know  
It's a form of intelligence  
To be hip means to be update and relevant  
Hop is a form of movement  
You can't just observe a hop  
You gotta hop up and do it  
Hip and Hop is more than music  
Hip is the knowledge  
Hop is the movement  
Hip and Hop is intelligent movement  
Or relevant movement  
We selling the music  
So write this down in your black books and journals  
Hip Hop culture is eternal  
Run and tell all your friends  
An ancient culture has been born again  
It's a fact

KRS-One thus breaks down Hip Hop into three essentials: knowledge, movement and relevance. I believe he finds the movement part of the meaning most important, as he urges people to "hop up and do it". The movement (as an action) is also what keeps the movement (subculture) relevant. KRS uses Hip and Hop as tokens in a way. The origin of the subculture's name is not well documented, and no-one is completely certain what it means. It might be how Kool Herc started it by using his crossfader, hip-hopping between the records, it could be the opening line in *Rapper's Delight*: "To the hip the hop, the hippie, the hippie to

the hip hop and you don't stop", etc. If a meaning was to be tagged to it, however, I think KRS's is a good candidate.

Throughout the song, KRS drops many lines concerning essentials in Hip Hop culture, how it lives on and the extent to which it can be regarded as a way of life (the "I" person is not KRS himself, as in most rap songs, but rather Hip Hop itself):

I come back  
Cause I'm not in the physical  
I create myself man, I live in the spiritual  
I come back through the cycles of life  
If you been here once, you gonna be here twice

A note must be made here concerning KRS and spirituality. Much evidence can be found in his lyrics of mysticism such as philosophy over life, the eternal presence of spirits, reincarnation etc. He is one of the main founders of the Temple of Hip Hop, which mixes Hip Hop positivism and ideals with spirituality. The Temple has an alternative, New Age pitch, although KRS himself is openly a Christian. An example of his somewhat alternative views can be seen in the fact that all of his albums after *Criminal Minded* have the sleeve note "Overseen by Scott LaRock". Scott LaRock, KRS's mentor, was killed after the first album, but KRS believes his spirit lives on and guides him, as we can see from a line in the 1993 single *Outta Here*:

In the middle of doing "My Philosophy"  
Scott was killed and that shit got to me  
But knowing the laws of life and death  
I knew his breath was one with my breath

It is only natural that he incorporates his views of the spirit in Hip Hop's immortality, making the culture human and thus eternal. On a different note, KRS is saying that Hip Hop creates itself. This is consistent with the things he said about the South staying truest to Hip Hop, and it seems that, as of late, "Tha Teacha" is becoming more of a documenting scholar than he used to be. On that note, I will leave the discussion around Hip Hop's death or continuing lifespan and instead concentrate on KRS-One's lyrics throughout his career. No MC has been more consistent, both lyrically and in the role of a teacher. His constant flow of edutainment

and Hip Hop philosophy makes his lyrics a reliable source of my investigation of Hip Hop as an ideology. Through his positivism, the founding of the Temple of Hip Hop and concern for the youth, he makes Hip Hop a way of life that he lives by and urges others to live by – he is perhaps Hip Hop’s main ideologist. I will start by summing up KRS’s Hip Hop ideology: Hip Hop is a creative culture, one that develops its potential through experimentation. Humans have vast potentials, but one needs to actively search for it by honing one’s skills and contributing creatively. Most important, however, is this: “Rapping (or breaking, DJing and graffiti) is something you do, Hip Hop is something you LIVE” (Krs-One 1997, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007). I still remember his parting words at the 2006 concert in Oslo: “Go out there and be not who you think you are. Forget who you have been, go out and be who you CAN be!”

#### **4.5. KRS-One<sup>14</sup>, Tha Teacha**

I wish to start by saying something about authorities within the Hip Hop culture, but only concerning MCs. Through their position as recording artists and entertainers, MCs are those that can most easily get their message across to the public, both Hip Hop heads and laymen. While subcultural authorities may be, for example, break dancers or graffiti artists, their accessibility is not at the same level, especially to non-Hip Hop heads. Authority is gained through being a central figure who has been a practitioner for a long time (Preisler 1999), and is enhanced by prowess within an element of Hip Hop. Within the Hip Hop community, MC authorities are often old-timers such as Guru from Gangstarr or underground political activist types like Atmosphere or Ill Bill. Many of these fall under the category of conscious rappers and often have political agendas and/or distinct views on Hip Hop culture. Other, more commercially successful rappers such as Snoop Dogg may be considered authorities to some extent, but would not, for instance, be seen as a subcultural guide. Musical prowess does not automatically grant authority status, and it is not always their main claim to status either. An example of this is Fat Joe. Although his music has arguably become more and more commercialized over the years, magazines and hard core Hip Hop heads still refer to the fact that “he’s still an active writer, you know”. Perhaps the most widely respected authority of them all is KRS-One. Admittedly, he is widely regarded within the Hip Hop community as the greatest MC there ever was, and I will have to say that I agree. Skills on the mic aside, an

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<sup>14</sup> The name originates from his nickname “Krisna”. (He apparently used to hang out with Hare Krishnas) He also used KRS-One as his tag as a young graffiti writer. When he started rapping, he made a backronym of it, Knowledge Rains Supreme Over Nearly Everyone. (Wikipedia)



important reason why KRS has gained so much respect is his loyalty to and belief in Hip Hop, combined with political consciousness and a philosophy of peace. He grabs any opportunity to air his views both on records, on stage and in interviews. He uses the music as a channel for his views, but does not restrict himself to that. I can honestly say that I have yet to read or hear an interview in which he does not in some way manage to turn the focus towards Hip Hop. His concerts are in a way based around the concept that African-American churches are known for. The preacher sets up the sermons with an abundance of highly entertaining gospel songs, and preaches in between to an entertained audience whose attention has been won. KRS does the same. He lectures to the audience in between classic songs and urges them to hear his message. At the Oslo concert, there was his Hip Hop Declaration of Peace at the back of the stage. After explaining the large charter which is surrounded by pictures of classic figures such as Kool Herc, Jam Master Jay, Queen Latifah and Snoop Dogg, he started a call-response session. KRS pointed to a face and said the name, and the audience or congregation as it were, shouted “Real Hip Hop”.

KRS-One’s recording career started with a battle. He and DJ Scott LaRock - together they were Boogie Down Productions - were trying to get their music aired, but Juice Crew members such as Marley Marl rejected them. Later KRS has admitted that they did in fact want to join the Juice Crew, who were the biggest act in New York at the time (HHC #215 2007). They resolved this by going on-stage during a Juice Crew concert and dissing them, answering their song *The Bridge* with the now classic *The Bridge Is Over*. MC Shan and Marley Marl were from Queens, and KRS would hear no talk of Hip Hop originating anywhere else than South Bronx:

Because Shan and Marley Marl dem-a rhyming like they gay  
Pickin up the mic, man, dem don’t know what to say  
Saying Hip Hop started out in Queensbridge  
Sayin’ lies like that, man, you dem can’t live

This started what was known as “The Bridge Wars”, and ended in triumph for BDP with the almost prophetic *I’m Still #1*. Originally a battle MC, KRS’s career and claim to respect started with a battle against the most powerful force in Hip Hop, crowning him the dopest<sup>†</sup> MC, and as far as many people are concerned, he still holds the crown. Needless to say, the aforementioned collaboration with Marley Marl was long-awaited. On BDP’s first studio album, KRS’s consciousness does not shine through as it has in all of his later records. The

death of Scott LaRock would change that. *Criminal Minded* (1987) is, as mentioned earlier, a blueprint for gangster rap. It is difficult to classify the album, however, as not all the tracks are “gangsta”. It might suffice to say that it is an old school album, and is no doubt worthy of the title “classic”. It is the only album produced by Scott LaRock, arguably one of the best, and it is also the first album to actively use James Brown beats and breaks throughout. And, of course, there is the introduction of KRS-One. Although not as conscious as we are used to hear, KRS shows himself as an intelligent lyricist, and it is possible that one of his nicknames “Tha Teacha” from originates with the first verse of the record in *Poetry*. KRS claims to be teaching at least:

Well now you're forced to listen to the teacher and the lesson  
Class is in session, so you can stop guessin'  
If this is a tape or a written down memo  
See I'm a professional, this is not a demo  
In fact call it a lecture, a written visual picture  
Sort of a poetic and rhythm-like mixture

Looking at the lyrics of this album retrospectively, it is evident that KRS has had a goal and certain views from the beginning. This track, which introduces him as an MC, contains many references to the cause he will be following. Later in the first verse, he says:

I am a poet, you try to show it, yet blow it  
It takes concentration for fresh communication  
Observation, that is to see without speaking  
Take off your coat, take notes, I am teaching  
A class, or rather school, cause you need schooling  
I am not a king or queen, I'm not ruling

He is here to school his peers. This section starts with a battle rhyme, claiming he raps well, while others cannot, meaning he sees himself as better than most. Yet at the end, he claims not to be a king, a title mostly connected to graffiti artists, but has been transferred to other elements. The point he is making is that, even though he may be the best MC, that is not his goal; his goal is to use his skills to teach. It is also interesting to note that “Tha Teacha” feels

that people need schooling in Hip Hop at a time most contemporary Hip Hop heads long back to. The first verse is concluded with his first explicit teachings:

You seem to be the type that only understands  
Annihilation and destruction of the next man  
That's not poetry that is insanity  
It's simply fantasy far from reality  
Poetry is the language of imagination  
Poetry is a form of positive creation  
Difficult, isn't it, the point, you missin' it  
Your face is in front of my hand, so I'm dissin' it

He lunges out at what sounds like early gangster rappers. At the same time, he shows the first signs of the contradictions he is so known for. He criticizes violent lyrics, yet on the same album he raps *9mm*, the tale of a drug dealer who guns down his rivals accompanied by the chorus “Wadada-deng, wadadada-deng, listen to my nine millimeter go BANG!” Also, he claims that “That’s not poetry that is insanity, it’s simply fantasy far from reality”, and follows up with “poetry is the language of imagination”. How can something not be poetry which is imagination because it is fantasy? I think he might be seeing fantasy and imagination as slightly different. Imagination might be the positive creation he mentions, and fantasy might be wishing to be or portray oneself as someone one is not. In short, he is discrediting “fake gangsters”.

KRS is almost always in one way or another speaking about “real” Hip Hop and its origins. A continuation of his claim that it originated in the Bronx is seen in the track *South Bronx*. This is also a battle track in the then ongoing Bridge Wars, and BDP’s claim to supremacy is in part based on the fact that they come from South Bronx where it started. KRS also continues to rap about his role in Hip Hop.

Party People in the place to be KRS-One attacks  
You got dropped off MCA cause them rhymes you wrote was whack<sup>†</sup>  
So you think that Hip Hop had its start out in Queensbridge  
If you popped that junk up in the Bronx you might not live

At this point I must say a little about battle rhymes. It ties in somewhat with gangster rap as well. Many times when MCs use violent lyrics it is not meant explicitly. Hip Hop originated in a time when gangs were prevalent in areas like the Bronx, and many early rappers were former gang members (Chang 2005). This, combined with badman tales and pimp narratives, has made violence part of the subcultural discourse. So when an MC says e.g. “Y’all gon’ end up dead after I blast at you”, he or she means that opposing MCs will lose to his or her “shots” with the microphone. A good example is in Black Moon’s *Looking Down the Barrel* (2003), a song that may sound like a violent threat, but is actually about lyrical prowess. Buckshot raps: “If we was a gun, you a uzi<sup>†</sup>, I’m a nine, but I’m accurate, one shot will fill your insides”. He is commenting on fast rapping versus good lyrics. So when KRS threatens that people might not survive claiming Queensbridge in the Bronx, it is likely he is talking about MC battles and/or credibility.

The second and third verses constitute an historical recount of the early days of Hip Hop in the Bronx. In addition, KRS’s vision of teaching the public is yet again expressed along with his views of not settling for commercial success when one can do much more with one’s skills:

I came with Scott La Rock to express one thing  
I am a teacher while others are kings  
If that’s a title they earn, well it’s well deserved  
But without a crown see I still burn<sup>†</sup>  
You settle for a pebble not a stone like a rebel  
KRS-One is the holder of a boulder

Even though he claims in *Still #1* that he is the best, and subsequently would be a king, he dismisses this. He basically says that he does not need a title like that, as his role is a teacher. He also builds up his own credibility as an MC willing to work for change. A rebel will not settle for anything less than a stone, whereas KRS has an entire boulder. One could say that the young man speaking here is a recently saved soul. Before he met Scott La Rock, KRS used to be a drug dealer and gangster. Through Hip Hop, he found a meaningful focus and a way out of his criminal life style. Already in this first album we can see a socially conscious individual in the making, but one episode would really bring out “Tha Teacha”. In late 1987, Scott La Rock was killed when trying to stop a fight (The Source # 100). KRS founded the Stop the Violence Movement and his lyrics became more and more conscious and

educational. His subject material ranged from Black awareness to information about contraceptives. Ever present was, and still is, Hip Hop as a unifying positive movement through which one could express oneself and find a creative, non-violent meaning in life. The second album *By All Means Necessary* (1988) shows KRS dressed up as Malcolm X peeking out of the window with a handgun. The cover, along with the album's title, shows that KRS is now really willing to make a change. The opening track *My Philosophy* (the last track produced by LaRock) is a sequel to "Poetry" in which he continues to show his despair over MCs not willing to use their skills for anything positive. Here are also the classic tracks *Jimmy*, used in a campaign to raise youth's awareness about condoms, and *Illegal Business*, where KRS claims that "Illegal Business controls America." One track stands out on the album, and that is the track that ended the Bridge Wars: *I'm Still #1*. Not only does this (in my opinion) surpass anything the Juice Crew could come up with, but it also affirmed that, although the death of Scott La Rock was a terrible loss to Hip Hop, and especially KRS himself, he was not the only reason why KRS-One was a phenomenal MC. The song starts with KRS listing up a lot of important figures that are down with him, showing that BDP's network has outgrown the Juice Crew. This is not only an attack on Shan and Marley Marl, however. This is an all-out warning to anyone who would dare challenge Boogie Down Productions, and telling them to focus their energy on better things. He also responds to anyone who dismisses Hip Hop as a fad. All of this can be found in the first verse:

People still taking rapping for a joke  
A passing hope or a phase with a rope  
Sometimes I choke and try to believe  
When I get challenged by a million MCs  
I try to tell them "We're all in this together"  
My album was raw because no-one would ever  
Think like I think and do what I do  
I stole the show and then I leave without a clue

In the last three lines, he even makes the claim that he (along with LaRock) has changed the face of rapping forever. I cannot say I disagree. To my ears, rapping before and after *Criminal Minded* are almost two different art forms. This is only my personal opinion, but it is like listening to early soul, and then putting on a James Brown record. Later, as in e.g. *Outta Here*

(1993) he tones it down to the change involving others, such as Eric B and Rakim and Public Enemy.

I cannot, sadly, go through KRS-One's entire discography (17 albums), so I will look at his thoughts on Hip Hop culture and realness, as this is the original intention of the chapter. Ever present is his constant plea for MCs to hone their skills and use them well, not necessarily only to make money. He is also persistent in the view that "going for the money" inhibits the potential in an MC. One technique he often uses is the traditional "I'm better than you" claim from battle rapping. He is using himself as an example of a virtuous MC, one who is respected throughout Hip Hop and, although not insanely rich, is well off due to his skills. A good example of this is found in the first and last lines of *MCs Act Like They Don't Know* from his 1995 album *Krs-One*:

If you don't know me by now, I doubt you'll ever know me  
I never won a Grammy, I won't win a Tony  
But I'm not the only MC keeping it real  
When I grab the mic to smash a rapper, girls go "IIILL!"  
Check the time as I rhyme, it's 1995  
Whenever I arrive, the party gets liver  
Flow with the master rhymer, that's to leave behind  
The video rapper, you know the chart climber  
Clapper, down goes another rapper  
Down to another matter, punch up the data Blast Master<sup>15</sup>  
[...]  
Remember you must learn  
About the styles that I flip and how wild I get  
I go on like a space-age rocket ship  
You can be a mack, a pimp, hustler or player  
But make sure live you is a dope<sup>†</sup> rhyme sayer

KRS is one of those that distinguishes between *rapper* and *MC*. A *rapper* is used by some Hip Hop heads about someone who is not a true MC. KRS makes it clear by calling them *video rappers* or *chart climbers*. He also says that he "grabs the mic to smash rappers" and that

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<sup>15</sup> Another of KRS-One's nicknames

when he enters the stage “the party gets liver”. This is a very important part of being accepted as a true MC. Your live show must be good, preferably better than your recorded work. Hip Hop is still (and I imagine other music-oriented subcultures share the view) a live-oriented culture. Hip Hop concerts often have a jazz-like jam element, with MCs e.g. rapping over entirely different beats than were used for the song originally. We can also see in this verse, that KRS has “softened” a bit. He now says that it is perfectly fine to be e.g. a pimp, but he adds the ever-present criterion of lyrical prowess. This album was released in 1995 and the West Coast with its gangster rap and the monolithic Snoop Dogg was steadily on the rise. Dr. Dre’s involvement in this added a good deal of credibility (this will be dealt with in the next chapter), and it seems KRS has acknowledged this (this line might even be a friendly nod to such rappers as Snoop and B.I.G.). On his 2001 album *Sneak Attack* there is a track called *Attendance* where he calls for the presence of Hip Hop practitioners. The song is made up as a concert and the chorus consists of KRS “taking attendance”:

Breakers (here!) MCs (here!)  
Writers (here!) Beatboxers (here!)  
Djs (here!) Hip Hop (here!)  
Hip Hop (here!) Hip Hop (right here!)

The main verses are classic KRS lyrics, where he goes through Hip Hop history and gives credit. The interesting thing about this track is that it is the beginning of an album that takes the form of a concert-lecture hybrid. He talks about society, the importance of voting, and most importantly Hip Hop. In numerous insertions between the songs he is telling young people that “Hip Hop is something you live”. One track that stands out is the aptly named *Hip Hop Knowledge*. As usual, it is a Hip Hop history lesson, and it starts with these lines:

1987 I was at the Latin Quarters  
Listening to Afrika Bambaataa give the order  
The call of the order was to avoid the slaughter  
He said “Record companies ain’t got nuttin for ya”  
Without a lawyer he taught the Infinity Lessons  
In how Hip Hop could be, uh, many blessings  
And that was great, so in 1988  
There was no debate, we had to end the hate

The name of the game was “Stop the Violence”

And unity, knowledge and self-reliance

This is KRS’s trust in the positive potential of Hip Hop as a way of life. “Stop the Violence” was centered on Hip Hop, as was “The Zulu Nation”, and now “The Temple of Hip Hop”. The certainty that everyone has some sort of creative talent, and that Hip Hop is a creative culture, seems to underlie much of KRS’s philosophy. Create rather than destroy, as it were.

Hip Hop as an ideology is well represented by KRS-One and his views and hopes. Claiming what Hip Hop is, both concerning the four elements, and a way of life, constructs a set or parameters that form the basis of the subculture. The bulk of arguments, however, seem to fall on what Hip Hop is not, or rather, who is not a true Hip Hop head. Rappers who use the music in an industry bent on maxing profit, for example. According to KRS, one has to live Hip Hop, be Hip Hop and think Hip Hop. At times, especially when KRS is “preaching”, it seems almost like a religion, but suffice it to say that Hip Hop is being portrayed as an ideology. There are some major authorities like the founding fathers, KRS, Rock Steady Crew (innovators of breakdance) etc, some with a symbolic function, such as the latter, some active ideologists. Their status as authorities comes through respect, which again comes from contribution and realness. KRS sums it up in his verse on Kanye West’s tribute to Hip Hop culture and Nike’s Air Force One line *Classic (Better than I’ve Ever Been)* (2007):

Me – I got no jewels on my neck

Why? I don’t need’em, I got your respect

#### **4.6 Summing up**

Many facets of our lives are influenced by discourse: there are discourses on both sides of global warming issues presenting their side as the truth, pseudo-sciences base much of their teachings on anecdotes and all sorts of political and religious groups air their version of “the right way”. Subcultures are not immune to this, and like in a political party or a congregation, authority figures are the masters of the discourse. In subcultures, these authorities enjoy a great deal of respect and their views are easily accessible over the internet and through records. Hip Hop is a young subculture and nearly all the “founding fathers” are still alive and outspoken. KRS-One is not a founding father, but one of the architects behind the development of Hip Hop, and holds a burning dedication to the subculture. During the last ten



years, almost every single song he has made has been Meta Hip Hop and edutainment with messages concerning what Hip Hop culture is and how it can help people live a righteous life. KRS calls himself a teacher and a philosopher and has truly become an ideologist just as he and a number of other conscious rappers present Hip Hop as an ideology.

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## Chapter 5 Snoop Dogg – building an image

“When you learn what to do with it, I’ll be done with it”

-Snoop Dogg

### 5.1 Background

This chapter revolves around construction and reconstruction of self, exemplified by rapper Calvin Broadus, better known as Snoop Dogg. Few, if any, rappers are more easily recognizable, even my mother knows who Snoop is. He has also managed to stay consistent both commercially and musically. The former is partly a consequence of the latter, but also a result of Snoop’s flair and ability to be a trendsetter of sorts. In this chapter I will show how Snoop has built up and reconstructed his persona around the African-American mythical creatures the Pimp and the Mack. I will be looking at visual representation, but I will not analyze lyrics from all of his albums. The extra-linguistic tools Snoop uses are as important as what he actually says, and as Snoop is selling a product, advertising is central.

### 5.2 Early career, Doggystyle and the Superfly motif

Snoop Dogg was introduced to the public by none other than Dr. Dre on the 1992 single *Deep Cover*. The single was originally on the soundtrack of Bill Duke’s movie by the same name, and as such is loosely based on that same movie. It starts off with Snoop’s character talking to a fellow drug dealer, accusing him of being an undercover police officer because he has never seen him “hit the pipe”. Then the music starts and Dr. Dre raps the first verse. The second verse sees the beginning of a grandiose career:

Creep with me as I crawl through the hood  
Maniac, lunatic, call me Snoop Eastwood  
Kickin’ dust as I bust, fuck peace  
And the motherfuckin’ punk police  
You already know I give a fuck about a cop  
So why in the hell would you think that it would stop

Apart from his trademark flow and voice, many of Snoop's techniques of constructing his own character are there right from the start. The first rhyme sees him compare himself to Clint Eastwood, probably the Dirty Harry character. In the fifth line, he claims that the audience knows how he feels about the police based on what he says one line earlier. Snoop has literally been rapping for ten seconds, yet presents himself as a character they recognize. This is the way in which this young rapper introduces himself to the world. The rest of the song sticks to the topic of undercover police and deals made with drug dealers, and not with Snoop's persona. An interesting thing to note, however, is how he looks in the video for this song. Snoop is clad in classic gangsta attire, with a blue tartan flannel shirt, a black Raiders beanie, baggy jeans and blue "chucks" (Converse Chuck Taylor All Stars), the latter being a trademark of the Crips gang.

Later that same year, Dr. Dre released his first solo album *The Chronic*. This is in many ways Dr. Dre's manifesto, where he asserts his skills and power after the bitter breakup with NWA. The album is set around the Los Angeles riots, with numerous clips of news reports in between tracks. It is also the launch of Dre's new record label "Death Row Records". He is showcasing his new talents such as Kurupt and Daz of Tha Doggpound, the G-funk crooner Nate Dogg and Snoop Doggy Dogg, to name those that have enjoyed success later. Central to *Tha Chronic* is Snoop, however, and it almost looks like Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg would grow to be a DJ/rapper team along the lines of Scott La Rock and KRS-One or Eric B and Rakim. The exception is, of course, that Dr. Dre raps himself, as he notes in the track *Nuthin' But a "G" Thang*:

You've never been on a ride like this before  
With a producer who can rap and control the maestro

Snoop's initial contribution is on the first track, which is not a rap track but rather Snoop introducing Death Row Records and lunging out at anyone opposed to Dr. Dre. This continues in the second track *Fuck With Dre Day*, where Snoop attacks Tim Dog. This is pure dissing and self-assertion, and is a legacy that will stay with Death Row's artists for a long time. Dissing is a long tradition in rapping, due to the competitive nature of Hip Hop, and is usually used as punch lines used to win battles. The type of dissing we see here, however, is due to *beef*, that is genuine rivalry and animosity. Violent content still is exaggerated, and should not be misconstrued as genuine threats. In fact, what seems like death threats in many diss-tracks spawned many conspiracy theories around the Tupac and Biggie murders. People

were lead to believe that the record labels were behind the murders. Another thing we see from the verse is that Death Row is presented in a way that can make it sound like a gang. Quite a few of Death Row's artists (e.g. Snoop, Daz and Kurupt) were affiliated with the Crips, and they merge their more "generic" gang symbolism into their lyrics. This might also enhance the violence in the language. Snoop raps:

Bow-wow-wow Yippie-yo yippe-yay  
The sounds of a dog bring me to another day  
Play with my bone, would you, Timmy  
It seems like you're good for making jokes about your jimmy  
Well here's a jimmy-joke about your mama that you might not like  
I heard she was a Frisco dyke  
But fuck your mama, I'm talkin' about you and me  
Toe-to-toe, Tim M-U-T  
Your bark was loud but your bite wasn't vicious  
And them rhymes you were kickin' were quite bootylicious<sup>†</sup>  
You get with Doggy Dog, oh is he crazy?  
With your mama and your daddy hollering "baby"  
So won't they let you know  
That if you fuck with Dre, nigga, you fuckin' with Death Row  
And I ain't even slangin' them thangs  
I'm hollerin' 187 with my dick in your mouth, biatch<sup>†</sup>

What Snoop is doing here is basically to emasculate Tim Dogg completely. Not only is he suggesting homosexual rape, he is also portraying Tim as effeminate. What might sound like an acknowledgement of his opponent's skills is actually an intricate way of saying the exact opposite: calling someone's rhymes *bootylicious* might seem nice, but this adjective is rarely used about anything other than women. A beautiful woman is *bootylicious*, making Tim's rhymes feminine. This is reminiscent of *The Bridge Is Over* where KRS accuses Shan and Marley Marl of "rhyming like they're gay". I actually find these two diss-tracks strikingly similar though Snoop is vastly more explicit than KRS. The underlying themes are the same, emasculation and feminization of the opponent, the claims that one is backed by a gang of sorts (BDP/Bronx and Death Row) and the violent metaphors ("You know dem can't live" vs. "I'm hollerin' 187"). Snoop adds to this by ridiculing Tim Dogg's name, calling him Tim

MUT (sic.), in addition to adding the element of yo mama jokes. This concludes my account of Snoop's contribution to Dr. Dre's first solo album.

The main theme of this chapter is how Calvin Broadus has created the Snoop Dogg persona, and this really starts with his first solo album, *Doggystyle* (1993). Like *The Chronic*, this album starts with a non-music track, which is quite common in rap music, and the tracks are usually simply labeled "skit". This particular skit's title is *Bathtub*, and we can hear splashing, and Snoop talking to a lady who is giving him a sponge-bath. In the background is an instrumental of Curtis Mayfield's *Give Me Your Love* from the *Superfly* soundtrack (1972). This skit is a small mash-up of the *Superfly* movie (1972) itself with two central scenes: The first is the bathtub scene where Priest (Superfly), a drug lord, is telling his girlfriend he wants to give up the game before it gets too late. This conversation does not take place in Snoop's version. I believe this is rather that Snoop is staging a fantasy of the pimp life – it is evident throughout his career that the Superfly motif is one he cherishes. The doorbell rings, and a friend of Snoop's enters, a switch to the most important scene in the *Superfly* movie, where Priest tells his accomplice that he is quitting. Snoop does the same telling Warren G (referred to as G-dub in this skit) that he "needs to get up out the game". Warren G's answer is an updated and revised version of Priest's henchman's (in parentheses):

Man you wanna get out the game? Come on man  
(You wanna give all this up?)  
You can smoke a pound of bud every day  
(and can snort a half a piece of dope every day)  
You got a big-screen TV man, you wanna give all this up?  
(Eight Track Stereo, color TV in every room)  
Nigga, you crazy? That's the American Dream, nigga  
(That's the American Dream, nigga)

The text must not be misunderstood as meaning that Snoop actually wants to end his career. He is using this scene from *Superfly* to show off his lifestyle. As I mentioned in chapter 3, material wealth and success with women is important, and with this introductory track he sets the stage by confirming his power. The rest of his career goes back to this prelude, and reads as an autobiographical pimp narrative. Richardson refers to stories of *badmen/badwomen* and *bad niggers* in African-American folklore and oral traditions (Richardson 2006: chapters 1&2). The badman is a kind of trickster who uses illicit means to get ahead in the world. The

*toast* is an important part of African-American oral tradition, and is “a clear precursor of contemporary rap, which usually celebrates the same type of characters, the same lifestyle, and the same exploitation of women” (Dance, 2002: 475).<sup>16</sup> Robin Kelley elaborates on toasts and the sub-class of badmen known as the *pimp* (Kelley, 1996: 24-31),<sup>17</sup> also known under many names, e.g. Hustler or Daddy Mack. The similarities to the badman are apparent, but with a side-order of misogyny. Kelley mentions Blaxploitation movies, and *Superfly* is a good example of a modern pimp narrative.

### 5.3 Doggfather and the No Limit period

It would take three years before Snoop released another solo album. He was not absent from the scene, however. Death Row Records as a collective released numerous albums, and in the tradition of Hip Hop, the entire crew is ever present. Just as Daz, Kurupt, Nate Dogg, The Lady of Rage etc. featured on Snoop’s albums, he contributed a great many rhymes on theirs. On Dr. Dre’s *Murder Was the Case* soundtrack, Snoop gets retrospective in *21 Jump Street* where he tells the story of his early teens when he did everything he could to become a gangster. He also raps on the remix of *Murder Was the Case*, a track originally from his own *Doggystyle*. This is a somber tale of a gangster who gets shot, and while in coma makes a deal with the Devil. In between the main verses, their conversation is a rap where Snoop and Satan (played by Daz) exchange lines:

I think it’s too late for prayin’  
Hold up! A voice spoke to me and it slowly started sayin’  
“Bring your lifestyle to me, I’ll make it better”  
And how long will I live?  
“Eternal life and forever”  
And will I be the G that I was?  
“I’ll make your life better than you could imagine or even dreamed of  
So relax, let me take control  
Close your eyes my son”  
My eyes are closed

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted from Richardson (2006: 37)

<sup>17</sup> In Perkins (1996: pp.140-147)

Snoop is a young gangster (“G”) who has seen the realities of this life first-hand. This song might be read in two ways. One is the scene from *Superfly*, where he says he wants to quit the game means that he wants to quit the criminal lifestyle. He can safely do this as his recording career secures the luxuries “G-dub” warns him he might lose. He might be seeing that choosing the criminal lifestyle is equivalent to selling one’s soul. The other interpretation is that Snoop is never going to give up his status and lifestyle of the gangster and that he is even willing to make a deal with the Devil to fulfill the dream.

In 1995, Tha Doggpound (Kurupt and Daz) released their debut album *Dogg Food*, which was a continuing string of boastful Death Row releases, and Snoop’s presence on many of the tracks was used to back it up. It was also, however, the album where Death Row’s almost paranoid attacks on a number of other acts started to escalate. Kurupt and Daz had already made *What Would U Do on Murder Was the Case*, which was a diss-track targeted at Ruthless Records and a number of other California-based groups. On *Doggfood*, Kurupt takes it further and with *New York, New York* attacks the East Coast and, without mentioning a single name, Bad Boy Records. The following year would be very eventful for Death Row records. In March Death Row released Tupac’s double album *All Eyez on Me*, which is arguably the album that secured the West Coast’s commercial domination at the time and made Death Row the most influential record company. This was also the beginning of the end for both. Dr. Dre left due to contract disputes and CEO Suge Knight’s way of handling business. Knight would later be heavily attacked by Doggpound, Nate Dogg and Snoop, all of whom left Death Row within two years. Tupac’s feud with his former friend Biggie extended to beef between Death Row and Bad Boy and would be one of the factors contributing to what is known as “the coast war”. I will not go into this in much detail, but the end came with the murders of Tupac in 1996, and Biggie in 1997. Jumping to conclusions was easy, and I have to admit I was certain Tupac was shot by Bad Boy affiliates and vice versa. Both murders remain unresolved, but that the Record Companies were involved does not seem viable in retrospect. The positive result was that members of both labels met and ended the conflict, seeing that things had gone too far. 1996 also saw Snoop releasing his final album on Death Row: *Tha Doggfather*. His gangster image becomes evident even before one actually listens to the record. The sleeve notes have numerous pictures of Snoop with long straightened hair and a suave hat, just like Priest. He even poses with the same type of Rolls Royce that was used in the movie. The suit Snoop is wearing in these pictures is less flashy than Priest’s however, and he looks like a black mafioso, hence the album’s title. Snoop’s image as a powerful gangster is enforced through imagery. Despite his lyrical claims on the previous

album, he was still dressed as a cripple, and while this has strong gangster connotations, this change of image empowers him and makes him “cool”.

In his Death Row period, *Doggystyle* and *Doggfather* gave Snoop a name, and the opportunity to start working on his image. He now needed a firm financial fundament, and subsequently signed with No Limit records. The South had already started to break through, and Master P’s label was very commercially successful. Snoop Dogg has never claimed to be a conscious rapper. He is an artist and a businessman. I call his career an autobiographical pimp narrative, and Snoop is “pimping” the industry. Signing to No Limit seems like selling out, but Snoop has nothing to hide. The first album he released under Master P in 1998 is called *Tha Game Is to Be Sold, not to Be Told*. He also dropped “Doggy” from his name. At the beginning of the album, Master P introduces Snoop to the rest of the No Limit artists, showing that Snoop’s self-representation is being acknowledged by others: “At ease. I’d like to welcome the newest No Limit soldier, mister Snoop D O double G, and he brings to the tank<sup>18</sup> money, power, respect, leadership, street knowledge and wisdom”. On the album cover, Snoop is sitting on a throne in front of a mansion with the words “Snoop World” written on it. He is flanked by two Rolls Royces and four menacing Dobermans. In his left hand is a diamond-studded cane. Pimps are often portrayed with canes, known as pimp canes. On the first track *Snoop World*, he raps about a place that sounds a lot like the Playboy Mansion. Anyone down with Snoop is welcome:

Welcome to my world, nigga, and it’s V.I.P.  
And the bitches and the buds<sup>†</sup> for free  
Welcome to a world that you never thought existed  
And you’ve got to be a soldier to be enlisted  
[...]  
Doggy Land, Doggy World, Snoop World, whatever  
It don’t matter cause we ‘bout it, and homies<sup>†</sup> down to do whatever  
Everything is legit and the bitches the shit  
And niggas they give love cause they down for it  
Now that’s just how it goes, and the hoes<sup>†</sup> on me  
And everything is V.I.P. and that’s on DPG

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<sup>18</sup> No Limit’s symbol is a diamond-encrusted tank



He is once again showing his economic success, but now it has escalated. A big screen TV has evolved into a large estate filled with luxuries that are free for all his friends. An important part is the last line I refer to here, “and that’s on DPG”. DPG is the acronym for Dogg Pound Gangsters, and he is sending out a message that no matter what happened at Death Row, DPG are still his friends, his crew. I might note that this includes Nate Dogg, who also left Death Row. Snoop has always claimed DPG to be his group. In *Vapors* on *Doggfather* he raps: “And since they wouldn’t try to get me, I made the Doggpound”, and he is featured as a member on Doggpound’s comeback album from 2006. 1999 saw the release of Snoop’s second No Limit album *No Limit Top Dogg*. He continues to hint at his loyalties, and made tracks with his old friends Warren G, Jewell and, most notably, Dr. Dre.

Snoop’s first two No Limit albums came and went quite unnoticed and things had been quiet around him. In late 2000, however, Snoop released his final album on No Limit. This is, in my own humble opinion the single most important Snoop Dogg album. *Tha Last Meal* would be the last album Snoop would release on a label he did not own and control himself. The title itself bears witness to this: this was the last time anyone would take a bite out of him. Musically, this album suits Snoop’s laidback flow better than No Limit’s hectic, Southern beats. Dr. Dre was back in the fold (Snoop played a large part on Dre’s album from the year before), producing several of the tracks, and Snoop’s own love of soul and funk shines through. It is apparent that this is an album he has wanted to make for a long time. The album is so tight-knit it borders on a concept album, and many old friends are featured. Snoop even sings a soul song he has written *Leave Me Alone*, and he also sings many of the choruses. This is also where he really starts to go back to his roots as part of his identity construction. Realness is, as mentioned in chapter four, an integral part of Hip Hop, and Snoop adds realness to his constructed persona. He literally sings it out in the chorus of *Wrong Idea*:

I don’t want anybody to get the wrong idea about me  
I ain’t got nothing to hide, I want the world to see  
I’m a gangsta  
Gangsta niggas do your dance [C-walk, C-walk, homie, yeah]  
Gangsta bitches wave your hands

Snoop is a gangsta rapper, and now he asserts that he is, in fact, a gangsta. This is further emphasized by his reference to the C-walk, or Crip walk, which is a symbol of the Crips gang,

a dance that resembles a shuffle. It has become quite popular in recent years outside of the Crips gang itself, and is so recognizable that Snoop's video *Drop it Like it's Hot* (2004) was censored on national TV. Several segments of Snoop C-walking were cut, but can still be seen in unedited versions. This is further emphasized in the skit *Game Court*, where Snoop is being defended by his "attorney" Mac Minista. The "defense" is in reality a tribute to Snoop and his skills. Towards the end, the gangster claims are being enforced:

So all you jerks with them \$11 words  
Coming out of your \$2 mouths  
About a multi-million dollar Crip  
Who's got the mind of a bid'nessman, the heart of a tyrant  
And the tongue of a Mack – I said  
He's a five-star guerilla Crip, with bars and stars

Like he says: he "ain't got nothin' to hide".

#### **5.4 Recent years, collaborations and Tha Blue Carpet Treatment**

Now that Snoop was free of all bonds and had his own record label, he started experimenting with style, while all the while asserting his persona. His lyrics uphold the Snoop Dogg persona, but in a more matter-of-fact manner. Many of his songs are playful and downright fun, and Snoop himself has become more of an in-control presence. He presents himself as an adult person who is beyond having to prove anything, and in many ways defines the concept of "cool". His first completely self-controlled album *Paid tha Cost To Be da Bo\$\$* (2002) bears witness to this. The title itself tells us that Snoop has paid his dues, and now he is in charge. The cover shows a close-up of Snoop smirking, quite aloof. On the back, Snoop is photographed impassive with only a do-rag and a white singlet. He no longer needs to dress like Priest or a don to prove anything. People know who he is now. The inside of the cover, under the CD, shows pictures of Snoop C-Walking. The first track *Don Doggy* is an adaptation of the wedding scene in the first *Godfather* movie. Several people are coming to Don Doggy to ask him favors. The only major hit single from this album is *Beautiful*. It was the first collaboration between Snoop and Pharell (who worked with Clipse as mentioned in chapter 3), and would prove to be a match made in heaven. Snoop is rapping to a girl he has his eyes on, backed up by Pharell and Charlie Williams singing the chorus:

Beautiful, I just want you to know  
You're my favorite girl (Oh, yeah, there's something about you)

Snoop asserts his “coolness” while flirting with this girl, but unlike what one might be used to in songs of conquest, this song is actually quite sweet. He never hides the fact that he is in control, however, and makes sure to add tidbits about his new style and his clothing line.

I know you gon' lose it, this new Snoop shit  
Come on , baby boo, you gots to get into it  
Don't foo with the playa with the cool whip<sup>†</sup>  
Yeah-yeah, you know I'm always on that cool shit  
[...]  
I laugh at these niggas when they ask who do this  
Cause everybody knows whose girl that you is

Verse 2:

When I see my baby boo, shit, I get foolish  
Smack a nigga that tries to pursue it  
Homeboy<sup>†</sup>, she taken, just move it  
I asked you nicely, don't make the Dogg lose it

Verse 3:

Snoop Dogg clothing, that's what I'm groomed in  
You got my pictures on the wall in your room'n  
[...]  
On the Eastside, that's the crew I choose  
Nothin' I do is new to you  
I smack up the world if they rude to you  
Cause baby girl, you're so beautiful

Comparing this to The Clipse's *Ma, I don't Love Her*, there are many differences. Snoop concentrates on the girl herself, and the effect she has on him. Yes, he flaunts his car and financial power, but not as a reason why she should stick with him. He also tells the world to treat his girl with respect, and not once does he mention adultery in any way.

In 2004, Snoop showed that he can almost do what he wants. One of the tracks, *Signs*, featured Justin Timberlake, a former boy-band member and Britney Spears' ex-fiancé. From a Hip Hop point of view, this could seem like professional suicide, but Snoop came out of it unscarred and probably with a host of new fans. His collaboration with Pharrell continued with the smash hit *Drop It Like It's Hot*. This song is pure gangsta rap, and the chorus goes like this:

When the pimp's in the crib<sup>†</sup>, ma  
Drop it like it's hot (x3)  
When the pigs<sup>†</sup> tryin' to get at you  
Park it like it's hot (x3)  
When a nigga get a attitude  
Pop<sup>†</sup> it like it's hot (x3)  
I got the Rolly on my arm and I'm pourin' Chandon  
And I roll the best weed, cause I got it goin' on

This entire album shows Snoop using his new position as CEO to make all the right business moves. His mobster image is back on the cover and in the sleeve notes, and the music is more accessible to the public. Guest artists like Timberlake, 50 Cent and even the Bee Gees set up a potential bestseller. He also makes sure, however, to keep his real loyalties in the open. Kurupt had for a short period accepted to be Suge Knight's vice-president in Death Row. Snoop defends Kurupt saying "The niggaz from the Eastsiders split up, and one'em tried to fuck your shit up (what?). Nah, don't believe it, that's my nigga for life." The following year, Daz, Kurupt and Snoop released an album together under the "Doggpound" name.

In 2006, Snoop released his last album to date *Tha Blue Carpet Treatment*. The cover resembles that of *Paid tha Cost*, but shows a mild-looking Snoop on a blue background. On the back, he is reclining against a Coup de Ville dressed in a blue jacket with blue sleeves that look like bandanas. Blue bandanas are the main gang sign of the Crips, and the "blue carpet" is an allusion to this. Snoop opens the record by saying that:

Whenever I'm making a record, I'm getting into my character  
And I'm trying to portray something that I'm feelin' so that the whole world can believe in it.

(Switch to recording of concert)

Do anybody know my name? [Cheers]

What's my name? (Snoop Dogg)

It was interesting for me to hear this, since I have tried to find ways of showing this for a long time now. It seems to be the final (until his next album, apparently) confession he needed to make. Although he makes quite a big point of going back to his roots as a Crip, Snoop has a collaboration track with The Game who is affiliated with the rival gang Bloods. The track, called *Gangbanging 101* features the two rappers representing their gangs. Snoop goes through the gang symbolism as he presents "100.000 rip riders from the side, Blue Chucks, blue rags" and finishes his verse by claiming he will be "20 Crippin' till I drop". The Games verse shows that despite their backgrounds, they have no problems with each other, and it almost resembles a peace treaty. The Game is signed to Dr. Dre's Aftermath label and has made guest appearances with Doggpound, for example. Game raps:

It's I, in the motherfuckin' S-5

With the red bandana double-knotted round the rearview

Niggas see clear through, they know it's Game

Cherry red Lowenharts, let'em know that I bang

So bang like Snoop in "Deep Cover"

[...]

I gangbang, but I'm the opposite of Tookie Williams

Red Lambo' red bandana-print ceiling

Me and Snoop got the West Coast locked

Red and blue rag tied in a knot

As Snoop openly admits, and is even proud of, his Crip heritage, so is Game about being a Blood. The red bandana, Bloods' color, is represented, and Game uses Tookie Williams, one of the original Crips, to state that he is a Blood. Nonetheless, he gives some respect to the Crips by mentioning Tookie who was executed in 2005 for his gang organization. It also seems that there is a level of distance from the gangs. Bloods and Crips have been fighting over control in and around Los Angeles for decades, but as Game says: he and Snoop are in

control, so they can go beyond that and tie their rags together. The final verse of the song is split between the two rappers, and consists of Game driving through a Crip area, and not seeing any Bloods around. He knows he is safe, however, as he meets up with Snoop. Game ends his contribution by stating: “So if you ain’t a Crip or a Blood, just throw up Westside!” Snoop has seemed more laid-back overall, and has even started a football team for children which he raps about in “Beat up on your Pads”. The end of the first actual song on this album sees him saying how he has now achieved what he wants:

I know they told you not to fuck with us  
Layin’ and playin’, and sayin’ man walking in vain  
Anxious for fame, my nigga tryin’ to walk in my lane  
And tryin’ to walk in my shoes but they just don’t fit  
You couldn’t spit the shit I spit, cause I’m the shit  
And this is it, legit, let’s split the chips<sup>†</sup>  
And fix, and move the work and hurt that bitch  
I’m through with this

This verse is long, and Snoop rhymes fast, and sounds more and more frustrated as the song goes on. The last line is almost literally spit out, but after this song, the rest of the album is laid-back, playful and full of positive songs. Lyrically, I feel this song sums up where Snoop is now, and with his initial confession, sums up my account of Snoop Dogg’s identity construction.

## 5.5 Summing up

I recently read an article on VG’s<sup>19</sup> web edition reporting that Snoop Dogg was in court after having sued Priority Records over a royalty dispute. There was some initial confusion, as Priority’s attorney did not understand who this “Calvin Broadus” was. Publicly, it seems, there is no such person. He has been so successful in his identity construction that it is as if like he has become Snoop Dogg entirely. I am not saying that Snoop is the only rapper whose real name is not commonly known. The interesting part of the confusion is really that “everyone” knows who Snoop Dogg is, and he has succeeded greatly in creating his stage persona. He has done so well, in fact, that his true identity becomes irrelevant. At the same

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.vg.no/pub/vgart.hbs?artid=173426>

time, Snoop's lyrics are dense with claims of reality. He is blatantly open about his past and uses gang-related symbolism in order to add credibility to his claims. Snoop is a prime example of the phenomenon I consider one of the most important reasons why I am writing about Hip Hop in the first place. At the very beginning of my thesis, I list explicit self-delivery an identifying trait of rap lyrics. Snoop also exploits and builds on the tantalizing lifestyle portrayed in gangsta rap which I mention in chapter three. His take on identity construction, based on African-American mythical figures with a constant stream of authenticating imagery, has come with a price. Snoop Dogg has become so real that the real Snoop Dogg, Calvin Broadus, has become secondary if present at all.

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## Chapter 6 Concluding remarks

It seems as if Hip Hop is adapting well to late modernity, and that it is a culture that continues to recreate itself and thus its practitioners' sub-cultural identity. Critical discourse analysis, combined with Preisler's views on sub-cultures, has been a good framework to work within. Reality construction seems to me quite apparent throughout the lyrics I have investigated whether it is concerned with identity, ideologies or reality itself. Gangsta rap is violent because the reality it represents is violent. Many gangsta rappers glorify the gangster's life because it is luxurious and an enticing alternative to welfare checks. I chose Clipse because they tell their tales of drug dealing and subsequent lifestyle prior to musical success. Their accounts are quite different from many fledgling rap stars today, who flaunt their money before even having started to earn it.

Ideologies are perhaps what I found most interesting in Chouliaraki and Fairclough's *Discourse in Late Modernity*, as it was easy to relate to. Conversations with my Hip Hop interested friends more often than not turn into laments over radio music, good MCs selling or radio shows and magazines that are not "real" anymore. KRS-ONE shows many of the same attitudes as to what Hip Hop is not, but he tends to focus on what Hip Hop is. I limited my own research a great deal in that chapter, but KRS is perhaps the most respected authority within the Hip Hop community, and his work has been Meta Hip Hop for twenty years. I tried to test my friend's "loyalty" while writing the chapter and told him that KRS claimed that the South is truest to Hip Hop (a view not in any way shared by yours truly or my friend). He contemplated and answered: "I guess there's something in it, then". It shows the importance of authority figures in sub-cultures and the way in which practitioners sometimes build their identities around the views of very few of these.

The chapter I took most joy in writing was chapter five about Snoop Dogg. He creates his on-stage persona on so many levels that he has made it an art form. Going through his entire catalogue of albums brought back many fond memories while at the same time showing me more intricate levels of lyricism than I have been able to appreciate earlier. Although he is already a pop-cultural icon, Snoop has not rested and has added something new to his character with every single album, and it has had effects. When I have told people that I am writing about critical discourse analysis and identity constructions, they usually reply with phrases such as "uh-huh" or "what was that again?" But when I have said that I am writing a chapter on Snoop Dogg, I have usually gotten a "cool!" Snoop is not the only rapper who has



created a certain identity, although I believe he does it better than most others. Among the most prominent is perhaps the Wu Tang Clan who build all their records around kung-fu and samurai movies. Another interesting MC in this respect is Kool Keith, whose fictional Dr. Octagon, originally intended for a concept album, became so popular that he had to kill him off in the first song of his next release.

I have based my research almost entirely on rap lyrics and other elements surrounding MCs. I chose to do this because rap is the most accessible area of Hip Hop, and because of the nature of the lyrics. The music (including DJing) is also the part of Hip Hop that I am most fond of, and it has at times been frustrating not to be able to write about production, beats, loops and all those non-lyrical elements of songs and entire albums. But discourse exists within Hip Hop outside of rap as well. Preisler uses break dancers when presenting Hip Hop as an example of sub-cultures, and there is also the fourth element of Hip Hop – graffiti. The latter holds a vast potential as a field of research as graffiti in its basic sense is illegal, and the voices of politicians, law-enforcers and the general public are both relevant and heard more often than those of the artists. Finally, on the base of all the elements put together is the voice that encompasses it all, the foundation of the subculture: the Hip Hop heads themselves.

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## Appendix

### Vocabulary

**Ballin'** (V) & **Balla** (N) Refers to basketball players. A balla is living the good life. He has money and women. Most often refers to making money in a non-regular job way, i.e. drug dealing or rapping etc. *I got that chick's number, she know I'm ballin'.*

**Beef** (N) A conflict of sorts. Rivalry that has turned into animosity. *I think Nas re-emerged as an MC after his beef with Jay-Z.* Ending the conflict is referred to as *squashing the beef.*

**Biatch** (N) Stylistic variant of *bitch*. Popularized by Snoop Dogg.

**Bling** (N) Jewelry. *What's up with the kids these days? You can't hit the yards wearing all that bling*

**Blunt** (N) A marihuana joint rolled with cigar leafs. Named after a brand of cigars. *If we gon' light up, someone better gawn down the store get some blunts.*

**Bootylicious** (Adj) Beautiful. Often used to refer to a woman with a nice *booty* – behind. *Man those honeys we was peepin' last were bootylicious fo' sho'!*

**Buds** (N) The buds of the marihuana plant. *That Hookie be sellin' nuthin' but buds, man.*

**Burn** (V) To excel. An MC can burn if his rhymes and flow are very good, and an exceptional piece is referred to as a *burner*. *Necro must have dipped his mic in gasoline, 'cuz he burns!*

**'caine** (N) Cocaine

**Chef** (V/N) To prepare or someone preparing raw cocaine for sale. *Distribution is faster now we got us a chef.*

**Chips** (N) Money. Used in a way similar to poker jargon. *After my album dropped, I've been busy stackin' my chips.*

**Chrome** (N) Gun. *I ain't gon' step up to those guys, they be packin' chrome.*

**Cop** (V) Acquire, buy. *Im'a cop myself some rims for my whip.*

**Creep** (V) To be unfaithful. *Renée cold threw my ass out when she found out I been creepin' with Aicia.*

**Crib** (N) Home. *Why don't we watch the game in my crib?*

**Diss** (V) To disrespect someone, speaking ill of someone or ignore him/her. *Man, I was trying to talk to Angela last night, but she just kept dissin' me.*

**Dope** (Adj) Good. A beat can be dope if it is pleasing to the ear, and a skilled MC or graffiti writer can be dope. *Man, the new Madlib beats are mad dope, yo!*

**Fly** (Adj.) Attractive. Use about both men and women. Can also describe clothes and objects. *Man, check out those fly ladies over there. Good thing I got my flyest kicks on.*

**Grindin'** (V) Dealing drugs. *You seen the rims on Hookie's whip? He gots to be grindin'.*

**Heat** (N) Gun. *Don't worry, I'm packin' heat.*

**Hoe** (N) Derogatory about women. Often denotes promiscuity. *Man, I'm so sick of that hoe paging me all the time.*

**Homeboy/homie** (N) A friend. Usually refers to someone who grew up at the same place as oneself. **Homegirl** is also used. *I'm just kickin' it with my homies today.*

**Hood** (N) Short for neighborhood.

**Hoodie** (N) A hooded sweater.

**Key** (N) A kilo of cocaine

**Pigs** (N) The police. *Man, the pigs be givin' a hard time lately.*

**Pop** (V) To fire a gun. *Step out, or I'll pop ya ass!*

**Sling** (V) To deal drugs. *Why would I get a job when I make so much more slingin' crack?*

**Uzi** (N) A type of automatic gun.

**Whack** (Adj) In Hip Hop, whack means bad. *I don't understand what's going on with Mobb Deep these days. Those tracks are whack!*

**Whip** (N) Car. Most often used about sports cars or large 60s-type cars. *Me and the homies were just cruising around in my whip, checkin' out the honeys.*

**Wigger** (N) A white person who adopts African-American symbolism, especially Hip Hop and gangsta style and tries too hard. Means "White Nigger"

**Yay/Yayo** (N) Cocaine