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Du Bois and Rap Music: Two Ways of Awakening of the African American
Self-Consciousness

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

vedoucí bakalářské práce (supervisor):

Prof. David L. Robbins

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Zpracoval/a (author):

Ladislav Sedlák

studijní obor (subject/s):

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THESIS ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to connect W.E.B. Du Bois and rap music as two immensely important influences on African American community by tracing the development from one of the greatest scholars in American history to the widely criticized musical genre. Du Bois is studied all over the world whereas rap lyrics are mostly ignored by scholars. Nevertheless, both can serve as extraordinary sources of knowledge and pride, both can lead to the awakening of African American self-consciousness, as far as we choose the right kind of rap music and the right Du Bois. Du Bois's inclination to Stalinism in his later years may be perceived as equally condemnable as the first album of the American gangsta rap crew NWA; but most importantly both Du Bois's radical political thinking and the emergence of gangsta rap are alerting and inevitable in a way. They were caused by the longstanding frustration of the black community in the US.

The thesis compares the themes of Du Bois's collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk* with the poetry of rap artists. An important part of this thesis is also a sketch of the development of African American progressive thought and social commentary, which is necessary to see the link between Du Bois and rap. It is also intended to make us see that the artistry of musicians such as Mos Def, Tupac Shakur or KRS One deserves to be mentioned next to the honored writers and poets Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou.

In the first chapter, the thesis deals with the first remarkable theme of Du Bois's essays the "double consciousness" and this notion is applied to the ambivalent understanding of rap lyrics and the disunity of rap music aims.

The chapter called "Reconciliation with Inferiority" discusses the emergence of gangsta rap and the decay of lyricism in rap music, it also touches upon the importance of African American music in the US.

The next two chapters, "Black CNN," and "Edutainment," are dedicated to the possible link between rap lyrics, education and social consciousness, in relation to Du Bois's views on the education of the Negro minority.

"Ghetto Jesus: Negro Religion" is aimed to compare rappers' views of religious questions and Du Bois's approach to faith.

The last part of the thesis, "Still I Rise: The Ancestors of Rap Music," sketches the development of social commentary and protest by means of both art and social activism from Du Bois to hip hop.

ABSTRAKT

Cílem této práce je postihnout určitý druh souvislosti mezi myšlením W.E.B. Du Boise a rapovou hudbou jakožto dvou nesmírně významných vlivů na afroamerickou komunitu, a popsat tedy vývoj myšlení této menšiny od jednoho z jejích nejvýznamnějších vzdělavců až po tento často kritizovaný hudební styl. Du Boisovo dílo a filozofie jsou předmětem odborných studií po celém světě, zatímco rapové texty a poezie jsou často zatracovány a v odborných kruzích ignorovány. Rap může však, stejně jako Du Bois, sloužit jako cenný zdroj poznání a pokroku, může také vést ke křivenému obrození afroamerické identity, pokud si umíme z obou zdrojů vybrat ty správné kapitoly. Du Boisovo pozdější přiklonění se k ideologii Stalinismu může být pro někoho právě tak pobuřující a odsouzeníhodné jako první album rapové skupiny NWA, ale především je nutné se zamyslet nad tím, že radikální vývoj Du Boisova politického myšlení a nástup fenoménu zvaného gangsta rap byly sice silně znepokojující, ale do určité míry nevyhnutelné posuny. Obojí bylo způsobeno nekončící frustrací afroamerické menšiny na území Spojených Států.

Tato bakalářská práce srovnává hlavní témata Du Boisovy sbírky esejí nazvané *Souls of the Black Folk* a významných postav afroamerické literatury s poezií rapových umělců. Důležitou součástí této práce je také nastínění vývoje afroamerického uvědomělého projevu a uměleckého i sociálního aktivismu, které je nezbytné k propojení W.E.B. Du Boise a rapové kultury. Toto spojení a stručně zmapování onoho vývoje dokáže, že umělci jako Tupac Shakur, KRS One nebo Mos Def si zaslouží zařazení do společnosti uznávaných básníků a spisovatelů, jakými jsou například Langston Hughes či Maya Angelou.

První kapitola pojednává o Du Boisově pojmu „double consciousness,“ a tento termín aplikuje na nejasné cíle rapových umělců a jejich rozpolcený přístup k dění okolo nich.

„Reconciliation with Inferiority“ popisuje vzestup gangsta rapu, vývoj rapových textů a jejich obsahu. Kapitola také nastiňuje zásadní význam afroamerické hudby pro kulturu Spojených Států.

Dvě následující kapitoly, „Black CNN“ a „Edutainment,“ se věnují vlivu rapu na vzdělání a sociální otázky ve vztahu k Du Boisově pohledu na vzdělávání.

„Ghetto Jezus: Negro Religion“ porovnává vztah rapperů k náboženským otázkám s přístupem W.E.B. Du Boise k víře.

Poslední část předložené bakalářské práce nazvaná „Still I Rise: The Ancestors of Rap Music“ stručně popisuje vývoj afroamerického aktivismu ve formě otevřeného protestu i literárního vyjádření.

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I. INTRODUCTION

African American progressive thought has both deep roots in the past and a turbulent contemporary expression. Artists and politicians have been looking for the answer to one question for decades: What is the place of African American citizens in the United States? How should they integrate in the society without losing their identity? Can they ever be cut loose from the aftermath of oppression that characterized and followed the age of slavery? Black scholars have been looking for solutions to their situation, revising the past, and searching for the long-yearned-for progress. Regarding the history of African American political ideology, it may seem problematic at first to mention names such as Du Bois and Ice Cube in one sentence. However, no matter how the two personalities are distant in time and in their manner of expressing dissatisfaction, we are able to find an undeniable link between them. We sometimes speak about Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Dubois, Booker T. Washington, and Martin Luther King on one side, and KRS-One, Tupac Shakur and Chuck D on the other. I want to prove that the former are the predecessors of the latter. For many years, many serious people, both black and white, have tended to respect the first group and damn the other. However, nowadays when Mos Def's lyrics are taught as a part of modern American poetry, and when there is a seminar called The Life and Poetry of Tupac Amaru Shakur at prestigious American universities, a wider recognition is called for regarding the importance and greatness of rap artists, the purpose of their actions, their connection to political-cultural commentators like Malcolm X and W.E.B. Du Bois, and their significant position in the complex African American heritage.

The purpose of this thesis is to show the common topics and ideas of, for example, *The Souls of the Black Folk* and rap lyrics, and to highlight the resemblance that is both wonderful and frightening; to try to demonstrate the possible influence of Du Bois on rap artists; and to

describe the development of political commentary from black scholars of Du Bois' time, through writers such as Richard Wright and Langston Hughes, the political figures such as Malcolm X and the Black Panthers, to street artists represented by Tupac and Notorious B.I.G. The thesis deals with the ways of expressing hope and hopelessness of African American discourse by means of comparing literary texts and thinking of African American scholars and writers with modern music lyricism. Moreover it sketches the development of a racial protest from Du Bois to Tupac and others.

Vithu Jeyaloganathan said that the identity of one changes with how one perceives reality. We are influenced by what is happening around us but the events are not as important as our perception of them. We should bear in mind that thoughts and perceptions create history and shape our identity more than anything else. We depend on our abilities to stand erect during hard times and to make something out of every crisis that we encounter. The identity of Africans brought to the American continent has always been a problem. After the era of slavery, that identity needed to be restored or awakened. Some even say that the identity needed to be created, since the change that shaped the lives of African slaves was immensely brutal and devastating. The whole concept of slavery was intended to destroy the identity, in which it nearly succeeded.

Since then, development of self-perception has been shaking the black community, reaching several peaks, one of them being the Harlem Renaissance, the huge explosion of black culture that occurred in the most significant African American community in the United States. It constituted a first significant and intensive outburst of African American culture, education, and identity. The next well known accomplishment was reached during the Civil Rights Movement which made a huge step towards ending the "visible" racism and discrimination against Negroes. Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and many others, formed another wave of awakening for both blacks and whites in America.

We may say that the previously-mentioned periods definitely constituted a positive contribution to African American identity and education. The question that may come to mind is: What about today? Nowadays we come across another highlight in African American cultural history. Hip hop culture represents its most visible part. One may encounter hip hop everywhere, even if you are not a fan of the relatively new cultural movement. We see it on TV every day, in commercials, in newspapers. People all over the world listen to rap music, speak like their new idols, use the same slang; you even hear whites calling each other “nigga,” which may seem ridiculous, laughable, absurd, and it is. However, it shows what is going on in today’s globalized world and what hip hop has achieved since its start in South Bronx in the late 1970s.

It started with DJ Kool Herc and several microphones and turntables, performing in the streets of the Bronx for everybody who wanted to listen and dance. The encouragements for dancers soon became rhymes that quickly changed their topic into commentaries on daily news and happenings within the community. These “folklore-like” parties with an old “mic” and a turntable, that nobody except the African Americans living close to the basketball courts where the entertainment took place was aware of, turned into something nobody could anticipate. The simple rhymes turned into complex multisyllabic rhymed word plays, such as those of Rakim, Kool G Rap and Big Daddy Kane; the DJs with basic skills and tricks transformed into brilliant music composers, such as DJ Premier, Marco Polo, Dr Dre and Jay Dee, who create music for celebrities beyond the horizon of hip hop. The unprofitable pastime is now a million dollar business, represented by Jay-Z who is today, whether we like it or not, more of a businessman than a pure rap artist. Rappers have their own labels and clothing lines, while they more and more often sink into Hollywood movie projects as rapping is suppressed as their secondary occupation.

The question is, however, whether the influence of hip hop is positive or not? What are the pros and cons of hip hop culture? A type of art produced mainly by African Americans has never been more influential and popular. The impact of hip hop on youth in general is

questioned every day. The lifestyles promoted by rap artists are often self-destructive and violent. What do we take from rap music and the so called “hood” films that surround us?

We need to specify what hip hop is and the basic terminology. Hip hop is a culture closely linked to African American communities in the USA. Rap is the music style of hip hop. As KRS-One once said: “rap is something that is being done, Hip hop is something that is being lived.”¹ Hip hop culture has five basic elements: breakdancing, graffiti writing, rap music, DJing and MCing, DJing being playing recorded music and additionally using turntables and performing various effects like scratching and back spinning; and MCing is what is commonly known as rapping or performing lyrics. One of the basic problems of hip hop remains the misunderstanding of some of its elements and people’s subconscious association of hip hop with crime. Even a big fan of hip hop lifestyle must admit that the association is logical, especially in case of graffiti writing. People immediately picture damaged buildings, sidewalks and bus stops everywhere and the amount of money that the removing of this “art” costs. The art becomes a true art when it is legal or, in this case, in locations that are reserved for it.

Fortunately, opinions like that are becoming scarce. The art of rap is widely recognized now because more and more people listen to it, which is a great achievement but also the worst thing that could possibly happen to rap. Hip hop is now a lifestyle that shapes millions of people, their personalities and psyche. The previous generations admired people such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, and their opinions and speeches gave them pride and a sense of identity. They, along with W.E.B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, were reservoirs of knowledge and motivation that flowed from them and nurtured new interests and determination to gather more information about the history and social conditions of their ancestors as the key to learning about themselves and their life.

We need to state at the beginning that rap music cannot substitute for the African American literary canon. However there are artists who surely, if not providing education as such, have

¹ *Rhyme & Reason*, prod. Aslan Production, dir. Peter Spirer, 1997, 16 min. 23 sec.

the potential to awaken a zeal for searching out some additional information about what is briefly mentioned in the lyrics. Rappers such as Rakim, KRS-One, Public Enemy, Immortal Technique, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Nas or Dead Prez use many references to history, sociology and religion that need to be recognized and understood in order to appreciate and savour their music fully. Moreover, rap lyrics and even the attitudes of rappers themselves resonate the common themes of African American literature.

II. DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

One of the main themes of the collection of essays written by W. E. B. Du Bois is the double-consciousness. The term summarizes the struggle of Negroes in the United States of America. Their experience is constantly being torn between being American and being Negro while they keep trying to function in America as whites and find their own identity inside their minds. Consequently, the double-consciousness means no consciousness and a painful life of belonging nowhere; even the term African American suggests this duality. To complete the inclusion of people with black skin, they need to be somehow “labeled”; but a label like that confirms the opposite and that is, in fact, that the inclusion is not possible to conclude.

Hip hop artists sometimes try to awaken the indigenous notion of origin to reconcile with the seemingly never-ending search for identity and to bring all the “kidnapped” back home at least in the metaphorical sense. Dead Prez released a track with this theme whose name is expressive: “I’m an African.” They rap: I’m an African , never was an African-American / Blacker than black I take it back to my origin / Same skin hated by the klansmen / Big nose and lips, big hips and butts, dancin /[...] No I wasn't born in Ghana, but Africa is my momma / And I did not end up here from bad karma.² This is of course very simplified attitude but there is an attempt finally to solve the issue of double-consciousness. At the same time it offers a solution that is not likely to restore peace in the minds of African-Americans; it will probably lead to further protests and discomfort. The question is whether the best solution is to decide between African and American. Even if it were possible it would cause either a further alienation or a loss of original cultural background which forms an undisputable part of souls of the black folk.

² Dead Prez, *I’m an African*, Loud Records, USA, 2000.

The term of double-consciousness is applicable to hip hop culture in another way as well, which is a little more distant from the question of identity. It seems as if some artist were trying to find balance between writing obscene and violent lyrics and a philanthropic approach towards their communities, while these two ways of conscience oppose each other. David Banner is known for his philanthropy but at the same time, one may object that his lyrics produce and support violence and may overshadow his effort to change the conditions of American society. In terms of violence, rap music is a mirror and it has to be understood as a mirror because otherwise the lyrics will fertilize violence although it was aimed to alert and call attention to the “projects.” David Banner defend himself by saying: “I can admit there are some problems in hip hop but it is only a reflection of what's taking place in our society. Hip hop is sick because America is sick. [...]People have been pimping and hoeing since back in England, but when Snoop Dogg and 50 Cent are pimping, that’s some bullshit. The Latin Kings, the Crips, the Bloods were around before rap music, but now we are the reason all these problems are there. I’m a study of history. I’m a study of people. This country was built on lies. They don’t want to clean up what is happening in the streets; they just want us to shut up about it.”³

Therefore, the modified meaning of “double consciousness” may be applied to rap music by people from the outside who do not see the real purpose of lyrics like: “ I fired a red beam, 9 people gon die, momas gon cry, spirits in the sky, preachers preachin, sermons tellin lives cause each and everyone of yall, niggas wasnt shit.”⁴ When David Banner’s explanation is applied, the lyrics have the power to teach and guide. However, there are lyricists whose intentions are very hard to explain because their songs approve hate and misogyny. One of the troubles in arriving at the appropriate explanation is the narrative principle of rap music. The narrator usually speaks (not always) in the first person, which is very confusing, in addition to

³ Morgan Steiker, “Interview with David Banner“, *Prefix Magazine*, 28th March 2010.
<<http://www.prefixmag.com/features/david-banner/interview/18481/>>

⁴ David Banner, *9mm*, Universal, USA, 2008.

the fact that rap is understood as an honest confession, personal story-telling and private experience. The “true” image of hip hop is what makes it both attractive and damaging at the same time. It both educates and murders, it inspires its listeners to follow the fate of its “heroes” and to reject it. Whether you choose to be influenced positively or negatively, depends on your knowledge of rap’s principle, the background information that prevents you from taking all the stories literally. If you do not happen to possess the necessary basic knowledge, rap may be very poisoning indeed.

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The double-consciousness in Du Bois means being an American and being black. Negroes judge themselves through the eyes of others. They see themselves through the eyes of white America and that picture is frequently not flattering at all; and the “external vision” has of course a great impact on the African American psyche. Since they have been constantly being fed with negative notions they have started believing those critiques. Blacks believed they were ugly, unable to do any job, and they in fact confirmed the superiority of white men. Negroes for instance used to straighten their hair to look more like whites. They simply took their inferiority for granted.⁵

⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Striving,” *Souls of the Black Folk* (New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 1994) 7.

III. RECONCILIATION WITH INFERIORITY

Rap music may be one of the consequences of this “reconciliation” with one’s inferiority, especially so called gangsta rap. However the difference is that the images in gangsta rap lyrics are created more or less consciously, whereas the previously mentioned behavior is rather a sub-conscious, natural psychological reaction. One of the theories of the development of gangsta rap says that black artists, especially musicians, grew tired of fighting against prejudice and they decided to approach the situation the other way around as if saying:” Ok, you are still scared of the black man, saying he is uneducated, dangerous and wild, and that he needs to be kept in ghettos. Since trying to convince you that we are different did not work, we are now going to give you the exact n***a that you see in us.” Similar to the times when white America was scared of the militant organization of Black Panthers and the mysterious Nation of Islam, there was a new stream of fear flowing from the black neighborhoods of American cities. Young blacks starting with NWA seemed to be proud of being a problem. They rapped about guns, criminal lifestyles, their lyrics were full of misogyny, hatred and protest. In 1988, Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, Eazy E, MC Ren and DJ Yella released a song called F**k the Police. The controversy and message of the track shocked America. It summed up some of the prejudice that the young blacks had to cope with, especially the harassment from the side of police. The song says for example: “Searching my car, looking for a product/ thinking every n***a is selling narcotics.”⁶ This was just a mild introduction compared to what was coming in following records. “Here’s a little something about a n***a like me,/ never should have been let out of penitentiary/[...] This is a gang and I’m in it/ my man Dre’ll f**k you in a minute/ With a right, left, right,left, you’re toothless/ and the you say: "Goddam, they’re ruthless.”

Suddenly, it looked as if being an uneducated criminal was a privilege. The attitude that made NWA popular was adopted not only by other recording artists but also by urban youth

⁶ N.W.A., *F**k the Police*, Audio Achievements, California, 1988.

who found themselves in being “gangstas.” There is a new spirit of pride in being thieves, murderers, pimps and threats to society in general, there is a sense of glamorization of the threat. This ridiculous way of thinking can be explained by quoting Du Bois who wrote his essays long before hip hop was born. Du Bois states that “ The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found freedom in his promised land. Whatever of good may come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people.”⁷

Frustration caused this kind of hip hop to emerge in the late 80s. The feeling was best expressed by Tupac Shakur who once said: “ It is like there is a hotel room where they throw parties everyday, they have food every day. I knock on the door every day, they open it, let me see the party, they’re like throwing salami all over the place, but they are telling me there is no food in there. And I’m standing outside trying to sing my way in. ‘We are hungry, please let us in.’ After about a week the song is going to change into: ‘We are hungry, we need some food.’ After two or three weeks, it’s like: ‘give me the food or I’m breaking down the door.” After a year, I will be just like picking the lock and coming to the door blasting, you know. We asked ten years ago, we was asking with the Panthers, we was asking with Civil Rights Movement. Those people who asked are now dead or in jail. So now what do you think we gonna do? Ask?”⁸

All of what is written by rappers today characterizes the mood in the African American community the same as what Du Bois pointed out: what it was like to be black in his times. The state of American culture and politics has been mirrored in the attitude of its minorities. American culture is penetrated and formed by the culture of the African American minority. They are the ones who are therefore able to give an accurate picture of the conditions of living because they have tasted all of its layers. Du Bois claims that Negro is a perfect representative

⁷ Du Bois, 4.

⁸ *Tupac: Resurrection*, prod. Lauren Lazin Preston Holmes, dir. Lauren Lazin, 2003. 51:20.

of America. “There are today no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave.”⁹

Additionally, Du Bois says that despite the cultural background of the American Negro, “we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness.”¹⁰ Du Bois seem to say that without Negroes, America would be culturally very shallow; however we need to ask a question: what is rap music doing for the advancement of American culture nowadays? When you ask common radio listeners all over the world they will probably say that rap chokes a potential cultural development and it establishes new ideals that do not correspond with anything we consider artistically valuable. Rappers talk about fancy cars, clothes, women, jewelry; and the lyrics which one hears coming from the speakers usually lack the witty lyricism that was once rap music’s primary element. Therefore, rap artists are judged according to the lyrics that are widely spread on TV and radio station even though they may not be the kind of lyrics they usually produce but only the lyrics that are allowed to be heard publically and that may be tolerated by a mainstream listener. It always sounds like a cliché that the mainstream cannot be compared with the underground, that the mainstream is garbage and the underground reigns. However, especially in the case of hip hop, this may hardly be denied. Critics would say that every music style is at its best right before it takes the next (and usually necessary) step and starts to be produced commercially for “everybody.”

Many rappers seem to be lost in the “dusty desert of dollars and smartness” that Du Bois talked about and tried to avoid. A last case of this transformation is a Snoop Dogg interview where the West Coast icon admitted that he had not written all the lyrics for his last album *Malice in Wonderland*. The listeners who encounter rap only occasionally on TV would

⁹ Du Bois, 10.

¹⁰ Du Bois, 15.???

probably not care and would not pay attention; but rap fans must be, to say the least, surprised and not in a positive sense. What was even more striking was the statement by which he intended to justify himself. He compared himself to Madonna who has also achieved almost everything that the music business offers and she does not write her lyrics either. The point is, is how can Snoop Dogg compare himself to Madonna? The possibility of comparison itself shows the incredible “success” of rap music that rap music (and rap musicians) should never have wanted to achieve. This peak of popularity should have been forbidden for rap music, but it is now too late. As mentioned above, rap is (or should be) built primarily on lyricism, whereas, with all respect to Madonna, stunning lyrical skills is not what she has been known for. To be more precise, rap music is personal experience, opinion, confession. When someone else writes the lyrics for you, it destroys the authenticity of hip hop that is crucial for the culture.¹¹

¹¹ “Snoop Dogg nepíše svoje texty,” Bbarák Mag, 16.2. 2010.
<<http://www.bbarak.cz/articles.php?cid=6&id=7360> >

IV. BLACK CNN

Moreover, one of the reasons why some songs and video clips cannot be shown on TV is because of their explicit content, strong language etc. Unfortunately, it is the same language that children hear and speak in school, we hear it every time we turn our TV on or go outside; but only rap music is gibbeted for it as if the pervasive language was rap's invention. The same thing can be said about violence in rap music. It has always been a part of American culture, it was there before hip hop and it will always be. Chuck D once said that rap is the "black CNN," echoing David Banner's assertion that rap does not invent things, rap does not make up stories, rap reports and the rapper is a reporter.

On the other hand, others, especially some of today's black intellectuals see hip hop as nothing but a symbol of crisis in African American culture. Bakari Kitwana, the author of *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and The Crises in African American Culture*, opens her book by stating: "Understanding the new crisis in African-American culture that has come about in my generation's lifetime- high rates of suicide and imprisonment, police brutality, the generation gap, the war of the sexes, Blacks selling Black self-hatred as entertainment, among others- I often wonder what life will be like for the generation of African Americans that follows."¹²

Kitwana is right in a sense. However, even when today there is not such visible racism as there used to be before the Civil Rights Movement, and the advancement of life of people with darker skin is undisputable, there must have been something that nurtured the need for another protest; and that is frustration. As Tupac describes it, the situation after Civil Rights Movement is far from ideal and, apart from that, the consequences of the pre-civil rights era are still at work and they will hardly ever be completely eliminated. There is a psychological scar that will always have some impact on the community that suffered.

¹² Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and The Crises in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003)76.

The underground rapper Akrobatik, like Chuck D of Public Enemy, talks about precisely the same legacy of slavery and the seemingly insoluble aftermath of legal racism that should no longer be at work in America. Chuck D says: “The effects of slavery have had a far reaching effect on black people in America. The scars run deep, not just the physical but the emotional and psychological scars.” They continue rapping:

Life flashes, whether from the whip lashes/ he's threatening to burn me in my own ashes/
Brown skin is now purple/ it comes full circle/ when the pain that I'll endure is the pain I have
to work through/ For now my body lies listless/ wishing that my wife wasn't forced to
witness/ Wishes she wasn't forced to be master's mistress/ wishes she wasn't forced to be
under this distress.“

Akrobatik remembers the characteristics of the old times and Chuck D goes on rapping about the most recent disaster that put suffering of African Americans and inequality back into national awareness--Hurricane Katrina:

“I'm on my rooftop, sick and thirsty, asking God for mercy/ please spare my wife, she's only
thirty/ Schoolbuses float atop murky waters/ could they have/ used them to at least evacuate
our sons and daughters?/ We sleep because we have no choice/ dehydrated, and we can't
scream for because we have no voice/ Crying for what the helicopters never dropped us/ the
stench of bodies in piles is evident for miles.“¹³

Chuck D and Akrobatik are clearly trying to find similarities between the two situations. Many African American activists protested the method by which the order of people's evacuation was determined, since in many cases, Blacks were the ones who had to wait for a rescue much longer. They found themselves once again in the land of the free, supposedly in their new home, a "home" that treated them as a less important and dispensable part of American society. The presumed idea of equality obviously did not offer equal aid for

¹³ Akrobatik, *Kindred*, USA: Fat Beats, 2008.

everybody regardless their social status or skin color. This is another example of the frustration that Tupac talked about and one of the main reasons why rap music has its indisputable place in American culture.

The criticism of social conditions in hip hop culture encounters various reactions from people. Many radio listeners do not know about this part of hip hop, since political hip hop has never exactly been a part of the mainstream. However, in America conscious rap music serves well in pointing to problems that many people might otherwise ignore completely. It can draw your attention and help you to realize that not every life is as easy as yours and that there are still areas that deserve help and people who deserve to be listened to.

V. EDUTAINMENT

When critics complain about the concept and the essence of hip hop music, they hardly ever mention the artistic form, they hardly ever pay attention to the poetic devices that hip hop uses; they are concerned usually about the violence, misogyny and drugs in rap lyrics. Nowadays, it is hard to overlook the fact that hip hop is one of the most educated and socially-aware kind of art. This fact is suppressed by the selection of rap that is spread among people by commercial radio stations and the image of the most famous rap artists such as 50 Cent, Jay-Z and other commercially successful “rappers” such as Soulja Boy. When people associate the term rap music only with 50 Cent and Soulja Boy, it is really a disaster for the immensely rich culture. The overall image of rap music is furthermore influenced by so called “hood” films where rappers often star as drug dealers and criminals with two watches on each wrist and tons of glittering jewelry which suggests superficiality.

We should not argue about the quality of party hip hop that is coming out of the speakers because that is what people want to hear. This is the people’s choice. It seems like listening to music is not a “full-time” hobby anymore. We listen to music when we are cooking, reading, we need music for dancing and as a background while having coffee with our friends, we listen to music while driving a car or on our way to school.

If you are to decide whether to read a book of poetry or a newspaper on your way to school or to a job, you will probably choose a newspaper because poetry frequently requires thinking and imagination, without which you do not savor it and it is a waste of time reading it. Rather, you wait till you get home from work, make a cup of tea and make yourself comfortable. These are the conditions under which one is able to read and examine poetry or any not-easy-to-read piece of literature in one's mind.

It works because people still devote some time to reading before going to bed for example. The problem of rap, and music in general, is that not many listeners spend an evening with

headphones in quiet solitude that allows them to recognize the true magic that rap music surely possesses. Slug from the rap band Atmosphere once said in an interview for the Czech hip hop magazine Bbarak: “Many people nowadays don’t give a s**t whether they play *All Eyez on Me* by Tupac or the new Game’s album. They just want something that is good for driving. Do you really want to analyze Sage Francis’s lyrics while driving a car?”¹⁴

5.1 Du Bois, Rap Artists, and Education of Negro

W.E.B Dubois is very much concerned about Negro spiritual progress and he knows that it has to be achieved by means of education. In fact, his whole collection of essays *The Souls of the Black Folk* is infused with the theme of education. Du Bois first rejects Booker T. Washington’s approach and his patient and humble method of advancement. Du Bois refuses Washington’s stance which Du Bois summarized in his book as follows: “the South is justified in its present attitude toward the Negro because of the Negro’s degradation; secondly, that the prime cause of the Negro’s failure to rise more quickly is his wrong education in the past; and thirdly, that his future rise depends primarily on his own efforts.”¹⁵

It is too simple to say that the future of African Americans depends primarily on the Negro himself and that it is the Negro’s fault that s/he has not made the necessary progress. It is never dependent only on one’s effort if he or she is going to succeed. Nevertheless, the thing that should be thought about is that today, there still remain certain communities of African Americans whose apathy, self-inhibiting and even self-destructive attitude is the primary reason for their lack of prosperity and progress. Those are people who do not see education as anything contributive to their situation; they are living in their small world where education

¹⁴ Bbarak

¹⁵ Du Bois, 34.

seemingly cannot do them any good; and for these individuals rap music is the thing which, instead of teaching them about culture and art, holds them back and keeps them in their place.

Du Bois makes a great point when he talks about the importance of having Negro teachers, someone who enjoys enough respect from black people to be carefully listened to mainly because the teacher and the students have the common background, therefore a common history and experience. Du Bois claims that: “ If the Negro is to learn, he must teach himself and the most effective help that could be given him is the establishment of schools to train Negro teachers.”¹⁶

Of course, the problem of African Americans is not just to integrate into American society by means of finding a job and becoming part of the economic machine that produces wealth and supports the country’s financial stability. Du Bois was aware of the other side of integration--spiritual development. He writes:

[...]when turning our eyes from the temporary and contingent in the Negro problem to the broader question of the permanent uplifting and civilization of black men in America, we have a right to inquire, as this enthusiasm for material advancement mounts to its height, if after all the industrial school is the final and sufficient answer in the training of the Negro race; and to ask gently, but in all sincerity, the ever recurring query of the ages, Is not life more than meat, and the body more than raiment?¹⁷

Teachers always have to have the sympathy of students, they have to win respect and show that there is something valuable and useful they can teach. One of the problems of African

¹⁶ Du Bois, ?

¹⁷ Du Bois, 58.

American ghetto communities is and has been that they do not feel any community in learning at school or they still think that the text books are racist by giving selective information and not teaching anything, for example, about African American history, which could awaken some sort of pride in Negro students. Most of the ideas of inappropriate school systems are summarized in one song by the famous political rap group Dead Prez: “Man that school s**t is a joke/ the same people who control the school system/ control the prison system and the whole social system/ ever since slavery.” Dead Prez continue: “I got my diploma from a school named Rickers, / full of teenage mothers and drug dealing n****s/ [...] I tried to pay attention but they classes wasn’t interestin / they seemed to only glorify Europeans/ Claiming Africans were only three fifths of a human being.” These lyrics seem exaggerated, and they may indeed be; but we have to consider the possibility that they are using exaggeration to draw attention to a smoldering problem that needs to be solved before it grows up to an uncontrollable fire.

Schools, according to Dead Prez, also try to suppress your own personality. “To advance in life/ they try to make you pull your pants up.” It is true that you always have to adapt to a new pattern of education and behavior but sometimes it keeps you from developing your own interests and skills. “Aint teachin us how to get crack out the ghetto.”¹⁸ The problem of drugs and life on the streets is far more complicated, but education should provide part of the answer to many of the problems that ghettos have recently been having.

A West Coast rapper The Game is aware of the ignorance of Black youth towards their history and people from the past who played important roles in Black man’s progress. On his last album *L.A.X.* he talks about his own childhood and apathy: “Didn’t understand a dream of a king, now do the math/ Coincidentally on your birthdays I ditched the class/ cause the younger me, dumber me, was chasing the cash/ chasing the a*s, low life with his face in the grass/ Riding from school in front of the bus/ not even thinking how Rosa Parks, done it for

¹⁸ Dead Prez, *They Schools*, Loud Records, USA, 2000.

us.” Young Blacks are not able to see the progress that has been made and the great personalities of African American history, whose honor, deeds, and suffering should be appreciated and celebrated.¹⁹

The educational system and its reformation are the main themes of another rap song "You Must Learn" by KRS One. "Knowledge reigned supreme/ The ignorant is ripped to smithereens/ [...]It seems to me that in a school that's ebony/ African history should be pumped up steadily/ I believe that if you're teaching history/ Filled with straight-up facts, no mystery/ Teach the student what needs to be taught/ 'Cause black and white kids both take shots/ When one doesn't know about the other one's culture/ Ignorance swoops down like a vulture.“ KRS One proceeds by listing some successful people of African American origin and concludes by: “The point I'm gettin' at, it might be harsh / 'Cause we're just walkin' around brainwashed / So what I'm sayin' is not to diss a man/ We need the 89 school system / One that caters to a black return.“²⁰ His approach is interesting because it is self-reflexive; he complains not only about the ways black people are treated by the school system but he knows that “his” people have to be willing to take the first step themselves.

Killah Priest also comments on education in his lyrics usually in the opposite sense to KRS One. In one song, he raps: “At school my teachers used to flunk me / hoping one day I turn to junky.”²¹ Although the attitudes of rappers may differ, they have one feature in common: they all agree on the fact that there is still some kind of prejudice at schools that holds African American back and that prejudice is a persisting barrier between them and the equal opportunity to educate themselves.

¹⁹ The Game, *Letter to the King*, Geffen, Los Angeles, 2008

²⁰ KRS One, *You Must Learn*, RCA Records, New York, 1989.

²¹ Killah Priest, *When Will We Learn*, MCA, USA, 2000.

KRS One is of the same opinion with Du Bois concerning education. They both see it as an obvious way to advancement of Blacks in America. The spiritual and educational awakening is perceived as a solution both for Negroes in Du Bois's times and nowadays even though one would expect the two periods to be completely different from each other. Sadly, it is not the case, and we are forced to notice the immortality of Du Bois's ideas, which is very revealing fact indeed even though he later turned his ideas closer to Communist ideology and focused on revolutionary approach to the advancement of colored people. "To stimulate wildly weak and untrained minds is to play with mighty fire; to float their striving idly is to welcome a harvest of brutish crime and shameless lethargy in our very laps. The guiding of thought and deft coordination of deed is at once the path of honor and humanity." He adds that: "If, deaf to the voice of the Zeitgeist, we refuse to use and develop these men, we risk poverty and humanity." He is aware of the fact that the lack of education will encourage prejudices and that only educated black man may oppose the racist society, not by fighting it directly, but by showing it empirically that African American are equal to whites in their intellectual skills.²²

When we endorse this theory, we have to question some of the aspects of rap, especially gangsta rap, mafioso rap and hardcore rap. The lyrics are either meant seriously or deliberately taken ad absurdum; they are very often close to a glorification of obscurantism, ignorance, and primitivism. Some may see the lyrics as a report from the streets; others are easily able to justify their view that the lyrics are a nice example of resignation on any progress or struggle to erase prejudice. Rapper Ice Cube expresses the attitude that exists among African American youth in the ghettos, especially those who live under the influence of street gangs, in a song called "Hood Mentality": "F**k school / I'ma be a dope dealer, / I'ma be a killa, yep, an urban guerilla [...] F**k school, n***a, they ain't trying to educate me / All they give a f**k is what I memorized lately / I'm gonna have to teach myself, clock the money, get the

²² Du Bois, 56.

wealth[...].” From these texts we see that certain communities do not see education as a valuable option, but only what the system wants them to do.

People living in those communities are likely to give up before they even start trying; or their hope is moved somewhere else, represented by something different. Ice cube says: “F**k school, n***a, if I grow a little taller / everybody tell me I’m gon do it, I’m gonna be a baller [...] Starting point guard n***a, fresh out of middle school / Either it’s the NBA, or it’s the NFL.”²³ Notorious B.I.G. also articulates the attitude, also without any feeling of desperation but rather with a cold reconciliation. “If I wasn’t in the rap game / I’d probably had a key knee deep in the crack game / Because the streets is a short stop / Either you slingin’ crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot.” This sounds more like a recitation of given facts of his life conditions than a protest or complaint.

Bakari Kitwana describes the economic background to the problem of unemployment leading to the rise of criminality. The uneasy conditions were caused by globalization, which “has negatively affected all low-skilled workers, working-class Americans, older workers have fared better than younger ones, and whites have fared better than Blacks. Thus the hip-hop generation has been hit particularly hard during these economic good times.” The conditions for unskilled workers suddenly became worse and African Americans were suffering the most. Young Blacks had to decide and the decision sometimes took form of the choice that rapper B.I.G. articulated in his lyrics.

In Grand Puba’s lyrics we find another example of demand for a proper education which Blacks are deprived of. “Now let me tell you folks just exactly what I mean / the way they try to lower the black man’s self esteem / Put us in their schools I call em mental graves / When they teach us about ourselves, all we learn that we were slaves / This is why we must teach

²³ Ice Cube, *Hood Mentality*, Lench Mob, Los Angeles, 2008.

our strong black nation, the proper education, education.”²⁴ He adds in another song that to be truly free, you have to know your history, an opinion shared with many other works by African Americans.

Malcolm X mentions one event of his youth connected with education that stigmatize him. Once his teacher asked him: “Malcolm, you ought to be thinking about a career. Have you been giving it thought?.” Young Malcolm says: “The truth is, I hadn’t. I never have figured out why I told him: ‘Well, yes, sir, I’ve been thinking I’d like to be a lawyer.’ His teacher’s reaction is a good summary of the prejudices of that time which probably to some extent exist even nowadays:

Mr. Ostrowski looked surprised, I remember, and leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. ‘Malcolm, one of life’s first needs for us is to be realistic. Don’t misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer, that’s no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to be thinking about something you can be. You’re good with your hands, making things. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work. Why don’t you plan on carpentry? People like you as a person, you’ll get all kinds of work.’²⁵

Malcolm was not mad at his teacher for his advice because he probably “meant well,” which is maybe even more striking since Malcolm was one of the school’s top students. The teacher just wanted to keep another Negro in his place regardless of his skills.

African Americans have been complaining about the quality and aim of education for decades. Malcolm X protested the same thing in his *Autobiography*. He says that when his school textbooks mentioned the history of Negro people, it took them one paragraph to

²⁴ Grand Puba, *Proper Education*, Elektra Records, USA, 1992.

²⁵ Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X As Told To Alex Haley* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989) 38.

summarize the whole complicated past. There was nothing you could be proud of, nothing that could somehow resurrect your identity and therefore elevate your thinking. He and many others were blinded by what the life seemed to require of them. Malcolm reveals that “When I had finished the eighth grade in Mason, Michigan, that was the last time I’d thought of studying anything that didn’t have some hustle purpose. And the streets had erased everything I’d ever learned in school.”²⁶ There was no reason to memorize what one has learned at school because there was no use for it in real life. Education was not satisfactory for Blacks, and although the situation has no doubt improved greatly, there are still people who complain about the contents of history classes, and they often share a rebel-without-a-cause attitude towards the system and America in general. However, when we consider the reality that African Americans have not been satisfied with the educational system since they started becoming a part of it, we might possibly admit that there really is a persisting problem that needs to be looked at.

5.2 Tookie’s Legacy

When Du Bois spoke about teachers, he meant teachers in a commonly acknowledged sense, teachers of math, history, literature etc. There is another type of men who could play the role of teachers and advisors. This does not mean that their instruction could substitute for the knowledge and skills that are developed at schools. The crucial aspect of their teaching would be the significant awakening of ambition and the thirst for education. It is in many cases the most important thing and the beginning of all education.

The people who are able to contribute to this beginning have to be respected and reputable in the community. There are many great African American intellectuals today: Cornell West, Conrad Muhammad, Michael Eric Dyson, Ras Baraka, for instance, and others. However their words and speeches do not reach the ghettos and the communities that need intellectual enhancement the most. The personalities are either unknown or not listened to, perhaps

²⁶ Haley, 157.

because they are considered to be too far from the streets to understand the issues that “regular” people have to cope with.

The “modern” teachers do not have to be rappers necessarily; but people of a similar social background or similar experience as the one of the close ghetto communities. One of the best teachers in recent history was a man named Stanley Tookie Williams. Williams was raised in the streets; he knew ghettos and their laws more than anybody else. He was a product of the “projects.” He had respect in South Central Los Angeles; he was admired when he was free, and he did not lose that respect when he was in San Quentin State Prison either. Williams committed many crimes; he may have even murdered people, for which he was given a life sentence. He was a brutal criminal and he paid for his crimes in prison, where he also went through a “black redemption” as his autobiographical book is called. He studied history and started writing books that were aimed to protect children from joining street gangs. He saved thousands of lives and his efforts earned him nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature. Despite his credits he was executed on December 13, 2005.

It is definitely hard to compare his crimes and his positive deeds and to say that he offered a reasonable compensation for the pain he caused. His crimes, his gangster reputation, and his violent past were irrelevant at the time of his execution. It does not really matter whether he committed what he was accused of; the important thing is, and this was not borne in mind by Arnold Schwarzenegger and the State of California, that from a pragmatic point of view, Williams could have been more useful when alive. One may complain about his criminal past or impugn the honesty of his redemption; but there is no doubt that his teaching saved lives and it could have continued doing so. He was a very intelligent man, and his many “followers” were willing to pay attention to him and to respect him as their mentor.

Although this may sound exaggerated, execution of Stanley Tookie Williams was, if only from a utilitarian perspective, possibly the worst disposition that could have been made of him. It was a step back from an improvement of the situation in African American

neighborhoods, especially those endangered by black-on-black violence. Moreover, the same people who enabled or even advocated William's execution, now inveigh against rap music and its damaging effect on American youth.

5.3 Black Teachers and Preachers

There is a new religion of the modern "slaves." Du Bois characterized the religion of his times by saying:

Three things characterized this religion of the slave: the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy. The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a "boss," and intriguer, an idealist; all these he is, and ever, too, the centre of a group of man, now twenty, now a thousand in number. The combination of a certain adroitness with deep-seated earnestness, of tact with consummate ability, gave him his preeminence, and helps him maintain it. The type, of course, varies according to time and place, from the West Indies in the sixteenth century to New England in the nineteenth, and from the Mississippi bottoms to cities like New Orleans or New York.²⁷

Who is the preacher of Black Folk today? Rappers seem to meet all the requirements for being new preachers, and it can indeed be argued that they play that role for African Americans today. They can (and perhaps should) be the voice of their people and lead them to salvation, or at least to better days from a secular point of view. Unfortunately, there are not many personalities in the rap industry that have the power, authority, and necessary knowledge of life in the streets to do that. Mos Def, Nas, Common, KRS One, and Talib Kweli are among those who transcend the role of entertainers and would be capable of leadership. All of these combine the art of rhetoric and poetry with charisma and political

²⁷ Du Bois, 116.

consciousness, however radical sometimes; and they are willing to acknowledge the mistakes of their people together with creating a hopeful manifesto for progress.

Unfortunately, not every rap artist is able to maintain the role of advisor or leader. As previously mentioned, some speak for their community and appear to present themselves as revolutionaries; but when they start selling albums, they forget about their original role and background, to which they should remain loyal. To quote Du Bois: “the Preacher and Teacher embodied once the ideals of this people,—the strife for another and a juster world, the vague dream of righteousness, the mystery of knowing; but to-day the danger is that these ideals, with their simple beauty and weird inspiration, will suddenly sink to a question of cash and a lust for gold.”²⁸ This is one of the reason why political rap is not as prominent as it used to be. Conscious and political rap does not sell as well as party-oriented rap music. Political rappers who are trying to point their finger at issues such as gangsterism, violence, teenage pregnancy and racism; will nowadays hardly sell as many albums as the ones who are in their lyrics closer to mainstream musical taste.

Similarly to the preachers of slavery, rappers are obviously closely linked to musical expressions of people’s sorrows and hopes. Du Bois, in fact, defined the purpose and origin of rap music and African American music in general:

The Music of Negro religion is that plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences, which, despite caricature and defilement, still remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil. Sprung from the African forests, where its counterpart can still be heard, it was adapted, changed, and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slave, until, under the

²⁸ Du Bois 50.

stress of law and whip, it became the one true expression of a people's sorrow, despair, and hope.²⁹

James Baldwin once said: "I have spent most of my life, after all, watching white people and outwitting them, so that I might survive....No one in the world--in the entire world--knows more--knows [white] Americans better or, odd as this may sound, loves them more than the American Negro." The same thing can perhaps be said regarding America. No one knows America better than her Negroes; they know both sides of life on the American continent, and therefore only Blacks are able truly to depict America with all its joys and sorrows.

Du Bois writes interestingly about Blacks' religion and their attitude towards suffering. He states that:

Nothing suited his condition then better than the doctrines of passive submission embodied in the newly learned Christianity. Slave masters early realized this, and cheerfully aided religious propaganda within certain bounds. The long system of repression and degradation of the Negro tended to emphasize the elements in his character which made him a valuable chattel: courtesy became humility, moral strength degenerated into submission, and the exquisite native appreciation of the beautiful became an infinite capacity for dumb suffering. The Negro, losing the joy of this world, eagerly seized upon the offered conceptions of the next; the avenging Spirit of the Lord enjoining patience in this world, under sorrow and tribulation until the Great Day when He should lead His dark children home,—this became his comforting dream. His preacher repeated the prophecy, and his bards sang,—

“Children, we all shall be free
When the Lord shall appear!”

²⁹ Du Bois 116.

This deep religious fatalism, painted so beautifully in “Uncle Tom,” came soon to breed, as all fatalistic faiths will, the sensualist side by side with the martyr. Under the lax moral life of the plantation, where marriage was a farce, laziness a virtue, and property a theft, a religion of resignation and submission degenerated easily, in less strenuous minds, into a philosophy of indulgence and crime. Many of the worst characteristics of the Negro masses of to-day had their seed in this period of the slave’s ethical growth.³⁰

It is both amazing and disturbing at the same time that Du Bois in a way thus described Black attitudes that are relevant even today. These attitudes are resignation and vices turned into virtues, because vices are easily perceived as rebellion and virtues as “Uncle Tom” characteristics. Vices represent protesting the system; virtues, being an obedient Negro. This attitude may have given birth to gangsta and hardcore rap. As mentioned before, African American artists like N.W.A., Ice-T or Heavy D felt that the system wants to keep them in their place, to make them feel as a part of society, although the prejudices were still at large on a daily basis. The attitude could be summarized as: “Let’s be the n*****s they see in us. Let’s give them what they are afraid of.” Du Bois seemed to anticipate this development of Blacks’ psyche because the roots of crime glorification date back to the era of slavery.

5.4 I wonder if Heaven got a Ghetto

By the quotation given above, Du Bois also touched upon a problem that is very often traceable in rap lyrics. It is the hopelessness and resignation of African Americans and their reconciliation to their fate, to suffering and death. This view was partly injected into their minds by slavery and Christianity. If you endure these conditions, you are promised a better

³⁰ Du Bois, 121.

place in the afterlife. If you do not fight against your fate, and are patient, you will be rewarded in Heaven.

The reason why this brainwashing was useful to slave masters is obvious: it kept slaves under control, it prevented uprisings. Nowadays, however, there still exists a way of thinking that is noticeably similar to the one of Christianized slaves; that looks like an aftermath of the “teaching” of slave masters; and that has a similarly devastating effect. It has little to do with religion, and its natural outcome is a lack of will for self-improvement and survival.

KRS One mocks this simulacrum of religion in his lyrics as well: “You're still a slave, look at how you behave / Debatin' on where and when and how and what Massa gave / You wanna know how we screwed up from the beginning?/ We accepted our oppressor's religion / So in the case of slavery it ain't hard / Because it's right in the eyes of THEIR God”³¹He sees this “Christian attitude” as an aftermath of slavery that remains useful to today’s masters.

As Du Bois notices, many Negroes have substituted hope for freedom and a better life in place of hope for heaven. Nevertheless, the original approach to the future survives even today in certain communities. It floats as a dark cloud above African American ghettos, and rap artists often articulate this resignation in songs like “Ready to Die,” “Life goes On,” “Thug Mansion,” “I Wonder If Heaven Got a Ghetto,” “Death Around the Corner,” “Last Wordz,” and others.

In hip hop, we hear young people about twenty years old talk about their own death without fear but with ease in their hearts and composure. Tupac for example says that: “Bury me smiling with G’s in my pocket / have a party at my funeral, let every rapper rock it / let the

³¹ KRS One, *Brown Skinned Woman*, Jive Records, New York, 1993.

hoes that I used to know from way before / kiss me from my head to my toe/ [...] nobody cries when we die we outlawz.”³²

The self-destructive behavior is a result of the desperation. Notorious B.I.G. says: “My s**t is deep/ deeper than my grave G/ I’m ready to die and nobody can save me.” He adds in another song: “When I die I wanna go to hell/ ‘cause I’m a piece of s**t, it ain’t hard to f*****g tell.”³³

Tupac was not happy about the way his life went, but he also knew that there was nothing he could do except to wait and pray: “Praying hard for better days promise to hold on/ Me and my dogs ain't got a choice but to role on.” In his song “Thugs Mansion” with Nas, Tupac imagines an ideal place where all his brothers should come to after death; and again, we get the feeling that Tupac is ready to leave and to join the ones who are free of suffering, which reminds us of what Du Bois described in his essay. Tupac is excited about meeting his role models and the famous personalities of African American culture. He once said that his only fear of death is coming back to this world reincarnated; and the people who knew him said that he was serious, although many others saw it as an exaggerated statement.

Dear momma don't cry, your baby boy's doin good

Tell the homies I'm in heaven and they ain't got hoods,

Seen a show with Marvin Gaye last night, it had me shook

Drippin peppermint Schnapps, with Jackie Wilson, and Sam Cooke

Then some lady named Billie Holiday

Sang sittin there kickin it with Malcolm, 'til the day came

Little LaTasha sho' grown

Tell the lady in the liquor store that she's forgiven, so come home

³² Tupac, *Life Goes On*, Death Row Records, Los Angeles, 1996.

³³ Biggie Smalls, *Suicide Thoughts*, Bad Boy, New York, 1994.

Maybe in time you'll understand only God can save us
When Miles Davis cuttin lose with the band
Just think of all the people that you knew in the past
that passed on, they in heaven, found peace at last
Picture a place that they exist, together
There has to be a place better than this, in heaven
So right before I sleep, dear God, what I'm askin
Remember this face, save me a place, in Thugz Mansion³⁴

Tupac devoted many of his songs to this theme of death. Another one is called “If I Die Tonight” where he says: “Don't shed a tear for me n***a I ain't happy hear / I hope they bury me and send me to my rest / Headlines readin MURDERED TO DEATH, my last breath / Take a look picture a crook on his last stand / M*****s don't understand, if I die tonight.” IF I³⁵Tupac talked about his death often in his lyrics in a way that should strike the listener by the feeling of desperation which shines from his lyrics, and people started asking what makes young Blacks think so persistently about their end. Tupac answers the question with his songs several times. There does not appear to be any kind of hope. Tupac himself was surprised on his 24th birthday that he survived twenty-four years in the ghetto; he did not expect himself to “last” so long.

5.5 Tupac Amaru Shakur and Education

W. E. B. Du Bois embodied the protest and Black progressivist thought of his time. He gave classic formulation to the African American struggle for equality, for economic and spiritual advancement. Du Bois's articulations promised hope and progress. He epitomized the

³⁴ Nas feat. Tupac, *Thugz Mansion*, Ill Will, New York, 2002.

³⁵ Tupac, *If I Die 2Nite*, Interscope, USA, 1995.

struggle of one generation as Tupac Amaru Shakur personified both the hope and the hopelessness of his generation and community. Du Bois once said: “To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships,”³⁶ and Tupac was a new kind of speaker for the black race. He was young, angry, articulate, educated in a special and inspiring way. It seems that all the race's virtues and vices were put into one personality, tenderness and violence, love and anger, intelligence and ignorance. He would have been a honored teacher if his dark side had not possessed him at times.

Du Bois praised the idea of black teachers, and Tupac played that exact role as a hip hop artist. He either directly or indirectly educated people. Michael Eric Dyson wrote a book on Tupac’s legacy called *Holler If You Hear Me*, where he says:

Tupac was enamored with literary creators and characters from Sun Tzu to Maya Angelou, from Richard Wright’s *Native Son* to Niccolo Machiavelli’s *Prince*. They flashed regularly to his titles, lyrics[...]Still I Rise, a posthumous album Tupac recorded with his protégés The Outlawz, pinched its title from Angelou’s poem. Legions of Tupac’s fans devoured her poetry after they gave their idol’s record a listen.³⁷

When Tupac mentioned Malcolm X or Huey Newton, everybody wanted to know why those names were important. Tupac resurrected the thirst for education, which probably no scholar could have done in the African American community. He inspired his fans to read classics that they would otherwise never have come across. Tupac served as a teacher for those who were left behind. For Dyson, Tupac was “a ghetto Dickens who explained the plight of the downtrodden in rebellious rhyme.”³⁸

³⁶ Du Bois, 5.

³⁷ Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me* (Basic Books: New York, 2001) 12.

³⁸ Dyson, 6.

Tupac talked about racism, black-on-black violence, misogyny, poverty, gangsta lifestyle; he summarizes the issues of one generation in his work. What made Tupac a good and respected teacher, apart from his artistic and rhetorical qualities, was the fact that he was “one of them.” Although his talent and his personality were exceptional, he still managed to stay with his community till his end. He did not want to be seen as an artist above the ghetto. He lived what he rapped about. The authenticity of his lyrics and poems is the most important aspect of his work, and his fans praised him for this quality that inevitably led to his murder. Mos Def, the African American musician and activist, notices what was so attractive about Tupac and his work: “I’ll tell you why people loved him: because he was the ghetto’s everyman, embodying in his art the horrors and pleasures that came to millions of others who were in many ways just like him.”³⁹

No rap artist ever represented his community as accurately as Tupac did. Like his people, he was gifted, he longed for a brighter future, and he fought for his rights. On the other hand, he was fighting the inner demons that were summoned by his life experience, and he was finally swallowed by them. He died as he lived. Tupac was able to show the way—or, more precisely, the direction—to young African Americans; but he himself was not a messiah. His critics often point out that in one song he promoted the same behavior which he rejected in the next one on the same album.

Rap music is a complex art. It is very influential but you cannot easily divide its positive side from its negative. It can point a finger at problems that need to be looked into, but it does not have the power to salve the African American community. Similarly, it may talk about black-on-black violence and gang-related murders, but you cannot blame it for all the troubles in Black neighborhoods. This can be said about both Tupac and rap music in general. Dyson asks: “Is it fair to expect DMX to achieve what W. E. B. Du Bois could not, or for Tupac to succeed where Archbishop Tutu failed? The complex relationship between art and social

³⁹ Dyson, 107.

responsibility is evident, but we must be careful not to place unrealistic, or even unjust, demands on the backs of artists.”⁴⁰

Tupac was a personality as complex as his music. His creativity was enormous, although he did not have time to realize his full potential. Du Bois laments the fate of great African American personalities when he states: “Throughout history, the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness. Here in America, in the few days since Emancipation, the black man’s turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving has often made his very strength to lose effectiveness, to seem like absence of power, like weakness. And yet it is not weakness,—it is the contradiction of double aims.”⁴¹

Therefore, Du Bois’s term “double consciousness” is applicable to Tupac’s behavior—unfortunately, because the “doubleness” of his aims is what confused his fans, critics, and maybe even himself. Tupac was willing to help those who needed help, he was willing to reform the conditions in poorer areas of American cities. On the other hand, he wanted to stay loyal to his “homies” in ghettos, he wanted to stay true to his “label of a criminal.” It is very complicated to find any kind of compromise between these two commitments; however, Tupac tried at least to establish order concerning the life in the streets in his code of THUG LIFE.

He was realistic and knew that the violence could not be stopped instantly; so he tried to found a set of rules that would regulate street life and reduce the rage. He condemned violence against innocents, shooting at parties and attacking someone at home along with many other atrocities that were happening on a daily basis.

⁴⁰ Dyson, 112.

⁴¹ Du Bois, 3.

In Du Bois's essay "The Sorrow Songs," the author, by summarizing his perceptions, and the wider effects, of slave song, also formulated Tupac's role in African American music many decades later:

[...]the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.⁴² Tupac's double consciousness is of course richly demonstrated in his lyrics. One of his most compassionate songs is "Keep Ya Head Up" which talks about the social position of women and the way they are sometimes treated by African American males. Tupac raps: "I give a holler to my sisters on welfare/ Tupac cares if nobody else care/ I know they like to beat ya down a lot/[...] and since we all came from a woman/ got our name from a woman and our game from a woman/ I wonder why we take from our women/ why we rape our women/[...] And I realize my momma paid the prize/ she nearly gave her life, to raise me right."⁴³ He continues in similar sense throughout the song, which is a probe into the sensitive part of his consciousness.

On the other hand, there are songs such as "Fake A** B*****s," "2 Amerika's Most Wanted," "Wonder Why They Call You Bitch," where his critics claim that he treats women purely as objects of sexual desire or he speaks of them in derogatory terms. Yes, Tupac does that sometimes in his lyrics. He comments on what is happening around him and he, as always, is not afraid to formulate his observations in a straightforward way. We have to take into consideration what kind of women he usually talks about. In one interview Tupac said that before he earned his fame, he was nothing. He was almost invisible to women and suddenly, after *2Pacalypse Now*, he appeared in the same club he used to go to and he was

⁴² Du Bois, 156.

⁴³ Tupac, *Keep Ya Head Up*, Interscope, USA, 1993.

adorable all of the sudden. Before that he could not have a dance could not get a date, he was “too skinny, too something.”⁴⁴ Tupac deplored this kind of attention based on his financial security and national fame. “It’s like I tell my n****a/ keep your eyes on these b*****s/ they love to G n****a young dumb and getting riches.”⁴⁵

Unsurprisingly, he wrote several songs on this topic, as on every one that became relevant to his life, and of course he used gross language to describe that sort of people. Thus, if we want to judge Tupac regarding his double-consciousness, we need to be judicious in our choice of examples in his work. As a conscious rapper, he was very outspoken when addressing social issues; he devoted much of work to African American community, alerting and helping. In his lyrics, however, he sometimes goes in the opposite direction. He ranges from: “No one will ever oppress this race again/ no Malcolm X in my history text, Why is that?/ Cause he tried to liberate and educate all blacks,” and “As real as it seems the American Dream/ was nothing but another calculated scheme/ to get us locked up and shut up back in chains/ to deny us of the future rob our names,”⁴⁶ to songs such as “ When we running for your jewels/ steady gunning, keep on b*****g at them fools/[...]you claimed to be a player, but I f*****d your wife[...];”⁴⁷ which is taken from one of the most successful “diss songs” in the history of rap music.

In the example of Tupac we see what frequently happens in the ghetto. Many talented young men and women are absorbed by their lifestyles. Tupac was a talented poet, rapper and speaker, self-educated and intelligent, but he was not able to resist the lifestyle he often rapped about.

⁴⁴ *Tupac: Resurrection*, prod. Lauren Lazin Preston Holmes, dir. Lauren Lazin, 2003. 1h 55min 31s.

⁴⁵ Tupac, *Fake A*s B*****s*, Jive Records, USA, 1997.

⁴⁶ Tupac, *Word sof Wisdom*, Interscope, USA, 1991.

⁴⁷ Tupac, *Hit Em Up*, Death Row, Los Angeles, 1996.

5.5 Richard Wright

Richard Wright offered his view by writing his most famous work *Native Son* (1940), the protagonist of which, Bigger Thomas, is in important ways a representative of African American youth living in urban areas today. His attitude, his thinking, resembles some features of contemporary African American "hood" psyche. Bigger is looking for his identity even though he would not admit it. He is overlooked by whites, and he and his two friends complain about racism and the white man's terror; but as nowadays the frustration and anger keep them from making any progress or actually fighting the prejudices. They are reconciled to their outcast identity, which is the first step towards ending up in a correctional facility.

Many readers criticized *Native Son* from the beginning for its portrayal of the American Negro and protested against its presenting Bigger Thomas as an example for African American youth. However, one literary critic, Alex Pitofsky, sees the book in a different light; he sees what Richard Wright would want modern readers to see:

Wright's purpose in *Native Son* is obviously not to burnish the image of African Americans, to empathize with victims of sexism, or to flaunt the elegance of his prose style. The novel is a meditation on the destructive power of poverty and racism. Throughout the narrative, Wright emphasizes that Bigger's painful, dispiriting early life in a Chicago slum has left him emotionally damaged. Bigger resents every moment he spends with his mother and siblings in their grimy one-room apartment, in part because he suspects that "the shame and misery of their lives . . . [will sweep him] out of himself with fear and despair."⁴⁸

The shame of his own life is transformed into a hatred towards everybody around Bigger, including his family and friends. For example, he compensates for his frustration by beating his friend for no particular reason, just to reassure himself of his own power and control over at least something, since he is not able to fight for anything in the white man's

⁴⁸ Alex Pitofsky, "Reconsidering Richard Wright's *Native Son*," 5th May 2010 < <http://reviews.media-culture.org.au/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1844>>.

world. The result of the frustration is black-on-black violence, which remains a problem till the present.

Bigger Thomas's mentality and his way of coping with prejudice and hatred constitute a recognizable continuity with gangsta rappers of a half-century later: Frustration transforms Bigger into a criminal, and he accepts his role because it gives him the previously mentioned feeling of free will and reign over his own destiny. He turns his anger against his own people, against other Blacks. His crimes embody defiance against the oppression and against the system that is ruled by white Americans.

Safetyandjustice.org, a web page concerned with, among other things, black-on-black violence, points out that: "It is in part how we have historically allowed the system to work in America dating back to slavery, and it is in part how Blacks have responded to systematic operation of oppression and dehumanization." Among the causes, there is the awakening of self-hate and turning it not only against yourself but against people who look alike, seeing them as the cause of your own struggle.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Dan Bell, "Black-On-Black Violence," 23th April 2010 < <http://safetyandjustice.org/story/260> >

VI. GHETTO JEZUS: NEGRO RELIGION

“Of The Faith of Our Fathers” is an essay on the issue of religion in Negro communities and Black people’s relationship with the church from slavery until Du Bois’s times. In it, Du Bois remarks that the church used to play the role of a meeting place during and after the slavery era. People met there in order to see each other, talk and share their experiences, rather than to seek a religious *raison d’etre* for their lives. The church was a “social centre of Negro life in the United States.” The purpose of church was rather practical, but there was a spiritual purpose added to its functions later, when and where Negroes started adopting Christianity:

Considerable sums of money are collected and expended here, employment is found for the idle, strangers are introduced, news is disseminated and charity distributed. At the same time this social, intellectual, and economic centre is a religious centre of great power. Depravity, Sin, Redemption, Heaven, Hell, and Damnation are preached twice a Sunday with much fervor, and revivals take place every year after the crops are laid by; and few indeed of the community have the hardihood to withstand conversion. Back of this more formal religion, the Church often stands as a real conservator of morals, a strengthener of family life, and the final authority on what is Good and Right.⁵⁰

Although the African American version of church absorbed many features from whites, it still maintained a spirit of African ancestry. “Endowed with a rich tropical imagination and a keen, delicate appreciation of Nature, the transplanted African lived in a world animate with gods and devils, elves and witches; full of strange influences.”⁵¹

It is important to point out that whatever Blacks have gone through, they always managed to continue practicing their original traditions or at least some elements of them, which helped

⁵⁰ Du Bois, 117.

⁵¹ Du Bois, 120.

them to restore their identity to a certain extent. Although the frame of a new faith and new customs was given to them, they brought something of their past into it.

However, the hope that was put into a “foreign” God was soon shifted into a desperate prayer. After years of struggle African Americans ceased to believe in hope and salvation; as if they had recognized that the” Lord” they called for was not in fact theirs. Their constant struggle for freedom and the frustration of not achieving it lead many to a crisis regarding religious beliefs. In Du Bois’s words:

Feeling that his rights and his dearest ideals are being trampled upon, that the public conscience is ever more deaf to his righteous appeal, and that all the reactionary forces of prejudice, greed, and revenge are daily gaining new strength and fresh allies, the Negro faces no enviable dilemma. Conscious of his impotence, and pessimistic, he often becomes bitter and vindictive; and his religion, instead of a worship, is a complaint and a curse, a wail rather than a hope, a sneer rather than a faith.⁵²

The Blacks who accepted the role given to them by slave masters, which is defined by humility and submission, were now becoming more and more scarce since their faith and hypocritical obedience could not last forever.

Generally speaking, the more radical protesters later find their identity in religious branches such as The Nation of Islam, sometimes called also Black Muslims. One of the most famous personalities in this faction was Malcolm X, who converted to Islam while serving time in prison. Such conversions became a typical development in the spiritual journey of Blacks—a path taken also by Kody “The Monster” Scott, nowadays known as Sanyika Shakur, and Nathan McCall, both of whom have written outstanding autobiographical works on their life struggles.

⁵² Du Bois, 123.

The form of Christianity that used to be taught to Negroes and its impact is summarized by Malcolm X in *The Autobiography*: This religion taught the “Negro that black was a curse. It taught him to hate everything black, including himself. It brainwashed this 'Negro' to think he was superior if his complexion showed more of the white pollution of the slavemaster.”⁵³ It was approached as a “white” religion and therefore automatically rejected. The new option adopted by radicals was usually the Nation of Islam. The teaching about “white devils,” glamorous ancient Black civilizations, and stolen names charmed many black Americans, and conversion became one of the most successful, but also radical, ways of resurrecting Black pride and identity.

Rap music follows, in many cases, the teaching of the Nation of Islam or Black Hebrews such as the rapper Killah Priest who is known for religious allusions in his lyrics. The vast majority of rappers advocate the modern view of “Black” religions. Killah Priest comments on the deception of “white” religion in his song B.I.B.L.E.: “And open bibles, instead of hoping on revivals/ Calling on His name and screaming hallelujah/ when he hardly knew ya/ that's how the devil's fooled ya/ See look into my eyes brethren/ that's the lies of a Reverend.”⁵⁴

Killah Priest is also convinced that the right faith enables Blacks to overcome prejudices and it may compensate for the loss of self-esteem: “I was once a radical poor dude that stood on the corner/ Teaching blacks were the lost Jews / Why? 'Cause my people were deprived of Yale and law schools.” By lines such as: “rolled up out of my bed walked on synagogue floors/ My house, cathedral ceilings with Egyptian walls/ My dinning room last supper style/ Twelve chairs with king Tut cups cave bathrooms and medieval tiles,”⁵⁵ he takes the role of a modern rap missionary, spreading the message of a new religion. African American religious

⁵³ Haley, 166.

⁵⁴ Killah Priest, *B.I.B.L.E.*, Geffen, USA, 1995.

⁵⁵ Killah Priest, *Till The Angels Come*, Good Hands, USA, 2007.

feeling is unsurprisingly formed by protest and searching for a new identity, which is natural due to the history of the race on American continent.

Searching for understanding from God is a theme of another song by the same artist. It is called “If I Die:” Dear heavenly Father / The reason why I stand at your gates holdin two revolvers / Cuz down on earth I had mad drama.⁵⁶ In songs like this or Thugz Mansion by Nas and Tupac, rappers are basically asking God not to judge and treat them as He would any other (i.e. non-Black) person. They are looking for understanding for their sometimes sinful lives; God should take into account the circumstances of their past and the conditions of their living.

Nasir Jones takes the original attitude of “obedient Negro” to absurdity in “God Loves Us” where he talks about peace and an entirely positive relationship with the Deity even though, in the very next line, he rhymes: “I ride past the church where they got his body and find / they takin him to the hearse to put his body in dirt / That's it, pay my respects, wipe my tears with my shirt.” Then he says: “Our lives are the worst, on top of that, we broke / That's the main reason why God, love us the most.”⁵⁷ He sees the suffering as a sign of God’s sympathies and testing. The song works as a parody on the previous religious direction of Negro thinking, as Nas also demonstrates his skill as one of the best lyricists ever in hip hop culture.

Many rappers speak about losing their faith due to their fates and the rawness of the streets; they curse God for taking their “homeboys” and killing their community. On the contrary, there are also Black missionaries who still find the maintenance of religion rewarding. Braille employs religious references very often; his works could be sorted into the category of Christian hip hop. For instance, he claims: “Every step we take, elevates us towards the final destination / determined and certain the words in the sermon are serving a purpose| lifting the

⁵⁶ Killah Priest, *If I Die*, MCA, USA, 2000.

⁵⁷ Nas, *God Loves Us*, Ill Will, New York, 1999.

burdens / if your searching I'm sure it's worth it[...]but I will rise, receive the spiritual prize / and not waste my life chasing temporary highs.”⁵⁸ Braille could be one of the people who stand against the modern trend in mainstream rap music, which is the glamorization of wealth, songs and video clips about fancy cars and women. Unfortunately not very well-known, he is a spiritual alternative to materialistic, commercial, party-oriented rap music.

Tupac Shakur mentions God in his songs as well, but he represents the more common, less reverent approach. He does not reject faith as such, he usually just questions God’s intentions because of what he has seen happening since his childhood. “Oh my Lord / tell me what I'm livin for/ Everybody's droppin got me knockin on heaven's door.”⁵⁹ It seems as if Tupac felt somehow close to God because of the life he led, when there was constantly “Death Around the Corner”⁶⁰. On the other hand, he was very distant from God concerning his comprehension of God’s governing of human lives.

⁵⁸ Braille, *It Won't Last*, Syntax Records, USA, 2004.

⁵⁹ Tupac, *Only God Can Judge Me*, Death Row Records, Los Angeles, 1996.

⁶⁰ Tupac, *Death Around The Corner*, Interscope, USA, 1995.

VII. STILL I RISE: THE ANCESTORS OF RAP MUSIC

There is a gap of seven decades between publication of *The Souls of Black Folk* and the first traces of hip hop culture. Obviously, we cannot say that there was Du Bois, then a silence, after which hip hop appeared and began its reign in African American culture. There clearly have been several intermediate personalities without whose contributions and impact there might never have been any hip hop: People such as Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Rosa Parks, Alex Haley, Billie Holliday, Sam Cooke, Hughie Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and Marvin Gaye. Without these figures, hip hop culture could not have developed to such a breathtaking extent. However there are personalities in the field of art who seem to have had an ever greater impact on rap music than any other: Those would be The Last Poets, Maya Angelou, and most importantly Langston Hughes.

7.1 Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes was an African American poet, novelist, playwright, essayist and also a fierce critic of segregated America. He wrote his major works during the Harlem Renaissance in 1920s and 1930s. He is known for his rebelliousness and impulsiveness, as manifested in his poetry. Like many rappers he criticized America's racism and treatment of Blacks—often in a rather strong language which earned him a controversial reputation. Hughes's poetry also sometimes attempts to reflect a collective state of mind, which contrasts with the more personal poetry of McKay, Toomer or Cullen.

One of Hughes's themes is the frustration that America is not able to fulfill what it stands for, that there is not prosperity and happiness for everybody. In his poem "Let America Be America Again" he says: "O, let my land be a land where Liberty, is crowned with no patriotic wreath, But opportunity is real, and life is free, Equality is in the air we breathe[...] Hungry yet today despite the dream. Beaten yet today—O, Pioneers! I'm the man who never

got ahead, The poorest worker bartered through the years.“ This poem has an identical theme with Tupac’s song “Words of Wisdom” or “Panther Power.” Tupac writes: “Pledge allegiance to a flag that neglects us/And yet they say this is the Home of the Free/ but if you ask me it’s all about hypocrisy/ The constitution, Yo!, it don’t apply to me/ Lady Liberty still the b***h lied to me.“ Or “Promised me freedom, education, equality/ Never gave me nothing but slavery.”⁶¹ Tupac’s expressions are slightly closer to direct frustration whereas Hughes still maintains some hope.

Hughes’s “Mother to Son” can be compared to Tupac’s “Letter to my Unborn.” Hughes’s mother instructs her son: ”Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair/ It’s had tacks in it, and splinters/ and boards torn up/ and places with no carpet on the floor.”⁶² She prepares her son for his life’s journey but, contrary to Tupac’s song, Hughes uses more figurative language to describe the mother’s experience. Tupac raps: “Many things learned in prison/ blessed and still living/ Trying to earn every penny that I’m getting.” He later continues: “It’s hard to face this, cold world on a good day, When will they let the little kids in the hood play?”⁶³

Both Tupac and Langston Hughes were concerned with the fate of Black women in America. Langston Hughes sums up his ideas in a poem called “The Negro Mother,” and Tupac wrote about a similar topic in his “Keep Ya Head Up” or “Baby Don’t Cry.” They both share a respect for women and they both admired them for their ability to bear well the many inconveniences that life has prepared for them.

In one of his poem, Hughes makes the point that his people and he were and still are ready to build America, but, to make this contribution sustainable, America has to function according to its initial ideals. The Negro has built America and it has not yet given anything

⁶¹ Tupac, *Panther Power*, Interscope, USA, 1991.

⁶² Langston Hughes, “Mother to Son,” 12th May 2010 <<http://www.poemhunter.com/langston-hughes/>>

⁶³ Tupac, *Letter To my Unborn*, Death Row Records, Los Angeles, 2001.

back to him for his work. “The land that’s mine—the poor man’s, Indian’s, Negro’s, ME, who made America.”⁶⁴ A Californian rapper The Game, who is not usually a representative of conscious rap, talks about similar topic in his track “Letter to the King,” which is devoted to African American history: “Make him pick cotton/ while their momma clean up the kitchen/ The same cotton in white tees, that’s the cotton they was pickin.”⁶⁵ The Game says that America was built on the Negro’s back, the development of its economy and its wealth depended upon Black men.

Hughes’s “Democracy” voices a demand for immediate progress, since there was supposed to be a promising future which is still not fulfilled. Hughes says: “I tire so of hearing people say/ Let things take their course/ Tomorrow is another day/ I do not need my freedom when I’m dead/ I cannot live on tomorrow’s bread.”⁶⁶ This theme is again adopted by Akrobatik in “Remind My Soul.” “We’re no longer supposed to be slaves I bet Harriet Tubman will be turnin’ in her grave[...]We’re supposed to fight for freedom not just the end of slavery.”⁶⁷

7.2 Black Panthers and the Rise of Black Masculinity

In 1960s, African Americans came up with another means of defending their rights and protecting the safety of black minority. The Black Panther party appeared and white Americans was scared. There had never been such a militant respond to white supremacy before. Pictures of groups of blacks, dressed in dark jackets and carrying guns flew around America with a clear message: We are ready to fight back, we are ready to use violence if

⁶⁴ Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again,” 15th May 2010, <http://www.poemhunter.com/langston-hughes/>>

⁶⁵ The Game, *Letter To the King*, Geffen, Los Angeles, 2008.

⁶⁶ Langston Hughes, “Democracy,” 15th 2010, <http://www.poemhunter.com/langston-hughes/>>

⁶⁷ Akrobatik, *Remind My Soul*, Coup d’État, USA, 2003.

necessary. It was also probably the first time when a black man with a gun represented one very influential faction of black America and the black masculinity got a energy boost which was to develop later to even more extreme phase represented by the hypermasculin image of black rap artist who stare at us from magazine covers half-naked with built-up bodies, AK-47s and this I'm-not-the-one-you-wanna-mess-with facial expression.

The Black Panthers impersonated the greatest threat for white America. They stood up against police brutality and miseducation of Negroes in the same way that was adopted later by conscious rappers. One of the leaders of the party, Eldridge Cleaver, is famous for his collection of essays *Soul on Ice* where he manage to articulate both the basics and philosophical questions of African American defiance. He managed to capture several very controversial views rooted in the long period of terror such as the one expressed in a chapter "The White Race and Its Heroes": "The "paper tiger" hero, James Bond, offering the whites a triumphant image of themselves, is saying what many whites want desperately to hear reaffirmed: I am still the White Man, lord of the land, licensed to kill, and the world is still an empire at my feet."⁶⁸ Such ideas may seem to verge on paranoia, however, as unbelievable as it may seem, they spring naturally from the interpretations of the conditions that blacks were forced to live in.

Eldridge Cleaver also articulated the conflict between the blacks and the police which I have touched upon earlier while speaking of NWA's lyrics. "The police are the armed guardians of the social order. The blacks are the chief domestic victims of the American social order. A conflict of interest exists, therefore, between the blacks and the police." Cleaver, however, does not blame the police entirely as many rappers do. Rappers generally dislike the police as an institution, as a group of people who do anything in their power to harm the blacks. Cleaver blames the system: "It is not solely a matter of trigger-happy cops, of brutal cops who love to crack black heads. Mostly it's a job to them. It pays good. And

⁶⁸ Eldridge Cleaver, "The White Race and Its Heroes," *Soul on Ice*(Dell Publishing: New York,1999) 104.

there are numerous fringe benefits. The real problem is a trigger-happy system.” The police force is merely a means of maintaining an order which is set by society. ⁶⁹

7.3 Maya Angelou

One can see that depression was there when Du Bois wrote his essays. It remains palpable in Langston Hughes's work, and all the way through the twentieth century into modern rap lyricism. Maya Angelou's poetry is often mentioned as another crucial inspiration for rap artists. For example, when one reads her poem “My Arkansas,” it is comparable to the mood of CunninLynguists' lyrics “Georgia.” Both see the respective states as their homes, although they are aware of the atrocities that were happening there and they cannot forget them. Angelou talks about “her” Arkansas but she knows the dark side and the history of the state. The title of the poem is ironic since the relationship she expresses toward the land is rather negative; she writes that: “There is a deep brooding, in Arkansas. Old crimes like moss pend from poplar trees.”⁷⁰ On the other hand, CunninLynguists are more reconciled with the past. They acknowledge the history and what Georgia did to them but they still feel a kind of patriotic sense of belonging there, which in Angelou's poem is perceptible only from the title because she (or the speaker of the poem) is not sure about the future. CunninLynguists assert that: “The dark hearted people that threatened my kin/ Spit on my friends for the color of their skin/, So when I think back to the clay that raised me/ I thank God for the strong man it made me.”⁷¹

Angelou also dedicates one song to Black women on welfare just like Tupac and Nas did several times. She is grateful for their abilities and endurance because she knows they were

⁶⁹ Cleaver, 162.

⁷⁰ Maya Angelou, “My Arkansas,” *And Still I Rise* (Random House: New York, 1978) 21.

⁷¹ CunninLynguists, *Georgia*, Bad Taste, USA, 2007.

left to take care of children on their own. “Too fat to whore, too mad to work” from Angelou’s poem “Momma Welfare Roll” resembles Tupac’s famous song “Brenda’s Got a Baby”; both texts deal with the last desperate attempts to secure families. Tupac writes: “So what’s next there is nothing left to sell, so she sees sex as a way of leaving hell.”⁷²

As mentioned before, Tupac also named one album after Maya Angelou’s poem, “Still I Rise.” Pac’s song is again more about ghettos and how he grew up there against all odds, surrounded by violence. The tones are very much alike. Angelou claims that she was supposed to survive whatever obstacles the world had thrown into her way. She says she was able to cope with hatred and now she is “a black ocean, leaping and wide”⁷³ She is what America made her and she can never be stopped because she was strengthened by the setbacks. The poem shares the idea with Tupac’s poem “The Rose that Grew Up from Concrete.” Maya Angelou may have also sensed the fear of white America, fear of the self-confident Negro, which Pac often describes as one of the things that frightens America the most: “ They say they hate me, they wanna hold me down I guess they scared of the rebel -- the rebel of the underground.”⁷⁴

7.4 The Last Poets

The Last Poets formed probably the final instance before hip hop. They frequently added music to their texts so it sounded very similar to the first rap songs. They were formed in 1968 in Harlem, and they immediately started to articulate the burdens of the African American community of that time. They expressed a loud musical protest, just as did rap music about twenty years later. They also began to use the N-word for addressing each other

⁷² Tupac, *Brenda’s Got a Baby*, Interscope, USA 1991.

⁷³ Maya Angelou, “Still I Rise,” *And Still Rise* (Random House: New York, 1978) 41.

⁷⁴ Tupac, *Rebel of the Underground*, Interscope, USA, 1991.

and their audience. For example: "Dreaming of bars, black civilizations that once flourished and grew HEY! - WAKE UP, N*****S or y'all through!"⁷⁵ The Last Poets laid the cornerstone for political and conscious rap on which rap artists later built a majestic palace. They opened most of the topics that were later embraced by rappers; Hustling, black-on-black violence, Black power, promiscuity, the search for the end of prejudices, etc. They call for elimination of ghetto conditions and for an end to violence.

The Last Poets offer a new source of pride for Black folk, as many activists have done before. However, there still exist the same sort of problems that have been talked about for a hundred years. Du Bois was right when he said that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line."⁷⁶ We could surely extend his statement and say that the twenty-first century will continue to search for a solution. Of course we cannot compare the situations of African Americans at the beginning of twentieth and twenty-first centuries, since the progress is indisputable; but the fact that the questions are still discussed, that there are still movies being made on the topic, that there are still protests against racial prejudices, suggests that the struggle to solve the problem of equal opportunities and treatment of people of different ethnicities continues today and will continue tomorrow as well; and the struggle will be reflected in the culture as it always has been.

⁷⁵ The Last Poets, *Wake Up Niggers*, East Wind Associates, USA, 1970.

⁷⁶ Du Bois, v.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Many people fail to understand the purpose of rap music. The majority of people will say that they despise it because it is just “talking to music about cars and guns.” Unfortunately, few of them see the deep roots of the musical style; few of them realize its social and historical background. There is no other musical style as underrated as rap. Nevertheless, hip hop culture is capable of helping to resurrect African American identity; it sums up its burdens, and it offers a way out. It brings a fresh air of hope to poorer areas of US cities.

Scholars, sociologists and historians praise people such as Du Bois, Langston Hughes and Malcolm X for supporting, either directly or indirectly, their African American communities. What about rap? Their topics are similar, their expressions are very much alike. If you added a proper beat to Hughes or the Last Poets you would be able to make a catchy rap song. However, rap is very often criticized. Rap has many branches: there is gangsta rap, Christian, conscious and political rap, ghettocentric rap, mafioso or hardcore rap. You cannot judge the music as one group. You may hate gangsta rap for its violent lyrics but the question is: Is there something wrong with the music or with us? What leads young Blacks to such a strange corner of creativity? KRS One once said: “I know that hip hop is a representation of this oppressed culture..And I will represent that till the day I die.”⁷⁷ Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Du Bois have nowadays their indelible place in history books because they helped their people to find identity and they were the voices of an oppressed population. We admire works of Ellison, Angelou, Toomer, and McKay because they reflect the state of society. Rap music is the mirror today, and people are gradually learning to appreciate it.

⁷⁷ *Rhyme & Reason*, prod. Aslan Production, dir. Peter Spierer, 1997, 1h 51min 1sec.

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